



**Democracy, Youth Restiveness and National Sustainability:  
The Niger Delta Experience**

**Dominic Akpan, PhD**

Department of History/International Studies, University of Uyo

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**Abstract**

*It is an acknowledged fact that democracy is the form of government every nation yearns to adopt since it allows for dignity and the autonomy of man, which are enshrined in freedom, liberty and equality. Democracy allows the will of the people and indeed the majority to prevail. If a leader feels very strongly that he cannot agree with the majority then he must take exit. When man is free he can then choose what he feels good for him and act rationally for his well-being. Democracy succeeds if the people understand their role, resources are equitably distributed, enhance the standard of living of individuals; but when the people's rights and privileges are punctuated by misrule creating room for some to live in object poverty, squalor and unemployed, registration of anger would result in incessant violence – translated to mean restiveness. National sustainability is all about improving the well-being. The implication is that both moral and practical imperatives for making sustainable livelihood security the focus for action in the context of sustainable development.*

**Introduction**

Toward the last quarter of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the business of governance the world over had changed phase because of people's yearning for dignity and rights of man, which are enshrined in freedom, liberty and equality. The business of government centred around various forms of government such as monarchy, aristocracy, fascism, democracy, etc. But democracy is becoming a popular form in many countries of the world because of its appeal and values for the upliftment of the people and society. It is the most acceptable form in which world governments recognise and prepares to do business with. Countries of the world that do not adopt democracy for governance are seen as pariah or out-group among comity of nations. Nigeria has been adapting democracy but often punctuated with dictatorships. However, since 1999 to date, we have been grappling with democracy and to cue behind other nations especially the Western Democracies. Nigerians and indeed Niger Delta people are interested in knowing and being part of how their resources are used to develop the people now and in the future.

Democracy as originated by the Greeks, put it as the government of the people by the people and for the people (Alapiki, 2004; Appadorai 1975). It is also seen as a responsive government (Osagie, 2007) Sustainable development here means people's interaction with the social, political, economic environment without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Alhassan, 2002). It is all about improving the well-being of people of today and the generations of tomorrow (Anijah-obi, 2001). Development can therefore be said to be a reduction in poverty, inequality and unemployment without a loss of self-reliance. It is in this regard that government policies are geared toward creation of sustainable economic and social environment for the establishment and operation of skills to make life more comfortable and meaningful for her citizenry (Adeyemi, 2002). Sustainable development embraces economic development, some political development, environmental development, intellectual

development-all are interwoven in providing the balance for main overall existence (Akpan, 2006).

### **Some essential features of democracy**

Some of the most important features of democracy include the right to life, freedom of movement and association, freedom of speech and religion, freedom from arbitrary arrest, and the freedom of man. It sums up to mean fundamental human rights. It also deals with the presence of majority rule. That is the government itself is supposed to have been instituted by the will of the majority. We can also mention the independence of the judiciary, periodic election and universal adult suffrage (Alapiki, 2004) when one is free, all others seem to have their roots.

Economy of the Niger Delta before the discovery of oil: The people prior to the discovery of oil lived on land and water. Put differently, their means of livelihood centred and sustained on agriculture, fishing and lumbering. There was enough food for themselves and export to the nearby communities. 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. They were able to use the proceeds from their farms and rivers to sustain themselves physically and send their children to school or to learn 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 farmlands, rivers and streams no-longer support agriculture, fishing was no longer lucrative. Apart from killing the aquatic lives fish caught usually smell oil and unfit for consumptions (Ndarake, (2004); Osagie, 2007) in areas where people depended on stream for their drinking water and other domestic use, it becomes difficult to comprehend why such a condition should befall them. In this connection, the self-employed people are now unemployed, their means of sustenance jeopardised. The children cannot attend school and life becomes miserable. They have no source of drinking water, they live in a state of squalor. The worst aspect is that the local people are part of the 'new economy'. The oil activities are controlled by the government of the federation and her cronies without the peoples participation. 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 (Akpan, 2006). The continuous oil spillage and its attendant problems have placed the people in abject poverty, and unemployment.

### **The vexed issue and the militant posture**

The challenge of the Niger Delta terrain is difficult and has its peculiarities. And it would appear that the people forecast what and how they would be treated after independence and they decided to agitate for a state, evident in Sir Willink Commission Report of 1958. The report of the Commission to Her Majesty's office in London was to enquire into the fears of minorities and the means of allying them (Ibaba, 2005).

Indeed, the vexed issue lies in the fact that the land had been damaged and the people can no longer farm on it. The people are not part of oil exploitation. The people can see the glamorous things around them such as electricity, pipe-borne water, super-highways, high rise buildings, but they do not benefit. One can imagine the expectation from the people. What else than anger?

The issue is that the federal government and the oil producing companies have made specific development efforts to the Niger Delta. Indeed, the Federal Government has done this through the establishment of Agencies and extra ministerial departments, the oil companies have embarked on community development/assistance. However, such agencies established by the Federal Government include the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB); the Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC); Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). These Commissions, it is contended are waste pipes or put it differently conduits for corruption

by the group that set them up. This is concluded since no impact have been felt by the common people of the Niger Delta.

### **Youths Restiveness**

Apart from Middle East, the horn of Africa-area bordering and including Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, another region that captivates world attention in relation to global peace is the Niger Delta caused by youths restiveness. The area knows no peace. Thousands of people are dying everyday either through hunger, disease related problems, militant activities, etc. The region housed about 12 million people by 2006 Nigerian census. More than 6 million of these numbers are youths of productive and majority are unemployed. These are the angry group. It is because of cheating, oppression and outright neglect, keeping them away from their resources, that the people mainly the Ijaws agitate for self-determination, and or resource control or restructuring of the federation.

It is also from this pool of unemployed that constitute themselves into "Area Boys" and "Italo Connection". A year ago, the idea of Area Boys was foreign to this country. Today it is a currency, a means and a strategy for layabouts, unemployed youths to survive. Equally, the idea of "examination mercenaries" was unheard of. Armed mercenaries at examination centres have now been entrenched in our culture. On the same corollary, if students were in any cult, it was with fine, noble ideas to liberate the mind, relieve the oppressed, ensure equity and not as a group bound to violence, anarchy and to steal. Now it is a reverse, "the infamous Italo connection" that has brought the Nigerian female folk into serious disrepute in terms of international prostitution, was rare. Cultism and female prostitution are more rampant in the Niger Delta States than other parts of the country. It is estimated that over 30,000 Nigerians are in Italy and other Western Countries. This number largely involved female children between 14 and 18years. (Guardian, Monday, May 29, 2000; Akpan, 2005). In this connection, the Edo State House of Assembly in the year 2000, passed a bill that provided stiffer penalties for anyone caught in illicit trade of prostitution ... at home or abroad (punch, Tuesday, August 29, 2000). Manifestation of anger and security problems in the Niger Delta over the years and indeed now the region is very strategic not only because of being the "house" of crude oil but a home to fish, high forest, wetland, ports, its openness to Western and Eastern countries covets. It has the potentials of attracting foreign investments, however, this is not to be.

Hostage taking and requests for ransom by these hungry militant youths are recurring. Though hostage taking is not a new phenomenon in international relations, it is a way of attracting foreign interest in their struggle for assistance either for self determination or for independence, etc. Quite a number of hostages of foreign nationals have been taken and released. Bomb blasts is also a method used by the militants. Pipe-lines vandalism is another product of anger often expressed by these militants, "iron" and "bullet" consumers. Pipe-lines explosions occurred on October 1998, 1999, March, 2000, July 2000, June 2003, September 2004, December 2004, May 2006, December 2006, the line is parallel (Guardian Thursday, December 28, 2006) and (The Guardian, Thursday, May 17, 2007; Vanguard, Wednesday, July 4, 2007; Newswatch November 6, 2006; The News, April 2, 2007).

It is true that about 70% of Nigerians do not have a decent accommodation. But it is very acute in the Niger Delta. One needs to take a look at the quality of houses the people who will bequeath something for the future are living. These houses are of serious concern, because there is a strong correlation between good accommodation and productivity. Productivity contributes to the Gross National Product, which in turn depends on the quality of life individuals or groups live.

However, following the fall-out of all these, there exist acute insecurity to life and property, and this has made even some companies who were operating in the Niger Delta to leave. For instance Wilbros, an oil servicing and contracting company had left; Michelin sold her assets and liabilities and had since returned to her Western European

base. Well, in the case of Michelin it was a combination of the demand for higher tax by government that hasten her relocation.

A country's development especially the developing nations lie to a large extent on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). But it should be known that no nation or individual, organisation would want to go and invest in an area they are not sure of protecting their capital and at least a minimal profit. According to Tohomalet Obadiah, a World Bank's External Affairs Officer in Nigeria,

...there was the need for government to deal decisively with the problem of general insecurity and communal conflicts in the country, ...scaring foreign investors. At the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)...FDI World Wide between 1998-2000 placed Nigeria on 103<sup>rd</sup> position out of 140 countries (Punch, Sunday, September 22, 2002).

Indeed, all the combined activities also have negative impacts on the economy. For instance, the blockage of rigs, hostage-taking, bomb blast do not allow for the free flow of oil drilling and therefore large quantum of oil is either wasted, through spillage, stolen or out-right non drilling. However, it was reported by the finance minister that in 2006 "a whopping N570 billion was lost to the ongoing crisis in the region where vandalism of oil facilities and hostage taking of foreign oil workers for ransom have become a time-honoured predilection", (Tell, March 5, 2007.)

At the celebration of Nigeria Democracy at one by Olusegun Obasanjo, he made the world to know that all was well with Nigeria in areas of enabling domestic environment for national development ...the gospel had been to market the rich and conducive enabling environment for investments in Nigeria. It was such a gospel of deceit, because as he was preaching Ife and Modakeke was burning, Oku-Iboku and Ikot Offiong were killing themselves; he had sent his troops to Odi to silence the troublemakers, according to him, once and for all; he also sent his troops to Zaki-Biam; equally there was the Sharia Palaver in many Northern States. Where lies the sustainability and an atmosphere for investment?

Now back to the Niger Delta and sustainability. To many Nigerians our democracy or "demons – going – crazy" is lop-sided. There is no democracy yet in Nigeria. It is so since the affairs of this region and indeed Nigeria is decided in the aristocratic power bloc-the bloc with financial muscle. Already this country including the Niger Delta is owned by a few Nigerians. The people are hungry. They lack the essential things that make life worth-living, good roads, energy at home and industries, health facilities, no source of good drinking water; the environment have been abused and degraded through oil pollution and gas flaring and can no longer support food production; there is unemployment, no access to good education in some communities; the children are exploited and abused at will, there is the general lack of insecurity to life and property. If sustainability is to make use of what is today and leave for generations yet unborn, then for the people of Niger Delta, it is a mirage.

### **Ways to end Niger Delta crisis and national sustainability**

The issue of true federalism must be addressed, or structurally the resource control be entrenched in the constitution.

The state and federal government should provide massive education for the people. If the much money wasted through military intervention was channelled towards the provision of essential conditions for human development, the situation would have been different now.

These people need electricity, good roads, medical care, and the reduction in environmental degradation so that they can also return to farming, fishing and lumbering.

Employment opportunities should be created for the graduates at all levels. Industrial projects should be labour intensive to mop the roving unemployed youths. In the final analysis the youth should bury their hatchets and return to the voice of reason by embracing the federal government restructuring of the Niger Delta through the current Niger Delta Development Plan. The plan it is hoped would change the Niger Delta for the better.

### Conclusion

Democracy and its sustainability for the development of Nigeria demands much from our leaders and not just lip-service. The leaders should put developmental structures such as provision of good education, access to free medical facilities across all ages, provide good roads and other communication facilities and maintenance culture entrenched. Corruption is a bane to sustainability and therefore the "hydra" should be fought to the marrow. In this process the present generation will bequeath something tangible for the future.

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