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Conflicts in Nigeria's Niger Delta: Issues on Response and Management

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ABSTRACT - The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has one of the largest mangrove forests in Africa. It is naturally endowed with abundant natural resources. There is a high reserve of mineral and agricultural riches. The Niger Delta States produce about 75% of Nigeria's petroleum representing about 50% of the Federal government revenue (CBN, 1981). However, in spite of this vast oil reserve, the region remains poor. Thus, the region has witnessed generational conflicts and escalating youth violence in recent years perpetuated by youths and youth vigilante groups. Though the Nigerian governments especially at the Federal level have adopted some methods to manage the conflicts, the impacts of such strategies are difficult to evaluate. Thus, there is a need for an alternative approach. This approach which is a product of several interactive sessions organized for stakeholders in the Niger Delta region recommends a participatory community strategy that aims to foster growth through effective consultations at the grassroots.

KEYWORDS: Conflicts, response, management, Niger Delta

INTRODUCTION

As described by Alamika (2000), conflict is a product of antagonistic interest between two or more opposing forces or groups within the society. It may manifest itself on a continuum range from early warning signals to violent crises or wars. This implies that conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction. It is a universal phenomenon that occurs amongst countries, states, groups and even individuals. Conflict is therefore not limited

to the Niger Delta region. There are rumours of wars all over the world especially in Africa.

Nigeria in recent past has witnessed increasing cases of conflict both at the international and domestic level. At the international level, the most recent conflict was between Nigeria and Comeroon over Bakassi which is ceded to Cameroon by the International Court of Justice. At the national level, conflicts have gotten to a pervasive height.

For instance, the Ife-Modakeke conflicts of Oyo/Osun states (1999), Hausa/Fulani and Kataf of Zangon Kataf in Kaduna State (1999), Hausa/Fulani, and Yoruba ethnic conflicts in Oyo and Lagos States (1999/2000), Jukun/Chamba and Kuteb, Jukun and TIV in Taraba state (1999), Igbakwu-Omor, Aguleri and Umuleri conflicts of Anambra state (1999), and the most recent conflict in Plateau (2004) and conflict in Benue (2004). The root causes of these conflicts differ from ethnic, religious, political as well as the feelings of deprivation and environmental degradation.

At the domestic level, cases of conflict and violent against children and women are widespread. The problem at hand and the question posed by this, is why Nigeria has not demonstrated sufficient efforts and ability to manage ethnic conflicts. Majority of these conflicts have political, economic and religious connotations.

In the Niger Delta, there has also been escalating conflicts caused by perceived exploitation, environmental degradation caused by the multinational oil companies. Social and economic changes in Nigeria over the past two decades incidental to petroleum oil exploration and exploitation, as well as the physical and environmental problems, have had an impact on the lives of our youths in the Niger Delta region. There is an alarming youth unemployment, poverty and the exclusion of all sections of youth and youth groups from their wealth which others are enjoying. This has sparked off youth violence, and restiveness. The effect of this has been the increasing or escalating conflicts experienced in the region. This paper therefore examines the incidence of conflicts in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. To achieve this, we shall:

- (i) Examine the background of conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria
- (ii) Assess the causes of conflict in the region
- (iii) Examine government response to conflict and the strategies adopted so far
- (iv) Suggest solutions to conflict management in the area.

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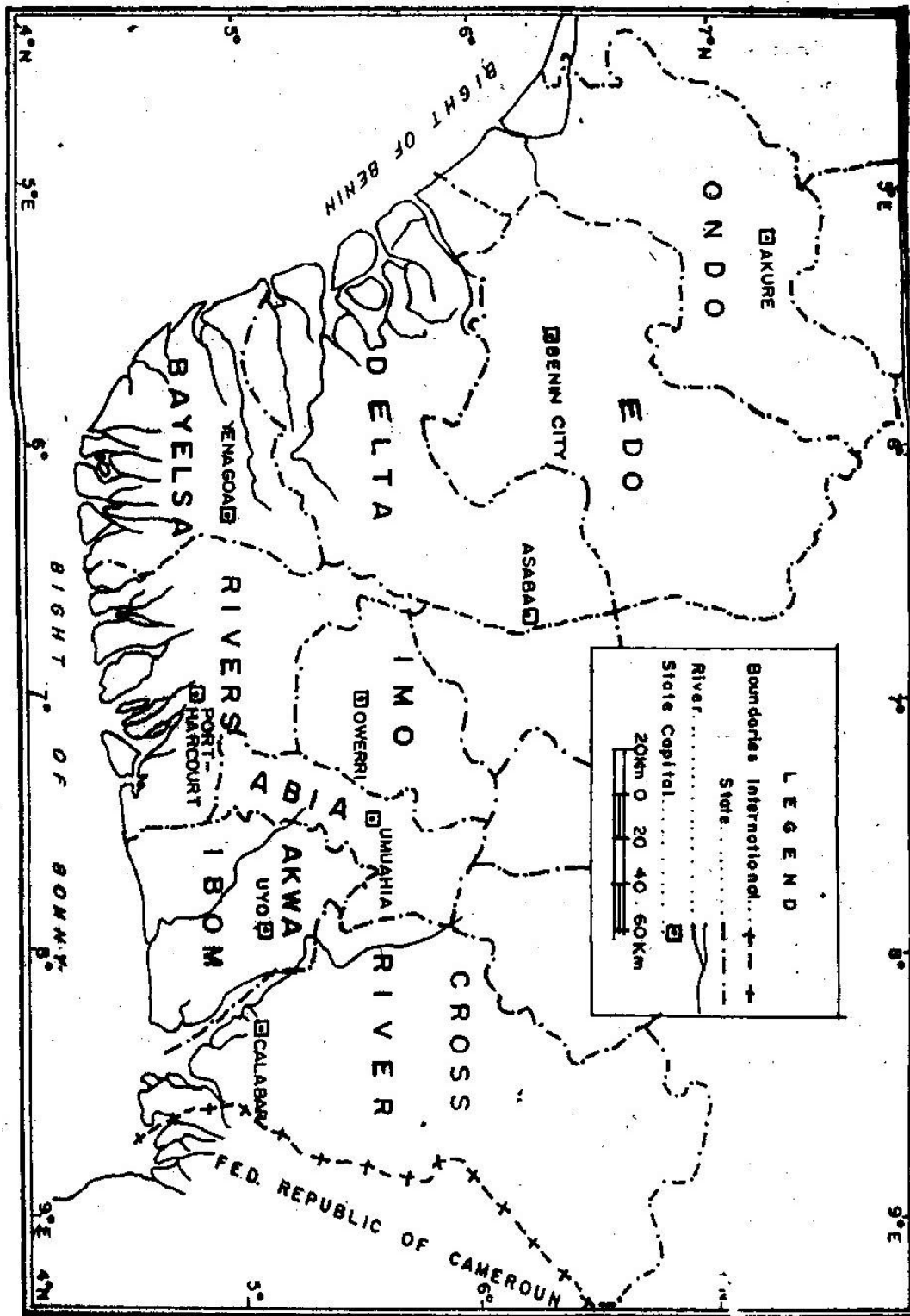


Fig. 1: The Niger Delta Region, Nigeria
 (Source: Ministry of Lands & Housing, Cartography Directorate AKS)

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

Conflict like many other concepts in the social science is subject to **many definitions**. There is no one universally accepted definition. Social **conflicts have some consequences** in social relationship. These consequences **may be positive or constructive**; it may be negative or destructive. Conflict **as stated by Zartman (1991)** is “an inevitable aspect of human interaction, an **unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions.**”

Stephen Stedman (1991) also describe conflict as the effects of the interaction of individuals who have partly incompatible ends, in which the **ability of one actor to gain his ends depends on the choices or decisions taken by another actor**. To him, conflict may result into violence though violence is not an aspect of conflict. In the Niger Delta conflict can be viewed as a product of antagonistic interest between two or more opposing forces or groups within the society (Alamika, 1991). Thus, conflict can be categorized based on its origin, issues is grievances at stake as well as the domain of expression (Alamika, 2000).

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

This involves efforts or strategies aimed at resolving an already existing conflict. It is the process of handling conflict, to avoid conflict escalation. There is a serious need for proper handling of conflict since it is counter productive in any organization or amongst any group. This method becomes necessary only when conflict cannot be prevented. In the light of this, conflict management is not the elimination of conflicts but the ability to regulate conflicts to render it positive and constructive.

In the Niger Delta, conflicts have been handled so far in the most precarious ways. The government in most cases have been adopting the “Fire-Brigade Approach” of managing conflict. This has not produced the desired result as it creates more problems to the conflict parties at the end. For proper management of conflict, the problem solving approach should be adopted. Here the parties involved should be brought together to dialogue. They should listen to each other with the intent of understanding the underlying elements in conflict.

YOUTHS

Youths generally are people within the age bracket of 16-30 years old. This group are prone to extreme behaviour (Etuk, 2003). But in the Niger Delta it connotes not only age but economic empowerment or disempowerments and may include political disenfranchisement and social exclusion (Ukpong, 2003). Shaw and Tschiwula (2002) have identified three

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groups of youths: Youth in conflict with the law; **youth offenders** and **youth at risk**.

Youth in conflict with the law include those youths who have problems and are reported to the justice system but are not persecuted: **like in those** arrested by the police and those charged with offences and **found guilty**. **Youth offenders** are those subjected to the criminal justice system. **Youth at risk**, are those whose behaviour and circumstances puts them at **risk of offending** in the future.

THE STUDY AREA

The Niger Delta region is one of the largest wetlands in Africa. It is occupied by minorities of Southern Nigeria which currently comprises of nine states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Rivers, Abia, Imo and Ondo States. The Niger Delta people are the largest group amongst the ethnic minorities spread over the South-South geographical zone of the nation. It has a population of over seven million people distributed in over one thousand, six hundred (1600) communities.

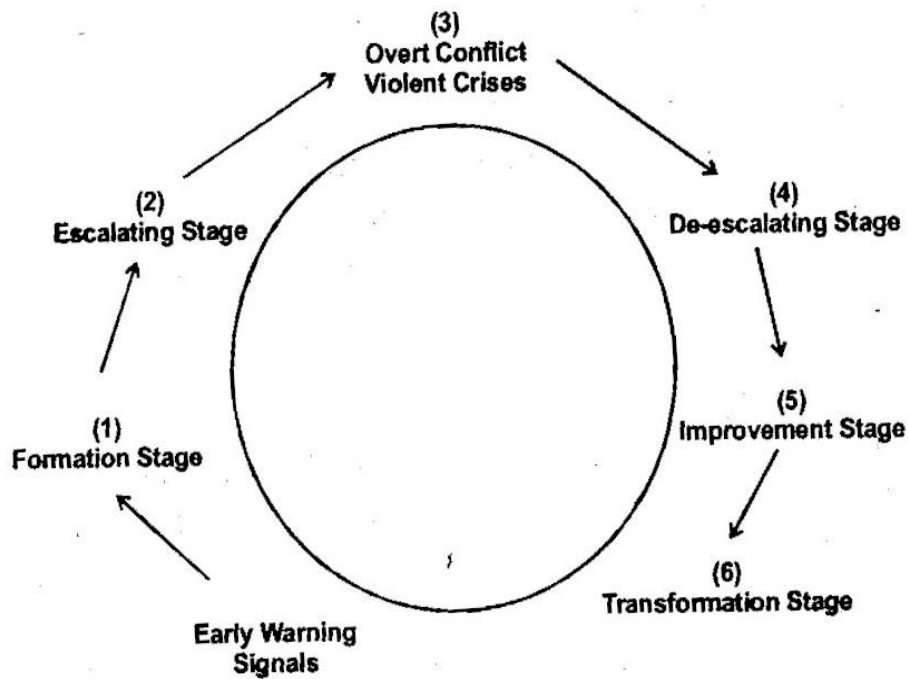
The region has some unique characteristics, which tend to make development very difficult. As one of the largest wetlands in the Africa, it covers an area of 70,000 square kilometres and is known for its sandy coastal rigged barriers, brackish or saline mangroves, fresh water, permanent and seasonal swamp forest as well as low land rain forest. The whole area is traversed and criss-crossed by a large numbers of rivers, rivulets, streams, canal and creeks. The coastal line is buffered throughout the year by the tides of the Atlantic ocean while the mainland is subject to regimes of flood by the River Nile. By this, the Niger Delta region is one of the largest deltas in the world. Most of the inhabitants of the area are farmers and fishermen.

The Niger Delta is the centre of oil and gas production activities in Nigeria. Thus, it constitutes the hob of revenue generation for the country, accounting for more than 80 percent of government revenue (CBN, 1981). The major oil companies operating in the region include: SHELL, Chevron, ExxonMobil, AGIP, ELF, Texaco, etc. Given Nigeria's position as one of the leading oil producing countries in the world, events in the Niger Delta have had strong impact on the global economy.

STAGES OF CONFLICT

This refers to the level in which conflict can attain. It is pertinent that conflict does not just escalate. It follows some stages. It is always good to manage conflict at the early stages.

Stage 1: There emerges a problem and the communities start complaining.



Early warning signals have started to set in things hitherto taken for granted now become serious issues.

- Stage 2:** At this stage, the effects of nocturnal meetings have started to manifest. People begin to take sides and communication distorted becomes distorted. At this stage conflicting issues should be properly dialogued.
- Stage 3:** This is the stage of overt conflict of violent crisis. Services are disrupted and properties lost.
- Stage 4:** Here conflict gradually cease.
- Stage 5:** Here efforts are being made towards attaining peace.
- Stage 6:** All conflicting issues and problems are solved and reconciliation made.

STUDY PROCEDURE

This work is the product of several interactive/stakeholders workshops organized in the Niger Delta region between 2002 and 2005, under the theme. Governance, Environment and Development in the Niger Delta. The interactive stakeholder workshops which took place at the University of Uyo constitutes part of the activities of a six-year collaborative, interdisciplinary linkage programme between the University of Uyo (Nigeria) and Lancaster University (U.K).

The fora concentrated on exchange of ideas through paper presented by resource persons and academics and included policy statements from the oil companies, position papers from State Governments, Niger Delta Development

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Commission (NDDC), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), organized groups, community and youth leaders. The outcome of the interactive seminars has supplied materials for this paper.

It was noted that up till now, no workable remedy or solution has been proffered as regards conflict management and resolution in the area. Apart from the first workshop held in January 27, 2003, this work also received backing from youth seminars sponsored by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC).

BACKGROUND OF CONFLICT IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION

Scholars of political history have linked the problems of the Niger Delta region to the Nigerian system. According to them, the Federal constitution of Nigeria which established three regions suffers some flaws which has adversely affected the minority groups up till date. As Onduku (2001) observed "The Federal constitution suffers two fundamental and destabilizing flaws":

- (a) That the division of the country into the unequal regions with the population of the Northern region alone exceeding that of the two regions put together.
- (b) The political domination of the Northern, Western and Eastern regions, being the majority ethnic nationalities and the attendant marginalization of the minority ethnic groups sowed a seed of conflict amongst the minority groups. The Niger Delta people form the largest group amongst the ethnic minorities spread over the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria.

The Niger Delta region predates Nigeria's emergence as a British colony by at least a decade. By the mid 1890s, Britain's Niger Delta protectorate and the Niger Delta coast were already well established, even before the formation of Southern Nigeria in 1900 by the British. In the decades before world war II, many Niger Delta communities had their local leaders who distinguished themselves in the service of their people while serving the British. However, the Authur Richard's Reforms of 1946 brought regional representation in the British colonial arrangements. As observed by Onduku, the peoples experiences with the treacherous British policies produced agitations and characteristic leaders who represented them in the 1940s.

Agitations were widespread. For instance the agitation by the Ijaw Rivers people's league led to the creation by the British of the Rivers Province in 1947. It was during this period that the Niger Delta congress was founded by Harold Dappa Biriye to fight for equality for the disadvantaged people of the Niger Delta. It was later chosen to represent the Niger Delta people in

the London conference of minorities. The agitations at that time led to the establishment of Sir Henry Willink's commission which was to recommend the best strategies for the development of the region. When the commission turned in its report in 1958, it described the Niger Delta as "a poor, backward and neglected region."

In 1960, the injustices against the Niger Delta people prompted Isaac Adaka Boro, the master campaigner of resource control to champion a revolt against the Federal government which he called the "oppressors of the people of the Niger Delta." The aim was to effect the proper management of resources in the Niger Delta so that "man can be man". It is on record that on 23rd February, 1966, Boro with one hundred and fifty-nine (159) youths from the Niger Delta sailed to Tontoubau (a sacred forest) in Kaiama town located in the present Bayelsa state and launched a guerrilla war against the then Federal military government. Earlier in January, 1966, Boro had proclaimed the Niger Delta peoples Republic with himself as the Head of State. He engaged and defeated the Nigeria Police Force in a bloody battle but was later defeated by the Nigerian Army on the twelve day. The rebellion has today become known in political history as the "twelve-day revolution."

Since then, youths, children, women and elders in the Niger Delta region have continued to protest. The Niger Delta region have seen no peace as conflict is notice now and then. For instance, there has been repeated cases of conflict among the Ogoni's, Odi's, Ijaws, Warris, Ekets and several people in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN THE NIGER DELTA

The Niger Delta region has a record of escalating conflict perpetuated by the youths or youth vigilante groups. These groups bear different names: Ijaw Rivers People League, the Niger Delta Congress, the Niger Delta Youth Movement (NDYM), Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Ijaw National Congress (INC), Youth councils, Ogoni Youth Movement (OYM), Afi 'Wad Ekid, etc. These groups perceived that the Niger Delta people are marginalized, balkanized and their environment are despoliated by the activities of the oil multinationals who discover oil since the late 1950s. That despite being the richest geopolitical region in terms of natural resource endowment, the regions potential for sustainable development however remains unfulfilled, and is now increasingly threatened by environmental devastation and worsening economic conditions. That the mangrove forest of Nigeria is also threatened and above all that their fresh water swamp forests which most people depend on for survival is also facing extinction.

Apart from the ecological devastation is the political marginalisation

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and the total denial of the peoples rights especially their land rights. That despite of the enormous wealth accruing from their land, the people continue to live in abject poverty and misery as they lack most of the essential facilities that makes life worth living. As summed up by the late minority rights crusader and environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, "the situation of the Ogoni people and indeed the entire Niger Deltan's is that of slavery and extinction."

Demands for equitable and privileged treatment by the oil producing minorities of the Niger Delta, as well as struggles by them for the redress of power imbalances has always been the major cause of the Niger Delta conflicts. The parties in the conflict involve the Federal Government and the oil multinationals. As expressed by Onduku, the grievances of the Niger Delta people have involved three closely interrelated issues:

- (a) That all laws relating to oil exploration and land ownership be abrogated.
- (b) The issue of nature resource control.
- (c) That the country should may appropriate institutional and financial arrangement to compensate the oil producing communities for the devastation they are passing through oil exploration.

It is on record that the Nigerian government have recently started to look at the issue raised above. But the sincerity of purpose and the level of treatment will determine the extent to which the problem of conflict is solved.

Another cause of conflict in the Niger Delta region is the insincerity of the parties involved in resolving conflicts as well as the goal-blocking attitude practiced by the government. The government continues to marginalize the people militarizing the area and suppressing personal opinions as well as intellectualism. Cases in points are the killings of Ken Saro-Wiwa, Claude Ake, Isaac Boro and other youth activities. The locals have now opted for hostage taking, hijacking and kidnapping of expatriate oil company workers, vandalization of oil installation etc. It appears that the goal blocking attitude of government have made the Niger Delta people more organized in their demands for the development of their areas. This has continued to be characteristic of Niger Delta thinking as illustrated by this excerpt from recent Newspapers.

NIGER DELTA TO GET RESISTANT MOVEMENT

A group of activists from the Niger Delta area has concluded plans to form a resistance movement to fight for the autonomy of the area and control its resources. Lagos lawyer and human right activities, Mr. Festus Keyamo said the movement would be known as Armless Revolutionary Council (ARC)

and would be made up of young men across the Niger Delta (The Punch Newspaper, December 23, 2003 pp.5).

RAGE OF THE YOUTHS

Angry youths close down Totalfina ELF flow station located at Ogbogu in Ogbo/Egbena/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State under the umbrella of Egi producing families/association on 17th march, 2003. According to the youths, "The Flow station will remain shut until the Government and the company comes to a round-table discussion with us (The News, 7th April, 2003 pp.26-27).

HEAVY DEATH TOLL IN DELTA ARMY: DAZED BY MILITIA FIREPOWER

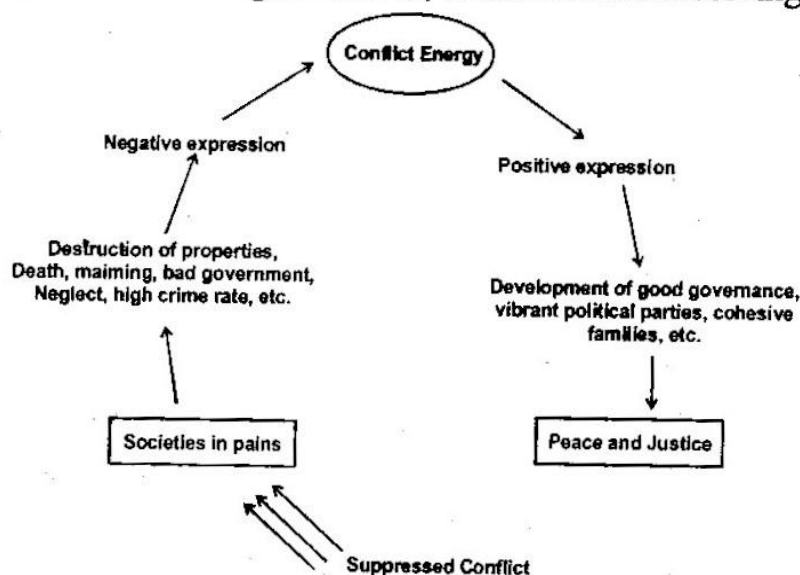
No fewer than 100 people die in the unsuing war in Nigeria's Niger Delta as soldiers face stiff resistance of youths wielding sophisticated weapons (The News, 7th April, 2003, Vol.20, No.14, pp.20).

On the whole, the continued neglect, exploitation, suppression and militarization in the Niger Delta have cause conflicts and have given rise to militant youths that resort to hostage taking, kidnapping destructed of oil installations and development projects.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO CONFLICTS/CONFLICTS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES ADOPTED SO FAR

In the Niger Delta, conflict have been managed in the most precarious way. The government have been adopting the "FIRE BRIGADE Approach" to manage conflict through suppression. In other words, Government response to the Niger Delta conflicts has always been to deploy armed mobile policemen and soldiers to suppress the people.

As shown in the diagram above, this method of resolving conflict has



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made the people internally colonized. Unfortunately, the approach served to worsen the situation. There is negative expression which leads to destructions of properties, death, maiming, etc. The approach often live the society in pains, thus escalating conflict rather than reducing. A case in point was the Ogoni uprising and the consequent execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other of Ogoni leaders 10th November, 1995 by the military government. It is also on record that the government deployed soldiers to invade Ijaw communities consequent upon the Kaiama Declaration and the Odi direct action of 1999 which left many people killed because of the demand for more equitable and privileged treatment by these oil producing communities in the Niger Delta region.

In Warri, soldiers deployed to maintain peace pitched tent with one of the warring faction and even provided ammunition to them to fight the other faction. There was newspapers reports of women who were openly raped by soldiers sent on peace mission. As usual the Nigerian soldiers issued statement refuting the allegation and claiming that the photographs were faked. In all the cases, poor management style have resulted in loss of lives and properties. This paper therefore posits that mismanagement of conflict and conflicting issues in the region has resulted in incessant/escalating conflict in the region.

IMPLICATIONS

Conflict in the Niger Delta has many implications not only for the people but the Nigerian society. In all cases, conflict in the region have led to widespread killing and maiming; destruction of property, displacement of people, suspension of economic activities and loss of livelihood. The Niger Delta problem is a threat to the nascent democracy and the stability of Nigeria as a country. The response of government has always been to deploy military forces to maintain peace. As reported by Human Right Watch (1997):

Repeated incidents in which people were brutalized for attempting to raise grievances with oil companies are rampant in the Niger Delta, in some cases security forces threatened, beat and failed members of community delegations even before they presented their cases. Such abuses occurred on or adjacent to company property, or in the immediate aftermath of meeting between company officials and individual claimants or community representatives.

In some cases, political and economic considerations have taken precedence over the welfare concerns of the citizens in the Niger Delta region. The youths have alleged that there is no definite effort by the government to ensure that the oil companies and their joint venture partners improve the

living conditions in the operating communities as they were required by law.

In the two interactive sessions, the youth express concern about their neglect from their own resource-endowed environment. They saw their conflict and violence as initiation process to be accepted and considered in decisions that concern their welfare. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) have recently started a skill acquisition and self-sufficiency programme (Punch Newspaper, 31st March, 2003, p.7) for the youths, but the youths denied hearing this since they could not afford to purchase newspapers.

SUMMARY AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

This paper has examined the causes of conflict in the Niger Delta region. The youths are citing injustices, marginalization, oppression, deprivation, insensitivity, insincerity, and lack of adequate attention as an explanation for their behaviour. The parties to their problems include the Federal Government of Nigeria and oil multinationals.

Often, the Federal government in an attempt to respond to the needs of the Niger Delta people embark on certain developmental projects. Most of these projects have failed even at the inception (Ukpong, 2003). The reasons are summaries below:

- (i) Such projects and approaches are not based on the felt needs of the people "rather they are just handed down to the people without due consultation with the communities."
- (ii) Implementation of such projects are always undertaken through government contractors or government machinery who inflate prices, underpay labour or discriminate in labour recruitment. This does not always favour the local communities.
- (iii) Lack of partnership among stakeholders has affected the delivery of development projects.

Based on the above and relying on the experiences of the youths, this paper recommends the following as solutions to conflicts in the Niger Delta:

- (i) The government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria should revisit all relevant laws, decrees and policies that tend to marginalize the Niger Delta region.
- (ii) The Federal government should carry out "Youth Impact Assessment." They should ensure that all practices and development and other policies employed by the oil multinationals and government be assessed with respect to their impact on the youths.
- (iii) Government should encourage planned intervention projects which are true reflection of the need and desires of the oil producing

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communities. Here the communities should determine what they want through a participatory continuity approach which synthesizes the minds of the majority of the people (Ukpong, 2003). This approach involves the consultation of all segments of the community: youths, women, elders, opinion leaders, etc. Youths inclusion in the decision making process can be achieved through the appointment of youth representatives at the levels of decision making and decision implementation.

- (iv) **Enlarged and result-oriented capacity building:** The NDDC should go beyond the short term capacity building to a long term training of youths which will help in the future development of the area and will produce project supervisors in Niger Delta region. Youth empowerment should be given priority.

CONCLUSION

Conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria revolves around bad governance, insincerity as well as lack of good corporate community relationships (Akpan and Akpabio, 2003). To reduce conflict involves building the capacity and strengthening the capacities of youths through economic empowerment and inclusion in decision making and decision implementation. In planning and implementing projects, the participatory approach have been recommended. This approach will minimize if not prevent conflict in the region.

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