

Poverty, Monetization of Conflict and Insecurity in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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Abstract

The issue of poverty has been a subject of concern for academics and policy makers around the world. In the Niger Delta region poverty has been correlated with the emergence of an economy of conflict with a cyclic character that has engulfed the region over the years. Therefore, this paper examines the theoretical and empirical linkages between poverty, monetization of conflict and insecurity in the Niger Delta region. The paper relies on the Marxist theoretical assumption especially the emergence of poverty as a result of the social evils associated with the expanded reproduction of capital. However, drawing on the strength of rigorous content analysis of existing theoretical and empirical literature, the paper submits that widespread poverty benefits the ruling class as it provides a veritable platform for the monetization of conflict and the persistence of insecurity in the Niger Delta region. In other words, in the midst of poverty, conflict has now assumed the place of a commodity similar to any of its kind in the market place, making it easy for more youths to get involved in illicit socio-economic activities that continually undermine security in the region. The paper concludes that the original class-based struggle to emancipate the Niger Delta region from the shackles of exploitation to entrench a more humane social system that addresses the many challenges of the people notably poverty amidst plenty has been clearly defeated under the new approach of monetizing conflict which in itself is a ruling class strategy that takes advantage of widespread poverty amongst the people.

Keywords: *Poverty, Monetization, Conflicts, Insecurity, Niger Delta.*

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Background to the Study

The issue of poverty has long been a subject of concern for academics and policy makers around the world. While there are practical dimensions to this concern drawing on empirical works by scholars and international development agencies such as the World Bank, United Nations among others, the theoretical focus especially within the field of sociology and economics have been overwhelming. For sociologists particularly, two competing theories have dominated the analytical endeavor with regard to poverty even in the Niger Delta region.

These theoretical perspectives are functionalism and Marxism with the latter attracting more scholarship than the former. This is however due to the fact that the subject matter of poverty and indeed its relationship to other variables like conflict in the Niger Delta seem to have more correctness under the analytical umbrella of Marxism in terms of causal explanation when compared with Functionalism. This is not to say that those who profess Functionalism and by extension the functions of poverty as well as conflict in society do not maintain some level of correctness at least from their scholarly conviction. But the challenge with a functional analysis of poverty is that billions of people who live with poverty globally are bound to disagree with its results.

In the Niger Delta of Nigeria for instance, it is known that poverty amidst plenty (Okaba, 2005) is a major causal factor for the conflict economy (Ikelegbe, 2005) that has characterized the region over the years. This perhaps accounts for the number of youths involved in the conflict economy and the magnitude as well as the dimensions of such conflicts. This is why it is easy to submit that conflict and its multidimensional character in Nigeria cannot be entirely dealt with unless the issue of poverty and all its associated adverse socio-economic allies like youth unemployment, low literacy rate among others have been conveniently addressed.

Sadly, instead of addressing the core issues that generate conflict and violence in the Niger Delta as well as Nigeria in general, the ruling elite as Marx would say further exploits the masses by taking advantage of their poverty situation to create an unholy scenario where young people are paid to get involved in conflict actions. In other words, youths find it worthwhile to be employed as conflict actors by the ruling elite who flourish under this condition and retain political power through the process. This is why Michael Peel (2009) in his book titled; *A swamp full of dollars* alluded to the fact that he had always thought that the conflict in the Niger Delta region reflected the genuine desire of the people to get justice not knowing that youths in the conflict are only gainfully employed.

Research Problem

It is important to note that Marx and mostly neo-Marxists after him such as Rosa Luxemburg especially resting on the logic of destruction of local economies, have explained, that the motion of traditional capitalism generates some key contradictions that undermine local economies where ever they tend to nest. In this sense, capitalism and its associated activities especially those of International Oil Corporations (IOCs) generate socio-ecological disincentives that reduces the potential of local people to maintain a healthy livelihood. The social and ecological risks associated with capitalist exploitation of the natural environment as well as the massive exploitation of workers and indigenous people dovetail to incentivize the emergence of an army of aggrieved persons mostly youths who now maintain antagonistic relationship with the state and its allied capitalist structures.

However, widespread poverty continues to act as a clog in the wheels of progress in terms of genuine attempts at battering the walls of the exploiters. Instead, pockets of insurgents emerge with the aim of making money out of a socio-economic system defined mostly by conflict. This category of insurgents are easily swayed with money hence the monetization of the conflict and the persistence of insecurity in the region.

Social conflict and insecurity in the Niger Delta region have attracted a plethora of mostly Marxist academic papers (Douglas, 2004, Ikelegbe, 2005; Okaba, 2005; Amadi & Alapiki, 2014; Amadi, Imoh-Ita, & Obomanu, 2016). However, none of these works examined the relationship between poverty and how it enables the monetization of conflict as well as a cyclic scenario of insecurity in the Niger Delta region. It is against the foregoing that this paper examined the issue of poverty, monetization of conflict and insecurity in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The objectives therefore are to; provide a Marxist interpretation of poverty in the Niger Delta region; discuss the empirical link between poverty and monetization of conflict as well as the cycle of insecurity and provide some measures through which the problem can be mitigated.

Conceptual Framework

The three basic concepts or variables in this paper presents some degree of analytical relationship that is cyclic in nature. However, before delving into the conceptual framework that the variables represent, it is important that the concepts are first defined. In this regard, it is safe to start by conceptualizing the issue of poverty without necessarily going over the robust debate of its multidimensional nature and measurement. In the context of this paper, the basic needs approach which views 'poverty' as the inability of some persons to freely and independently meet the basic necessities of life is adopted. 'Monetization of conflict' on the other hand, is the act of attaching material value either in terms of liquidity or providing access to economic incentives that ultimately translates to wealth for conflict actors as a way of pacifying them. The next concept is 'Insecurity' which is defined here to mean a condition of social being that is characterized by openness to danger and threat that is usually detrimental to life and property in a given society.

As stated above, the three concepts have some degree of conceptual linkage that ordinarily define how they interact. At this point, this level of interaction may not clearly show causality, but it reflects the interplay of one to the other in a structural sense. Figure 1.1 below provides the conceptual framework showing the interaction between the variables.

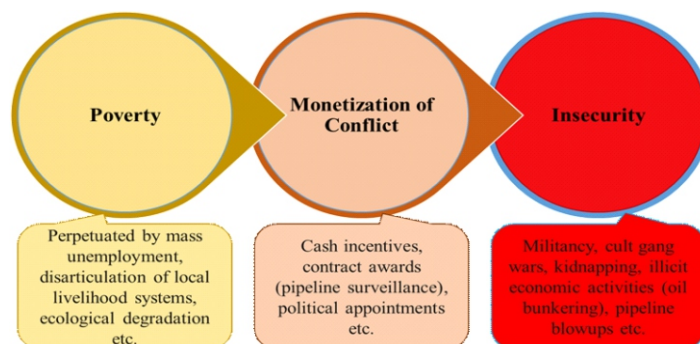


Fig. 1.1: Conceptual link between poverty, monetization of conflict & insecurity

The implication of poverty in any society can be very devastating and multifaceted in nature. Mass poverty is usually enabled by other socio-economic indicators as shown in Figure 1.1 above. For instance, within the context of the Niger Delta, widespread unemployment which is further exacerbated by ecological degradation and by extension, the destruction of the local livelihood systems of the people all dovetail to deepen the poverty conditions of people in the region. This adverse socio-economic scenario provides the required incentives for idle youths to channel their energy into illicit activities one of which is armed conflict. Furthermore, a conflict scenario presents a fertile social environment for insecurity to thrive.

Theoretical Framework: Marxist Approach

The theoretical approach known as Marxism is associated with the German scholar Karl Marx who under this theoretical perspective focused strongly on the political economy of societies. The Marxist theoretical perspective rests on the assumptions that (1) there is an intricate link between political and economic structures of society; (2) the economic structures of a society determine its general values, cultures and norms as well as the direction and practice of governance, (3) a more robust analysis of society is provided by an understanding of the relationship between the economy and its dialectical interrelations with other social structures or institutions, 4) economic social relations and the exploitation therein is responsible for all class struggles and historical reorganization of society.

The emphasis on class conflict in society accrued to Marxism its popularity in the social sciences. Its main argument is summarized by the famous statement by Karl Marx in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). According to Marx “in the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in their development of material forces of production” (Ryazanskaya, 1993:2). The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. In this sense, Marxist assumptions about class-based societies (like the one we live in) and the social relations emerging from them are intricately woven around the overarching logic that economic structure determines the character of the superstructure which includes the political, legal, cultural and religious sub-systems of society.

Thus within the Marxist model, is the interplay between class struggle on the one hand, and political and economic interface on the other hand (underscoring its political economy perspective). With regard to class relations, the ruling class is found within the dominant equation in the mode of production as owners of the means of production either by historical circumstances or by their control of political power at the detriment of the masses who are exploited. From the point of view of this theory, every struggle in society is purely resource based since the oppressed are often found struggling against their oppressors for control of the means of production. While it can be said, that the Marxist theoretical orientation provides analytical justification for the emergence of poverty, conflict and insecurity in the Niger Delta region, it requires a little bit of modification to understand the new dimensions of conflict which are peculiar to certain societies for instance, how the monetization of conflict and cyclic insecurity is perpetrated.

Methodology

The design for this paper is content analysis. However, in adopting this strategy, Marxism as both a theory and a method (Goldfrank, 2005) takes precedence. Marxism is a method of socio-economic analysis that anatomizes class relations and societal conflict using a materialist interpretation of historical development and a dialectical view of social transformation. The principal components of Marxist method are the dialectical method of logical deduction and synthesis as well as its application to the emergence of real social phenomena within the context of history. This method also provides opportunity for qualitative analysis along thematic lines.

Discussion

In this section, the results derived from extensive document review of Marxists interpretation of poverty, monetization of conflict and insecurity in the Niger Delta region are discussed. However, this is done in line with the objectives of this paper.

Marxist Interpretation of Poverty

Perhaps, it is more convenient to say that the issue of poverty more than any other socio-economic problem has received the highest level of research interest in the social sciences especially sociology. Also, as stated in the introductory section of this paper, Marxist analysis of poverty has by far dominated the theoretical discussions on poverty and this is to beg the question when the subject matter of conflict is taken into consideration. While Marx did not himself write directly about poverty, he clearly showed in his writings that the character of capitalist exploitation of workers and by extension the masses is a basis for their impoverishment. Marx and indeed Marxism as a theoretical perspective maintains that poverty, like wealth, is an inevitable consequence of the capitalist society. Marxists argue that poverty benefits the ruling class, as it ensures that there is always a workforce willing to accept low wages.

Similarly, the existence of unemployment and job insecurity means that there is always a 'reserve army of labour' able and willing (or, unable to be unwilling!) to take their place if they are not happy. By extension, those who own the means of production, benefit from the existence of widespread unemployment and poverty (Cunningham, 2007). As a result, the deliberate perpetuation of poverty amidst plenty creates enabling conditions as well as the socio-economic environment to hire and fire at will within the capitalist social system. This is perhaps why Kincaid (1973) clearly argued that, it is not simply that there are rich and poor, but rather that some are rich because some are poor.

For Marxists then, poverty is an intrinsic and integral feature of capitalist society, which is a direct consequence of the inequality inherent in the class system. Until the bourgeoisie are overthrown by the proletariat and the capitalist system is replaced by an egalitarian socialist system, there will always be poverty, irrespective of any half-hearted attempts to alleviate it by the welfare state (Cunningham, 2007). Marxists then, clearly locate the source of poverty in the structural nature of society; they identify the welfare system as an instrument of the state, which acts to maintain gross inequalities of wealth that see some people living in dire destitution with little chance of ever really escaping from it.

Consequently, the desire to eliminate the capitalist system gave rise to numerous struggles around the world notably the Niger Delta region where youths have continually engaged the state and its capitalist agents in the form of Multinational Oil Corporations (MNOs) operating

in their vicinities. Onyinlola (2014) has reported in his study that the poverty amidst plenty scenario in the Niger Delta region has a significant relationship with widespread discontent among youths who now have no choice but to take up arms against the visible agents of capitalism as a way of reaching the state. However, he also argued that the struggle which started with the intention to address the structural-historical problems associated with the capitalist system of exploitation of natural resources and degradation of their environment became hijacked by deviants who turned the struggle into a criminal venture (Ogadi, Raimi & Nwachukwu, 2012) for the purpose of personal gains. Below, an analysis of the poverty in the Niger Delta provided a veritable platform for the monetization of conflict and insecurity in the region.

How does Poverty and Monetization of Conflict lead to Insecurity?

Marx predicted categorically that widespread poverty and mass starvation among the working classes are the inevitable outcomes of exploitation in a market (no socialist) economy of private ownership. According to Marxism, commodity fetishism is the basic weapon of capitalism. So in the midst of poverty everything can take the place of a commodity which has a price. The genuine struggle to reverse years of exploitation and marginalization in the Niger Delta region started on the grounds that the region has long been impoverished despite being endowed with the most important natural resource (crude oil) which provides over 80% of the country's foreign exchange earnings. As a result, perceived injustice especially one associated with massive poverty amidst plenty (Okaba, 2005) in addition to widespread unemployment of youths and adverse impact on the environment provided the required impetus for youth insurgency which turned the region into what Ikelegbe (2005) has correctly referred to as a conflict economy.

In the annual report of the International Center for Peace Initiatives (ICPI, 2009) on the causes of conflict and the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa, among the key economic factors identified as a trigger of conflict is the misalignment between the gains associated with the exploitation of natural resources especially by International Oil Corporations (IOCs) and the human development realities of host communities especially in terms of poverty and unemployment. United in agreement, the World Bank's continental report for Africa also fingered poverty as one of the major contributory factors for conflict and of its recurrence. The report moved on to cite examples of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria among others as a place where poverty has provided major incentive for the perpetuation of violent conflicts (World Bank, 2010).

According to Obi (2011), as unemployed youths from oil-producing communities began to besiege oil companies in search of jobs, the companies began attempting to buy peace by paying the youths monthly allowances. The handouts ironically created an impression of the industry as a place to scrounge free money. The failure of such handouts to sustain peace led the oil companies to hire some youths as security consultants to protect facilities. The favoured youth contractors deployed some portion of the payments they had received to purchase weapons. Free money and light weapons had a destabilizing effect on many communities as different youth groups formed their own companies or gangs to compete for security contracts from oil companies (see International Crisis Group 2006). This disguised security situation which thrives on monetizing the conflict in the region, ended up providing a fertile ground for the cycle of insecurity.

Hence, it became clearer, that the involvement of mostly unemployed youths in violent social conflicts in the Niger Delta region and indeed in Nigeria rests on the need to get employed in the conflict economy. The fact therefore, is that a good number of conflict scenarios are created for the purpose of attracting financial incentives or are fundamentally incited by cash handouts in the region. Marxism's postulation that exploitation and poverty of the masses is a fertile condition for class struggle cannot be totally ignored when discussing violent conflicts especially in resource endowed nations or regions like the Niger Delta. However, what has not been clearly established in the literature is the fact that the conflict in the Niger Delta region has long been compromised as genuine struggle for justice has been progressively edged out by a monetized struggle for personal and sectional gains by youths. This is why Osahon and Osarobo (2011) assert that, following the rebel-greed mechanism, the conflict economy in the region has necessitated the emergence of domestic groups who engage in quasi-criminal activities in order to benefit from natural resources and according to him, this is further supported by a grievance model which rests on the assumption that perceived discontent over the negative impact of oil exploitation is the major catalyst for social conflict and insecurity in the region.

As a result, the violent conflict in the Niger Delta has necessitated the emergence of a handful of warlords who benefit from the conflict economy. This is perhaps why Amadi, Imoh and Obomanu (2016) in their work provided a very telling narrative of how Nigerian leaders use state resources to enrich leaders of gangs or militant groups who self-style themselves as Generals. For instance, the awards of monstrous size pipeline surveillance contracts to these individuals, as well as cash incentives quickly transformed them into militia capitalist with great consequences for the Niger Delta struggle. This is because creating conditions that makes billionaires out of militants out-rightly shows that conflict has been monetized and other youths tend to see conflict as economically rewarding. This then provides enabling environment for the perpetration of the cycle of insecurity as more youths attempt to cash into the monetized conflict scenario as a way to get out of poverty. The cycle of insecurity occasioned by a monetized conflict system is provided in Figure 1.2 below:

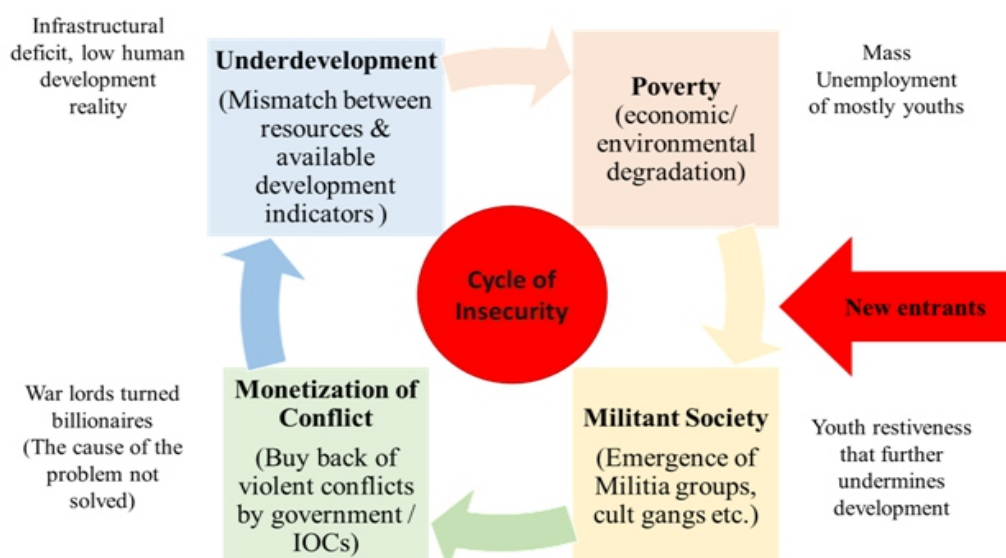


Fig. 1.2: How poverty & monetization of conflict enables the cycle of insecurity

The entrenchment of a cycle of insecurity in the Niger Delta has a dual link to underdevelopment in the region. First, the unwillingness of successive governments within the region as well as at the federal level to develop the area provided the structural historical character of underdevelopment in the region. As represented in Figure 1.2 above, the crisis of insecurity in the Niger Delta began with the visible mismatch between endowed natural resources and available development indicators. In this regard, human development realities as well as physical infrastructure deficits when compared to the huge revenue generated from the area were significantly incongruent. This already represents enough reason for frustration and aggression in the region. However, widespread poverty especially occasioned by the degradation of the people's livelihood systems in terms of economic and ecological terms provided both necessary and sufficient reasons for an army of mostly unemployed youths to redefine the societal character of the region into a military society. At this point, the emergence of militia and cult gangs became inevitable to fight the course of the region after years of peaceful agitations. Sadly, the genuine struggle for resource control which had (to say the least) a Marxist character of emancipating the poor masses became seriously compromised by the ruling elites through what is referred to in this paper as the monetization of conflict. This new model of buying back conflict entrenched an abnormal pattern of incentivizing violent conflicts (Raimi & Boroh, 2016) and creating conflict bourgeoisies (Raimi, 2017) with serious adverse consequences for the regions struggle for genuine resource control and security in particular. This is because, a monetized conflict scenario only provides the much needed social impetus for new conflict actors to emerge seeking relevance in order for them to benefit from the conflict buyback approach of government. This leads to the second link between the cycle of insecurity and underdevelopment where in the Figure above, there is a return to the initial status quo of underdevelopment which *ab initio* provided the social justification for poverty, monetization of conflict and insecurity in the region.

Conclusion

In this paper, attempt has been made to provide a Marxist interpretation of the problem of poverty and the monetization of conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The fundamental guiding assumption is simply that poverty which is an outcome of capitalist exploitation of the masses provides a fertile ground for youths to see conflict as a way of making money. The conclusion therefore is that the conflict in the Niger Delta region which started following a genuine trajectory to address the structural historical imbalances or marginalization and injustices associated with resource distribution, has now been hijacked by a deviant struggle characterized by the quest to make personal rather than social gains.

Hence, it has become increasingly clear that the original class-based struggle to emancipate the Niger Delta region from the shackles of exploitation to entrench a more humane social system that addresses the many challenges of the people notably poverty amidst plenty has been clearly defeated under the new approach of monetizing conflict which in itself is a capitalist strategy that takes advantage of widespread poverty amongst the people. As a result, poverty has now become a tool in the hands of the ruling elite that is used to lure youths into conflicts for cash rather than the struggle for freedom and emancipation from marginalization. This new scenario where conflict is monetized, has enabled the cycle of insecurity in the region.

Recommendations

Following the discussion and conclusion reached in this paper, three key recommendations are provided below:

1. **Poverty reduction:** The Niger Delta states should as a matter of urgency galvanize both funding and technical efforts aimed at solving the issue of poverty in the region. However, this should be done under a framework that allows robust stakeholders' participation in the process. For instance, governments should partner with private sector organizations especially IOCs as well as non-governmental organizations to provide sustainable interventions for poverty reduction in the region.
2. **Employment creation:** Just like the intervention to reduce poverty, youth unemployment should also be tackled through robust partnership and collaboration framework. The governments of all the Niger Delta states could also align together to create indigenous industries to produce local products associated with the region. There is yet to be any society that develops without a commensurate industrialization process. Thinking around this area will go a long way to reduce the teeming unemployed youths and ensure that they channel their youthful energy into positive productive activities rather than engage in illicit socio-economic endeavours.
3. **Lastly, there is the need to de-emphasize material incentives as buyback for genuine struggles:** While there is no deliberate intention to legitimize class struggle in the region, genuine non-violent struggles against ruling class exploitation are necessary to emancipate as well as alleviate the suffering of the masses. However, it is also necessary to sound a Marxist warning that all struggles should aim at doing away with exploitation and class-based relations rather than forming a lifeline for conflict actors to become wealthy and emerge as new elites in the region.

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