



Governance and The Persistence of Oil-Driven Conflict in The Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, oil and gas resources have spawned a series of hostilities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Apart from the disruption of oil production, they have heightened social tension and security challenges in the region. This study probed the hostilities to identify their causes and persistence and discuss how they could be mitigated. The study employed a qualitative research design and used data obtained from secondary sources. It found that, although oil wealth constitutes a large percentage of total revenue and foreign exchange to the Nigerian government, oil production has spawned a conflict of various magnitudes, which include those between the people of the region and the oil companies, those between the people and the government as well as inter and intra communal hostilities. This study linked the protracted oil resource driven conflict to the distortion of governance and mismanagement of oil and gas wealth, which have not addressed the grievances of the people of the region. It posited that the persistent conflict could be assuaged through a redefinition of governance which entails adherence to extant regulations on oil exploration to protect the environment, effective and judicious management of oil wealth and infrastructural development in the region. Others include creating jobs for the teeming youth and constant dialogue with the region's inhabitants.



INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region in Nigeria is one of the extensive wetlands with a large deposit of oil and gas resources in the world. It is inhabited predominantly by minority ethnic groups such as the Edo, Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, Isoko, Itsekiri, Kalabari, and Urhobo, among others (Onigbinde, 2008). The oil production in the region has spurred a series of hostilities in the various oil bearing communities and villages. The hostilities started in the early days of independence when Isaac Adaka Boro, an undergraduate chemistry student at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, led other Ijaw youths to protest against the oil exploration in the region. Similarly, the civil war between 1967 and 1970 was allegedly fought in connection with the presence of oil in the Niger Delta region (Obi, 2009; Onigbinde, 2008).

In the Second Republic, that is, between 1979 and 1983, the conflict was more of legal tussles between oil-bearing states and the federal government over the regime of revenue allocation, which did not make adequate compensation for the oil-producing states and communities (Ibaba, 2008). During the military era, particularly in the 1990s, the conflict manifested in the series of protests against the dreadful depredation of the region's environment due to oil exploration and exploitation.

Since 1999, Nigeria has continued to witness the oil-based conflict in the region manifesting in the hostilities between the people of the Niger Delta and the oil companies operating there. It is important to state that the conflict and hostilities in the Niger Delta, which started as mere protests, later transformed into militancy, kidnapping, oil bunkering and theft, and separatist agitations. (Ikelegbe, 2005) and have led to the loss of many lives and wanton destruction of property, including oil installations.

In response to the persistent conflict, successive Nigerian governments have taken steps to assuage them. Such steps include setting up Boards, Commissions, and Agencies to oversee the development of the region. Despite these measures, the oil resource-driven conflict has persisted, thereby raising questions on the effectiveness of such policies. The issue is: Why do oil-driven conflict and hostilities persist in the Niger Delta region despite the series of measures taken by the government to address them?

This study probes the oil-driven conflict in Nigeria to ascertain its causes, why it has persisted, and how it can be abated. Aside from this preliminary remark, the remainder of this paper is organised into four sections. Section one centres on conceptual and theoretical issues. The second section focuses on materials and study methods, while the third section focuses on results and discussion. Section four concludes the study.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

Governance

Governance is one of the terms that is suffering from a definitional quagmire. Writers such as Stoker (1998), Hyden and Court (2002) and Katsamunskas (2016), to mention but a few, have defined it from different perspectives. This seeming ambiguity influences Pierre and Peters, as cited in (Katsamunskas, 2016), to assert that the term governance is slippery, meaning that there is no one for all definition of the term. Scholars and institutions emphasise different things in their definitions of governance. Some of these definitions focus on the steering dimensions of an entity or a state and how the affairs of an entity are carried out or managed (World Bank, 1994; UNDP, 1997). Some scholars focus attention on the distinction between government and governance. They see the scope of modern governance transcending the activities of the state. It is used to describe the new ways of organising society (Rhodes, 1996).

Governance is central to the functional existence of human collectivity and society. It depicts the mechanisms or processes employed by people to manage their affairs. Contemporary governance transcends the activities of the state. It involves multiple actors such as the government, the private sector, and non-profit organisations. This understanding of governance implies that although government remains central, other actors are equally involved in the coordination and management of the affairs of an organisation or a state.



In this study, governance is used to describe the mechanisms and strategies employed in managing the oil and gas sector, such as the participation of the stakeholders, policies and their implementation.

Natural Resource Conflict

Natural resources are seen as a non-man made endowment with economic values, i.e. resources that can be transformed into wealth (Kumeh, 2007). Therefore, a resource conflict refers to disputes and disagreements over the ownership, control, and utilisation of natural resources (Matiru; 2000; Maphosa, 2012; Okonkwo, 2017). Different scholars have espoused several theories to explain the nexus between natural resources such as diamond, gold, oil, water, and conflict (Bannon & Collier, 2003; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Mwanika, 2010; Bayramov, 2018). The different and contending perspectives on the nexus between natural resources and conflict can be grouped into three analytical categories.

The first group comprises those writers who focus their attention on resource scarcity and the proclivity for conflicts of various magnitude. The central argument of these scholars is that the scarcity of natural resources naturally spurs conflict in contemporary society. The argument as mostly canvassed in the environmental security literature identifies population growth, climate change and distribution mechanism as factors that may create a situation in which the demand for resource outweighs the supply (Raleigh & Urdal, 2007). Percival and Homer-Dixon (1998) specifically identify three of types of environmental scarcity that may lead to war and hostilities. These are supply-induced, demand-induced and structural scarcity. The second perspective links resource endowment or abundance to conflict in many countries. Ordinarily, following the argument of resource scarcity scholars, the abundance of natural resources should engender development and stability in contemporary society. However, the abundance school of thought contends that the presence of resources is a potential source of conflicts and not scarcity. Countries like Sierra Leone, Angola and Nigeria are seen as countries where resource-induced conflicts have been visible. Various postulations such as greed and grievance are often cited as factors that may trigger conflict in resource endowed systems (Gendron & Hoffman, 2009; Brown and Keating, 2015).

We can identify a third perspective that flows from the resource scarcity and resource abundance postulations. It is a perspective of scholars who do not directly link natural resource conflicts neither with scarcity nor abundance of resources. To this group of scholars, there is no clear and proven evidence to show that resource scarcity or resource abundance spurs conflicts in society (DiJohn, 2002; Gendron, & Hoffman, 2009; Sebudubudu, 2011). Writers of this orientation believe that the relationship between resources and conflict is not linear and that not all natural resources can trigger conflict in societies where they are found. The argument is that it depends on several factors (Nillesen & Bulte, 2014), such as the type of natural resources in question. The argument goes further that the nature of the ownership, and governance of the natural resource, to a large extent, determine whether natural resources can induce conflict or not (Mildner, Lauster, & Wodni, 2011; Sebudubudu, 2011).

The Framework of Analysis: The Grievance Theory

There is rich literature amplifying different theoretical and analytical frameworks explaining how natural resources have triggered conflict and wars in many countries. These include greed, grievance, resource abundance, and resource governance theories. While these theories provide and explain how resources trigger conflict in resource-dependent countries, this study is anchored on the grievance theory of conflict.

The grievance theory of natural resource-driven conflict links activities relating to exploration and exploitation of natural resources to conflict in resource bearing communities and areas. The grievance theory links conflict to the frustration experienced by the inhabitants of natural resource areas, who are often the victims of natural resource exploration and exploitation. They bear the environmental hazard and dislocation occasioned by such activities (Oyefusi, 2007; Ikelegbe, 2005). The grievance stemmed from the belief of the people that despite the presence of resources in their domain, there is little gain accruing to them. Thus, such people resort to agitations for compensation and the development of their domain. Therefore, within the context of the grievance theory, resource-driven conflicts in Nigeria could be seen as a movement to address



the underdevelopment of the region caused by neglect by successive Nigerian governments despite its contribution to the Nigerian economy. The people are agitating to improve their well-being and the development of their communities. The agitations are directed at seeking compensation for the land taken away from them, their dislocation from their traditional occupation, environmental degradation, and pollution.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design and relied on data sourced from primary and secondary sources. Namely, official documents such as the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta, 2018, textbooks and journals. The discussion in the study focuses on the following three questions:

- (i) What are the causes of oil and gas-driven conflict in Nigeria?
- (ii) Why do oil and gas resource-driven conflict and hostilities persist in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria?
- (iii) How can oil and gas-driven conflict be mitigated in Nigeria?

The study used the grievance theory of conflict. It linked the hostilities in the Niger Delta to the frustration being experienced by the inhabitants due to neglect by successive Nigerian governments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Causes of Oil resource-driven conflict in the Niger Delta Region

The Niger Delta region is very strategic to the Nigerian State. As stated earlier, it is the hub of oil exploration and exploitation related activities. Currently, the area defined as the components of the Niger Delta is made up of all the states in the South-South geopolitical zone, i.e. Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo and Rivers. It is important to note that all the states in the South-South geopolitical zone are all oil bearing units in the Nigerian State. The definition of the Niger Delta also includes three other oil-producing states outside the south-south geopolitical zone. They are Abia, Imo and Ondo States. (Akpabio & Akpan, 2010; Olasupo, 2013). The region occupies about 70,000 km² landscape, and it is naturally blessed with large deposits of oil and gas resources. Its strategic importance to the Nigerian State can be inferred from its contribution to the national economy. As of 2017, 77.5 per cent of total government revenue and 97.7 per cent of total export earnings were sourced from the oil and gas sector of the Nigerian economy (Adenikinju, 2018).

The persistence of the oil resource-driven conflict in Nigeria can be attributed to many factors. Nonetheless, various explanations have revolved around the agitations by the people of the Niger Delta for the ownership and control of oil and gas resources rents which have been of little benefit to the region even though such resources are sourced from their domain (Obi, 2009; Uwasomba & Alumona, 2013; Ebiede, 2017).

The hostilities in the region cannot be divorced from the oil prospecting, which has dispossessed the people of access to their ancestral land and displaced them from their traditional occupations such as fishing and farming. Moreover, oil prospecting has led to wanton degradation of the ecosystem and the pollution of the environment. Apart from this, the political dynamics of the Nigerian state put the management of rents from oil and gas resources in the hands of the elites outside the region. Thus, in terms of decision-making relating to oil and gas resources, the oil bearing states and communities are mere receivers of those decisions.

The oil-driven conflict in the Niger Delta region is not limited to confrontations between the region's people, major oil companies, and the government. It has equally manifested in inter-ethnic as well as inter-communal and intra-communal hostilities. Such hostilities emanated from disputes over the ownership of land and boundaries between communities as well as the struggles for the compensations for oil land, which have collectively pitched some ethnic nationalities against each other as witnessed in the Urhobo/Itsekiri, Ijaw/Ilaje and Ijaw/Itsekiri conflicts to mention but a few.

Similarly, the hostilities between communities such as Basambri-Nembe and Ogbologbomabri-Nembe and many others in Isokoland have been linked to disputed land with oil deposits (Ikelegbe, 2005). These



hostilities have led to the loss of lives and the destruction of property in the affected communities. Apart from this, they have led to the breach of peace and peaceful coexistence in the affected areas.

Another dimension of the oil-driven conflict can be discerned from its transformation over the years. This can be analysed in terms of the scale of the hostilities, the methods used by the protesters and the motive behind the conflict. Regarding the conflict between the host communities made up of youth and elites and the various oil companies and the government, it started as mild protests. However, it has been transformed to elicit national and international attention. Similarly, what started as the demand for compensation and justice has now been infiltrated by some groups whose motives are different from the real intention of the people of the region. Thus, it is becoming difficult to distinguish between the activities of groups such as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), whose agitations focused on addressing the injustice and neglect suffered by the region and the various groups which have converted the agitations to the means of hostage-taking and the demand for ransoms.

Another visible transformation is that the issues are no longer confined to compensation. The demands now include the reform of the Nigerian State with emphasis on increased devolution of powers to the constituent units of the federation and practice of fiscal federalism, and the upward review of the proportion of the principle of derivation in the revenue allocation formula. Besides from this, there have been increased agitations for separatism. The feeling of most people of the region is that their grievances cannot be addressed in the current political structure and arrangement.

The Persistence of Oil-driven Conflict

The persistence of oil driven conflict in the Niger Delta axis of Nigeria can be attributed to a series of factors. These factors are discussed in the subsequent section.

The ownership and control of oil and gas resources

Oil-driven conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria dates back to the colonial era when the grievances and fear of the people were first formally expressed before the Sir Willinks Commission. Though no concrete action was taken to pacify the people and allay their fears (Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta, 2008), it led to the setting up of the Niger Delta Development Board NDDDB, which was charged with the task of accelerating the development of the region.

However, under the military, 1966-1979, some steps were taken by the Federal Military government, which sowed the seed of contemporary conflict in the region. These include the Petroleum Act, 1969, which transferred oil and gas resources to the federal government and the Land Use Decree, 1978, which similarly entrusted land where natural resources are discovered to the government (Onigbinde, 2008; Brown & Keating, 2015; Okonkwo, 2017). These two legislations have robbed the Niger Delta people of the entitlement to ancestral land with enormous oil and gas resources.

Similarly, the 1999 Constitution, as (amended) in section 44(3), transferred all mining activities to the federal government. (the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). These legislations imply that the region's inhabitants have no control over their land. Hence, the various agitations and hostilities in the region are directed at reclaiming their land so that they could have control over their natural resources (Ikelegbe, 2005; Onigbinde, 2008)

The Regime of Revenue Allocation.

Over the years, particularly since 1954, when federalism was introduced, different criteria for allocating federally collected revenue have been instituted through various commissions and equally enshrined in successive constitutions. In the First Republic, prominence was given to the principle of derivation, which gave the various regions power to retain almost 50 per cent of resources generated in their domain (Uwasomba & Alumona, 2013). However, this arrangement changed when the military took over the reign of government. The derivation principle was abandoned from 50 per cent to 3 per cent. During the Obasanjo civilian administration between 1999 and 2007, the percentage for derivation was later increased to 13 per cent following the



agitations from the oil and gas-bearing communities and states (Ikelegbe, 2005; Ukiwo, 2009; Obi & Rustad, 2011; Okonkwo, 2017). The current revenue allocation formula, which fails to emphasise the derivation principle, is one of the grievances of the region's people. The people believe that resources originating from its domain are being used to develop other parts of the country (Ezirim, 2011) while the region wallows in poverty and underdevelopment.

Weak Institutional framework for the Management of Oil and Gas Resources

One area where governance deficit has fuelled the oil-related conflict in the Niger Delta region is the realm of the weak institutional framework for managing Nigeria's oil and gas industry. Over the years, oil exploration has caused environmental havoc in the region, such as oil spillage that dislocated many people from their traditional sources of livelihood, such as fishing and agriculture, without compensation. The Nigerian government is allegedly weak in compelling the various oil companies to adhere to and implement rules regarding oil production and commitment to the oil bearing communities (Ezirim, 2011). Hence, the little corporate social responsibilities embarked upon are seen as tokens to pacify the various communities so that they can continue their activities in the region.

The youths in the region have consistently protested against this unfair development. Rather than sanctioning erring oil companies, the government is allegedly seen to always be on their side. For instance, before the Nigerian Local Content Act was promulgated some years ago, major engineering and servicing activities in the oil industry were done overseas, leading to the loss of about 2million jobs and \$380bn by the Nigerian government (Adenikinju, 2018).

Repressive Measures by the Government.

The use of force to suppress various agitations is one factor explaining the persistent oil-driven conflict in the region. The first oil-driven insurrection led by Isaac Boro was crushed by the government using military forces in the First Republic (Obi & Rustad, 2011). During the 1990s and early part of the 2000s, which could be regarded as the peak of uprisings in the region, the military government, rather than resorting to dialogue with the protesters, used repressive state powers to crush various uprisings. One of such was the hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa and the other eight Ogonis. They were protesting against the degradation of their environment and calling for the cleanup of Ogoniland. The killing of Saro Wiwa and other Ogonis transformed the hitherto peaceful protests into violent conflicts (Ikelegbe, 2005).

Similarly, when Chief Olusegun Obasanjo came to power at the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999, he deployed the military to the region to restore peace. One of the fallouts of such a move was the destruction of various communities, such as Odi in 1999 and Choba in 2000. Similar earlier repressive measures taken under the military led to the destruction of oil-bearing communities such as Uwuechem in 1990, Ogoni in 1994 and Kaiama in 1998 (Inokoba & Imibua, 2010).

Another occurrence linking repressive government measures to the protracted oil-driven conflict can be discerned from the renewed activities of the militants witnessed after the 2015 general election. Apart from the deployment of the military with different codes, such as 'Operation Crocodile Smile', a statement credited to President Muhammadu Buhari that he would treat the militants as terrorists if they refused to come out for dialogue sparked off fresh hostilities in the already tensed Niger Delta region. The preceding indicates that the deployment of force instead of abating the crisis in the region intensified and heightened the social tension and conflict in the region.

Limited Impact of intervention Agencies

Since independence, successive governments have intervened in the region with certain development agencies and instruments such as the establishment of NDDDB in the First Republic earlier alluded to, the River Basin Development Authority in the Second Republic, the Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) under the Ibrahim Babangida administration and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) under the Obasanjo civilian administration to foster the development of the region. A



similar effort was made in 2008 when the Yar Adua led administration created the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs to oversee and coordinate the region's development and the 2009's amnesty programme.

The amnesty programme was applauded as a peacemaking mechanism. It was a comprehensive blueprint designed to restore sustainable peace to the region. It was made up of three activities, Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration. (Ikelegbe, 2010). With the amnesty, hostilities in the region initially abated but later resurfaced after the 2015 presidential election was lost by Dr Goodluck Jonathan, who incidentally hails from the region. Moreover, conflicting decisions regarding the continuity of the amnesty triggered fresh hostilities. While not doubting the intentions of these agencies and policies, their implementations were fraught with a series of challenges, particularly corrupt tendencies; hence could not function as expected.

Corruption

A great deal of attention has focused on corruption as one of the causes of oil-induced conflict and social tensions in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Writers such as Ikelegbe (2005) and Ezirim (2011) have asserted that corruption is one of the problems undermining the development in the Niger Delta region. Various accounts of corrupt practices such as the mismanagement of oil wealth and oil theft abound in the literature. For instance, it has been reported that until recently, the leadership of the Nigerian State did not know the quantity of oil produced and sold, a trend that provided a fertile ground for corruption to flourish. (Ezirim, 2011). For instance, it was reported that Nigeria lost about \$42 billion due to crude oil theft between 2009 and 2018 (Udo, 2019).

Similarly, corruption has not allowed for the effectiveness of various government intervention agencies such as the OMPADEC, NDDC and even the amnesty programme. Some revelations on the activities of the NDDC in recent times showed that funds meant for the development of the region were misappropriated and utilised for questionable activities instead of the intended purposes (Ebiri & Abuh, 2020; Salem, 2020)

Mitigating oil resource-driven conflict in Nigeria

Conflict is inevitable in society, but its intensity can be mitigated if appropriate mechanisms to address its causes are put in place. Oil-driven conflict in the Niger Delta cannot be attributed exclusively to one causal factor. In this study, we have linked the protracted oil-driven conflict in Nigeria to Nigeria's distorted pattern of governance and the mismanagement of oil and gas resources. Consequently, the following measures are recommended to address the oil-induced conflict in Nigeria.

First, on the issue of grievances of the people of the region, the neglect of the oil-bearing communities in terms of development is a recurrent theme in oil and gas-driven conflict in Nigeria. Though successive governments, as noted earlier, have taken some steps in this direction, there is no meaningful impact of such endeavours. Government should intensify efforts aimed at providing basic facilities in the region. Good roads should be constructed to link the various communities and villages, and electricity and health facilities should be provided. Schools should be built and renovated, and portable water should be provided. When these amenities are provided, the inhabitant of the region will feel the impact of the government in their domain. Without a doubt, mass investment in infrastructural facilities will tend to reduce the spate of agitations and militancy in the region.

Second, apart from embarking on massive development of the region, there is the need to come out with legislations that can increase the control of land and water resources by the people of the region. Many people have come up with a series of recommendations in this regard. While some suggest an increase in the principle of derivation (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008), others say that the country should return to the pre-independence arrangement or what was obtainable in the First Republic when the various regions were controlling resources originating from their domain. Simply put, the suggestion is on the practice of true federalism. The way to achieve this is through the political restructuring of the Nigerian State that has continued to be debated.

Third, adherence to the Local Content Act, 2010 in managing the oil and gas industry. To a considerable extent, this would increase the participation of Nigerians in the industry. In terms of employment, qualified



indigenes of the region should be engaged. This would address grievance issues such as marginalisation and neglect.

Fourth, it has shown that the government's repressive measures have not reduced the scale of hostilities in the region. What seems to be a working mechanism is dialogue. Consequently, the government and the oil companies should devise mechanisms for regular interaction and dialogue with various oil-bearing communities in the region.

Fifth, the various oil and gas companies operating in the Niger Delta axis should adhere to internationally adored rules regarding corporate social responsibilities to the host communities. Tokenism as a method for placating traditional rulers and chiefs is no longer a workable mechanism. Projects of overall benefits to the communities, both the rich and poor, should be embarked upon. Similarly, oil companies should be made to abide by rules regarding the mechanism for reducing pollution of the environment.

Sixth, corruption has been identified as a factor that has not allowed for the effectiveness of the various interventionists policies and agencies in the development of the Niger Delta region. The government should intensify efforts to ensure that funds earmarked for the regions' development are judiciously utilised as intended. The light of anti-graft agencies should be beamed at those institutions and agencies established to develop the Niger Delta region.

CONCLUSION

Natural resource abundance should be a source of growth and development and not that of underdevelopment, violence and war. In this study, it has been demonstrated that the presence of oil and gas resources has tended to breed conflict in Nigeria because of the distorted pattern of governance and the mismanagement of oil wealth. Nigeria is a federal polity, but in practice, it is more of a unitary entity. The terms and conditions surrounding the management of oil wealth are centrally defined to the detriment of the oil-bearing states and communities.

Moreover, mismanagement of resources earned marked for the development of the region has undermined the development of the region. Similarly, the deployment of force to suppress uprisings in the region rather than calming the tensed atmosphere has intensified the conflict. This study contends that conflict-induced by oil and gas resources can be mitigated if there is a benign governance mechanism for managing the oil and gas sector and appropriate policies for addressing the grievances of the people.

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