

Is the Niger Delta Neglected?

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Abstract

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is seen as neglected and marginalized by the federal government and oil multinational corporations in spite of the area's contributions to the economic sustenance of the country. This perception has precipitated militancy and insurrection in the region; and is canvassed by mainstream scholarship in the region. This paper examines the veracity of this perspective in the face of recent developments in the country. The paper basically answered three questions: was the Niger Delta neglected and marginalized? Is the Niger Delta region neglected and marginalized? Why is there a persistence of development deficit in the Niger Delta region in the face of its huge natural resource endowment? The objective was to locate the fundamental issues responsible for the perpetuation of underdevelopment in the region, and how to ameliorate such issues. The study argues that the neglect and marginalization of the Niger Delta region was in the past; that the region receives a lot of attention from the federal government and oil producing companies currently. The study was conducted through the lenses of federalism; and used primary and secondary data. The instrument for primary data collection was participant observation. The data revealed that there was neglect and marginalization of the region in the past. However, the federal government and oil companies have committed significant sums of money to the region, enough to spark off development in the region. Inept and irresponsible local ruling class is the reason for the perpetuation of underdevelopment in the region in the present time. Consequently, it was recommended that Niger Deltans should hold the local ruling class accountable. To effect this there has to be a mental liberation of the people, as well as publicizing the evidence of intervention by the federal government and oil companies.

Keywords: *Neglect; Marginalization; Oil Producing Communities; Niger Delta Region*

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Background to the Study

Coleman (1986), looking at the nature of the Nigerian state, observes that “the groups that make up its population reflect the widest range of political organization of any territory on the continent” (p.4). This character hoists on the country a cacophony of demands and expectations among its constituent parts and people. Each group remains distinct in spite of the integrating efforts of the state. Each is engaged in a cut throat competition for political and economic spaces; and ascending and retaining the top of the food chain remain the preoccupation of each participant. In this situation each participant tries hard to give up as little as possible, while maximizing its profits. The Niger Delta is about the most viable and most prosperous unit in Nigeria. The region's claim to prominence is anchored on it being the nerve center of the nation's hydrocarbon resources, and the country's developmental quest is buoyed by these same resources. Given its contributions to the country's economic sustenance, many within and outside the region thought the region would be one of the best treated, most developed in the world.

However Okoko and Johnson (1996) observe that “The oil producing communities have always been cheated since as minorities, the prevailing criteria have only served as a means of siphoning their resource to the domain of the major ethnic groups” (p. 126). Natives of the region and scholars of Niger Delta extraction contend that they and their area are neglected and marginalized. Political agitations (such as demands for the creation of states and restructuring), economic demands on the Nigerian state (such as asking for the application of the principle of derivation in revenue allocation), as well as militancy (resort to sabotage, boycotts, and military actions) are some of the avenues deployed to give vent to the pains experienced in the region. The region has become a hotbed of revolts and violence; conditions that add enormously to the development deficit in the area.

As stated above, the region's claim to political and socio-economic relevance lies in the fact that Nigeria depends on the region for economic survival. The region is the sub-structure on which the rest of the country rests; a role it has played for about fifty years. The place has very little to show for its role in development terms, Hence the neglect and marginalization thesis. This thesis merits a closer examination and elucidation however. Thus three fundamental questions are to be addressed in this study: was the Niger Delta neglected and marginalized? Is the Niger Delta neglected and marginalized? Why the persistence of development deficit in the region in the face of its enormous economic endowment?

The paper develops a central thesis of its own, viz: the Niger Delta was neglected and marginalized before the Fourth Republic (1999-date). The status of the region has changed since then as it now enjoys unprecedented attention from the Nigerian state and multinational oil corporations. The poor level of development is explainable by factors endogamous to the region. This argument was advanced using federalism as a theoretical framework. Secondary and primary sources of data were deployed. Whereas documentary materials constitute the secondary sources, participant observation constitute the primary data gathering instrument.

Operationalization of Concepts

Neglect: Is a condition in which a group of people are disregarded in the determination of their own affairs.

Marginalization: Refers to a situation in which a group of people are considered unimportant and irrelevant in the exploration and exploitation of their environment.

Oil Producing Communities: Refers to areas that own and produce crude oil.

Niger Delta Region: As used in this study, refers to nine oil producing states in Nigeria, including: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers.

Federalism and the Delimitation of Obligations

Federalism, wherever it exists, sees the delimitation of responsibilities between vertical and coordinate governments as a cardinal and primary objective. This component was uppermost in the mind of Wheare (1963) when he conceptualized federalism as a governmental system anchored on the division of powers such that a general government and regional governments are each within a defined sphere co-ordinate and independent. In keeping with Where's postulations every federal state has at least two tiers of government sharing governmental responsibilities and obligations. Each tier has unfettered latitude to act independently. Nigerian constitutions, from the Macpherson Constitution to the present, contain a concurrent legislative list that states duties which both tiers of government could do at any given time.

Almond, Powell, Strom, and Dalton (2004) explain that federalism is a system of separation of powers that ensures prevention of injustices that could come from unchecked legislative or executive power. Given this characterization there is no reason why states in the Niger Delta could not address the centuries old neglect and marginalization in the region. Doing so would have amounted to using governmental power to mediate abuses and injustices perpetuated by government.

Sodaro, Collinwood, Dickson, Klesner, and Sisk (2008) emphasize that a federal state has certain marked differences from a unitary system. According to them, unlike a unitary system, federalism “combines central government authority with significant decision-making powers for local officials”(p.453). Nigeria has been a federal state even before the attainment of independence. The local officials in the Niger Delta are constitutionally empowered and morally expected to make decisions that would transform the region. Indeed Magstadt (2006) recounts that the component units in the German federation played very vital roles in the development of the country shortly after World War II, and even checked the excesses of the national government.

Federalism affords local authorities a large room for independent thought and action, and this can be exploited to effect development engineering at sub-national level. Development therefore is a joint responsibility of the national and sub-national authorities. The adoption of

federalism in this study facilitates understanding of the work since the research setting, Nigeria, is a federal state. The framework adopted herein enhances examination of the issues of interest to this paper.

Neglect and Marginalization in the Niger Delta

The neglect and marginalization of the Niger Delta region was centuries old as it started from about the sixteenth century. About that time Europeans came to the Niger Delta coast and entered into a trade relationship with the natives. Though the Niger Delta middlemen made profits from the trans Atlantic trades, it was clear they were the junior partners in the relationship. Cooley (1974) states that for Deltans of the sixteenth century and after, the most important component of their participation in the international trading system was the sourcing and supply of ever increasing number of slaves from the mainland. The merchandise actually initially originated from the Delta communities. The first slaves were natives of the area who were unable to pay their creditors, or were convicted of criminal activities. Even when the slaves came from the mainland it has to be stated that many of the communities involved presently qualify to be called Niger Delta communities.

In 1807 the legitimate trade officially replaced the slave trade in the region. This trade was characterized by the violation of human rights of the natives, unacceptable trade practices, and siphoning of surplus from the region to Europe. Members of the indigenous ruling class were targets of dethronement, deportation, and displacement. In some cases they were forced to early and dishonorable graves. Tamuno (2011) describes the hardships the people endured in the name of commerce. According to him, “The King and the people of Brass (Nembe) had, for several years, sent to the Consular authorities their serious grievances against the RNC whose regulations had deprived them of their traditional markets and thus exposed them to starvation” (p. 50). The Royal Niger Company (RNC), consular authorities, and other European commercial interests formed a league the objective of which was to pauperize the natives and siphon surplus to Europe. The Europeans who lived in the Niger Delta applied modern technology to effect a comfortable existence. They ensured that the natives remained under pristine and harsh conditions. Thus the foundation for apartheid in the area was laid. The protestations of the natives fell on disinterested ears.

The RNC was both a business concern and a government; and enjoyed an unfettered British government support and backing. Azaiki (2007) shows that King Koko went to war in 1895 against the RNC and its backers due to the business and administrative rascality displayed by the latter. Azaiki (2007) states further that “This war, the Akassa War of 1895, was an expression of the king's determination to protect the rights of his people against an oppressive power that sought to marginalize and side-track them” (p. 153). The spread of colonial rule was trailed by further neglect and marginalization. Azikiwe (1970) gives a glimpse of the logic of colonial rule, stating that the colonial regime “flagrantly exercised its powers without regard to the dictates of conscience and equity” (p. 372). A leadership devoid of conscience and equity is certainly incapable of positively impacting its followership. The people of the Niger Delta, and the other minorities dotted across the country, were in no illusion that the attainment of independence would improve their existential conditions. They therefore made

an unsuccessful bid to extricate themselves from the neglect and marginalization of the nascent indigenous ruling class.

Moro (2009) observes that that leadership was “tribalistic” and “nepotic”, and so favored its kin, near and extended (p.12). To worsen matters, the state entered into an alliance with multinational oil corporations operating in oil producing communities in the Niger Delta. The league continues the tradition of siphoning surplus from the region (this time to the regions of the dominant ethnic groups in the country who also control the state). They also, like the Europeans before them, built an oasis of wealth and comfort in the region where they live in opulence and affluence. Eremie (2008) locates a “triumvirate or a tripod made up of the three dominant ethnic groups. Members of these groups have dominated the polity, economic and social life of the country since independence” (p. 82). The rise of Goodluck Jonathan, a Niger Deltan, may be seen as a negation of this assertion. However, a closer examination would show the veracity of this claim. Jonathan only became president because the dominant groups so permitted. Once he no longer enjoyed their confidence they made sure he lost his position even when he was an incumbent president. The self-seeking tribalistic and nepotic leadership saw control of political power as an avenue for looting resources from less fortunate regions to their domains. Alamiyeseigha (2005) argues that the Nigerian nation depends on the Ijaw for survival, but the needs of the Ijaw have been neglected by the Nigerian state. “Inevitably, therefore, the gap between abundance and penury, and that between self-sufficiency and want continue to widen. Today there is something everyone of Ijaw stock has come to understand: the cry of poverty and the pain of deprivation” (p. 38). The Ijaw is one of the tribes that inhabit the Niger Delta, it is also one of the major oil producing communities in Nigeria. It is also typical of the saying that some people have their feet in the river while they have soap in their eyes.

Okoko, Nna and Ibaba (2006) blame the situation on the legal framework. They argue that the constitution places oil exploration and exploitation in the federal government, and so this deprives the oil producing communities much of the oil revenue. They argue further that this state of affairs is responsible for the conflicts and crises in the region. The region displays all the trappings of resource curse: poverty in the midst of plenty; deprivation; corruption; want; disease; hunger; and several other such indices. Observations show that the crescendo of protests and revolts against the state and oil multinationals increased towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. One aftermath of this has been that the federal government and oil producing companies have directed their attention on the region, starting from the year 2000. To answer the first question “was the Niger Delta region neglected and marginalized? The answer is yes. It was neglected and marginalized from the pre-colonial era, through the colonial period, to about the year 2000, as the data show.

Remediation of Neglect and Marginalization in the Niger Delta

In response to the upsurge in agitations in the region against the national government, the latter took some definite steps. The first was the faithful application of the principle of derivation as part of the revenue allocation criteria. In 1953 the colonial state decided to regionalize the commodity marketing boards which were till then an exclusive preserve of the

national government. Awolowo (1960) records that sequel to that decision, allocation of proceeds from the boards was based on the principle of derivation, and the Western Region was very happy with the situation, as it gave the region an unprecedented revenue buoyancy. The oil producing areas of Nigeria have hoped that this principle would be continued in sharing of revenue from the Federation Account. There has been a progressive increase in the application of this principle in the distribution of the proceeds of the Federation Account. It moved from 1.5%, to 3%, and now 13%. The practical implication of this is that states of the federation first appropriate 13% of the Federation Account based on their contributions to the Account. Business A M Live (2018) reports that the oil producing states shared a total of 602.37 billion naira in sixteen months, between January, 2017 and April 2018. The breakdown is as follows:

Table 1: 13% Allocation (Derivation Principle) to Oil Producing States, January, 2017 to April 2018

Month/Year	Amount (Billion Naira)
January, 2017	26.83
February, 2017	34.11
March, 2017	3.87
April, 2017	35.75
May, 2017	29.94
June, 2017	26.96
July, 2017	29.89
August, 2017	31.59
September, 2017	41.97
October, 2017	40.22
November, 2017	40.85
December, 2017	43.21
January, 2018	51.74
February, 2018	52.74
March, 2018	57.49
April, 2018	55.98

Source: Business AM Live (2018).

Copley (2016) discussing the proposed 2017 Federal Government Budget, makes the following observation:

President Buhari has allocated more to the oil-producing Niger Delta region ... The Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs has been allocated N33 billion (\$108 million); the Niger Delta Development Commission – a federal government agency with the sole mandate of developing the oil-rich Niger Delta region – has been allocated N61 billion (\$300 million); an additional N65 billion (\$213 million) has been allocated for the militant's amnesty program...(n.p.).

The figures considered do not include regular allocations from the Federation Account to states in the region. Thus it can safely be argued that huge sums of money came into the region that could be deployed to significantly address the development deficit in the area. The figures may not be considered enough in overall terms, but they are significant enough to swing the pendulum in favor of development. States in the region receive billions of naira in derivation revenue annually as the data in table two show.

Table 2: 13% Derivation Revenue Receipts for Selected Niger Delta States, 2007-2018.

Year	AMOUNT(billion naira)				
State	IMO	BAYELSA	RIVERS	ABIA	AKWA IBOM
2007	5.01	49.44	126.74	3.01	78.34
2008	6.72	65.7	156.68	4.73	98.02
2009	4.07	33.47	75.8	3.75	69.58
2010	5.33	65.53	98.57	5.44	107.13
2011	6.22	101.54	131.31	4.74	129.62
2012	5.89	102.68	127.51	4.23	150.94
2013	6.49	67.06	58.61	6.73	96.26
2014	6.26	106.33	111.41	6.51	166.28
2015	3.96	62.82	64.3	4.1	107.04
2016	2.1	40.97	44.73	1.93	63.31
2017	3.7	72.29	70.18	3.9	93.27
2018	6.0	116.07	114.05	7.92	149.06

Source: Adapted from National Bureau of Statistics (cited in www.theatlas.com)

The amount a state draws from this fund is determined by certain ascertainable variables. The first is the quantity of crude oil the federation is able to sell at a given accounting period. The more the quantity of crude oil sold the more the amount standing to the credit of the Federation Account. The second variable is the price of the commodity in the world market. Prices are very volatile due to certain factors, among them, viz: demand level; geopolitical forces at play; the number of sellers available at any given time; and the general health of the world economy. What an individual state gets reflects its direct contribution to the total. In other words the percentage contribution made by a state to the overall output of crude oil determines what that state gets. This explains why states such as Rivers, Akwa Ibom and Bayelsa enjoy more revenue than Imo and Abia States.

On the whole these states receive revenue that if well and properly directed would have lifted the region out of poverty, unemployment and want. It would also have enhanced the security architecture capable of improving the general standard of living of the citizens. In the 1970s Nigeria enjoyed an economic boom occasioned by high demand for crude oil and high prices for petroleum products. Rather than use the wealth to ignite sustainable development of the country, the leaders of Nigeria pursued a policy of waste and irresponsible living. The country therefore lost a rare opportunity for development. Fortune again smiled on the country, and especially the Niger Delta region when oil prices went up to 100 dollars per barrel, with an

accompanying strong demand for petroleum products. As the data above indicate over 602.37 billion naira in sixteen years came to the region by way of derivation. The region does not have much to show for this sum.

The federal government also created the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs and Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to address issues of development in the region. Healthy budgetary allocations are made to the Ministry and Commission by the federal government. The NDDC budget is propped up by the major oil producing companies. Ukpong (2017) reports that “President Muhammadu Buhari in his speech at the National Assembly... announced an allocation of N53.89 billion for the Niger Delta Ministry and N71.20 billion for the Niger Delta Development Commission, NDDC, in the 2018 budget proposal, a marked increase over last year”(n.p.).Elumoye (2019) reports that the Senate rejected the sum of 23 billion naira voted for the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, describing it as too meagre. A neglected and marginalized region would not consider a sum of 23 billion naira too meagre to be accepted. In addition to all these there is the amnesty to ex-militants programme that pays out a monthly stipend of 65 thousand naira to each repentant militant. Observations show that those who head the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, the Niger Delta Development Commission, and the Amnesty Programme are usually indigenes of the region.

The data presented and analyzed in this section clearly show that the Niger Delta region can no longer be qualified to be called a neglected and marginalized region in the face of the various interventions the area presently enjoys. The negative disposition of the federal government and the oil corporations discussed in the preceding section changed as a result of the upsurge in protests and agitations by individuals and groups in the region. The change in disposition is manifested in the creation and funding of a ministry and interventionist agencies and programmes. Indigenes of the region are put in charge of these government establishments, thereby giving them an opportunity to run the affairs of their region. These activities have lasted for upwards of fifteen years, long enough for the positives to manifest in the lives of the natives of the region. Fruit of development engineering takes time to sprout, mature and ripen. There are the short term, medium term and long term benefits. The special interventions in the Niger Delta region have gone on long enough to effect desirable short and medium term changes. However observations point in an opposite direction. Therefore explanations need to be found elsewhere.

Perpetuation of Underdevelopment in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta continues to display most of the defining characteristics of underdevelopment, including: poverty, want, unemployment, income inequality, insecurity, and so on. This state of affairs in the past fifteen years or so is not the result of exogenous factors. It is not due to neglect and marginalization by the federal government or irresponsible oil producing companies. It is due to endogamous forces; internal factors bothering on leadership deficit. The great Chief Obafemi Awolowo, one of the fathers of the Nigerian state, and one of those who started modern administration in Nigeria, gave a treatise on the responsibilities of government. Awolowo (1960) posits that:

we believe in the equality of all men, and in the liberty of the individual. I believe that every citizen, however humble and lowly his station in life, has a right to demand from his government the creation of those conditions which will enable him progressively to enjoy, according to civilised standards, the basic necessities of life as well as reasonable comfort and a measure of luxury (p. 269).

The Niger Delta ruling class fails to meet citizens' expectations. Inequality in the Niger Delta, it has been observed, has increased since the special interventions by the federal government and the oil companies. There are insinuations that the ruling class appropriates the resources meant to develop the region. Business AM Live (2018) reports that “It could be recalled that some time ago, the leadership of Oil and Gas Producing Communities of Nigeria had alleged that the governors of the states had embezzled over N8.1 trillion between 2000 to June 2013 to the detriment of poverty-stricken oil producing communities”(n.p.). The local ruling class, through administrative recklessness, ineptitude and a lack of administrative dexterity, continues to pour sand in the wheel of socio-economic development.

Interestingly members of the ruling class are aware of their failings, and they expose themselves when they engage in intra-class clashes. Bayelsa and Rivers States are engaged in dispute over some oil wells claimed by both states. Tensions boiled over and the Governors of the two states went after each other's throats, exchanging tantrums publicly. Nwachukwu (2019) reports that Governor Wike of Rivers State accused his Bayelsa counterpart, Seriake Dickson, of having nothing to show for eight years of administering his state in spite of the huge revenue at his disposal. If this allegation is true, then a pertinent question has to be answered – what did Governor Dickson do with all the allocations he received while in office? This trend is typical of the workings of the Nigerian state as a whole, but more so in the Niger Delta. Okonjo-Iweala (2012) explains the situation succinctly, stating that in 2004 Nigeria earned some 25 billion dollars from oil; the figure for 2005 was 45 billion dollars. This figure was shared by the federal government, state governments, and local governments. She states further that “The governors of the states have almost complete autonomy in the constitution as to how to manage and use these resources. The states and local governments are mandated to provide certain basic services: education, health, waste management, water, rural and state roads, and other states and municipal services”(p.84). Effective provision of these services would have catapulted oil producing communities into Eldorado given the huge revenues the oil brought to them. This has however not been the case. Okonjo-Iweala (2012) notes that Nigerians have witnessed a deterioration in service delivery where they expected their money to be spent on improving their lot. They have rather witnessed a looting of their money.

The situation was ably summarized by Ibaba (2017) who described the crisis in the Niger Delta as “the crisis of leadership in the region, and the resultant poor quality of governance, service delivery, overt corruption and the consequent neglect of development”(p. xi). Now this is the sand in the grains of the Niger Delta people, the reason why the region has remained underdeveloped. Once the sand is removed the region would become a high flier as long as development is concerned; and this shall only be effected internally.

Conclusion

The claim of neglect and marginalization often made by scholars and people of Niger Delta extraction was interrogated in this study. Drawing from both primary and secondary data, it has been revealed that this claim can no longer be substantiated in the face of huge sums of money earned by the region from 13% derivation, allocations to the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, the Niger Delta Development Commission and the Amnesty Programme. It was further revealed that the continued underdevelopment of the region is due primarily to leadership deficiency, inept and irresponsible local ruling class devoid of any commitment to the betterment of the existential conditions of the ordinary people of the region. Adoption of the measures hereunder adumbrated would significantly change the narrative in the Niger Delta region.

There is presently a high degree of misinformation in the Niger Delta region which impedes the capacity of the people to hold their leaders accountable. There should be a mental liberation as a prelude to making the regional ruling class accountable to the people. Citizens conscious of their rights, and insistent on the enjoyment of same, are the most effective bulwarks against misrule, as well as inept and irresponsible leadership. Once such transformation is observed in the followership, the ruling class would have little room for continuance of ineffectual leadership.

Furthermore, evidence of intervention by federal government, the Niger Delta Development Commission, and Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, should be publicized using conventional media and in local languages in the region. Such step would enable the people to appreciate the depth and magnitude of the interventions, and thereby reduce the level of deception currently prevalent in the region. It would also reduce animosity felt by Niger Deltans towards the federal government and the oil producing companies. The poisoned environment in the region that militates against investments in the non-oil sector would be remediated and the living standard of the general population remarkably improved.

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