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## **The Dynamics of Sustained Environmental Resource Crisis in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: A Theoretical Periscope** (*Pp. 355-368*)

**Ogege Samuel Omadjohwoefe** - Department of Sociology, Delta State University Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria

**Ewhrudjakpor Christian** - Department of Sociology, Delta State University, Abraka, Delta State Nigeria: [acadchris@yahoo.com](mailto:acadchris@yahoo.com)  
Phone: +2348035784715

### **Abstract**

*The Niger Delta region of Nigeria witnessed a remarkable upsurge in environmental resource crisis as a result of the presence of oil multinationals in the region. The mass media flash before the public a vivid and multi varied images of violent behaviour that characterized social interactions in the region. The youths in the Niger Delta whose occupational aspirations are blocked due to persistent hydrocarbon extraction in their region resorted to violent behaviour as a rational response to the monumental deprivation and marginalization by the multinational oil companies and their accomplice in the Nigerian state. The paper adopts George Homan's social exchange theory in providing understanding for the sustained environmental resource crisis. The paper argues that the sustenance of youth violent oriented behaviour is a natural outgrowth of the social exchange relationship that exist between people of oil bearing communities and the various actors in the hydrocarbon extraction companies. The paper suggests the options of real fiscal autonomy for the federating units, resource control, creating employment and skill acquisition scheme for the displaced youths as mitigation measures to curb the age long environmental resource crisis in the Niger Delta.*

## **Introduction**

The environment constitutes an integral component of the indigenous cosmogony of the Niger Delta people and Africa as a whole. The people worshiped or even venerated the environment, gave it names that reflect the popular myth associated with the traditional milieu. As Jike (2002) rightly noted, in some areas, fecundity rites were routinely performed on the environment as a symbolic demonstration of the sustenance of the environment in local agrarian and related economic pursuits.

The inhabitants mainly the youths had a ready zeal to meet their economic needs. These economic needs compelled the inhabitants to make deliberate efforts to modify their environment according to the dictates of basic requirements of existence. Anchored on the principle of environmental determinism, their present needs and the technology at hand, obviously influence their occupational activities.

The major economic and occupational activities of the Niger Delta people were farming, fishing, hunting, palm oil production etc. However, it should be noted that occupational activities vary significantly from one region to another. Those who settle in a particular zone or area exploit the resources that the environment has in abundance. Thus, those that settle in coastal areas take to fishing while those that settle in upland take to farming as their predominant occupational activities.

People with farming as their sole occupational activities do compliment with other economic activities for instance, the Urhobos of Delta and Bayelsa states sometimes take to fishing during rainy season when the land for farming is either flooded or inaccessible. It is the same with those who live in other ecozones. The implication of this occupational arrangement is that everybody in traditional communities in the Niger Delta is occupationally engaged throughout the year.

The economic activities of the people thus reveal that, in spite of their difficult terrain, the Niger Delta environment still offer something in form of occupation. With this occupational arrangements in place, both young and old had variety of occupations to choose from. In other words, virtually everybody was gainfully employed. People of all ages could meet their needs with the available resource and the technology of their time.

The Niger Delta environment witnessed a fundamental modification with the discovery of hydrocarbon (Schatzl 1969, Pearson 1970, 1974). The exploitation was significantly different from the initial exploitation of agricultural resources by the European explorers. Unlike the previous exploitation that made use of the skill of the indigenes, hydrocarbon extraction requires expatriates (as 'we are made to believe) as a result of the high technology needed for its exploration and exploitation. Another aspect of dissimilarity is in its negative impacts. Hydrocarbon extraction has a lot of negative impact in terms of environmental degradation and social disequilibrium (Jike, 2004, Jike & Ogege, 2005).

As a result of the unique characteristics of hydrocarbon extraction, the traditional practices of farming, fishing and related economic activities underwent alterations. Gradually the inhabitants become displaced in their traditional occupations. The displacement became severe as hydrocarbon extraction was intensified. The paper therefore seeks to examine the environmental resource crisis as an outcome or response by the youth to occupational displacement. The paper also attempt an overview of the Niger Delta environment, pattern of violent oriented behaviour as response by the displaced youths, provide a theoretical explanation for the sustained violent response and finally provide some mitigation options to the persistent environmental resource crisis.

### **The Niger Delta Ecozones and Major Economic Activities**

The Niger Delta is a vast expanse of land mass in the south of Nigeria which extends eastward Of longitude 4.30° E to the Nigeria-Cameroun border and bounded by the Atlantic Ocean. It lies within some 22 estuaries that are linked locally by a complicated network of mangrove creeks rich in wetland biodiversity among others -he region is also characterized by an immense complexity of many s\vamps, creeks, rivers and estuaries possessed of seasonal inundation during flood periods.

The region is one of the largest wet land in the world covering an area of nearly 26, 000km<sup>2</sup> with various ecological zones, lowland, rainforest, fresh water, mangrove forest and sand coastal barriers. These ecozones cut across a heterogeneous, multi ethnically diverse states namely: Abia, Akwa-lbom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers (Durotoye, 2000). Niger Delta region is characterized by occupational distributions which are mainly farming, fishing, traditional mangrove exploitation, raffia/oil palm

exploitation, and port and associated activities. This occupational distribution is dictated by the ecozones in the region. (See table).

From the table above, the Niger Delta region has four ecozones. These ecozones dictate the settlement pattern and economic activities there in. It should be noted that hydro-carbons are abundantly evident in all the ecozones hence oil extraction is the only economic activity that cut across all the ecozones in the region. This explains why the contributions of the Niger Delta region in terms of oil and gas to the Nigerian state cannot be overemphasized. Presently, this richly endowed region contributes almost 90% of Nigerian annual income through exploitation of crude oil and gas.

The ecozone also reveal that the region has more water than land. The network of rivers flowing over an expansive flat terrain of the Niger Delta makes the region vulnerable to flooding. As a result of this, the region is characterized principally by sparsely populated rural settlements occupying isolated dry sites or islands within the swamps. Large settlements are found in areas where drainage condition and accessibility are better of.

There is the abundance of environmental resources in the region. Every ecological zone presents various occupational options for the inhabitants irrespective of seasonal variations. In other words, in pre-crude oil extraction era, people solely engaged in the primary sector production.

The inhabitants extract raw materials and natural resources from their environment to meet their consumption requirements. The unemployment level was abysmally low as those who are capable and are willing to work must get themselves engaged in one economic activities or the other.

The availability of work alone does not give people the zeal to work. The zeal to work is inculcated in children in the early years of their lives. The virtue of hard work and focus to realize life's objectives constitute a vital aspect of the informal socialization curriculum in the Niger Delta and Africa in general (Muoboghare & Ogege, 2003). With these virtues well internalized in the early years of life, the children grow up as well rounded individuals willing to work hard and fit themselves into the occupational activities of their parents and other adults around them. This perfect cultural arrangement that abhorred indolence was altered few years after the multinational oil companies arrived the Niger Delta region.

### **Militant Behavioural Dispositions of Youths in the Niger Delta**

With the enormous contribution of the various communities in the Niger Delta to both the treasuries of the multinational oil companies and that of the Nigeria state, one could undoubtedly be tempted to say that the host communities will benefit immensely from the crude oil extraction. It is as a result of this tall order expectation of better standard of living that the oil yielding communities embraced the fast emergence of crude oil extraction industries. They had the belief that this new economic order could usher in better economic expansion where the inhabitants will be better engaged occupationally. It is partly these expectations that explain why the early years of oil exploration witnessed a harmonious social relationship between the inhabitants and the various actors in the extraction industries. This anticipation was underscored by Madume (1992). He contends that any community that was blessed with oil got their gods sanctified for the abundant blessing.

Paradoxically, rather than better the lot of the inhabitants, development is skewed in their disfavour. The trend is heightened as the multinationals intensify their exploration and exploitation. The overall picture is that those who ought to be in comfort now found themselves in pain and sorrow. The myriad of economic activities in the various ecozones which the people depended on are now truncated due to constant degradation of the environment occasioned by crude oil extraction. This adverse impact of oil exploration and exploitation of crude oil to the traditional environment and the various economic activities in the region left the people especially the youths in a most disadvantaged position.

Beside the deleterious consequences of their exploration activities, the people of the oil yielding communities began to see that infrastructural development which ought to be the companies' social responsibility was lacking. At this point, it was clear that the euphoria and anticipation of bettered lots were illusions. It is the dashed expectations that opened the floodgate of violent responses on the part of the Niger Delta youths. The position of the youths is vividly portrayed thus:

*The elders told us that peace and dialogue are the best options to get result. We listened to them and drop arms and look at what they have done to us over the years ... we now know that only violence can get results (Agbo 2006:27).*

The assertion suggests why the youths take to violence behaviour. As (Jike, 2004) rightly noted, the youths belong to the same social stratum; preponderantly unemployed, economically deprived and they collectively face a future with bleak prospects. The recognition of this common status tends to crystallize in a level of consciousness that push them to take appropriate social action to redress their disadvantaged position. The numerous ethnic youth militias in the region point to this fact.

The first militant behavioural disposition that marked the watershed in the violent agitation was that of Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro (Okey 1993). The Kaiama born revolutionary and then student of University of Nigeria Nsukka led a cream of Ijaw youths in a revolution. Justifying his action, as Niboro (1999) succinctly put it:

*We discovered that most of the youths were so frustrated with the general neglect and that they were ready for action.... Remember your poverty stricken people and then remember too your petroleum which is being drained out of your vain and then fight for your freedom.... (p. 28).*

Consequently on February 12, 1966 Adaka Boro mobilized militant youths under the auspices of the Niger Delta Volunteer Service. The militant youths held out striking, destroying and torpedoing. The agitating youths were overran by federal troops and Adaka Boro was arrested on February 24 and hurriedly charged for treason, convicted and sentenced to death in manners reminiscent of imperialist jungle justice (George 1999, Okaba, 2005).

Although the Adaka Boro's revolution lasted for only 12 days, it created dramatic impact on the Niger Delta people. It gave the initial awareness to the travails of oil exploration and the impetus for agitation. Akawa (1994) pointedly reminded us that the short lived revolution yielded dividend. According to him, it was to assuage the sublime feelings of the people of the Niger Delta that River state was created a year later precisely May 27, 1967. The Ogoni people of River State had over the years engage in a violent clash with Shell BP. Their action was necessitated by their inability to bear the chicanery and heartlessness of the company (Saro & Wiwa, 1990, Ake, 1994, Boele, 1995). The crux of the clash was in the 90's when an ethnic militia known as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People MOSOP came up with the Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR) (MOSOP 1992) some of the demands contained in the OBR were the right to the Ogoni people to comfort and use a fair proportion of their economic resources for their own development and

the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation. Sha'aba (1998) MOSOP contend that gave an ultimatum of 30 days to pay royalties and compensation or quit their land. Rowell 1994, Obi 2001 lends credence to MOSOP position.

Similar violent demonstrations were recorded in later years (Birabi 1995, Saro-wiwa 1995). In precisely May 21, 1994, the Ogoni experienced another violent clash in which militant youths killed 4 prominent leaders at Giokoo. (Biodun, 1995) Birnbaum, (1996), reported that it was this incident that led to the arrest and conviction of the environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others and their eventually execution in November 10, 1995.

Ihonvbere (2000) recorded a gruesome violent agitation in Bayelsa state - the hot bed of youth militancy. The Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) and the militant and seemingly invincible Egbesu Boys came into lime light and made their landmark declaration known as the Kaiama Declaration in (1998). The main part of the statement of the declaration read thus:

*All land and natural resources including mineral resource within the Ijaw territory belong to the Ijaw communities and are the basis of our survival ... we cease to recognize all undemocratic decrees that rob our people the right to ownership and control of our fives and resource. We demand the immediate withdrawal from Ijaw land of all military forces of occupation and repression by the Nigerian state.... (Kaiama Declaration 1998).*

The militant youths who were disrupted from registering their protest with the then state governor, Lt Col Paul Obi engaged the military forces in fierce battle. Niboro (1999) contends that the clash marked the beginning of hostilities between Ijaw youths and security forces. Following this ugly incident, the Egbesu Boys regrouped apparently ready for war having been in possession of sophisticated weapons of war. Nikoro aptly report thus:

*They engage both the navy and the army in fierce battles, with heavy casualties on both sides. In some cases, militant youths ransacked military formations, terrorized fleeing soldiers and became warlords in strategic locations; they were able to close down oil installations in the Niger Delta thereby grounding oil production (P. 14)*

However, the victory/of the militant youths was short lived. About 23 days after the declaration, Kaiama was subsequently turned a ghost town. Okonta and Douglas (1999) succinctly present another violent agitation in Odi, a sleepy community in Bayelsa state. The youths were alleged to have murdered 12 policemen out of the security forces dispatched to calm the protest on ecological devastation by multinational oil companies. The president upon that allegation deployed a troop with full complement of artillery, bombarded the reverine shanty village of Odi in November 1999 (Gbinije, 2001) President's Obasanjo's action on Odi according to Ogege (2002) was probably meant to avenge the Ijaws for humiliating the Ilaaje people his kinsmen from Ondo state.

In what appears to be like a replication of Adaka Boro's effort, Asari Dokubo rose to the challenge of addressing the deplorable impact of oil exploration on the host communities in the Niger Delta. With the aid of his Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) the oil companies operating in the creeks of Niger Delta were shut down. What he wanted as partly contained in his 10 point agenda is a holistic community development in the Niger Delta (Adegbamigbe, 2004).

In recent times the pattern of violent agitation has assumed a new shape; hostage taking. Youths of Ijaw ethnic nationalities claim that in addition to the adverse effect of oil exploration on their land, they are equally denied employment opportunities in oil companies in their areas and as a result resorted to hostage taking. According to Associated Press (2002) some 40 Ijaw youths from Amatu in Bayelsa state took 10 employees hostage aboard a Shell drilling rig of southern coast of Nigeria.

A group known as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) unleash orgy of violence on expatriates of the oil companies operating in the area. In December, 2005, the militant youths abducted 4 employees of Tidex and Ecodrill a contracting firm to Shell (Agbo 2006). In February 18 2006, Adekunbi (2006) reported that 9 expatriate were abducted in Delta State by militant youths. The entire hostage taking was necessitated by the spate of injustice in the Niger Delta by the oil multinationals and the Nigerian states.

### **Niger Delta Youths Violent Agitations: A Theoretical Anchorage**

A model of theoretical understand: ng that explains the sustenance of violent

agitation of youths in the Niger Delta is the social exchange theory. The theory has its root in behaviourism with social relationship as basic unit of analysis. The major proponents of the theory are George Homans, Peter Blau and a host of others (Ritzer 1996).

The main assumption of the social exchange theory is that human beings exhibit rationality in their relationship. People in group situations examine and make calculations about the various alternative options open to them. Thus, in choosing between alternative actions, a person will relate well with his fellow man if he perceives the relationship as rewarding and verse versa (Homans, 1958).

George Homans anchors his social exchange theory mainly on two principles: the principle of reciprocity and fairness and the principle of aggression and approval. The former emphasizes the indispensability of getting kindness or reward. In otherwords, in any social relationship people usually adhere to the norm that when people do go or behave in favourable or rewarding manners towards a person, the person tries as much as possible to reciprocate that kind gesture in a similar way. Homans (1974) contends that the principle of reciprocity is central to the continuation of virtually all social relationship.

The aggression and approval principle on the other hand, stresses that there are two sides to every social relationship. The first aspect of the principle has it that when a person's action does not receive the reward he expected or receives punishment he never anticipated he is most likely to be angry. The anger manifests or translates into aggressive behaviour and the outcome of such behaviour become positively reinforcing or more valuable to the person. The other aspect of the principle has it that when a person's actions receive the reward he expected, or gets a higher reward than he expected or does not receive punishment that he expected he will naturally be pleased. He becomes more likely to repeat that behaviour and such behaviour becomes more valuable to him.

What we deduce from the aggression approval principle is that there are always two outcomes - the negative and the positive emotions in all social relationship. These emotions are determined by the expectations of the actors involved and the behaviour they invest in the relationship. If a person's expectations are fulfilled it elicits positive emotions and verse versa.

In relating the theory to the violent oriented behaviour of youths in the Niger

Delta, the principle of aggression and approval is most appropriate.

The Niger Delta People's expectation that:

Oil exploration will inevitably usher in absolute peace and comfort and all other attributes of sustainable development while the inhabitants watch in great admiration.

The reality on ground is a far cry from the people expectations. Rather than turn a blessing, the abundant natural resource is now a curse. Beside the problems of constant oil spillage, gas flaring and the attendant environment degradation, there is also a worse damage of seemingly invisible nature that is done to the socio-cultural fabric of host communities.

The social relationship that exists between the multinational oil companies and the inhabitants of host communities sharply negates the principle of reciprocity and fairness in social exchange relationship. The inhabitants willingly gave their environment to the multinational companies for oil exploration activities in anticipation of better lots - high standard of living, increased job opportunities, infrastructural development etc. Instead of getting what they expected, they are being punished as their traditional means of livelihood is truncated due to deleterious impacts of oil exploration.

In the face of this frustrated or unfulfilled expectations, the youths lost faith in the ability of the multinationals and the Nigerian state to meet their existential needs. As Homans rightly noted in the aggression approval principle, unfulfilled expectations breed aggression. The youths now reject institutionalized norms and they now employ crude force and other violent oriented behaviour in redressing their disadvantaged fate of suffering in the means of plenty. This Gent oriented behaviour of closure of oil sites, destructions of oil installations and hostage taking become more valuable to the youths as a rational response to the large scale deprivation and widespread injustice.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

The issues of militant behavioural disposition of youths in the Niger Delta as a rational response to the protracted injustice of the multinational oil companies are well articulated. The paper has it that the spate of violent oriented agitations is not only on the increase, it is also assuming dangerous dimensions. In what ever perspective the issue is view from; it has

devastating implications to the inhabitants of oil communities, the multinational companies and the Nigerian state.

There is therefore the need to recommend some remediation measures to the lingering violent agitations in the Niger Delta region. The Nigeria state in this democratic dispensation should turn in a considerable dose of fiscal autonomy for the federating units. This will help diversify Nigerian revenue base by enhancing domestic taxation as regions without oil resource will be forced to find alternative ways to boost their economy.

The resources of survival of the Niger Delta people that were taken away violently, undemocratically and unjustly by the Nigerian state should be return to them. Resource control should be emphasized. The whole idea of resources control as used here, entails regaining ownership, control, use and management of resources for the benefit of people in whose land the resources are found.

Thirdly, the youths that have the skills and qualifications in the Niger Delta should be considered first in employment policies of the multinational oil companies. While those that lack the requisite skills should be provided with alternative means of livelihood or be paid unemployment compensation while at the same time, are exposed to different skill acquisition schemes that will be put in place by the multinational oil companies.

These suggestions if well implemented will have adequate potentials for reducing the upward spiral of violence on the part of the frustrated and angry youths in the Niger Delta. Then peace, physical and economic development shall be sustained.

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Table 1: Ecozones and Major Economic Activities in *the Niger Delta*.

ECOZONE	APPROX. AREA	MAJOR ECONOMIC
Low Land Equatorial Moozon	7400 km <sup>2</sup>	Oil extraction, arable farming, palm oil production, rubber tapping etc.
Fresh water.	11700k	Oil extraction, traditional forest exploitation, modern forestry, breweries from raffia palm and palm oil production, fishing, etc
Brackish Water	5400km <sup>2</sup>	Oil extraction traditional mangrove exploitation port and associated activities, etc.
Sand Barrier Island	1140km <sup>2</sup>	Oil extraction, fishing breweries from raffia palm, palm oil exploitation, etc.
TOTAL	25640 km <sup>2</sup>	

*Source: Ashton - Jone. (1998)*