



SUSPENSE IN A COMPLEX NIGER DELTA: INTERROGATING THE LOUD SILENCE OF RESOURCE CONTROL AGITATORS

IYABRADE IKPORUKPO PhD

Abstract

The Niger Delta is very central to Nigeria's economic survival, yet, the region remains underdeveloped. A situation that has resulted in the agitations for resource control and the practice of true federalism. This study examines the grouse of the agitators and the interventionist strategies of the federal government and posits that while the agitations cannot be classified as misplaced, resource control and the practice of true federalism are not panaceas for the region's development. The study describes the Niger Delta as a complex region in suspense. This description adequately reflects a region seated on a gun-powder; naturally endowed but prone to different forms of crises. The study adopts Frustration Aggression and the Political Economy Theories as theoretical explanations for the agitations. It is the position of the study that rather than the agitation for resource control (an agitation that has assumed loud silence), the agitators should concentrate on tackling some identified hindrances to the region's development.

Introduction

The Niger Delta is a complex region. Its description is guided by certain interests and analytical inclinations of different scholars. Henry Willinks Commission report of 1958 saw the Niger Delta to be only three divisions (Ogoni, Degema and Brass together with the Western Ijaws) Willinks 1998 p.51. According to Ibaba (2017 p. 6), "The description of the Niger Delta has elicited two broad view points": the geographic description and the political description.

The region is recognized in various political discourses as one of the fundamental threats to political order, institutional stability and state cohesion in the multi ethnic Nigeria's federation. Rich in tremendous renewable and non-renewable resources, yet classified as an underdeveloped region that is prone to crisis, violence and criminality.

Analysts have argued that the complexity of the Niger Delta is a reflection of the Nigerian state that is bedeviled by multiplicity of problems, painful paradoxes and a dysfunctional federation. A





situation that has led to the emergence of different agitations and disparity in power sharing and revenue allocation arrangements.

There is dissatisfaction, displeasure and a strong feeling of suspicion among the various federating units. These have resulted in protests, agitations and separatist threats. Among the Yorubas there is the agitation for an “Oduduwa Republic” and a call for the convergence of a “Sovereign National Conference”. The Igbos through the “Indigenous People of Biafra” (IPOB) champion the agitation for the creation of a “Republic of Biafra”

The Niger Delta which Ekpebu (2008) described as “the Achilles Heel of Nigeria” has continued to agitate for self-determination and resource control. The consensus among public commentators is that the grievances that prompted Niger Delta agitation are understandable. Because as Ekpebu puts it, “Nigeria will rise or fall with developments in the Niger Delta”. The region is not just the bedrock of the Nigerian economy, it provides the country routes through the waters to other countries. The survival of the Nigerian state is largely dependent on activities in the region.

These activities such as those of the oil industries destroy the ecosystem of the area, cause drastic decrease in available land mass for the cultivation of agricultural produce, depletion of aquatic and various airborne diseases. Alabir and Oviasogue (2005), emphasized this point when they indicated that “rivers and streams in the area contain oil that is above “Maximum Permissible Concentration (MPC)”

Development data of the World Bank, Bureau of Statistics and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have indicated that the region is comparatively underdeveloped. The Nigerian state rolled out some “Obnoxious Decrees and Acts” such as “The Minerals/Petroleum Decree, 1969” “The Land Use Decree, 1978”, The National Inland Water Ways Decree, 1997”, Which disempowered the people of the area from significantly using the resource of the region, although the federal government has embarked on some developmental initiatives that the agitators of the region considered “Cosmetic”.





There are accusations, collaborations and betrayals among the various stakeholders of the Niger Delta Project which have created suspense in the region. This paper raised pertinent questions which responses can redirect stakeholders' approaches to the region's development projects

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Niger Delta and Resource control are two concepts that have dominated contemporary social discourse. This is because scholars do emphasize seeming contradictory variables in their analyses of what constitute the Niger Delta and the practicability of resource control in a dysfunctional federation.

The Niger Delta as a concept has no settled meaning. The Niger Delta Human Development (NDHD) report of 2006 defined the region "as comprising the area covered by the natural delta of the Niger River and the areas to the East and West, which also produce oil". NDDC (2006) cited by Ibaba (2017), explained that the Niger Delta is in the southern part of Nigeria and has a landmass of about 112,110 kilometers. He added that "the vast landmass of the region is spread across five ecological zones (lowland rain forest zone, derived savannah zone, fresh water swamp zone, the mountain zone, and mangrove forest/vegetation zone).

A non-governmental organization, the Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES) fourth volume of its report cited in Tamuno (1999, p. 9), gave a useful definition of the Niger Delta based on political, cartographic and ethnographic settings of the region. In the political definitions, the NDES adopted the definition used in establishing a federal parastatal: The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). This definition lists nine states (Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo, Rivers, Abia, Imo and Ondo) as the components states of the region.

The NDES cartographic definition placed the limits of the region thus:

- North of Aboh
- West from the Benin River Estuary
- East to the Imo River Estuary





- South palm pout, below Akassa and the Niger River Estuary

Some scholars gave the Niger Delta a geographic definition. Ibaba (2017: 6) listed six states (Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo and Rivers) as components of the geographic definition of the region. Some scholars further listed Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers as core-states of the Niger Delta and classified other states within their description of the region as periphery

This study is not intended to be part of the controversies surrounding the definition of the Niger Delta, neither is the paper disapproving the validity of any. The paper applied the geographic description of the Niger Delta in its analysis. States within this definition are known to be the champions of resource control.

A significant difficulty when engaging the “resource control” discourse from the preview of the Niger Delta is its conceptual ambiguity (Ako, 2012 p. 1). Amucheazi (2001) holds the opinion that the agitations for control of resources in the region emanate from the feelings of marginalization borne out of perceptions that despite the huge petroleum revenues from the region, the region is still underdeveloped. The author further notes that the struggle is a call by the governors of the region for the federal government to underscore the principle of derivation as the core principle of revenue allocation in the country. In the opinion of Adesopo and Asuju as quoted by Ako (2012), resource control is defined in terms of a people to control or manage the revenue accruing from oil or any natural resource in accordance with the tenet of true federalism. The concept gained prominence during and after the famous Kaiama Declaration where the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) used it expressly to agitate for the control of the natural resources especially oil that is explored in the Niger Delta.

The politicization and different interpretations given both concepts have led to numerous theories in their analysis. This paper examines the Frustration – Aggression and Political Economy Theories as bases for the Niger Delta agitations. The frustration aggression theory was proposed in 1939 by John Dollard, Neal Miller, Drval Mowrer, Leonard Doob and Robert Sears (Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, & Sears 1939) and further developed by Neal Miller and Leonard





Berkowitz in 1941 and 1967 respectively. The theory explains that aggressive behavior or conduct is a consequence of inhibited expectations or frustrating a person's efforts towards goal attainment, in other words, aggression is as a result of frustration. The frustration of the people of Niger Delta is understandable. As Ikporukpo (2006) noted “.....anywhere oil is discovered and exploited in commercial quantities (beginning from the world's first well in Titusvile, USA drilled in 1859) there is always such great expectations for prosperity”.

The Political Economy Theory as elaborately presented in the works of Marx (1977), Ake (1981), Asa (1998), Chikendu (2002) among others, is centered on dialectical – materialism. The theory was propounded by Karl Marx. Dialectical Materialism is the hallmark of the political economy theory and it places primacy on the economic condition of a society which is the substructure that determines the superstructure. Both theories largely explain the Niger Delta questions.

Agitations for What?

The grouse of the Niger Delta resource control agitators have always been underdevelopment of the region and the environmental injustice that affects the traditional occupation (farming and fishing) of the people. The formation of the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS) on February 23, 1966 and the proclamation of the “Niger Delta People's Republic” was in protest against the abject poverty and neglect of the Niger Delta. Isaac Boro (1982: 115) put it thus, “petroleum.... being pumped out daily from (the) vein of the people” has taken them into perpetual bondage.

In 1990, the “Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People” (MOSSOP) under the leadership of Sir Ken Saro-Wiwa together with heads of several Ogoni clans made a presentation of the “Ogoni Bill of Rights” to the then federal military government. Like other resource control agitators, the grouse of MOSOP is environmental injustice and the damages caused by oil exploration and exploitation activities. Dr. G.B. Leton, OON JP, noted in the Ogoni Bill of Rights that the Ogoni people have suffered the negative externalities of oil extraction in their communities. He asserted that natural capital like creeks, streams, and lands have been compromised and destroyed even as the air is polluted with hydrocarbons and other toxic chemicals. Communities experience the downsides of





gas flares like quaking, acid rain, as the flares have continued to burn for more than 33 years. Cumulatively, these actions and outcomes have contributed to severe environmental degradation and pollution, leading to low agricultural outputs, reduction in fishing outputs and low protein availability in the area due to polluted creeks and rivers; as well as increased health hazards in the area (<http://www.bebov.com>).

The Ogonis were initially very peaceful in their agitations, but unfortunately the agitation later led to the execution of the “famous Ogoni Nine”. The factors that led to the agitations have not been addressed up till now.

The quest for the development of the region and protest against continual degradation of the environment equally led to the gathering of youth from over five hundred communities representing twenty-five organizations in the Niger Delta on the 11th of December, 1998 in what has become “Kaiama Declaration”. Item F of the communiqué issued at the end of the conference noted that the continued damage caused by exploration to the region’s ecosystem and the health of the people of the area is as a result of failure in the regulation of exploration activities as exemplified in the number of oil spills, unmitigated gas flaring, logging, coastal erosion and tremors. The communiqué noted that while there is the knowledge that oil is exhaustible, the complete disregard for ecological protection and sustainability of natural capital in the region is a sign of impending doom for the people of the region (Kaiama Declaration, www.unitedijaw.com).

The situation in the region also resulted in the emergence of various groups that joined in the agitations, notable among them are:

- i. The Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), a group that announced its existence in March, 2016
- ii. Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)”
- iii. Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) Niger Delta Liberation Front
- iv. Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF)

Government Interventionist Strategies





Since 1966, the federal government has seen every agitation of the people of Niger Delta as threat to the economic survival and national integration of the country. The government has therefore adopted various reactionary and interventionist strategies to address the causes of these agitations. The strategies range from setting up commissions of inquiries; “Don Etiebet Ministerial Fact Finding Team to Oil Producing Communities in 1994”, “Popoola Presidential Committee on the Development Options for the Niger Delta 1998”, “Ogomudia Special Security Committee on Oil Producing Area 2001” among others, to the extreme measure of militarization and invading communities in the region as captured by Uzodike and Isike (2009: 110) in the table below.

Date	Place	Operating Force	Action
October 1990	<u>Umuechem</u>	Security Protection Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Killed 80 unarmed demonstrators ▪ Destroyed 495 houses
1993	<u>Umuechem</u>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Razed houses and destroyed properties
1999	<u>Odi</u>	Army and mobile police	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Razed the entire community as every house and property worth millions of naira were burnt down
January 2004	<u>Uwheru</u>	Operation Restore Hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Killed 20 persons ▪ Burnt down 11 houses
July 2004	<u>Egbema</u>	Operation Restore Hope Joint Security Task Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Used gun-boats, military helicopters and bombs to destroy 13 communities ▪ Razed a total of 500 buildings ▪ 200 persons, mostly women and children feared dead and are still missing
August 2004	<u>Olugbobiri and Ikebiri</u>	State security operatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Killed 16 youths for agitating for a better deal from multinational oil corporations
October 2005	<u>Odioma</u>	Joint Security Task Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Killed 77 persons, including youths

Source: Uzodike and Isike (2009)





The federal government has equally tried to address the developmental and environmental challenges of the region by establishing development agencies and commissions with specific tasks of “formulating policies and guidelines for the overall sustainable development of the Niger Delta Area”. Ibaba (2008; pp. 465) identified some development agencies established by the government in the Niger Delta when he, citing (OMPADEC Quarterly Report, October 1991: 12) wrote that:

In 1961, the federal governments established the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) which metamorphosed to become the Niger Delta Basin Development Authority in 1976 and later renamed the Niger Delta Basin and Rural Development Authority (NDBRDA). In 1981, the 1.5 presidential commission was established to manage the Mineral Producing Areas Development Fund. Similarly, the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) was created in 1992.....

In 2000, the Olusegun Obasanjo’s administration established the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDC) with a vision and mission to:

offer a lasting solution to the socio-economic difficulties of the Niger Delta Region and to facilitate the rapid and sustainable development of the Niger Delta into a region that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative and politically peaceful. <https://www.nddc.gov.ng>

And to further boost the development of the region, on the 10th of September, 2008, the Federal government crated the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs and charged it with the responsibility of promoting and coordinating the development policies of the government. The ministry was given the primary task of executing government’s policies and programmes for the holistic development of the region.

Development Situation in the Region

It is very much expected that with the federal government approaches to development in the region, the Niger Delta should be relatively developed. Unfortunately, the reverse is the case. The incidence of underdevelopment has increased in the Niger Delta since 1966 when the first notable





agitation led by Major Jasper Adaka Boro was carried out. For instance, the poverty rate in the region as shown in table 2, shows an increase in the poverty ratio between 1980 and 2000.

Table 2: Poverty Level in the Niger Delta

	1980	1985	1992	1996	2004
Nigeria	28.1	46.3	42.7	65.6	54.4
Edo/Delta	19.8	52.4	33.9	56.1	Delta 45.35 Edo 33.09
Cross Rivers	10.2	41.9	45.5	66.9	41.61
Imo/ <u>Abia</u>	14.4	33.1	49.9	56.2	Imo 27.39 <u>Abia</u> 22.27
Ondo	24.9	47.3	46.6	71.6	42.15
Rivers/Bayelsa	7.2	44.4	43.4	44.3	Rivers 29.09 Bayelsa 19.98

Source: National Bureau of Statistics in NDHD Report 2006, pp.58

Similarly, the Human Development Index (HDI) does not indicate development neither does it show prospects of development. Table 3 is the HDI for states in the region as captured in the Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta

HDI for the Niger Delta State 2005





State	Life Expectancy	Education Index	GDP Index	HDI
<u>Abia</u>	0.492	0.578	0.560	0.543
Akwa Ibom	0.506	0.683	0.540	0.576
Bayelsa	0.455	0.523	0.520	0.499
Cross Rivers	0.556	0.630	0.565	0.584
Delta	0.587	0.636	0.621	0.615
Edo	0.579	0.602	0.600	0.594
Imo	0.503	0.546	0.591	0.547
Ondo	0.501	0.575	0.512	0.529
Rivers	0.563	0.590	0.626	0.591

Source: ERML field survey 2005, cited by Report of TCND 2008

The point should be noted also that in any region such as the Niger Delta where the basic sources of livelihood of the people are the traditional occupation of fishing and farming, environmental management issues are very significantly germane to poverty reduction and by extension development. Ibaba, 2005, 2007, 2011, Ikelegbe, 2006, & Ikporukpo, 2008, NDHDR, 2006 among other studies have shown a very high level of environmental devastation in the Niger Delta. In other words, the region is largely underdeveloped. The high level of underdevelopment in the





region gives credence to the agitations by the people. Agitations that gained international recognition but have lately assumed loud silence.

The Loud Silence

In an attempt to interrogate the loud silence of resource control agitators in the region, certain questions were provoked.

- i. Is resource control or the practice of fiscal federalism in Nigeria a panacea for the development and environmental security of the Niger Delta
- ii. Is the federal government sincerely committed to the development of the Niger Delta region
- iii. What is the fate of the rural dwellers and oil producing communities in the region
- iv. What can be done to address the numerous development and environmental challenges in the region

The prevailing argument among resource control agitators in the Niger Delta is that the region is not developed because the people of the area are not allowed to manage the resources found within the region. They further contended that in any society where true federalism is practiced, local governments and states manage the resources, from their areas and enjoy some level of financial autonomy. Udoiem and Udofot (2017), agree with that position when they argued that “in true federalism, states and local governments should manage the resources from their territories under federal guidelines”. Proponents of this arguments include some political office holders of the Niger Delta region.

While it cannot be argued that the Nigerian federation is dysfunctional, does true federalism or resource control guarantee development? Ibaba (2017) raised the concern that “the huge oil revenue that accrued to the area has barely benefited the population living in poverty”. For instance, he stated that “In 2008 for example, the Niger Delta states received ₦852, 112, 410,





145.40 out of the total sum of ₦1975, 830, 151, 342, 05 allocated to the 36 states of the federation”. (Ibaba, 2017; p. 20).

In the same vein, Enweremadu (2005), made a breakdown of allocation to selected oil and non-oil states between June 1999 – December 2005. The breakdown is captured in table 4:

States	Amount (Billions)
Delta	₦ 321.002
Rivers	₦ 286.395
Bayelsa	₦ 259.882
Ekiti	₦ 61.471
Nasarawa	₦ 60.967
Plateau	₦ 52.530

Source: Enweremadu, 2008: 400

It is worrisome that the huge allocation to the Niger Delta states has not impacted significantly on the area, instead, the region is saturated with systematic misallocation of funds, mis-prioritization, corruption and unaccountability which are the hallmarks of underdevelopment.

These vices coupled with series of abandoned or politically motivated projects have crippled the region more than anything else. For instance, the Rivers State government under Rotimi Amechi embarked on the construction of a Monorail that was estimated to cost ₦150bn. The project was abandoned after ₦30bn was spent on it (Ikporukpo, 2019). Incidence of abandoned projects is in no way unique to Rivers state, other states in the region are as guilty. The interventionist agencies of the government are not less guilty. It is alleged that the audit panel on NDDC reported cases of about 1,300 abandoned projects in the region (<https://www.premiumtimes.ng.com>)





Incidence of corruption among elective or appointed political office holders in the region are as visible as abandoned or politically motivated projects; D.S.P. Alamiyesegeha of Bayelsa State, James Ibori of Delta and the alleged rot in NDDC are few among many others.

The federal government has made several attempts whether genuinely or otherwise to develop the Niger Delta, the argument as to whether the measures are cosmetic cannot be said to be valid until the internal hindrances to the region's development are addressed.

What can be Done?

The impediments to development and environmental justice should be addressed. Resource control and the practice of fiscal federalism that are being advocated for cannot guarantee development and environmental justice for the region. With the high level of corruption among major stakeholders of the Niger Delta Project, misappropriation/misallocation of funds, policies inconsistencies and greed, it will be strange to expect a developed Niger Delta. These vices breed crises, result in situations where Multi-national Corporations (MNCs) do not honour Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), disregard environmental best practices and create disunity even among the agitators.

There is therefore the need for a re-appraisal of the modus operandi of the agitators. The focus should be on ensuring/enforcing proper management of resources/ accountability. Questions such as “Why not complete this abandoned project or programme before introducing a new one?” “What are your administration's policies for revenue drive?” For the region to be developed, all hands must be on deck, the region should show capacity to control or manage its resources for the benefit of everybody. It is only then the agitations whether loud or silent will be seen as golden.

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Author's Profile

Iyabrade Ikporukpo is an Associate Professor of Development Studies and presently, acting Head of Department of Political Science, Niger Delta University, Bayelsa State. His research interests include: Conflict Management and Resolution, Oil and Minority Right, Development Crisis in the Niger Delta. He has published in both international and national journals and a member of several professional organizations.

