

Regional Concept and the Assessment of the Challenges of Regional Institutions in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

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Abstract

The ideology of regional policy, planning and development remains an early concept attempting to create spatial balance in the allocation and distribution of developmental resources and to reduce inequality within and among regions. Several esteem countries like France, Germany, Britain and USA adopted different regional policies to address their challenges at various periods. In Nigeria, regional institutions were first established in 1962 sequel to the recommendations of Sir Willink's Commission in 1958 to create sustainable economic and environmental friendliness and to reduce deplorable social conditions in the then Niger Delta. This paper examines the challenges faced by the regional institutions and attempts to proffer solutions to the identified problems. The present political states of the Niger Delta were randomly sampled. Subsequently, Rivers State was chosen. The identified regional institutions were listed and randomly sampled for detailed assessment while 20 structured questionnaires were administered to staff of the authority. Findings reveal confronting challenges of poor funding, staff commitment, corruption, poor man power resulting from lack of training, to reduce effects of policies and bad governance. Effective regional planning strategies, proper monitoring of the activities of regional institutions, and maintenance of the conceptive delineation of the recommended Niger Delta should be enhanced for the effective functionality of regional institutions in the Niger Delta.

Keywords:

Regional governance,
Institutional
problems,
Niger Delta,
Policy making,
Corruption.

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Background to the Study

The contemporary ideology of region does not stand on a new platform from that of the indicators rather, it remains in developmental sequence. It is a derivative concept from the discipline of geography, attempting to mark the surface of the earth into identities of physical, social and economic blocks. According to Omuta and Onokerhoraye (1994), the ideology of region was traditionally formulated by Ferdinand Von Richthofen in the 1880's and by Alfred Hettner in the 1890's and was further developed by Vidal de Blache in the 1900's. Attempting to design accurate delineation in the physical occurrence of region have always been challenging and call for inter-regional and intra-regional planning and development. Such planning and development can be ascertained in regional planning which is conceived to address the challenges of inequalities existing within and between regions through centrally directed allocation of resources to achieve certain regional and national objectives (Glasson, 1978).

Regional planning as a concept strives to inculcate developmental impulses into an identified region to address certain general needs of the people. It has been observed that spatial imbalance and disparity in development exist in all the nations and regions of the world through the distribution of resources and services and therefore, planning attempts to engender social justice and ensure an equitable distribution of these resources among all the component regions (Glasson, 1978; Adedipe, 2002).

Though, developing nations including all the countries in Africa are not the only victims. Regional inequality and agitation for planning is a universal challenge which confronted even the very today's developed countries. According to Areola et al (1992), the Tennessee Valley Authority was put together to address the depressed economy and the unproductive landscape of the Tennessee area in United States.

Also, it took the recommendations of the Barlow's Commission Report of 1973 to address the imbalance in the lopsided distribution of industrial population and the decentralization of the industries. Another very significant regional development approach in Europe was the gross investment into the Eastern part of Germany to bridge the gap after the unification in the 1980's. According to Abumere (1998) growth centre approach was employed in France to subdivide the country into mine functional regions as growth foci.

Several attempts have been made to address regional inequality in Nigeria. These were ascertained through the planned establishment of Niger Delta Development Boards, Agricultural Development Boards, Rivers Basins Development Authorities, creation of 36 states and a Federal Capital Territory; balkanization of the states into 774 Local Government Areas; and establishment of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). These established institutions are perpetually been confronted with several challenges ranging from lack of regional planning concept, poor funding, inconsistency in administration, corruption, political instability, duplication of functions and institutional deficiency. Development can only be enhanced in a nation like Nigeria through the practice of integrated regional development, and re-institutionalization of the existing regional institutions. This can be attained through proper assessment and addressing the existing as well as perceived problems faced by the institutions.

Objective of the Study

The objective is to examine the challenges faced by the regional institutions and attempts to proffer solutions to the identified problems.

Literature Review

Defining Region

The term “region” has its conception in the discipline of geography since the nineteenth century. It was used not only as a concept but as a tool of regional analysis. Thus, Omuta and Onokerhoraye (1994), assert that regional concept holds that the face of the earth can be marked off into areas of distinctive character and that the complex patterns and associations of phenomena in particular, possess a legible meaning, as ensemble, which added to the meanings derived from a study of all the parts and processes separately provide additional perspective and additional depth of understanding perspective and additional depth of understanding.

In the analysis of the concept of regional, Glasson (1978), views region from two perspectives. The first as a classification and device to segregate a real feature, while the other views region as an entity that can be identified and mapped. He further asserts that early scholars in the 20th century aligned with the first perspective using analytical approach to divide the world on the basis of land configuration, climate, vegetation and population density.

The concept of region has been assessed from the geographic, economic and political points. Due to the complexity of the definition and assessment, there exists no strong meeting point. Thus, Dawkins (2003), while determining the uniformity in the definition of region maintains that there is surprisingly little agreement among researchers as to how regions should be defined. Though, some of these theorists presume a priori existence of a cohesive geographic and economic entity.

Researchers like Christaller (1933) and Losch (1954), attempted to provide early approach for the definition of region. Taking critical view into the analysis of Christaller's theory of central place, regions are defined to be fusion of bigger and smaller places or cities with bottom-top dependence found within the hierarchical system. He maintains that each region has a smaller number of smaller lower order cities. The order of a city is determined by the diversity of good offered in the city which in turn, is determined by the relative size of market areas for different goods. The central place theory assumes that cities have to import goods from higher order cities and same time export to lower order cities and not to interact with other cities of the same order. Generally, it is acceptable that spatial structure of regions is deeply explained through Christaller's approach to the concept of region. The view of region in the above theory involves geographical space and economic activities of city and its surrounding cities.

The ideology of region can still be traceable to the activities of urban location, its expansion and population increase (urbanization). Thus, Harvey (1973), ascertain that the concept of a region was borne out of concern for city regions as the “urban centre – is regarded as containing a periphery, for there can be no centre without a periphery and each helps to define the others”. In this regard, “the city is inextricably bound up with its surrounding regions” (Jone, 1976).

Also, The Nigerian Urban and Regional Planning Law of 1992 defines region as an area of Land less than the country but more than a town area having distinctive characteristics that distinguish it from other areas. It maintains that such area of land as region is less than the state but more than a town area. These reveal that there can be no regional plan for the country and the state since the region must be less than each of these entities. In Nigeria, this could be responsible for the federal law calling for a National Physical Development Plan. A region therefore may be viewed as a geographical space delineated for its convenience or scientifically demarcated on the basis of its characteristics, such as natural resources, level of development, industrial mix, population or land form. It is a sub-spatial system within a larger national or international spatial and socio-economic system such that all regions are somehow connected to the others.

The above points have revealed that, a region is indeed capable of meaning all things to all men and no special classification exists to assist its definition. In spite of these ambiguities, the attributes of a region stand out clearly as a geographic or spatial entity with a location in space, and a real extent and specific boundaries (Malecki, 1997). An aggregation of these views projects the region as a spatially contiguous population of human beings that is bound either by historical necessity or by choice to a particular geographic location.

Regional Development Planning in Nigeria

Regional development planning is defined by Faniran (1981) as the planned development of the resources of a unit area in order to maximize returns on investment and to improve the living conditions of the inhabitants of the area concerned, has been in existence as a strategy for areal planning in Nigeria since the pre-colonial era. During this era, regional development planning could be traceable to have kicked up in 1917 during the enactment of the Township Ordinance of 1917, when settlements in the nation were classified into first – 'second' – and third – class towns. The settlement class dictated the number, types and order of facilities and services like road, educational and health institutions, electricity, telecommunication, pipe borne water, security like police as well as skill trainings. Subsequently, provincial and local government headquarters were created to serve as growth centres with the expectation that development will trickle down to the surrounding rural settlement (Hirschman, 1958; Myrdal 1957). At this point, development planning in Nigeria were mainly focused on urban planning, and regional development activities were mostly in form of transportation of rural agriculture to the urban areas.

The first actual policy on regional development could be lined to Sir Henry Willink's Commission in 1958. The Commission reported that Peculiar socio-economic and environmental development characterized the Niger Delta Region. The commission recommended that the area required prompt and special developmental attention. The Nigerian Government, therefore, established the Niger Delta Development Board during the first National Development Plan (1962-1968). The Board was expected to address developmental challenges of the then region (Yenagoa Province, Degema Province, the Ogoni Division of Port Harcourt and the Western Ijaw Division of the Delta Province) by conducting a systematic survey of the area as a potential producer of valuable products and manage developmental needs of the region.

Subsequently, especially from the independence, various efforts have been demonstrated to enhance development at the regional levels. Such as earlier noted include the establishment of Agricultural Development Boards; Rivers Basins Development Authorities, balkanization of the nation into 36 states (and a Federal Capital Territory), and 774 Local Government Areas; in addition to those in the Niger Delta, the creation of Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992 and later transformed to Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 1999, and tertiary institutions in every state in the country.

These notable institutions and boards were established with the expectation of developing people within the catchment and regions. Though, it is significant to know that none of these activities was backed by a comprehensive regional development plan, none save the creation of Abuja, adequately served as growth inducers for their hinterlands, and development gap between and within regions, especially when measured in terms of quality of life of the citizens, tends to increase rather than decrease (Weinard, 1973); Ebumere, 1975; Gaile, 1980; Gana, 1986; Egunjobi, 1989; Sanni, 2010). It becomes necessary to assess various elements and factors which tend to reduce and affect regional institutions in Nigeria with special interest in the Niger Delta.

Challenges of Regional Planning and Institutions in Nigeria

Regional planning which is universally acceptable as an important tool in national development is still experiencing significant level of problems in Nigeria. The basic responsible factors for poor regional planning and development are assessed from institutional such as policy making and implementation as well as socio-economic perspective like poverty, inequality and segregation and physical like desertification, deforestation, erosion and environmental pollution resulting from the activities of oil industries as generally experienced in the core Niger Delta. One out – standing challenge of regional institutions in Nigeria is traceable to the inability in the design of regional policies and plans as well as proper conceptualization of region. Thus, it is observed that Nigeria has no regional development policy framework such that what currently seems to be ongoing as regional development is not based on deliberate regional development plans and policies. As asserted by Mabogunje (1978); Yunusa,(2014), “Nigeria has never deliberated emanated regional planning policies aimed at deliberately attaining the objective of reducing regional inequalities. Others like Barbour (1972) and Ajaegbu (1976) have earlier stressed this issue independently. Adeniyi (1983), ascertained that considerable effort has been devoted to sectoral and financial planning to near – neglect of regional and spatial planning.

The practice of regional planning in Nigeria is tailored toward the enhancement of rural development. Thus, the concept of regional planning and development is scarcely found and practiced in policy agenda. George (2007), for instance, notes that the issue of regional planning is seen as rural development and resource conservation. This perspective is still not close to the spatial distribution of various activities and population in urban areas or regions as the pre-occupation of physical planning. Another significant factor confronting regional planning in Nigeria is the lack of regional physical plan as an integrated component of the national planning and development process has been noted to be endemic and responsible for the poor spatial structure of development.

Also, it is found that some of the agencies set up by the government of Nigeria to address regional problems failed to meet their expectations resulting as major regional challenge. Thus, Okereocha (2013), while assessing one of the major agencies – the River Basin Development Authorities maintain that virtually all of them have performed below the expectations of Nigerians, such that most farmers never benefitted from the authorities.

Others like Udofia (1988) and Scudder (1994) attribute failure of some authorities to poor implementation to deliver on their designed mandate of integrated regional development in sub-Saharan Africa is the fault of the operators and not the authority as a concept. Another significant factor as attached to be responsible for the failure of the Authorities is duplication of functions and institutional deficiencies. Thus, Akanmu, Eluwa and Ekpo (2007) maintain that institutional deficiencies were responsible for the failure of the River Basin Development Authorities (RBDAs) especially with the establishment of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), with the mandate to co-ordinate the physical development of nine (9) states which simultaneously belong to different RBDAs. This accordingly, is in addition to the separate mandates of the states and their agencies which also share in the provision of the institutional services of RBDAs. This overlapping jurisdictional duplicity creates obvious and expected administrative and management bottlenecks that can frustrate, constrain and limit the effectiveness of Authorities to deal with their mandates (UNDP, 2006; Omuta, 2011).

It is interesting to note that several studies on the major regional agencies reveal that not poor funding but diversion of funds. It is the appropriation or misappropriation of funds allocated (Kumolu, 2013). It has also been confirmed by several researchers who investigated into the activities and failure of the regional development agency that corruption actually stand as the major challenge. Thus, Barrow (1998); Edigin and Okonma (2010); and Omuta (2011), maintain that official corruption has been variously and strongly implicated in the failure of the RBDAs.

To further ascertain the challenges of the agency, Faniran (1981), has attributed the widespread failure of the regional development agencies including RBDAs partly to the fact that resources were controlled by a range of bodies, mostly for sectoral projects. He maintains that while for instance the RBDAs receive their core allocations through the Ministry of Water Resources, they also receive allocation for the purpose of implementing the Mellenium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as from other multinational donor's agencies like World Bank (Okereocha 2013).

The Niger Delta Development Commission which is one of the regional development agencies supposed to oversee the activities of delta region of Nigeria is confronted with political delineation of the physical space of the region. Thus, political interest is found to manifest in the development and delineation of the Niger Delta. The Commission (NDDC), which is supposed to engineer development of the slate delta by the Willink's Commission, its scope was increased to presently covering about nine states whose terrains do not possess characteristics and challenges of the commissioned Niger Delta. Also, the Niger Delta Development Commission seems to have abandoned confronting challenges in the area like in Ogoni and other parts of the initial Niger Delta, but concentrating on the perceived

political Niger Delta. It is also observed that another serious challenge of regional development in Nigeria is the lack of assurance that the funds allocated to state/regional authorities will be used to stimulate development in all parts of the state concerned. Thus, Omuta and Onokerhoraye (1994), confirm that there has been a concentration of development in the state capital at the expense of other areas (rural settlements). This current situation of bias has necessitated the enhancement of increasing in equality between the major urban centres and the rural areas.

Methodology

This entails the identification of the politically acceptable Niger Delta States. These are Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Abia, Imo and Ondo. Subsequently, 10% of these states were sampled and Rivers State was chosen. Also identified regional institutions in Rivers State were sampled. The institutions were as follow;

- i. Niger Delta River Basin Development Authority
- ii. Federal University – University of Port Harcourt
- iii. Federal Government College
- iv. Federal College of Education
- v. 23 Local Government Areas

This was followed by the sampling of 20% of the above institutions in which, Niger Delta River Basin Development Authority was chosen for detail study. Subsequently; 20 structured questionnaires were administered in-confidence to 20 staffs of the Authority.

Findings and Discussion

The examined regional institution is one of the prominent federal government agencies charged with the earlier responsibility of providing regional services and development in the region. Findings reveal that 16 out of the 20 respondents representing 80.05% affirmed that poor funding was the major challenge confronting regional institutions in the Niger Delta. It maintains that staff commitment constituted another serious challenge as 70.0% confirmed this particular activity. Though, 13 respondents symbolizing 65.0% ascertained that corruption actually maintained central position and posed serious problem in regional development institution. Another outstanding activity which also confronts regional institution is poor man power as 11 out of 20 respondents representing 55.0% affirmed to the statement. It is significant to note that 12 symbolizing 60.0% revealed that bad governance was not actually a major issue in the administration and effective functionality of regional development institutions in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. This is closely followed by 11 representing 55.0% who maintained that poor policies were not the major issue. (See table below).

**Table 1: Summary of Field Survey
Presence of the following Activities in the Authority**

Activity	Yes		No		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Corruption	13	65.0	7	35.0	20	100.0
Poor Funding	16	80.0	4	20.0	20	100.0
Bad Governance	8	40.0	12	60.0	20	100.0
Poor Man Power	11	55.0	9	45.0	20	100.0
Staff Commitment	14	70.0	7	30.0	20	100.0
Poor Policies	9	45.0	11	55.0	20	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2016

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined various approaches toward the definition of region and outline reasons why regional planning cannot be avoided in a nation like Nigeria. The necessitating conditions for the practice of regional planning are found to be prominent, such ranging from intra to inter regional inequalities. The increasing imbalance prompted serious quest for equity in the allocation of infrastructure and to create socio-economic balance which existed from the colonial to the present era. Early attempts at achieving regional development were through the inculcation and establishment of regional institutions were examined. Findings revealed that almost all these institutions failed due to challenges ranging from policy inconsistencies to corruption, poor funding and bad governance. The paper recommends proper monitoring and assessment of foreign regional development policies for the enhancement of functional and effective regional development in Nigeria.

Recommendation

The Nigerian government will have to carry out regional development in line with regional planning strategies which will gear up regional institutions. Proper monitoring of the institution should be carried out to assess areas of deficiencies like corruption, poor funding and policy in consistency. Also, to ensure effective planning in Nigeria, the initiatives and concepts of regional planning in some European countries can be imitated.

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