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NIGER - DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE OF THE CONFLICT

FRANK, E. O.

ABSTRACT: The Niger Delta region is by nature an area of poor alluvial deposits, consisting essentially of estuarine and tributaries. It was this difficult nature, which resulted in the colonial masters, recommending it for a special Board to administer Development in the area. The funds for this were to be contributed by the federal, the eastern and the western regional Governments at the time. The refusal of these Governments to contribute to the funds led to the death of the Niger Delta Development Board, which came in the aftermath of the Willinks's commission report. The conflict theory had rationalized in the main the hostile pedigree of the indigenes of the region, as well as the explication of the behavioral manifestations of the people in respect of the facilities of the oil companies. The duties to be carried out are enormous, ranging from the development of 'political will' to the location of people with altruistic dispositions to channel the resources available to the needs of the people to assuage the anger of the people. The road is long and winding, but it involved, the local, State and the Federal Government in concerted effort to perform each duties. It is only then, that we shall be inching towards the resolution of the problem in the Niger Delta.

INTRODUCTION

The Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, is made of six states (political administrative units), of Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, Edo and Cross River States respectively. These States also belong to a geographical group, known as the South-South regions, which borders the Atlantic Ocean. The region has been accounting for over 90 per cent of the export earnings of Nigeria, arising mainly from the quantum of petroleum resources exported. Nigeria is Africa's leading oil producer and ranks in the top ten of oil producers in the world. After the first discovery was recorded by Shell, in 1956, production started in 1958 from the company's Oloibiri field in the Eastern Niger Delta (NNPC: 20), in the present Bayelsa State.

Frank, E. O. is a Registrar, Akwa Ibom State College of Arts and Science, Nung Ukim, Nigeria.

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In the last six years, since the initial Isaac Boro's uprising in the region, there have been massive opposition to both the Multi-national company exploring and drilling petroleum in the region, so much that this has affected the global oil prices, resulted in the kidnapping of foreign oil workers as well as the death of a notable playwright, Ken Saro Wiwa and others. This study seeks to establish the nature of the problem, causes and proffers a non-political solution to it both at the theoretical and practical levels. The aim is to achieve a lasting peace in the area. The significance would be the evolution of a structural development approach of the area in consonance with other part of Nigeria.

THE MORPHOLOGY OF THE NIGER-DELTA

The term Niger-Delta refers to that region of Nigeria which is low lying, adjoining Atlantic Ocean, which serve as a terminal exit point for the River Niger and River Benue respectively to empty themselves into the Atlantic. By the geographical nature, all debris and waste water flowing from both the Benue and the Niger, are deposited herein. Because of the nature of the region as the terminal waste point for the upland rivers—there is a high concentrate of alluvial deposits (clay, silt, sand and gravels) brought to the area. These detrital materials render not only the waters of the region unsafe for domestic usages, but also have multiple negative effects in the regions economy.

Beneath the earth of the various tributaries which adorned the region, is a rich deposit of hydrocarbon petroleum products. Its exploitation since 1956 has turned out to be the sustaining strength of the Nigeria's economy. The Niger-Delta is also blessed with thick vegetation of flora and fauna. The mangrove swamp with its interlocking branches of trees, constitute foliage which has reduced considerably, the penetration of sunlight to the ground. The ground which is always swampy is deficient in nutrients, culminating in poor yield of agricultural crops under massive rainfall regime.

THE PROBLEM OF NIGER-DELTA

Given the above described environmental description, agriculture can not sustain the people because of poor yields, for the reason stated above. The land holding, if available, is very small because of its swampy nature, then the multi-national companies which exploit petroleum resources on behalf of the national Government aid and abets the poverty of the regions chemically and managerially. Another dimension to the problem is the insensitivity of the Federal, State and the local Governments. The frustration of the region is rekindled, when they see development in other part of the country resulting from resources which have rendered their environment impoverished. It is this sense of marginalization and the neglect, which has resulted into the various manifestations of anomic behaviors. This conflicting pattern of relationship need to be explicated theoretically.

Before a social conflict between negatively and positively privileged groups can take place, before hostile attitudes are turned into social action, the negatively privileged group must first develop the awareness that it is, indeed, negatively privileged. It must come to believe that it is being denied rights to which it is entitled. It must reject any justification for the existing distribution of rights and privileges. Thus, when a social structure is no longer considered legitimate, individuals with similar objective positions will come, through conflict, to constitute themselves into self-conscious groups with common interest (Coser, 1956). This is what has happened in the Niger-Delta. The youth have come to the realization that they are being denied the rights not only to own the oil wealth, but to a share in the distribution of development arising thereof. They then form themselves into militia, since political representatives have become demagogue.

George Simmel had warned that where the structure inhibits the expression and acting out of hostile feelings, substitute mechanism for the venting of such feelings can be expected to exist. In cases in which conflict behavior against the original object being both the Federal, State, local Government and the Multi-national companies is blocked—hostile feelings are deflected upon substitute objects and substitute satisfaction may be attained through mere tension releases. This explicates the released anger on oil pipelines, hostages and similar anomic manifestations of the frustration of the Niger-Deltans.

Ordinarily, one would regard the situation as criminal and brigandage and antithetical to Development, since without the oil revenue Nigeria would be at economic stand still. But this framework allude that there are cases in which hostility is indeed expressed against the original object, but it may expressed indirectly an even unwittingly. According to Sigmund Freud, wits permit us to make our enemy ridiculous through that which we could not utter loudly or consciously on account of existing hindrances. Wit is used with special preferences as weapon of attack or criticism of superiors who claim to be in authority (Coser, 1956). This is why there are various behavioral manifestations of this hostility.

In this study, we bring to you the detail effect of oil exploration on the people of the Niger-Delta. Firstly, inhabitants of the oil producing areas feel exploited and uncared for by the government and oil producers. They have been displaced from their homeland and farmlands to give way for petroleum exploration. They complain that they are not provided with infrastructural and social amenities vital to their survival (Nwilo, 1998). An illustration of this is the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), case in Odema and Diobu both in Nembe and Southern Ijaw local Government areas of Bayelsa state, where SPDC was blamed for its failure to site projects in the areas since its inception 50 years ago and provide water, electricity and award scholarships to the youth.

Secondly, the impacts of oil spillage on the already impoverished Delta regions heighten the rate of hostility. Between 1976-2005, 2.039 million barrels of crude oil

were spilled into the environment. A recent oil spillage is the Idoho incident which occurred on January 12, 1998, through the off-shore to the coast of Akwa Ibom State, causing the spillage of 40,000 barrels of crude oil into the marine environment. The general effects include, the killing of plants and aquatic lives in the estuarine and tributaries. The ecological impact of oil on fishes, barnacles, mussels, crabs, planktons and on the mangrove ecosystem is better imagine.

Crude oil settles on beaches and kills organisms that live there. It also settles on the ocean floor and kills benthic (bottom dwelling) organisms such as crabs. Those that survive may accumulate toxins in their tissue, making them inedible. Oil poisons algae and may disrupt major food chains and decreases the yield of edible fish. Oil endangers fish hatcheries in coastal waters and can contaminate the flesh of commercially valuable fish (Nwilo, 1998). It is on these aquatic resources that the economic lives of the Niger Delta citizens revolve. If these are incrementally destroyed by oil exploration, with nothing to show for it, it means the people are dying install mentally.

Oil in water occludes sunlight penetration getting to the plants and therefore preventing photosynthesis by the plankton to develop the water algae which water animals feed on. The absence of food would mean their dying off and the fishermen would have nothing to keep them employed. Oil on water surface also disrupts gaseous exchange between the sea surface and the oxygen level in the sea, which reduces the quantity of oxygen available for aquatic lives. The end result is the reduction in the live span of the life of the marine resources. No wonder, we find often dead fishes floating in our rivers, estuaries and tributaries. This is economic waste caused by oil seepage/spillage, which affects the Delta people's standard of living.

Lastly, farmlands, and sources of drinking water are polluted with toxins, besides poor fishing and its attendant general effect on the economy of the people. It should be noted, that the present economic system has made it that everyman must wear an economic mask. What economic mask would the Deltans wear? This is the crux of the hostility in the Niger Delta Regions. The anomic participation of the people of the Niger Delta the scene arises from:

- (i) The failure of the local Government which is the closest arm of the Government to them to address any of the aforesaid problems. It is instructive to admit that the scale of the problems of Development is above that of this level of Government. Are we to believe that they have no role, in the amelioration of the problems? Certainly no. The question to ask is this, how effective have they been in managing those roles which have been constitutionally assigned to them? Local Government administrations, in an out of the Niger Delta have been failures. The purpose of devolution of power to this level of administration is yet to be realized. This is the first level conflict.

- (ii) The State; at the state level, at the risk of sounding immodest, very little have gone into addressing the grievances of the regions. On the general level, Development is exclusive for political reasons (development is denied some ethnic group/tribe) and some reasons known only to the Governors. Then the coastal ethnic groups who sits directly on the oil wells and and feel directly the impact of oil exploration, even when a drop is spilled, are excluded in the utilization of 'ecological funds' (special funds meant to address impact of the oil activities in the communities which are directly affected by the activities of the companies). Where ecological funds are not heard, animates hostility, where heard but projects are cited and commissions in areas that are not directly affected by oil activities, inflame hostile passions. This is the stock-in-trade in the Niger Delta States. This is second level hostility.
- (iii) The Federal Government obtains excess crude revenue often, without changes in the region. For instance, the Gulf war 2.9 billion dollar revenue has not been accounted for till this day.
- (iv) The multi-national companies, the holder of the technologies of exploitation of the region become the seen enemies. According to the 'conflict theory', the framework of analysis, conflict which arises from the frustration of specific wants (as outlined herein) within the relationship and from estimates of the gains of the participants, and which are directed at the presumed frustrating object, is a realistic conflict. Realistic conflict, on the other hand, will cease if the actor can find equally satisfying alternative ways to achieve his end (Coser, 1956). It is on this basis that the workers of the companies become the object of attack. This is more so when cognizance is taken of the allegation that the oil companies employment policy is in favor of non-indigenes of the host communities. This is by far the greatest source of displeasure particularly to the youths, and its constitutes the most potent source of perennial conflicts. It has triggered off devastating confrontations between the youths of the host communities and the oil producing companies. In some cases, the crisis degenerates into bloody conflict between neighboring communities as was the case between Twon-Brass and Okpoma in Bayelsa State which claimed lives and property. Members of the host communities who are lucky to find jobs in the oil companies do so as contract staff with the implication this status bring (Ihonvbere, 1981).
- (v) The Federal Government Neglect: In solidarity with the editorial of the Guardian, this work accedes to the assertion that the Nigerian state has been the medium through which the oil companies derived their power and authority to wreck havoc in their land. The Nigerian state is seen today by the Niger Deltan as a

co-perpetrator as well as a partner in the ordeal of sufferings in the hands of the oil companies (Guardian, 2000). The credence lend to this, is the reluctance of the state to develop the area genuinely.

Before the discovery of oil in Oloibiri- Bayelsa State, the colonial masters through the Willink commission of 1958 recommended in chapter 14 paragraph 27 and 28 that 'this is a matter which requires a special effort and the co-operation of the Federal, Eastern and Western Governments; it does not concern one region only. Not only because the area involves two regions, but because it is poor, backward and neglected, the whole of Nigeria is concerned. We suggest that there should be a Federal Board appointed to consider the problems of the area of the Niger delta.

Also, should be a chairman and vice chairman appointed by the Federal Government, one representative of the Eastern region and one of the Western region Government, preferably Ijaws... (Willink, 1958). Interestingly, the document went on to suggest that other members of the board should be chosen by local bodies. This body was inaugurated but could not operate, by 1963 it became moribund. The fact of the matter was that both the Federal, Eastern and Western governments were not ready to contribute resources for the benefit of region. It would be recalled that at this time, oil was yet to be the main stay of the economy. Contributions if they were to be made would have been from the resources of the regions sourced from the regional cash crops. No one was ready to do this for the Niger Delta.

The neglect of the Niger Delta persisted till 1992 when the 1.5 derivation fund was channeled into a body corporate - Oil Mineral Producing and development Commission for the growth of the region. The 1963-1992 neglect had deteriorated that the OMPADEC became a child's play. It soon suffered from lack of fund releases. It died by installment until it fizzled out. On its ashes came PTF in 1995. This time it was meant to focus on the entire nation. It forgotten the Niger Delta in the use of the resources derived from her belly. The impacts of the defunct Petroleum Trust Fund were more visible in areas which do not suffer the effect of oil exploration.

The cumulative effect of all these, conduce to pent up anger, which according to Freud, permits the ridiculing of the enemy by attacking anything which claim to be in authority, on the account of existing hindrances. For instance PTF as an interventionist agency was the worst thing that insulted the intelligence of the Niger Delta people. Three Northern States including Katsina, where the PTF chairman hails from cornered about 70 per cent of the total PTF projects and 76 per cent of the total road rehabilitation (Ekpenyong, 2001). 622 Consultants were engaged by the PTF, 1781 contractors and 2081 suppliers. Not up to 10 of all these came from the Niger Delta.

Niger Delta Development commission (NDDC) is the latest institutional arrangement to address the problem. It is a political instrumental inadequacy, for it is

composed of politicians who are not experts in political economy. It does not include the focused group in its operations. It requires a non-political approach. In spite of all these, the problems of the regions have grown in geometric ratios, while the solutions inches in arithmetic proportion.

The realization that, the colonial government acknowledged the peculiarity of the region and recommended for both regional and central Government interventions, failed, frustrated the indigene of the region.

Secondly, the further realization that the crude oil later realized from the region is what those who refused to help initially with their own resources, now feed on, goaded the frustrations further to the second degree.

Thirdly, noting that the federal Government to which it contribute about 90 per cent of its revenue have not been sincere in the Development of the area, led to the direct expression of hostility against the person or group which is the source of the frustration. That the release of tension which provides satisfaction in itself without the need for the object or object substitute (Coser, 1956). The physical manifestations of these are in, kidnapping, destruction and spill of pipelines, siphoning of crude and refined petroleum where possible.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The solutions canvassed here are in no way exhaustive, but it would however follow the theoretical guides.

Public Policy: Social Responsibility of Companies. The Government is the biggest player in the Niger Delta. It is therefore its duty to ensure that companies licensed to operate in the region are socially responsible to the host community has been subjected to a lot of views. It is necessary that we look at it and draw inferences to the issue at hand. Geoffrey Mills contended that the company should not fancy out ways of being goos, it should not seek to develop the qualities of a natural person, such as goodness and charity. Companies are created to be charitable to their external community. They are created to do business, and, through that process, to create wealth for their...employees, shareholders, the taxman and the community at large (Kolade, 1997).

This view was conceived from people who come from western and European societies, where Government know their theoretical and social roles, which does not leave the company with no social responsibility. This view is further reinforced by the Smithian Capitalist philosophy, which entrusted to the firm, profit as the only objective. The benevolence of the firms' shareholders would rub-off on the society writ-large. This view is anachronistic in the 21st century world while its application in the Niger Delta had only resulted in what Professor I. A. Adalemo termed 'arrested Development' (1977) and its resultant consequences.

On the other hand, the confederation of British Industries conceptualized that 'a company, like a natural person, must be recognized as having functions, duties and moral obligations that go beyond the pursuit of profit and the specific requirements of legislation (Kolade, 1977), to contribute to the well-being of the community from where it has made its gains. It is here submitted that the federal Government should ensure by legislation that companies in the Niger-Delta, are socially responsible to the communities because:

- (a) The Niger-Delta are the society writ-large is one of the stakeholders in the interest calculus of the companies,
- (b) That it is natural for all citizens, individual or corporate to give part of what it took back to it, to enhance sustainable rather than arrested Development; and
- (c) The environment which features, peace, efficiency and orderliness provides the best context for the successful pursuit of business activities. Enterprises, therefore, owe a duty to themselves to help in promoting and sustaining such an environment.

The Local Government: Governance should be made more responsible. The managers at this level should be able to identify the needs of the people and meet same within the limit of available fiscal resources. This implies that the human resources entrusted with Development Administration at the local level must have the relevant Executive capacity.

The State: This is a critical level to the problem. First of all, the need of the people must be identified while the ecological funds should be use as an interventionist fund in the local areas which suffers directly the impact of oil exploitation, this should include needs such as safe-drinking water, alternative occupation to fishing/farming which have been made less productive by the processes of oil exploration and production. On the general development program of both the State and the Federal Government, the localities which have benefited from the intervention, must not be excluded from further general development program. It should not be out of place for both the local, State and Federal government to embark on different projects in the same locality. These should be accompanied with accountability of the funds, and the use of transparent due process in the Development administration in the Niger-Delta.

Agency for Intervention: Any agency such as NDDC meant for intervention in the region must not be a political one. It should be administered by development administration experts. The agency should start with a survey of the areas and the 'Development Need' of the region. The survey team should be made of people from various works of life. The doctors, engineers, surveyor educationist, agriculturalist, communication experts, building technologist, etc. A blue print of Development would then be produced and vigorously pursued. Finally, corruption if not chase vigorously and punishment meted out to culprits, could mar the implementations of these recommendations. It is hoped that these would constitute the first step in bringing calm to the region.

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