Nigeria's Niger Delta: Understanding the Complex Drivers of Violent Oil-related Conflict

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex roots and dimensions of the Niger Delta conflict which has escalated from ethnic minority protests against the federal Nigerian State-Oil Multinationals' alliance in the 1990's to the current insurgency that has attracted worldwide attention. It also raises some conceptual issues drawn from 'snapshots' taken from various perspectives in grappling with the complex roots of the oil-related conflict in the paradoxically oil-rich but impoverished region as an important step in a nuanced reading of the local, national and international ramifications of the conflict and its implications for Nigeria's development. The conflict is then located both in the struggle of ethnic minority groups for local autonomy and the control of their natural resources (including oil), and the contradictions spawned by the transnational production of oil in the region. The transition from resistance – as-protest – to insurgency, as represented by attacks on state and oil company targets by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), is also critically analyzed.

Résumé

Cet article explore les racines et les dimensions complexes du conflit dans le delta du Niger qui a évolué à partir des protestations de la minorité ethnique contre l'alliance entre l'État fédéral nigérian et des multinationales pétrolières dans les années 1990, pour aboutir à l'actuelle insurrection qui a attiré l'attention du monde entier. Il soulève également quelques questions conceptuelles émanant de diverses points de vue traitant des racines complexes du conflit pétrolier dans cette région riche en pétrole, mais paradoxalement appauvrie, comme une étape importante d'une lecture nuancée des ramifications locales, nationales

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et internationales de ce conflit et ses conséquences pour le développement
du Nigeria. Le conflit est alors situé dans la lutte des groupes ethniques
minoritaires pour l'autonomie locale et le contrôle de leurs ressources
naturelles (notamment le pétrole), et les contradictions engendrées par la
production transnationale de pétrole dans la région. La transition de la
résistance sous forme de protestation à l'insurrection par le biais d'attaques
perpétrées par le Mouvement pour l'émancipation du Delta du Niger
(MEND) contre des cibles appartenant à l'Etat et aux compagnies
pétrolières y est également analysée de façon critique.

Introduction: Big Prize, High Stakes, Violent Conflict

Hardly a day passes without reports in the international and local news media
on the growing insurgency by armed militias in Nigeria's oil rich province,
the Niger Delta, which accounts for most of Nigeria's estimated daily oil
production of 2.46 million barrels – most of which goes to the United States
and other Western oil importing countries (EIA 2009; Lubeck, Watts and
Lipschutz 2007; Obi 2007b:94-98). These reports since 2006 have focused
on the attacks on oil installations, kidnapping and ransoming of foreign oil
workers and the disruption of oil exports as a result of mounting attacks by
heavily armed militias. Some articles and reports also profile these militia
groups such as the Nigeria Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), the
Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), and the most noted, Movement for the Eman-
cipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), and their respective leaders and spokes-
persons: Asari Dokubo, Ateke Tom, and Gbomo Jomo. Others have focused
on the security threats arising from West African transnational criminal net-
works involved in the theft and trade in stolen crude, arms proliferation, the
use of sophisticated ammunition and explosives by militias and the disturb-
ing human rights situation arising from the activities of armed groups and
security forces in the region.

Apart from being Africa's largest oil producer and exporter, Nigeria is
also a producer of natural gas, accounting for an estimated output of 22
million tonnes per year. Natural gas exports account for about $4 billion
worth of earnings annually. Most of the natural gas is produced from the
Niger Delta or its coastal waters. However, this oil- and gas-rich region that
generates billions of dollars worth of revenues and profits annually is also
paradoxically one of the least developed and conflict-ridden parts of Nigeria.

According to a UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs report,
in January 2007 alone, 'at least 50 foreigners were taken hostage, two of
whom were killed. That compares to a total of around 70 foreigners snatched
in the whole of 2006. Most of the kidnap victims are non-Nigerians working
in the oil industry. Victims have included American, European and Asian

workers' (IRINnews.org 2007). The sharp increase in the acts of violence and kidnapping of foreign oil workers in the region has raised some serious concerns both within and outside Nigeria. This is in spite of a heavy military presence and governments' engagement with some of the interest groups in the region. The increased militarization of the region and the strategies of some of the armed groups designed to apply more pressure on the Nigerian government to accede to demands for resource control and negotiate the release of certain political leaders, who are considered sympathetic to the cause of the militants, from detention has further fuelled the intractability of the conflict.

Yet there are other groups with links to local politicians and elites that are into the 'business' of ransoming foreign oil workers and relations of prominent local politicians, business people or traditional rulers, by collecting payments from oil companies and local authorities in exchange for the release of the kidnapped people. What these syndicates do with the money is open to conjecture. Some plausible explanations include the purchase of sophisticated arms for criminal activities or the building of war chests or campaign funds for the coming local elections. Either way, oil is writ large in the escalating violence in the Niger Delta, which has since 2006 resulted in the cutting of Nigeria's oil exports by twenty five percent, and a revenue loss estimated by Nigeria's Federal Finance Minister, Nenadi Usman, to be around 4.4 billion US dollars.

In 2007, the temporary truce between MEND and the Nigerian state declared in mid-2006 collapsed, resulting in a further deterioration of the security situation in the Niger Delta. According to a CSIS report, 'between January 2006 and March 2007, militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) abducted over 100 oil-sector employees. An active ransom market has emerged that has brought considerable financial resources to these groups. A rising level of hostage taking has also made oil and gas service companies increasingly reluctant to dispatch personnel to repair sabotaged or ruptured pipelines, contributing to the enduring shut-in of over 600,000 barrels a day of oil production' (Iannaccone 2007:2).

The report goes on to note that 'Armed militant groups operating in the Niger Delta have graduated to a new level of lethality and technical and tactical sophistication'. Citing a confidential survey which estimates that 'the availability of AK-47s in the Niger Delta has increased five-fold in the last thirty months and militant groups likely possess remote-detonation and night-vision equipment, as well as antiaircraft missiles', the report paints a frightening picture of 'state failure' in the Niger Delta. Still on the subject,

the survey also reports 'the five best-trained groups have a combined fighting force of 10,000 men and access to 25,000 weapons' (2007:2). While the threat posed by militias should not be trivialized, it should also not be exaggerated. The situation in the Niger Delta is more complex and should not be read simply as a case of state failure, requiring stronger state or military intervention, which does not address the social-political and historical roots of the crises in the region.

While the intention of such a report in magnifying the 'security threat' in the Niger Delta is not in doubt, it brings into sharp focus the magnitude and impact of MEND's attacks which, in 2007 targeted Shell, Agip and Chevron, leading to a shut-in of 27 percent or 675,000 bpd out of Nigeria's estimated daily production of 2.4 million bpd, the highest levels of loss since the crisis escalated early in 2006. The scenario appears to have worsened after Yar Adua was elected President in Nigeria's disputed elections late in May 2007 (Swartz 2007), and one of MEND's leaders Henry Okah was arrested in December 2008 in Angola on charges of gun-running, after which he was deported to Nigeria and arraigned on a 47 count charge, including treason, before a high court in Jos, Central Nigeria.

The breakdown of figures for the shut-ins in oil fields, destroyed pipelines and platforms and affected MNOCs as provided by Swartz in 2007, is as follows in barrels per day: Forcados Terminal and EA Platform, Shell, 477,000; Olero Creek, Chevron, 70,000; Agip, 15,000; Nembe Creek, Shell, 77,000; and Ogbainbiri, Agip, 36,000. However, the most recent figures for January 2008 indicate that the current crude oil shut-in has increased from 600,000 to one million barrels of oil per day, thereby suggesting a worsening of losses linked to the tensions and conflicts in the Niger Delta (Lawal 2008). Apart from this huge loss in terms of oil revenues and profits, members of the Nigerian military and security operatives (Joint Task Force), the armed militias, and villagers caught in the crossfire have lost their lives, and properties worth millions of naira have also been destroyed.

Oil pollution, extreme poverty, high levels of youth unemployment, pollution, perceived discriminatory employment practices against locals by oil companies and socioeconomic and political marginalisation and neglect by successive administrations constitute the main grievances against the oil companies and the government. These complaints have a long history connected to the view of the ethnic minority groups in the Niger Delta that they are being 'cheated' out of a fair share of oil revenues because they are politically marginalised by a federal government that is dominated by bigger (non-oil producing) ethnic groups, which in partnership with foreign Oil Multinationals exploit their region, take their lands and expose them to oil

pollution and environmental degradation, while the indigenes and owners of the land do not benefit from the billions of dollars generated from their region, nor do they get adequate compensation for the destruction of their livelihoods or the 'loss' of their lands (Saro-Wiwa 1995; Okonta 2008). Taking advantage of a favourable post-Cold War discourse on environmental and minority rights, the Niger Delta resistance movements in the 1990s framed their protests and demands in political and environmental terms.

On the other hand, the government sees the activities of the protesting oil communities and the armed militias as acts of economic sabotage to the main source of national revenues and a challenge to its power in the Niger Delta. The activities of some of the armed groups are also interpreted as acts of criminality as well as a threat to national stability and security. Since Nigeria is an oil-dependent nation, with oil accounting for over 80 percent of national revenues and 95 percent of foreign exchange earnings, any act capable of resulting in the disruption of oil production is perceived a threat to the survival and wellbeing of the country. On the other hand, Western Oil Multinationals (Anglo Dutch Shell, Exxon Mobil, Chevron Texaco, Agip-ENI and Total) which operate in partnership with the Nigerian state oil corporation, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), see community agitation and attacks on them as a threat to their business interests. Also, their home countries have become, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US and the growing presence of oil competitors from Asia (China and India), quite concerned with the threats that the hostility against foreign oil companies by armed groups in the Niger Delta. This is mainly because armed attacks endanger the lives of oil workers (including foreign nationals), expensive oil installations, resulting in the disruption of oil exports, which is perceived as a threat to the energy security interests of oil-dependent global powers (Obi 2008). There has been a policy of corporate oil support for state repression of protests in the Niger Delta, even though the oil companies are often quick to claim that they do not interfere in local politics. However, given the intensity of the attacks and the high stakes involved in oil production in the troubled region, oil companies have began to engage with some of the oil communities in social provisioning as an aspect of promoting cordial oil company-community relations.

Whichever way it is viewed, oil defines the high stakes involved, both in terms of politics and power in the Nigerian context (Omeje 2006:5-6), and in relation to the centrality of oil to the energy security, strategic and profit calculations of the world's most powerful states and corporate actors. It is important to note that although the conflict in the Niger Delta in its most recent phase is oil-related, its background lies deeper in the nature of the

Nigerian state and the depredations of the ruling political elite. Also critical is a long-festering sense of grievance and marginalisation by the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta region which has continued to fuel agitation for self-determination and control of the resources of the region.

Perspectives on the Causes/Drivers of Conflict in Africa

New Political Economy/War Economies

The discourse around the causes of conflict in post-Cold War Africa has been characterised by various perspectives. Of note is what may be described as a 'rational choice' or 'war economies' school of thought based on an econometric intervention in the 'greed versus grievance' debate over the cause(s) of war, represented by the earlier works of Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (2001), and the World Bank. The new political economy of war generated some controversy and spirited debates in the 1990s. It was hinged on the position that 'economic considerations often shape the calculations and behaviour of parties to a conflict, giving rise to a particular war economy' (Collier 2000; Berdal and Malone 2000:2; Ballentine and Sherman 2003). The arguments of Collier and the other authors centred on demonstrating how wars acted as an incentive or opportunity for African elites and warlords to loot the resources of their countries. In this regard, they played down the role of the grievances of the people, and focused on suggestions about how to 'disincentivize' African wars as a strategy of promoting peace and development. More recently however, Collier has moved on to look at the effectiveness of aid in post-conflict contexts, the conflict trap (2003), the poverty trap, and the connections between conflict, poverty and the crisis of development in the third world (Collier 2007).

Neo-patrimonialism

Another approach to politics and conflict relates to the neo-patrimonial school of thought, which attempts to demonstrate the 'rationality' of corruption, conflict and misgovernance, within Africa's cultural, social and historical milieu. This is perhaps best articulated in the works of Chabal and Daloz (1999; 2006), where they explore the 'instrumentalization of disorder' by African political elites to undermine the state and pursue their personal interests, resulting in conflict, state failure and crises. In a similar way, Bayart, Ellis and Hibou (1998), connect the crisis in Africa to the predatory activities of Africa's political elite, which 'criminalize' the state, subvert it and enrich themselves. The combination of such weak, personalized states and patrimonial politics is deployed in providing a context for misrule, corruption, state failure or collapse and conflicts over the state, power and spoils. Neo-patrimonialism is also connected to personal ties and networks of power in

which family, ethnic, communal and religious connections are perceived as being fundamental to political mobilization, access to power and resources, as well as political relations of inclusion and exclusion. This thinking also features in most of the explanations of conflicts in Africa in ethnic, communal or religious terms. Apart from this, it also lays some of the blame for most of the conflict on 'state failure'.

Another interesting perspective is that of Reno. While he takes on board some of the insights from the neo-patrimonial approach, he brings into the debate the role of international actors and agencies, by showing how these external forces impact on local neo-patrimonial networks and the political elites in Africa. This is underscored by the ways in which political elites construct 'shadow states' and 'shadow economies' largely by undermining the formal state and economic structures and engaging in profitable 'informal sector' economic activities whose benefits go directly to them, rather than the state or people.

While Reno goes to great lengths to explain why African states are 'failing', he brings back 'grievances' into the debate about the roots of conflict – except that this time, grievance is linked to injustice and insecurity, which sometimes drives the 'aggrieved' into predatory organizations. To break this circle of grievance, it is suggested that the roots of 'popular experiences of personalist rule and state collapse be addressed' (Reno 2003:47).

While Reno places most of the emphasis on how patrimonial political networks, corruption and state collapse breed feelings of injustice, violence and predatory behaviour, he primarily presents corruption and the struggle for resources as the main source(s) of conflict.

The Resource or Oil Curse

The discourse on the oil-development nexus in Africa is often predicated on the view that oil breeds corruption, misgovernance, human rights abuses and violent conflict (Gary and Karl 2003; Human Rights Watch 2002; Coalition for International Justice 2006; Obi 2007a; Ross 1999, 2001, 2004a, 2004b). This perception is clearly a spin-off of the 'Dutch disease' and 'resource curse' theses, which are mainstream explanations for (resource) conflicts and insecurity in Africa. The 'resource curse' thesis seeks explanations for the causes of violent conflicts by demonstrating how huge natural resource endowments rather than brighten the prospects for development, paradoxically motivate people to struggle over resources, or act as an incentive for armed groups to engage in conflict in order to exploit the opportunity to loot. It is hinged upon the resource wealth-violent conflict nexus (Auty 1993), and provides explanations why, in spite of being relatively well endowed resource-wise, African countries remain poor and conflict-ridden. Ross (2004b) presents

a concise description of the resource curse based on findings 'that natural resources play a key role in triggering, prolonging, and financing conflicts'. In an earlier article, he had observed that 'many of the poorest and most troubled states in the developing world have, paradoxically, high levels of natural resource wealth. There is a growing body of evidence that resource wealth may harm a country's prospects for development' (Ross 2001:328).

The picture that emerges is clearly one in which resource wealth is subversive of the development process. Operating within this perspective, (Billon 2001:562), asserts that 'beyond increasing the risk of armed conflict by financing and motivating conflicts, natural resources also increase the vulnerability of countries to armed conflict by weakening the ability of political institutions to peacefully resolve conflicts'. Thus apart from the risk of subverting development, natural resources increase the risk of war and insecurity.

Environmental Scarcities

This approach is essentially hinged on the view that population growth be-yond a particular threshold places pressure on renewable natural resources and the environment in general, leading to the relative scarcities of resources (Homer-Dixon 1994; Myers 1993). Environmental scarcities are also notice-able where resources are being rapidly depleted as a result of degradation, climate change or unsustainable forms of exploitation and production. Such scarcities are mostly associated with the developing countries, where they trigger conflicts over shrinking renewable resources. At the heart of this perspective to violent conflict is the population size-natural resource linkage. Kaplan (1994), a decade and a half ago, constructed a frightening picture of a coming anarchy in a 'Hobbesian' West Africa, as the result of an 'immi-nent' demographic-environmental catastrophe that would lead to violent wars and chaos in the sub-region. Thus, in a neo-Malthusian fashion it assumes that population growth beyond the rate of replenishment of renewable re-sources (leading to scarcity) triggers off violent conflict in developing coun-tries. The resource or environmental scarcities approach is also writ large in the explanations for some of Africa's civil wars that are often presented as resource conflicts. The primary concern is therefore with environmental security, which among other things seeks to prevent threats emanating from the environment, and thus avoid environmental conflicts or resource wars from threatening global security (Obi 2000:47).

Horizontal Inequality-conflict Perspective

This perspective is hinged on the human motivation of participants engaged in violent conflict, particularly the role of political, cultural and economic

factors in influencing and constructing group identities and mobilizing such groups to compete for power (Stewart 2000:246-247). Stewart makes the important point that group identity is constructed 'by political leaders, who find group cohesion and mobilisation a powerful mechanism in their competition for power and resources, adopting a strategy of "reworking of historical memories" to engender group identity' (2000:247). Horizontal inequalities relate to 'the existence of severe inequalities between culturally defined groups' as distinct from vertical inequalities (Stewart 2002:2), and the fact that they 'affect individual wellbeing and social stability in a serious way'. In this regard, human inequalities can be multi-dimensional and complex, linking the welfare of the individual within a group to the stability and development of society.

Thus, where there is a sense of inequality in access to power and resources, the disadvantaged groups are likely to be mobilized to challenge an unsatisfactory status quo. In the view of Ostby (2008:143), horizontal inequality is 'highly explosive'; 'when power and resources are unequally distributed between groups that are also differentiated in other ways – for instance by race, religion or language'. However, it is noted that shared group identities may not be enough to mobilize a group for conflict, except when the group has a sense of collective deprivation due to marginalization or discrimination. Yet, in spite of its attractions, most of the conclusions of the horizontal inequalities school of thought have been disputed by the new political economy/war economies perspective that is of the view that 'inequality does not increase the risk of civil war' (Ostby 2008:143). However, the horizontal inequality perspective has continued to grapple with some challenges, not least that of measuring polarities and horizontal inequalities and how these relate to the risk of violent conflict. Also of note is the need for a historical reading of the origin and evolution of inequalities in a given context. The horizontal inequality approach remains a useful conceptual frame for re-focusing attention on the root causes of conflict, and adopting policies that target the fundamental causes of violent conflict as they relate to inequalities and inequities between groups in the context of the interaction of political, economic and cultural factors (Stewart 2000:260).

An Alternative Discourse Regarding the Causes of Conflict in Africa

An alternative discourse on the causes of violent conflicts in Africa is largely based on a critique of the dominant perspective(s) on post-Cold War wars in Africa. This springs from the dissatisfaction with the mono-causal explanations of such conflicts and the realisation that the complex roots of conflict on the continent cannot be fully explained by one perspective. Beyond this is the reality that post-Cold War conflicts are not limited to Africa. There is also

the concern to see beyond the prognosis that Africa's conflicts as an aspect of the failure of the development project on the continent can be solely attributed to the inability of African societies and cultures to accept and 'efficiently' pursue a Western-style modernising project/enterprise.

The foregoing provides the basis for understanding that the roots of war in Africa are complex, and are attributable to more than one cause or solely to internal factors. This is more so relevant because of the ways in which the forces and processes of globalisation contribute to the exacerbation of some of the structural weaknesses on the continent, the weakening of states and the deepening of the social contradictions. Thus, war economies, neo-patrimonial and cultural explanations, and resource curse/scarcities approaches, can at best offer partial value-laden perspectives to an understanding of civil wars in Africa. In the same regard, while the horizontal inequalities approach is relevant to understanding the underlying causes of violent inter-group conflict, it still faces challenges in grappling both with intra-group conflicts, measuring inequalities (sometimes represented statistically), and dealing with the factor of globalized pressures/actors that deepen existing contradictions and cleavages in some African societies. For example, in relation to those that focus on the economic incentives for war, when we examine the roots of violent conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria's Niger Delta, it is possible to establish several trends.

First, the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia were the result of a complex combination of historical, political, economic and historical factors, as well as the deep-seated crises that engulfed both countries (Abdullah 2004; Zack-Williams 1999; Hutchful and Aning 2004). While it is often attractive to focus on inter-ethnic or resource conflicts, the boundaries of the forces-in-conflict are often blurred and contingent on more than one factor or a situation that is fluid depending on leadership, regional, or transnational forces that require a holistic and critical reading. For example, differentiating Nigerian from international actors could be problematic in a context where local actors can simultaneously be global actors either by connecting global networks or using IT and global media to influence global oil markets, while at the same time oil transnationals are domesticated within the context of the Niger Delta, taking decisions that affect (or disrupt) local life. In the same way, some militia leaders form exigent partnerships with some government functionaries, politicians and oil companies, in ways that contradict 'fixed' boundaries or evolutionary tracks. Thus a conflict can be within, or between groups, between a group and a foreign oil company, or a state-company alliance, or between various militias engaged in 'turf wars'.

With regard to the neo-patrimonial perspective and its focus on predatory corrupt elites colluding in state failure, some of the external variables that

undermine the state and partner with corrupt elites are not included into the analysis. In some respects, specific African states show elements of weakness and strength in difference aspects, contributing to their resilience and seeming defiance of predictions by some sceptics of imminent 'state failure'. Rather than locate 'state collapse' exclusively in the 'corruption of predatory ruling elites', it has been noted that it would have been more analytically rewarding to locate the weakening or 'implosion' of some African states in several complex factors, including the collapse of the 'post-colonial mode of accumulation' that was in part linked to the pressures from globalisation, and 'the anti-state market reform agenda promoted by the IMF, World Bank and other donors' (Olukoshi 2005:185).

The resource curse approach suggests that even if Africa experiences an increased net inflow of oil revenues or earnings from mineral/cash crop exports, the 'rentier effect' will conspire to ensure that it feeds into corruption, waste and violent conflict, rather than the democratic development of society. But this approach does not capture the complex dimensions of the politics and international linkages that underpin violent conflicts in resource-rich African countries. Neither does it explain why wars break out in resource-poor countries. Rather it exaggerates the role of a single factor, out of many, as the predisposing factor to violence.

Even when the emphasis is placed on intensified struggles over 'scarce' resources, the fundamental questions about how such scarcities are produced, and the distributive inequities that underpin such scarcities are usually glossed over (Obi 2000:47-62). The second issue relates to the question of who the actors in conflict are. While most of the attention is often placed on local actors: the state/political elites, militia groups/warlords, and weak and inept bureaucracies, very little attention is paid to the role of external and transnational actors and the lack of transparency that shrouds the extent of their involvement in these conflicts. Such external actors include private security organizations, mercenaries, international traders and companies, arms suppliers, and extra-African powers pursuing strategic and economic interests in the continent.

In a rapidly globalising world, the international scramble for, and exploitation of, Africa's resources has been intensified (Bond 2006). While resource-endowment may be a curse for those that lose their land, homes and rights for oil extraction to take place, it is a blessing for those extractive external forces and their local allies that control and sell the oil on the world market or share in the 'spoils' of oil at home. Thus, oil alone does not cause conflict. It is transformed and mediated through market, social and power relations, so that by the time it features in the 'circuits of conflict' involving various groups and transnational interests, it would have entered into other

spheres as energy, profit, and power. The fundamental question then is who has the power over these resources, how are the benefits shared in the context of state-society and local-global power relations. This is partly relevant in explaining why a resource-rich Norway is developed, and not embroiled in 'resource wars'; while a resource-rich Nigeria is confronted by insurgent militias in the Niger Delta. The fundamental issue however is that the roots of Africa's conflict lie more in historical, social and distributive inequalities and inequities, grievances and the contradictions being spawned within the continent by globally-led extraction, and accumulation.

The foregoing goes to the heart of the complex conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta, where the intersection of global, national and local forces and processes also influence or define the various actors, high stakes and lines of partnership, struggles and conflict. It also underscores some of the contradictory alliances and strategic calculations that underlie a transnational process of extraction and dispossession, and the attempts by some local forces to either ride on the process for narrow ends, resist the predatory global-state alliance actions which expropriate their resource and pollute the environment, or navigate between the two positions based on calculations of expediency.

Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle for Local Autonomy and Resource Control in Nigeria

The roots of the Niger Delta conflict lie in the history of the struggles for self-determination, local autonomy and democracy of the ethnic minorities in the region, which goes as far back as the second decade of the twentieth century. The creation of Nigeria by the British as their colony in 1914 consigned the people of the Niger Delta to the status of ethnic minorities in relation to the numerically preponderant neighbouring ethnic groups which dominated political life in what later became the Western and Eastern regions of the country. The successive institutionalization of revenue sharing and power distribution along regional lines tended to reinforce the politicization of ethnic identity, and its mobilization in the struggles for access to power and resources. On this basis, smaller groups defined as 'ethnic minorities' tended to lose out, while the dominant ethnic groups asserted power at the regional (North, Hausa-Fulani; East, Igbo; and West, Yoruba) and the national level.

The initial reaction of the minorities was to protest against the perceived 'majoritarian stranglehold of the three ethno-regional blocs' (Mustapha 2003: 8) over power and resources by forming political parties representing their interests, and seeking local autonomy through state or region creation in the context of Nigerian federalism. These parties included the Cross River Ogoja State Movement (COR), the Midwest Movement, and the Niger Delta Congress (NDC). Although, they did not succeed in their quest for the creation

of new states before Nigeria's independence in 1960, the post-independence crises that culminated in civil war between 1967 and 1970 provided new opportunities.

Shortly before the eruption of war between the secessionist Biafra in the Eastern region in June 1967, the four regions of Nigeria (North, East, West and Midwest), were abolished and replaced with twelve states, of which the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta had three. Sensing that the creation of states had pulled the rug from under their feet in relation to gaining access to the oil fields of the Niger Delta, one of the early actions of the Igbo political elite was to stake Biafra's claim to the oil in the Niger Delta and demand the payment of royalties and taxes by oil companies to the Biafran government. In response, the federal government imposed a naval blockade on the Bonny and Port Harcourt oil export terminals and attacked Biafran forces in the Niger Delta (Ikein and Briggs-Anigboh 1998:128). Thus, the Nigerian civil war was to some extent an oil war and it was logical that the victorious federal army went on to establish its full control over the oil during and after the war. In this way, oil became the main object in the acrimonious politics of revenue allocation after the end of the Nigerian civil war.

By the 1970s, the Niger Delta had become the main source of oil and gas, and as a result the new fiscal basis of the Nigerian State (replacing agriculture), accounting for over 80 percent of national revenues and 95 percent of export earnings. In spite of the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta having their 'own' states, the federal government, largely controlled by the political elite from dominant ethnic groups, had seized monopoly control of the collection and distribution of oil revenues. Just as the states were created by military fiat, federal monopoly over oil was similarly established through Decree No. 51 of 1969 and Decree No. 9 of 1971. Apart from the state creation exercise, and the centralization of power over oil, the revenue allocation principle of derivation was progressively changed to reduce the share of oil producing states of the Niger Delta from 50 percent in 1966 to 1.5 percent in the 1990s.

The progressive reduction of the derivation principle – which provided for revenue allocation in proportion to the contribution to the federal purse by each state – and the introduction of the Distributive Pool Account (DPA) or federation account that emphasized the allocative principles of population size and need (and de-emphasized derivation), was viewed as an injustice by the ethnic minorities, particularly in the context of decades of marginalization and neglect of the Niger Delta by past governments. It was also strongly felt that the principle of derivation which gave 50 percent of revenues to the old regional governments controlled by the dominant ethnic groups was abandoned in order to enable these same groups to control the oil wealth produced from the oil minority states. Hence the struggle between the oil minorities/states of

the Niger Delta and the non-oil producing ethnic majority groups/states/federal government became the object of the politics of controlling oil revenue or resource control.

The campaign (non-violent until recently), which in Nigeria's political lexicon is referred to as 'resource control', is based on the demand for self-determination to control the resources within the 'territory' of the Niger Delta (inhabited by minorities), compensation for damages inflicted upon the territory by oil production (pollution, degradation, loss of livelihoods), and access to an increased share of oil revenues. It draws its rationale from the view that the control of oil by a federal government controlled by elite from the dominant (non-oil producing) ethnic groups is both unjust and explains why the Niger Delta has suffered decades of neglect, characterized not only by marginalization in relation to oil revenues, but also with regard to 'poor quality infrastructure, high unemployment rates (among its predominantly youthful population), high levels of HIV/AIDS infection rates and high levels of poverty estimated at an average of 69 percent' (UNDP 2006:15-18, 44). Also, its people have been discriminated against in the federal distribution of political and socioeconomic opportunities, entitlements and welfare services and development in general. Federal control of oil is also perceived as the result of an iniquitous political arrangement that enables the ethnic majorities to 'colonise', exploit and persecute the ethnic minorities, who they feel 'cannot pose any real threat to federal hegemony' (Okonta 2005).

Various Niger Delta ethnic minorities led the agitation for resource control. Some environmental/human rights groups protesting against the exploitation, neglect and pollution of the region by successive governments and oil companies also supported them. They expressed the view that the control of their oil resources by outsiders was akin to 'internal colonialism' and demanded for the right to control their own resource, oil. Such demands were largely ignored by the various military regimes that also repressed such protests. It was not until Nigeria returned to democratic rule in May 1999 that the derivation principle was increased to 13 percent. The increase was in response to international campaigns and local protests by ethnic minorities, and constituted a strategy of the new democratic regime of winning legitimacy on the basis of attending to the grievances of oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta. Part of the calculation was also to demobilize the protest groups by providing patronage to the local elite, co-opt the leadership of the protest and activist groups and create the conditions for the operations of the oil industry by stemming the tide of restiveness.

Unfortunately, the result has been the exact opposite, leading to the militarization of the ethnic minority resistance and escalating violence in the

region, partly as a result of worsening socioeconomic conditions, the co-optation of some armed groups by local politicians, and growing frustration and discontent among the youth that democracy had not addressed the roots of their grievances, and demands for improved welfare in the context of the continued extraction of wasting non-replaceable oil and gas resources from their region.

The sharing of oil revenues was again a source of acrimony at the National Constitutional Reform Conference in 2005 where most of the delegates were nominated by the state and federal governments. The conference ended up in a deadlock over its inability to reach an agreement between northern and southern delegates, the demand of delegates from the Niger Delta for an upward increase in the derivation formula from 13 to 25 percent, and a progressive increase within five years to 50 percent (IRIN news, 2005). This further increased the frustration of the people of the Niger Delta and fuelled demands for the restructuring of the Nigerian federation in ways that decentralized power and emphasized local autonomy and resource control.

Closely related to the discontent fuelled by the feelings that the oil minorities of the Niger Delta have been severely short-changed by the dominant groups that control federal power and oil is the issue of the ownership of land. One of the legacies of military rule was the 1978 Land Use Decree, later the Land Use Act, and a host of related laws that transferred the ownership of land from communities to state governments, and gave the latter the power to use land for (oil) 'development' purposes. As Omeje (2005:324), notes, 'what evidently compounds the institutional disadvantage of the oil-bearing communities and the stultification of their customary land rights is the fact that that the 1978 Act denies courts the jurisdiction to inquire into matters of compensation relating to the provisions of the Act'. Thus, not only can the state government acquire communal land, it also determines what compensation is paid for surface rights: i.e., the things on the land, buildings, shrines, trees, crops, etc.; and to whom it is paid. Therefore, the Act has been largely seen as yet another ploy to dispossess the Niger Delta people of their oil-rich land. The other dimension is that state control of land has also fed into the politics of compensation (payments), which has become a source of intra- and inter-community tension and conflict in the region.

Globalisation and Oil in Nigeria: Between Transnationalism and the Politics of Local Resistance

Oil multinationals (OMNCs), as the world's wealthiest and most powerful corporations, play a key role in the processes of capitalist globalisation and power. OMNCs dominate the global energy market through the commodification of oil – the most viable source of energy and the basis of strategic and industrial power in the world. The global reach and might of oil

multinationals is underlined and reinforced by recent mergers in which the 'seven sisters' became 'four': Exxon/Mobil, Royal Dutch Shell, BP-Amoco-Arco and ChevronTexaco (Davis, 2006:3). Just as these oil Super Majors have extensive trans-boundary connections, they also have a lot of influence in their home countries.

Shell first struck oil in Oloibiri in the Niger Delta in 1956, began exports in 1958, and was joined by the world's other leading oil multinationals in 1959. Shell maintained its head start over the oil multinationals, today accounting for almost half of Nigeria's daily oil production, while others such as Chevron-Texaco, Exxon Mobil, Total, and Agip-ENI mostly account for the rest (Obi 2001:177-178). Thus, when global interests within oil-rich developing countries are threatened, local states (backed by oil companies and their home governments) seek to crush those threats through a combination of repression of local protests and the co-optation of some local leaders.

Thus, Nigeria has been integrated into the global oil market as a supplier of crude oil and gas. In spite of the recent entry of Chinese and other Asian and South American as well as indigenous oil companies, the OMNCs still dominate the Nigerian oil industry (Obi 2009:136). The enmeshment of 'the global' and 'national' in 'the local' in oil production in the Niger Delta is both emblematic of a seamless trans-global capitalist accumulation process, which also defines the region as a 'local' site of 'global' production (mediated by the 'nation-state') with its attendant contradictions, contestations and crises. Given the nature of the political economy of oil in Nigeria, the transnational production of oil is underscored by a Nigerian state-OMNC alliance, which in the context of the Niger Delta is being confronted by protests and local resistance.

From Local Protest to Resistance

The earliest violent attempt at the local control of oil took place in February 1966, when an ethnic minority Ijaw militant, ex-policeman and undergraduate led a group of youths named the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) in an abortive attempt to secede from Nigeria, and establish a Niger Delta republic. At stake then, as now, was the ownership and control of the oil in the region, which Boro and his supporters feared would be seized by the Igbo ethnic majority-dominated Eastern region government, and the new 'unitarist' Nigerian military government, led by General J. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo officer. Initially sentenced to death after being found guilty of treason by a court, Boro and his followers were freed after another military coup in July 1966 led by military officers of northern origin resulted in Ironsi's overthrow and death, and his replacement with Colonel Yakubu Gowon as the new head of state. Upon his release, Boro joined the Nigerian Army and

fought in the civil war on the federal side, apparently to defend the oilfields of the Niger Delta from falling into the hands of the rebel Biafran (Igbo) forces. Boro died at the war front shortly before the Nigerian civil war ended in 1970. His bravery and exploits in furthering the cause of Ijaw freedom made him a hero in the eyes of the people, and was to be revived in the 1990s by Niger Delta militants struggling for local autonomy and resource control.

Several developments after the war ended had implications for the struggle of the Niger Delta ethnic minorities. These included the increased transfer and centralization of the control of oil revenues from the regions to the federal military government, the OPEC-led oil-boom of the 1970s, the transfer of the ownership of oil-rich land from local communities to the federal (and state) governments, and the vast expansion in local oil production and its impact on the fragile Niger Delta environment. This provided a background for agitation by the ethnic minorities that felt that the federal military government had short-changed them, after they supported it during the civil war, only for them to lose access to a considerable proportion of the oil produced from their region. Rather than having a right to 50 percent of oil revenues on the basis of the derivation principle of revenue allocation, it was progressively reduced till it got to a mere three percent in the early 1980s. In its place, population size and need were used, giving the greater share of oil to the non-oil producing ethnic majority groups from other parts of the country, who also were seen as occupying the most lucrative political offices as well as high positions in the Nigerian oil industry. By the late-1970s, various ethnic minority identity and elite groups had begun to mobilize support for a peaceful protest against the activities of oil companies and neglect by the government. These took the form of petitions, reports and articles in local newspapers.

The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) moved the struggle to its next phase in the 1990s when it presented the Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR) to the government, demanding local autonomy and control of its oil, and waging an effective international campaign against Shell on account of its exploitative and polluting activities in Ogoniland, which threatened the survival of the people (Saro-Wiwa 1995). However, rather than respond to these demands, the MOSOP resistance and 'revolution' was literally crushed largely through the use of state military force, and the hanging after a controversial trial and verdict, of nine of its leading members, including the writer and minority rights campaigner, Ken Saro-Wiwa, in November 1995. Although the fate that befell MOSOP was to send a signal to other ethnic minority groups that the government would not brook any challenge to its control of oil, Ijaw youth took up the struggle from 1997 onwards. In December 1998, the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) was formed, and it issued the Kaiama Declaration (KD), which among demands, insisted on the Ijaw control of Ijaw oil.

To show that it meant business, the IYC, using the slogan 'Operation Climate Change', demanded that all oil companies should leave the Niger Delta before the end of December 1998. Like MOSOP, the IYC mobilized the youth and ordinary people, by drawing upon local Ijaw idioms and a culture of resistance. Part of this included the use of *Egbesu*: literally the Ijaw god of war, but whose real significance lay deep in Ijaw cosmology as a symbol of spiritual protection (invincibility) for the Ijaw, when fighting a 'just war' for liberation. Rather than respond to the demands of the KD, or seek to enter into dialogue with the IYC on the need to negotiate a withdrawal of the Operation Climate Change, the military government sent in troops that forcefully put down the uprising against transnational oil. Many protesters were injured in the repression that followed, while Boro's birthplace, which was perceived as a rallying point for IYC activists, was sacked by the army. A search then followed for IYC activists believed to have the tattoo of *Egbesu* on their bodies. It was in this state of the repression of the IYC protest, and the non-resolution of the Niger Delta question, that Nigeria returned to elected democratic rule in May 1999.

Expectations were initially high in the Niger Delta that Nigeria's return to democracy would lead to the de-militarization of the region, reduce tensions, and bring 'democracy dividends' to the people. At the same time, the local political class had gone round in an attempt to co-opt the leadership of the various social movements, identity and communal organizations, with a view to de-radicalizing and demobilizing them or using them for narrow/personal political purposes.

After the 1999 elections, the security forces remained in the Niger Delta, but assumed a rather low profile. However, when a criminal gang that had held an oil producing community captive killed some police officers, even before the expiration of an ultimatum given to the Bayelsa state government by the federal government, the Nigerian Army invaded the community ostensibly to apprehend the criminals, but it later took the form of a punitive expedition, which razed the entire community save for a few buildings, and left thousands injured, homeless or dead. After Odi, military forces also raided other communities in the Niger Delta such as Olugbobiri, Liama and Gbarantoru (Human Rights Watch 2002).

The continued militarization of the region contributed to the feeling in some circles that those that had held the oil-rich Niger Delta 'captive' would neither listen to the demands of the people nor respect their rights. Such views were informed by the apparent failure of peaceful protest to effect change in the attitude of the state-oil alliance toward the Niger Delta. The response by such groups was to adopt violence, either in navigating the complex terrain of survival in the region, or in resisting what was seen as the

predatory instincts of the state-oil alliance and wrest the control of oil from them. A very common refrain in response to questions posed to people in the Niger Delta about the attitude of the Nigerian state and Oil Multinationals is that 'they are very arrogant', leading to the widespread view that 'they only respond to force' when their interests are threatened by violence. This is both an expression of frustration as it is the failure of peaceful protest to lead to any meaningful change in the plight of the people, and anger at the impunity with which the region is being plundered by the state-oil alliance, with the complicity of some local elites and 'violent youth'.

The violence of resource extraction in the Niger Delta by the state-oil alliance has dialectically resulted in the violence of local resistance. However, it must be noted that the very nature of such dialectics is complex, and sometimes contradictory, as the various forces find expression at different levels, and alliances are built, destroyed and reconstituted in various ways. For example, three state governors in the Niger Delta in 1999 were able to penetrate and sponsor some of the militia's armed groups in the region to unleash violence upon and intimidate their political opponents and voters. Of note was the case of the governor of Rivers State, who got two of the leaders of such groups, one, Mujaheed Asari Dokubo, then Vice President and later (with the governor's support), President of the IYC, and the other, Ateke Tom, then leader of the Okrika Vigilante (later Niger Delta Vigilante), to 'help' him during the 1999 and 2003 elections (Best and Kemedi 2005; Human Rights Watch 2005). Now estranged from the politicians and the military that have declared him a wanted person, Ateke has been accused of attacking police stations in Port Harcourt just before the Presidential elections in April 2007, destroying the stations and killing some officers in the process. In response, Ateke noted, 'I am a Niger Delta Freedom fighter' (Simmons 2007). Apart from these two groups, there has been a proliferation of other armed groups or 'cults' (Coventry Cathedral 2009). For now, the most potent militant group engaging in local resistance, but targeting a global audience, is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). MEND has launched daring raids into fortified oil installations onshore and offshore and kidnapped foreign oil workers, detonated explosive devices near oil compounds, and fought pitched battles on land and at sea with Nigeria's military forces, and publicised its activities in various global media.

MEND: The Militarization of Local Resistance?
MEND first burst forth into the public consciousness in Nigeria in 2006, with far-reaching global ramifications. The group has effectively attracted international attention to the plight of the Ijaw ethnic minority group and to its resistance campaign through the taking hostage of foreign oil workers,

demonstrating the inability of Nigerian security forces to stop its attacks and sabotage of oil installations. Using the internet to send e-mails and images to the world's leading news agencies and local newspapers, taking journalists to its camps in the swamps of the Niger Delta (Junger 2007), MEND has tried to distance itself from the local political class and the ransoming of foreign hostages, and tapping into local idioms, symbols and grievances to embed itself in the people's consciousness. It has however gained most attention internationally by its threats to 'cripple the Nigerian oil exports' (IRIN 2006).

The organization has proved to be as elusive to those hunting it, as it is concrete to those supporting it in the villages and creeks of the Niger Delta and abroad. It has been profiled by the MIPT (2007) as 'an active terrorist group that uses violent means to support the rights of the ethnic Ijaw people in the Niger Delta'. The report also notes that 'led by a notoriously shadowy and secretive elite cadre, MEND's ultimate goal is to expel foreign oil companies and Nigerians not indigenous to the Delta region from Ijawland. In the short run, the group wishes to increase local control over the money made from the exploitation of the region's abundant natural resources'. While this profile dwells on labelling, rather than analyzing the circumstances within which MEND emerged and the content of its message(s), with a view to constructing the image of an imminent 'terrorist threat' to western energy interests, a more nuanced and informed view locates its emergence in 'the lethal cocktail of economic deprivation, military dictatorship and worsening environmental crisis' in the Niger Delta, and its tapping into 'the fifty year Ijaw quest for social and environmental justice in the Niger Delta' (Okonta 2007:7-11).

While it has targeted foreign oil workers, it has released all such hostages after a period, all unharmed, giving credence to the view that they are used to draw international attention to the injustice in the region, seen as an important aspect in globalising local resistance in the Niger Delta. In an interview with Brian Ross (2007), Jomo Gbomo, the spokesperson of MEND, elucidated on the objectives of the group:

> The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is an amalgam of all arm bearing groups in the Niger Delta fighting for the control of oil revenue by indigenes of the Niger Delta who have had relatively no benefits from the exploitation of our mineral resources by the Nigerian government and oil companies over the last fifty years.

It appears that MEND's anger is against the government and the oil, which, in tandem with the Oloibiri metaphor, are held responsible for the plunder and pollution of the Niger Delta. Although the militant group has recently

been affected by factionalism following three developments (the release of Asari Dokubo, leader of the NDPVF from prison in June 2007, the election of Jonathan Goodluck as Nigeria's Vice President in 2007, and the arrest and detention in Angola, before the extradition to Nigeria of one of MEND's leaders, Henry Okah), the core of MEND has remained steadfast to its goals and methods.

In its most recent phase, the politics of local resistance has been decisively violent. The new trend in the Niger Delta is also feeding into the global securitization of the region and the surrounding Gulf of Guinea, whereby the international community, particularly the United States, is concerned about its energy security interests and a possible 'contagion effect' of the volatile Niger Delta on its maritime commercial and strategic interests in West Africa. Apart from the billions of dollars worth of oil investments by US oil companies, and the safety of American oil workers, the entry of oil companies from China, India, Brazil, Malaysia and Korea into the region is perceived as a threat by some US policy makers. Also of relevance is the centrality of the Niger Delta to the post-9/11 US security calculations within the overall context of its global security and the US Command for Africa (AFRICOM).

Conclusion

What the foregoing shows is that oil is central to the spiralling violence in the Niger Delta which has gone beyond an ethnic minority conflict, with far reaching national and global ramifications (International Crisis Group 2006; Obi 2007b). Its centrality is reflected at different levels, and underpinned by the high stakes involved, and a deeply felt sense of grievance among Niger Delta ethnic minorities, arising from perceived injustices in the distribution of oil revenues and benefits. At certain levels, the conflict appears to be one between the ethnic minorities against the ethnic majorities-controlled federal government, but such a conclusion would be misleading and false as the reality is much more complex. It involves violent contestation around a historically constructed sense of grievance, injustice, inequality and wanton exploitation and impoverishment by the state-transnational oil alliance, to which a faction of the Niger Delta elite also belongs. The Niger Delta elite faction is ambivalent or Janus-faced: one face for the people, the other for its federal and transnational partners.

In spite of the vast earnings from oil, Afeikhena (2005:15), drawing upon a World Bank report, estimates that 'about 80 percent of Nigeria's oil and natural gas revenues accrue to one percent of the country's population. The other 99 percent of the population receive the remaining 20 percent of the oil and gas revenues, leaving Nigeria with the lowest per capita oil export earning

put at $212 (N28, 408) per person in 2004'. The anatomy of the struggles over oil is one that pitches the one percent of the populace that has monopolised oil-dependent political and economic power, against the 99 percent, which is also torn from within by bitter struggles over the 20 percent of the oil and gas revenues. However, the nature of economic inequalities as they relate to oil cannot be understood outside the nature and logic of 'fossil capitalism' and the social contradictions that it spawns in developing countries.

Worse, most of the wealth that accrues to the one percent of the Nigerians (the elite) who have 'cornered' the 'national oil cake' ends up outside the country. As Afiekhena again points out, drawing on a UNIDO report, 'Nigeria had an estimated $107 billion of its private wealth held abroad'. As a result, not only are most Nigerians and the Niger Delta people excluded from the benefits of the oil wealth, most of the wealth has not been invested within the country, contributing to most Nigerians living below the poverty line, and to the deepening social crisis whose effects can be seen in the cities and villages of Africa's most populous country and leading oil exporter.

Nowhere else are the contradictions in the political economy of oil in Nigeria writ as large as in the troubled Niger Delta region which accounts for the bulk of oil production and exports. The UNDP Niger Delta Human Development Report (2006) concludes that the Niger Delta has 'an appalling human development situation summed up in social instability, poor local governance, neglect of infrastructure, lack of access to fundamental services, environmental degradation and extreme economic deprivation' (2006:15-16). The volatile brew provides a fertile context for the growing insurgency.

But while the Niger Delta is the site of conflict, the actors are both local and global. OMNCs through their policies in the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta have been implicated in local conflicts through their pay offs to 'pro-company' groups, elites, militias and 'chiefs'. Such pay offs have either been the object of conflicts or division within and between communities, while some of them have ended up buying arms to unleash further violence on the groups or the oil companies themselves.

The evidence coming out of the Niger Delta shows that the conflicts have complex causes: roots and branches that mutate over time in response to various factors, and forces: local, national and global, and defy simplistic explanations or 'quick fixes'. Also reducing these complex factors to statistical assumptions and representations or abstract matrixes that do not capture the nuances and specificities of the Niger Delta conflict may lead to misleading results. It is for this and other reasons that great care must be taken in adopting partial perspectives in examining the roots of conflict in the region. It is important to be wary of perspectives that tend to privilege simplistic

mono-causal or cultural explanations, over those that note the complex roots of African conflicts, including the role of global processes and transnational forces. Failure to recognise the historical specificities and dynamics of each conflict tend to feed the 'one size fits all' shopping list: peace agreements, multiparty democracy, human rights, the securitization of development, that define the solutions that international donors and Western governments promote in Africa in pursuit of the 'liberal peace' (Paris 2002), but which usually end up further down the road in results that are not liberal, developmental or peaceful.

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