Poverty and Nation Building in the Niger Delta, 1958 – 2021.

By

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Abstract

Poverty is a crippling condition that destroys lives and hold down people from progressing or improving their lives. It is a bad condition that affects people negatively and impede on nation building. The work argues that poverty affects a great number of the Niger Delta people hence, they have little or no access to good drinking water, health facilities, good roads, education and other infrastructures that make life meaningful to people. The work x-rays the causes and effects of poverty as well as government efforts at combating the scourge of poverty. The work utilized the progressive social theory which explains how the economic system of capitalism erected an army of the unemployed to keep people in poverty trap. The data for the reconstruction of this work were derived from primary, secondary sources and interdisciplinary approach. The paper explains that poverty has negatively impacted nation building and the political leaders have not addressed the causes and how it can be eliminated to alleviate the suffering of the Niger Delta people despite the massive crude oil and gas explored in the area. The paper recommends that government should embark on projects and programmes that will have direct bearing while contributing to improve the living condition of the people.

Keywords: Poverty, Niger Delta, Nation Building, Government, Effects

Introduction

Poverty has remained a threat to the well-being of the Niger Delta people. It is complex, multidimensional and multifaceted in the economic, social, political, environmental and every realm of human existence. Poverty occupies the front burner as it is seen as the most challenging development issue facing the Niger Delta. Even though the core Niger Delta that is; Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta are oil producing states, producing crude oil and gas yet, the people have been pauperized. Their potentials for economic growth and sustainable development remains unfulfilled and its future is threatened by deteriorating conditions that are not yet addressed by present policies and programmes (Jaja, 2008:177). Oil and gas production which is the mainstay of Nigeria's economy impacted negatively on the oil bearing communities and states in a way that is not commensurate with the impact it created on the nation. Nigeria is a mono economy sustained with gas and crude oil from the Niger Delta. It remains absurd that the people are left with plethora of problems that affects their survival (Okorobia, 2008:201).

Crude oil is the largest revenue – yielding export in Nigeria accounting for about 95 percent of the country's foreign exchange earnings. Akpan (2008:219) posits that the God-given resources brought penury instead of wealth; misery instead of fortunes; fear instead of security and curses instead of blessings. The greatest negative effects of poverty is lack of portable water, hospitals, schools, roads and other infrastructures. It also include the effects of the exploration and exploitation of oil through environmental degradation which has polluted the water and kept the atmosphere volatile. The Niger Delta is easily the least developed region plagued with poverty in Nigeria. The Niger Delta youths and women are the most hit as they bear the greatest brunt of poverty in the region. The youths are of the opinion that corrupt leaders use their political structure to plunder the economy for their selfish benefits in Nigeria leaving the Niger Delta whose land produces the black gold and gas in a "sorry state" lacking various means of livelihood and infrastructures which will make their lives meaningful.

Sources and Method

The study was premised on oral and written sources of history as well as adopted the interdisciplinary approach in the reconstruction of this work. Alagoa (1978:13) posits that the difficulties of penetrating the distant past of African societies have

imposed the necessity of a multi-disciplinary approach using knowledge from related discipline in the social sciences and humanities to generate data. The primary sources used include oral tradition, oral history and face to face interview technique. While oral tradition penetrates deeper into the past and provide the most authentic account of the people, the problem associated with it are enormous which include the possibility of distortion of facts, failure of human memory and the risk of exaggeration.

Oral sources were complemented with written sources which constitute the main sources of historical reconstruction. The written sources used in this work include books, journals, research thesis by scholars among others. Written sources provide the most precise source of information about the past. They have the advantage that they cannot be altered after they had been written. While we reckon with written records as reliable source, cautions about the circumstances which might make them unreliable should be taken. Some limitation include bias and distortion of knowledge that tend to rob history of its objectivity. Written documents diminish as one penetrates deeper into the past and it is also susceptible to abuse in the form of forgery, falsification and misinterpretation. In order to write an objective history of the impact of poverty on the Niger Delta people, comparisms, criticisms, analysis and cross-examination were carried out before arriving at conclusions.

Theoretical Framework

The progressive social theory was adopted to explain how the economic system of capitalism developed an army of the unemployed as a deliberate strategy to keep wages low so that the people remains in poverty. Proponents of this theory include Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. They argue that people may work hard and have acceptable attitudes but still be in poverty because of dysfunctional social and economic systems.

The progressive social theory believe that people should have equal access to resources, opportunities and services. What this meant is that the Niger Delta which laid the golden eggs should be adequately compensated and treated fairly by the state (Nigerian government). The theorists also believe that individuals and

groups should be allowed to take control of their lives, communities and resources.

Progressive social theory ascribes poverty to economic, social and political structures that make the poor to still remain poor no matter how committed they may be. System flaws associated with poverty also include when people are being discriminated against on account of race, gender, disability and religion which limit their opportunities for economic survival inspite of their personal capabilities (Faleti, 2005). In Nigeria, government policies and actions negatively influences poverty. Poverty alleviations may be introduced in good intentions but poor implementation usually impoverish the Niger Deltans. The structure of Nigeria's economy has worsened the poverty rate in the Niger Delta due to its high level corruption that has remained unchecked among the political leaders even with the functions of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). Nigeria's productive base is narrow and undiversified with the economy largely dependent on oil revenue with negligence of other critical sectors. It therefore remains that the Niger Delta should be given adequate attention as regards to the physical condition of the people by eliminating poverty and building other critical infrastructures that will better their lives since what is laid beneath their soil produces the only source of economy of the Nigerian state.

Causes of Poverty in the Niger Delta

The financial and infrastructural poverty have contributed negatively to the process of nation building and peace in the Niger Delta. They include;

1. Loss of Arable Land and Resources

The loss of agricultural land which mainly affects the farmers, hunters, fishermen, lumbermen and gatherers of resources in the forest. The people being deprived of their ancestral land for oil exploration and exploitation remained without hope of survival. Few people are being recruited in oil companies mainly as casual workers with meagre salaries which cannot improve their lives and members of their families.

Okorobia (2008:202) has this to say;

> We are not sure if the generally unfair and inadequate monetary compensations, paid on surface rights over acquired land (which itself is usually gotten only after serious clashes and sometimes legal battles) is to be counted as part of the economic benefits from the oil/gas activities. The rural Niger Delta people have very few blessings to count. These activities of oil exploration have alienated the people of their economic undertakings and have rendered the Niger Delta people very poor.

The loss of vast hectares of the deltaic vegetation through deforestation to enable the laying of pipelines, wellheads, flow stations and other industrial materials has become a major economic set back to the people. They can't farm, fish or gather the various forest foods and fruits necessitated through the felling of trees which bears the fruits that nourishes the health of the people. Periwinkles, oyster, crabs and fishes which constitute the rich protein given food have not been easy to find in the swamp (Ipalibo, 2020).

2. Environmental degradation and Pollution

Pollution from oil spills and gas flares, water pollution, water scarcity, soil degradation among others are the greatest negative tendency associated with the exploration and exploitation of oil in the area. These explorations are done by the multinational corporation without adequate or no compensation at all to the inhabitants of the area. The people have been agitating and calling on the Federal Government to come to their aid as there has been no meaningful development. This neglect by the Nigerian State and the multi-national oil companies have resulted to poverty thereby making the Niger Delta especially the remote swampy areas as the least developed area in Nigeria notwithstanding their enormous contributions to Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings (Akpan, 2008:219). Gas flaring has generated "acid rain" that often caused corrosion and damaged the roofs of most houses and have also contributed to the disappearance of some plants species in the Niger Delta. Gas flare has been linked as one of the causes of skin cancer and also make the river uninhabitable to aquatic animals.

Oil industry activities led to the depletion in the population of aquatic animals. Farming and fishing, the main occupation of the people are made impracticable as

a result of oil spillage which pollutes land, streams and rivers and become a threat to the means of livelihood of the Niger Delta people. This affected their ability to sustain themselves in an environment that has become unfriendly (Babatunde, 2012:259). The negative impact of oil exploitation has radically altered the self-reliant oil bearing areas for the worse. It has increased the level of poverty in these communities and has made the standard of living to be very low.

3. Corruption

The word corruption is derived from the Latin word *corruptus* which means "corrupted" and in legal terms the abuse of a trusted position in one of the branches of power (executive, legislative and judicial) or other organizations with the intention of obtaining economic and material benefit which is not legally justified for itself or others. Corruption is a kind of dishonesty by a person or group of persons entrusted with a position of trust. Corruption include such acts as bribery, embezzlement, diversion of public funds, goods and services for personal interest. The World Bank (1997) defines corruption as "the abuse of public office for private gain" Nigeria has lost hundreds of billions of dollars through high level corruption. In the Niger Delta, Nigerian State in order to address the underdevelopment of the area had set up several boards such as the Niger Delta Basin Development Authority, the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC).

These boards in their time have handled the issues of development and yet nothing has come out. The people have utilized both constitutional and unconstitutional means to draw attention that the resources in their domain are carted away to develop other parts of the country while they live in penury, lacking infrastructures. The Federal Government has decided to take some measures to address this abnormal situation and decided to establish various boards to mitigate on the suffering of the people. There has also been seen the efforts of the government to address specific complains such as gas flaring and oil pollution. As good as these efforts seems to be, the fact remains that the expected improvements in the conditions of the average man, woman and child from the Niger Delta swamps have remained largely embarrassing. This implies that it is either that the government has not done enough or the monies put into the coffers

of these boards are being siphoned by the board executives without carrying out the task of developing the area, not just development but "sustainable development" that will stand the test of time and bring the people out of poverty.

4. The Rise of the Oil/Gas Sector and Decline of Native Economy

There has been an increase in the production of crude oil and gas sector while the agricultural sector has been on decline. The reason is not far-fetched. Oil exploration activities have depleted forest and bushes used by farmers. Their oil drilling equipments and pipes have also crisscrossed the land space and forests. The drilling chemicals and explosives such as dynamites have kept the area unsafe and responsible for vibrations of the earth and the resultant cracks and damages to houses around the oil and gas fields in the Niger Delta. These activities of the oil and gas renders the people poor and keep them living in semi destroyed houses which exposed them to dangerous reptiles like snake sneaking into their rooms through the cracked walls.

5. Lack of Good Education and Unemployment

Poverty is a cycle and without education, people cannot improve their living condition. According to UNESCO, over 170 million people could be free of extreme poverty if they have basic reading skills. However, in Nigeria including the Niger Delta, traditional jobs like farming and fishing are declining due to insecurity. The people have been stripped off from their livelihood due to the activities of the petro dollar companies which have alienated them from their land and river. The resultant effect is that the people especially the remote swampy areas still live in abject poverty. Fisher men cannot go fishing due to the effects of the drilling chemicals and pirates who intercepts the fishermen, kidnap, rob and kill some of them.

Effects of Poverty on the Niger Delta People

1. The rise of militancy in the region has been seen as one of the factors causing unrest, criminality and agitations mainly by the youths against ecological devastation on one hand and neglect arising from crude oil and gas production on the other hand. Raji (2012:248) posits that "this have left the Delta region dissolute, uninhabitable and frustrated, the youths of the Niger Delta took up arms against petro-business and its political allies".

Unemployment of the youths and not implementing true federalism has been responsible for most agitations in the Niger Delta. As a result of many years of exploitations, injustice, inequality, oppression and marginalization, the youths decided to hold the bull by the horn and demanded for compensation for lost means of livelihood and other challenges associated with oil exploration and exploitation activities. The Federal Government and oil and gas companies has been reluctant to pay attention to these oil bearing communities especially in terms of development. Most of these communities are living in perpetual poverty of physical cash and infrastructures as there are no schools, no roads, no portable drinking water and no electricity. Yet, what is used by the Nigerian state for all the states in the federation lies beneath their soil which the multinationals siphoned to the detriment of the people in the region. This violent confrontation was fuelled by the frustration of many years of neglects, poverty and unemployment.

The rise to militancy was necessitated by the refusal of the oil companies to meaningfully engage the army of unemployed and underemployed youths from the region, instead preferred to engage people from their own ethnic groups. This attitude displayed by the oil companies has always been resisted leading to unavoidable confrontations by the youth against oil multinationals and the Nigerian state. The youths under various movements such as (MOSOP), the Ijaw National Congress (INC), the Ijaw Youth Council among others were able to draw both national and international attention to seek on their right for survival in their various communities. Some of the youths operated as cult groups, seeking power and influence to seize control to community leadership and to also embark on the kidnapping of oil workers for ransom which became a favoured line of attack by the militants, aggravating tension and fear generally (Okorobia, 2008:208).

2. **High Rate of Crimes:** Poverty in the Niger delta have led to increase in the level of crimes in the region. Gaining ascendancy are social vices such as rape, prostitution, kidnapping, robbery, disregard of adults by the youths, breaking and entry, petty theft, alcoholism, drug abuse mainly executed by

the youths who possessed the arms. However, the inability of the youths in the region to sustain themselves from traditional vocational activities such as fishing and farming pushed them to become tools for ready use in the fight between the people and the multinationals thereby making such crimes as kidnapping and sabotaging of oil installations an accepted form of survival among the youths.

The activities of the armed groups do not only affect the oil companies but also women and children of the communities. Women are the most vulnerable in situation of armed conflict. Albert (2012:4) affirms that many people from communities experiencing violent conflicts suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome which contributes to poor mental state and reduced quality of life. Children in the crises areas suffer from malnutrition as their parents bear the brunt of poverty in the region. Women suffer discrimination and human right abuses in situation of armed conflict and oil related activities in the Niger Delta. They suffer environmental degradation, loss of livelihood, physical abuse among other human rights violation which affects their livelihood, food security, personal security and mental health (Abosede, 2012:260).

3. **Proliferation of Fire Arms, Light Weapons and Armed Groups:** The oil war created unprecedented security problems in the Niger Delta and left the belligerents with a lot of light arms. The youths prosecuted the oil wars in almost all the places the multinationals had oil wells and installations. There were conflicts in Odi, Umuechem, Rumuekpe and some remote swampy communities in the region where oil installations are found. The situation puts the people at risk for future conflict occurrence due to the presence of arms and dangerous gang groups thereby generating a group of blood thirsty young men. They sometimes became easy tools for political thuggery who often hired them for the snatching of ballot boxes, killing and maiming of individuals opposed to their actions. Crude oil and gas have become the engine of conflict in the Niger Delta promoting various forms of armed groups in their efforts to present a united front in the militarization of the Niger Delta and resistance against the multinationals and Nigerian state whom they accused of being responsible for the

prevalent poverty occasioned by deforestation, unemployment, oil spillage which destroys the rivers, kill the fishes and destroyed their farm lands.

4. **Loss of Lives and Property**

The oil conflict in the Niger Delta led to the death of many people and destruction of numerous properties. Albert (1994), Ikpeze (1997) cited in Nwanegbo (2009:509) states that "Communities that experience situations of conflict retard development either through the destruction of existing structures or discouragement of investment."

The neglect of the Niger Delta people by the Nigerian State remains a case of marginalization by the major ethnic nationalities. This is a worrisome situation as the people cannot remain docile and watch you exploit their crude oil and gas while displaying tendency of total abandonment of the region. The Nigerian government do not care about what happens to the people of the region as long as the flow of oil and its revenue growth is not disturbed.

The clandestine attitude by the Nigerian state have led to the loss of lives and property. The total number of deaths recorded cannot be ascertained. The Umuechem incident and Rumuekpe crises in Rivers State in 1989 and 2005 respectively, the Odi incident of May 1999 and the Odioma incident in the Brass Local Government Area of Bayelsa State in 2005 all show the extent to which the multinational companies with the connivance of the Nigerian State could go to undermine the cries of the people so long as there could be continuous flow of the black gold. The multinationals have taken to "divide and rule" policy to break the unity of the communities in their agitations. In Rumuekpe crisis, many lives were lost and properties worth millions of naira were destroyed. Rumuekpe conflict was mainly oil induced. The people were dissatisfied over the exploitation unleashed by the community leadership, multinationals and the Nigerian State. At the height of the contentions and violence, the oil multinationals used the "divide and rule" tactics to support and sponsor any of the warring faction that should head the leadership to enable them continue in exploiting the crude oil within the community. The aftermath was that violence escalated

in the community and many people lost their lives, houses, cars, motorcycles, farms and other properties worth billions of naira were destroyed.

Poverty also contributed to the Rumuekpe oil violence of 2005. The advent of Oil Company brought hope to the community since its inception in 1958. But instead of lifting the people out of poverty, the multinationals continue to exploit them by drilling the black gold continually while the people wallow in abject poverty. What the people got out of this relationship was nothing but ecological devastation. The oil producing communities of the Niger Delta have become the "goose that lays the golden eggs" as the people became so poor that they are prepared to risk their lives in what God has endowed them with (Dandyson, 2020). Tell magazine of May 21, 2007 cited in Emordi et al. (2012) shows that the bulk of poor and jobless Nigerians reside in the Niger Delta, the source of the nation oil wealth. The recent World Bank report cited in Ijayi (2006:7) discloses that despite the vast oil resources, the region still remains extremely poor, with education, health care delivery system, sanitation among other physical infrastructure far below acceptable standards.

Undoubtedly, the incidence of poverty manifests in the prevalence of hunger, disease, illiteracy, unemployment, poor housing, low life expectancy and general lack of basic infrastructures and facilities like electricity, clean water and good roads. Taken together, this created restiveness among the youths of the Niger Delta who were then recruited as foot soldiers to fight the evils of exploitation and exploration by kidnapping the expatriate and the blacks within their reach for ransom while carrying out other negative activities (Dike, 2020).

Poverty and Nation Building

Nation building is a process of developing national consciousness and cultivate a sense of love to one's country. When citizens are poor without having food to eat, how do they now cultivate a sense of love for the country. People crippled by poverty and lack of basic needs like physical cash, good roads, clean drinking water, electricity, health care centres, unemployment and other infrastructures can

hardly be expected to play its proper role in nation building especially in the Niger Delta where exploration and exploitation activities are carried out without adequate compensation. The people are being short changed by the Nigerian states who connived with the multinational to siphon the region's resources. Poverty has contributed negatively to the process of nation building due to the neglect of the people. If majority of the people are well to do, the march to progress and development will be unlimited, because oil is a veritable tool for change. This will lead to nation building because the shackles of poverty that had a firm grip on the Niger Delta people will began to loosen its grip on the people. Jaja (2008:17) affirms that the economy of Saudi Arabia is dominated by petroleum and they have utilized the vast revenue from oil to finance programmes of infrastructural development and modernization in the education, health and social sectors.

Saudi Arabia, an arid country has provided water and electricity to everybody through the use of technology. In like manner, Libya's economy has been transformed by their leader Muhammed Ghadafi. He so utilized the oil wealth to give the people of Libya new self respect, thus, erasing memories of the Italian humiliation. Sadly, the Niger Delta case is different. It appear that the region only existed for the Nigerian state and multinationals continuous exploration and exploitation to develop and maintain other regions of the country. As long as the unequal yoke persist in the Niger Delta, it will strive to increase youth restiveness and violence which will make the cultivation for one's love of his or her country a Chimera (Nwabughuogu, 2004).

Conclusion

The Niger Delta which is the main source of the nation's foreign exchange earnings due to its crude oil and gas production has been ridiculed to a state of poverty, unable to compete with other oil producing regions such as Saudi Arabia and Libya. Crude oil and gas are responsible for the heightened spate of youth restiveness and crises plaguing the region. The causes of oil exploration and exploitation are loss of arable land and resources, environmental degradation and pollution, corruption, the rise of the oil and gas sector and the decline of native economy. Among the effects are; the rise of militancy, high rate of crimes, loss of lives and property as well as the proliferation of fire arms, light weapons and armed groups. Poverty is a crippling and bad condition that sends people

backward. The people from this region are not supposed to be poor because God has given them what can sustain them in the bad terrain they found themselves. But the state and the multinationals has been acting in connivance to undermine the survival of the people. Poverty has led to poor mental health of the people as they struggle to survive in the bad economy of the state with lack of food, electricity, good drinking water, good roads and other infrastructures which make the task of nation building a herculean one.

Recommendations

The work recommends that:

- Government at all levels should embark on projects and programmes that will have direct bearing on the people like providing employment, good drinking water, building of schools with scholarship, electricity, good roads and other infrastructures.
- Corrupt leaders should be punished severely to serve as deterrent to others in order to channel our resources to the development of critical sectors of the economy.
- Our leaders should build the economy and polity towards meeting the basic needs of the people so that the people are not driven by poverty. This is because a hungry man is an angry man and a member of the devil's workshop. This has made the Niger Delta youths to embark on youth militancy and kidnapping making the region to be restive.

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