

Enduring Issue in Nigerian Politics: The Niger Delta Crisis

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Received date: December 19, 2016, Accepted date: February 22, 2017, Published date: February 28, 2017

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Abstract

The paper looks at how the interventionist packages from the federal government have been managed in addressing the problems of underdevelopment and environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region, occasioned by oil exploration and exploitation. Using descriptive method of data gathering, the paper reveals that the region remains undeveloped as a result of the shameful attitude of its corrupt and predatory political elite and politicians-its real enemies, rather than the federal government. Therefore, corruption is implicated for its underdevelopment. It is recommended that the militants who are presently agitating violently for development should change their focus and beam their searchlight on the region's politicians for them to give account of their stewardship.

Keywords: Corruption; Constituency projects; Derivative component; Agitation; Militancy; Predatory; Underdevelopment

Introduction

The Niger Delta region geographically comprises of the six states in the South-South of Nigeria. These are Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa-Ibom and Cross River states. But politically, other states have been added to the list, namely- Ondo, Imo and Abia states, simply because they produce oil. The six states are called Niger Delta states not because of oil. Will Sokoto state be referred to as a Niger Delta state if oil is discovered there tomorrow? The study is therefore, concerned with the geographic Niger Delta. The inhabitants of the region were predominantly farmers and fishermen before oil was discovered in commercial quantity. The exploration and exploitation of the commodity led to the pollution of the area. This affected the occupation of the people as farmlands and rivers were damaged by oil spillages with no meaningful remediation activities carried out by the oil firms and no infrastructural projects were built to pacify the people. This prompted Adaka Boro, a very courageous Ijaw man, to declare the Republic of Niger Delta in 1966 in an armed struggle that was routed by the military government. Ken Saro Wiwa, another illustrious Niger Deltan took over the struggle for the development of the region with his pen. This led to his judicial murder by the Sanni Abacha regime. The federal government, between 1970 and 1998, didn't do much for the region despite being the greater beneficiary of the pollution of the area occasioned by oil exploration, and considering the fact that 90% of the nation's wealth was derived from there. Even the appointment of some people from the region as ministers of petroleum in the military regimes didn't yield dividends.

But when Chief Olusegun Obasanjo assumed office as a civilian president in 1999, he established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000 as an interventionist agency to tackle the issue of development in the region. His administration also implemented the 13% derivative component approved by General Sanni Abacha for the oil producing states. The Obasanjo civilian regime also created the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs to facilitate the development of the region. Despite all these interventions, the region

remains undeveloped, thereby making the crisis occasioned by the violent agitation for development an enduring political issue.

Many scholars have blamed the federal government and the multinational oil firms for the underdevelopment of the region, using the Marxists' dependency theory or the Post-Colonial theory by John Saul [1] in their analyses. Both theories see Nigeria as a weak state that cannot call the oil firms, who are the neo-colonial agents in Africa, to order and do the needful in areas of environmental remediation and corporate social responsibility. It has been suggested that the State and the oil firms are in an unholy alliance hence the former always deploys its instruments of violence against any community that protests against any of the oil firms [2]. But a much more suitable theory that explains the underdevelopment of the Niger Delta is the Centre and Periphery model by Johan Galtung [3]. Taking the Niger Delta as the periphery and the federal government as the centre, there are politicians within the periphery who constitute themselves as the centre of the periphery in a way that truncates or impedes development in the region for selfish reasons. This explains why the region is underdeveloped despite the fact that the Niger Delta states since 1999 have never been ruled by foreigners, the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs has never been headed by politicians outside the region, the chairmen and managing directors of NDDC have never been outsiders. In other words, the affairs of the region have been presided over by its own people but yet, the development of the region has remained elusive despite the yearly budgetary allocations.

Can it be said always that the funds released to the region by the federal government since 1999 were too meagre? How well have the "meagre" funds been managed? Have the governors judiciously applied the funds? It is very obvious that the funds have been largely embezzled and mismanaged. The 13% derivative component could have been used by the governors to procure gas turbines for the electrification of the region after reaching an agreement with the oil firms to supply the needed gas which they have been wastefully flaring. A constant power supply would have tremendously engendered development in the region as several industries would have sprung up. It is a shame that the natural endowment of the people, the natural gas, is being mindlessly wasted while the governors or emperors are waiting for monthly allocations from the federal government. So what is the

role of the governors? The fact that Nigeria is not truly practising federalism does not stop the governors from looking inward to set an agenda for the transformation of the region.

NDDC could also have linked the region together with bridges. The 3rd Mainland Bridge in Lagos is a good example. Two of such a bridge would have been very ideal. It is unbelievable to hear that NDDC is donating desks and chairs to primary and secondary schools instead of embarking on meaningful capital projects. A region can only be transformed with capital projects that can trigger industrialization. What is the role of the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs? It was created to tackle the problems of underdevelopment. Regrettably, it has not impacted the people of the region, despite the annual budgetary allocations, but the federal government is always erroneously blamed for the underdevelopment in the region rather than its enemies-the corrupt and predatory Niger Delta politicians.

Some activists and agitators who campaigned for the development of the region were not sincere. Some asked former president Obasanjo to give crude oil to Julius Berger Ltd so that the latter can carry out construction jobs in the region. They claimed that former military head of state, General Babaginda, used this trade by barter with Julius Berger to transform the nation's capital, Abuja. It was this demand that probably made President Obasanjo to establish the NDDC and implement the 13% derivative component for the oil bearing states. But when a Niger Delta man became the president of Nigeria, he was not asked or persuaded by the vociferous agitators or activists who were his kinsmen, to replicate in the Niger Delta, what Babaginda did in Abuja with crude oil. These people were concerned with accumulation of wealth, not the development of the region. It is worrisome that the money acquired was invested outside the region. How would the region be developed when the indigenes were buying mansions in choice places outside? They didn't see the need for the true practice of federalism when the immediate past administration was in office because they were getting free money, but surprisingly, as soon as the current president was sworn in, the call for the true practice of federalism became more strident. People who showed very sincere concern for the development of the region were Adaka Boro, Ken Saro Wiwa and Orono Douglas of blessed memories, not those government contractors.

What is the reason for the current militancy in the region? The reason is that the previous agitation and militancy enriched very few people at the detriment of the entire region. Some people became multi-millionaires overnight. The Amnesty programme, midwived by late president Musa Yar' Adua, was not well managed after his demise. It later turned to a drain pipe as N328b was discovered to have been mismanaged and the senate had vowed to probe it [4]. The last stage, reconstruction, was never implemented despite the fact that the president at that time was from the region, the minister for petroleum was from the oil-rich region, the minister for Niger Delta Affairs as well as the Amnesty managers were all from the region and coupled with the oil boom during which a barrel sold for over \$120. Some politicians from the region who wanted the status quo to be maintained allegedly resorted to the sponsoring of idle youths in bombing oil pipelines with the assurance that they would benefit from another round of Amnesty largesse, making the violent agitation or militancy a vicious cycle. This is the reason for the current crisis in the region and it would remain a reoccurring decimal in Nigerian politics as long as oil remains the major source of revenue for the nation. If the present administration negotiates with the militants to stop the bombings, another group of militants will come up as soon as this

government leaves office. This imbroglio would have been averted if the political elite in the region took advantage of the unprecedented oil boom to address the issues of underdevelopment in the region. It is therefore, not hypothetical to opine that the Niger Delta remains undeveloped due to the selfishness of its predatory political gladiators. A look at the management of federal interventionist packages by these gladiators would further support this.

The Niger Delta Development Commission

The NDDC was established in 2000 by former president Obasanjo in response to agitations for the development of the Niger Delta region. It was created as an interventionist agency to speed up the development of the long neglected and polluted oil producing region. The federal government had a good intention but unfortunately, the Niger Delta people who had managed the commission were not ready for the development of the region. It has been an annual story of corrupt practices rather than news of world class capital projects commissioning ceremonies. Despite the annual budgets of over N300 billion, the region is still sadly undeveloped. For instance, the commission got over N300 billion in 2014 [5]. In 2015, it got N300.1 billion, while N241.1 billion was allocated to it in 2016 [6]. Since inception, the commission has not been starved of funds but yet the region is wearing a colonial look. The NDDC Act 2000 makes it mandatory for the federal government to contribute 15% of the total monthly statutory allocation from the federation account and 50% of the ecological fund to the commission.

Corruption is implicated for the poor performance of the commission. There have been allegations of embezzlement, diversion of funds, duplication of projects and connivance between the commission's officials and contractors to do shoddy jobs. For instance, the Auditor General of the Federation had alleged that N183 billion was diverted by the managers of the commission [7]. Most of the abandoned projects and those shoddily completed have been paid for by the commission. Again, majority of the contractors are indigenes of the region. Some years ago, a chairman of the commission allegedly spent about N1 billion for a voodoo charm to exterminate a top official of the commission and a state governor [8]. How can the region be developed with this type of recklessness? As noted earlier, the commission has never been managed by people from outside the region, therefore, it stands to reason that the elite has been the impediment to the development of the region. Due to alleged infighting among the officials of the commission and poor performance, the Managing Director and all the board members were relieved of their appointments by the Senate in September 2011 [9].

Allocations to the States, Niger Delta Ministry and Constituency Projects Funds

The oil producing states have been getting higher allocations from the federation account if compared with other states. They get additional 13% from the federation account monthly. For instance, in March 2012, Akwa Ibom state got N5.9 billion, Delta state got N5.1 billion, Rivers state got N5.3 billion, Bayelsa state got N2.4 billion while Edo state received N380.1 million, according to a Federal Ministry of Finance Bulletin, and reproduced by The Summary, November 3rd, 2015. The annual allocation to any of the Niger Delta States is higher than the annual budgets of some African States like Liberia and Gambia. For instance, Akwa Ibom state got N260b, Rivers state N230b, Delta state N209b and Bayelsa state received N173b as

statutory allocations for 2013 [10]. With all these, the Niger Delta region should have been developed by now if the funds have been judiciously utilized. Even with these funds many industries are still moribund in the region. A pathetic example is the Delta Steel Company, Aladja in Delta State. When the federal government wanted to privatize it, the emperors of the six states didn't see the need to come together and buy it because they were bereft of vision. The firm could have improved the fortunes of the oil states now that oil price has dropped sharply leading to the dwindling of allocations. There are very strong indications that the former governors had grossly mismanaged the resources of the region. They behaved as if the region was a conquered territory. It was as a result of this brazen mismanagement of funds that one of them was impeached and removed by the state legislators and consequently prosecuted by the anti-graft agency [11].

The Federal Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs has not impacted the people as expected. Despite the huge annual allocations from the federal government, the story of underdevelopment has not changed. In 2014, the ministry got N113.6 billion for personnel, overhead, statutory transfer and capital/development projects, according to the Budget Office, 2014 and reproduced by Africa Network for Environmental and Economic Justice [12]. In 2015, N50 billion was earmarked for projects [5] while N67.3 billion was budgeted for projects in 2016. Despite all these disbursements from the federation account since the creation of the ministry, the major road that links all Niger Delta states together, the East-West road, whose dualization project was awarded many years ago, is yet to be fully completed. Many riverine communities have no drinkable water and electricity, e.g. Burutu in Delta State. There, the people drink and bathe with salty water. In many communities in Bayelsa State, including the hometown of the ex-president, the people rely on sachet water from neighbouring Delta State. What does it cost the ministry to drill water wells with treatment plants for the people?

There have been reports of mismanagement of funds in the ministry. According to a report in Sahara Reporters on 23rd August 2016, titled "Six Years of Waste", the ministry blew over N700 billion between 2009 and 2015. This money was spent on 427 contracts and achieved only 8% impact. This was made known by the Ministerial Technical Audit Committee on Contracts. The Independent Corrupt Practices and Related Offences Commission (ICPC) had seized 24 property and several exotic cars from three civil servants in the ministry who are indigenes of Niger Delta. One of them has 18 property. Among the seized property were 10 hectares of land in Abuja at N50m, an uncompleted duplex in Abuja at the cost of N90m and a 4-bedroom duplex in Abuja at N60m [13] What a tragedy! Why are Niger Deltans not using their loots to develop their place? Some former governors of the Niger Delta states, while in office, allegedly built ultra-modern hospitals, ranked among the best in the world outside the shores of Nigeria. They also set up several investments outside the region, creating jobs abroad while there is unemployment at home.

Since 1999, the federal and state legislators have been collecting funds for constituency projects running into several billions of naira. The six geographic Niger Delta states have been represented by 18 senators. Those in House of Representatives are more, and very many are in the state assemblies. In 2012, senators got N240m each for constituency projects while representatives in the lower chamber received N160m according to The Street Journal [14] in a report titled "Legislators": How Nigerian Lawmakers Feed Fat on Constituency Project Funds. It noted that only very few loyalists of the legislators

benefitted from the largesse and the greater part of it went into the legislators' political empire. Which projects did they execute? Where did they execute them? In Dubai or South Africa or in the US? If the funds collected were used judiciously for this purpose, the region would have worn a new look. This strongly supports former president Obasajo's view that the national assembly is a committee of thieves [15].

The time has come for the people to interrogate the application of all funds disbursed to the Niger Delta from 1999 till date. The militants should go after the prodigious and predatory political elite that have arrested development in the region rather than blowing up pipelines which is deepening the ecological devastation of the region.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

The Niger Delta is undeveloped because of the mismanagement of its resources by the predatory political elite in the region. The enemies of the Niger Delta are its people, not the federal government. So long as oil remains the major revenue generator for the nation, the crisis in Niger Delta may remain for a long time in the polity. The politicians behind the crisis are selfish and corrupt. The funds released to the region were diverted by those who managed its affairs thereby creating a misleading impression that the federal government has been neglecting the region. Those calling for the true practice of federalism now are doing so because they have lost the access to the national cake. They were not deeply concerned with the development of the Niger Delta, if not, what did they do with all the funds disbursed to the region between 1999 and 2015 when oil price was higher?

The previous agitation and militancy had enriched few people in the region at the detriment of the greater population. People became multi-millionaires overnight from the largely mismanaged Amnesty Programme. The youths, who also want to get rich, were easily cajoled by dubious politicians to bomb the oil pipelines with the expectation that the federal government would throw largesse at them in another Amnesty. This would make the militancy a vicious cycle. The only panacea is for the militants to interrogate how the region's resources have been applied, rather than destroying critical national assets. Therefore, it is recommended that:

- The militants or agitators should go after the politicians who mismanaged the funds released by the federal government. These include the former governors, sitting governors, federal and state legislators, top officials of NDDC and Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs. They should be forced to refund the looted funds. This will make those in office now think twice.
- The federal government should scrap the interventionist agencies like the NDDC and the Niger Delta Ministry and take over the development of the region directly as it did in Abuja rather than disbursing funds to the enemies of the region.
- The federal government should stop destroying illegal refineries. The operators of such refineries can be registered by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and allocate crude oil to them for a token to prevent illegal bunkering that damages the environment. As they will settle down to do the refining without fear of being arrested by security agents, the quality will improve and in no time, modular refineries would spring up, giving birth to cottage industries. This is imperative as NNPPC has pitifully failed to ensure availability of fuel for Nigerians at affordable cost.

- The federal government should consider practicing federalism truly with the six geopolitical zones as constituent units. This would trigger development in the country as there will be healthy competition among the zones for survival. This becomes imperative as crude oil will soon fade out from the international market.

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