Curtailing Conflicts in the Resource-Endowed Niger Delta Communities of Nigeria

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Violent conflicts remain unabated in the Niger Delta communities of Nigeria despite efforts of successive governments and international organizations to broker peace in the area. Using an interpretive approach, with insights from historical and contemporary theoretical perspectives, various studies were reviewed and 24 Key Informant Interviews were conducted with stakeholders in four oil-producing Niger Delta communities selected from Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States of Nigeria. The respondents were drawn from different groups, comprising community/religious leaders, youth activists, government officials, managers of multinational oil companies and members of the National Union of Petroleum Engineering and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG). The findings reveal that there are differing opinions about conflict resolution mechanisms in the Niger Delta among the different groups. While government officials and multinational oil companies were optimistic about mechanisms for conflict control, youth activists and labour leaders were pessimistic about the possibility of lasting peace in the study area. The community and religious leaders identified structural barriers such as intervention efforts that failed to facilitate peace, rising spate of hostage taking by militant youth and inadequate infrastructure. However, what appear as intractable conflicts are informed by divergent interests of state elites and local leaders over the modalities for managing the prevailing circumstances in the region. The study concludes with strong recommendations.

Key words: Niger Delta, exploitation, violent conflict, youth militancy, Nigeria

Introduction
A dominant view in peace and conflict studies is that conflict is inevitable in human societies. This perception however includes the assumption that acute and chronic conflicts hamper socioeconomic development. The lingering violence in the Niger Delta (the homeland of several ethnic minorities marginalised by the Nigerian government and multinational oil companies) has attracted serious concerns. Successive Nigerian governments and international organizations have, over the past several years, attempted to promote peace in the Niger Delta, but to no avail. This partly explains why it is one of the least-developed regions in the country, even though it occupies a strategic position in the formation, sustenance and survival of Nigeria due to its abundant oil resources. The deployment of the state coercive apparatus has taken precedence over the needed development projects in the region. Thus, the region has been plunged into resurgent crises against itself as well as the state and multinational oil corporations. How have the Niger Delta communities, the Nigerian State, and the multinational oil corporations managed the crisis? What are the forces fueling the crisis and what is the lasting solution to it?

The above questions, coupled with the urgent need for policy formulation to address the problem of
youth militancy, form the basis for this study. Several studies (Ihaba, 2009; Ihaba, 2007; Osaghae, 2007; Ibeanu, 2006, Onasode, 2003; Ibeanu, 2000; Osaghae, 1998) have been carried out to determine the causes of the conflicts and the attempts made at managing them effectively. But the region is yet to witness lasting peace, hence the need for this study. Unarguably, time is ripe for providing a significant insight into sustainable modalities for peaceful resolution of the protracted conflict in the Niger Delta. Based on documentary evidence and exploration of insiders' account, the protracted conflicts and some emergent trends of violence that contributed to insecurity and declining peace in the Niger Delta were examined.

The sociological analysis of the cultural context of conflicts in the study area was guided by different perspectives of social change (Scott and Steinberg, 2008; Liu, 2006). A modified version of Lockwood's Theory of Social Change provides a foundation for addressing the social forces of conflict in the Niger Delta, while solutions to the crisis in the region were anchored on the development model by Scott and Steinberg (2008). Of relevance to the understanding of the crisis in the Niger Delta is Lockwood's assertion that contradiction between the core institutional order and the material substructure of a society gives rise to violence and may lead to change in the society (Liu, 2006). Nigeria's rhythm of change is a function of several contradictions in its colonial and post-colonial structures. Diverse groups in the country were successfully amalgamated but not adequately integrated. Following the amalgamation, the inherent contradictions built into the Niger Delta led their people to move in contrary directions. The emergent violent conflicts in the Niger Delta exist within contradictions between the state elites and the multinational oil companies on the one hand, and the youth and their perceived opponents on the other hand. Contradiction connotes the incompatibility of interests among different groups in a society.

Various studies have tried to illuminate contradictions that the youths in post-scarcity societies need to negotiate (Scott and Steinberg, 2008; Wyn and White, 2000). Young people are pulled into contradictory directions due to the weakening traditional identities and the expansion of cultural possibilities (Maira and Soep, 2004; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Melucci, 1996). These contradictory forces are further intensified by the processes of globalization, which make a description of the youth more complicated (Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004; Maira and Soep, 2004 ref; Cohen, 1997). The complication in the conceptualization of the youth opens up multiple channels of influence and produce symbolic possibilities, which affect the youth's understanding of cultural practices (Giddens, 1996; Melucci, 1996).

This study examines how these channels and possibilities play out in a contextual analysis of the emergent violence and youth militancy, which represent a new form of local resistance against internal and external oppressions in the Niger Delta. This study aims at promoting local knowledge to expand world scholarship on youth agency and conflicts in the Niger Delta. The remaining sections of the paper cover a general overview of conflicts in Nigeria followed by conflict situations and management in the Niger Delta. The methodology and findings of the study are also discussed prior to conclusion and recommendations.

General Overview of Conflicts in the Nigerian Society

Following the 1884/5 Berlin Conference which preceded the official political conquest and the establishment of the Royal Niger Company, different groups in northern and southern protectorates were amalgamated, hence the emergence of Nigeria (the most populous and heterogeneous country in Africa). The amalgamation accentuated ethnic consciousness, resulting in the proliferation of ethno-religious conflicts across the nooks and crannies of the country (Otite, 2000; Nnoli, 1998). The Hausa/Fulani traditionally dominate in the north, the Yoruba in the southwest, the Igbo in the east, and the Ijaw in the Niger Delta. Rivalries among these ethnic groups have resulted in protracted conflicts and political instability resulting in the internal restructuring of Nigeria.
The problem of nation building in Nigeria has not been laid to rest principally due to ethnocentrism, which fuels violence in the country. Despite its remarkable potentials, Nigeria is among the most volatile countries in the world (Better World Campaign, 2008; The US Department of State, 2008). The US Department of State has warned Americans of the risks in Nigeria, stating that over 44 foreigners in multinational oil companies in the Niger Delta have been kidnapped from off-shore and land-based oil facilities, residential compounds, and public roadways since January 2008. It specifically directs their attention to violence in Lagos and the Niger Delta States of Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers. Guseh and Oritsejafor (2007: 140) lend credence to Nigeria’s volatile situation:

The country has experienced numerous military coups and counter coups and has survived a secessionist civil war. The attainment of political independence does not seem to have transformed the state because the indigenous elites that replaced the colonial administrators have failed to implement policies to move the country forward politically and economically. The indigenous elites inherited a state that was not designed to cater to the needs of the Nigerian people; yet these elites were content with the political structures designed by the colonialists.

The fallout of the aforementioned elite-state manipulation is the gruesome image of Nigeria in the international community. Nigeria’s position has gone down to 158 out of 177 countries examined in the Human Development Index (HDI) for 2005 and 2008 respectively; it is among the twenty countries with the lowest development index (The Central Intelligence Agency, 2008; UNDP, 2008; UNDP, 2005). The national contentions include constitutional amendments and the oil revenue allocation, which generate crises in Nigeria.

**Contradictory Situations and Conflicts in the Niger Delta**

The Niger Delta has an estimated population of 29 million people, the bulk of which live in rural fishing and farming communities. Their socio-economic conditions are worrisome as 73% of the people lack access to safe drinking water, about 70% of households lack electricity, 94% of the population lack access to telephones, and primary school enrolment rate is below 40% (Ibeanu, 2006). These situations show that poverty and underdevelopment remain widespread in the Niger Delta in spite of its abundant resources (Ihaba, 2009; Okoko, 2004). Further, the Niger Delta is one of the world’s largest wetlands and the largest delta in Africa; its geographical spread and population projection is tabulated below.

| Table 1. Estimated population of the Niger Delta |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| State  | 2005   | 2010   | 2015   | 2020   |
| Abia   | 3,230,000 | 3,763,000 | 4,383,000 | 5,106,000 |
| Akwa   | 3,343,000 | 3,895,000 | 4,537,000 | 5,285,000 |
| Ibom   | 1,710,000 | 1,992,000 | 2,520,000 | 2,703,000 |
| Cross  | 2,736,000 | 3,187,000 | 3,712,000 | 4,325,000 |
| River  | 3,594,000 | 4,186,000 | 4,877,000 | 5,681,000 |
| Delta  | 3,018,000 | 3,516,000 | 4,096,000 | 4,871,000 |
| Imo    | 3,342,000 | 3,894,000 | 4,535,000 | 5,283,000 |
| Ondo   | 3,025,000 | 3,524,000 | 4,105,000 | 4,782,000 |
| Rivers | 4,858,000 | 5,659,000 | 6,592,000 | 7,679,000 |
| Total  | 28,856,000 | 33,616,000 | 39,157,000 | 45,715,000 |

*Source: Niger Delta Region Survey Based on National Population Commission Data (cited by Ibeanu 2006)*

The context of the Niger Delta struggle is defined by the Nigerian national question with grave implication for conflicts. The dimensions of conflict in the Niger Delta include conflicts between the multinational oil companies, the Nigerian State and the host communities, as well as intra- and inter-communal conflicts. The complexities of these conflicts stem from contradictions in the exploitative production systems and the hostile exchange relations
between the two major coalitions, comprising the multinational oil companies and the Nigerian state on the one hand and the youth and peasant communities on the other. The major oil companies in the area include Shell-BP, Exxon-Mobil, Elf Aquitane, Chevron-Texaco, Eni-Agip, and TotalFinaElf (Iwayemi, 2006). Their operations were principally organized as joint ventures with the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). In the 1970s, the Nigerian government used the indigenization policy to acquire 60% equity in the major multinational oil companies and 80% in Shell-BP. Some multinational oil companies, however, abandoned their operations in Nigeria due to the implementation of the policy. The attendant decrease in foreign investments and the perceived failure of the indigenization policy motivated the Nigerian government to move towards partial deregulation and commercialization of the various operations of the NNPC, which was commercialized with the creation of 11 subsidiaries in 1988. The government has shifted emphasis from ownership of the petroleum industry in favour of complete deregulation of the industry and sale of the NNPC. However, the petroleum sector workers embarked on strike in August 2002 to protest against government’s attempt to privatize the NNPC-owned refineries. The Nigerian government is however reputed for curtailing labour rights and weakening labour movements as an important part of its economic strategies (Okafor, 2007).

The dependence of the Nigerian government on multinational oil companies has generally been on the increase. Since the 1960s, oil has played a strategic role in the economics and politics of Nigeria (Iwayemi, 2006). The Nigerian government enacted laws to claim ownership of all mineral deposits, including crude oil, in any part of the country. In April 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that the federal government should control offshore petroleum deposits. This ruling was enforced despite the Niger Delta States' petitions for an increase in revenue allocation from 13% to 50% of oil resources derived from each state. Exploitation in oil exploration and violation of the rights of communities as a result of the promulgation of obnoxious laws has intensified violent conflicts among emerging interest groups in the Niger Delta.

The internal conflicts involve elite groups, youth organizations, urban residents and rural communities. Of the two major external opponents, the multinational oil companies are in more physical contact with the communities and their expropriated inhabitants. The deprived communities have made more demands for social services from the oil companies compared to the often unreliable Nigerian government. However, the oil companies have collaborated with the Nigerian government in the process of applying violence as a means of pacifying the protesting communities (Pegg, 1999).

The numerous negative environmental impacts of crude oil mining and refining have been documented. Pollution arising from oil spillage destroys marine life and crops, makes water unsuitable for fishing and renders many hectares of farmland unusable. Besides, state aggression against the Niger Delta communities has taken four main forms, namely: constant harassment of the leaders of popular movements and organizations; instigating inter-communal conflicts, especially along ethnic, religious and clan lines; instigating internal division of popular organizations, and direct repression using the army and police. As such, national security and security of oil companies take precedence over the needed concerns for local inhabitants and environment in the politics of oil.

The aggression of the Nigerian State against the Niger Delta was experienced by the Ijaw ethnic minority in Bayelsa State between 1998 and 1999 through the Egbesu wars and Odi massacre. The Nigerian army invaded Odi in 1999, killing hundreds of people in the process and practically razed down the once thriving town. In the highly-volatile creeks of the Western Delta, particularly in Delta State, military patrols have killed hundreds of people, ostensibly in trying to dislodge armed gangs that steal crude oil and abduct oil workers. The situation has worsened since April 2004, when a team of Chevron workers returning to land from an offshore facility ran into a gang of oil thieves. Unfortunately, the
Chevron workers had a military patrol escorting them and in the ensuing shootout between the soldiers and robbers, two Americans and five Nigerians in the Chevron team were killed (Ibeanu, 2006).

This has led to the displacement and death of many people, especially women and children. In many cases, state officials and oil companies either generate or fuel conflicts through their antics of ‘divide and rule’. This trajectory of conflict has been worsened by party politics since 1999. In Warri, shortly after the inauguration of the new civilian government in May/June 1999, violence broke out and almost 200 people were killed in raids and counter raids by Itsekiri and Ijaw ethnic militias. This violence was so brutal that the Governor of Delta State (James Ibori) imposed a curfew (Ibeanu, 2006). The level of violence in the region remains relatively high and the acrimonious relationships of the communities, the Nigerian government and oil companies persist. Oil politics, creation of states and redrawing of ethnic boundaries were significant factors fuelling violence (Otite, 2000; Mustapha, 1998). The bases of contestation that emerged from state creation have direct bearing on youth militancy in the Niger Delta. The youths’ actions are based on the understanding that the Nigerian state and oil companies have benefited immensely from oil in the Niger Delta since it was discovered in commercial quantities in 1956 (Owabukerye, 2000; Eteng, 1997; Gbadegesin, 1997). Paradoxically, oil exploration has adversely affected the Niger Delta communities for over five decades and this has been the driving force for the rising state of violence in the region.

The environmental consequences and the resultant underdevelopment of the Niger Delta communities, as a result of oil exploration connect with internal and external production forces. The Nigerian oil industry has fashioned a remarkable economic growth for the country, but its activities have adversely affected fishing and farming, which are the traditional occupations in the region. The upsurge in oil exploration has intensified farm land pollution, increase in the magnitude of landless farmers, and rural urban pressures. These situations are current antinomies of development in the Niger Delta. Gbadegesin (1997: 9) demonstrated that:

Apart from loss of farms, oil spills have led to extensive deforestation with no adequate replanting practices...this in effect has shortened fallow periods, compounded land use degradation and led to a loss of soil fertility and consequently erosion of the top soil.

State actions such as the 1969 Petroleum Act and 1978 Land Use Decree worsened the situation as they were primarily promulgated to restrict community access to land. Conversely, the Nigerian government granted multinational investors unrestricted access to explore communal land for oil exploration. Local elites in the oil producing communities have reacted violently against the state and oil companies through social movements and the use of militia tactics. They organized their movements to challenge an inequitable transfer of oil resources in the Niger Delta to the detriment of the local people in the region. Similarly, unequal exchange relationship between the core and the periphery occurred in Latin America, Africa and other developing countries. These regions witnessed the failure of the intensification of export drive of primary natural resources as the basis for modernization and development of the periphery. The Niger Delta is a classical model of enormous environmental degradation, resulting from oil exploration for export. Eteng’s (1997: 21) description shows the picture as follows:

What currently prevails in the Nigerian Southern oil enclave is a specific variant of internal colonialism...The specific, highly exploitative...relations between the Nigerian state and the oil-bearing communities explains why the enormous oil wealth generated is scarcely reflected in the living standard and life chances of the peasant inhabitants of the oil-bearing enclave...The beneficiaries have always remained the
government in power, multinational corporations and multilateral funding agencies.

The above picture corresponds with the key finding by Collier and Hoeffler (2005: 625): “Case studies as well as cross-country studies suggest that countries with abundant natural resources are highly prone to violent conflict.” These scholars specifically cited the case of the Niger Delta as shown below:

...in the Delta region of Nigeria, large-scale organized crime is "bunkering" (i.e., stealing) oil from pipelines to the scale of around $1 billion per year, selling it in East Asia. There is obviously scope for this massive criminal activity to link with the political secessionists of the Delta region. Resources can motivate conflict, especially in the form of secessions. Secessionists not only claim ownership of the resources, they also claim that the national authorities are misusing the money – that it is being embezzled by distant elites. Perhaps the best defense against such secessionist pressures is to make the secessionists look greedy. To achieve this, national governments should probably link resource revenues to some basic social service such as primary education (Collier and Hoeffler, 2005: 632)

While several studies largely subscribe to the assumption that resource-endowed communities are prone to violence and underdevelopment, the argument could be misleading. The models of resource-endowed peaceful countries such as Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Canada, Australia, the USA and the United Kingdom have clearly negated such ‘resource curse’ thesis. For instance, the relatively peaceful Norwegian society had relied on raw materials export and combined economic growth with an egalitarian distribution of income long before its discovery of oil (Cappelen and Mjøset, 2009). The logic of resource curse can be dispelled in this guise.

Conflict Management Strategies in the Niger Delta
Conflict resolution attempts in the Niger Delta are diverse. Communities in the Niger Delta have attempted to resolve conflicts in the region through several measures such as community meetings, dialogues, petitions, the mass media, and litigations (Onosode, 2003). These strategies have resulted in popular demands for political empowerment, mitigation of environmental degradation, resource control and sustainable development (Osaghae, 1998).

Some of these demands formed parts of the objectives of commissions such as the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPDEC), the Niger Delta Development Commission (NNDC), the Delta State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (DESOPADEC), the Ondo State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (OSOPADEC) and the Ministry of the Niger Delta. However, a major loophole in these commissions is the lack of wide consultations with the majority of people in the Niger Delta.

As a result of the failure of various commissions to promote participatory action and learning (PLA) for peace in the Niger Delta, civil societies including non-government organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) and religious groups have contributed to the management of conflicts in the Niger Delta, using different measures such as advocacies, conferences, workshops, public enlightenment and prayer (Onosode, 2003). These measures have however not been adequately integrated with official actions taken by oil companies and the Nigerian state.

In their attempts to contribute towards the management of conflicts in the Niger Delta, oil companies in the region have embarked on development projects such as construction of roads, provision of health centres, electrification, employment opportunities, and scholarship schemes. Actions taken by the oil companies to mitigate conflicts in the region remain inadequate, hence the perennial hostility between the oil companies and their host communities.
Besides the conflict management strategies of oil companies and communities in the Niger Delta, the state has intervened through the establishment of commissions and the deployment of armed forces, including the police and the military. The coerciveness of the state strategy in the management of conflicts in the Niger Delta resulted in the futility of such measure, thereby fuelling the spate of militancy in the region. In recognition of the futility of the continued use of force in the management of conflicts in the Niger Delta, the Nigerian government granted the militants opportunities to embrace amnesty in order to ensure lasting peace. The state endorsement of amnesty is an indication of a paradigm shift in the management of conflicts in the Niger Delta. The security situation in the Niger Delta in the post-amnesty period deserves urgent attention, which can be examined in a separate study.

Various dilemmas in the Niger Delta conflict management strategies were vividly described by Ibeanu (2000: 18) as shown in the following passage:

*The shady modus operandi of oil companies and the incompetence and corruption of state officials, ensured that neither took responsibility for the enormous environmental and social damages caused by crude oil production. Frustrated, the people of the Niger Delta took up arms against petrobusiness and its political allies. The failure of a violent final solution to the community resistance, a tactic favoured by successive military dictatorships, inevitably led to calls for a reassessment of the petroleum industry in Nigeria, and particularly the need for a new conflict management regime in Nigeria's oil belt. Presently, these calls are even more pronounced since the inauguration of an elected government in May 1999 appears not to have assuaged the people's needs of the Niger Delta. As late as November 1999, there were very violent clashes between youths and security forces in the communities of Choba in Rivers State and Odi in Bayelsa State. In the case of the Odi, the new civilian administration surprisingly called in the army, which sacked the entire community, killed over 100 inhabitants, and destroyed property running into billions of Nigerian naira.*

In light of the above, it is apparent that the effectiveness of any conflict resolution strategy lies in addressing the interest of majority of the people in the society. Expectedly, the coexistence of traditional and modern conflict management strategies can be considered in the development of processes of conflict resolution in the Niger Delta. Surprisingly, the state interventions in the management of conflicts in the Niger Delta negate the principles of mediation, thereby providing an avenue for further escalation of conflicts in the region. An emerging weakness in the attempts made to ensure peace in the Niger Delta flows from lack of consensus on security knowledge among different groups in the region (Ibeanu, 2000). While the local communities perceive security in terms of reduction in oil exploitation and capacity building for resource control and environmental protection, the Nigerian government and oil companies understand security in terms of uninterrupted exploration of oil.

**Materials and Methods**

The study was conducted in the Niger Delta offshore communities, characterized by large quantities of oil exploration and prevalence of violence. Both secondary and primary data were gathered for the study. The secondary data included various (empirical) studies of conflict and violence in the Niger Delta. The primary data consisted of information obtained from 24 key informants selected through a combination of purposive and chain referral sampling methods. Four communities (Warri, Escravos, Okrika and Nembe) were selected based on their proximity to the oil exploration spots and violence scenes in the Niger Delta. Using a chain referral sampling technique, key informants (adults who held leadership positions and consecutively lived in their communities for 30 years) were contacted for interviews and requested to introduce other key
members among the various groups in their communities.

The respondents for the study comprised four youth activists, eight community-religious leaders, four managerial staff of oil companies, four officials of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and four members of the National Union of Petroleum Engineering and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG). Key Informant Interview was employed to gather information from all the 24 respondents selected from six groups across four communities in the Niger Delta. The different groups were interviewed separately in the selected communities. In line with ethical principles in social science research, the purpose of the study was communicated to the respondents for obtaining their consent and assent.

Four research assistants were employed from among the indigenes of the study area, to obtain an insider's perspective of the problem under investigation. Their understanding of local idioms and cultural oaths facilitated acceptance and encouraged the respondents to freely express their opinions. The atmosphere of the interview was so relaxed that the respondents freely narrated their experiences and aspirations. All the 24 respondents participated actively in the key informant semi-structured interview conducted by the four research assistants in different places, including homes and offices, depending on the preferences of the respondents and the importance of conducting interviews in a natural setting (Johnson, 2002; Eder and Fingerson, 2002; Seidman, 1991).

In keeping with a semi-structured approach to interviewing (Seidman, 1991), interview protocols were developed but were used primarily as a guide while following the narratives of each respondent, who was asked questions covering different topics, such as: chronic problems and new trend of conflicts in the Niger Delta, memories of encounter with militant youths, factors fuelling violent conflicts and perception of possible solutions to youth militancy and hostage taking in the Niger Delta. Most interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, but six interviews lasted more than one hour. The primary data were collected in four communities from 9th July to 16th August 2007. All interviews were conducted in either English or Pidgin. The data were transcribed and translated verbatim in the process of using ZY Index and ethnographic technique for data analysis.

Findings
Narratives of the New Trend of Violent Conflicts in the Niger Delta
The age of the respondents ranged from 25 years to 70 years. Twenty men and four women participated in the study. Their socioeconomic background varied widely. There was a general agreement on escalation of conflicts and severity of violence in the Niger Delta. Awareness was high about the prevalence of militant youths in the Niger Delta. There was a general agreement amongst the respondents that militant youths have multiplied and expanded their scope of operations. The activities of the militant youths vary from oil bunkering to pipeline vandalism. They also engage in other heinous crimes. The multinational companies and the Niger Delta communities are disturbed about the increase in the spate of violent activities by the militant youth. An elder stated as follows:

Militant youths are many nowadays. They are in different groups. Some are in much organised groups while some are just operating on their own. Among the group that is not well organised their members are not many because we see them. They are here with us but we can't say this is where they live...You only see them when they are parading on the water.

Different organizations, including the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), and the Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV) were mentioned to be directly associated with youth militancy. The MOSOP was established in 1990 at the early beginnings of military repression of the minority ethnic communities of the Niger Delta. It was established to serve as the umbrella organization for
the Ogoni people. In 2003 and 2004, the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), led by Asari Dokubo, and the Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV), led by Tom Ateke, became more popular in Okrika as a result of their violent clashes. These militant youth organizations have become the most dreaded armed gangs in the Niger Delta. Some respondents described the militant youths as political thugs used by powerful political elites to settle political scores during political crises. Their privileged positions give them the impetus for the possession of modern arms and ammunition. They are generally well-equipped and can challenge any organization operating in the Niger Delta. The following comments shed light on the power of the militant youths:

The militant youths forced organizations to pay development fee. Oil companies pay millions of naira to each community as development fee every year... during festivals, they ask for donation of money and other materials like rice, cloth, drinks, goats, cows, and all sorts of things. The militant youths are deadly, when you see them, you see them with guns, not like the kind of gun you see with the Nigeria Police or ordinary soldier, their own gun is correct riflle...AK 47, have you ever seen this type of gun before, ok? You will see the gun with many of the militants that move around in this area. They move in groups, it is rare for one militant youth to move alone. They move in groups. They are different from ordinary people around the Niger Delta. They put red ribbon on their heads. They also use the ribbon on their guns. They move in different directions but one may not be too sure of where they are heading to.

It was gathered that the attack of militants goes beyond oil companies. They are involved in piracy and other crimes. Cases of militant attack on politicians were also mentioned as other sources of worries among communities in the Niger Delta. The respondents stated that the militant youths might attack government officials whom they alleged to have misappropriated funds in collusion with oil companies. Militant youths have been collecting ransom from their captives. On their part, oil companies argued that the militant youths maliciously targeted their installations and workers for selfish motives. It was mentioned that the oil companies had spent more on security than on development of their host communities. One respondent states as follows:

We employ hundreds of naval men, we employ hundreds of soldiers, we spend on security daily and we give allowances to our security personnel. The daily allowance we pay alone can be used for better things in the host community if there is peace.

It is quite evident that oil companies have recognized the fact that an atmosphere of peace is needed in order to promote development in the Niger Delta. It is believed that expenditure on security issues remains costly and has affected funding of development projects in the region. A recent study by Ihaba (2009) provided an illustration of the interdependence between development and peace building. The study also explained some linkages between democracy and development as well as the strategic roles of the civil society organizations (CSOs) in peace building.

Factors fuelling Violent Conflicts in the Niger Delta
The informants expressed different views on the factors that fuelled conflicts in the Niger Delta. They emphasized the role of the internal divisions among the elders in the communities, activities of the oil companies, insensitivity of the Nigerian government to the dilapidation of social infrastructure, and increase in the number of militant youths. Some informants mentioned poverty and ignorance, which they said impacted negatively on living standards of the aggrieved people and prevented them from knowing when to fight and when not to fight. Other factors include restlessness, aggression and hostility. This group believed that poverty and ignorance were
Youth unemployment has also contributed to rising violence in the Niger Delta as demonstrated below:

They give better jobs to their own people. They only reserve petty jobs for few of our own people. They give better jobs to workers who are foreigners. All their technical jobs go to the foreign workers. It is these foreign workers who know the secret of the oil industry and they will not tell anybody. Even our people that are working with them are only doing menial jobs and they will never allow our people to move close to certain areas of operation. How can there be peace if there is no trust? Our people are suffering. The politicians do not live here so they are pretending that everything is alright. But if you go down the waterside, you will see that people are left to fend for themselves. There is no good water to drink. Our children die of diseases; our youth don’t have sound education. Everybody is frustrated.

Another respondent mentioned that:

Oil companies, very powerful set of people! They are controlling everywhere. They can tell the government what to do. Do they even trust the government? I don’t think so, because after governments give them soldiers and police to protect them they also use their own security gadgets which they use to intimidate people. Without iron hand, it will be difficult to face them.

A religious leader however expressed a contrary opinion as follows:

The oil companies work hand in hand with the communities to promote development. They set up skills acquisition centres to train youths in different vocations. The problem is with the youths themselves. Many of them are not ready to work. In some cases the oil companies give employment to natives, they give them slot of jobs, sometimes the oil companies ask the community to bring names of job applicants for immediate employment. However, the major problem is that many of the youths that are causing violence don’t want work. They already have money. Even if they are given employment on a platter of gold, rather than resume for work they prefer to sell the slot of their jobs to non-indigenes by collecting ransom depending on the type of job and the salary. In some cases they give their jobs to other people and reach agreement with their beneficiary so that they get their own share of the salary every month.

Mechanisms for Resolving Violent Conflicts in the Niger Delta

There was no general agreement among the informants regarding the possibility of eradicating cases of hostage taking and youth militancy in the Niger Delta. Some of the informants said the crises would continue. The majority said community participation and collective dialogues, recognition of the needs of the people of the Niger Delta, removal of the state coercive apparatus and improved social responsibilities of oil companies in the Niger Delta.
could reduce the spate of crises in the Niger Delta. It was generally agreed that different conflict resolution strategies and continuous surveillance would be needed to achieve lasting peace. The respondents from the oil companies said that the government capacity for providing a secure environment for their operations was weak. It was however mentioned that the militant youths could not overthrow the management of the oil companies. They saw the existing moves towards eradicating conflicts as inadequate. They argued that until the conflict situation is brought under control, tangible development would not occur in the Niger Delta. Some respondents maintained that as long as the Nigerian government refuses to rework the formula for resource control and provide all the needs of the people of the Niger Delta there would be no peace in the country. It was mentioned that the Nigerian government is only interested in exploiting the God-given oil resources that belong to the people of the Niger Delta. It was also stated that oil mining and exploration have been detrimental to the Niger Delta communities.

One informant quoted a Marxian dictum as follows:

*If peace is desirable violent conflict is inevitable. This is the belief of an average Ijaw youth; nobody can cheat us and go away, never!*

For this respondent, however, violence is a means of ensuring peace in the Niger Delta. This opinion is equivalent to the Marxist revolutionary approach to problem solving, unlike Gandhi's non-violent change perspective.

**Discussion of Findings**

The study circumscribed the views of different groups including youth activists, community/religious leaders, oil companies, members of oil workers union, and government officials. These groups narrated their experiences on violent conflicts, including youth militancy and hostage taking. As shown in the findings, conflict was considered a major problem in the Niger Delta. It has been a major obstacle to the socioeconomic development in the area. The increasing rate of vandalization of oil installations, kidnapping of oil workers and communal conflicts were attributed to the prevalence of youth militancy and hostage taking in the region. Militants have reportedly launched several attacks against oil companies despite Yar’ Adua government’s offer of amnesty to make them disarm and stop violent activities, including bombings, kidnapping, and killing in the region. The rising insecurity occasioned by the militancy has adversely affected the socioeconomic activities in the region. The major oil companies such as Shell, Chevron and Agip recorded a substantial decline in output by several thousands of barrels per day (Ibaba, 2009).

Popular militant organizations like the MOSOP, the NDPVF, the NDV and the MEND were described as very powerful and deadly. For instance, the MEND was perceived by many government officials as an underground group specialising in the abduction of oil workers for ransom. Government perception of the militant youths has raised the tempo of secret military operations in which many local people are tortured and summarily executed in remote creeks and mangrove forests.

The protracted conflicts in the Niger Delta were attributed to different factors. Rather than focussing on a monolithic perspective, an idiographic approach was applied in the explanation of conflicts in the Niger Delta. However, much of the blame was shifted on the Nigerian government and the multinational oil companies operating in the region. Therefore, the collusion of internal and external pressures was recognized as the principal factor fuelling the escalation of conflicts in the Niger Delta. To match the collusion of forces, however, local attempts have been strengthened through youth agency and adoption of the ideology of revolutionary movements with clandestine guerrilla tactics. The situation in the Niger Delta finds expression in scholars’ observation that oppression generates resistance (Anderson and Collins, 1998).

Similarly, the militant youths in the Niger Delta seem to have joined forces with established
organizations for training and procurement of arms and ammunition. Following the murder of Ken Saro Wiwa and his colleagues, militant groups have increased and become more violent. The Niger Delta is presently regarded as a region of violence. However, the region used to be a peaceful region of fun loving people. In the 1980s and 1990s, some organizations such as the Association of Minority Oil States (AMOS) and the MOSOP employed peaceful protests against the neglect of the Niger Delta. Following Nigeria’s return to ‘democracy’ in 1999, organized militant groups emerged from the dominant political parties to intensify the process of demanding economic and political justice for the region (Kporupuo, 2007). Clearly, the emergence of different militant groups is political. The state of assassinations of top politicians of the Niger Delta since 2003 is evidence that youth militancy is political. Dr. Marshall Harry was assassinated in March 2003 and Chief A.K. Dikibo in February 2004. In August 2004, 6 people were killed, 50 houses were razed and about 6,000 were rendered homeless when an armed gang thought to be members of the NDPVF raided the Njemanze waterfront in Port Harcourt. The attack was believed to be linked to the struggle between the NDPVF, led by Asari Dokubo, and the NDV, led by Ateke Tom, both members of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Rivers State. Also in December 2004, a gang of armed youths believed to be members of the Egbesu cult, attacked the convoy of the Rivers State Governor, Dr. Peter Odili, along the East-West Road in Port Harcourt. The fact that even the Governor was a target of gang attack shows a heightened level of political conflict and insecurity in the region.

Contradictory realities have thrown up the conflicting relationship between the militant youths and other groups in the oil producing communities in the Niger Delta. The privatization and ethnicization of politics in Nigeria has resulted in a resource distribution system that alienates oil producing communities from the oil wealth. State legislations on the oil industry and manipulations of the revenue allocation system have made this possible (Ibaba, 2007). This study confirms the findings that the causes of the conflict are complex and interrelated, although material deprivation is central to it. It highlights oil-based environmental degradation induced productivity losses and occupational disorientation, inadequate compensation for damages caused by activities of oil industries, poor channels of communication by oil companies, and failed community development programmes of oil companies as factors fuelling the conflicting relationship.

There is an agreement on the dire developmental situation and living conditions of the people of the Niger Delta and the need to increase the oil revenue accruing to the Niger Delta communities. There is a broad agreement on the legal, political and practical obstacles to the attainment of peace in the Niger Delta. Emphasis was placed on the intensive oil resource extraction which has resulted in environmental degradation, pollution, and poverty in the Niger Delta communities. The crosslink of these factors culminates in a complex exploitative relationship to the detriment of local communities. The intensification of oil export since the early 1960s led to deprivation, violence, and socioeconomic neglect in the region (Iwayemi, 2006; Owabukerye, 2000). The dramatic escalation of resource control conflict in the Niger Delta is anchored on economic deprivation and inequality in oil revenue distribution. These problems characterize fragile states and countries that lack the capacity to discharge their normal functions and drive forward development. However, the weak institutions, poverty, social inequalities, corruption, civil strife, armed conflicts and civil war are not original conditions, but are rooted in specific historical contexts (Osaghae, 2007). It is important to understand the internal and external factors if the problems are to be solved.

Unfortunately, the efforts to overcome some of these obstacles remain inadequate. The efforts of the Nigerian government in addressing conflicts in the Niger Delta have not produced the desired results. The OMPADEC and the NDDC could have helped to resolve conflicts in the area. The NDDC was established in 2000 to replace the military-driven
OMPADEC. Generally, inadequate attention has been paid to the provision of facilities like education, health, roads, electricity and potable water by both government and oil companies. However, these facilities are available at oil installations, making oil companies arenas of affluence in deprived communities. The OMPADEC failed to execute several projects and it was scrapped. The NDDC took over in January 2001, with a relatively high capital base. Although little progress has been made in the area of human rights, social conditions remain appalling.

Violent clashes involving various militant groups and the Nigerian government’s Joint Task Force (JTF) escalated between 2004 and 2009 despite the establishments of the NDDC in 2000 and a new ministry (the Ministry for Niger Delta Affairs) in September 2008. The ministry shares similar goals (infrastructure development and youth empowerment) with the NDDC but both are not being adequately funded and are yet to harmonize their similar institutional frameworks for development of the region. The sum of ₦47 billion ($314 million) was allocated to the ministry in Nigeria’s 2009 budget, while ₦27 billion ($180 million) was earmarked for the NDDC, which received between ₦58 billion ($387 million) and ₦79 billion ($527 million) in the 2007 budget (International Crisis Group, 2009). The situation in the Niger Delta show that the majority of the population still lack basic amenities. In recognition of this fact and the need to revamp the NDDC, the Nigerian government launched a master plan (Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan) in March 2007 for sustainable development based on stakeholders’ inputs. The master plan designed to be implemented over fifteen years covers 25 sectors, including health, education, transportation, and agriculture. In contrast, the leadership of the Ministry for Niger Delta has embarked on touring the region to solicit views on modalities for managing the region’s crisis. Over 92 attacks on oil companies were recorded in 2008 and as a result, crude oil exports have fallen to 1.6 million barrels per day (bpd) in March 2009, down from 2.6 million bpd in 2006. Nigeria lost at least $23.7 billion to oil theft and sabotage in the first nine months of 2008, and about 1,000 people were killed within the same period. The attacks adversely affected various oil companies like the Shell Petroleum Company, whose production declined from nearly 1 million bpd in 2004 to 300,000 bpd in March 2009 (International Crisis Group, 2009).

The Nigerian government’s Joint Task Force (JTF) intensified efforts resulting in a raid on three communities (Soku, Kula and Tombia) of Rivers State in September 2008 in the process of searching for leaders of a militant group. In view of this raid, the MEND declared an ‘oil war’ which led to repeated attacks on oil companies and death of several people in the Niger Delta. The MEND later declared a unilateral ceasefire but revoked it on 30th January, 2009, following an attack on the camps of its leader (Ateke Tom) by the JTF. The militants launched a reprisal attack on a civilian helicopter in the Niger Delta on 25th February, 2009 through a general purpose machine gun (GPMG), which seriously wounded at least one passenger and forced the local Aero Contractor-operated Sikorsky to make an emergency landing (International Crisis Group, 2009). Many of the militant youths are not united. The oil companies and the Nigerian state rely on military approach to solving the problem. However, the military solution has not helped much. Many militant youths continue to unleash terror in the Niger Delta. The militant youths have spearheaded the political resistance against state oppression in the region. Addressing the situation would require a synergy of peace to be derived from different theoretical perspectives and strategic thinking, combined with practical actions. The realm of social integration is very important in the analysis of peaceful resolution of conflict. It concerns actors and their actions and how they relate to structural change. The fundamental elements that constitute a society can be connected in defining the elementary conditions under which the society can be regarded to have undergone transformation (Liu, 2006: 505). A positive transformation is urgently needed in Nigeria as various elements of the stratification order disagree on existing patterns of power relations.
Nigeria's non-oil sector, which generated about 75 per cent of Nigeria's total revenue in the early 1970s, appeared to have been neglected since the oil boom period of the middle 1970s, such that it only contributed 22.5 per cent of the total revenue in 1975. Its contributions to total revenue dropped further to 18.9 per cent in 1980, increased again to 25.3 per cent in 1985 and fell to 16.1 per cent in 1992. On the other hand, the oil sector presently contributes close to 95 per cent of export revenues (Guseh and Oritsejafor, 2007). In spite of the tremendous resource-endowments, Nigeria remains underdeveloped, even after about fifty years of its political independence from Britain.

Conclusion and Policy Implications
The study has demonstrated that diverse groups in the Niger Delta recognized protracted conflicts, youth militancy and hostage taking as priority issues. Addressing these issues is viewed as critical in the process of promoting development. This partly explains the justification for the willingness and enthusiasm they displayed during the study. The forces associated with the proliferation of violent conflicts are complex and a holistic approach is required to deal with them. The observed multi-factorial forces fuelling conflicts throw up a significant challenge and drives home the importance of incorporating local understanding and community efforts towards a collective peaceful conflict resolution.

The present government and oil companies have agreed to facilitate renewed interests in conflict management. However, their approaches to resolving the crises remain coercive and their attention to local conditions and divergent stories of the risk of neglect are weak. Much of their strategies are quite dismissive of local concerns and preferences of militant youths. The government's strategies, including the master plan approach and the establishment of the Ministry for Niger Delta Affairs are yet to address the forces sustaining violence in the Niger Delta. These forces include frustration, chronic deprivation, corruption and ignorance.

The coincidence between the establishment of the Ministry for Niger Delta Affairs and the JTF-driven violent raid on militants in some Niger Delta communities exposes a contradiction in the extant strategies for development and conflict resolution. Similarly, the militants' revocation of ceasefire is another contradiction in the emerging negotiation for peace and stability in Nigeria. This barrage of contradictions is grounded within the political economy of underdevelopment in Nigeria. Any attempt to redeem this situation must flow from the context of the Nigerian society because social context is critically important to the successful completion of developmental tasks. A policy measure that ignores the people as primary change agents is bound to fail. As proved by Scott and Steinberg (2008), sanctions that effectively invest in the human capital and facilitate transition to adulthood are likely to promote the development of a society.

The solution to the intractable conflicts in the Niger Delta can be found within a framework of youth agency, local cultures and fragile state redemption. A major issue that came up during the survey is the critical importance of infrastructural development. It was emphasized that rapid transformation of the Niger Delta is likely to motivate the militant youths to genuinely lay down their arms. The success of peace-making initiatives in the Niger Delta communities will be guaranteed if the unequal exchange relationship that placed the region in a disadvantaged position is balanced. In this regard, the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies can promote peace and tranquility if they collectively agree to put the Niger Delta at the centre of their priorities. Furthermore, private-public partnership can help to speed up the development of the Niger Delta through provision of modern technological facilities and social welfare package that can transfer the region from its present dungeon to an industrial area. The hideout of the militant youths should be opened up and replaced with broad streets, tarred roads, regular lights, modern schools and information and communication technology centres.
A.A. Akinwale: Curtailing Conflicts in the Resource-Endowed Niger Delta Communities of Nigeria

However, the solution goes beyond employment creation for the youths. A major issue raised by some respondents is that some of the youths lack basic education and would not wish to go back to school, considering their age, coupled with the fact that they have been gaining immensely from violence. There is therefore an urgent need for revamping Nigeria’s political economy to accommodate an effective management of resources through forward and backward linkages. This process must be anchored on a good-quality institutional framework. An efficient institutional framework of development and effective management of resources can counteract rent seeking activities, which have been building structures that expose the Niger Delta to crisis.

References


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