

NIGER DELTA YOUTHS BEYOND THE AMNESTY: PREPARING THE NIGER DELTA YOUTHS FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC RELEVANCE*

BY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this write-up is to contribute to an understanding of the position of the youths and their relationship to the post – amnesty programmes in the Niger Delta Region. It is assumed that the Niger Delta crises came to an end with the expiration of the amnesty period and that what is needed now is to make the youths relevant within the on-coming socio-economic boom in the area. The president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria had offered an unconditional pardon and cash payments to militants who agree to lay down their arms within 60 days from August 6, which expired on October 4, 2009. Reportedly, as over 15,000 militants or “youths” surrendered their arms, crude oil output soared to 2.5 million barrels per day, closer to OPEC quota, compared to 1.7 million barrels at the height of militancy in 2006. But how much of the revenue realized from crude oil export will go to elevate the status of the youth?

2. WHO ARE THE NIGER DELTA YOUTHS

Youths in the context of the Niger Delta connotes not only age but social exclusion deprivation, economic disempowerment and political disenfranchisement. They constitute a segment of the society which, traditionally should be seen rather than be heard, but who nevertheless always struggle to be heard.

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They are the category of humans who get blamed when things go wrong in the society even though these may have been masterminded by the adults. They constitute that class who are supposed to dress responsibly, think responsibly, behave responsibly and respectfully, take up responsibilities in and out of homes and in the community and still remain young enough to be called youths. Hence there is a local saying in Akwa Ibom State that “Mkparawa edi obio”, i.e. the strength of the community depends on the youths. These support the aggressive assertion employed by young people to stamp their own version of authority in community or national affairs. Incidentally, this aggressive attitude is often related to mild violence or even total violence which they regard as an assertion of the boldness of manhood.

3. POST-AMNESTY NIGER DELTA YOUTHS

It is reasonable to assume that without peace in the Niger Delta, every youth is a potential militant. Just as we have army reserves who are potential soldiers, this category of young people are apt to be “drafted” by frustration into one of the several expanding militant camps. At the moment we have the repentant militants who have surrendered their arms; the active militants who are still probably holding onto their arms; the dormant militants who are out of active militancy but are liable to erupt again if conditions are not favourable to them and; the new breed militants who are bound to be more sophisticated in technology and intelligence should the need arise for them to emerge. In as much as rehabilitation and reintegration of former militants, including support of the communities are desired as an immediate step, I am of the opinion that the whole gamut of Niger Delta youths should be placed within a comprehensive and sustainable empowerment programme with clear sub-regional bias, in proportion to the importance of the area that has shaped their lives.

Some pertinent questions:

To understand the relationship between youth and society and how to deal with the problem of exclusivity in the post-amnesty period, a set of ideas concerning labour, dependence and clientelism are important and should be explored:

- What are the perspectives of young people in the Niger Delta region concerning the relationship between “youth” and their ability to act within formal and informal structures of governance? In other words what do the youths want that can be supported by governance?
- What kind of processes and structures have been put in place by the state, business and civil society, to incorporate youth into formal and informal governance and with what effect?
- How are young people negotiating access to education, apprenticeship and commerce and government service?
- How do current forms of patronage investment shape the livelihoods of young people? And what historical changes can be perceived in terms of household debt and investment in children?
- Are young Niger Deltans unable to access patrimonial lines of redistribution? If so, are they turning to forms of horizontal solidarity for protection and profit instead? And in this context why are forms of peer networks and youth mobilization shaped by customary sociality, especially by the idioms and practices of initiatory societies?

These are the fundamental issues of youths that need to be addressed and given the correct perspective in the post-amnesty period. Traditionally parents take on responsibilities, even up to the age of marriage for their young ones, but this is becoming increasingly difficult due to harsh economic conditions. Many youths become independent of their parents at a very early age far below the statutory 18 years. Hence the young people have been exploited as

underpaid labour, some sold into slavery and abused sexually. These are the fallouts of dislocated family structures, poverty and ignorance.

Public financing, which involves government – free primary school, partially free secondary school and limited opportunities at tertiary schools are completely unacceptable in the post-amnesty Niger Delta. If the youths must be prepared for socio-economic relevance, education must be absolutely free. The problem here should be the quality of such free services that can have significant transformation impact on the youths.

If parents are allowed to take wholesale responsibilities in financing the development of their children to adulthood, there is the danger of unequal exposure and opportunities for the youth since parent's capabilities differ in wealth, resources, beliefs, value, attitudes and power etc. But if government takes wholesale responsibilities, there is the possibility of equal opportunities for the youths. But the several interplay of factors in government programmes and the apparently endemic insincerity and dishonesty in the system could create lopsidedness in government intervention programmes.

When young people finance themselves, there are a number of dangers:

- Psychologically the youth matures to see the society as failing and will not see the need to conform to whatever standard such a society sets;
- Educationally most youths will have difficulties finishing their schools, with consequent high number of drop-outs in the society. Such youth have limited job opportunities and most of them take to menial jobs.

The overall implication is that the failing youths will be readily available as thugs in the hands of some politicians and trouble makers. Without massive investment in human capital development particularly in terms of absolutely free education and acquisition of relevant and specialized skills, the young Niger Deltans are stuck. Patronage relations that traditionally financed their transition to adulthood have collapsed to the extent that growing up is frustrated by an inability to complete education, to find work or to marry. These frustrations give rise to a militant imperative for redness, to a tendency to cooption by political brokers, and as a result to violence. This should never be allowed to happen.

RESTORING CONFIDENCE IN THE YOUTHS

The problems of the Niger Delta are known. No time should be wasted further in analyzing the region's problems before addressing them. The repentant militants have identified lack of roads, good schools and hospitals, environmental degradation and youth unemployment as the biggest problems of the Niger Delta. For this reason the youths took to the creeks, determined to ensure that the Niger Delta people live a decent live. For this same reason the militants became heroes. I believe that it is time for positions to change. This time, beyond the amnesty, the government should deliberately seek to become the hero of the Niger Delta youths through determined efforts at the following:

- i) **Good governance:** Government's sincerity to the youths should be reflected in good governance values and ethics. When trust is built between young people and the government, massive support for government programmes and projects is achieved. Rather than vandalize projects and pipelines to make a living or in revenge, the youths will protect them. When governments are indicted for poor accountability and its executives engage in money laundering it creates room for conflicts and violence

among youths who feel betrayed. All cases of abuse of public office should be exposed, punished and the loot returned to public treasury.

) **Job creation:** Government needs to chase militancy with jobs through deliberate massive investment in industrialization. This is not negotiable. It is only reasonable that by the long run the Niger Delta be flooded with petrochemicals and related manufacturing concerns which will provide stable and well-paying jobs for the youths of the area. My vision of the Niger Delta is that in a decade from now youths in their thousands will be streaming in and out of factories, with good living wages in their pockets. When the amnesty plan offered a stipend of N65, 000 per month to repentant militants, it clearly set the minimum wage in the Niger Delta region. In the near future no young person should earn less and this is possible in the petroleum and related industry.

Much has been said but little achieved in the area of skill acquisition. I am of the opinion that accelerated skill acquisition e.g. tailoring, welding, hair dressing, ICT etc will only partially solve the youth unemployment problem. The per capita for this category of skills appear to be sufficient without turning out further hundreds whose interests may not be in the skills but in the stipend paid during training. I once investigate 22 young people that underwent various skill acquisition programmes; only 4 were actively or partially engaged in varying skills they acquired, reasons being that earnings were too low. Several males preferred to hang up their equipments and become okada riders. What is desired, essentially, are high-tech skills that are relevant for modern industrial technology and commercial set-ups and this may not be acquired through road-side or mass apprenticeship. What is needed is a

deliberate training in relevant skills as detected by developmental needs, and a determined injection of investment in agriculture, manufacturing and industrial sector. The fallouts of these investments will generate the required skills supported by high earnings.

- iii) **Sub-regional well-being:** To enhance the general well-being of the Niger Delta and increase opportunities for community investment, small scale enterprises and self employment of which youths have great potential, there should be accelerated development of local network of roads waterways and greater investment in communication methods. These will also serve as early warning system of impending violence even in the remote parts of the delta.
- iv) **Youth programmes and popular participation:** These should be encouraged to ensure that all youths have a voice and equal chances of success in life. Popular participation will make the youths move willing to bear hardships and tolerate mistakes since they are part of the decision planning and implementation of the plan that affects them.
- v) **Training and consultation services:** The dynamic nature of youth demands that qualified persons and organizations provide regular training and consultation services in income generating activities and conflict resolution methods among others. These should be based in the academic, business, religious, non-governmental or philanthropic setting. Such training should include developing various types of skills in leadership, negotiation, active listening and mediation, strategic planning, small-scale business management and conducting constructive

struggles. To prevent a relapse to pre-amnesty era, the consultation should include such training that helps in developing conflict-management systems.

- vi) **Problem solving workshops.** As new socio-economic issues emerge, they are proposed to utilize a workshop structure in getting across to the youths. An academically based convener could bring together select members or leadership of youth groups and facilitates discussions about the emerging issue and its relevance to the youths. The workshop should last a few days until all discussions are exhausted and clarified. It may be necessary to feed-back into the system ideas generated at the workshops.
- vii) **Dialogue groups:** These are unofficial, regular meetings between well-connected persons (preferably officials of the youth ministry) and influential youths, aimed at providing channels of communication and discussion of possible solutions to contentious youth issues. Members of the dialogue groups are essentially unofficial but their actions are done consciously and are known to the leaders and the others in the groups to which they belong.
- viii) **Multilateral conferences:** In order to consolidate the gains of the amnesty (brought about by resource use that involves numerous aggrieved parties), a variety of conference formats should be used to bring many of the stakeholders, including youths together. Under no circumstance should any group or community be excluded from this conference type. There is always the possibility that delegations in multilateral conferences may coalesce into camps with similar

interests so that fragmentation of interest between youths and adults is finally removed.

CONCLUSION

I will conclude my presentation by quoting the President directly: "Amnesty is not an end to itself". It is aimed to "ensure that each and every one of them (the repentant militants and the entire Niger Delta youths) has a career and livelihood that he will be proud of himself and his family, proud of his country and proud that he is a Nigerian".

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