

Oil and Youth Militancy in Nigeria's Niger Delta Region

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Abstract

This study explores the myriad of reasons responsible for the role of the youth in violence in the Niger Delta region. Based on data drawn from primary studies of community youth groups in four oil-rich communities in Bayelsa and Rivers States and secondary sources, findings reveal that community youth revolt over socio-economic and political deprivation arising from oil exploitation and exploration by multinational oil corporations in collaboration with the Nigerian state. These deprivations and marginalization have transformed youth from merely engaging in community protests to militancy with deleterious consequences threatening the security of the region.

Keywords

environmental degradation, militancy, Niger Delta region, oil, youth

Introduction

Since Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, it has been embroiled in a myriad of crises perceived within the contexts of equity, access to oil resource and power, self determination, ethnic autonomy, decentralization of a hegemonic federal power, and citizenship rights in terms of the relationship between ethnic majorities and minorities (Obi, 2006: 2). However, the crises are more evident in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, where years of oil exploitation and exploration have resulted in degradation of the environment, the deprivation of livelihoods earned through farming and fishing, neglect, impoverishment, injustice, and ultimately, general environmental insecurity. These problems have resulted in frustration, anger, social tensions and activism. In the face of pervasive crisis in authority, oil-producing communities have been forced to fall back on group (ethnic) loyalties in the region. Though many groups, including that of women, have been formed to accentuate struggles in the form of protests, agitations and violence, youth have appeared as the major site of the struggles.

With the discovery of oil in 1956, the Niger Delta region, which hitherto was known for its agricultural export of palm oil, rose in significance in Nigeria's crude oil political economy with export earnings increasing from 1 per cent in 1958 to almost 98 per cent and about 90 per cent of

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the government's total revenue in the 1990s (Akande, 2008; Ebeku, 2001: 1–3). Paradoxically, while the state and oil companies have continued to profit enormously from oil production, the rural population from where oil is produced has benefited the least from its wealth. While oil in itself is central to the history of industrial capitalism, its discovery and extraction in Nigeria's Niger Delta region has ushered in a miserable, undisciplined, decrepit and corrupt form of 'petro-capitalism' (SDN, 2006; Von Kemedi, 2006: 1). Environmental pollution, resulting in brackish swamp forests and rivers, depletion of agricultural resources on land and the death and extinction of aquamarine resources, gas flares, and acid rain, impacting negatively on the health and physical lives of the region's inhabitants, have dislocated local communities, culminating in the impoverishment of the populace and insecurity of the environment from which they gain their livelihoods (Adetula, 1996: 20–21; Gary and Karl, 2003; Hazen and Horner, 2007; HRW, 1995, 1999; Obi, 1997; Okonta and Douglas, 2001: 3–5; Olojede et al., 2000).

While peaceful efforts were made by oil-producing communities to attract attention to the problems encountered through oil political economy, they were always met with repression by the state in collaboration with the oil companies, leading to the deaths of people and destruction of property. Hence, this has created a generation of youth, who do not only feel embittered but have become militant in their approach to seeking justice against the state's military approach. The trend of events has succeeded in transforming the region into the most heavily militarized state in Nigeria.

To this end, this study is guided by the following questions. Who is a youth and why is the notion of 'youth' central to this study? Why are the Niger Delta youth at the forefront of the Niger Delta struggle? How do they mobilize themselves against the state and oil companies? Is their mobilization an organized routine or anomic, and what influences their mobilization and activities? How does the state respond to youth militancy in the region and what are the consequences of its reactions to peace in the region? The following sections seek to answer these pertinent questions. Beyond having a working definition of a 'youth', especially from the Niger Delta's perspective, this article analyses factors responsible for youth's militant involvement in the region's violence. It deconstructs the criminalization of youth, and points out the dichotomies in the system that have prompted militancy in the youth. It examines the modes of youth mobilization and activities, and explains the role of the government in the environmental struggle. Finally, this study concludes and suggests, among other variables, that the political will to actually develop the region, especially, oil-rich Delta communities is a *sine qua non* to peace and security in the Niger Delta region.

Conceptual Clarification

The stereotyping of youth as miscreants, and their involvement in negative actions such as disrupting the state's affairs, especially in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, has prompted examination of who the youth are and the reasons for their negative construction in the public space. The definition of a youth is, historically, a contested concept, relational and situated in a dynamic context taking into consideration its complexity as a permeable category identified within the social milieu. This complexity has resulted in the categorization of the concept as a site for particular and localized framings of human agency constituted by various intersecting and contested discourses, much of which relies on seeing the youth as a deviant group.

Youth definition transcends biological or chronological age due to social and cultural variables such as gender, religion, class, economy, responsibilities and ethnicity, which play an important role in defining who is a youth or not (Durham, 2000: 116). Lukose (2000) makes a useful

contribution here when he describes 'Youth' as the essential precondition to adulthood and the indefinite postponement of maturity. No wonder therefore that as part of youth description in Africa, youth is attained through status and behaviour rather than biological age. This is in contradiction to the United Nations perception of a youth. To the United Nations (1985), a youth can be perceived as someone between the ages of 18 and 24, irrespective of status and behaviour. Interestingly, in Nigeria and most parts of Africa, quite an appreciable number of adults (considering the stipulated age described by the UN) consider themselves as youth based on their socio-economic strengths and weaknesses to the extent that often unemployment and poverty turn them to 'adult-youth'.

Youth is a social construction arising out of the political, socio-cultural, institutional and economic dynamics of a society that needs to be fully interrogated in order to understand the milieu within which it operates. Naturally, youth create and recreate their roles, either positively or negatively, depending on changing conditions within the environment in which they survive. But generally, youth are seen as the most agile, active, resilient survivors and ever ready to bring about social transformation, either peacefully or violently, in order to achieve a desired future. Hence, they are always associated with or drawn into protests, violence and war as witnessed in Liberia, Sierra Leone, DRC, Cote d'Ivoire, to mention but a few (Abdullah and Bangura, 1997; Furley, 1995; Honwana, 1999; Oluwaniyi, 2005; Richards, 1996). This fact cannot be denied in the context of past experiences of youth engaging in violence when they perceive themselves as excluded from the distribution of socio-economic and political resources and opportunities that they regard as their rights in society. Corroborating this argument, Gore and Pratten (2003: 213) and Blackman (1998: 38–56) describe youth as the spearhead of contemporary political contests between the politics of identity and citizenship. They navigate the agitation through militancy or violence for (re) distribution of resources in their favour, protest exclusion and resist the theft of what they consider their natural heritage.

In Africa, young people constitute the majority of the population at the centre of societal interactions and transformation, yet they are often placed at the margins of the public sphere and major political, socio-economic and cultural processes (Honwana and de Boeck, 2005: xii). When feelings of economic repression, frustration, and despondency about the future are coupled with perceptions of ethnic repression and religious persecution, youth become easily susceptible to sparks of violence and they are predisposed to engage in low-intensity conflicts in order to draw attention to their plight (BBC, 2002; McIntyre, 2003; Momoh, 2000). Hence, the place of the youth within a given mode of production, and their level of exclusion from the state social surplus, influences their participation in politics. El-Kenz (1996), supporting these arguments, posits that youth explore cycles of violence as the only way of responding to socio-economic problems, which the state is unable to resolve, whether in a spontaneous or organized way. It is therefore, not too surprising that youth are constructed by other agencies as a 'problem' or a 'lost generation' (Cruise O'Brien, 1996) or the creatures of nightmares, social impossibilities and existential angst (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005: 22–23). In some cases, impoverished youth are always available to be exploited to act as perpetrators and victims of the production of violence. However, this is not to stereotype youth, based on highlighted perception, as always violent. They can also be perceived in a positive light as leaders of tomorrow (Obi, 2006).

Though literature on youth in Nigeria is relatively scanty, the available literature explains the incidence of youth violence in Nigeria as a microcosm of the general crisis of youth marginality in Africa (Albert, 2003; Momoh, 2000; Obi, 2006). But while this crisis has degenerated into armed conflicts in other parts of Africa, Nigeria has witnessed low-intensity conflicts. In Albert's analysis of youth and conflict in Nigeria, he perceives youth that participate in violent conflicts in Nigeria as:

Frustrated young school leavers who feel let down by their leaders. While the youths live in abject poverty, their leaders flaunt their affluence ... in most cases, these youths see violent conflicts as economically enterprising as politicians in Nigeria deliberately create conflicts and employ frustrated, unemployed youths, providing the resources (financial and arms) for the escalation and intractability of conflicts. (2003: 23)

Youth form themselves into sub-cultures in order to create a social identity to create space for engagement in social formations and associations that are often legitimated by long-standing traditions that lay claim to autonomy from the state. In Nigeria, various youth groups exist, and sometimes are trapped within ethnic and religious colourations, as portrayed by the yandaba gangs in Kano, the Oduduwa People's Congress (OPC) boys in Lagos, the Egbesu boys in Bayelsa and the Bakassi boys in the Eastern part of Nigeria. However, this category of youth in Nigeria fully emerged since the watershed of economic reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a key factor in Nigerian political discourse. Due to various negative socio-economic and political conditions, the category of youth, which is locally conceptualized as relatively transitory in its parallel to the age-grade system, as against Marx's description, has crystallized into an extended social category over time. It is in this light that the conflict pitting the state and oil multinationals against the Niger Delta youth over the extraction, degradation, marginalization and deprivation from the resources on their land that has benefitted other parts of the country is studied.

A disturbing aspect of the youth's description in the Niger Delta region is the fluidity of their ages. While those in the age category 17–35 are referred to as youth in the context of the region's crisis, it is common to read and hear in the media about those in the age bracket 50–60 as participating in the conflict. This confusion prompted a clarification of the term, 'youth'. From interviews with youth groups in the Otuasega, Peremabiri, Kegbare Dere and Bille communities in the Niger Delta region, it was realized that a youth is 'any member of the Niger Delta community who feels strongly about participating in the struggle to liberate the region from the Nigerian State and the oil multinationals'.¹ As far as the interviewees, mostly youth, in the Niger Delta were concerned, there is no age limit to the definition of a youth. Youth can be seen as any man or woman, boy or girl, who has the strong desire or ability to give selfless service to the struggle without the expectation of any reward, and their participation in the struggles does not connote the notion that they are delinquent. As stated by Jonjon, the Ijaw Youth Council leader:

You see in most of our general protests, there is no age barrier. A man of 60 years could still decide to join the younger ones to go on a protest. During the regime of Babangida, he announced that the then Rivers State was pregnant and was going to give birth to a lot of children. To us, we thought we were going to get more states and more local governments, but that did not happen. Angrily, what we did was to block the East–West Road. The people who did this were not just those in the age bracket of 15–16 but those of the age of 50, women, including married women, and educated people also participated by blocking the roads that led their communities to the highways.²

Though young people are the majority of those involved in violent confrontations because they are more agile, the involvement of older people in the struggle is very common, and it is a manifestation of the extent of the marginalization, frustration and impoverishment indigenes pass through in their various communities. Therefore, the participation of older people is an indication of the support given to the youth in order to create a strong and formidable team against oppression in the region. This interest further symbolizes group politics against environmental insecurity.

The youth culture in the Niger Delta region is synonymous with the perceptions of youth in other parts of Nigeria. What is important here is that youth militancy is engendered by their awareness that huge sums of money are being made from the Niger Delta region through oil exploration, while indigenes' benefit can only be calculated in form of the hydrocarbons emitted, degradation and gas flares, unemployment and impoverishment. However, this activity should not portray youth in the oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta region as warmongers, rag tags, criminals, or even permanently restive, rather they should be seen as rational youth who are only reacting to years of marginalization and who desire justice, and economic and political empowerment. Their power is gained through group identity. For most youth alienated from access to the resources gained from oil, localized collective identities, such as the localized community youth groups and cross-community groups including purely militant groups, have emerged as important sites and means of laying claim to deprived rights. Youth groups are always very distinct, vocal and vibrant.

Methodology

To carry out this study, two communities each were selected in both states. In Bayelsa State, fieldstudy was carried out in Otuasega, Ogbia local government and Peramabiri, Southern Ijaw local government. In Rivers State, focus was on Kegbare Dere in Gokana local government and Bille in Degema local government using a questionnaire on 50 respondents in each community, and in-depth interviews with youth, women and traditional chiefs in all the communities based on purposive sampling approach. Out of 200 questionnaires administered, 183 questionnaires were returned and analysed with the use of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). At this juncture, it is instructive to state that the emphasis of this study centres on the popular community youth groups in the region. Of note is that questions were not centred on militant youth but youth generally because of the sensitive nature of the areas and the fear that respondents might either avoid answering questions pertaining to their militia group status or might provide wrong answers just to satisfy the researcher.

Findings

In analysing the questionnaire, it was observed that the ages of respondents ranged from 17–40 years while the majority of the respondents were between 24- and 30 years of age. Interestingly, all the respondents were coincidentally of the male gender. Questions, which sought to know respondents' educational qualifications reveal that out of 183 respondents, 11 per cent were graduates, 37 per cent represent secondary school leavers, 36 per cent were primary school holders, 7 per cent were school drop-outs and 9 per cent never went to school. Out of the 11 per cent of the higher institution graduates, 85 per cent went to polytechnics and 15 per cent went to the University of Science and Technology as well as other universities. The question on the inability to continue with education shows that lack of money served as a major hindrance for their inability to access as well as finish education, but others felt that the inability to get well-paid employment opportunities contributed. But to some respondents, they filled 'still in school'.

Analysis of respondents' occupations provides more shocking revelations about the future of the Niger Delta youth. Out of the total respondents, 58 per cent had one or two forms of employment opportunities, while 21 per cent were still scouting for jobs and 21 per cent were still students. Out of the 58 per cent who were employed, only 17 per cent were employed into white collar jobs, ranging from teaching to clerical jobs, 47 per cent were into businesses ranging from tailoring,

commercial bus driving, motorcycle riding (*Okada*), contract jobs with oil companies and fishing, and 32 per cent lacked any productive employment but sit at home or are always available at salons. Further questioning reveals that most of the youth in the more permanent jobs were not paid on time. This phenomenon makes it difficult for an average youth in those communities to survive except for a very few of them who have benefited from community leadership positions. When disaggregated by age, almost 93 per cent were in the age range of 25–34, 3 per cent were in the age range of 15–24 and 3 per cent were over 35 years of age.

It becomes imperative at this point to analyse arguments raised by interviewees as responsible for engendering and increasing youth militancy in their oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta region.

Youth and Militancy in the Niger Delta Region: A Discussion

The crisis of development experienced in the oil-rich region set against the wealthy resources that have benefitted the state leadership that seeks rents from oil corporations, has a strong correlation with the militancy pursued by marginalized community youth. Some of the structural and precipitating factors identified by the women's groups, elders and most importantly, the youth groups as facilitating youth violence in oil-rich Niger Delta communities include the following.

Lack of Social Welfare and Infrastructure

Actually, the issue of youth militancy arose due to marginalization from the MNCs and their allies. What we have realized is that the mineral resource that is taken out of this place has been quite enormous for us to have been transformed like Texas. But we are still living in shanty areas.³

An analysis of reasons why youth are involved in the region's conflicts shows that socio-economic facilities are totally lacking. Youth respondents decried the state of social amenities in their communities. It is disappointing to note that up until now, Yenagoa, the capital of Bayelsa State (mainly Ijaw domain) has not been connected to the national grid. On a visit to some of the streams in K-Dere in Rivers State and Otuasega in Bayelsa State, it was shocking to note that clean water is a luxury in most of these communities, a condition worsened by the environmental practices of oil companies, causing oil spills in fresh water and underground aquifers. Due to the fact that the Niger Delta is made up of a network of creeks and rivers that flow into the Atlantic Ocean, an oil spill in one locality spills over into other communities. The result is the brackish water people have to contend with for drinking and laundry purposes. In Otuasega, it was revealed that the community sourced drinking water from the brackish river until Shell, which has been operating for over 40 years and whose camp is a stone throw from the community, provided a bore hole for the community in 2004 after series of protests.⁴ A major contradiction, which seems difficult to reconcile is that whereas oil companies that are situated within oil-producing communities have access to all basic and social facilities, inhabitants in the oil-producing areas lack such luxury and have had to engage oil companies in protests before being provided with basic amenities. In Kegbare Dere, no pipe-borne water existed throughout the period of 35 years that Shell operated in Ogoni land.⁵

Currently, the effluents discharged into fresh water sources contain high amounts of toxic materials such as mercury or Benzo[a]Pyrene (Benzopyrene),⁶ with a high concentration of 0.54 to 4ug per litre, which is far above the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendation of 0.7ug/l for

drinking water.⁷ The concentration of this chemical is higher in fish and other aquatic creatures because of the sediments they feed on. People who in turn feed on these marine creatures automatically take in higher levels of the cancerous chemical. The resultant effect has been interpreted by a community youth leader as:

Whether we agitate or not, we are dying silently. In a situation where your environment is polluted, what you inhale is gradually killing you. There is no community that is exempted from gas flaring and acid rain. If we agitate or not, we will still die, so why won't we sacrifice our lives for the few who will live?⁸

In spite of the glamour that 'beclouds' Shell camps, the living conditions of indigenes are hardly an advertisement for the presence of oil companies in such areas. Most of the houses in these communities are built with mud and thatched, like pre-colonial structures. One would not expect such low level of development in oil-rich areas. The most unfortunate of the four communities is K-Dere in Gokana, Bomu oil fields, Ogoniland. Though Shell began operations there in 1958, and it has 57 out of the 96 oil wellheads in Ogoniland, the living conditions are utterly dismal as there is no sign of modernization in the community.

Pollution of water by oil spills in these communities affects their professions as fishermen and farmers, therefore, leaving the people with no positive and productive engagement. The creeks are the economy of the people in the oil-producing Niger Delta, but due to the extraction of crude oil and the passage of pipelines across farms and houses, creeks have been blocked. Therefore, it has become difficult for farming and fishing to take place as before. Sometimes, when the oil pipelines are hot, the crude oil sweats, and when the sweat gets into the water, fish suffocate and die. As a result, most fishermen hardly catch enough fish to sell in order to earn sustainable livelihood, and even when they finally succeed, the catches (and the fish) remain very small. Oil spills have also affected the quality and prices of farm products in the markets. But despite the challenges faced by these people, they still embark on fishing and farming as sources of survival in their communities. In Otuasega and Peremabiri, the inhabitants complained of the disappearance of some species of cocoyam and plantain resulting from the effects of pollution and gas flares on farmlands. Unfortunately in most cases, compensation is not paid for oil spills, the passage of pipelines over farmlands, and the destruction of farmlands. When such compensation is paid, they are only paltry sums that could not cover for the years of planting of affected crops. For example, N10 is paid for a stem of cassava affected by oil spill or the acquisition of land. This attitude aggravates frustration and consequently leads to conflict.

The display of wealth by oil workers in the presence of females in host communities faced with deepening poverty, has increasingly led to prostitution in those area. According to interviewed respondents, it is normal in the oil-producing communities for most single and married women to turn into camp followers. Young women are invited to the oil camps at nights as prostitutes and in the mornings, they return to their homes.⁹ There is no gainsaying arguing that the money earned from prostitution is used in alleviating the sufferings of their families. However, to an Otuasega youth leader, 'young men are not happy with this development because they perceive it as a hindrance to getting their future wives'. This phenomenon has turned a lot of young girls in host communities into victims of the HIV/AIDS scourge. As the Ijaw Youth President said:

In fact, the young women in the host communities cannot control themselves because of the money the people display and they go into prostitution. That is why when you take proper statistics of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria, you will see that the Niger Delta has got the highest rate of infection.¹⁰

The economic challenges faced by indigenes from oil exploration and exploitation of their land, such as bad harvests on crop yields, invariably mean that the majority of parents or guardians cannot afford school fees for their wards, therefore resulting in high drop-out rates in oil-producing communities. Children drop out of school for one or more years to make money, engaging in some trade, and resume when they have enough to pay school fees and purchase uniforms and books. At the end, most students spend up to ten years or more in school in a situation where they would be expected to spend six years. To David who was a school teacher at the time of interview, illustrated:

Since my parents did not have money to send me to school, it was difficult finishing secondary school. I had to do a shift every year by staying one year in school and the next year outside school. I spent my one year outside school farming, selling the yields and saving money for next session in school. Therefore, I spent close to 11 years in secondary school and this is the lot of most children even today. That is why you see most of the so-called students looking very aged for their classes and for those who are ashamed to continue with their education because of the age, they drop out and find something to do for themselves.¹¹

Usually for the majority of the youth who struggle to complete the Ordinary Level school certificate, education ends there. In spite of the difficulties faced by students in host communities, Shell, for example, gives only four scholarships to secondary school students and two scholarships to university students, which is terribly inadequate.¹² In Ogoni land, including Kegbare Dere, Shell did not institute a scholarship programme for the host communities before its eviction from Ogoniland. Though oil companies provided a six-classroom block there (which is not enough), it is not equipped to meet basic educational standards. For example, there is no science equipment or library, therefore culminating in poor educational outcomes. On 11 October 2004, about 70 students of the Amalgamated Imotel Students Union, comprising students from the Imiringi, Otuasega and Elebele communities in the Kolo Creek besieged Shell's camp at Kolo Creek LGA. The agitation was due to Shell's insensitivity to their plight. They protested, carrying a mock coffin covered with white linen at the front. The students demanded scholarship awards based on quota system, the establishment of libraries and science laboratories in the communities and sponsorship of educational programmes.¹³

Health facilities are inadequate to meet the burgeoning needs of a population demanding good health care. From observation of the four communities visited and sets of interviews, the cottage clinics provided by oil companies in host communities lack state of the art facilities. While oil companies provide the structures, maintaining them is always outside their immediate concerns. In fact, in K-Dere and Otuasega, doctors and nurses are hardly present at the clinics and when they show up, it is very brief. Moreover, in most cases, drugs are not available, hence, most patients are referred to bigger hospitals in the cities for treatment. This is against the background of the availability of the state-of-the-art medical facilities in oil camps less than 5kms from host communities.

A major concern for most of the youth and other groups interviewed in the four communities is the rate at which gas flares have destroyed their communities. Respondents revealed three major consequences of gas flares on the communities. First, gas is flared throughout the day and night to the extent that with the brightness of the flares, there is no difference between day and night. Invariably, host communities inhale fumes arising from flares, therefore putting them at risk of diseases such as eye problems, difficulty in breathing (lung problems) and cancer. Second, the gas flared also destroys roofing sheets turning them into brownish sheets. Moreover, the flares affect

trees in their farmland, destroying their fertility, and consequently, the yields of farm produce. In spite of all these challenges, facilities are not available to cushion the effects of the potential dangers.

Denial of Employment Opportunities

Economically, in spite of the oil revenues derived from the Niger Delta region, majority of the inhabitants in oil-producing communities are not employed in the oil companies there. There was a strong consensus among youth groups during interviews about the inequality and injustice embedded in gaining white collar jobs in oil companies. They all concurred that employment opportunities are heavily skewed towards youth outside oil-producing rural communities. For those employed from host communities, only a few of them occupy managerial positions. To the youth, the major Nigerian ethnic groups (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa) dominate the oil industry while the minority ethnic groups suffer environmental degradation, impoverishment, and total neglect. The 'lucky' indigenes employed, occupy positions as cleaners of oil installation facilities, pipeline security personnel and temporary contractors whose appointments terminate at the completion of those contracts. According to Kime, an elder in the Supreme Egbesu Assembly:

Outside the foreigners, the next category of people that manage the gas and oil industry are Igbos, and Yorubas. The oil companies will call us for interview, we will do it, and when we pass the interview, they will now say that we have to go through aptitude test. I know that nobody surmounts a Shell aptitude test without an insider giving him or her an insight of what the aptitude test will look like ... But our people do not have the privilege. So they use the aptitude test to fail our children. So, in terms of employment, our children are not employed, while children from other ethnic groups are, especially the westerners are employed and put in managerial positions. But our people would not have bothered if the environment was still safe for us to do the things our forefathers were doing.¹⁴

For the contractors, wages are extremely meagre. As at May 2005, Shell contractors were being owed about six months' salaries. Rather than provide permanent employment opportunities for youth in those oil-producing communities, Shell prefers to implement a programme known as the 'Sit at Home' allowance. In Otuasega, Peremabiri and Bille, youth are paid to prevent them from disrupting oil operations and attacking industry workers and facilities. According to respondents, Shell gives 50 youths in host communities the opportunity to sit at home and earn N30,000.00 per month N30,000.00 per month (at the rate of N1,000.00 per day). Apart from its negative impact on those youth who now depend on such allowances and do not intend engaging in developing the productive skills necessary for getting out of poverty, it has also triggered conflicts among youth in neighbouring communities who feel sidelined from the largesse. Unfortunately, allowances are used by most youth on non-productive ventures such as purchasing television sets, radios, videos, alcohol, and womanizing. In Otuasega, youth in the neighbouring communities are fairly represented in the sharing of these benefits,¹⁵ but in Peremabiri and Bille, inequality in the sharing of oil benefits has precipitated bloody conflicts among the youth of the two communities over the years.

A finding from the field that seems discouraging is the proliferation of alcohol joints in some of the host communities visited, except in Kegbare Dere. Quite a number of youth patronize these joints, drinking and smoking instead of engaging in productive work. Through inquiries, it became clear that since there are no white-collar jobs or contract jobs with oil companies or even available land to engage in farming as was the case prior to environmental degradation, they sit at home all day, waiting

for their own share of the free allowances as well as an invitation by oil companies for contract jobs. When such opportunities are absent, they become frustrated and protest their dismal conditions.

Demand for Resource Control

The issue of economic inequality in the Niger Delta brings to the fore, the unbalanced nature of revenue allocation in Nigeria. During most interviews in the four communities, one issue re-echoed, that is, the deliberate attempt by the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, supported by the oil-dependent state, to maintain an unholy alliance with multinational oil corporations, and with the paraphernalia of force, to subjugate the inhabitants of the Niger Delta. To most respondents, during the colonial and immediate post-colonial agricultural boom period, revenue allocation to the regions was based on derivation principle. But the derivation method changed with the discovery of oil. Beyond the inequality perpetrated by the state, oil companies have their offices and headquarters outside oil-producing communities while they pay taxes to the states where their headquarters are located. This approach suffices that taxes are paid to states where oil is not extracted and exploited, and utilized to develop those states to the detriment of the oil-producing communities. Therefore at the heart of militancy is the inequality revolving around the sharing of the proceeds from the sale of crude oil explored from their ancestral land.

Non-Fulfilment of Memorandum of Understanding

A major factor sparking violence in host communities is the non-fulfilment of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) by oil companies in their areas.¹⁶ In Otuasega, Peremabiri and Bille, the failure to honour the terms of the MOUs after several appeals, sparked off conflicts between the host communities' youth groups and the oil companies. Otuasega youth cited conflicts that occurred first in 1999 between youth from the three communities making up the Kolo Creek, including Otuasega, and Shell over the environmental consequences of oil exploitation. The peaceful demonstration started as early as 4.00 am. The youth blocked Shell's camp gate and presented their demands, which resulted in the merciless treatment of some of the youth by the police invited to quell the protest, through beating, arrest and torturing of the youth. Second, in March 2005, the Otuasega community youth group also revolted against Shell over non-fulfilment of an MOU, which revolved around electricity via gas turbine to the community. From the early to mid-1990s, K-Dere was host to a pocket of protests within the Gokana local government area due to its proximity to the Shell site.¹⁷ Though peaceful, the youth were at the forefront of these conflicts over the failure of Shell to fulfil MOUs. For example, to the paramount ruler in Kegbare Dere:

The youth were at the forefront of the struggle in Ogoniland. Just imagine a multi-million naira company like Shell that came into this community since the 1950s and was not able to create anything one can pinpoint to as being done by Shell. The youth had to revolt.¹⁸

With the resumption of Shell's activity in Ogoniland, K-Dere youth protested against Shell in a bid to know their stakes in the new arrangement of oil extraction.

Illegal Deals between Chiefs and Oil Companies

Another factor precipitating and exacerbating violence in the Delta region is the making and concretization of deals between chiefs in oil-based communities and oil companies. According to

respondents in Bille and Peremabiri, intra-community conflict between chiefs (paramount and others) over oil compensation is very prevalent in both communities. Being a host community supposedly has its own benefits as oil companies operating in certain communities are expected to give compensation, implement development programmes and provide contract and sometimes permanent jobs in the communities, especially in this era of Global MOUs. But oil companies negotiate such agreements with individuals whom they identify as community representatives, notably the top traditional leaders or chiefs, in a divide and rule tactic.

The realization of the subversion of goals and plans by elders in oil-rich communities, who are most often corrupt and frequently collected bribes from oil companies to the detriment of the overall interests of the community, trigger jealousies and generate tensions and violence between the chiefs and youth. This system of divide and rule aims at weakening traditional society and turning de facto community leadership into an all-comers affair, including youth factions. Respondents in Peremabiri asserted that due to youth's attack on chiefs' lives in 1997, the paramount chief's throne was vacated, leaving the youth to take over the governance of the community.¹⁹ In recent times, while intra-community conflicts have reduced, inter-community conflicts between Peremabiri and its neighbours have intensified over the sharing of compensation.

While youth in the four communities started their agitations in the early 1990s, due to the total negligence of the oil-rich communities, their modes of mobilization and operation have since become more organized.

Youth Militancy: Mobilization and Modes of Operation in the Niger Delta

The focus of this section is on the processes of youth's involvement in protests against oil companies. More importantly, it analyses ways and means in which youth are mobilized for protests and militancy against oil corporations in a bid to gain national and international attention to their plight in the region. Based on interviews (administration of questionnaires, face-to-face interviews and FGDs), it was revealed that there are different modes of operation utilized by the youth groups *in their communities, however, they all share similar characteristics*.

In relation to mobilization, participation in community youth groups is completely voluntary, however, participation is considered an obligation for every youth residing in the community. The class of youth cuts across every educational, age and status divide. Youth meetings are held in every community, and at the regional level. In the latter context, representatives from Otuasega, Peremabiri and Bille attend the Ijaw Youth Council where all activities at the local level are coordinated, and policies which impact on all the Ijaw youth in the region are transmitted to them. In K-Dere, its youth group also has a broader ethnic youth group known as the Ogoni Youth Council, which coordinates all the activities of the youth in Ogoniland, including K-Dere.

Youths meet on a regular basis to discuss issues of urgent concern in their areas, especially as they relate to degradation, failure to implement MOUs, deprivation and neglect by oil companies, in addition to other relevant community issues. Based on the outcomes of their meetings, their needs are presented to oil companies. Sometimes promises are made by the oil companies concerned and at other times, they are ignored. 'At the expiration of the deadline, we would re-inform them but they would not respond. Maybe they love conflicts and crisis, we don't know, and then we would strike'.²⁰

On Wednesday 6 July 2005, the Ijaw youth in Bille closed down the flow stations in the Bille community of Degema, a few days after they had issued a warning to SPDC. To the youth in the

area, the decision to shut the oil wells was taken as a result of the total neglect of their area by SPDC after 47 years of oil exploration, exploitation and production there. They demanded resource control, improved conditions of living and employment opportunities for the youth in Bille.²¹ In August 2005, there was another protest sparked by the non-response to July's demands. According to a Bille youth leader, 'Violence is the only language Shell understands and the youth of this community are bent on shutting down every Shell flow station in Bille if it fails to heed to our requests'.²²

From 1998, youth in Peremabiri began to protest against Shell, that had began full operation in 1963. In this host communities, youth were not at first militant, but years of neglect and marginalization at the hands of the oil companies brought about militancy. According to Michael (the former Community Development Committee (CDC) chairman in Otuasega), 'In our relationship with SPDC, if they do not do what we want them to do, we are forced to be violent with them'.²³

In Otuasega, information about the right time to get the company's attention is usually filtered through a contract staff. Youth are then mobilized to march to the camp as early as four in the morning. Gates leading to the camps are locked in order to debar the oil companies' staff from their offices, and oil wells are locked. They block the road leading to Shell camps, stopping their operations and presenting their demands until they are met.

Beyond community groupings, the failure of oil companies to fulfil MOUs has sparked the formation of social militant groups in which most of the community youth take part. Even though 69 per cent of the respondents agreed that they are members and hold meetings with some militant groups, such as the Supreme Egbesu Assembly (SEA), the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), and the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) to mention but a few, they all refused to reveal the groups they identified with.

Analysis of the question concerning the reasons youth join militant groups reveals that almost 73 per cent joined to identify with the sufferings of oil-based communities, 26 per cent joined because it is normal to join a social group, and 1 per cent did not respond to the question. This shows that even though militancy is now the norm, the original purpose was to draw national and international attention to the injustice perpetrated by government on their communities. Some of the militants' activities include hostage-taking, seizure of boats, and killing of oil workers, and the wave of militancy has increased due to the influence of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) such as AK-47s, shotguns, handguns, dynamite and rifles. These modern weapons are used simultaneously with local weapons such as cutlasses, spears, machetes, knives and traditional charms.²⁴ Findings on how they source and accumulate these sophisticated weapons reveal that politicians, wealthy elites and sometimes traditional rulers influence and encourage the youth, as well as purchase weapons for them to use against oil companies. Another form of accumulating weapons mentioned by respondents is through funds realised from illegal bunkering activities. Most importantly, oil company's illegal act of bribing community youth against damaging and shutting down oil wells, has created a new source of funding for acquiring arms.²⁵ At this point, it is pertinent to note that unscrupulous criminals are taking advantage of genuine militancy by community youth. By committing crimes, ranging from kidnaps to ransom-taking in the region, distinguishing criminals has become more complex as new thesis emerging posits the possibility of militants resorting to criminal activities to fund their objectives.

Navigating Peace in the Niger Delta Region

The response of the government has been a mixture of peace and militarization, or carrots and sticks, as the case may be. The 'sticks' have been in the form of the state's militarization of the

Delta region, for example in the destruction of Ogoniland, Odi, Odiodioma, to mention but a few, and the establishment of the Joint Military Task Force (JTF) whose role has been to clamp down on the level of 'criminality' and eliminate 'criminals' or 'rag tags'.²⁶ But this strategy has yielded more violence than expected and has spurred armed groups to consolidate their commitment to making the region untenable and ungovernable, thus increasing the level of social and economic insecurity of the Delta environment.²⁷ For the meantime, peace still remains an elusive project in the Delta region.

The 'carrots' are in form of institutions created to engender peace and development, and assuage the effects of oil exploitation. Some of the recent institutions include the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), which has been starved of funds²⁸ and mired in corruption; the controversial Niger Delta Technical Committee whose White Paper has not been made public since the submission of its report, and the creation of the Ministry of the Niger Delta.²⁹ Unfortunately, there has been no sustainable commitment on the part of government to make the strategies work, due to corruption, indiscipline and the patronage system (Hazen and Horner, 2007: 18). These attitudes were revealed in the way the federal government compromised its stand on ending gas flaring by 1 January 2008. Beyond these institutions, the federal government instituted the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme on 25 June 2009 with the aim of first granting amnesty to militants, and collecting arms, demobilizing and developing the Niger Delta generally. However, the success of this programme depends on several tenets, which include a clear conceptualization of 'amnesty', the transparency of the government at all levels, the provision of adequate funds for militants' rehabilitation, the total commitment of the government to make it work while removing every form of militarization from the region, and the immediate concrete development of the region itself.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it will be realized that environmental degradation resulting from oil exploitation for over 50 years, and clamour for resource control, autonomy, and improvement in socio-economic lives, are at the heart of youth militancy in the oil-producing communities, and the resultant internal instabilities. The inability of the government and oil companies to readdress these problems culminated in the graduation of community youth from mere engagements of sporadic protests at the community level to more popular engagements worsened by the formation and activities of militant groups that profess the interests of the poor oil-producing communities.

Addressing such issues entail guaranteeing environmental security in the Niger Delta. At this point, the major challenge in resolving conflict and building peace in the conflict-ridden Niger Delta lies not in the militarization of the region but in bringing key leaders or stakeholders (the Nigerian state, the oil and gas industry and oil-rich communities) together to persistently dialogue on the way forward. In other words, there should be a long-term process of collaborative capacity building designed to resolve the issues at the core of the insurgency and counter-insurgency, and to build the capacity of such stakeholders to work together and implement strategies that will reduce poverty to the barest minimum. This alternative should also include ensuring that host communities are, in practice, at the mainstream of policies affecting the management of oil and gas resources. This option will serve as a starting point for peace, security and co-existence to be achieved in the Niger Delta region in particular and Nigeria in general.

Other measures include bringing back the legal framework aimed at protecting host communities from oil companies' extractive processes. This does not infer that international and domestic laws do not exist, but governments have been tolerant of oil companies' practices due to their own

selfish interests, neglecting the negative consequences of such processes on oil-rich host communities. Hence, laws and regulations adopted to regulate the oil industry's operations must be strictly adhered to (including gas flaring and pollution), and punishments meted on recalcitrant companies. In addition, adequate compensation should be made to individuals and communities for land use and pollution, in a transparent manner devoid of the divide and rule tactics associated with most oil companies there. As part of encouraging social capital in the region, youth should be economically empowered, both in the oil and non-oil sectors in order to create positive alternatives to militancy.

Government needs to take practical and holistic measures to diversify the economy. The end result will be a reduction on over-dependence on non-renewable oil and gas resources. Moreover, this measure will strengthen the economies of non-oil producing states by lessen their over-reliance on federal government's allocations based on oil profits realized from oil-producing states, and therefore, lessen political and economic inequity.

Of all these recommendations, political will remains the most important instrument for achieving peace and justice in the Niger Delta's oil politics. This recommendation brings to the fore the clear gap between theory and practice, or policy initiation and policy implementation. Government must not be seen as making grandiose policies for the region, and oil companies must not only be seen as signing Global MOUs with host communities. Rather efforts must be geared towards having the will to implement such policies. Though the DDR programme is ongoing and aimed at realizing this intent, what is of utmost importance is that achieving results is a long-term process not just a one-off event. The will must be devoid of inept and corrupt leadership, which has been the bane of governance in Nigeria as a whole today, but must entrench justice, equity, transparency and good governance. Furthermore, in realization of this goal, the DDR programme must holistically include the communities which have suffered total neglect, alienation and injustice over the years and not just concentrate on militants. Failing these, institutional fixes as well as militarization of the region will further entrench the region in more violent attacks and reprisals that will end up threatening the basis of Nigeria's unity.

Notes

1. Most youth groups resonated this definition during interviews.
2. Interview with Mr Jonjon, the Ijaw Youth Council leader on the 4 April 2005 at the IYC Centre, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State.
3. Interview with Richard in Peremabiri, Bayelsa State on 21 May 2005.
4. Focus Group Discussion with youth group and Community Development Committee (CDC) members in Otuasega community on 5 April 2005.
5. Interviews with youth and women's group leaders in Kegbare Dere on 19 May 2005. I was taken round the village, including the oil polluted river. The two pipe-borne water systems utilized by the community were installed by individuals and not the state or Shell.
6. Benzopyrene's chemical name is known as Benzo[a]Pyrene and it has the chemical formula is $C_{20}H_{12}$. The chemical is a five-ring polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon that is mutagenic and highly carcinogenic. It is found in coal tar, automobile exhaust fumes, tobacco smoke and charbroiled food. Benzopyrene causes genetic damage in lung cells and disrupts the normal process of copying DNA, which may lead to cancer.
7. In the chemical sciences, ug means a microgram and 1000 ug equals 1 milligram. In other words, the presence of Benzopyrene in drinking water is much higher than the recommended maximum amount.
8. Interview with Mr Jonjon, IYC President.
9. These young girls are affected by the paradox of wealth and poverty, and therefore, easily deceived by the

display of beautiful and modern jeeps by oil workers who come around the communities to invite girls to their camps.

10. Interview with the IYC President on 5 April 2005. In agreement with the IYC President, the CDC Public Relations Officer in Otuasega, Nelson Kokunu Adams confirmed that two young girls in Otuasega died of AIDS in the community.
11. Interview with David Collins, a Secondary School teacher in Otuasega on 30 April 2005.
12. Interviews with youth and elders in Focus Group Discussions in Otuasega and Peremabiri.
13. Interview with comrade Wisdom Illaili at Yenagoa on 5 April 2005.
14. Interview with Mr Kime, an elder in the Supreme Egbesu Assembly (SEA) and a member of the Ijaw Youth Council in Bayelsa State on 4 April 2005.
15. The Kolo Creek includes three communities namely, Otuasega, Elemele and Imiringi. According to Christian Igbedon, Otuasega Youth leader, two youths from each community are paid N30,000.00 each for the period of three months after which it is rotated again among other youths in the communities for the same period. This practice is done to avoid conflicts that may arise from oil compensation sharing among host communities and their neighbours.
16. MOUs are general statements, which are indicative of the compromises of all sides/parties establishing that certain agreements have been reached in terms of engagement and relationship between two or more parties. MOUs are legal in some cases and in others, it signals a gentleman's arrangement between two or more parties committed to peace. The parties are expected to voluntarily honour the terms of the MOU.
17. Interview with the Kegbare Dere's youth leader, Ledor Mene and women's leader, Nwindee Namon on 7 May 2005.
18. Interview with the paramount ruler of Kegbare Dere, Chief Bandi Sunday Piri-Gberesun on 7 May 2005.
19. Interview with Basil Young in Peremabiri on 22 April 2005.
20. Interview with Bille youth leader, Socrates Dokubo on 26 May 2005.
21. During the July crisis, the Rivers State Commissioner for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, Clapton Ogolo, had to intervene in order to reach a ceasefire agreement.
22. Interview with Bille youth leader, Socrates Dokubo on 26 May 2005.
23. Interview with Mr Michael, Otuasega's former CDC Public Relations Officer, on 7 April 2005.
24. Discussions with youth groups across the four communities.
25. Interviews with Mr Kime and Mr Jonjon on 4 April 2005. Revenue from this source is used to buy weapons and to fund the survival of the youth involved in the struggles.
26. Criminality to the Nigerian state and the JTF in this sense means the acts of oil theft, kidnapping of oil workers, expatriates and indigenes, hostage taking and blowing up of pipelines, among others. The criminals signify the 'militants who are involved in the acts of "criminality"'. The focus of the JTF include Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers States.
27. Nigeria's crude oil exports have declined more than 20 per cent since late 2005 when militants began their campaign. As at 13 September 2008, Nigeria has lost 280,000 barrels daily of its output to attacks in the Niger Delta region (see *Business Day*, 2008).
28. The 2009 federal government allocation to NDDC fell from N41.3 billion in 2008 to N29.5 billion, and as at June 2009, the allocation has not been awarded to NDDC for it to implement its capital projects in the Niger Delta.
29. The Ministry of the Niger Delta has been wrapped in various controversies since its initiation, starting from its choice of location (Abuja), the Minister to be in charge, the coalition of its terms of reference with the NDDC, and even the political will behind its set-up.

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