

AFRICAN SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL JOURNAL
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
IMO STATE UNIVERSITY
NIGERIA
VOL. 11 NO. 1 JUNE 2022

THE NIGER DELTA REGION AND PEACE-BUILDING INITIATIVES

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Abstract

The Niger Delta presents an interesting case study in peace-building. Every society must maintain social harmony in order to experience peace, and development. Individuals, groups, households, communities and companies must locate their quest for survival and growth within an atmosphere of peace. The Niger Delta region has intractable conflict issues which has enabled government, organizations and institutions at all levels to focus attention, energy and resources in ways and means of attaining sustainable peace in the region. As economically and politically important as the Niger Delta is to all stakeholders, the pathways of peace must be consciously directed. This paper argues that the achievement of peace is both a goal of development and a condition for social progress and co-existence. We adopted a survey method which enabled us to look at the various peace-building efforts initiated over time in the Niger Delta. Our conclusion is that peace-building is an ongoing process and must be institutionalised to achieve desired outcomes. Some recommendations have been made as measures for preventing conflict, promoting peace, reducing conflicts, reconciling aggrieved stakeholders and enhancing sustainable development in the region.

Introduction

The Niger Delta was an important area for European trade which stimulated the economic, political and social life of the people living there. New city states emerged to cope with growing prosperity. Most towns in the delta sprang up during the period of European trade between 1450 and 1800, especially in places where European traders had set up businesses (Dike, 1956). As a result of the palm oil trade, middlemen became a powerful and prosperous class.

As a result of the foothold the British traders had in the Niger Delta, the area now known as Nigeria was conceded to Britain at the Berlin Conference of 1885. The Royal Niger Company, in addition to its trading activities, was already virtually in charge of governance on behalf of the British. Its attempt to monopolize the trade in palm oil to the exclusion in of the Niger Delta kings and middlemen was to result in the first major rebellion in the region against injustice. The British revoked the charter empowering the company to govern in 1900; thereafter, Britain assumed direct rule of Nigeria.

The active participation of the British Government in the internal development of Nigeria did not begin until the passing of the first series of Colonial Development Acts in 1929. Before this time, development was carried out with funds generated from Nigeria itself. In 1939, the

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scope of the Acts was changed under the Colonial Development and Welfare Act. Its stated aim was the promotion of the development of the resources of the colonies and the welfare of their people. The same year, southern Nigeria was subdivided into the Western and Eastern Regions. The Present Niger Delta people in Delta and Edo states thereby became minorities in the Western Region, which was dominated by the Yoruba. In the same way, the people in the states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River and Rivers became minorities in the Eastern Region.

The creation of minority populations also underlies the subsequent unfairness and inequity suffered by the Niger Delta states in a Nigerian Federation dominated by three big ethnic groups: Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa/Fulani. The Niger Delta has been enmeshed in various crises and conflicts due largely to resource exploitation by the Federal Government of Nigeria and oil multi-nationals.

Background of the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta region has a population of about 45 million people (2015) and covers an area of about 70,000 sq. km. The people live in a few large cities and over 3,000 small and often remote communities/villages in the mangrove, swamp and lowland rainforests. Farming, fishing, lumbering and sand mining are the main economic activities in the communities, while commerce and oil industry-related activities dominate the urban and rural areas. The terrain is extremely difficult and a substantial portion of the region falls under the “world’s fragile ecosystem”. Many communities live along creeks and are accessible only by boats.

The riverine communities are particularly vulnerable to climatic changes and man-made disasters (floods, sea encroachment, oil pollution, piracy, hostage taking, communal conflicts, etc). Oil exploration started in the Niger Delta region in the late 1930s in Owerri and oil was found in commercial quantity in 1956 in Oloibiri community, in present day Bayelsa State. Since then oil production has increased significantly.

The Niger Delta region is faced with a lot of developmental and environmental challenges including unemployment, high level of poverty, decline in agricultural production, low level of industrial activities, environmental degradation and social conflicts. The unique characteristics of the Niger Delta region have made occasional and uncoordinated development efforts difficult, expensive, and unsustainable.

This is especially true when the implementers of the developmental effort have no long-term interest in developing the area. This is why Sir Henry Willink’s Commission (1958) recommended that the Niger Delta region deserves special developmental attention by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Consequently, the Federal Government established the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) in 1960 to handle the developmental needs and challenges of the region. In its years of existence, the NDDDB achieved little if anything before it faded away.

The 1963 constitution was fashioned to reflect some of the tenets of true federalism. For instance, it included a provision for the payment of 50% derivation (of rents and royalties from mineral resources) to the regions from where such mineral resources were obtained. But, when the military took over the government in 1966, it opted for a unitary system of government and dismantled the regional governments, replacing them with 12 “states” governments and increased the number gradually to 36 before handing over to a democratically elected regime in May 1999.

The Problem

The genesis of the Niger Delta struggle started from Oloibiri in the Niger Delta region, the first place where oil was struck in commercial quantities in 1956. The scientific survey published in 1997 by the Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES) reported that: "Poverty is prevalent in the Niger Delta and has been linked to degradation of agricultural lands and fishing waters. Affected people became impoverished. In many cases, they tend either to migrate to become part of the urban poor or to remain in their villages to grapple with the low yielding lands and poor sources of water" (Benjamin Ogbebulu). From the above description, we can conclude that the bone of contention is alienation of the people of the region from the benefit of the oil that they produce and the degradation of their environment unabated.

Generally speaking, communities are dissatisfied with the consequences from oil operations. This disaffection is expressed in various forms, including violent demonstrations against oil companies, blockades of their operations, oil theft, the sabotage of pipelines and other oil installations, and hostage-taking.

The current conflict in the Niger Delta arose in the early 1990s over tensions between foreign oil corporations and a number of the Niger Delta minority ethnic groups who feel they are being exploited, particularly the Ogoni, Ogba, Ijaw, etc. Ethnic and political unrest continued throughout the 1990s and persisted despite the return to democratic rule and the election of the Obasanjo government in 1999. Competition for oil wealth has fuelled violence between many ethnic groups, causing the militarization of nearly the entire region by ethnic militia groups as well as Nigerian military and police forces.

The agitations against degradation and underdevelopment of the Niger Delta are not really new. They belong to a long tradition of the resistance against political and economic external domination spanning centuries. Thus, the resource control struggle represents a stage in the history of Niger Delta resistance. The level of lawlessness in the region was alarming. With arms and ammunition in circulation, many communities in the region became battle fronts.

The point of departure in this paper is that various conflicts and crises in the Niger Delta propelled government, at all levels, to initiate actions, programmes and institutions towards achieving sustainable peace in the Niger Delta. Whether these initiatives have succeeded in bringing peace in the Niger Delta will be determined by the findings of this study.

Objectives of the Study

1. Examine the issues surrounding Niger Delta conflict and peace building process.
2. Identify the various peace-building strategies in the Niger Delta and their effectiveness.

Theoretical Framework

Inherent in all political systems and indeed, the general society, is the constant threat of one group to assert its interest over another. In every society, therefore, there occurs an infinite number of daily conflicts. Thus, human life revolves around conflicts and efforts are constantly made to manage this so that it does not lead to the integration of the society. The resource control conflict in the Niger Delta must be anchored upon a theoretical framework for justice to be done to the historical perspective of the struggle in this region.

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Scholars are increasingly linking resource conflicts to greed and at other times grievance. Yet the interrelationship between the two has implications for conflict and development. After the Second World War, there was the belief that the endowment of natural resource wealth would bring about socio-political and economic development to resource endowed states. But rather than engendering development, resource dependence has been found to be inimical to growth and a catalyst especially in developing countries like Nigeria.

The greed and grievance theory is a major contribution to the natural resource-conflict debate. The model has been popularised by Paul Collier and his associates as well as the World Bank. In recent times, this paradigm has been used extensively in analysing civil wars and conflicts in Africa, especially in resource-endowed but conflict-torn states such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo, to mention only a few. Some of the central ideas of the greed and grievance theory regarding rebellion and the functionality of violence in resource rich countries and regions.

Firstly, proponents of the greed theory maintain that the availability of natural resources in a country causes conflicts because the huge revenue that accrues from such resources serves ‘as “spoils” for government at all levels unwilling to distribute the revenue equitably. These advocates argue that conflicts and rebellion are chiefly motivated by greed, even though grievance is often declared as the propelling motive of such conflicts. This means that aggrieved people as in the case of the Niger Delta are likely to fight and encourage aggrieved people to also fight for everyone to enjoy the benefits accruable from their resources.

Secondly, militancy is equated to organised crime. This is because it thrives only through predatory activities such as the levying of protection charges, extortion, sales of extraction rights (‘booty future’), and kidnapping for ransom that render the organisation viable. Militant groups are not political organisations claiming to be pursuing social change, but they are also organised as criminal elements.

Research Design

We used the *Ex. post facto* Design which enabled us gather existing information and data from the communities, government, institutions and the public domain. The *Ex. post facto* design makes it possible for us to go back through time and sought the causes, consequences, relationships and meanings about the events in the Niger Delta region.

We used the purposive sampling technique to determine the areas to be covered in the Niger Delta in order to obtain representative samples. This non-probability sampling makes it easy to include areas and issues which we perceive are determinants of the Niger Delta conflict situation and its peace-building efforts at all levels.

Table 1: Selected Niger Delta States for the Research

S/N	Region	States
1.	Western Niger Delta	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Edo State• Delta State
2.	Central Niger Delta	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bayelsa
3.	Eastern Niger Delta	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rivers State• Akwa Ibom State

Presentation of Findings.

We collected primary data and organised them into timelines and historical events. Through tables we were able to capture meaning out of the entire research findings. The tables below explain the result of our data analysis.

Table 2: Major Conflicts and Crises in the Niger Delta

S/N	Timeline	Conflicts and Crises
1.	1895-1914	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benin raid/abduction of Oba of Benin • Abduction of King Jaja of Opopo • Abduction of King Nana of Itsekiri • Nembe war against Royal Niger Company(Akassa You Mi, Gbeke You Mi)
2.	Feb 22, 1966	Major Adaku Boro-led 12-Days Revolution
3.	1990	Umuechem Massacre 1990s (Shell/Nigerian Soldiers)
4.	1993 1995 (Nov 10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ogoni struggle and agitations. The killing of Ogoni 4 • Hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and 8 other compatriots
5.	1997	Warri crisis
6.	1999	Odi Massacre by Nigeria Soldiers
7.	1993 (October 4)	Egi Youths Uprising against TotalEnergies (Formerly Elf Petroleum)
8.	2001-2008	Militant uprising in the Niger Delta

Source: Author's research and secondary data collection.

Table 3: Peace-building Initiatives in the Niger Delta

S/N	Timeline	Initiators	Actions
1.	1957-1958	British Colonial office	• Sir Henry Willink's Commission on Fears of Minorities in Nigeria recommended a Federal Development Board
2.	1960	Nationalists/British Government	Nigeria gains Independence from Britain
3.	1962	Federal Government of Nigeria	Niger Delta Development Board(NDDDB) later changed to Niger Delta Basin Development Authority
4.	1981	Federal Government of Nigeria	1.5% Presidential Special Fund for Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Fund.
5.	1992	Federal Government of Nigeria	Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission. (OMPADEC) to manage 3% Oil Revenue Derivation.
6.	1997	Shell/World Bank	Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES)
7.	1999	Federal Government of Nigeria	Statutory 13% Oil Revenue Fund to Oil Mineral Producing States.
8.	2000	Federal Government of Nigeria	Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC).
9.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1993 • 2004-2014 	Total and Egi clan	Development Partnership Agreements (DPA)
10.	2006-Present	Shell Chevron Agip	GMOUs (Global Memorandum of Understanding)
11.	2008-2010	United Nations, FGN	• UNEP Report

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12	2015	FGN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Niger Delta Ministry
13	2016-	FGN United Nations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Clean-up of Ogoni land
14.	2008-2013	Federal Government of Nigeria	Amnesty Programme for the Niger Delta Militants
15.	2021	Federal Government of Nigeria	Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) with 3% Oil Revenue

Source: Author's research and data collection (2021)

Strategies for Peace-building

During the colonial period 1900-1959, the British colonial administrators shifted the emphasis to arbitration by setting up commissions and panels of enquiries. Under this approach, the major responsibility for conflict management and resolution moved away from the traditional rulers of communities in the Niger Delta region. In their place, the defunct Regional Governments, especially, the eastern Nigeria Government appointed and installed their own "paramount rulers" in form of Warrant Chiefs for the different local communities.

In response to the political agitations of minority groups in Nigeria (Niger Delta inclusive), the colonial offices set up the Sir Willinks' Commission of Inquiry into the Fears of Minorities in Nigeria (1958). The commission was set up to enquire into local conditions and identify the sources, causes, actors and consequences of conflicts. Similarly, panels were promptly set up when conflicts flared up, and decisive actions were taken on the recommendations approved and published in official Government White Papers.

The Sir Henry Willinks' Commission (1958, 94) recommended as follows:

This is a matter which requires a special effort and the co-operation of the Federal, Eastern and Western Governments; it does not concern one Region only. Not only because the area involves two regions, but because it is poor, backward and neglected, the whole of Nigeria is concerned. We suggest that there should be a Federal Board appointed to consider the problems of the area of the Niger Delta.

At independence, the state and federal governments, especially, from 1960-1969 have changed the face of conflict management and peace-building by indulging in the creation or adjustment of local governments areas (LGAs) as a vehicle for conflict resolution. The exercise in some cases deliberately split hitherto compatible ethnic groups, thereby promoting conflicts. The 1997 War crises in Delta State and the Nembe (Ogbolomabiri/Bassambiri) crises in Bayelsa State are examples.

Ochoche (1998) has outlined three broad instruments, practices or strategies adopted by the federal government for peace-building. These include the establishment of structures such as federal character principle and the committee system. The structures range from the adoption of federalism (1963) which strengthened the autonomous defunct Regions, State creation exercised (1967) and the propagation of federal character principle under which public offices are allocated to each of the federating units in the federation.

Under the committee system, we have the National Reconciliation Committee (NRC), Committee on Devolution of Power (CDP), and National Boundary Adjustment Commission

(NBAC). These actions have failed to achieve their desired objectives probably because the structures are not properly functionalized by the executive and supervisory agencies.

The post-Colonial States and the Nigerian Federal Governments do not seem to react swiftly and decisively to arrest the situations that threaten peace. This, in our opinion, have accounted for part of the reason why the principles and structures put in place have failed or unable to even reduce the tempo of conflicts and crises in the Niger Delta region.

According to Alagoa (2003:10-11).

*If we consider our present "contemporary" government practices, we may discover
That we have not done enough to manage conflicts, thus, creating opportunities for
conflict to escalate to the point where we have to take fire brigade action to resolve them.
And because the action was not thorough, it later resurfaces.*

The Contemporary Period

In recognition of the failure of post-independence State and Federal Governments in building peace in the Niger Delta, there is another shift of emphasis since 1990 to private individuals and organizations, including Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs); all searching for peaceful settlement of the Niger Delta conflicts. This shift in the modern times (contemporary period) became necessary as there was an uproar in 1990 when the Federal Government applied military force to destroyed Umuchem village in Etche of Rivers State for demonstrating over their economic and socio-economic rights. This was followed by the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight compatriots in 1995 and the Odi Massacre in 1999. In an effort to resolve the Ogoni crises and build peace, the Yakubu Gowon Centre (YGC) for instance, developed a multi-task approach.

The multi-track peace model is designed for major parties in conflict (Militant groups, Federal Government, MNOCs and the Host Communities) to work together as partners in the peace-building process.

The perspective and method of each track was synthesized through several technical sections between 1997 and 2003, and finally to a consensus peace document. The multi-track approach propelled three methods below:

1. **Effective communication:** The essential method incorporates skill and is normally the first steps to peace-making. This alternative seems to be the least explored strategy in conflict management, resolution, and peace building in the Niger Delta Region because of "self-imposed" roadblocks. The obstacle to this approach is usually created by the federal Government, which believes in its ability to apply forces, and the MNOCs that manipulate the situation for its economic gains. The essence of communication is to encourage all the parties to the conflict to listen with their ears and their minds in other to focus on the issues, and their remote and immediate causes, and to minimize the content of bias during the peace-building processes.
2. **Constructive Collaboration:** This encourages convergence of interests where community, government and companies pursue their respective interests and positions and to work together to resolve the age-longed problems of neglect and under development of the areas. It should be noted that collaboration is closely related to negotiation, which is focused on the issues involved to find a common ground. This leads to a consensus peace document that would be enforced for the benefit of the parties.

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3. **Mediation:** This encouraged the conflictual parties to use respectful language and never to interrupt while the other person or party was speaking. This method took into consideration the problems and the different positions of the disputants, i.e., Egi, Total, Ogoni people and SPDC, etc. The disputants were encouraged to encourage discussing the problems and proffering solutions in avoidance of an impasse. The goal at this stage was for all the parties to agree for a consensus peace document. The consensus peace document serves as the end result of the process that would be enforced for the benefit of all the parties. In the case of Shell, Chevron and Agip it produced the GMOU, while Total produced Development Partnership Agreement (DPA) with the host communities and government. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) is also a direct response of the Federal Government to address issues arising from the Niger Delta conflict. Although the multi-track approach appears to be attractive and so useful, it is not a full-proof approach. As noticed in the Ogoni case, the government is implementing a clean-up exercise of the environment which is regarded as a first step to peace in the area.

Conclusions and Recommendations

One striking thing at the Niger Delta is a range of issues on which cooperation among communities, civil society, oil companies and government is possible, but which are not pursued. For instance, all stakeholders agree on the dire developmental situation and living conditions of the people of the Niger Delta and the need to increase the benefits accruing to local communities from the oil economy.

As well, there is a broad agreement that there are legal, political and practical obstacles to the attainment of these ends, such as existing laws, high level of violence and insecurity, as well as corruption. Yet, little efforts have been put into working together to overcome these obstacles. The reason for this is that stakeholders are talking at rather than to each other. There is a lot of talking going on in the Niger Delta, but very little communication.

The consequence is the persistence of a conspiracy syndrome on the part communities and civil society, and a siege mentality on the part of oil companies. Thus, communities continue to feel that government officials have the ulterior motive of misappropriating funds and colluding with oil companies, who through political payments seek to perpetuate environmental degradation.

The most effective peace-building strategy is the Negotiation Method which leads to negotiated agreements and settlements. This method has been very effective in managing host communities/oil-companies relationships. Shell, Chevron, Agip, NLNG, etc have used the Global Memorandum of Understanding (GMOU) to address several issues of peace and sustainable development. Total has used the Development Partnership Agreement (DPA) effectively with her host communities.

The Amnesty Programme was achieved through negotiation with militant groups. Through negotiation and extensive discussions with multiple stakeholders of the Niger Delta, the NDDC and Niger Delta Ministry were created by the Federal Government.

On their part, oil companies continue to feel that restive communities maliciously target their installations and workers, and that government is incapable of providing secure environment for their operations.

Based on our findings above, we wish to make the following recommendations:

1. **Political Will:** The State and Federal Governments should demonstrate the political will and courage to prosecute individuals and corporate organizations who perpetrate conflicts in the communities. This will serve as deterrence to all groups.
2. **Adoption of Multi-Track Approach:** This approach involves all the major parties to the Conflict-Militant groups, States and Federal Governments, MNOCs, traditional rulers, NGOs, religious leaders and host communities. They should be put together to work as partners for peace. Legal structures should be placed on all stakeholders and disputants not to renege on consensus peace documents as this may derail the entire process.
3. **Limiting Proliferation of Arms:** Local and State Government and Community leaders should discourage the proliferation of the use of arms in addressing grievances. The proliferation of arms in the Region makes it easy for communities in the Niger Delta to resort to arms at the slightest provocation. The National Assembly must address this trend by enacting laws(s) with stiff penalties against communities, cult groups, and individual offenders who are found guilty in the wanton use of arms.
4. **Demilitarize the Region:** The Federal Government should desist from militarizing the area, since military expeditions have failed to serve as the solution to the problem. This is important because often times, the military, and security personnel deployed to the region create tensions that aggravate the precariously existing situation. In conclusion, we hold that while conflict is inherent in every human society, it does not have to be violent or result in negative consequences all the time. We believe that the stakeholders can transform the scenario in the Niger Delta without aggression. Active negotiation holds the key to sustainable peace in the Niger Delta region.

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