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COLLAPSING LIVELIHOODS AND CRISIS OF MASCULINITY IN RURAL NIGERIA: THE NIGER DELTA EXPERIENCE SINCE 1960

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Abstract

For more than three decades the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria has become the focus of threat and a theatre of struggle between some youths who constitute themselves into militias and the federal government over their economic dislocation, disarticulation, physical destruction and degradation of their land and water which serve as the areas of their life supporting activities. Indeed, over 95 percent of the inhabitants live on farming and fishing. Since the beginning of oil exploitation in the late 1950s to now their lives have not been the same. Oil exploitation has destabilized their livelihood because of oil pollution both on land and water and incessant gas flaring. This paper therefore examines the linkage effect of oil exploitation and the disability experienced by young men whose future have been overturned, reduced to a state of squalor, means of their enablement as men punctuated; experiences they never had before the advent of oil exploration and exploitation.

Introduction

Masculinity has become an issue for discussion both within and without the Niger Delta Area of Nigeria because of its worrisome status. The quality of an individual, be it social, political or economic, to a large extent determine the productivity and its contributions to the development and growth of the society. The positive contributions made by people lend credence to sustainable development.

However, this is not the case with the majority of young men in Nigeria and indeed the Niger Delta. A sizeable number of people, numbering over twelve million, are found in the Niger Delta and majorities are men (2003 census). In fact to say it all, the bane of the Nigerian society today and by connection the people of the Niger Delta is that a majority of its members are living in squalor and destitution. The negligible percentages are living in affluence. It is so, simply because the economic machineries of government are propelled by "political vultures" aimed at pillaging the economy for their selfish ends. On the other hand the resources of the nation are not evenly distributed hence the economic orbit becomes over heated and only the strong ones can pull the "economic rod" from the orbit. Indeed, it should be known that the "economic rod" anchors on access to good education, better health care system, good and adequate portable water, adequate supply of energy, good road network, markets, food security and improved recreational facilities. Only an affluent few enjoy these facilities while the majority are excluded thus suffering in pains and stress.

Politically, Niger Delta is made up of Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Cross River, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo, Imo, and Abia States; more than seventy percent of the populations live in the rural areas made up of creeks, swamps and muddy environment. Hence, they constitute themselves into subsistence farming, fishing and lumbering, while some others managed to engage in one form of trade or another and yet others engage in such activities such as carving, among others. They have been in this condition for many years until the discovery of oil in the late 1950s (Ibaba, 2005; Akpan, 2007).

Reasons for the collapsing livelihoods and crisis in the Niger Delta

Traditionally, men are the foundation of every home, the 'rock of Gibraltar' and the corner stone on which the family economy, growth and development are anchored. The people of the Niger Delta, prior to the discovery of oil, lived on land and water. Or to put differently, their means of livelihood evolved and sustained on

agriculture, fishing and lumbering. There was enough food for themselves and they exchanged their surplus with their neighbours. In other words, there was food security (Ndarake, 2004). The people were self-employed since they engaged themselves in subsistence agriculture, fishing, lumbering and other trades. It should be noted that men were the leaders in the farming, fishing and lumbering for the economy to propel itself. They were able to use the proceeds from their farms and rivers to sustain themselves and sent their children to school or to learn a trade. With the discovery and exploitation of crude oil in the late 1950s, and now, the new economy totally dislocated the traditional means of livelihood of the people. The process of the dislocation of the traditional means of livelihood was through frequent oil spills and gas flaring by oil companies into farmlands, rivers and streams. Thus, farmland, rivers, streams no longer support agriculture, fishing is no longer lucrative, as most fish caught usually smell of oil and are unfit for human consumption (Ndarake, *ibid*; Osagie, 2007). In areas where people depended on stream for their drinking water and other domestic uses, such water become unfit because it usually smell kerosene or petrol. It becomes difficult to comprehend why such a condition should befall them. In this connection, the once self-employed people are now unemployed; their means of sustenance jeopardized. The children cannot attend school and life becomes miserable. The worst aspect is that the local people are part of the 'new economy' but are not integrated into the main stream of the oil economy. The issue is that the people have benefited a little from the changes or modernization of the environment through oil money. Though they have enjoyed some levels of modernity, they do not have control over the management of the oil sector of the economy in its proper perspective.

Now, between 1956 when oil was first drilled at Oloibiri in the present Bayelsa state and 2004, the oil spill into rivers, land stood at 1591 cases (Akpan, 2006). The number of times oil is being spilled into water and on land is an indication of its devastation, or the quantum done to the livelihood of the people. The continuous oil spillage and its attendant problems have placed the people in abject poverty and unemployment.

Unemployment and collapsing livelihoods in the Niger Delta

Unemployment remains one of the challenging issues in the development agenda of all countries world over. Unemployment is capable of impacting negatively on any society. The fall-out of large scale unemployment in the society may lead to rise in crime, social frustration and the attendant alienation as well as loss of personal confidence of those affected. Indeed, there is linkage effect on employment and development. Development here does not only mean the building of infrastructural facilities but also human development. Human development is the cardinal means for development as every development whether social, physical, economic revolves around human beings. In this connection the sustainability of individuals within the Niger Delta was based on farming, fishing and lumbering. But since these areas have been dislocated, a vacuum is created, leading to the collapse of livelihood of these young, old and talented members. It should be remembered that these men are not part of the new system – but of the oil economy. These young men are unemployed; they are not well compensated for exploiting the God given resources of their land. They do not even have people at the top management in those companies doing business in their environment. The revenue accruing from the exploited resources, a very negligible percentage is used in the development of the Niger Delta. That explains the hostile tendencies and militant posture of these frustrated people within the Niger Delta area (Akpan, 2005).

It is understandable that the federal government is putting some programmes on ground to carry these people along but this is not enough to cushion the effect of disarticulation from their traditional means of livelihood. The federal government food programme ranges from Integrated Rural Development of 1965, the Operation Feed the Nation Programme of Obasanjo, the Green Revolution of Shehu Shagari and Back to Land of the Buhari Administration (Emmanuel, Y. and Iyaji, A. 2006). These measures do not satisfy the people. There is no government in this country since independence that really consider as a matter of priority to

develop the Niger Delta. All that we see is a face-saving venture. Secondly, the little fund put in for the development usually disappear because of corruption by the same leaders who advocate development.

According to Okorie (2000), unemployment means wasted workforce and loss of potential production of goods and services. Unemployment does not only lead to wastage of talent of the unemployed alone but also hinders the individuals from making its contribution to national development.

Poverty

Poverty literally means a condition in which people live in a state of want, having very little to eat, inability to send ones children to school, living in shanty environment, not being able to have access to medical facilities, in other words living in a state of squalor (Akpan, 2007). A majority of Nigerian and indeed the Niger Delta wallow in abject poverty, feeding on less than "one dollar per day" (Adeyemi, 2001). In other words, there is no food security. Such a condition cannot lead to the building of the quality of life expected for development.

Indeed, unemployment and poverty are working against the development of the people and have aided the collapsing of livelihoods and the crisis in the Niger Delta. When people cannot feed and cloth themselves it becomes impossible to send their children to school. So children born into these families are into a vicious circle of perpetual need. Hence, the beginning of oil exploitation to a large extent was the gradual beginning of the collapsing livelihoods of these people mainly those in the riverine communities. The effect of one need leads to another.

Suggestions for Improved livelihood of Niger Deltans for sustainable Governance and economy

For the people of this region to feel a sense of belonging in the Nigerian project, there should be free and compulsory education to first degree level; free medical treatment for all, true poverty

alleviation through provision of working capital for fishermen, farmers and craftsmen. There should be development of infrastructures such as good road network, uninterrupted electricity or energy supply, provision of water, hospitals and health centres, provision of basic housing units in all the local government areas. Labour intensive industries that has bearing with the oil economy be established, this will assist mob up excess unemployed young men and women. This, if done, may help reduce to the barest minimum the culture of friction, violence and militancy. For corrupt leaders, they should be tried in the law courts and be made to go in for their sins.

Conclusion

The paper has discussed the reasons for the collapsing livelihoods and crisis of masculinity in rural Nigeria with particular reference to the Niger Delta. Having destroyed their land through pollution, government should integrate them through establishment of oil related industries that are labour intensive to mob up the excess unemployment people. It should also open good roads, build good schools, build and equip medical centres for them; provide electricity or energy facilities. This it is hoped would bring back the quality of life expected of men needed to contribute to Nigerian development.

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