Oil, Children and Adolescents in the Contemporary Niger Delta, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines oil in correlation with protracted crisis in the Niger Delta region and how the response by government and the oil multinationals (through the Amnesty and developmental programmes) have shaped what the contemporary Niger Delta is. The paper problematizes the nature of children and adolescents in crisis prone areas and at the same time underscores the developmental attention given to children and adolescents in the post-conflict Niger Delta. The study discovers that there are likely tendencies of conflict in the Niger Delta due to the imprecision and temporal policies of the government and oil multinationals which have neglected the post-conflict children and adolescents. This study concludes that children and adolescents will be the militias in the conflict that will ensue in the region due to their past experiences of past conflict and the benefits of government policy response given to former militias through the Amnesty Programme.

Keywords: Oil; Child; Adolescent; Contemporary Niger delta; Nigeria; Oil multinational corporation; Oil producing communities

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is unarguably one of the world's richest river basins and most important wetland and coastal marine ecosystems [1]. Revenues derived from oil exploration have funded virtually all the sectors in the Nigerian economy. It has also contributed and still contributes to the world energy consumption in the area of oil production. However, the region has been one of the major concerns for Nigeria. Conflicts, militancy, kidnapping, vandalisation of oil installations are common as a result of marginalization and uneven distribution of oil wealth to the communities in the region. Various developmental and security challenges that have succeeded the years of marginalization and uneven distribution of oil wealth in this region, has threatened oil production in the region with adverse effects on global oil production.

In one of its efforts to end the crises in the Niger Delta, the Federal government of Nigeria granted amnesty to repentant militants and collaborated with the oil multinationals to increase the level of human development through its developmental policies. Though these initiatives have relatively reduced conflict in the region, various challenges have risen due to inadequacies in the implementation of government policies towards peace and development in the region. The Amnesty programme is a laudable initiative but it has been criticized to be more of bribery for peace instead of serving its purpose to reduce conflict, increase human development and oil production. The developmental programmes have witnessed setbacks owing to high level of corruption amidst government officials. Consequently, the Niger Delta region will implode once again, but literature is divided over the cause, actors and the severity of the coming implosion of conflict in the region.

Children and adolescents are in a fragile developmental stage of human life owing to their inquisitive nature, attitude to learn and the fact that they are dependent on their environment to provide their needs. The responability of this rests on the shoulders of the parents, community, society and the government [2]. Thus, in a conflict situation they are vulnerable to risks and as such children and adolescents depend on themselves to provide all their needs and protection. During the Niger Delta crisis, the children and adolescents were victims of psychological and social deprivation. In order to understand the impact of the conflict on children and adolescents, this study investigates the impact of previous crisis, failed policies response and social insecurity on the post-conflict life of children and adolescents in the Niger Delta. The paper addresses the inclusion of children and adolescents during the conflict, their exclusion in the post-conflict arrangements and the consequences on the future of peace in the region. The paper argues that the children and adolescents will be the next militia groups that the conflict and post-conflict years recruited for future instabilities in the region. The subsequent sections of this work shed more light.

Understanding Oil and the Contemporary Niger Delta

Oil

Crude oil or petroleum is a naturally occurring mixture, consisting predominantly of hydrocarbons with other elements such as sulphur, nitrogen, oxygen etc [3]. out of all the elements contained in the crude oil, various consumable products are derived through the process of refining. Products such as the aviation fuel, kerosene, diesel, petrol, cooking gas, and other derivatives used in the manufacture of medicines, fertilizers, foodstuffs, plastics, building materials, paints, cloth and to generate electricity [4]. It is also an essential international commodity used for global energy consumption; providing, among other things, the propellant for transportation systems that facilitate human mobility [5]. Apart from the aforementioned domesticated importance of oil, it has at the same time played and still plays important role in defining world politics and economy. To a great extent, it defines the capabilities of states in relations with others in contemporary international politics; and this natural resource has

become a tool or better still a weapon that states use to pursue their national objectives.

The presence of Oil in abundance has made some regions like the Middle East, South and North America and Africa strategic in the international system. Countries with abundance of oil in these regions determine the global energy supply and are on the bandwagon of their respective regional or sub-regional politics and economy. Nigeria for instance, is able to maintain its leadership position in Africa and West Africa owing to huge revenue from exportation of oil. Nigeria takes the responsibility to maintain peace and development in West Africa through its military and economic contributions to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and to Africa by making the largest contribution to the Africa Development Bank amongst others. Besides, oil producing countries formed the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) "to co-ordinate and unify petroleum policies among Member Countries, in order to secure fair and stable prices for petroleum producers; an efficient, economic and regular supply of petroleum to consuming nations; and a fair return on capital to those investing in the industry" [6]. The politics in OPEC has grown overtime to expand its official objectives to include the unofficial ones such as placing oil embargo on enemy states and pushing-up international oil price through reduction in production quota for the benefits of its member states. This was noticeable during the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, when OPEC members halted all petroleum products exportation and as well raised the price of oil to countries that supported the Israeli during the war. The outcome of this was scarcity of oil products in the some Western countries.

Oil has enjoyed interest in literature and public debates owing not to its global political and economic importance but also to the various challenges posed by it to states and non-states actors in the international system. The exploration and exploitation of the product has raised issues of global environmental concern and conflict in virtually all the countries that export it in small or large quantities. To understand this, some economists have used the terms "resource curse" and "Dutch Disease" to push their argument on the challenges posed by oil to states and non-states actors that revenue from oil cannot be totally advantageous to the development of exporting countries. To them, "Dutch Disease" refers to the decline in the productivity and competitiveness of the manufacturing and other tradable sectors following the real exchange rate appreciation in the wake of a resource boom [7]. Invariably, oil can relegate other sectors (agriculture, education, domestic industries etc.) of exporting countries economy, which pose severe consequences on the economy and development in such countries. Likewise, when the abundance of natural resource generate negative developmental outcomes, including poor economic performance, growth collapse, high levels of corruption, ineffective governance and greater political violence, it is referred to as "Resource Curse" [8]. Deprivation, environmental conflict, communal clashes, insurgencies in the Middle East and some parts of Africa are case in point. However, it is important to note that the form of oil related conflicts in the oil producing countries are relatively not the same. For example, in Africa; protracted marginalization, corruption, deprivation and uneven distribution of oil wealth gave rise to the militant groups which are commonly noticed in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In the Middle East on the other hand, it is the case of checkmating the Western ideological influence and dominance, which breeds insurgencies and terrorist groups especially after the end of the cold war.

In addition, environmental challenges are globalized in nature. Oil spillage, gas flaring, industrial pollution etc. contributes the largest percentage of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere causing global warming and environmental degradation. Global initiatives for controlling these gases are organized by states and non-states actors (multinational corporations, non-governmental organisations, intergovernmental organisations, etc.) to protect the environment. There are international conferences and summits held to minimize the level of greenhouse gases emitted into the atmosphere, at the same time, agreements are made and treaties signed to protect the environment but some powerful states still violate or failed to be party to the agreement.

Understanding oil goes beyond its scientific definitions and characteristics. Its political and economic relevance among states in the international system clears the grey areas on the globalized issues and challenges it raise. It is undeniable that the political and economic relevance of oil cannot be overemphasized attributed to the above give arguments.

The Contemporary Niger Delta

The Niger Delta region is located on the southern part of Nigeria. It covers 70,000 square kilometers and makes up 7.5% of Nigeria's land mass [9]. The region is the geographical heart of oil production in Nigeria [10] because it has a large deposit of crude oil and natural gas. The servicing of the Nigeria economy has been made possible for decades through the exploration and exportation of crude oil from the region. On the contrary, the region has been neglected for long by the Nigerian government and oil multinationals operating in the region. The oil companies are interested in exploiting and exploring without due concern to the environment and development of their host communities. Despite the oil wealth, the region wallowed in abject poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy. Farming, the main means of livelihood was no more as a result of the negligence on the part of the government and oil companies. This left them with a polluted farm land and water, making farming and fishing impossible.

Previous military regimes used overwhelming force to silence the people of Niger Delta and protect oil production at the expense of their rights. Though there were agitations for better living conditions, the military government suppressed such agitation through arrests, killings and imprisonment. Ken Saro-Wiwa and his kinsmen (known as the Ogoni nine) were sentenced to death and hanged by the dictatorial regime of Gen. Sani Abacha due to their agitation. Still there were crisis in the region even during the military era but such crises were inter-tribal conflicts. An example of such was the Ijaw and Itsekiri rival crisis. Different military and civilian regimes made policy responses like the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB) in 1962 by Sir. Ahamadu Bello, Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1989 by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000 by Olusegun Obasanjo toward addressing the Niger Delta issues and challenges of development but NDDB and OMPADEC failed to actualize their objectives due to wasteful spending and corruption [11]. The NDDC is the recent one and it's also moving on the path of failure.

In sum total, the old Niger Delta is characterized by the above discussed factors, which is summarized to be the era of deprivation, negligence, human rights violations, killings, marginalization and underdevelopment.

The era of democracy in 1999 gave the Niger Delta issues and challenges a new dimension. Democracy eroded the former authoritarian responses to the Niger Delta and accorded the opportunity for protests and criticisms without fear of intimidation. Demands were made for the change of unfavorable status quo, for the communities to benefits from oil wealth and respect for the environment. However, in the wake of democratic dispensation the developmental and environmental crisis in the Niger Delta were still deplorable, the protests and criticisms were not achieving much result.

Consequently, few months after the inception of the third republic violence broke out on November 20, 1999 in Odi community, Bayelsa State where twelve police officers were reportedly killed. In a reprisal attack, the then democratically elected president Olusegun Obasanjo ordered a military action of overwhelming force to wipe-out the community killing over 400 civilians [12]. Human and environmental rights activist both in local and international condemned the government use of force on the community. The Odi crisis was a test on the democracy but the aftermath of this led to the proliferation of militant groups in the Niger Delta. Groups like The Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND); their activities include: vandalisation of oil installations, kidnapping of oil workers, assault on military personnel. The government responded by deploying large contingents of military and mobile police officers to the Niger Delta region. As such the crisis in the region was felt by the Nigerian state and the international community. Oil production in Nigeria dropped and it affected the economy because of overdependence on oil revenue. The international community also felt the impact of the Niger Delta crisis on outshoot of oil price in the international market.

The old Niger Delta era was a period of deprivation and minimal resistance, while the contemporary Niger Delta is it opposite. The contemporary Niger Delta is a period of responsibility and developmental actions by the government and Oil Companies. Corporate social responsibility towards development and developmental policies by the government and oil multinationals are noticeable in the response to the crisis. The oil companies are now held responsible for violating the environment, responsible for community development programmes. The government (the regime of Olusegun Obasanjo) on the other hand collaborated with the oil companies to reduce poverty and develop the region, the government established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to carryout developmental projects in the oil producing communities through joint partnership with the oil companies, the government of Late president Musa Yar'adua included the problems of the Niger Delta in his Seven Points Agenda, he granted Amnesty to repentant militants, rehabilitated and empowered them, the government also created the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs to give some appreciable percentage of Federal allocation to develop the region amongst others. The outcome of these actions has brought relative peace and oil production has increased.

All the above responses by the government and oil companies are bold and laudable. However, they are failing and the region will implode again! The implementation of these policies is mixed with corruption and favoritism on the part of policy makers. Today, new issues like proliferation of sea pirates, kidnapping and illegal oil bunkering also shape the contemporary Niger Delta. The contemporary Niger Delta region is still evolving; time will unveil it in full. It is then pertinent to investigate the major actors of the coming crisis in the region.

Problematizing children and adolescents in conflict and post-conflict situation

The use of children and adolescents in conflicts is abhorrent. Although it is easy to claim that children have no place in the world's violent conflicts, the reality is very much different. The litany of tasks undertaken by children in conflict zones is well known as are the physical, mental and sexual scars that result. While many children participation in conflicts is forced at the barrel of a gun, others involvement is forced by cruel circumstances and lack of alternatives. Furthermore, it is difficult to extract children from these conditions [13].

Over the years, millions of children and adolescents have been caught up in conflict not merely as bystanders or spectators but targets and victims of different conflict situations. Some are victims of a general conflict on civilians while others are part of a targeted crime against children. In most if not all conflict situation, children usually are either used as the feeders or receivers of this horror. Most children between the ages of 6 to 13 years have been recruited as child soldiers during the humanitarian crisis leaving them traumatized, often times rejected by their communities and branded as criminals afterwards (the post-conflict Liberia and Sierra Leone are cases in point). Many children and adolescents have been victims of gross violation of fundamental human rights, because during conflicts, most of them are subjected to the trauma of sexual abuse, child labour, trafficking and would do just about anything to survive the conflict.

During conflict situations, adolescents and children may be exposed either directly or indirectly. Direct exposure involves injury from firearms or other weapons or suffering from physical or sexual abuse. In many cases, the degree of their exposure to violence may vary according to their socioeconomic status, gender, age and race/ethnicity. For instance, the males tend to be the primary victims of physical violence, whereas females are exposed to sexual violence. Violence is a leading cause of injury and death in young people around the world [14]. Chronic stress and violence mean that children in conflict situations often develop psychological, behavioural and cognitive coping mechanisms [15]. Oftentimes, this coping strategy is a means of retaining what is left of their sanity and humanity in an unhealthy environment such as wars, political violence etc.

Children and adolescents do not set out to commit heinous crimes against humanity during crisis, however, the transition from 'victim' to 'perpetrator' is an evolving process, where innocent children are forced at gunpoint to commit such acts as a means of survival but as events unfold they begin to enjoy it. More importantly, their transition from 'victim' to 'perpetrator' is not linear and most of them do not experience the entire transition from victim to hardened perpetrator. Instead, it appears that they continually drift between committing acts of violence, and simultaneously being victims of violence by others [16].

Children and adolescent's involvement in conflict, whether as victims or as perpetrators has profound consequences. The after-effects include living with loss of family, disturbing memories of war and violence, as well as feelings of guilt and shame. Moreover, in the aftermath of conflict, they are sometimes forced to contend with rejection by their families and communities [17]. In many instances, the post conflict challenges that a child faces is habitually grave. The physical, psychological, and social effect that occurs in the aftermath of

the crisis is the reason why strategies, reintegration, peace building initiatives and rehabilitations has fallen short, especially where children and adolescents are concerned. It is almost impossible for them; having passed through such trauma to become stable because the needed platforms necessary for re-integration are most times missing. Such victims/perpetrators are stigmatized and labeled as 'evil' (physical violence) or 'unworthy' in event of (sexual violence). As a result of long term memories of violence and brutality, they are haunted by memories of brutalization and violence even after the conflict has ended. Many suffer from profound sense of loss, anxiety, sadness and in severe cases, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). All this further explains why there is increase in suicide cases, due to a child's mental instability.

The end of a conflict does not automatically guarantee the end to their miseries. The post conflict period is usually an extension of it they are expected to face the realities of the brutalities of war, which includes dealing with the separation from their loved ones, dealing with their death, constant remainder of physical injuries and disabilities. Although the pain of physical injuries is highly significant, the psychological consequences of these injuries are equally important to recognize. Wounds of all types become a significant and symbolic aspect of the cruelty and brutalization children and adolescents endured during the conflict [18]. While their victimization is undeniably clear during the conflict, in its aftermath they are arguably bearing forms of secondary victimization as mentioned earlier in this section. This post-conflict "re-victimization" is most evident in the limited possibilities for economic and educational attainment, the lack of systems of support, rejection and marginalization by family and community members. Despite formal demobilization processes, reintegration and sensitization programmes within their everyday lives constantly remind them of their former status as either victims or perpetuators [19].

Children and adolescents in conflict and post- Conflict Niger delta

The Niger Delta is the 'honey land' of Nigeria where the honey has continually been milked and the bees left to sting the indigenes having greater and lasting effects on children and adolescents. The Niger Delta issue has become a perennial crisis, first because of the different positional views of involved stakeholders, the lack of political will on the part of the state to curb it and the non-recognition of the issue as a national problem leading to national insecurity [20].

The Niger Delta conflict that spanned for over two decades was claimed to have been caused by many various reasons, such as corruption, economic exploitation, greed, environmental degradation, unemployment, militarization of oil producing communities, uneven distribution of wealth and resources, pollution, weapons proliferation, to name a few. Although, scholars differ on the cause of the conflict, there is strong unanimity that it has created complex emergencies, including the loss of lives and properties, high levels of disease, poverty, socioeconomic disparity, rising gender inequality, family displacement (leading to misplaced family values), political thuggery, hooliganism, militancy, educational decline, loss of revenue and income, and many less tangible costs. The adverse consequences of the violence make the Niger Delta region a 'zone of violence' [21].

The effects of this conflict on children and adolescents are innumerable as aptly captured by Saliu, Luqman and Abdullahi. They claim that 'no region of the country best exhibits the deplorable nature of Nigeria's human security as the Niger Delta [22]. In the Niger Delta context, challenges such as psychological problems, health issues, security challenges and moral decadence has since been witnessed amongst the children and adolescents inhabiting therein.

As it is with the mind of a developing child, the psychology of an individual informs a lot about himself/herself as well as his/her decisions. When the mind of children and adolescents have been marred by conflict of this enormity (the Niger Delta conflict), without the necessary counseling and therapy needed as guide, he/she is liable to be subjected to traumas relating to the violence, often leading to the display of erratic behaviour, schizophrenia, PTSD (Post-Traumatic Disorder) and in most cases mental instability. Traumatic stress may occur as a result of an exposure to a life-threatening situation such as physical assault, war situation, sexual assault, accidents, disaster, violent assault, kidnapping, school shooting, torture, being taken hostage, or as a prisoner of war.

The lingering crises in the Niger Delta have since thrown the inhabitants of the area, especially the children and adolescents into frustration; hence they exhibit deviant behavioural patterns, which manifest in the form of violence, aggression, anxiety, depression, diminished status, and a host of other problems. As a matter of fact, aggression, which is a behaviour resulting from the emotion of anger, is almost palpable among the young and the old in the region, especially against the perceived oppressors and their agents [23]. Explaining the psychological consequences of the deprivation suffered by the people, Naanen said that the current youth militancy in the Niger Delta is an expression of the frustration engendered by the slowness of change in the region regarding state policy and actions, and the role of oil companies [24]. The emergence of groups like Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Movement for Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) etc., as pointed out by Walker, are all reactions to the frustrating experiences the people have been exposed to in the hands of the oppressive forces.

In a similar vein, a number of health problems have been recorded in this region as result of the conflict which includes fatigue, gastrointestinal problems, being easily startled, headaches, nausea, dizziness, changes in appetite and sleep patterns, rapid heart rate, grinding of teeth, and so forth [25]. Female children and adolescents who were subjected to physical as well as sexual abuse are not left out as they are posed with multiple health challenges ranging from unwanted pregnancies often leading to shame, disgrace, abortion and ultimately in some cases death, to transmission of sexually diseases and a lot of reproductive problems that could mar their entire life. As enumerated by the World Health Organization, some consequences of collective violence (violence resulting from wars, terrorism and other violent political conflicts, state-perpetrated violence, and organised violent crime such as banditry and gang warfare) as including increased mortality, increased morbidity (injuries from external causes, infectious diseases, malnutrition, and mental health problems), as well as increased physical, psychological and social disability [26].

Consequently, adolescents often result to prostitution in order to survive even after the conflict is over. They also resort to whatever means necessary for a paltry sum to care for their young or old as the case may be, in event of violence, the moral compass of right and wrong has been distorted leading to exposure to sexual pervasion, increased cases of robberies, cultism and gangsterism within and outside schools, vandalization of oil pipelines and kidnapping, all aimed at making wealth. They also end up in drug abuse, having no respect for constituted authority, and in fact, human lives as the case may be [27].

Conclusion

New conflict and new actors in the Niger delta

In conclusion therefore, the long years of neglect suffered by the people of the Niger Delta region in the hands of government and the oil companies have fostered a siege mentality, especially among children and adolescents who feel they are condemned to a future without hope, and see conflict as a strategy to escape deprivation [28]. Now, it is recorded that there are proliferation of cult gangs in the region comprising of the adolescents who were children during the Niger Delta conflict. Undoubtedly, their experiences during the conflict has given them the courage and leverage to commit crime. This is caused by the flaws in governmental policies made to bring peace to the region through the Amnesty Programme for former militants. This programme does not only rehabilitate them, it also empowers them to be relevant in the society. The children and adolescents during the conflict period are neglected and this neglect is gradually breeding future militias to fight for their rights to the oil share in the region. Although the government and oil multinationals have invested in various empowerment programmes especially in the area of education through corporate social responsibility, the Amnesty Programme however have indicated that it pays to be a militia. This is owing to the fact that former militant are paid monthly salary, which is more than what some university graduates get per month. The options are then widely opened for the children and adolescent of the conflict period to choose between educational empowerment that does not pay and well-paid militia.

Today, it is evident that there are myriad of security challenges bedeviling the Niger Delta Region, which include a reformed militancy, pipeline vandalization, oil-bunkering, street violence, armed robbery and other violent crimes. The actors in these crimes are the neglected children who have grown to become adolescents in the contemporary Niger Delta. Consequently, the region should get ready for another round of conflict whose perpetrators will be the neglected children and adolescents who were unknowingly trained during the first conflict to take up arms in future.

In summary, the adolescent and childhood years are crucial developmental phase in human. This is the stage when the foundation is laid for purposeful, moral judgments and goals. Under the extreme conditions of war, if adolescents and children are left without opportunities to envision a better future, youthful optimism may turn into bitter pessimism [29]. In order words, when their sense of right and wrong becomes compromise without adequate and necessary mechanisms to address them. It provides a room of chaos and disaster and this in turn would ultimately cause the future of the country in question to be in jeopardy. This would definitely affect the growth, productivity and development of such country. Hence, addressing their rights and protection is therefore not negotiable; it is an urgent priority!

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