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WOMEN AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT: AN ANTIDOTE TO THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS

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Introduction

Over the past four decades, the issues confronting the Niger Delta region have caused increasing national and international concern. The region produces immense oil wealth and has become the engine of Nigeria's economy. But it also presents a paradox, because these vast revenues have barely touched the Niger Delta's poverty. The Niger Delta holds some of the world's richest oil deposits, yet Nigerians living there are poorer than ever, violence is rampant, and the land and water are fouled (O'Neill, 2007). Today, there are formidable challenges to sustainable human development in the region. The manifestation of these challenges includes the conflicts over resources among communities, and between communities and oil companies (UNDP, 2006).

The Niger Delta region includes the nine oil producing states in Nigeria comprising Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers states. It covers a total land area of about 75,000 square kilometres and 185 local government areas. Majority of its settlements, about 94 percent are rural communities with populations of less than 8,000, 000 people. The area offers very limited economic opportunities just as infrastructure and social services are either non-existent or are in very deplorable conditions. This is most evident in three of the States of the Niger Delta- Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers States where instability has translated into violent political, socio-economic, ethnic and communal conflicts.

In the process of evaluating the problems of the Niger Delta region, some questions come into play. Why is it that a region with so much human and natural resources have had little impact on poverty? Why do conflict and youth restiveness simmer endlessly in the region? How can peace be attained in the region? How can environmental sustainability and poverty reduction be achieved given continued extraction of oil and gas resources?

The situation in the region epitomises the interplay between economic, social, political and environmental issues. Thus, social instability, poor local governance, competition for economic resources and environmental degradation has taken a toll. The general neglect of infrastructure, often rationalized by the difficulty of the delta's terrain, has worsened the people's access to fundamental services such as electricity, safe drinking water, roads and health facilities which are in different dimensions in different parts of the country. Also worthy of mention is the negative impacts of the oil industry in the Niger Delta.

Today, the Niger Delta is a place of frustrated expectations and deep rooted mistrust. With long years of neglect, the area is besieged with conflict and violence by the restive youths who feel that they are condemned to a future without hope, and see conflict as a strategy to escape deprivation. On the other hand, this has affected oil production leading to a loss of needed foreign exchange to finance national development. Blown pipelines interrupt the supply of crude oil to refineries and produce shortages that cause sudden hikes in oil prices. In addition, hostage taking is not only a stress on foreign captives, their families and the companies they work for, but also presents a challenge to international diplomacy and foreign direct investment.

Unfortunately also, the disruption has adverse effects on the local people and their communities. Infact, in some cases, whole villages have been destroyed and their populace displaced because of the disputes that could have been amicably resolved. In addition, while the turmoil in the Niger Delta has many sources, one prominent and underlying cause is the historical failure of governance at all levels. Declining economic performance and over concentration on crude oil to the neglect of agriculture has led to rising unemployment for the majority of the youths of the region. With declining agricultural activities and increasing oil pollution, women now face a double marginalization due to gender.

The Paradox of the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is a massive reservoir of national and international importance. It is rich in oil and gas which makes Nigeria the sixth highest oil producing country in the world. Surprisingly, the Niger Delta suffers from government neglect, crumbling social infrastructure high unemployment, abject poverty, filth, squalor and endemic conflict. The vast oil and gas deposits show that between 2000 and 2002, total oil revenues to members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) were \$606 billion (OPEC, 2003).

According to Gary and Karl (2003) if transparency, accountability and fairness were pursued, oil revenues will become a source of substantial benefit for the country's citizenry. There tends to be an inverse relationship between economic growth and natural resource abundance. With poor performance on such social indicators as education and health, what you have has been dubbed the oil resource curse or a double-edged sword.

It is also ironic that while one-fifth of the energy needs of the United States comes from the Niger Delta region, life expectancy in the region is falling just as energy availability is poor. A region that experiences oil exploration is also made to import fuel despite producing over two million barrels of crude oil per day. It suffers from an almost total lack of roads in spite of the fact that its wealth is funding gigantic infrastructural development in other parts of Nigeria including expensive peace keeping missions across Africa. It accounts for about 80 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and about 70 percent of government revenues.

The pain of the Niger Delta people is that while oil workers live in air conditioned comfort, the community manages without electricity, portable water, and health facilities. Mbachu (2006) writing on the situation in the Niger Delta region reports on the level of discontentment among the ethnic groups that inhabit the region. According to him, "the ethnic minorities who inhabit the delta region accuse the bigger ethnic groups that dominate government of cornering the oil wealth to their detriment". This is why Anifowose (2003) contended that individuals or groups who feel frustrated in the attainment of their desires and demands often react by directing aggressive behaviour at what is perceived as being responsible for thwarting their desires.

The Challenge of Governance

The Delta water-logged, flood prone terrain is indeed the most difficult to handle in Nigeria. Unfortunately, governments in Nigeria have not given it the needed attention. Development planning in Nigeria dates back to the formative 10 year National Development Plan which began with the 1946-1955 plan of the Colonial administration.

Traditional Development Plans in Nigeria have become ends in themselves. They often ended up not being implemented. The post-independence government responded to the Willink's Report of 1958 by setting up the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) in 1961. This could solve the problems of the Niger Delta and it was followed by the Niger Delta Basin Development Authority (NDBDA) set up in 1976. The Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) was set up in 1992. Between 1993 and 1997, OMPADEC collected about N17.42 billion. It was initially allocated three percent of the Federation Account, but was later raised to six percent in July 1995. The Commission did not make any meaningful impact on the lives and environment of the Niger Delta people. Consequently, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was inaugurated in December 2000 to offer lasting solution to the socio-economic difficulties of the Niger Delta. Experience today shows that the NDDC does not seem to have created any impact in the lives of the people.

Political measures intended to decentralize responsibility for development and provide adequate resources to States and Local Leaders have not achieved much. In most cases, there has been a lack of insensitivity on the part of government. Infact, the enormous revenue given to the states and local governments in the region from the federal account including OMPADEC (now replaced by the NDDC) have failed to achieve the desired impact. At the root of this has been corruption, mismanagement, rampant human rights abuses, inadequate access to justice and security, vulnerability of the people and alienation from all levels of government. Consequently, poverty has increased, the quality of life very dismal and unemployment has been on the increase.

The critical issue in the Niger Delta is not only the increasing incidence of poverty, but also the intense feeling among the people of the region that they ought to do better. This is based on the considerable level of resources in their midst, and the open display of wealth in Nigeria, most of which derives from crude oil wealth. Poverty has become a way of life due to economic stagnation, unemployment, poor quality of life due to shortages of essential goods and facilities, an unhealthy environment spreading diseases and malnutrition and government insensitivity. It is imperative to state that even if poverty is measured as living on less than US\$1 a day, the true levels of poverty in the region will still be underestimated.

The existence of poverty is indeed a call to action for the poor and the wealthy alike a call to change the world so that many more may have enough to eat, adequate shelter, access to education and health, protection from violence, and a voice in what happens in their communities (World Bank, 2006). While poverty may seem to cause deprivation and hinder individual development, it is also the consequence of a number of social and national factors, such as poor governance and the exclusion of particular social groups, including minority ethnic groups, women and youth, from participation in decision-making on matters relating to their welfare.

It is also on record that there is no effective machinery to hold elected officials accountable to the electorate. Indeed, the mismatch between allocations and the low level of infrastructural development and service delivery seems to lend credence to such a claim. If a particular State gets at least N6 billion allocation every month, that should translate into tangible physical developments. The fact that it does not give rise to the legitimate question: Where does all that money go? Truly speaking, no poverty alleviation or empowerment strategy can succeed with such magnitude of official corruption.

All of this points clearly to the fact that the failure of the oil companies and the government to recognize the relationship between the Niger Delta people and the land which they depend upon for their livelihood is a major mistake of governance. There is indeed the need to appreciate the problem from an objective perspective.

Revenue Allocation and Its Pitfalls

The politics and dynamics of revenue allocation are complex and have posed severe challenges to the development of the Niger Delta. Historically, at the root of the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates by Lord Lugard in 1914 was the issue of cross subsidization in which the richer South would subsidize development endeavours in the poor North.

The first attempt to properly document the revenue sharing was in 1946, when Phillipson Fiscal Commission, set up by the Colonial Administration, proposed the derivation principle as a basis for fiscal federalism. The idea was that revenue should be shared, among other things, in proportion to the contribution each region made to the common purse or central government. At Independence in 1960, the disparity in allocation largely reflected the degrees of enterprise and levels of production in the regions. With such cash crops as Cocoa, Palm Oil, Cotton, Hides and Skin, Rubber, Groundnuts, etc, competition was encouraged in the regions. And so from 1946 to 1967, when the Nigerian Civil War began, the derivation principle was maintained at 50 percent of proceeds to the region where they were extracted; 30 percent went into a pool for distribution to all regions; and 20 percent to the Federal government. The 50 percent derivation formula changed in varying ways during Military and Civilian Administration in Nigeria. General Gowon promulgated the Petroleum Decree No. 51 in 1969. With this, ownership and control of all petroleum resources was put under the control of the federal government. This meant that individuals, communities, local governments and even states with land containing minerals were denied their rights to the minerals. General Olesegun Obasanjo's government of 1976-1979, made a distinction between onshore and offshore proceeds with all off shore proceeds going into the Distributable Pool Amount. In addition, the share of the onshore proceeds in the pool was raised to 80 percent while producing states were allocated the balance of 20 per cent. Between 1982 and 1992, derivation accounted for only 1.5 percent of oil proceeds.

The military regime of General Sani Abacha of 1993-1998; raised the derivation to three percent but on the recommendation of the National Constitutional Conference, this was changed to 13 percent Derivation Fund though not implemented.

At the inception of democratic rule in 1999, there was so much agitation and conflict over the derivation formula especially with pronounced neglect and deprivation in the region, and the inability of government to meet the people's expectations. Till date calls for an increase to about 25 percent by those in the region failed to see the light of day.

Table 1: Federal and State Shares of Petroleum Proceeds

<i>Years</i>	<i>Producing State (percent)</i>	<i>Distributable Pool Amount or Federation Account Percent)</i>
1960 - 67	50	50
1967 - 69	50	50
1969 - 71	45	55
1971 - 75	45 minus offshore proceeds	55 plus offshore proceeds
1975 - 79	20 minus offshore proceeds	80 plus offshore proceeds
1979 - 81		100
1982 - 92	1.5	98.5
1992 - 99	3	97
1999 -	13	87

Source: Sagay, 2001

However, the new thinking today is that the people must be allowed to control whatever resources are in their regions no matter the part of the country using the principle of comparative advantage.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on two theories, namely, the Marxist Theory and the Theory of People Centred /Participatory Development.

Marxist Theory

Marxism takes its name from its founder, the German born Karl Marx (1818 - 1883). Marxist theory begins with the simple observation that in order to survive, humans must produce food and material objects. In doing so, they enter into social relationships with other people (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000).

Marx stated that society is shaped by the economic basic or infrastructure of society. The other aspects of society, known as the superstructure are the political, legal, educational institutions including the beliefs and values of the society. He asserted that there is a fundamental conflict of interest between social groups since one gains at the expense of another. And so, the social relationship between the elites and the masses breeds exploitation and oppression. In it, there is an unequal exchange of benefits or rewards as the masses are alienated from their products and from society.

This situation of perpetual subjugation is clearly evident in the Niger Delta where the people whose lands are being exploited and polluted hardly get commensurate compensation. Rather, in the midst of plenty, majority suffer form poverty, squalor, unemployment and misery just as the gainers of the system, the government and oil firms enjoy the gains of oil production. Consequently, based on the principle of class struggle and class consciousness as espoused by Karl Marx, the active labour force, the youth of the Niger Delta have been forced to fight back so as to claim what rightly belongs to the people of the region.

The Theory of People Centred and Participatory Development

This theory IS focused on the situation of the rural poor and the need for equity and equality in the distribution of resources, The rural poor require access to land and water resources; agricultural inputs and services, including extension and research facilities and participatory development strategies to tackle rural poverty.

A people centred development therefore implies that development must be people based or human centred because development entails the full utilization of a nation's human and material resources for the satisfaction of various human needs.

According to Chinsman (1995), people centred development will:

- i. Enable people to realize their potential, build self-confidence and lead lives of dignity and fulfilment;

- ii. Free people from poverty, ignorance, filth, squalor, deprivation and exploitation; and
- iii. Correct existing economic, social, political injustices and oppression.

The theory therefore asserts that development must lead to the empowerment of the people and must capture the interest, needs, and aspirations of the people. Popular participation therefore is “a process by which people take an active and influential part in shaping decisions that affect their lives” (OECD, 1995).

Once people are able to participate in decision making over issues that concern their livelihood, they are able to realize their human potential, build self-confidence and lead lives of dignity and fulfilment. This process guarantees economic growth and equitable distribution of its benefits. It helps to regenerate the environment rather than destroy it. It helps to empower the people rather than to marginalize them.

This theory is therefore an attack on the perennial conflict, political instability and social unrest in the Niger Delta based on inequities in the allocation of resources from oil and gas and the degradation of the Niger Delta environment by oil spills and gas flares that have continued to affect the living conditions of the people.

The Oil Companies and the People

The Niger Delta region has been particularly attractive to the major international companies including Shell, Chevron, Mobil ELF, Agip, Texaco etc. They have been involved in joint ventures with the federal government in connection with oil exploration, exploitation and production. Since 1958, when the first oil well was drilled at Oloibiri, over 1,481 oil wells have sprung up, producing from about 159 oil fields. There are more than 7,000 kilometres of pipelines and flow lines and 275 flow stations operated by 13 companies (NNPC and AAPW, 2004)

Oil exploration and production by the multinational oil companies has contributed in transforming some sections of the region. Some communities have benefited from their activities through attractive wages for full-time employment or specialized contractual services. However for the majority, there is marked underemployment and unemployment. The expectation of the Niger Delta people is that these multinationals will respect human rights, comply with environmental standards for exploration and exploitation, and where necessary restitution for damages. On the other hand, the oil companies expect the provision of security for the oil facilities, the prevention of damages to their facilities and environment and the protection of their personnel.

Natural resources can cause or promote violent conflict through massive environmental degradation, which culminates in resources scarcity and poverty for local host communities.

The best known example in the world is the case of the Niger Delta in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The unquenchable thirst for profit by multinational oil companies resulted in the use of cheaper technologies for the production of crude oil in Nigeria. The consequence is massive pollution through oil spillage and gas flaring (United Nations 2001, Eboime, 2006).

The people of the Niger Delta believe strongly that the environmental predicament contributes to social and economic deprivation. There is loss of fishing grounds, disappearance of livelihoods and land shortages among others. The oil companies, particularly Shell Petroleum has operated for over 30 years without appreciable control or environmental regulation to guide their activities. The Federal Environmental Protection Agency did not come into being until 1988. Unfortunately, the victims of pollution have been poorly compensated, and some law suits have dragged on for many years (Adewale 1988, Fajemirokun 1999, Worika 2002).

Existing laws prescribe that aggrieved persons can only seek redress against the oil companies in the Federal High Court. To the local people, this is another case of collusion between the oil companies and the government as the courts are located in the state capitals beyond the reach of most rural habitants.

The Way Forward (Women and Youth Empowerment)

The chaotic and desperate situation in the Niger Delta condemns the youth to a future without hope. Women who are the vulnerable group in the society bear the brunt of poverty and squalor in the region. They are greatly disadvantaged in terms of job opportunities just as they lack basic infrastructural facilities for a healthy living. For both women and youths, deprivation has driven them into deep involvement in the Niger Delta conflicts.

Unfortunately, ongoing dissent denies the region lasting security, enduring peace and prosperity and the realization of opportunities for empowerment of the people. This implies that attainment of peace in the region will require very determined efforts due to long years of neglect and conflict which have left a part of the population, particularly the youths with a siege mentality.

For peace to return to the region, there must be not just physical development of the region but also the establishment of a new and positive culture of social, economic and democratic rebirth. There must be some realistic attempt to develop or pen up the area and promote long

term development and ensure the rehabilitation of the youths who have suffered long years of unemployment. This must include poverty reduction through the widening of people's choices, capacity development for employment opportunities, gender empowerment and management of the environment, promote diversification and change in economic structure to reduce the dependence on resource revenues. The dividend of growth must be properly distributed with adequate trickle-down effect. Multinational oil companies must arrive at some meeting point with the government and community leaders so as to find suitable solutions to the development of local host communities.

Damage to the environment which has hampered the traditional occupation of the people must be adequately compensated for. This will even curtail agitation of the people for job placement in oil companies in the region. There must be some concerted effort in the region to improve governance through checks on corruption and the engagement of the people of the region in shaping policies for their wellbeing. The derivation issue in national revenue allocation needs to be resolved. People desire to control their resources. While this is being resolved, government must decide how the current monthly 13 percent derivation is to be disbursed between the state governments, the local governments and the communities under consideration.

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