Demystifying the Niger Delta Conflict: Towards an Integrated Explanation

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The conflict in the Niger Delta region in Nigeria has lasted for more than a decade, with little or no attempt at an analytical explanation. As a result, the situation has made effective conflict resolution difficult, and perpetuated the confusion of fiction over fact. This paper sets out to correct the shortcomings in existing literature by proffering an integrated explanation of various factors responsible for the conflict. The paper concludes that political and economic factors are the root causes of conflict in the Niger Delta, with environmental and social factors as the proximate and trigger causes, respectively. Given the nature of the relationship among the myriad factors responsible for the conflict, what is required is a comprehensive approach to conflict resolution that pursues development in the Niger Delta on the basis and principles of social, economic and environmental sustainability.

An epoch in the history of the Niger Delta region (Figure 1 over) was marked by the discovery in 1956 and the subsequent exploration of crude oil in Oloibiri, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Since then, oil production and its socio-economic and environmental impacts transformed the Niger Delta from a relatively insignificant region into one of significant geopolitical importance at the national and international levels. Unfortunately, this has more to do with the negative impact of oil production on local communities, than the widely expected positive benefits of oil production. Over the years, the Niger Delta has moved from a relatively peaceful enclave in the 1960s, to a region prone to sporadic low-level conflict in the 1980s, and finally to an outright unstable region with persistent violence since the 1990s. It is evident that if the communities in the Niger Delta are not in conflict with the oil multinationals over land rights or compensation for environmental damage, they are in dispute with the government over access to oil wealth and resource control, or they are locked in conflict with one another over claims to ownership of areas where oil facilities and accompanying benefits are sited (Zandvliet and Pedro 2002). As such, the general attitude in the Niger Delta is not whether there will be more trouble, but it is a question of when and where (Ibeanu, 2000).

The conflict in the Niger Delta has been attributed to a myriad of factors – often the subject of multiple interpretations. Some scholars attribute the conflict to marginalisation and frustration among local communities (see van Dessel, 1995; Welch, 1995; Ukeje, 2001; Ifeka, 2001; Fleshman, 2002; Ikelegbe, 2005), while others focus on the clamour for more oil revenue (see Obi, 2001; Ross, 2003; Omeje, 2004). Yet, others have explained the situation within the broad context of oil extraction and the resultant environmental degradation (Naanen, 1995; Okoh, 1996; Onduku, 2001).

Perhaps the most sophisticated explanation has been to link the conflict to differences in perception and understanding of security by both the Nigerian State and the indigenous people (see for example, Ibeanu, 1997; Obi, 1997; Ibeanu, 2000; Olojede et al. 2000). These explanations are not necessarily incompatible and no doubt improve our understanding of the conflict along different lines. However, because their focus may be on either one or two variable as the 'explanation variable' for the conflict, most are unable to provide a complete picture of the nature, causes and dynamics of the conflict. A complete picture is, however, needed for the design of an effective policy geared towards conflict management and resolution. Ibeanu (2000) asserted that while the Niger Delta conflict is often said to be caused by a multitude of factors, what has been lacking is their integration into an explanatory system to enable us make sense of empirical data and support effective policy intervention. He went on to argue that it is not often clear if all the factors that are said to be responsible for the conflict are causal or mediatory, or if they are all causal factors, which are principal, secondary and tertiary. It is also not clear which factors are trigger, pivotal, mobilising or aggravating. These shortcomings make conflict management and resolution in the Niger Delta an uphill task.

Any attempt to resolve the foregoing shortcomings demands asking one fundamental question: what is the possible relationship among the factors responsible for the conflict? Even though the conflict in the region has gone through a trajectory, which demonstrates that different factors at different times has accentuated the conflict, it is difficult (if not impossible), to demonstrate in practice that one factor is more responsible than another and therefore the explanatory variable for the conflict. The failure to explicitly address the question of how factors responsible for the Niger Delta conflict are interlinked has contributed to the reason why most previous studies are unable to proffer viable solutions beyond general recommendations.

Filling this gap in existing literature would require a critical probing of historical evidence and contemporary events shrouding the Niger Delta conflict, with a view to highlighting how the factors responsible interact with one another. Against the above background, this paper argues that the Niger Delta conflict in its present form is the result of the cumulative effect of the synergetic interplay among conflict-generating factors that have at various times worked together or individually to tilt state-society relations towards the outbreak of conflict (**Figure 2 opposite**). Although
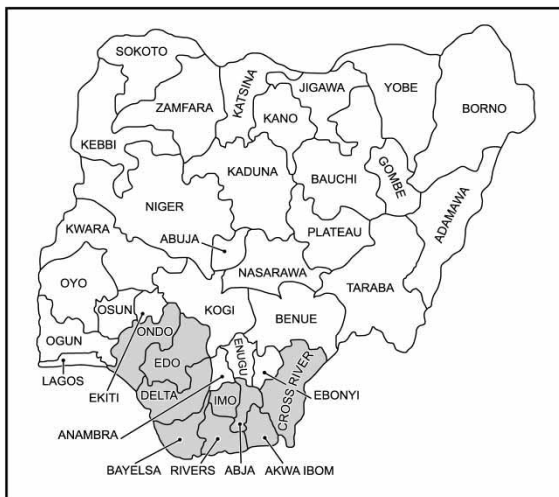
Obi (2001) implicitly made similar suggestions by asserting that the Niger Delta conflict could best be understood in terms of the analytical fusion of economic, political, social and environmental consciousness, he failed to develop the idea any further. As such, the aim of this paper is to suggest an integrated explanation that draws on the relationships among the different factors often deduced to be responsible for the conflict.
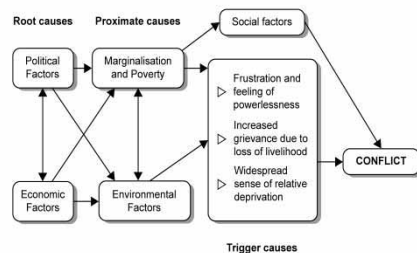
Towards Explaining Conflict in the Niger Delta

It is evident that the best scholarly studies of internal conflict are powerful precisely because they do not rely on single-factor explanations. Instead, they try to weave several factors into a more comprehensive argument. Similarly, the explanations that follow from here have the advantage of avoiding the shortcomings inherent in single variable explanation of natural resource conflict. For example, Watts (2005) criticised Collier (2000) and Ross (2001) on the grounds that many of the dynamics they noted between oil and conflict did not emerge from oil *per se*, but also from the centralisation of oil revenue. He also argued that both ignored how oil's contribution to violence builds upon pre-existing (i.e. pre-oil) political dynamics. Similarly, the conception of political and economic factors as the root causes of the Niger Delta conflict is supported by the assertion by Agim (1997) that the remote cause of the friction between oil companies and their host communities can be traced to be deep-seated historical discontent with governance in Nigeria. However, it is also important to note here that the chosen approach (i.e. integrated explanation) does not assume to address the entire issues surrounding the Niger Delta conflict nor does it portend to provide a foolproof explanation. Rather, what it achieves rests on its ability to highlight hitherto neglected relationships among the factors responsible, and therefore provide a basis for pursuing effective conflict resolution.

Political Factors

The role of political factors in the Niger Delta conflict is inextricably linked with the interplay of ethnicity, statehood formation, corruption and the contradiction inherent in 'black gold'. The quagmire has its roots in the 1914 union of two different protectorates (i.e. Northern and Southern) to give birth to what is now called Nigeria. Critics have referred to this tenuous union as an error of design, with Chief Obafemi Awolowo (a prominent Nigerian statesman), consequently arguing that 'Nigeria is not a nation, but a mere geographic expression' (see Olojede et al. 2000:7). Political scientists have corroborated these assertions when they argued that given the processes of state formation in Europe and America, African states are state-nations as opposed to being nation-states. According to Rejia and Enloe (1969), in 19th century Europe, the nation preceded and created the state, whereas in developing countries this relationship is reversed, so that the state is creating the nation. The multi-ethnic constituents of Nigeria, the religious division that permeates the state, coupled with the forced nature of its union make Nigeria a true state-nation. One of the deficiencies inherent in the state-nation has now taken an expression in the form of the Niger Delta crisis.

The existence of multi-ethnic nationalities and different religious groupings do not by themselves constitute an issue with political consequences. However, it is the process of social change that elevates the interest of the different ethnic groups to the political realm (Babangida, 2002). This elevation fosters competitive communalism, where each ethnic group competes to maximise the benefits it can derive from the Nigerian state. As competitive communalism flourishes, the state gradually disap-

pears (Zalik, 2004). Ultimately, winners and losers emerge and a sense of identity is reinforced (i.e. majority-minority), with conflict as the likely outcome.

From pre-independence, members of the Ibo and Yoruba ethnic group have dominated the people of the Niger Delta. By virtue of their population, the ethnic nationalities of the Niger Delta became a minority in relation to the two dominant ethnic groups in the two regions (Naanen, 1995; Obi, 1997). Since regional politics was basically primordial and often defined in terms of ethnicity, competitive communalism flourished, with the consequence that the Niger Delta minority ethnic groups suffered neglect under the rule of the two major ethnic groups. They lacked basic socio-economic and developmental infrastructure that could be considered to be at par with that in other parts of the region. For example, the Ogonis were so embittered that the chiefs complained to the Governor of Nigeria during his visit to the Eastern Region in 1956, that they were being denied access to scholarships, jobs, important positions, and other socio-economic opportunities. Naanen (1995) described this scenario as a case of 'internal colonialism'. Similarly, minority status within these regions meant the people of the region suffered political exclusion. It is on this basis that one can fathom why at independence, they clamoured for a region of their own, out of fear of further political marginalisation and socio-economic exclusion. This agitation lead only to the setting up of the Willink Commission in 1958, which conducted a study and reached the conclusion that the region was poor, backward, neglected and a harsh terrain to live.

Based on the above, it could be argued that from the pre-independence era, the people of the Niger Delta never had any substantial control over their destiny. The inability to significantly influence the course of their destiny owing to a lack of political influence meant backwardness, poverty, illiteracy, and more recently, social instability flourished. Ethnic politics at the national level also gave little or no room for issues concerning the people of the Niger Delta to be addressed. Rather, such issues were relegated to the background of the national agenda or at best recommendations were made but never implemented. The politics that shrouded the setting up of the Niger Delta Development Board in 1960, and its eventual demise in 1966, attest to the disdain treatment of issues concerning minorities at national level in Nigeria.

However, two independent events brought a ray of hope to the people of the Niger Delta, albeit, a false one. First, the aftermath of the Civil War (1967-1970) saw the creation of states in Nigeria. It was believed that state creation would engender conditions that would eventually allow the people more room for political participation and economic benefit from the centre. Second, the discovery of crude oil allayed fears that development and modernisation might never reach the region as oil was being extracted in the region. Unfortunately, these two events in the long run turned out to be diametrically opposed to the aspirations and expectations of the people. What eventually happened was the effective replacement of Ibo and Yoruba dominance with Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Ibo dominance at the centre (i.e. federal level). State creation only weakened the regions vis-à-vis the centre, centralisation purchased by oil wealth allowed corruption and competitive communalism at the centre to deny the people of the region the benefits of oil production. Although successive governments defended their various centralisation policies on the grounds of forging a sense of nationhood, Rejia and Enloe (1969) pointed out that the reason for this kind of top-downward process of cultivating nationalism was due in

part to the pre-existence of the state, which is trying to bolster its own legitimacy and also deliberately quell upward development of nationalism out of fear of heterogeneity.

Furthermore, as oil rent flowed directly to the state coffers, those who controlled state power and occupied strategic positions not only used their office as an instrument to control oil, but also as a means of amassing wealth (Obi, 1997, 2001). Issues of corruption, competitive communalism, and over-dependence of other tiers of government (i.e. local and state) on the centre (i.e. federal), made the contradiction inherent in 'black gold' inevitable. Government failure to provide the expected development benefit, despite huge returns from crude oil sales, became a major driving force for the antagonism between the state and the people of the Niger Delta. Watts (1998) noted that the dependency on the centre for petrol-dollar by the different tiers of government (i.e. federal, state, local) permitted the centre to enforce a certain degree of political cohesion within the federation, but oil simultaneously produces conditions that directly challenged and questioned the very same hallowed tenets of nationalism and development. In essence, government failure to deliver developmental benefit in the face of perceived political and economic marginalisation created a sense of disenchantment within the region.

Given that there was little or no belief that redress could be sought for their grievances in the existing state structures, clamour for self-determination and resource control that the people saw as a means of reversing decades of political and economic marginalisation became the order of the day. Unfortunately, such demands are not only a threat to the legitimacy of the government in power, but also a threat to the idea of 'nationalism'. Hence, such agitation and clamour were largely misconstrued as 'separatist tendencies' that must not be tolerated (Okoh, 1996; Omeje, 2004). To make matters worse, Nigeria has predominantly been under military rule (**see Table 1**) which was largely authoritarian, totalitarian and often lacked grassroots support. This meant that they were often already immersed in a crisis of legitimacy. Since democratic instruments, including those of conflict management and conflict resolution are more or less suspended under the military rule, there was almost no room for state-society dialogue.

With growing frustration, bitterness and a widespread sense of powerlessness, public protest became a viable means for the people of the Niger Delta to vent their grievances. Unfortunately, such expressions of grievances were not only worsening the legitimacy crisis of the military government, but also became a threat to their personal wealth accumulation schemes. The Nigerian-petrol-state saw the stakes in such agitations as too high for any kind of retreat, because it would totally erode the basis of its rule, legitimacy and continue reproduction (Obi, 2001). Hence, due to its militarilistic tendencies, the state continually used the armed forces to snuff out opposition that effectively ensured the militarisation of the Niger Delta region and fuelled the breakdown of state society-relationship (see also Frynas, 2001). For example, Osaghae (1995) attributed the Ogoni uprising and the incessant violence between 1990-93 to the unprecedented repressive character of the Babangida military administration. The predominance of military rule in Nigeria was therefore one singular political factor that drove the people of the Delta to express their grievance through violence. The inability of the Nigerian state to maintain internal order with minimum use of force, and its inability to meet its social responsibility to the people earns Nigeria the status of a failed state, and conflict is endemic to a failed state. This failed state status, therefore, represents the political dimension to the Niger Delta conflict.

Table 1: Chronicle of Political Leadership in Nigeria

Period of Rule	Head of State	Type of Govt.	Ethnic Origin	How the Rule Ended
1960-66	Balewa	Civilian	Hausa	Attempted Coup/ Assassination
1966	Ironsi	Military	Ibo	Coup/Assassination
1966-75	Gowon	Military	Angas/Middle Belt	Coup
1975-76	Mohammad	Military	Hausa	Attempted Coup/ Assassination
1976-79	Obasanjo	Military	Yoruba	Elections
1979-83	Shagari	Civilian	Fulani	Coup
1984-85	Buhari	Military	Fulani	Coup
1985-93	Babangida	Military	Minority Group in the Niger State	Election, results nullified in June 1993,stepped down in August 1993
1993	Shonekan	Civilian	Yoruba	Head of Interim Govt, Coup
1993-98	Abacha	Military	Kanuri	Presumed heart attack
1998-99	Abubakar	Military	Middle Belt Group	Elections
1999 -	Obansanjo	Civilian	Yoruba	

Source: Fynas, 2000

Economic Factors

Economic factors engendering the conflict can be thought of in terms of two nexuses (i.e. political-economic and the economic-environment). The political-economic nexus to the conflict in principle rests squarely on oil revenue allocation, which directly heightened the sense of relative deprivation among the people of the Niger Delta. For example, Obi (1997; Obi 1999) and Ibeanu (2000) affirmed that the bulk of the oil revenues generated from the region should be returned back to the region on the basis of fairness, compensation and self-determination is at the heart of the Niger Delta struggle. Other politico-economic factors include the rentier status of Nigeria (Yates 1996) as well as the national economic crisis of the 1980s (see Collier, 1987; Obi, 1997).

Commercial oil exploration turned Nigeria's political economy into a mono-commodity economy upon which the state heavily depends. The expansion of the oil industry saw the corresponding decline of other sectors of the economy, a classic symptom of the 'Dutch disease' (Auty, 1993). This situation, according to proponents of the rentier state thesis was due mostly to the ready availability of rent revenue, and the fact that oil rents reduce the political and economic significance of the taxpayer, as it allows the state to be less dependent on taxation. These incentives

made rent seeking a principal preoccupation of the Nigerian state, which allowed for the manifestation of the predatory tendencies inherent in the state. According to Lewis (1996), predatory rule denotes a personalistic regime ruling through coercion and material inducement. This type of regime tends to degrade the institutional foundation of the state, as well as its economy. Within the context of this paper, the rentier-predatory status of the Nigerian state contributed to the conflict in the Niger Delta in two main ways.

First, the rentier status, with the associated effect of 'Dutch disease', allowed the various state and local governments in Nigeria to become heavily dependent on the federal government for economic sustenance. Khan (1994) made allusion to this, when he stated that the state governments abandoned any pretence of a productive identity and relied unashamedly on federal government handouts. Given that competitive communalism had already taken a strong hold on Nigeria politics, issues of oil revenue allocation became a hotly contested terrain. Oil revenue was effectively a 'relatively accessed goods' such that the amount that accrues to any actor depends on the amount that accrues to its competitor (see Hasenclever et al. 1996). The relative accessed nature of oil revenue, among the tiers of government made increases in access to oil wealth for the people of the Niger Delta extremely difficult, which within the context of marginalisation, gave room for the development of a 'worse off' feeling among the Niger Deltans, in relation to other major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

An exploration of the implementation of the principle of derivation on which revenue allocation was initially based makes very obvious the unevenly accessed nature of oil revenue and its contribution to inciting a sense of relative deprivation within the Niger Delta region. Under the derivation principle, 50 per cent of the proceeds of any mineral extracted from any region are paid to that region. According to the African Network for Environment and Economic Justice (ANEEJ, 2004), the principle of derivation accounted for the rapid development and healthy competition among the regions from 1960 to 1966. For example, the Northern region produced cotton, hides and skin and was renowned for groundnut production and the Eastern region produced palm oil and petroleum. On the other hand, the Western region and mid-western regions produced cocoa, rubber, timber, palm oil and petroleum. Each region got 50 per cent of the proceeds of its produce under the derivation principle. However, as Nigeria gradually attained its rentier status, the principle of derivation was gradually abandoned. For example, by the late 1960s, population, need and equity principles were invoked; in the 1980s social development and internal revenue were included, and by the 1990s, the weighting criteria fully metamorphosed into population (30 per cent), equity (40 per cent), land area (10 per cent), social development (10 per cent), and internal revenue (10 per cent).

The abnegation of the principle of derivation meant that the five southern oil-producing states that accounted for 90 per cent of oil revenue received 19.3 per cent of allocated revenue, and the five northern non-oil producing states conversely received 26 per cent of the allocated federal revenue (Ikporukpo, 1996). Despite its vast oil resources, the Niger Delta region still remains poor, with its GNP per capita and educational levels below national average, and 70 per cent of its people living below the poverty line (NDDC 2004). The successive revision of the principle of derivation from a whopping 50 per cent to 20 per cent, 0 per cent, 2 per cent, 1.5 per cent and 13 per cent in 1975, 1979, 1982, 1984, 1992 and 2001, respectively, thus remain the biggest single economic blow dealt the people of the Niger Delta.

The second contribution of the predatory-rentier status of the Nigerian state arises from its inability to perform its traditional role of mediating conflicting and competing interest among the various strata of society as an unbiased umpire. Olojede et al. (2000) noted that since the Nigerian state is enmeshed in the crisis of accumulation, it could not extricate itself from social antagonism because the state, by implication, cannot be an impartial arbiter as it is a direct stockholder. In turn, this undermined the credibility of the Nigerian state within the polity of the Niger Delta. In the Niger Delta, Nigeria is seen as a privatised entity that has been parcelled out as a means of production serving ethnic, personal and other interest at the expense of the people of the region (Obi, 1997).

There is no doubt that revenue sharing and allocation are politically sensitive issues in Nigeria. This is further compounded by the lack of consensus on the criteria of distribution, the absence of reliable socio-economic data, the rapid rate of constitutional and political change, and the extent to which revenue distribution is tied to perceptions of regional ethnic dominance. The continued appropriation of a disproportionate share of the Federation Account by the Federal government at a time of expanding administrative costs and increasingly unsustainable spending obligations at the state and LGA levels have galvanised fervent nationwide opposition to the revenue sharing system.

The above perception is underpinned by the fact that for over 40 years, oil wealth has brought nothing to the people of Niger Delta, except ecological catastrophe, social deprivation, political marginalisation, and a rapacious company capitalism in which unaccountable foreign oil companies are seen to be granted a sort of state immunity (Watts, 1998). Given the perception by the people of the Nigerian state as biased against their interest, the chances of the state being able to manage internal contradiction without recourse to force were significantly diminished. The Nigerian state was in essence confronting a people that have lost confidence in its existence, and that it sees as threat to its economic security. While Ibeanu (2000) sees this as the aggression of the state against a targeted group of people, Fleshman (2002) provides a more critical insight when he asserted that community violence and kidnapping provided a sort of justification for the state to seek military solutions to civil problems.

The economic-environmental nexus to the conflict relates to the role of poverty, the geography of oil and the economic impact of environmental degradation on host communities. Watts (1998) noted that insofar as oil is state property, then the relationship of oil producers (and citizens in general) with the state becomes an object of debate. In other words, oil as a subterranean and territorial resource that is highly centralised and a property of the state necessarily channels claims over nature ('our oil') into a sort of **right talk.** As Obi (2001) points out, the location of oil in the region of the ethnic minority gave the people leverage provided by 'economic power' to adopt an oil-owning identity and claim special rights. Hence, 'oil' minority rights reversed the perceived political and economic insignificance of the Niger Delta people by increasing the bargaining power of the people vis-à-vis the state. This sense of ownership of oil strengthened the peoples' resolve and provided the impetus for the people to demand political inclusion and for the state to meets its social responsibility to them.

Environmental Factors

The relationship between the environment and political conflict has been a subject of debate since the dawn of history. However, in recent years consensus began to emerge that environmental factors cannot by themselves alone be the cause of conflict. Hence, the role of environmental factors in the Niger Delta conflict can only be understood in terms of being a proximate cause (see Figure 2). Besides, given the dynamics of the conflict, it is difficult to see how environmental factors could contribute to conflict without interacting with pre-existing conflict generating factors. After all, political and economic factors are partly responsible for environmental degradation within the Niger Delta.

The vulnerability of the Niger Delta ecology and the dependency of the people on their environment for livelihood sustenance are the basis for explaining and understanding the contribution of environmental factors to the conflict. The environmental dimension to the conflict can be understood in terms of an environmental-political and environment-economic nexuses. Environmental change may take any of three forms: overuse of renewable resources, overstrain of the environment sink capacity, i.e. pollution, and the impoverishment of the space of living (Libiszewski, 1992). This conception of environmental degradation allows for a much broader understanding of the role of environmental changes in fostering conflict in the Niger Delta, which goes beyond the narrow focus of most analysis that focus exclusively on oil pollution and gas flaring.

The people of the Niger Delta are predominantly engaged in farming and fishing for their livelihood sustenance. Although there is scant empirical data on changes in agricultural production and land use due to environmental change, anecdotal evidence suggests such changes have occurred. According to Moffat and Linden (1995), issues of seasonal flooding and erosion have also been known to cause the loss of scarce arable lands. Available evidence also suggests that the fish stocks in the Niger Delta are being depleted from overuse. It also suggests that official catch figures exceeded the maximum sustainable yield for at least twelve of the last fourteen years, and this was attributed to over fishing.

Issues of oil pollution and gas flaring have frequently been cited as the most formidable challenge confronting the people and environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta region. This is not surprising given that between 1976 and 1996, there were a total of 4,835 incidences of oil spill of at least 2,446,322 barrels (102.7 million US gallons), of which an estimated 77 per cent were lost to the environment (see Ogri, 2001; Adenikinju, 2002; Ojefia, 2004). Jike (2004) has argued that most other causes of the environmental change become insignificant when pitched against the consequence of oil spills and gas flaring that occurs on a daily basis in the Niger Delta. There is no doubt that the impacts of oil spills have been devastating in environmental and, therefore, economic terms for community members. According to Okoh (1996) and Olojede et al. (2000), oil spills jeopardise the occupation and means of livelihood of community members, and indirectly fuel competition for scarce arable land among community members.

Studies have shown that areas that are constantly exposed to repeated or consistent spills or leaks, like the Niger Delta, frequently exhibit long-term environmental problems as oil spills cause permanent damage to both fauna and flora. In contrast, Moffat and Linden (1995) argued that no scientific evidence has been found to support these claims. However, they fail to take into consideration the politicisation

of science and the power relations between oil companies and their host communities in the Niger Delta. Thus, given the average number of spills that have been recorded in the Niger Delta, environmental degradation due to oil spills is certainly more profound than that suggested by Moffat and Linden (1995). Nevertheless, the extent to which oil spills alone has accentuated environmental degradation in the Niger Delta remains an open debate.

Oil companies are known to acquire scarce arable lands for the construction of oil facilities or the laying of pipelines. Such land use often brings with it issues of compensation claims that very often lead to corporate-community conflict. Ibeanu (2000) argued that while the government and oil companies often portray communities as greedy, corrupt and unpatriotic as regards issues of compensation, such statements are simplistic and reductionist, in the sense that they mask the key issues at stake, and reveal very little about the relationship between the various stakeholders in the Nigerian oil industry. He argued that conflict over compensation is very often either about the type and amount, the procedures for making such payments, or the skewed nature of how compensation is distributed. These issues pertaining to environmental degradation arose partly as a result of government failure to effectively regulate the oil industry and its externalities, as well as due to the pursuit of self-serving cost cutting policies by the oil companies. The environment-political nexus to the conflict therefore hinges on the poor performance of government, and the social irresponsibility of oil companies in the Niger Delta (see Ite, 2004, 2005; Idemudia and Ite, in press).

The environment-economic nexus relates to the interactions of poverty and environmental change. While poverty in the Niger Delta is certainly not due mainly to environmental change, environmental degradation did endanger conditions of poverty as well as accentuates the impact of poverty on communities. Community conflict in the 1960s and 1970s was perhaps low as people of the region could still engage in subsistence farming and fishing and, therefore, afford to be complacent. The expansion of the oil industry since the 1970s meant oil companies acquired more lands to build installations, oil production infrastructures, and lay pipelines on the few arable land. According to Human Rights Watch (2002), since the implementation of the statute that vested land ownership on the state, over 10,000 families and another 4,500 people (in 1995 alone) lost their farmland to either installations of oil infrastructure or to oil spills. Unfortunately, poor levels of education and the capital-intensive nature of the oil industry meant most people displaced from their land could not find jobs in the oil industry. Consequently, by the 1990s the oil industry had effectively turned out to be more of a burden than a blessing, and interest in its survival was non-existent in local communities. By this time, inter- and intra-community competition for available renewable resources was now pervasive. Kemedi (2003) attributed this dimension of the conflict to the twin effect of land seizure by the state for oil companies and oil pollution by the companies.

The consequence was that widespread environmental problems in the region became a useful variable that the elites could use to mobilise the youth and gain grassroots support for their confrontation with the Nigerian state. Since everyone felt the impact of environmental degradation, environmental factors made it possible for the cost of violence to be distributed widely, therefore making the cost of inaction seem to outweigh the cost of any violent action. Environmental factors thus widen the opportunity structure for collective violence, and made the prevailing condition unacceptable. According to Jike (2004), part of the fulcrum for social

activism in the Niger Delta stems from shared experiences and aspirations by those who find themselves in deprived social conditions. Similarly, Osaghae (1995) argued that environmental degradation and in particular the destruction of farmland and fishing via oil pollution, provided a new basis for the forging of closer ties among the Ogonis to deal with a common problem during the Ogoni uprising in the 1990s.

Social Factors

The contribution of social factors to the conflict in the Niger Delta includes proliferation of the sense of relative deprivation, mass youth unemployment, and increased awareness that oil is a finite resource. Since independence, the number of educated people in Nigeria's rural communities has been on a steady increase (Ibeanu, 2000; Ukeje, 2001), with an associated increase in awareness of the sense of relative deprivation. More people in the Niger Delta now realise that they were, and are, living in worse conditions than people from the majority ethnic groups (i.e. Yoruba, Hausa) in other parts of Nigeria, partially due to oil production in the Niger Delta. When elders and youth from the Niger Delta region travelled to big cities like Lagos and Abuja in search of jobs and a better life, they often brought back news and stories that the people were living in conditions not comparable with what is obtainable at home. Ibeanu (2002) asserted that political rallies such as the one organised by Abacha in 1998 graphically showed participating unemployed youth from the Niger Delta, the stark contrast between opulence in cities like Abuja, funded by oil revenue, and pervasive squalor in their home communities. This spawned a deep sense of relative deprivation, frustration, and a feeling of rejection that are expressed at the slightest opportunity through violence.

The realisation by the communities that oil was a finite resource given the experience from Oloibori where oil was first explored also brought a sense of urgency to act. According to Okoh (1996), the inhabitants of Oloibiri whose town was once a major hub of oil production now live a solitary and depressed life. Electricity, good roads and pipe-borne water are non-existent in Oloibiri. Two things remind the people that oil was drilled from their soil. The first is the presence of abandoned pipes and oil exploration equipment at the numerous sites that served as oil wells and flow stations. The second legacy is the infertility of their land. This situation has led many people in the Niger Delta to ask the question: what will be the fate of their community when oil wells finally dry up? (Okoh, 1996). Obviously, the answer to this question is not far fetched, as most people believe that history is bound to repeat itself. Hence, the Niger Delta people increasingly became less willing to sit it out and instead opt to take their future into their hands, making confrontation with the Nigerian state and the oil companies an inevitable outcome.

The problem of unemployment in the region has also been another social factor accentuating conflict in the region. Ibeanu (2002) asserted that youth unemployment in the Niger Delta is the highest in the country. As a consequence, a huge number of youth roam the streets feeling alienated and powerless – waiting to get even with the larger polity at the slightest opportunity (Jike, 2004). Unemployment made youth activism, militancy and rebelliousness a common phenomenon in the Niger Delta. In addition, these jobless youth became a useful tool for political elites pursuing self-seeking interest, which often results in clashes between different groups. Joblessness and militancy have made oil pipeline bunkering a professional occupation for many youth in the region. Proceeds are the used to buy weapons that effectively help

sustain the militarisation of the Niger Delta. For example, it has been alleged that Ijaw youths are linked with the criminal syndicates who illegally bunker substantial oil flow (anywhere between 100,000 to 300,000 barrels per day) from remote and vulnerable pipelines. This situation has enabled Ijaw youths to bring into their confrontation with the state, new assets such as rocket propelled grenades, AK-47 rifles, machine guns, satellite phones and speed boats (Cesarz et al. 2003; UNRIN, 2003). As such, social factors therefore constitute a trigger cause of the conflict in the Niger Delta, by deepening and expanding the feeling of relative deprivation among the people, and making the tool and means for confrontation with state and oil companies readily available.

According to Ronnfeldt (1997), the term 'relative' should be perceived in a fourfold sense, referring to either a comparison with a situation in the past, to other social groups, to what the actors feel they expect, or to a mix of the preceding three. The mix of the preceding three captures succinctly the situation in the Niger Delta. Political and economic marginalisation meant the people of the region felt worse off than people from the majority ethnic groups. The environmental change in the Niger Delta made sustaining livelihoods via traditional means untenable with no ready alternative, while the failure of the oil boom to provide modernisation meant widespread expectations were not met. Gurr (1970) noted that the greater the deprivation an individual perceives relative to expectations, the greater his discontent, the more widespread and intense is discontent among members of the community, the more likely and severe the civil strife will be. Hence, while political and economic factors provide a fertile ground for conflict formation by inciting a feeling of relative deprivation via marginalisation, environmental factors altered the opportunity structure for violence by distributing the cost of violence, and social factors provided the tools for violence. It is this interplay among these factors that has lead to the conflict.

Synthesis & Conclusions

The integrated explanation proffered here suggests that the Niger Delta conflict is a product of structural deficiencies inherent in the Nigerian state, and systemic anomalies within its society. Hence, any genuine attempt to resolve the crisis must address the root causes of the conflict that arose from structural deficiencies, proximate, and trigger causes that are due to systemic anomalies within the Nigerian society. The ramification of the foregoing understanding for conflict resolution in the Niger Delta is that addressing only one issue (e.g. political, social, economic or environmental) would not guarantee peace within the region. Rather, several interrelated problems responsible for the violence in the region must be vigorously and simultaneously addressed, given that the pursuit of development within the Niger Delta has been the dominant strategy employed by various key stakeholders to address the crisis in the region.

On the one hand, the Federal Government of Nigeria has at various times established several institutions for the purposes of development in the Niger Delta. These include the Niger Delta Development Board in 1960 and the Oil Mineral Producing Areas and Development in 1993. To further demonstrate its commitment to development in the region, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was established in 2000, with a mission to facilitate the rapid, even and sustainable development of the Niger Delta, and to transform the region into one that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative and politically peaceful (NDDC, 2004).

On the other hand, the oil and gas industry is the most important private sector group in the Nigerian economy in general, and the Niger Delta, in particular. To contribute to development of the region, many of the companies (e.g. Shell, Chevron, Exxon Mobil) have well-established community development programmes through which they provide and support socio-economic development activities and initiatives for local communities in the areas of their operation in a bid to improve corporate-community relations. However, this has not been sufficient to resolve and reduce the conflicts. If anything has changed, it is the case that conflict within the region has increased in intensity and scale, with sophisticated weapons now being readily deployed by the communities in their confrontation with the Nigerian state and the oil companies. The failure of past development efforts in the Niger Delta has largely being inevitable because the key stakeholders (e.g. government, oil companies) have often not realised that addressing the Niger Delta crisis requires going beyond filling institutional gaps, or the simple provision of social infrastructure. A focus on human development on the basis of economic, social and environmental sustainability is an imperative for enduring peace to return to the Niger Delta.

As Renn et al. (1998) noted, sustainable development is a complex undertaking. A region offers reasonable homogeneity in population characteristics, in agricultural and industrial practices, and in the configuration of the environment. In addition, a region has suitable political institutions and regulatory mechanisms for legitimising sustainability by implementing measures, monitoring their observance and enforcing them. Such political institutions generally do not exist at the international level. To be realistic, approaches to sustainability must make good ecological sense and be politically and economically feasible and both aspects are best pursued within the confines of a region. This paper maintains that the pursuit of sustainable development will help address the proximate and trigger causes of the conflict in the Niger Delta. Since sustainable development is a continuing process, its pursuit and implementation in the Niger Delta must be guided by the principles of social, environmental and economic sustainability.

Among other issues, sustainable development in the Niger Delta would require innovative constitutional and institutional reforms, and some kind of 'reinvention of the wheel' of governance in Nigeria. The quest for 'unity in diversity' must be balanced against the need for a fair and just society in which individual security and freedom is guaranteed, and spaces are created for the voices of minorities in the design and implementation of national political and economic agenda. To achieve this kind of balance would require social and technical ingenuity, political will at all strata of government, and a true sense of nationalism. Conflict resolution, management and sustainable development in the Niger Delta calls for a collective response and acceptance of responsibility from the Nigerian government, the oil companies and the Niger Delta communities.

It is clear from the analysis in the preceding sections that political and economic factors constitute the root causes of conflict in the Niger Delta region. At the same time, environmental and social factors have emerged as the proximate and trigger causes of the conflict, respectively. Striking a balance between the demands of economic development and the history, culture and environment of the Niger Delta, therefore, poses a considerable challenge to all stakeholders with regard to the future level and pattern of development in the region. This is particularly the case as previous government attempts to undertake development and alleviate poverty in

the region have often ended in failure due to the absence of continuity, the isolated actions of different actors with attendant duplication, lack of complementarity, low transparency and accountability. Given the nature of the relationship among the factors responsible for the conflict, what is now required is a comprehensive approach that pursues sustainable development on the basis and principles of social, economic and environmental sustainability.

The foregoing analysis suggests that the solutions to the Niger Delta crisis does not rest only in the hands of oil multinationals, but rather in the hands of the Nigerian government at all levels (i.e. federal, state and local) and the host communities themselves. The Nigerian government needs to provide the enabling environment for sustainable development to take root in the region. The current 'buck passing' mentality and the culture of dependency now permeating the region must be transformed by carefully designed policies backed by concrete action. It is the failure to simultaneously address the triple pillars of sustainable development (e.g. economic, social and environmental) in the design of developmental efforts for the region that has contributed immensely to the reason why past attempts to resolve the Niger Delta crisis has failed to yield the desired result. Peace and sustainable development in the Niger Delta is (and will continue to be) a collective responsibility. It can only be achieved on the basis of the Nigerian government meeting its social responsibility, the oil multinationals addressing their corporate social responsibility as well as reciprocal responsibility on the part of the host communities.

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