



READINGS IN

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**CONFLICT MANAGEMENT  
AND PEACE BUILDING IN AFRICA**

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VOLUME I

*Edited by*

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Readings in Conflict Management and Peace Building in Africa

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# POVERTY AND ETHNIC MILITIA ACTIVITIES IN THE NIGER DELTA, NIGERIA: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The Niger-Delta area is home to about 23% of Nigeria total population. One thing that readily comes to mind about this area is conflict through the instrumentality of ethnic militancy. The issue of conflict in this area has been discussed and examined against many indices. This paper, however, tried to place the incidence of ethnic militia activities against the perception of deprivation by the people of this area. The paper employed frustration-aggression and relative deprivation theses in explaining the phenomenon of wanton destruction of oil exploration facilities, deaths and hostage taking by many militant groups that traverse the region. Recommendations that could assuage the conflict situation were suggested.*

Keywords: conflict, militia group, poverty, relative deprivation, frustration, aggression

## **Introduction**

The Niger Delta is a region with high conflict incidence (Eguavoen, 2003), as evidenced by the recent upsurge in attacks on oil installations, vandalism of gas pipeline, hostage taking, and killing of government officials (police and members of the armed forces). The Niger-Delta region typically comprises the following states in Nigeria- Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Delta, Edo, Ondo, and Rivers. The area has an estimated population of about 30 million people as of 2005, representing about 23% of Nigeria's total population. Agriculture and fishing are the predominant occupation of inhabitants of this region, however, oil exploitation and the resultant effects on the environment have rendered nearly impracticable,

these occupations; the corollary of which is unemployment, poverty and feeling of helplessness. It is imperative to state that the phenomenon of ethnic militias is attributable to a multiplicity of factors. These include: economic reasons (Fadahunsi, 2003); the mismanagement of ethnic grievances by the Nigerian state; and the general discontentment of the component units of the federation with the allocation of power and resources. This can be understood in terms of the vast wealth accruing to the Nigerian nation from oil exploited in the area against harrowing poverty and exclusion being experienced by the people of the area.

It will help the present discourse to point out the dimension that has been introduced to conflicts in the area. That is, a shift from inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic crises to what can be regarded as a mobilization of aggression against the Nigerian state, and the operations of the multi-national oil corporations (the scapegoats in the aggression). The late 1990's witnessed series of conflicts between the Ijaw and Itsekiri, the Urhobo and the Itsekiri (Eguavoen, 2003)); however, these conflicts have given way to what could be termed 'complementary opposition' or 'massing effect' against a common and more dangerous enemy, which in this case is the federal government and its agents. Contributions to the 'complementary opposition' scenario by the different groups in this region may not necessarily be armed struggle; some contribute through shielding of militiamen from security agents, supplying of vital information for successful operations and 'opinion switch' to the cause for which there is conflict. These go a long way in tilting the public opinion to the side of the militia groups and thereby 'legitimizing' their operations in public opinion court.

### **Perspectives on causes of conflict**

Various positions have been taken on the causes of conflicts in the Niger Delta region and which have informed intervention strategies employed to tackle the problem. Imobighe (2003) identifies three factors as responsible for the rise in the incidence of conflicts in the Nigerian society with particular reference to the Niger Delta: non-adherence to the principle of broad participation in public affairs in the country and the over concentration of the control of the country's resources at the centre; the emergence of ethnic militias constituted from the youth wings of the various ethnic groups; and the proliferation of small arms in the country made possible by porous borders.

It is, however, to be noted that the major players in the conflict situation (government and local ethnic groups) have taken positions on the causes of the conflict. On the one hand are government and its agencies, which see the

problem as resulting from laziness and rascality. This position better explains the use of force, through the instrumentality of the different arms of the country's security agencies to bring about order. The invasion of Odi in Bayelsa state by soldiers on the order of the federal government of Nigeria is an attestation to this. The people of Odi were described as rascals and miscreants with the corollary attacks on the community. Also, comments credited to federal government officials describing the militiamen involved in recent attacks on oil facilities and hostage taking as 'terrorists', 'cultists' and 'criminals' further attest to the position of government on the issue.

On the other hand are ethnic groups known by different names as Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC), Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU), Isoko Development Council (IDC) among others. These groups see the conflict as resulting from years of neglect and deprivation despite the fact that the country's survival is anchored on oil that is exploited from the region. The conflict is also adduced to environmental degradation caused by years of oil exploration due to pollution from gas flaring, spills, oil blast discharges, oil well blow-outs and improper disposal of drilling mud. These have combined to cause damage to marine wildlife, modification of the ecosystem through species elimination, damage to land needed for agriculture, and hampering of fishing activities.

Writing on the "Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and the Struggle for Democracy", Deeka (2003) states:

Our struggle has been portrayed as a struggle against military dictatorship, multi-national exploitation, human right abuses and environmental degradation. In truth our struggles have been all these things, but it is founded in a more positive struggle to assert our rights to survive as a people, maintain a positive relationship with our environment, protect our culture, and ensure that our children enjoy an appreciable state of development.

It is necessary to further state that from its formation Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) has stood for sufficient autonomy that the local people may take responsibility for the care of their environment, resources and needs. At various times this has been characterized as secessionist bid, an excuse used by many governments to embark on suppressive and repressive policies targeted at perceived insurgents.

### **Conceptualizing poverty**

The word 'poverty' denotes an undesirable state. It means that individuals or groups in such a state need improvement in their situation. The phenomenon of poverty has assumed multifaceted dimensions both at the level of

methodology and practice. This is not unconnected with the different reasons advanced for its presence in human societies.

One dimension argues that the poor are responsible for their situation. In line with this explanation, the anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1966) posits that the poor become trapped in a *culture of poverty*, a lower-class subculture that can destroy people's ambition to improve their lives. The major feature of the poor, according to him is their inability to defer gratification. Socialized in poor families, children become resigned to their plight, producing a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty (Macionis, 2001). Government's position on the causes of conflict in the region may be implied from this assumption.

Another position holds that society is primarily responsible for poverty (Wilson, 1996). This is exemplified by unemployment and damage to the environment, which are socially generated. Yet another school locates poverty in environmental factors such as famine, drought, and lack of natural resources, amongst others.

It is however believed that poverty is an undesirable social problem to which a solution should be found (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000). The World Bank Report describes poverty as a condition depicted by poor nutrition, inadequate shelter and low health standard. Three approaches to describing poverty, namely the, the income/expenditure approach; the basic needs perspective and the capability/deprivation perspective are discussed here.

The income /expenditure approach defines as poor any individual whose income/expenditure level falls below a given threshold. On the basis of this, the World Bank distinguishes absolute poverty from relative poverty. Absolute poverty exists when income/expenditure of an individual is less than 1US\$per day. Relative poverty views poverty in the context of the overall standard of living that prevails in a particular society, Advocates of this concept hold the view that poverty is culturally defined and should not be measured according to a universal standard.

The Basic Needs Approach goes beyond income to incorporate the availability of basic human needs such as access to food, housing, clean water, educational facilities and health care. This approach also encompasses socio-economic indicators of well being such as high rates of morbidity and mortality, prevalence of malnutrition, illiteracy, high infant and maternal mortality rates, low life expectancy, poor quality housing, inadequate clothing low per capita income and expenditure, poor infrastructure (electricity, communication, transport, road and other social services) and lack of access to basic services such as safe water and food. These features can be used to identify poor and nonpoor individuals, households and societies. An individual, household or group found to be characterised by some or all of these features can be identified as being poor



The Capacity Approach sees poverty as involving deprivation of opportunities for a fulfilling life. The indicator would normally include a measurement of the extent to which individuals and groups are deprived and excluded from economic and/or social rights privileges.

Do all of these approaches hold for the Niger Delta region? Relating her experience of poverty, one of the inhabitants of the region posits:

While oil workers who run the Shell facility and Nigerian troops who guard them live in air-conditioned comfort, the community nearby manages without electricity, portable water, and health amenities. Yet we hear that the money being made from this oil is being used to develop other parts of Nigeria and making other people rich.

Mbachu (2006), writing on the situation in 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 accuse the bigger ethnic groups that dominate government of cornering the oil wealth to their detriment." This resentment is a demonstration of feeling of relative deprivation.

### **Theoretical anchor**

The psychological frustration-aggression and relative deprivation theses have been found to be relevant in explaining the phenomenon under study (Draman, 2003). Frustration-aggression approach was given vent by some Yale University scholars-Dollard et al (1939). This model premised conflict (aggression) on frustration. According to Dollard et al (1939) "the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration and, contrariwise, that the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression." They further argue that there is a direct positive proportionality between the instigation to aggression and the amount of frustration, that is, the level to which an individual or a group is instigated to aggressive behavior is a function of the amount of frustration. This amount is dependent on the strength of the drive toward a goal, the degree of interference, and the number of frustrated responses. The resulting instigation to aggression will be directed toward the perceived agent of frustration (displacement), and the act of aggression reduces instigation to aggression (catharsis).

Frustration is defined as interference with a goal response while aggression is equated with the desire to hurt or injure others (Dollard et al, 1939). For example, Anifowose (2003) contends 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.

In this case, relative deprivation is used in explaining the frustration of the inhabitants of this region. Gur (1970) is one of the major advocates of this approach in explaining conflict and violence. This paradigm is premised on two assumptions: a discrepancy between outcomes and expectations and the prevalence of outcomes that are regarded as unjust. These assumptions can singly or jointly cause a feeling of relative deprivation. In explaining the importance of this theory to understanding conflict, Draman (2003) posits:

With poor governance structures and unequal access and distribution of economic resources, some segments of the population tend to have better opportunities than others. This inevitably alters power relations and in turn leads to the persistence of poverty amongst certain groups with very serious consequences for social stability. When people perceive that poverty as being inflicted on them, then the frustration-aggression thesis becomes relevant in understanding why men rebel.

One interesting dimension to the phenomenon of conflict in the region is the linkage of scapegoatism to frustration-aggression and relative deprivation theses. The federal government of Nigeria is perceived to be the agent of frustration (displacement), whereas the oil companies (scapegoats) are at the receiving end of the aggressive behaviours. For example, the attacks on oil facilities and hostage taking are directly borne by people other than the government though with indirect consequences for government. The two umbrella bodies of oil workers in Nigeria-the National Union of Petroleum and natural gas workers (NUPENG) and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN)-while reacting to incessant harassments of oil workers by militiamen, contend that "the workers are always the first targets of youths' aggression in the Niger Delta region."

### **Effects of conflicts in the Niger Delta**

Aggressive behaviours targeted at oil facilities and oil workers as a result of conflicts in the Niger Delta have reinforcing effects on the sources of frustration which is relative deprivation in the area. Attacks on gas pipelines, which have drastically affected electricity generation in the country has taken its toll on all facets of the national economy, with the attendant poverty effect on the population. This is felt in reduced capacity utilization in the manufacturing sector and high cost of production of service and consumer goods, and the implications for employment generation and cost of goods and services.

Studies have established a positive relationship between conflict and poverty (Goudie & Neyapti, 1999, Azam et al, 1999, Fadahunsi, 2003). Conflicts lead to deliberate vandalization of public utilities and this causes poverty and misery among the population (Fadahunsi, 2003). In the same vein, Azam et

al. (1999) report that persistent conflicts in Chad between 1960 and 1995 affected oil exploration activities, which could have moved Chad from poverty to an appreciable level of prosperity. They argue that this has affected Chad's quest for development.

At the household level, individuals are at risk from violence, especially from federal government as witnessed in Odi, Bayelsa state, where civilians were killed and displaced. Conflicts also diminish access to services such as health, education with corresponding higher disease rate, decreasing life expectancy and low school enrolments. Displacement, consequent upon conflict worsens economic conditions. For example, to escape reprisal attacks from government wherever militant activities take place, many households live in palpable fear while others flee their homes where their means of livelihood are located thus swelling unemployment situation. One interesting thing to also note is the distracting effect of conflict on youths from engaging in productive economic activities; many of them have been recruited into the hordes of militia groups that dot the region. This situation presents scenes where women become breadwinners and men become militants. It also has implications for parenting and family living pattern, because of absence of men from homes; most families are now female-headed with its attendant problems on parenting.

At the macro level, conflicts in the region produce the impression of growing fragility of the Nigerian state. Because of the place of oil in the economy of the country, ethnic militia activities have affected the country's capacity for optimal revenue generation accruing from oil due to reduced oil exploration activities by oil companies. The effects of conflicts are also felt in wilful damage to public utilities. The worsening energy situation in the country is partly attributed to the activities of the militants. Other results are: capital flight as no investor will be interested in a long-term investment, budget imbalances, falling or stagnant GNP, unstable international oil market, among others.

Also at the macro level, there is a threat to the conception of citizenship as people subscribe to primordial rather than more inclusive conception of nationhood. This is exemplified by the rise in ethnic nationalism in the country.

### **The way forward**

This work has tried to situate conflicts in the Niger Delta within frustration-aggression and relative deprivation hypotheses. The reinforcing effect of conflict on frustration is also presented. It is believed that whatever intervention strategies are to be adopted; they must be guided by the above considerations, which make demands from all the parties involved in the

conflicts.

Sincere attempts must be made at instituting fiscal federalism in the country. This will enhance economic empowerment and foster a sense of stake holding. Vested interests may stand in the way of this attempt, however, advocacy by non-governmental organizations and the media can go a long way in reinforcing the need for fiscal federalism. Institutions designed to fight corruption must, however, be empowered so as to prevent private individuals cornering the gains that may be attendant upon fiscal federalism.

The principle of broad participation in public affairs must also be encouraged. If people believe that they have a say in what affects their lives, they will be disposed to seeking legitimate means to resolving issues rather than resorting to armed struggle with the state. Broad participation can be engendered by conscious effort at making the votes of people count, that is, by having a credible electoral system that will produce leaders who are actually voted for. A situation where peoples' votes do not count, they are left powerless, helpless, frustrated, angry and aggressive.

In the same vein, agitators should not be labeled; they should be seen as people with genuine concerns who deserve to be listened to. Research has linked labeling to sustained deviant activities and increased tendencies toward aggression.

Damage to the environment, which has hampered the traditional occupation of people, can be compensated for through a tested entrepreneurial education programme and adequate provision of micro-credit facilities. This will reduce unemployment and also curtail increasing agitation for job placements in oil companies in the region.

Education and enlightenment programmes aimed at picturing the adverse effects of conflict must also be designed. This is achievable through the operations of non-governmental organizations and civil society groups.

## **Conclusion**

The failure of oil companies and government to recognize the relationship between the Niger Delta people and the land, which they depend upon, is one of the mistakes of governance. The need to appreciate the problem from an objective perspective cannot be overemphasized. The government should note the socio-economic importance of land in the lives of the people of Niger Delta and should allow that appreciation to inform its policies of oil exploitation in the region. It is inevitable that resistance will greet any policy or programme that fail to take into account the needs, yearnings and aspirations of the people, as is the case at present. It is important to point out that the cost of conflict in the Niger Delta is going to exceed the cost of recognizing the rights and aspirations of the people. It is therefore necessary for government and its agents to build on people rather than having to rebuild

and repair the ruins occasioned by anger and frustration.

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