

ENDING THE MILITANT CRISIS IN THE NIGER DELTA: THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

The Niger Delta conflict is one created and exacerbated by the oil and natural gas riches of the region. Great hydrocarbon wealth has been extracted over the past decades, yet Niger Delta residents continue to live in underdeveloped and polluted circumstances. This situation has fueled widespread, and often violent, conflict within the region. While the Nigerian government has made attempts to resolve the conflict, most recently with the 2009 amnesty program, these attempts have repeatedly failed. This paper will discuss these failures, as well as present a set of initiatives for the Niger Delta that, together, represent a possible path for regional rejuvenation, and sustainable development.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Amnesty Program, Conflict, underdevelopment, violence.

Introduction

The June 2009 amnesty program for Niger Delta militants offered by former Nigerian President Musa Yar' Adua represented an opportunity to stabilize the region for constructive conflict resolution negotiations. It was not the first time, however, that an amnesty initiative had been put forward to resolve the violence in the region. Yet it did seem to be an offer backed with solid proposals to end the

violence in the region, an effort to encourage necessary disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of the region's militants. Despite this the program was not able to assuage regional violence, largely due to the lack of attention to the peculiar type of conflict in the Delta. Thus, in order to fully appreciate the task of conflict resolution there, it is important to look at past attempts at conflict resolution as well as ideas for the future. In the coming years, the Delta may yet be stabilized and transformed into a region suitable for economic, social and political development.

In order to fully understand how best to address the possibility of future widespread violence in the Delta, it is important to first recognize the particulars of the conflict facing the Nigerian government. Simply, the conflict is one created and exacerbated by the oil and natural gas riches of the region. Hydrocarbon resources are the engines for Nigeria's economy, as oil provides 95 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and 80 percent of the government's budgetary revenues. Yet the vast majority of the Delta's 30 million residents live with only the negative effects of oil and natural gas production; the environment and its degradation are daily features of life for many. This, in turn, has fueled decades of cyclical conflict that continues to devastate the region.

The petroleum industry is, globally, a dirty industry. Nigeria is no exception. Owing to the wealth of oil and natural gas under their feet, the Delta constitutes some of the "richest real estate" on the African continent.¹ Yet, despite this wealth, the region has degenerated into a "severely impaired coastal ecosystem" suffering from "damage from oil operations [that] is chronic and cumulative." The pollution from petrochemical exploration, extraction and refining poses a constant threat to those whose livelihoods have not yet been disrupted. Rural residents live with "no real development, no roads, no electricity, no running water and no telephones" while only scraping by

economically. Historically, Delta residents have engaged in farming and fishing as principal sources of household income, and livelihoods.⁷ As the environment continues to be polluted, the traditional means of economic activity in the region continue to dwindle; there are few, if any, opportunities in their place.⁴ Compensation, clean-up and monitoring practices - whether public or private - continue to be lackluster and hardly effective.

Thus, economic discrimination - including the marginalization of poverty, the creation of national sacrifice areas and a high level of international dependence - has become a pervasive aspect of life for Delta residents.³ In response to their common challenges, communities have bonded with "considerable coordination" in order to strengthen the "quality, intensity and extent of articulation, aggregation and expression of demands... for equity and justice,"⁶ In the Delta, as in other regions of Africa, this organization has culminated in the growth of a nascent civil society that seeks to address the claims of Delta residents against both the Nigerian government and multinational oil companies operating in the region.⁷ Many of these groups are peaceful organizations seeking redress through legitimate channels. Others, however, act through violence and function in a world of gross illegality that further intensifies the conflict. The vast majority of the Delta's 30 million residents live with only the negative effects of oil and natural gas.

The Nigerian government is severely handicapped in addressing the demands of these groups. The country is a fragmented collection of over 250 ethnic groups, with each holding "certain basic political orientations" as well as an "unwillingness to alter" those orientations. Public attitudes and political culture are vehemently localized; history, language, culture, religion and political values stem from communal rather than national experience. Coupled with the country's history of military rule, the situation is one where Abuja views political pluralism as a "weapon of potential destruction" rather

than a force for good. The Nigerian state remains fundamentally weak and thus continues to be unable to adequately perform for its citizens, particularly for those in the Delta region.

In the Delta the government has successively failed to execute its duties, evident in a 2002 decision from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights that found Nigeria to have violated its responsibilities as a government on multiple levels. Corruption is a pervasive problem, and much of the government's transparency issues are directly related to oil and natural gas activities.¹¹ The Delta continues to lack "adequate social services, viable employment opportunities, or economic growth and development." while oil funds continue to be diverted, wasted, or both.¹² By law, 13% percent of oil revenues are to be transferred to the oil producing states, yet residents of the Delta see few improvements in their socioeconomic situation. Far from being effectively appropriated, the financial wealth simply "seems to disappear."¹³

Clarification of Terms Niger Delta:

Niger Delta is succinctly described as the Niger River Sitting directly on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean in Nigeria. It is located within nine Coastal southern Nigeria states, which include; all six states from the south south geopolitical zone. It is also a petroleum a petroleum rich region in the center of International concern over a period of time.

Amnesty program

This is simply the act of authority by which pardon is granted to large group of individuals (offenders) by the government. Amnesty program was therefore designed and established by the government to tackle the problem of insecurity and youth restiveness in the Niger Delta region and beyond; and it is granted usually for political crimes against the state, such as treason, sedition, or rebellion. In 2009, the

Nigerian government under Late. President Umaru Musa Yar-Adua established the Niger Delta Amnesty program (NDAP) to provide stipend payments, professional training, and the promise of job placement for militants.

Conflict: Conflict refers to the pursuit of the compatible goals or interest by nations or people. It involves some kinds of friction, disagreement or discord arising with a group when beliefs or actions of one or more members do not actually agree with that of another group.

Past Government Efforts

Despite their geographic separation from the problem, Nigerian officials have consistently been faced with pressure to resolve the Delta conflict. The past efforts of a confounding series of panels, reports and commissions have overwhelmingly sought to address the root causes of conflict in the region and facilitate a situation in which substantive conflict prevention can take place. Two specific reports - the 2001 Ogomudia Report of the Special Security Committee on Oil Producing Areas and the 2004 Xiger Delta Regional Development Master Plan - are expressive of both the government's historical focus on trying to resolve the Delta conflict and its glaring inability to do so.

As the security situation in the Niger Delta began to deteriorate at the turn of the century, the Special Security Committee on Oil Producing Areas was set up so that the Nigerian government could, in the words of the panel, "beam a search light on the oil producing areas in the quest for a solution" to the region's deteriorating situation.¹⁴ The resulting Ogomudia Report, released in 2001, comprehensively presented a proposed series of graduated steps with a heavy emphasis on ownership of problems by all involved. Yet it accomplished no

tangible gains in the region; the political will in Abuja was simply not present at the time.

The 2004 Xiger Delta Regional Development Master Plan was a second major attempt by the Nigerian government to address the situation in the Delta. Put forward by the Niger Development Commission, the plan was based on a careful examination of the day-to-day needs of Delta residents. The report sought a comprehensive "package of cross-sectoral, mutually supportive measures" that would effectively address the Niger Delta's challenges while taking full advantage of the region's opportunities.¹⁵ The plan rightly focused on wealth creation, employment generation, poverty reduction and value re-orientation, facilitated by an expansion of the private sector, the introduction of governance reforms and the development of a social development charter. Recognizing that previous reports were nothing but hollow political acts, the plan offered a specific funding schedule through 2020 and outlined the contributions needed from government and the private sector. It had however, little effect in reaching its goals.

Both the 2001 report and the 2004 plan expressed the government's belief that the resolution of the underlying causes of conflict in the region - socio-economic marginalization lack of adequate services and infrastructure, and governance issues - could act as a viable conflict prevention mechanism for the Delta. Yet only surface attempts at preventing conflict were achieved. The lack of progress can be attributed to the fact that the litany of reports, plans and committees have not adequately addressed the issue of militarism in the region. Without first addressing militarism, there can be little hope that proposed economic and political initiatives would be able to take root and develop into solutions.

Militarism is the violent culmination of "popular responses to economic mismanagement, economic marginalization and crime waves," which have historically been "prolific and controversial."¹⁶ This is particularly true in regard to the emergence of youth-led, identity-based social groups. Social movements are a powerful force within the region, and the primary antagonists in the Delta are those whose leadership is dominated by militia and paramilitary members. As the environmental crisis destroyed the economic prospects of many young Delta residents, the ranks of these social groups swelled with youth seeking both recourse for grievances and group solidarity. Since these groups are responsible for the majority of violence and illegal activities in the region, any conflict prevention efforts must address their allure to Delta residents.

In order to address this fundamental obstacle to development in the region, in June 2009 then-President, Yar Adua, announced a policy of amnesty for any and all Delta militants, to last from August 4, 2009, until October 4, 2009.¹⁷ The offer amnesty, and the subsequent plan for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the militants, was widely accepted within the Delta. A daily food allowance, monthly stipend, the promise of professional education and training, and the personal involvement of the residents all contributed to the appeal of the amnesty proposal.¹⁸ What should have been cause for celebration, however, was instead darkened by the memory of the historical failings of the government to follow through on its promises and obligations.

Unsurprisingly, the amnesty program was derailed by allegations of corruption regarding the handling of funds meant for former militants. A key militant group in the region, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) declared the ceasefire over in January 2010, less than six months after the amnesty program was implemented. In March 2010, MEND went further, claiming

responsibility for two bombs exploding adjacent to a government building in the city of Warri. The group succinctly stated its position with the announcement that the "deceit of endless dialogue and conferences will no longer be tolerated."¹⁹ Abuja had again failed further eroding faith in government and leading to a renewal of violence.

The Way Forward

In the Niger Delta, it will be especially important to take into consideration the stakes each side holds in the conflict, the attitudes of each side toward the other, and the tactics that each side uses to attain its goals.²⁰ Firstly, in moving forward, each side will make gains at certain times. Thus, it will be important to transition viewpoints away from zero-sum attitudes, so that all conflict participants will realize that development and regional stabilization are for their overall benefit. Secondly, by shifting the attitudes of the parties from "conflictual to accommodative," each will be able to better, understand the other's viewpoints and thus arrive at a more comprehensive and mutually beneficial solution.²¹

Finally, recognizing the importance of tactics in achieving goals will allow each side to understand the best overall methods to achieve mutual goals in the new positive-sum, accommodative environment. The first issue that must be addressed is the basic socio-economic needs and grievances of Delta residents. Economic development, save that required for oil and natural gas operations, is almost non-existent and those living in the area continue to lack access to clean drinking water, electricity and basic social services such as schools and health clinics. Unemployment and the perception of hopelessness in the region push "a huge number" of regional residents to "roam the streets feeling alienated and powerless" while making "youth activism, militancy and rebelliousness a common phenomenon."²²

Socio-economic and political marginalization represents a significant "trigger cause" for conflict

"by deepening and expanding the feeling of relative deprivation among the people, and making the tool and means for confrontation... readily available.²³ while militants and other "modes of collective youth action" grow from the "topdown modes of governance and bottom-up responses to disorder," the level of socioeconomic marginalization in the region also represents a significant casual factor. By giving disenchanting youth education, access to basic services and economic opportunity, there would be a significantly lower appeal for opportunistic activities such as kidnapping, oil bunkering and the pursuit of general violence. A lack of consideration for economic empowerment of the youth population is a grave mistake; youth will soon be young adults, and without legitimate opportunities they will be young adults easily recruited into a new generation of militancy.

Related to this point is an emphasis on graduated development in the Delta. Since resolving the basic issues will likely be a series of long-term initiatives, special emphasis on short-term projects with immediate results should be pursued as 'good faith' measures. This would not only jump-start regional development, but would also galvanize popular support among residents who would see quick results that positively impact their everyday lives. Yet although short-term projects can facilitate popular support by providing residents with an immediate tangible impact, these must be successively built on by later projects.

The 2001 Ogomudia Report and the 2004 Master Plan discussed above have an appreciation for this fact. Each incorporates a tiered development process that, in addition to allowing the cost of development to be extended over time, would allow authorities to

periodically reevaluate circumstances and adjust development plans, accordingly. In the Delta, this is an especially important aspect of developmental, political and communal circumstances can rapidly change the situation in which development is taking place. Graduated development allows officials to refocus resources and attention as time goes on, since what was planned in the past may not be relevant, necessary, or desirable in the present.

A third initiative for the region is the prevention of environmental problems to the greatest possible extent. The costs to the regional population from petrochemical activities are two-fold. There is the immediate cost to well-being from environmental problems such as oil spills, gas flaring and the general toxicity of population. Yet there are also the long-term costs of diminished economic capacity, degraded rivers, lands and air hamper the ability of residents to earn a traditional living. By maintaining a high level of ecological awareness and protection there would likely be fewer bitter feelings, less economic marginalization and less reason for residents to turn to violence.

Concluding Remarks

The study has that the Niger Delta oil and natural gas crisis has affected adversely the region's economic development as well as the entire nation. However, the finding of the study equally showed that; the situation has indeed funded the widespread of violence in the region, as well as conflict within the oil rich Niger Delta. But which the successive government have made traumatic attempt to checkmate and resolve the impasse, the crisis up till the present time, has remain devastating.

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