

Commercialization of the Niger Delta Agitations and its Implications for Development

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Abstract

The Niger Delta region is generally described as an underdeveloped area that has difficult terrain. This situation necessitates various forms of agitations from the people of the region largely because the survival of the Nigerian state is dependent on the oil exploited from the area. This paper deploys the desk study to examine the nature of the Niger Delta people agitations for development and posit that the agitations that started in a protest form have been hijacked by criminal-minded individuals and have become mighty commercialized. The work argues that the Niger Delta people are peace-loving and the now commercialized agitations of few persons in the area is not enough to classify the region as notorious. It is the position of the study that the development of the area will remain a mirage unless the challenges of commercial agitations are addressed. The work therefore recommends collaborative approach of the Niger Delta stakeholders in tackling the challenges.

Keywords: *Commercialized agitation, Niger Delta, Kidnapping, Development, Crises*

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Background to the Study

There are lots of agitations in the Niger Delta against the underdevelopment of the region. The agitations dates to the pre-independence era when the people complained of neglect and the absence of government presence in the area (Ikporukpo, 2011) the colonial government was then compelled to institute the Henry Willink's led commission. In 1958 when the commission submit its report, the following recommendations among others were made.

1. The Niger Delta people have peculiar problems which arose out of the difficulties of their terrain and therefore the region should be regarded as a special area.
2. The development of the area needs special attention by Government.

Several years after independence the people of the region still agitate against the same challenges (Etekpe, 2017, Ikporukpo, 2018). The Niger Delta represents an area that is endowed with national resources that drives the Nigerian economy but the area is underdeveloped with communities and settlements that seemed abandoned and a population of youths with blink future.

The Nigerian state survival is largely dependent on the oil exploited from the Niger Delta environment, unfortunately as Ibaba (2017), puts it, "the area represents one of the extreme conditions of poverty in the country". The region has witnessed the emergence of different groups, armed and unarmed. In February, 1966, Isaac Boro and about one hundred and fifty-nine young men formed the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS) and proclaimed "the Niger Delta Peoples Republic". The grouse of the group as was described by Boro (1982) and captured by Ikporukpo (2006), was the abject poverty and the neglect of the area. Other notable groups that emerged in the region include, the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Avengers.

The groups seek for self-determination, resource control, environmental justice and inclusiveness in government and governance and their modus operadi get the attention of the government, oil companies' operation in the area and in some instances, the international community. The agitations in the region have assumed a dangerous trend. It has been commercialized. This paper examines the commercialization of the Niger Delta agitations and revealed implications on the development of the largely underdeveloped region.

Theoretical Framework/Methodology

Scholars adopt several theories in the discourse of Niger Delta agitation. Agitations for development and inclusiveness can be triggered by frustration which can eventually lead to aggression. In the words of Ibaba (2011), people tend to be aggressive when what they get falls below expectation. The agitations can also be analyse from the Political. Economy approach, a theory propounded by Karl Marx. The theory is based on dialectical materialism.

However, for the purpose of this study the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is used in the analysis of commercialized agitations in the Niger Delta. Adam Smith, the father of modern economic and a philosopher is credited with propounding the theory. The theory assumes that

individual use their self-interest to make choice that will provide them with the greatest benefits. (Green and Fox, 2017) Unmindful in most instances of the consequences of their choice. RCT is associated with individuals behaviour. It explains the mindset of humans that make their decision and choices by keeping their personal interest a priority. The justification for the application of RCT in this study lies in the fact that commercialized agitators in the Niger Delta place their personal interest above the region's interest and believe within themselves that whatever action they take is justified and rational because the Nigerian state deprives them of inclusiveness in resource and political control. The paper relied on relevant literature from journals, Niger Delta intervention agencies websites. Security reports within the Niger Delta and verified newspapers commentaries for data collection.

The Niger Delta Agitations

It is necessary to provide a socio-historical context of the Niger Delta agitations that have resulted in crises situation in order to appreciate the fact that the region is not peopled by groups that are prone to crises. The Niger Delta that is seem as a region of violence was until the 1980s a peaceful region of fun-loving people (Ikporukpo, 2007). A former President of the federal republic of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo attested to this in 2004 thus.

In 1961, I was here and the Niger Delta that I knew then was not a Niger Delta of violence, it was not a Niger Delta of bitterness, it was a Niger Delta of reasonableness, of discussion as people who see themselves as an integral part of Nigeria, it was a Niger Delta that stood firmly against secession. Otherwise, I would not have been able to operate here. (Weekend Vanguard, April 17, 2004, p3 cited by Ikporukpo, 2006).

Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, another former President of Nigeria made the same point in his address to the special Niger Delta consultative forum in Yenagoa on February 10, 2006 when he stated "... when the oil companies first came, relationship between them and the locals was very friendly. As a child, I noticed there was no need to guard or protect anything as the local people were very friendly and even freely offered houses to oil workers".

In the same vein and as noted by Ikporukpo (2006), after the Twelve Day Revolution of Isaac Adaka Boro led Niger Delta Volunteer Service that started on February 23, 1996, Isaac Boro and his compatriots were vilified and demonized by the Niger Delta people that they set out to "liberate". Ikporukpo further noted that Isaac Boro and his men were commonly perceived as a bunch of troublemakers and school dropouts bringing misfortune to their families and communities. The literature on Niger Delta question agree that the region was peaceful and the people were very hospitable in the 1970s and 80s. The questions that beg for answer are therefore:

- i. How did a peaceful region become restive?
- ii. Are the Niger Delta people born to be hostile?
- iii. Is there a relationship between the restiveness in the Niger Delta and the level of development of the area?
- iv. How can the challenges be addressed?

Owugah (2000), in his categorization of the Niger Delta situation divided the Niger Delta crises into four phases. Owugah wrote that in the first phases, the dominant strategy the people applied in addressing grievances was mainly legal actions against the companies. It was an era the communities had enough confidence in the state and its institutions especially the judiciary. However, during that era in most instances, Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) the companies freely entered into with communities were not honoured and count cases dragged for several years and when eventually judgments are passed in favour of the communities, implementation are often problematic.

The disappointments the people got from the first phase made them to embark on peaceful demonstrations, disruption of workers from operations and so on. In responding to these peaceful agitations which Owugah considered as the second phase, the state and oil companies called the military and other security outfits to quell and some instances, arrest peaceful protesters. The third phase which was informed by frustration of people as a result of the attitudes of government and the companies involved kidnapping of oil company workers, seizure of vessels and vehicles belonging to oil companies. In this phase, the state response was more forceful. The military were said to be very brutal in their approaches. It was during this era Odi, Gbaramatu, Ayakoromo and some other communities were burnt down (Ikporukpo, 2021). The fourth phase is the more openly militant phase. The activities of the fourth phase were supported by the Kaiama declaration on December 11, 1998. See Kaiama Declaration; (unitedijaws.com.)

On his part, Ikporukpo (2002), believed that the agitations began in the early 1990s when civil society organizations press for better condition of living the area. Whether, the agitation began in 1990s or earlier than that, the modus operacli of the agitators then was non-violent. In the words of Ikporukpo (2007) “In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of organizations employed largely non-violent method to protest the neglect of the Niger Delta”. Notable among them are the Association of Minority Oil States (AMOS) and the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). for instance, one of the mandates of MOSOP is “to campaign non-violently to promote democratic awareness and protect the environment of the Ogoni. (<https://www.escri-net.org>).

The Commercialization of the Agitations

The agitations of the Niger Delta people were carried out through different ways and dimensions. Ikporukpo (2008), identified some of them to include:

- i. Protest and Demonstration
- ii. Sabotage of oil facilities
- iii. Kidnapping/hostage-taking

Ikporukpo (2008), believes that sabotage is perhaps the oldest form of interference/agitation against the oil industry. It involves taking actions that will disrupt oil production activities, the most common form is the destruction or damaging of oil pipelines. Ikporukpo further noted that the first instance of sabotage was in February, 1966 when Isaac Boro and his followers blew up the pipelines connecting Olobiri to Port-Harcourt and Ughelli during his “Twelve

Day Revolution”. Sabotage has become very common in the region and has gained frightening dimension. It is important to note that sabotage is also characterized by the destruction or damage of an entire production platform.

After the February 1966 sabotage by Isaac Boro and his followers which was carried out in protest against the federal government and oil companies, on June 19, 2008 MEND attacked the Bonga field which is Shell's largest oil field and platform located about 120 nautical miles from the coast of the Forcados Terminal in Delta State (Ikporukpo, 2016) MEND described the attack in an online statement reported in Vanguard newspaper of June 20, 2008 (pp 5) thus

On June 19, 2008 at 0045 hrs, gallant fighters from the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) overran the supposedly fortified Bonga offshore oil field operated by the Shell Petroleum Development Company. The main computerized control room responsible for coordinating the entire crude oil export operation from the field was our main target. Our detonation engineers could not again access to blow it up but decided against smoking out the occupants by burning down the facility to avoid loss of life. (Vanguard 10/6/2008 pp. 5 cited by Ikporukpo 2016).

The action of MEND was a protest against perceived economic and environmental injustices against the Niger Delta. MEND is noted to have always raise issues that prompt its actions and once the issue is addressed, the group ceases further actions. Kidnapping/Hostage-taking in the early days were carried out in protest against the activities of the federal government or oil companies. The perpetrators of the acts adopt the principle of no ransom payment, for instance in 2005, MEND kidnapped nine foreign oil workers in Delta State to press for the release of Mujalid Dokubo Asari (the leader of another group, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force) who was being detained by the federal government. The foreign workers were freed immediately Asari was released.

The principle of no ransom payment was also evident in the attack of June 19, 2008 on Bonga platform. In its message reported by Vanguard 20/06/2008, MEND indicated that an American was kidnapped in the process and would be released unconditionally in a few hours. Indeed, that was done. The orientation of MEND was that asking and receiving ransom payment will debase the struggle against oil companies and the government. Protest and demonstration were also weapons for agitation in the Niger Delta. These are largely carried out by women and youths in the region whenever they feel betrayed or short changed by the activities of the oil companies and in most instances, once of their grievances are addressed, normalcy is also restored.

Unfortunately, agitations in the Niger Delta have been commercialized hence the region is now classified as unsafe. Kidnapping/Hostage-taking before this era of commercialization was focused on oil workers particularly the foreign ones and the federal government and as the instances cited above indicate once the concerns of the people are addressed, peace and normalcy is restored. Presently, kidnapping/hostage-taking are carried out for commercial purposes and nobody is considered safe. There was an incident where 15 children of Abaji

nursery and primary international school in Abia state were kidnapped in 2010 and the kidnappers demanded for 95,000 US dollars (<https://www.theguardian.com>).

The print is noteworthy that kidnapping/hostage-taking are recurring decimals in the Niger Delta and are not done in protest or agitations for development in the region, the commercialization of these acts, started when ransoms are demanded instead of improve condition of living for the people. In April 2002, some youths from Ekeremor Local Government Areas of Bayelsa State kidnapped ten staff of the Shell Petroleum Development Company and demanded for a ransom of 3.1. million naira, an amount that was paid before the staff were released. (Albert, Ijangibo and Albert; (2020). The focus of most of the agitators changed from protest agitation to commercial agitations. People are kidnapped for ransoms to be paid, oil pipelines are vandalized for illegal bunkering, the same way demonstrations are either carried out for cheap financial gains or as dictated by the highest bidder.

Implication for Development

The crises in the Niger Delta is a contributory factor to the underdevelopment of the area. In 2006, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) published crises induced abandoned projects in the region

Table 1.

S/N	Prospects	State Located
1.	Construction of Ihubogo-Odieke-Odimerenyi-Akoh Road (18.630km) Ahoada East LGA, Rivers State	Rivers state
2.	Construction of Ogbunabali Internal Roads, Port-Harcourt LGA Rivers state	Rivers state
3.	Construction of Old Bakana Road/Bridges (4.338km Road & 40m Bridge)	Rivers state
4.	Award of contract for the construction of comprehensive health centre (main block) at Umuabia, Oyigbo L.G.A, Rivers State	Rivers state
5.	Award of contract for the Ngo-Ikuru Town canalization project, Andoni L.G.A	Rivers state
6.	Award of contract for the electrification of Okelli Ndaslli, Etche LGA, Rivers State	Rivers state
7.	Extension of Betem HT to Kaa water-side with TDN at kaa	Rivers state
8.	Construction of Elele-Egbeda-Vbimini-Ikiri-Omoku Road/Bridge	Rivers state
9.	Construction of Ula-Ahoada-Odioku-Odiereke Road	Rivers state
10.	Bille waters	Rivers state
11.	Construction of shore projection and reclamation work at Adu Island (warri Oversight) Delta state	Delta State
12.	Kokodiagbene Sandfilling	Delta State
13.	Uzere/Ekregbesi Electrification	Delta State
14.	Ojobo Electrification	Delta State
15.	Bikorogha/Egodor/Agbodobiri Road	Delta State
16.	East-West Road	Delta State
17.	Ogoni, Andoni, Opobo Unity Road	Rivers State
18.	Solar water scheme for Orhonot-Eku, Ethuope East	Delta State
19.	Solar water scheme at Okpai	Delta State
20.	Solar water scheme, Ekrota Udu LGA	Delta State
21.	Ogbe-Ijoki canalization	Delta State

Source: NDDC projects profile 2006 cited by Ikporukpo, 2011

Findings reveal that seventeen years after the projects profile was published, most of the projects are yet to be completed, the very important East-West Road inclusive. It is true that corruption cannot be ruled as a causative factor however in a public lecture delivered by Rotimi Amaechi at the Waldorf Hilton Hotel, London on the subject matter “Investing in Africa” Amaechi as a governor of Rivers State then lamented about the devastating impact of the Niger Delta crises on the development of the region. He was specific on the impact of kidnapping on the region. In his lecture, Amaechi identified construction of roads, bridges and railways as necessary tools for developing the Niger Delta but lamented a situation where a Lebanese construction engineer was kidnapped with ransom demanded at a construction site in Rivers State by unknown gunmen and another killed in the process. In his analysis which captures the reality of the Niger Delta situation the high level of kidnapping and hostage taking explain why there are several abandoned projects in the region (The Guardian 25/08/19)

The impacts of kidnapping especially commercial kidnapping on development goes beyond the Niger Delta region. For instance, the impact of Kidnapping on oil production was highlighted during an interactive section on oil and community relations in Port-Harcourt. At the section, experts and other commentators posited that in 2009 Nigeria has an installed capacity to produce 3.3 million barrel of oil per day. Unfortunately, it was noticed that Nigerians production total output dropped to 1.8 million barrel per day due to kidnapping and hostage taking (Vanguard, 23/18/09 pp. 19) coincidentally while the interactive section was on, Shell Petroleum Development Company was forced to shut down production at Alakiri flow station. It was reported that an expatriate was kidnapped in the process (Ikporukpor, 2011).

In the same vein, during the same period, the governor of Akwa-Ibom state while taking delivery of six gunboat to bolster operation by the Navy in its fight against militants lamented the porous security on waterways in the state, a situation the governor said resulted in the kidnapping of some Russians at Ikot Abasi and Eco bank staff at Oron in Akwa-Ibom by some militants (The Nations, 30/4/2009). The Governor concluded by saying development cannot take place in an unsecured environment. The trend and dimension of piracy in the Niger Delta is worrisome (Ikporukpo, 2019). the invasions of communities such as Ayakoroino, Bolou-Turegbe, communities in Gbaramatu Kingdom in Delta State and Azagbene, Igbomotoru in Bayelsa State among others have been blamed on piracy. The destruction of properties and the loss of lives that characterize these invasions cannot be quantified (Ikporukpo and Inokoba, 2023).

The Niger Delta region is experiencing capital flight and investors do not see the area as a safe haven to do business in spite of the fact that the region is blessed with both renewable and non-renewable resources hence the Niger Delta is presently classified as having the highest rate of youth unemployment. According to a data released by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2018, Akwa-Ibom had an unemployment rate of 37.7%, River's state 36.4%, Bayelsa state 32.6% and Abia state 31.6%, none of the Niger Delta State have unemployment rate below 30.0% and these are the highest in the country (Oluseyi, 2020)

Conclusion

The development of the Niger Delta region will remain a mirage unless the challenges of commercialized agitations are addressed. No doubt, there are genuine and peaceful agitations that have desire for the development, of the region, unfortunately, the activities of the criminal-minded few have made the region notorious.

The agitations in the Niger Delta predate Nigeria's independence but became very pronounced in the early 1990's and the focus then was solely for the socio-economic and political advancement of the region and the Nigerian State has responded to some of the needs of the area by establishing several commissions and agencies that had initiated development plans and roadways for the development of the region. Dr. Goodluck Jonathan alluded to the fact there are several recommendations and blueprints that clearly indicated development guidelines for the Niger Delta.

On the occasion of the inauguration of the Technical Committee on the Development of the Niger Delta, on September 8, 2008, as Vice President Dr. Jonathan was quoted to have said "...I don't believe however that the task (of drawing a roadway for Niger Delta development) will attract new research, field trips or length debates every data needed for the region's development are already documented' (Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta; 2008).

The emergence of commercialized agitations in the Niger Delta therefore calls for concern. A collaborative approach by the different stakeholders (the government, oil companies and Niger Delta oil host communities) in tackling the criminal-aspect of the agitations is a step in the right direction.

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