

AFRICAN JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Volume 3

November 2002

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ISBN 978 - 2514 - 65 - 9

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Subscription and advertising rates change from time. Orders should be sent to the Circulations Manager. Subscriptions are available without charge to qualified readers with mailing addresses in developing countries. Written request is required.

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31 Ikwerre Road, P. O. Box 3185

Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Tel: 08037070140

Printed and Published in Federal Republic of Nigeria

ISBN 978-2514-65-9

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The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Development of the Niger Delta Region

Patrick Agbor Assibong

This paper examines the attempts by the people and governments of Nigeria to address the highly vexing and contentious issue of resource control and the development of the Niger Delta Region in Nigeria highlighting early attempts via the COR State Movement, the Willinck's Commission of the Ephemeral OMPADEC intervention in the 1980s. The primary reason for the failure of previous attempts at developing the Niger Delta Region, the paper contends, resides in the dialectics of the character and disposition of those implementing the multifarious policies institutionalised to address the issues involved in the underdevelopment of the region. From this basic premise, the paper concludes, it is now left for the authorities of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to learn from the dysfunction of OMPADEC, restructure the objectives of the NDDC to create a meaningful role for (i) the native population (ii) the multinationals operating in the region and (iii) the Non Governmental Organisations like the World Environment Movement for Africa (WEMFA) and the All-Africa Community Development and Environmental Protection Agency (AACDEPA) if the newly created NDDC is to succeed. The paper is of the view that once the incontrovertible facts are accepted and the NDDC authorities have the political will to implement the policies of the Federal Government without any modicum of hypocrisy, the Niger Delta Region will experience rapid sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

Public policy analysts and some concerned environmentalists in Nigeria and abroad seem to have a general consensus that the people of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria and the Nigerian State need to work together to improve the living standard of the people residing in the core oil producing communities which include Bayelsa, Cross River, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Edo and Delta States. What is polemical is rather the actors concerned, the modus operandi and the policy thrust of successive governments at the federal, state and local government levels. This total agreement emanated from the incontrovertible fact that the above states and especially Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa States account for more than 80 percent of the total output of crude oil in Nigeria. The above states can be christened the treasure base and the bread-baskets of the Nigerian Federation.

Unfortunately, however, the above states are the most undeveloped in the federation in terms of infrastructures, the number of medical personal per thousand, lawyers per thousand, high death rate, and low birth rate exacerbated by toxic industrial fall-outs from the oil wells.

The big question here is, why has development eluded the Niger Delta region since 1914 when the Governor-General formulated and enacted one of the earliest oil development policy/law? That law stated as follows:

The Governor-General shall only grant licences and leases for mineral oils which shall be exercised subject to the condition that no leases or licences shall be granted except to a British subject or to a British Company (Oformey, 1983).

Much later, after the colonial administration, the military government in 1969 passed a decree, which vested the ownership and control of petroleum products in the state government. This perhaps was the earliest attempt of the state governments controlling their oil resources. The period of lease was reduced from thirty to twenty years. The Nigerianisation of the vital organs of the oil industry and the control of government over important operations took place with immediate effect.

From Calabar, Ogoja and Rivers (COR) State movement through the constitution in April 1958, of the Willincks Commission to address the problems of the minorities, to the establishment of the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992 by the

Federal Government of Nigeria, the Niger Delta people and the Federal Government of Nigeria have failed woefully at correcting the issue of real or imagined marginalisation. One cannot help wondering why, despite large sums of money allocated via OMPADEC, the Niger Delta communities are still light-years behind in terms of development.

WHY ISOLATE NIGER DELTA FOR DEVELOPMENT?

The Niger Delta people had been fishermen, farmers and hunters in a very clean environment for years before the invasion of their privacy by the seven sisters i.e. seven oil companies (multinationals who control the world) namely: Shell, Mobil, Chevron or Socal, British Petroleum (BP), Texaco, Gulf and Esso or Exxon. The executives of the oil companies form a sort of world government who usually "fly between Pittsburgh and Kuwait, between San Francisco and Saudi Arabia, as casually as across their own State" (Sampson, 1981:23) and are constantly preoccupied watching the New York Stock Market, calculating their profit margins, increasing discounts, and redirecting their tankers in mid-ocean from one busy loading port to another. As if to satisfy the biblical dictum of "those that have, more would be given and for the have not, even the small they have would be taken away", the oil companies have plundered the oil resources of the Delta people for years in the most despicable, ravenous and ruinous way, leaving in its trail, sweat, blood, death, pain and misery.

Oil spillage, with her attendant evils, is a common feature in the Niger Delta area. Aquatic life is often destroyed thereby damaging the only source of protein in the area. The devastating effects of oil spillage in the Niger Delta region is also discernible in pollution of the sources of fresh drinking water and abnormal births in the area. As if that is not enough, there is constant gas flares which make the Niger Delta region "a sort of hell on earth". This causes acid rain, which in turn, damages the corrugated iron sheets used for building. Gas flares are a major source of air pollution, emitting smoke, carbon dioxide and methane. Needless to mention that with the intensity of the above emissions, the ecological balance is distorted leaving the land bare and water resources depleted. Another practice of oil operations with equally devastating effect on the environment is the dredging of the creeks to allow for rigs and barges to be installed. It is on record that when Shell drilled an oil well at Okoroba in Bayelsa State in 1991, it became impossible for the inhabitants to get clean and salt-free drinking water from the Okoroba river.

The Niger Delta region was carved out for development because, as a result of oil exploration and exploitation, the local economy, which depended on fishing and peasant agriculture, was destroyed rendering the people poorer. In other words, oil exploitation led to a destructive change in the hydrological regime of the region. Communities, which had some links with other lands, became islands as a result of uncontrollable dredging which precipitated the pollution of the water with poisonous chemicals from the floor of the creeks leading to the death of many fish species. Some communities experienced flood for the first time as a result of dredging. The multinationals' response to these oil imposed catastrophes was conspiratorial neglect which later provoked the rise of "Action Groups" like the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) which later gave birth to the National Youth Council of Ogoni People (NYCOP). The late writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa, led up these groups to 1995.

Above all, the natives in most areas is impoverished and the only government presence there are security agents ready to deal with indigenes at the least provocation. In terms of infrastructure amenities, there is no pipe-borne water, electricity, good roads, banks and even the engine boats which would have facilitated communication are either non existent or broken down.

THE OMPADEC INTERVENTION

As a result of the proper documentation of the environmental problems of the Niger Delta people by Osagie, (1992) and Saro-Wiwa, (1993), the Nigerian people and the international community became aware of the extent of deprivation in the region and the end product was the mounting of the Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES) (see Onosode 1997 for details). The government set aside 1.5 per cent of revenue derived from oil revenue for the development of the Niger Delta region between 1981 and 1992 and later 3 per cent after the establishment of the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992 by a reluctant Federal Government. These, according to them, were genuine examples of contributions by the Federal Government of Nigeria toward the eradication of poverty in the region.

When, in November 10, 1992, OMPADEC was established, the Niger Delta people were full of expectation, especially given the objectives of the Commission. These were:

- i) the provision of social infrastructure and amenities for oil producing communities;
- ii) protecting of the local people against environmental degradation, oil spillages and pollution;
- iii) provision of jobs to thousands of unemployed youths;
- iv) economic empowerment of the rural people through micro credit schemes;
- v) opening up the oil producing communities through the construction of roads, provision of railway transport and linking the communities with major towns and cities in the Nigerian Federation.

From the beginning, Chief Albert Horsfall, the Commission's Chairman, started with zeal because as an insider, he knew "where the shoe pinches". But, as time went on, OMPADEC failed to achieve any meaningful development in the area. Horsfall fell because there is always a big difference between public policy formulation and public policy implementation. What is always on paper may not be easily squared with what is in the field. The realisation of this dichotomy must have forced the former chairman to remark in the *Newswatch Magazine* of March 11, 1996 that the problem was "well beyond what we (the commission) originally imagined". Before the swearing in of Professor Eric Opia who took over from Horsfall, the commission inherited over "1,000 uncompleted projects" all over the Niger Delta States "after spending ₦971.5 million on them" (Ekoriko, 1996:9).

The above scenario was exacerbated by Horsfall because he over-committed the Commission by sponsoring more projects than his staff could monitor. For example, in his first two years in office, he awarded contracts for over 589 major projects, which were abandoned by contractors after collecting 50 per cent mobilisation. Some contractors decided to put the mobilisation fees into fix deposit accounts in commercial banks which pay a high (40 per cent) interest rate which eventually ended into peoples' purses. In his quest to empower his people, Horsfall awarded some contracts to Niger Deltans with no technical skill to execute the jobs; the end product was woeful failure. Most of the projects could not take off because the various military Governors wanted to control the OMPADEC; hence they indicted the chairman in most of their Security Reports to the Presidency. There were a lot of political hands on the OMPADEC cake".

Things did not change even after Professor Eric Opia took over. OMPADEC still failed at its declared attempt at improving the standard of living of the Niger Delta people. The situation remained so until the Obasanjo Administration took over and established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). There are, however, other non-oil issues in the Niger Delta problem.

NON-OIL RESOURCES, THE STATE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The remote and immediate causes which led to the "judicial murder" of the "Ogoni nine" (Ken Saro-wiwa, John Kpuien, Dr. Barinem Kiobel, Baribor Bera, Nordu Eawo, Paul Levura, Saturday Dobe, Daniel Gbokoo and Felix Nuata) could be replicated in Cross River State where authorities of the World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF) sponsored National Park in Cross River State have embarked upon a scheme of deprivation which could result to another Ogoni in the Oban and Okwangwo divisions of the Park. Just as other Niger Deltants have oil together with Cross River, the Cross River State has, in addition, forest products which include timber, vegetables, medicinal plants, food additives and wildlife. The people of Abung, old Ekuri, Mfamiyen, Mbeban, Ojok, Ndebeji, Mkpot, Osomba and Ntebachot in the Oban Division and Okwa, Abo-Mkpang, Bamba, Kanyang in Okwangwo Division in Cross River State (Many more villages are mentioned in Talbot book written in 1912, *The Shadow of the Bush*) are involved in his new threat. Heretofore, the communities lived with the forest and wildlife for generations; hunting and farming for survival. Now both their communities and livelihood are threatened. Conservationists and the African governments must strive to protect the resources in this only natural luxuriant and expansive forest in tropical Africa. Unless this is done, the local populations of these areas will not only be alienated from government; they will also fight back, as has been the case with the oil producing communities.

Conservationist, apart from the All-Africa Community Development and Environmental Protection Agency (AACDEPA), have failed dismally to understand the Cross River/African farmers plight and relationship to the beautiful African elephant.

This misunderstanding was exacerbated by Thortons and Reeves article to the Editor British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) wildlife magazine, when they failed to mention farming or the Cross River farmer as if they do not exist. Are we to assume that farmers do not exist in both the Cross River National Park area and the Korup Park area in the Cameroons? Do we assume that farmers do not matter to conservationists? Is one Cross River/African farmer less valuable than one elephant? Is one Cross River farmer less important than one European tourist? These are the issues raised in the article, parts of which are quoted below:

...but the efficient PR machines of South Africa and Zimbabwe contribute a *veil of secrecy hiding the reality facing the African elephant today. But how does the African farmer stand up to the public relation machines of the European (Worldwide Fund for Nature - WWF) and North American conservationists?* (Emphasis mine).

Forest elephants roam freely in the mountainous forest, which extend from Cameroon into parts of South Eastern Nigeria and measures about 4000 square kilometres. Thus, is the Cross River National Park, adjoining the Korup National Park in Cameroon, these beautiful animals have been roaming the forest since creation and if we must preserve them, the African peasant who relies on the African elephant for his protein supply must be given an alternative. Otherwise the whole essence of conservation will be tantamount to systemic and institutionalised genocide against the Cross River people. Thornton and Reeve see tourism as an economic benefit arising from elephant conservation but the Cross River farmer and indeed all African farmers do not benefit much although a few Africans and their national economies do.

The situation in Cross River State and Southern Cameroons is that the local people are suffering a disadvantage from eco-tourism having lost access to the resources that traditionally supported them. Mundemba around the Cameroon/Nigeria border is ringed with squatter villages containing the people who used to live in the area taken by the Korup Park which is full of deserted villages, a sad reminder of a human landscape now turned over to the enjoyment of privileged few elephants. The story is the same in the Kasungu district in Zambia.

The danger of multinationals, governments and conservationists seeing the native people in Cross River as a nuisance to conservation rather than the reason for it, has led some people to devalue the worth of man and the needs of the common people in conservation planning. This would seem to imply that the European tourist is more important than the hungry African child and Cross River/African peasant farmer! The Cross River farmer and the Cross River wildlife both have a right to survive. The NDDC has to restructure her objectives in future to accommodate the marginalised and deprived people of Cross River State whose only fault appears to be that they were born in the area of land now housing the Cross River National Park.

PROGNOSES FOR ACTION BY THE NDDC AND SUNDRY

The main focus of the NDDC is towards a better environment and a better life for the Niger Delta people. Activities of the Commission must touch and be felt by all inhabitants of the Niger Delta.

First, the NDDC should use NGOs like WEMFA and the AACDEPA to educate the Niger Delta Youths for them to appreciate the fact that Action Groups against Environmental degradation all over the world have recorded little or no success. From the 1972 Stockholm Conference to that held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the world has witnessed two decades of the over politicisation of the natural environment. In other words, they should know that environmental issues are often highly political, involving the state and its allies like Shell, Mobil, on one hand and those with little political power like MOSOP in Nigeria, Chipko and Narmada in India, Shahabat Alam in Malaysia and Wanana Lingkungan Hidup (WALHI) in Indonesia, on the other. These Action Groups cannot succeed because the state has the highest instruments of coercion like the police, soldiers, guns etc. to compel the civil society to give up their struggle. Hence, the youths should try the peaceful way of seeking redress because with the new democratic dispensation and a president willing to listen much can be achieved via the non-violent approach.

The above brings us to the problem of timing. If there is a dictator in power, agitators should bid their time until such a time that they have a government ready to listen. On this matter of timing, Peluso has this to say:

The state's claim to defend threatened resources and its exclusive right to the legitimate use of violence combines to facilitate its apparatus building and attempts at social control. State threats or the use of violence in the name of resource control helps them to control people, especially unruly regional groups, marginal groups or minority groups (MOSOP & Egbesu) who challenge its authority. (Emphasis mine).

The above quotation means that the state may use violence against such groups if it deems it necessary to ensure its control of valuable resources such as oil, forests, minerals or hydroelectric power. Among the environmental action groups mentioned earlier, only the Chipko movement in India succeeded by asking their members to stand between the loggers and the trees which were being exploited by contractors supported by the Indian bureaucracy. This was, however, done peacefully by literally embracing the loggers.

In the case of MOSOP in Ogoni land, Peluso's position came to play as the government used all instruments of coercion, including guns, tanks and tear gas, to stop the restive youths who were struggling to protect their environment from oil spillage and gas flares. As Naanen remarked,

... what has happened instead is that the patterns of power distribution between central government and the component units, on one hand, and between the various ethnic groups, on the other, have politically emasculated the Ogoni people, causing them to lose control of their resources and the environment" (1995:46-7).

From the above view, one can safely conclude that the only success recorded by MOSOP was bringing the Ogoni plight on the international agenda after the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

The NDDC should, as a matter of urgency, commission the NGOs to reinvestigate why OMPADEC failed. Once the reasons for the failure have been identified, the NDDC should avoid them. For example, there is no justification for awarding contracts to companies without the technical know-how; neither should the new chairman award contracts to contractors who would be interested only in the 40 per cent fixed deposit windfall. Once this is noticed, the contractor should be sanctioned.

The NDDC should protect the little surviving species of fishes along the continental shelves of the Niger Delta people so that many fishermen can be gainfully employed. This will not only reduce crime, but also help to put more money in peoples' pockets. Again, land should be made safe for farming since most Niger Deltans are either farmers or fishermen. Most of them are both fishermen and farmers.

It is the responsibility of the NDDC to get the children in the area in question to become interested in school work because merely building schools will not help the people develop if a majority of the children refuse to go to school. The management of the NDDC should note that due to the frequency of relief rains in the Niger Delta region, all construction works for building any structures must be consummated within the four months dry season period to avoid the projects being abandoned.

There is always a yawning gap between policy formulation and policy implementation. One cause of OMPADEC's failure was that it lacked the machinery to monitor and supervise the execution of such a large number of projects. To avoid this, the NDDC should commission independent bodies like WEMFA and AACDEPA to do the job by making periodic recommendation to the NDDC.

The NDDC should not be an extension of the chairman's house; rather the office should be seen as impersonal and at the service of the Niger Deltans. The oil companies operating in the area and other Nigerians and corporate bodies who may have suggestions to make or bring information which may help management make useful decisions should be allowed to see the chairman. The youth leaders including the "Egbesu" chief priest, whose Supreme Assembly is believed to be in Amabolu in old Ekeremor Local Government, the chiefs or their representatives, the women and men should be consulted before vital decisions are taken or major projects embarked upon. Most rural development projects have failed in Africa (Uma Lele, 1978) because the people who are the direct beneficiaries of these projects made no input in the decision making process.

The NDDC should do a little more than just implementing the Federal Government blueprint for the development of the Niger Delta by serving as a conduit pipe for the Niger Deltans who are clamouring for Federal appointments as Ministers; recruitment into Armed Forces; recruitment into the top echelons of the Federal Civil Service; and appointment into the Federal Boards. Success in this direction would certainly win more confidence of the people for the Commission.

The NDDC should, as a matter of priority, complete abandoned projects initiated by OMPADEC like the Sagama Water Project; Yenagoa-Otuokpoti-Anyma-Okodi road project; refurbishment of the Second Gas Turbine Plant at Kolo creek and investigate where the first power generating plant was diverted to; the Otagi water project; provision of the landing jetty at Ologi which has but a sign board in place of the jetty; the Emeyal-Otuoke road on which only one kilometre was graded and filled; and all health care projects across Niger Delta states, etc. In completing these abandoned projects, the NDDC should not resort to inviting the forces of law and order; rather the authorities should try to replace these structures.

The NDDC should commission a study to investigate whether the pipelines are not too old to be replaced and whether some wells are not unsafe for both the workers and the native population. Once the study is completed and there is need to replace the pipelines and close unsafe oil wells, the NDDC should so recommend to the Federal Government of Nigeria. It is through the honest presentation of the facts as they are that the FGN would allocate funds to the commission without hesitation. The NDDC should, as a matter of urgency, invite companies interested in gas exploitation so that the gas flares would be used for economic purposes.

Conflict resolution should not be consummated by soldiers and police but should be done through consultation and dialogue with youths, chiefs and any peaceful organised group in the Niger Delta area and beyond. What the NDDC should be interested to see is a peaceful, clean and prosperous Niger Delta and not how many heads are guillotined.

The multinationals should be committed to solve the problems of the Niger Delta people understanding that it is from their land that their companies make profits. Hence, more classroom blocks should be built; more scholarships given to all the pupils, students and undergraduates from the Niger Delta region; teachers' quarters should be built; science equipment should be provided in schools; hospitals should be built, drugs supplied and equipment provided; and job opportunities should be given to the people instead of importing workers from Lagos, Kaduna and Enugu.

The newly created Local Governments in some of the States in the Niger Delta should be recognised and funded by the FGN because the State Government is already trying to complement the work of the NDDC by bringing not only government nearer to the people but also development. Alternatively, steps should be taken to grant the immediate recognition to MOSOP, "Egbesu" Boys, the Chikoko movement and any other movement whose objectives are geared towards Resource Control. The cry to control the resources of the Niger Delta is not only by youths; Royal Fathers too are involved (*The Punch*, Monday, February 7, 2000 page 4). If the bureaucracy and politicians have failed to solve the problem of deprivation, pollution, marginalisation and underdevelopment and the Niger Deltans insist on controlling their resources, the FGN should respond cautiously because most of the wars in Africa (Congo Democratic Republic - control of copper resource at Katanga; Sierra Leone - control of diamond mines in the north of the country etc) were fought, lost and won, because certain interests were invested in controlling the resources of the areas concerned.

CONCLUSION

The Niger Deltans have come a long way in their struggle for recognition and getting a fair share of the national cake. From their initial struggle in the COR State movement, Willinco Commission, to OMPADEC and now NDDC, the struggle has been long and frustrating mainly because of the insensitivity of Nigeria's major ethnic groups who have always used their control over power and government to frustrate the just and genuine aspirations of the Niger Delta people. Now is the time to correct these accumulated wrongs visited on a people who have sacrificed their land, waterways, talent and livelihood to provide the resources that have made Nigeria what it is today.

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