

# The Politics of Oil in the Niger Delta

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### INTRODUCTION

Oil production in Nigeria has been a mixed bag of fortune and misfortune, of blessings and curse, depending on who is feeling what effect. For the country, it has been a huge fortune. It is the source of her wealth, accounting for about 90 per cent of her foreign exchange earning. It is the source from which governments at the federal, state and local levels fund all developmental programmes and projects. (TELL, February 18, 2008).

Oil is one sector in which the much desired transfer of technology had, to some extent, been achieved, especially in the areas of exploration and production. Nigeria's membership of such important bodies as the World Petroleum Congress (WPC), Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and African Petroleum Producers Association (APPA) has raised the country's profile internationally. In other words, that Nigeria is a force to reckon with in the comity of nations is, arguably, attributable to her being an oil producing country, (Udeme Ekpo, 2004: 39).

For the oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta, however, oil has been more of a curse than a blessing. In communities where oil exploration and production are carried out onshore, deforestation, erosion and destroyed farmlands are the main signposts for this gift of nature. Oil production activities in these communities have polluted creeks and destroyed aquatic life. And where there are spillages, losses would be unquantifiable in monetary terms. There is also the problem of acid rain, which destroys houses, which people living within the vicinity of oil exploration and production activities have to contend with everyday of their lives (Ray Ekpu, March 10, 2008; Dan Agbese, January 25, 1993).

Obviously, over 50 years of oil exploration and exploitation had occasioned environmental degradation and pollution, resulting in excruciating and brutalizing poverty, unemployment, disease, health hazards and even death among people living in this region (TELL, February 18, 2008). According to Azigbo (2008:18), the major culprits in these ugly situations are the oil multinationals and the insensitivity of successive governments at the centre

Consequently, there has been for some time, which intensified since the late 1990s, the emergence of resistant organizations from various ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta to confront the oil multinationals and the Nigerian government. The restiveness which started on a mild note has since degenerated into a state of militancy, hostage-taking, destruction of oil installations, disruption of socio-economic activities and unparalleled violence, so that by 1998, the Niger Delta region had become a lawless zone (NDDC at a Glance, February, 2004).

At the root of the crisis in the Niger Delta have been the attempts by the indigenes of the region to control the oil resources located within their land. The struggle for the control of oil wealth by the indigenous population has a long history dating back to 1966 when the late Isaac Adaka Boro, attempted secession of the Kaiama Declaration. It has

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been sustained since then with the agitation taking different forms and dimensions.

Thus, examining the dimensions of resource control in the Niger Delta is the central focus of this study. The paper argues that the politics of oil in the Niger Delta highlights more profound national challenges with which the Nigerian state will need to contend, most notably, issues of fiscal federalism, minority rights, resources allocation and poverty alleviation.

## **DEFINING THE NIGER DELTA REGION**

For practical purposes, the Niger Delta region is defined as comprising the area covered by the natural delta of the Niger River and the areas to the East and West, which also produce oil. The natural limits of the Niger River Delta can be defined by its geology and hydrology. Its approximate northern boundaries are located close to the bifurcation of the Niger River of Aboh, while the Western and Eastern boundaries are around the Benin River and Imo River, respectively. The area covers approximately 25,000 square kilometers ([www.nddconline.org](http://www.nddconline.org)).

The broader Niger Delta region, which includes all oil-producing areas and others considered relevant for reasons of administrative convenience, political expedience and development objectives, extends the land area to 75,000 square kilometers (UNDP 2006:19). It is this definition that is used by this study. Defined in this way, the Niger Delta consists of nine states (Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Rivers and Ondo) and 185 local governments areas.

The region has some unique characteristics. For instance, it is one of the largest wetlands in the world and it is noted for its sandy coastal ridge barriers, brackish or shine mangroves, fresh waters, permanent and seasonal swamp forests as well as low land rain forests. The whole area is traversed and criss-crossed by a large number of rivers, streams, canals and creeks, while the mainland is subjected to regions of flood by the various rivers (ERML, 2005).

The Niger Delta region is extremely heterogeneous with respect to culture and ethnicity. The five major linguistic and cultural groups – the Ijaw, Edo, delta Cross, Yoruba and Igbo – are each composed of numerous sub-groups. The Ijaw, who are said to have the longest settlement history in Niger Delta, are the most complex linguistically. Each of the numerous clans of this group has some linguistic and cultural distinctiveness. In certain cases, villages in the same clan have linguistic differences. This group, which occupies virtually the whole of Bayelsa State, is also found in Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Delta, Edo and Ondo States.

The Edo group is made up of mainly of the Isoko and Urhobo of Delta State, the Edo of Edo State, the Engenni and Apie-Atissa of Bayelsa State. Even within these groups, several sub-groups exist; many claim to have their own individual identity.

The Delta Cross comprises mainly the Ogoni, Ogbia, Abua and Obolo-Andoni in Rivers State. The most well known, especially internationally, is the Ogoni because of its agitation for resource control and autonomy. The ethno cultural complexity of the Niger Delta region is vividly illustrated by the fact that even a small ethnic group like the Ogoni (about 500,000 people) is made up of at least four cultural groups: the Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme (UNDP, 2006:22).

In spite of the fact that the Yoruba and Igbo are two of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, the related groups in the Niger Delta are some of the smallest there. The main Yoruba groups are the Itshekiri of Delta State, and the Ilaje and Ikaile in the borderlands of Ondo State. The main Igbo groups are the Ikwerre, Ndoni, Egbema, Ogbia and Ekpeye in Rivers State and the Ukwuani in Delta State (ANEJ, 2004).

In 1991, the total population of all the nine states of the Niger Delta was 20.5 million. This was made up of 10.133 million males and 10.329 million females. The projected total population for 2005 was 28.9 million, rising to 39.2

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million by 2015 and 45.7 million by 2020. The states with the highest population size are Rivers, Delta, Akwa Ibom and Imo. With the possible exception of Bayelsa and Cross River States, there are probably no significant differences in population sizes among the states (CPED, 2003: 33)

Available information on the age structure of the population of states in the Niger Delta region depicts a large segment of young people below 30 years of age. This group comprises 62.1 per cent of the population of the region, compared with 35.8 per cent of adults in the 30 to 69 years age bracket. Based on the 1991 census, there is almost an even distribution of population between men and women in the Niger Delta Region (see NDDC at a Glance, 2004). Though the 1991 census reports that in some state (Abia, Akwa Ibom, Delta, Edo and Imo), there are more females than males, the NDDC Regional Master Plan, reports that there are more males (54 per cent) than females (46 per cent).

Fishing and agriculture are the two major traditional occupation of the Niger Delta peoples. During the colonial era, forestry was introduced as a third major economic activity in the region. Today, though agriculture, fishing and forestry still account for about 44 per cent of employment, all three economic activities have declined since the ascendancy of the oil industry (UNDP, 2006:25).

## **THE POLITICS OF OIL IN THE NIGER DELTA**

According to Ekpo (2004: 133), for more than four decades, the people of the Niger Delta had lived with the anomaly of having to feed on the crumbs of the national cake which is baked in their territory, but which is shared in the nation's capital – hundreds of kilometers away – with other Nigerians who know nothing about the negative effects of oil exploration and production as the highest beneficiaries. They had been content to accept the little handouts, which came their way, in forms of a few development projects, from the federal government.

If they were not satisfied with the situation, such dissatisfaction was expressed in subdued tones at public fora, whenever the opportunity presented itself. In extreme cases, especially when it concerned the youths of the area, dissatisfaction was often expressed through the use of violence – like disruption of the activities of oil companies operating in the area; kidnapping of oil workers with demands for ransom and vandalization of petroleum facilities to cause spillage for which communities would demand compensation.

These violent agitations in the Niger Delta have been informed by the desire of the people of this region to control the oil wealth and resources located within their land. This desire on the other hand has been occasioned by the pervasive feelings of decades of abandonment among the people by the oil multinationals and successive governments at the centre.

The argument by the indigenes of the Niger Delta region over the years is that a people whose land produces the wealth that sustains the nation cannot be made to dwell in abject and excruciating poverty consequent upon environmental degradation and pollution resulting from oil production activities (See Newswatch, March 10, 2008; TELL, February 18, 2008). They have, therefore, in different ways been demanding for a fair share of the oil wealth to ensure poverty reduction, enhanced well-being, socio-economic infrastructural development of the area, or alternatively, be allowed to wholly control these oil resources (Newswatch, January 25, 199:10).

On the part of the oil multinationals and the Nigerian governments, there have been accusations and counter accusations, of neglect and abandonment of the people whose lives have been frustrated and endangered by oil production activities. Though the government and oil companies have been offering tokenism, through the establishment of development intervention agencies (whose activities have largely been frustrated by poor funding), the people contend that such is not enough. The government and the oil companies are being accused of indirectly but purposely ensuring the poverty of the people and the underdevelopment of the area to enhance their (government's and oil companies') economic interests. These have over the years resulted in violent agitations of varying magnitude which date back to pre-colonial era.

According to Emmanuel Duru (1999: 100-103), the politics of oil merchandise produced the first nationalists in the

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Niger Delta. These were African merchants and rulers who insisted that the trade must bring a fair deal to the area. The commodities then were largely palm oil and slaves; the Europeans marked them as threat to legitimate trade and proceeded to terrorize and eliminate them. King William Deppa Pepple of Bonny was an early casualty in 1854. He was exiled by Consul Beecroff to Fernando Po (Equatorial Guinea) and then to Clarence, though he was restored in 1861, he died five years later.

Another Niger Delta indigene who was immersed in the politics of oil and merchandise was King Jaja of Opobo, and ex-slave, shrewd but generous business man who paid off the European slave owners in order to buy freedom for the slaves. He was originally from Bonny, but an orchestrated squabble from a rival house saw him exiled to Opobo in Andoniland. Others who opposed the exploitative trade of the European merchants and paid for it were King Nana Olomu of Itshekiri in 1883 and Oba Oviraniyem Nogbaisi of Benin Empire in 1897.

The agitation continued until the post-colonial era. Precisely in 1966, according to Duru (1999), there was a 12 day revolution by a Niger Delta indigene named Isaac Adaka Boro. He led a small guerrilla army of Ijaw nationals to declare the "Niger Delta Republic". After 12 days, federal troops overcame Boro and his determined compatriots. He, Samuel Owonanu and Nottingham Dick were tried for treason and condemned to death on June 21, 1966.

After what seemed a period of quietness and silence, the Ogoni uprising erupted and lasted between 1990 and 1995. This period marked a new phase in the interesting interface of oil and minority politics between the Nigerian state and government and the peoples of the Niger Delta. According to Duru (1999), not since the rebellion of Boro and Co. declared a short-lived independence over oil related grievances, has any oil producing community sought redress in ways which involved mobilized mass action and direct confrontation with the state as the Ogonis did. Ken Saro Wiwa, former playwright, social critic and one time federal administration of the region who led the insurrection against Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (SPDC), along with eight others paid with their lives on November 10, 1995.

Shell in particular is alleged to have influenced its joint partner (the Nigerian state) in the oil trade in the execution of the "Ogoni nine" as they were popularly known. In an editorial commentary on November 13, 1995, the Guardian Newspapers states thus:

*In the final tragic document on the Ogoni crisis, national and international global attention became focused on Shell Petroleum Development Corporation and other oil companies doing business in Niger Delta. Allegations and suspicious of complicity were raised against Shell in particular. Matters were not helped by statements emanating from Shell before and after the hanging. In desperate attempt to exonerate itself of guilt, Shell came off with the unfortunate impression that it cared more about being in good business than about the fate of the communities in which it exploits oil and allied products.*

The experiences of Adaka Boro and Ken Saro Wiwa and Co. according to Ekpo (2004:133) showed that the political atmosphere, for the greater part of the period during which the country was under military rule, did not present opportunity for a more forceful approach to demands for equity, justice and fair play in the Niger Delta. But even in the current democratic dispensation, the story of Odi, Bayelsa state is not different.

Since the emergence of the Fourth Republic in 1999, agitations in the Niger Delta moved from demands for a fair share of the national cake to the right to have control over natural resources that are found in the area. The demand for "resource control" as it is popularly called, was championed by the governors of the Niger Delta States and the entire Conference of the Southern Governors. In one of its meetings in Yenagoa, the Bayelsa State capital on September 20, 2001, the governors issued a communiqué in which they called for the adoption of what they referred to as true federalism. The communiqué read in part.

*The conference noted with dissatisfaction that Nigeria is not practising true federalism and urges the country to abide by the tenets of true federalism and fiscal autonomy for the federating states as well as proper devolution of*

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*power to the states (Ekpo, 2004: 135).*

The agitation for resources control was naturally tied to the demand for the control of land and was hinged on the precedent during the First Republic, when the regions, which were then the federating units had control over agricultural produce.

No issue, has in Nigeria's recent history been contentious and controversial as the issue of resource control. People in Southern part of Nigeria saw it as the only answer to the nagging question of how to guarantee justice and fair play in the handling of resources of nature, especially when exploration of such resources carry with it negative consequences on the environment. But many in the Northern part of Nigeria considered the agitation as an invitation of anarchy. They expressed the fear that behind the agitation for resource control is the suspicion of a grand design by states in the south with enormous wealth to seek independence from Nigeria. They, therefore, expressed preference for a stronger federal government that would be more responsible for all other parts of the country.

Caught in the clash of counter claims and charges the Federal Government under Obasanjo took the case for resource control to the Supreme Court. On April 5, 2002, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the federal Government which was asking for the determination of the rights of the federating state to control their natural resources.

Though a political settlement to the case between the federal and State governments was sort afterwards, the politics of oil in the Niger Delta has ever since assumed a more worrisome and violent dimensions, turning the region into a den of militants and lawlessness. The problem of militancy and violence in the Niger Delta manifests in two ways namely, disruption of oil and gas installations and facilities, and hostage-taking and kidnapping of oil workers. The militant groups in the region have carried out deadly and paralyzing attacks on oil and gas stations and facilities.

Statistics released by a non-governmental organization, the Niger Delta Development Monitoring and Corporate Watch (NIDDEMCOW) shows that between 1999 and June, 2007, a total of 308 hostage incidents occurred in the region (the Tide, Tuesday, July 10, 2007). A breakdown of this record shows that Bayelsa state was on the lead with 131 incidents; Rivers State had 113; Delta State 45, while Akwa Ibom had the least record of 15. Unfortunately, the situation appears to be deteriorating by the day as the spate of hostage-taking and kidnapping incidents are one the increase (see Sunday Vanguard, February 10, 2008: 9; Saturday Sun, March 29, 2008: 10 and Vanguard, April 6, 2008)

Even at the face of threat to national security and the unity of the state, the Nigerian government is yet to fashion out a strategy to ensure a lasting solution to the problem of oil and minority politics in the Niger Delta (Newswatch, August, 2008: 14 -26).

## **CONCLUSION**

Obviously, the politics of oil in the Niger Delta highlights more profound national challenges with which the Nigerian state will have to contend, most notably, issues of fiscal federalism, minority rights, resources allocation and poverty alleviation (Cesarz, 2003).

A modest start in this direction is for the government and oil companies to make life more bearable in these oil bearing communities. This will require a massive infusion of funds into this region. And because this is expensive, the governments and the oil companies shy away from the challenge or simply offer tokenism. Neither shying away nor tokenism can solve the problem of setting up schools, hospitals and industries in these places so that life can be somewhat liveable, and those who take up arms against the state and us, for right or wrong reasons, may let us live in peace.

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