

Social Welfare and the Niger Delta Conflict

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Abstract

The position argued for in this paper is that the use of social welfare in tackling the pangs of poverty, engendered by environmental degradation, is crucial to addressing and resolving the Niger Delta crisis. Although there have been various attempts to address the conflict by the Nigerian government, yet these attempts have not assuaged the belligerents in the region. Past attempts to resolve the conflict include: increased financial allocation to the region, creation of states, establishment of institutions that will attend to development issues peculiar to the area, and the use of the military to quash rebellion. However, as laudable as these approaches have been they have not prioritised tackling poverty. Arguments are thus presented in this article for the need to see chronic poverty as the root cause of the conflict. The provision of social welfare: affordable housing units, good health facilities, education and other social amenities will cushion the effect of poverty and will calm the aggrieved people of Niger Delta since a major cause of their agitation is the inability to afford certain needs essential for enhancing personal dignity and making life meaningful. Achieving this will enable the government to justifiably separate between criminal activities in the region and just agitations for minimum conditions for survival.

Keywords: Conflict, Niger Delta, Poverty, Social Welfare, Basic Needs

Introduction

Nigeria's Federal Government has made some attempts to address the conflict in Niger Delta, which has moved from being "a relatively peaceful enclave in the 1960s, to a region prone to sporadic low-level conflict in the 1980s, and finally to an outright unstable region with persistent violence since the 1990s" (Idemudia and Ite 2006:391). Some of the steps taken so far have touched on creation of more states in the region, increased financial allocation to the area and the establishment of agencies like the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and its predecessors (Omotola 2007:74). There have also been the deployment of military forces and the setting up of fact-finding committees. However, these meaningful steps have not fully assuaged the situation in the region. In some cases, it is not that "something is fundamentally wrong with these responses" as Omotola (2007:75) suggests. Rather, it is just that implementation has been poor.

In addition, these responses have not been sufficient because they were handled in piecemeal. The Niger Delta crisis, however, requires a holistic and eclectic understanding of problems leading to it. It should be noted that "social problems hardly ever arise from single causes, and it will always be rational to explore additional possible causes and solutions" (Osaghae 2002:x). In the light of this, the position in this paper is pushed in order to complement existing efforts to address the conflict in the Niger Delta. An evidence of the fact that the crisis in the region is far from being over is the latest series of violence emanating from the area as a result of the grievances and activities of the group called Niger Delta Avengers. Therefore, there is the need to seek for other measures that can complement existing attempts to address the crisis.

The position pursued in this paper is that attention must be devoted to the eradication of chronic poverty in the Niger Delta through commitment to the promotion of social welfare that will mitigate the gruelling circumstances fuelling the conflict in the region. This is needed because one major cause of conflict is abject poverty and a major consequence of poverty is one's inability to meet one's basic needs, which further results in the failure of an individual to achieve self-realisation.

Eradication of chronic poverty in the Niger Delta through a commitment to the promotion of social welfare is important because economic neglect which is often called “marginalization” among the people in the region, as well as indices like poverty, unemployment, and minimal educational opportunities for the youths are reasons adduced for the conflict by people in the region (Watts 2007:640). Thus, we are of the view that if the government at both the national and state levels and the multi-national organisations make painstaking efforts to meet the basic needs of Niger Deltans by enhancing social welfare, then the conflict that has engulfed the region, but which has not totally yielded to initial solutions so far, can be further curtailed. It is argued in the paper that the provision of social welfare: affordable housing units, good health facilities, education and other social amenities that will cushion the effect of poverty will calm the aggrieved people of Niger Delta since a major cause of their agitation is the inability to afford certain needs essential for enhancing personal dignity and making life meaningful.

The paper is divided into two sections. In the first section, an evaluation of the crisis in the Niger Delta is carried out with keen focus on causes and solutions that have been proffered to the crisis. In our discussion in this segment, one major cause we accentuate is the role that chronic poverty plays in the agitation engulfing the region as a result of environmental degradation. It is chronic poverty in the area that has made the people to become conscious of the economic worth of the resources in the region; the fact that the resources have not been instrumental in catapulting the region economically is the reason the conflict in the region is festering. In the second section, focus is turned to examining what basic needs are and how the inability to meet them can make a group of people violent. It is also argued in this section that there is the need to design a social welfare programme specifically packaged for the region in order to alleviate suffering.

The Niger Delta Crisis: Causes and Failed Solutions

The crisis in the Niger Delta is multifaceted and has reared its ugly head through pipeline vandalisation, formation of militant groups, attacks on oil companies and oil installations, kidnapping and hostage taking of oil workers, environmental degradation, piracy, insurgency, ethnic conflict, armed struggle, and confrontation with security agents among others. At the initial stage, the conflict “started out as justified environmental protests by people living in a region that was bearing the brunt of damage without seeing the benefits of oil revenues” (Collier 2007:31). However, over the years, interests of some groups in the region have been fuelled by greed aggravated by the desire to profit from the crisis in the Niger Delta. So, as it stands, the Niger Delta conflict has more than one dimension. The first one has links with grievances arising from a set of justified claims against government and oil companies that have, in the pursuit of oil exploration, not given adequate attention to meeting their social responsibilities to the people of the region. This set of grievances arises because the relationship that exists between communities in the Niger Delta, the government and the oil companies is unfavourable to the communities. “It is a relationship of extraction and exploitation in which the federal government and the oil companies benefit immensely from petrodollars, while the communities suffer the impact of ecological and sociological damage” (Kemedi *et. al.* 2015:21). The crisis is thus aggravated because of the belief that oil wealth which should be made to benefit the local communities from which it is derived is being stolen by the transnational oil companies with the aid of the federal government. The situation is worsened as a realisation of the fact that a higher share of the oil revenues generated in the Delta is being allocated to states that are non-oil-producing (Frynas 2001:32).

The second dimension to the Niger Delta conflict has to do with criminal activities perpetrated in the name of the ongoing strife in the region. This relates “to the various bands of criminal cult gangs established, encouraged and funded by political godfathers and dedicated to the theft of crude oil, kidnapping for ransom, assassination of political opponents, various acts of brigandage and piracy in the creeks, and upon the territorial sea” (Afinotan and Ojatorotu 2009:193). This amounts to the exploitation of the crisis situation in the region for private gains. It is apposite to note that Nigeria’s over-dependence on oil makes the Niger Delta region to be susceptible to violence. This is because organisations that are interested in the resources from the region are able to easily make a deal with rebels by funding them in exchange for resources worth millions of dollars. In addition, some influential and wealthy individuals within the community who believe they have a just course of action support rebels fighting for social justice in their domain. This situation obtains because “some economic conditions lend themselves to being taken advantage of by gutter politicians [and other elites], who build their success on hatred” (Collier 2007:24). In some cases, threats to their lives, property, and family make them donate to the rebel groups.

This second one is, however, an offshoot of the first and cannot be effectively tackled without evolving a comprehensive approach for addressing the first. This is because where the reality of human existence is awful rebel and criminal groups easily have a reason to justify their actions; they find easy recruits, and they also easily win the support of oppressed people who then aid and abet them. According to Paul Collier, “low income means poverty, and low growth means hopelessness. Young men, who are the recruits for rebel armies, come pretty cheap in an environment of hopeless poverty. Life itself is cheap, and joining a rebel movement gives these young men a small chance of riches” (Collier 2007:20). According to Michael Watts, “sources put the figure of trained militants at over 25,000 strong, commanding monthly salaries of over N50,000- well above the wage that can be plausibly commanded by an educated youth in the formal sector” (Watts 2007:640). The implication of this is that a lot of the people in the region are tempted to join criminal gangs because crime pays than being patriotic and law-abiding Nigerians.

There is, however, a third dimension to the conflict. This has to do with intra- and inter-communal crises in the Niger Delta. This third dimension relates to crises arising as a result of the desires of individuals and groups to control or have access to the meagre returns from oil being paid as patronage by the multi-nationals operating in the Niger Delta. It has to do with oil politics of who gets what, when, and how among the locals who constitute themselves as “internal forces fighting altruistically or otherwise for influence in the oil complex¹” (Kemedi *et. al.* 2015:37). This dimension, which has to do with politics of the distribution of oil wealth in the region, makes Idemudia and Ite (2006:391) to note that:

it is evident that if the communities in the Niger Delta are not in conflict with the oil multinationals over land rights or compensation for environmental damage, they are in dispute with the government over access to oil wealth and resource control, or they are locked in conflict with one another over claims to ownership of areas where oil facilities and accompanying benefits are sited.

Intervening from a historical perspective, Ogbogbo and Muojama (2008) situate the Niger Delta conflict within the dynamics of the international economy. For them, it is the developments during the different phases of the international economy that have dictated the pace and direction of the crisis. They contend that since the 15th century, the region has been sucked into the vortex of emerging international economy, first through its participation in the slave trade, and then by enabling the sale of palm oil. In these scholars’ view, the Niger Delta is strategically located and this has enabled it to serve as a transit-point for the slave trade and trade in palm oil. Niger Delta, being a coast, enabled its people to serve as middlemen between their hinterland neighbors and European slave dealers. It also enabled the area to serve as a major evacuation point for palm oil. The region has, however, metamorphosed into a place where crude oil and natural gas are obtained. Thus, Niger Delta has been a place with dynamic significance depending on the changing pattern of the world economy (Ogbogbo and Muojama 2008:177-178). However, the situation of the area has been worsened as a result of the increase in the demand in the world economy for sources of energy. The region has been marginalized because of its inability to negotiate the terms, on which it can exchange its resources for wealth, in the opinion of Idemudia and Ite (2007), the conflict can be explained in four folds- in terms of political, economic, environmental and social factors. Regarding the political dimension, Idemudia and Ite are of the view that, the manner in which the Nigerian state was created, the multi-ethnic nature of the country, the unfavorable and uneven distribution of the population of the various ethnic groups and corruption, have all in one way or the other aggravated the conflict in the region. In addition, lack of sufficient political influence of the region at the federal level, lack of political will to implement recommendations that would have improved the lot of the area have precipitated the crisis in the region. Also, a deficient federal structure in which the regions and states are weaker in relation to the centre and have no autonomy, increased centralization of political power, mismanagement of revenue at the state level, the authoritarian nature of military rule, which Nigeria suffered for long are some of the political factors that have contributed to the crisis in one way or the other.

The economic angle to the conflict has to do with agitation spurred on as a result of the demand for a new fiscal federalism that is favourable to the area by ensuring that the bulk of oil revenues returns to the region. This has, however, not been achieved despite agitations for it because Nigeria’s political leaders oppose it. The opposition is due to the fact that Nigeria is a rentier-state that is dependent on oil revenue and as such the region is seen as a means to the generation of revenue on which the country runs. According to Ogbogbo and Muojama (2008:188), between 80 to 90 per cent of the country’s Gross National Product (GNP) in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s is from the oil sector.

The unfortunate fallout of this is that “the interests of the oil companies came to play a much greater role in government policy than those of the farming and fishing communities in the Niger Delta and elsewhere. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the development of the oil industry took precedence over the interests of the local people” (Frynas 2001:30). However, even though the Niger Delta is the treasure base of the nation, accounting for around 90 per cent of the country’s total export of crude oil, which is the main source of the country’s revenue, yet rather than having a sufficient part of proceeds from oil exploration in the area benefitting it, the federal government appropriates a major share. The inability of Nigeria to arrive at an equitable formula for the distribution of revenue from oil is a reason for the crisis.

It is important to point out that oil revenue from the region has fuelled corruption. First, revenue generated from oil is seen as that which can be easily embezzled since it is from nature and not from the sweat of the people through taxation. Second, and flowing from the first, the embezzlement of the revenues derived from oil resources at the federal and the state levels hinders development from reaching the grassroots. According to Tarila Marclint Ebiede, although the political leaders of the Niger Delta region argue for resource control, fiscal federalism, and greater state share of oil revenues, they seem hypocritical given their own mismanagement of oil revenues. In fact, the governors of the region engage in primitive accumulation of wealth and use state funds to finance party politics and maintain their patrimonial ties to national political leaders. They fund political activities of the elites in other regions of Nigeria in a bid to build networks to help them stay in power (Ebiede 2011:145).

Consequently, conflict arises because a particular group of people monopolies the benefits accruing from natural resources at the expense of all those that should be the beneficiaries.

Environmental factors that contribute to the crisis can be traced to the fact that people depend on the environment for sustenance, which oil exploration in the region makes difficult. There is the instance of vibrations associated with rock blasting, which weaken the foundation of some buildings and sometimes lead to their complete collapse (Ogbogbo and Muojama 2008:188). Environmental degradation, as a result of oil spillage and gas flaring, has disrupted farming and fishing, the predominant professions of the people in the region. There is also the hardship associated with obtaining freshwater in a country where pipe borne water is hard to come by. This has made sustaining livelihood in the region difficult and has increased health hazards. Late Ken Saro-Wiwa, while making remarks about the devastating effect of oil exploration in Ogoni land, a part of the Niger Delta, holds that: oil exploration has turned Ogoni into a wasteland: lands, streams and creeks are totally and continually polluted; the atmosphere has been poisoned, charged as it is with hydrocarbon vapours, methane, carbon monoxide, carbon-dioxide and soot emitted by gas which has been flared twenty-four hours a day for thirty three years in very close proximity to human habitation. Acid rain, oil spillages and oil blow outs have devastated Ogoni territory. High pressure oil pipelines crisscross the surface of Ogoni farmlands and villages dangerously (Cited in Ebiede 2011:142).

In addition, there have been instances of conflict arising from issues relating to compensations that oil corporations in the region should give. Conflict over compensation may be about the type, amount, the procedure for making the payment, and how it should be shared among the communities. This is environmental because it has to do with geographical issues as to which part should get what and in what quantity. It is important to point out that the Niger Delta is a region that is home to diverse minority ethnic groups, some of which are: the Ijo, Isoko, Ogoni, Itsekiri, Urhobo, and Ukwuani (Ogbogbo and Muojama 2008:177). The fourth set of factors, identified by Idemudia and Ite, is social in nature. Social factors linked to the conflict include: increased awareness that the region is relatively deprived compared to other areas of the country, the realisation that oil is depleted, and the high rate of unemployment in the region. Unemployment has come to mean that there are more restive youthful hands that can be hired by rebel groups. It has, in addition, made oil bunkering, vandalism of oil pipes and oil facilities, kidnapping and other criminal activities lucrative in the region. Idemudia and Ite sum up their position on the conflict in the Niger Delta in the following words: “while political and economic factors provide a fertile ground for conflict formation by inciting a feeling of relative deprivation via marginalization, environmental factors altered the opportunity structure for violence by distributing the cost of violence, and social factors provided the tools for violence. It is this interplay among these factors that has led to the conflict” (Idemudia and Ite 2006:402). However, the frustration-aggression theory has been used to explain the crisis in the Niger Delta by Afinotan and Ojajorotu (2009). Their argument is that there is a wide margin between what the people of the region expected from the government and the oil companies and what these key actors were able to do for them in return for the oil exploration taking place in their domain.

The expectation that the people had at the commencement of oil exploration in the region was that there would be civilised and modern infrastructure such as electricity, pipe borne water, primary and secondary schools, well-equipped hospitals, gainful employment, and human capital development (Afinotan and Ojakorotu 2009:195). Unfortunately, the stark reality is that the region lacks basic socio-economic and developmental infrastructure that is at par with what is obtainable in other parts of the country. The Don Etiebet Report of 1994, a report generated upon the assessment of the region by a Ministerial Fact Finding Team led by Don Etiebet, the Minister of Petroleum at the time, paints the devastating picture of the region in the following words: “basic facilities such as roads, portable water, electricity, health care and education are completely absent in many communities and non-functioning in places where they exist. On the whole, the scale of physical neglect of oil producing region is enormous.” Oil exploration in the region has not been helpful to the aborigines; rather they have witnessed some negative consequences. First, there is the destruction of all the means of livelihood in the areas, which was largely agrarian. This has escalated the level of poverty in the region. Frustration sets in since the people are unable to even turn to the exploitation of the natural resources in their immediate environment for meeting their basic needs. Usually, “poverty-stricken communities, which by definition have unequal access to resources, are forced to overexploit the resources they do have so as to satisfy their own basic needs” (Weiss, 1990:201). Unfortunately, because of the law protecting natural resources in Nigeria, individuals, and communities where the resources are situated, are unable to profit from it. So, as a result of the frustration they get from the multinational organisations and the government, the people turn to violence in order to have access to the resources in their environment. Second, suffering has increased in the region because as Weiss (1990:201) rightly points out, “as an ecosystem begins to deteriorate, the poor communities suffer most, because they cannot afford to take the measures necessary to control or adapt to the degradation, or to move to pristine areas.” Third, future generations of Niger Deltans are worse off as a result of the oil exploration going on in the region since the quality of the environment into which they will be born is worse than that which their predecessors met. If things remain the same, they will inherit polluted ground water, intoxicated river basins, and extinguished habitats. Thus, in a way, repression, exclusion and exploitation are responsible for the grievances in the Niger Delta for what we have in the region is a struggle for justice on behalf of the oppressed.

Although critics may argue that it is not the level of oppression in the Niger Delta, that is responsible for the violence in the region because there are other communities suffering from neglect and facing some oppression without violence erupting. In addition, it may be shown that there are other communities rich in oil deposits that have similar set of conditions obtainable in the Niger Delta without violent confrontation with the state and multinational oil companies. One may respond to these arguments in the words of Collier (2007:24) that “genuine grievances should be redressed whether or not they provoke rebellion...” Thus, the grievances in the Niger Delta deserve attention not just because they have fanned the embers of the conflict in the region but as a result of the fact that the grievances themselves have merits that should be addressed.

The turbulence in the area has forced responses from the federal government. One way through which the Nigerian government has responded is the deployment of military forces in quelling the violent uprising in the region. Unfortunately, this method has helped in prolonging the conflict “and in the process the suffering to the people and the destruction of property and livelihoods (Oshita 2015:ix).” Apart from the fact that the deployment of the military has only made the people of the Niger Delta worse off, the situation is that the militants themselves are hardly quashed. In this regard, Kemedi *et. al.* (2015:20) point out that “the typical government response to communal conflicts is a belated dispatch of overwhelming but oftentimes slop shoddy force to affected communities.” Unfortunately, “more often than not, the militants escape, leaving innocent villages to the impotent but none the less devastating anger of security forces.”

In another dimension, what the use of military force has resulted into is the emergence of more militant groups and proliferation of ethnic militias who are determined to prove to the Nigerian government that no one has the monopoly of violence. Also, the activities of the militants and ethnic militias have led to the proliferation of small arms in the region and have thus further worsened the conditions fuelling the crisis. One should add to all these that military tactics deployed in the Niger Delta have not been too effective because the insurgents easily blend into the communities and cannot be easily identified and fought. Also, knowledge of the creeks and the Niger Delta terrain which the insurgents possess makes them effective in wreaking havoc despite the presence of the military in the region; and lack of this knowledge, somehow, incapacitates the ability of the military to deliver accurately.

In any case, in spite of military involvement in the crisis, Michael Watts has noted that: major and often spectacular attacks on offshore and onshore facilities are endemic and can be perpetrated at will. Unlike the 1980s or 1990s, militants are willing and able to directly confront federal and state security forces. The vast cache of sophisticated arms are skillfully deployed in an environment of mangrove creeks running for hundreds of miles along the Bight of Benin in which the Nigerian security forces - to quote the new Vice-President Goodluck Jonathan 'cannot cope with the situation' (Watts 2007:639). It has also been pointed out that the government is sometimes fraudulent in its use of the military in the troubled area. Human Rights Watch (1995) pointed out, for instance, that the military sometimes play an active role in fomenting violence such that "some attacks attributed to rural minority communities were in fact carried out by army troops in plainclothes." It is needless to say that military operations have been accompanied with rapes, extra-judicial killings, unlawful arrests, flogging and subjection of the people to inhumane treatments.

Another response is the setting up of various institutions designed to address peculiar issues, especially the issue of underdevelopment, affecting the Niger Delta. To mention few efforts in this direction, there have been the Niger Delta Development Board, established in 1961, Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC), established in 1992 and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), established in 2000. OMPADEC was set up, for instance, to administer judiciously the 3 percent revenue derivation of the oil producing area and, in addition, coordinate development projects in the area. The tasks of tackling ecological problems and consulting with local communities to determine the appropriateness of project were also allotted to it. However, apart from peculiar issues affecting each of these institutions, what may be said of them generally is that issues relating to corruption, misappropriation of funds, inadequate funding, failure of projects reaching the grassroots, unabated poverty level, the failure of the oil exploring companies in contributing their statutory quota, inefficiency, lack of consultation with local communities and politics hindered the efficiency of these institutions (See Omotola 2007:79-85).

There has also been the case of increased financial allocation² for the development of the area through institutions like the OMPADEC and the NDDC, on one hand and, on the other, through somewhat improved fiscal decentralisation, especially through the principle of derivation that allots more percentage of total earnings to the states. The oil boom has also influenced the influx of money into the states in the region. However, much of what should have gone into aiding development of the region has made its way into private confers of politicians and their cronies as a result of corrupt practices. The implication is that additional billion to the budget in favour of the Niger Delta has not added much to the standard of living of the people in the region. The basis of allocation to the oil producing areas has also been criticised. Frynas (2001:33) draws attention to the fact that only a small fraction of the oil revenues reaches the oil-producing areas because there is generally an attitude of neglect for ethnic minorities. Frynas concludes on this issue that: the current principle of resource allocation in Nigeria is flawed, because allocation takes place on the basis of the states rather than of ethnic minorities, yet state boundaries do not correspond to ethnic boundaries. Members of the dominant ethnic group in an area usually control the spending by a state or a local government council. They may, therefore, put other ethnic minorities in that area at a disadvantage in terms of allocation. Within this system, ethnic minorities in the oil-producing areas are marginalised because they tend to have little control over spending decisions (Frynas 2001:33).

Human Basic Needs

In this twenty-first century, it is not easy to come up with a catalogue of human needs that are basic. This is so because revolution in information and computer technology has extended what is necessary for human survival thereby making access to phones, internet and the use of computers have somehow become basic needs. In addition, since some cities or societies are more affluent than others, basic needs in more affluent societies may differ from basic needs in others with less affluence. McHale and McHale (1979:15) have drawn our attention also to the fact that "the assessment of human needs, even at the basic level, is a moving target. Individuals' needs vary considerably according to age, sex, activity, climate, and sociocultural values and situations. Needs and their satisfactions are socially and culturally conditioned and exhibit different configurations in different societies, cultures, and regions." These limitations notwithstanding, some attempts have been made to conceptualize human basic needs. Sterba (1981:111) defined basic needs as "those [needs] which must be satisfied in order not to seriously endanger the person's health and sanity." In the words of Brock (1998: 121), "basic needs are those the satisfaction of which is necessary to living an 'adequate decent' human life." Items on the list of basic needs for Sterba (1981) are: food, shelter, medical care, protection, companionship and self-development.

Wolf (1995:807) makes a distinction between basic needs and adventitious needs. According to him, “in the first class, basic needs, there are things that it is necessary for us to have if we are to live adequately decent human lives. In the second class, which we may call adventitious needs, there are things that it is necessary to have in order to enjoy benefits beyond what is necessary to live an adequate and decent human life.” Given these definitions, we may at the minimum list a few things that will qualify in all climes and times as basic needs. The items on this list will constitute the barest minimum “below which individual physical, social, and cultural growth is attenuated” (McHale and McHale 1979:16). Thus, in a more concrete sense, McHale and McHale (1979:16) have suggested that minimally human needs may be defined as “that amount of food, clean water, adequate shelter, access to health services, and educational opportunity to which everybody is entitled to.” Curry and Rothchild have, however, posited that there is a link between the various items that constitute basic needs in a community. According to them, “reducing gastro-intestinal diseases through combined water, sewage, sanitation, and health programmes can increase the nutritional value gained from consumption. Improved nutrition can likewise have a positive effect on education and on the acquisition of productive skills” (Curry and Rothchild 1980:144). This points to the fact that there is a connection between needs such that the deprivation of one has a way of hurting others. A person deprived of education may be unable to secure a good job. This may hinder his access to an environment with good amenities like a functional health care centre or hospital, pipe borne water, etc. This may also obstruct the ability to secure a moderately good shelter. All these may then have an effect on one’s mental and physical health. The links between all these basic needs may be rearranged some other ways to reflect how one affects the other. This points to the need to meet them all at once.

With Nigeria being one of the countries in which majority of the citizens live below poverty line, one can only imagine the devastating effect of poverty on the poorest in the country. Poverty in the Niger Delta is worse than in many other parts of Nigeria because its inhabitants are deprived of the opportunity to engage in basic economic activities that will enable them to emerge from chronic poverty level. Although McHale and McHale have noted that “condition of poverty vary according to rural and urban locations. In the rural areas of the developing countries, three-quarters of the population are estimated to live in relative or absolute poverty. Yet, while those in the rural settings may be absolutely poor in terms of income, their situations may be alleviated by growing their own food, using local shelter material and so on. The urban poor generally have no such margins to fall back on” (McHale and McHale 1979:18). Yet, in the Niger Delta due to oil exploration activities, the people have been unable to grow their food, and their shelters have been affected. These have worsened their poverty level. Unfortunately, poverty is an anchor that moors other evils like hunger, diseases, and ignorance among other related afflictions. Sadly, “a person suffering from the tragic afflictions of want and deprivation is rarely able to resist the temptation to ‘misbehave,’ the temptation to do things which, normally, are not expected of him or her (Oladipo 1999:43).” McHale and McHale (1979:16) are of similar view that “deterioration of the body constraints physical and mental activity and degrades the spirit. Deprived of basic shelter, on the edge of starvation, and without the rudiment of education, few can make relevant choices or seek personal fulfillment.”

With the inability of the Nigerian state to ensure that wealth generated from the Niger Delta trickles down to ordinary citizens in the area, they are unable to afford the basic requirements for self-development. Government initiatives directed at addressing the crisis have neither been able to improve the quality of the lifestyle of the people. They do not have sufficient employment opportunities and growth has not evenly or equitably touched every area of the Niger Delta to bring about access to good environment, education, shelter, and employment opportunities. To be more precise, such institutions like OMPADEC and NDDC, which are institutions established by Nigeria’s government as means of providing development to the area, have not been able to make development trickle down to the poorest at the grassroots. This has made the Niger Delta a region with the least standard of living and constant struggle for survival with many eating poorly, drinking impure water, having least opportunity to access good education, lacking good shelter, living in unhealthy environments and being prone to diseases. There is, hence, the need to adopt an approach that has as its centerpiece meeting the basic needs of the people in the region. This approach will mainly target the region’s level of poverty. An approach that targets the conflict by addressing the basic needs of the people will direct efforts to reducing poverty in the region and raising their standard of living through provision of, and access to, good education facilities, health care, improved nutrition, clean and fresh drinkable water, sanitation, sewage system, and housing. The justification for the need to design a special intervention targeted at meeting the basic needs of people in the Niger Delta is that the material resources of these people, if they are an independent nation, would have conveniently galvanised them into a developed nation and would have been sufficient in giving them a good lease of life.

Other than this, it should be added that since the activities of the Nigerian government has brought harm in some ways to these people, and by such activities, the region has been made more backward than other parts of the country, the Nigerian government is duty-bound to be extra-committed to the emancipation of the region. In addition, an approach that is specifically packaged for the region with the aims of liberating the poor from the shackles of poverty has the advantage of addressing the poor directly rather than assuming that development of the region will trickle down to the grassroots through such an institution like the Niger Delta Development Commission. There is more. With this approach, especially with efforts on education, it will be possible to build competency and capacity of the people in the region such that with time the people themselves can become a driving force for their own development, only needing support from the government. Finally, the justification for the basic needs' approach to the conflict in the Niger Delta is in the self-interest of the government and the Nigerian state as a whole. Considering the amount that has been spent on tackling the conflict in the Niger Delta, especially in the deployment of military forces, as well as the amount that has been lost to insurgency, assuaging the belligerents in the creeks of the Niger Delta, and the populace of the area through a well packaged social welfare programme that alleviates their suffering is an effective and cheaper option to explore. There is no doubt that much destruction visited on the oil facilities can be prevented if this approach is adopted. To further strengthen this approach, it is important to ensure that people, for whom this programme is designed, are actively involved in the conceptualisation, understanding, implementation and assessment of their needs. This is important in order to avoid the top-down approach.

Conclusion

As Frynas has rightly suggested, addressing the crisis in the Niger Delta will require more than one single approach. It will require: greater financial allocation; significant reduction in the adverse effect of oil operations; meaningful development programme; change in the attitude of the government and oil companies towards the people in the oil-producing areas; structural changes within Nigeria's institutional framework that will enable a more judicious use of oil wealth; improved political legitimacy at the levels of government; and improved financial responsibility that will enhance successful implementation of programmes and projects designed for the improvement of the Niger Delta ([Frynas 2001:53-54](#)). To complement these, and other existing efforts to address the Niger Delta crisis, it is argued, in this essay, that there is need to have commitment to social welfare by Nigeria's government in order to mitigate the harsh conditions in which the Niger Deltans have found themselves. The need for tackling poverty is because fundamentally it is responsible for the confrontation with the state since chronic poverty makes people to be predisposed to exploiting any option, including criminal and immoral ones, to aid survival. Added to this is the fact that criminal minds have used the condition of the people as an excuse for attacking oil facilities, kidnapping, hostage taking, and other crimes. Through this approach, efforts will be directed at meeting the basic needs of the people in the region and this will consequently lead to calming the grievances of people. This approach may not fully lead to immediate development, but it will, with time, help the people of the area meet their basic needs and then attain self-development. Once poverty is addressed in the region, the justification for confrontation with the state will cease to exist. Government can then separate the just agitations in the region from criminal activities.

To reduce poverty in the region, there is need for government to do this through purpose-driven policies. The first thing that needs to be done is avoidance of the top-down approach in determining what is crucial as basic needs for the various communities in the region. Efforts should be put in place to reach the people for their input for designing this programme, and they must be encouraged to make contributions at various stages of implementation. This is important because popular involvement in decision-making and decision-implementation will ultimately improve motivation of the people, confidence in government, and the commitment of the people to the pursuit of collective goals.

An agency should be set up by the government which will be saddled with the responsibility of implementing decisions directed at alleviating poverty and providing basic needs. An approach that targets the conflict by addressing the basic needs of the people will direct efforts to reducing poverty in the region and raising their standard of living through provision of, and access to, good education facilities, health care, improved nutrition, clean and fresh drinkable water, sanitation, sewage system, and housing. Affordable housing units, well-equipped health facilities, primary and secondary schools, as well as technical schools which will aid human capital development, should be established in various communities in the region.

The advantage of this is that these visible infrastructures will, apart delivering required service to the people of the area, allay the fear of the people about marginalisation. Second, there is the need for increased funding. The current 13% should give way to something more substantial. A certain percentage of the new allocation should, however, be given to the agency conferred with the responsibility of providing social welfare to the people of the Niger Delta. It is, however, important to point out that other than strict monitoring of how the finance of the agency is spent, strict laws (perhaps stricter than is obtained in other parts of the polity) should be put in place for deterring corrupt practices. It is crucial that government saddles the oil producing companies with more responsibilities in relation to the health of the environment. These oil companies need to adopt better environment friendly approaches to oil-production. Accidental oil spillage should be cleaned up in stipulated short period of time. In addition, these oil companies should state yearly their corporate social responsibilities which are directed at aiding social welfare of people in the Niger Delta.

Notes

1. The notion of oil complex is used to explain the relationship between oil producing communities, oil producing companies and the federal government.
2. There has been an increase from 1.5 to 3 percent in 1992, which later increased to 13% in 1999.

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