

## **Oil, Unfulfilled Expectations and the Aggressive Survival Strategies in the Niger Delta**

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### **Abstract**

The researcher examined the effects of oil exploration in the Niger Delta. The study relied on desk survey of relevant journals, official gazette of government agencies and reports of committees of inquiries on the Niger Delta. The findings of the study revealed that the activities of oil companies operating in the region have devastating effects on the people and their sources of livelihood. They, therefore, resort to what the study described as “aggressive survival strategies. Based on the foregoing, it was recommended that the government, interventionist agencies and the oil companies should make concerted efforts to fulfil the expectations of the people.

**Keywords:** Unfulfilled Expectations, Oil, Survival Strategies, Niger Delta, Resource Control

### **Introduction**

The discovery and exploration of oil in commercial quantities in any environment present an enormous opportunity for prosperity and economy development. The opportunity lays in the fact that crude oil exploration is a basic source of foreign exchange earnings, economies are built on the foundation of oil, jobs are created and infrastructures are developed. However, while the discovery of oil is a source of blessings to some regions and countries like Norway and the United Arab Emirate (UAE), it is not to others. The discovery of oil in 1956 at the Oloibiri area of the present Bayelsa State was greeted with great expectations and excitement. Ikporukpo (2006, p. 5) captured it thus: “The people imagined that the dazzling boats and plane together with the white-men they now regularly waved to and applauded were evidences that development and prosperity were at their door step.”

More than seventy decades after the discovery and exploration of oil in the region, it is strange to describe the Niger Delta as underdeveloped. The region which is the bedrock of the Nigerian economy has become an arena of crises, agitations and unprecedented youth restiveness. It is important to know that the Niger Delta is also blessed with arable lands and produced crops such as oil palm, rubber, cassava, plantain and banana. But the activities of oil companies destroy the soil of the area and hinder the production of these crops in commercial quantities. Complicating the Niger Delta economy and developmental challenges is the controversies that surround the description of the region. Human Right Watch (1999) describes the region as the largest wetland in Africa and one of the largest

in the world. According to the Watch, the area encompasses over 2000 square kilometres of Nigeria's total land of 92.377 km<sup>2</sup>. Azaiki & Oguozor (2002) on their part posited that the Niger Delta lies between longitudes 50151 and 80151 east of the Greenwich Meridian. The latitudinal limit of the region lies between 40171 and 60 north of the equator. Singh, Moffat & Linden (1995), cited in Ibaba (2017) observed that the topography of the region is two metres above the sea level. It is believed that the different descriptions of the area are dictated by scholars' analytical inclination and circumstances that prompted the analysis at the given time. Ibaba (2017, p. 6) further stated that the description of the region educed two different views, the geographical view that classifies the Niger Delta in terms of the six South-South states of; Rivers, Edo, Delta, Cross-River, Bayelsa and Akwa-Ibom and the politically description that grouped all the oil bearing states of the country as Niger Delta in which case, Abia, Imo and Ondo states are classified as Niger Delta. While the latter seen to be the acceptable definition of the Nigerian ruling class. Our scope in this study is on the "core" Niger Delta states of Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers. Of course, the other states in the geographical description of the region have similar features with the core states.

The dependence of the Nigerian state on the wealth of the Niger Delta and the near total concentration of powers at the centre create a situation where the people of the region do not have control over the resources in the area; they cannot control the operations of the oil companies whose activities have very negative impacts on their lives. Empirical data confirm the concerns of the people in the region that in several instances, where Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) are entered between the companies and host communities, the companies more often than not end up dishonouring such MOUs (Ikelegbe, 2009).

In addition, there are several laws and degrees that disempowered the people of the area from actively participating in the management of the resources in the land; the Land Use Act of 1978 and the Petroleum Act of 1969. The people, therefore, express their discontentment through various forms of agitations which made the region restive. In response to the restiveness, the government has always intervened through agencies, committees, lobbying of stakeholders and even the militarisation of the area.

### **Oil Induced Crises in the Niger Delta: Theoretical Explanations**

Numerous theories explain the different dimensions of oil related crises in the Niger Delta. This study examines three of them namely: the "conflict-theory," the "political-economy theory" and the "frustration-aggression theory." However, the frustration aggression theory was used in the analysis of this study. Conflict theory was first proposed by Karl Marx in the 19th century. The theory says that in society, there are different categories of people that are in continuous competition and struggle over limited powers and resources. It argues that in the competition, the more powerful group or person benefits while the other suffers. Karl Marx was concerned with the exploitation of the weak by the strong and the deprivation the former suffers in the society (Bell, 2013).

The political economy theory as proposed by Marx (1977) and further captured by Ake (1981) and Aja (1998) places emphasis on the economic condition of society and the

fact that man is largely concerned about his economic needs. The theory places primacy on the division of society into different classes; those that own the means of production and those that own the labour power and that these classes are in constant conflict with the former being exploitative. It is not the scope of this work to interrogate the views of the Neo-Marxists. Our concern is to explain that the Niger-Delta crisis can also be attributed to the material condition of the people.

On its part, the frustration aggression theory contends that aggression is a consequence of frustration. Frustration sets in when an individual or group is prevented from achieving an anticipated goal. The theory is propounded by John Dollard, Leonard Doob, Robert Sears, Orval Mowrer and Neal Miller in 1931. They argued that aggression is triggered by frustration. The unjustifiable deprivation of anybody from the attainment of a goal leads to frustration, it is from the premises of frustration that this study explains the Niger Delta crises. In other words, the aggressive survival strategies the word discussed are reactive measures consequences upon the frustration the people of the region suffer.

### **Methodology**

The study is a qualitative research that relied mainly on secondary sources for data. Data were gathered from relevant journals articles, reports of committees and agencies established by government to address the development challenges of the region, and official gazettes on the Niger Delta Crises. They were presented using texts and tables where appropriate and analysis was done using the descriptive method.

### **Oil and the Niger Delta Experience**

The survival of the Nigerian state is largely dependent on the oil of the Niger Delta. Oil accounts for about 95% of the country's foreign earnings and is a unifying factor for the various ethnic divides. Prior to the discovery and exploration of oil, Nigeria was an agrarian state and was known for exporting cash crops such as cocoa, groundnuts, palm oil, cotton among others (Nweze & Greg, 2016). Unfortunately, with the oil boom, the country is afflicted by the "Dutch Disease" (Dutch Disease occurs when focus, labour and capital from other sectors of the economy are diverted and concentrated on a booming sector, mostly on newly discovered natural resources). Dutch disease usually results in initial substantive increase in money flow. Oil is the mainstay of Nigerian economy. Scholars are of the view that the operations and activities of the oil companies have negatively impacted the region. Soremekun & Obadare (1998, p. 44) in their analysis of the impacts of oil operations in the Niger Delta observed that oil operations have caused massive damages to the environment of the oil producing area, these damages according to them, include pipeline leakages that destroy vegetation, forest and farm lands, aquatic life and alteration of the taste of fishes and animals in the waters, oil spillages that have similar effects as pipeline leakages, well blow-out and air pollution.

Adeyemi (2000) considered oil-spill as one of the natural impacts of petroleum exploitation. Like Soremekun & Obadare, Adeyemi (2000) agreed that the consequences of oil spills on the environment are numerous, devastating and occurs frequently across the region.

**Table 1: Incidence of Oil Spillage in Nigeria between 2011 and 2021**

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of Spills</b>	<b>Quantity Spilled</b>
2011	1,059	73,132
2012	1,135	41,807
2013	1,666	32,292
2014	1,521	78,890
2015	921	47,714
2016	685	42,744
2017	595	34,887
2018	702	38,009
2019	744	41,782
2020	458	23,592
2021	370	23,958
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,856</b>	<b>468,807</b>

**Source:** Khadijat (2022).

It can be seen from the table above that oil spills has been a reoccurring phenomenon across states in the Niger Delta. The National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) equally reported that Nigeria recorded about 881 cases of oil spillages between January 2019 and April 2021 in the oil producing states of the country and 77 percent of these cases occurred in core Niger Delta states of Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States. A total of 352 cases were recorded in Rivers state, 233 were recorded in Delta state and 89 were recorded in Bayelsa state. These incidences occurred across several communities in these states including Touma-Ama, Ogulagha, Odimodi, Nembe, Lasugbene, amongst others (<http://www.dataphyte.com>).

Gas flaring is another repercussion of oil production, besides its adverse effects on wildlife, human beings and vegetation, Obanijesu, Adebisi, Sonibare & Okelana (2009) admitted that gas flaring produces sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere and this causes acid rain and generates greenhouse gases which contributes to global “climate change.” The uninterrupted nature of gas flaring in the region and its impacts were noted by Okoko & Ibaba (1999) when they quoted a World Bank source that declared the Niger Delta as the most polluted area in the World; this according to them, is because 70% of the gasses associated with oil exploration is flared into the region. Some of the effects of gas flaring on the environment include climate change which causes heat and diseases on the people, ozone layer depletion that results in increase in sea level, global warming that causes heat and destruction of agricultural resources, acid rain and air pollution, that contaminate seafood and CO<sub>2</sub> emission among others.

The consequences of the activities of oil companies are of concern to researchers, Orubu, Odusola & Ewharieme (2004) carried out a detailed study on the activities of oil companies and listed the activities to include, exploration, geological, refining of petroleum tanker loading, storage of the product, transportation and marketing of the product. Each of these activities have damaging effects on the region and people; for instance, transportation of petroleum product that seems harmless disrupts the sea-bed

when the land is dredged for the installation of pipelines and this cause erosion and flooding of the area in addition to water pollution whenever there is pipeline leakage or breakage of pipeline.

Oil company operations in the Niger Delta have made the area to gain international significance. Some policy makers, especially sympathisers of the Nigerian state describe the region as crises-prone and attribute the development status of the region to the crisis. Development scholars, Ibaba (2005, 2007, 2010), Etekpe (2007), Ikelegbe (2001, 2006) see the region as an area that has suffered all forms of deprivations from the government, oil companies and political office holders of the region. Worthy of note is that they are anonymous in their analysis that the area is comparatively not developed. The resources of the area that ought to be a blessing to the people is rather a curse. There is a deep feeling of discontentment among the Niger Delta people.

### **Unfulfilled Expectations of the Niger Delta People**

Oil boom in any place, beginning from Titusville, USA in 1859 gives that the inhabitants of the area great expectations of decent living. Therefore, the expectations of the Niger Delta People for economy growth, infrastructural development and gainful employment was (is) not forthcoming. Unfortunately, the exploration of oil in the region, rather than being a blessing can best be described as a curse. It has impoverished and caused in quietude among the people (World Bank, NBS).

However, the Nigerian state, in its attempts to address the challenges occasioned by the activities of oil companies established interventionist agencies (Niger Delta Development Agencies, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs) and inaugurated different committees, some of which are identified in this study. It should be noted that the agitations for the development of the Niger Delta predicated the country's independence on October 1, 1960. The agitations led to the inauguration of Sir Henry Willinks' Commission. The commission among other recommendations made, said the people of the Niger Delta region have peculiar challenges which are as a result of their difficult terrain. The commission, therefore, advised that the development of the region should be given special attention by the then Federal and Eastern region government (Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta (RTCTND)). The establishment of the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) in 1961 was seen as a step towards the implementation of one of the recommendations of the Willinks Commission Report. Fifteen years after the establishment of the NDDDB, it was clear that the board lacked the capacity to deliver; so in 1976, the Niger Delta Basin Development Authority (NDBDA) was established to replace the NDDDB. It later turned out that the NDBDA could not perform better than the NDDDB. It was simply an old wine inside a new bottle (Ikporukpo, 2008).

In 1992, the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) was established. Some commentators argued and doubted the capacity of the commission to deliver on its mandate of ensuring the development of the region. Their arguments were justified by the failure of similar commission and boards before it and of course in the year 2000, the federal government had every basis to create another agency with fresh zeal; so,

the NDDC was created by the Obasanjo's administration with the same task of ensuring the development of the Niger Delta region. Part II of the Act establishing the commission listed in details the functions and powers of the commission and it is centred on preparing a master-plan for the holistic development of the region. Among the functions captured is "... cause the Niger Delta to be surveyed in order to ascertain measures which are necessary to promote the physical and socio-economic development" NDDC (Establishment) Act 2006. The establishment of any commission or inauguration of any committee for the purpose of developing the Niger Delta gives the people of the region high expectations for prosperous and decent living, largely because the aims and functions of the commission or committees are squarely for the development of the region. The then Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in one of his visits to the Ebenanaowei (Paramount ruler) of Ogulgha kingdom in Delta State was said to have lamented that there is no justification for the underdevelopment of the Niger Delta; like some commentators before him, he believed that "...the huge resources the federal government invests in the Ministry of Niger Delta, NDDC and other interventionist agencies in the region ought to reflect in the physical development of the area (punchng.com, 2019).

The federal government cannot claim to be ignorant of the various factors that hinder the efficiency and effectiveness of these agencies, but they continue to raise the expectations of the people; thus, in September 8, 2008, the then Vice-President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan inaugurated the Technical Commission on the Niger Delta and in his inaugural address, he told members of the committee that the task of gathering data to advise the Federal Government would not attract new research, lengthy debates or field trips. He noted that any information they might need would be found in existing commission recommendations, report or suggestions that might be forwarded to them by Nigerians (RTCTND). The inauguration of the commission gave high expectations to the Niger Delta people. The commission headed by Bafom Mitee came out with detailed recommendations on how to address the challenges of the region, the report was submitted in September, 2009 and over a decade, nothing seems to be done. Like, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan rightly observed, there are several reports, recommendations and suggestions which when implemented, will have far-reaching developmental impacts on the region and its people. Some of them include:

- i. The 1994 Don Efiabets report that has part of the report reads: "Based on what the team observed on their tour, it is confirmed that most of the communities in the region lack basic amenities and should be urgently developed (RTTCTND).
- ii. The Sustainable Development Report of 2003.
- iii. The Niger Delta Human Development Report 2006.

### **Survival Strategies in the Niger Delta**

The feeling of discontentment among the people of the Niger Delta breeds frustration and this has reflected in the emergence of different militant groups that express their frustrations against the system through various agitations, self-determinations, call for resource control or the practice of fiscal federalism and their modus-operadi (disruption of

oil companies operations, pipeline vandalism, kidnapping/hostage taking, issuing of threats) can be described as aggressive because in most instances, forces are applied to enforce them and the militant groups survive through these strategies. The groups include:

- i. **The Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV):** The NDV is a militant group led by Tom Ateke and the agitation of this group is centred on resource control.
- ii. **The Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF):** Like the NDV, the NDPVF is a militant group that came into existence in 2004. The activities of this group that sometimes have global impact is to correct perceived injustice against the region.
- iii. **The Niger Delta Liberation Front (NDLF):** The agitation of the NDLF led by John Togo was for self-determination and their area of operation is around the Warri axis.
- iv. **The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND):** The MEND which unarguably is the most popular group among the militant groups in the Niger Delta agitates for resource control and has argued for adequate compensation for the people of the region that have suffered environmental injustice and are deprived of their sources of livelihood.
- v. **The Niger Delta Avengers (NDA):** The NDA came into existence in March 2016 and like the groups, the NDA has always agitated for self-determination.

A point to note is that the modus operandi of these groups and other similar ones disrupt the operations of oil companies in the region, have devastating impacts on government economy projections and in most times, have global impact. The question is necessary here, can these be classified as “survival strategies? The government, oil companies and political office holders of the region that have deprived the region of basic infrastructure and impoverished the people, have made the recruitment process into armed militant groups in the Niger Delta very easy and of course, whenever, these groups strike or threaten to strike, they are compensated. Members of these groups survive through their operations which often attract the attention of the government and oil companies.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Niger Delta has gained global importance largely because of oil in all its ramifications. The exploration of petroleum products that should be a source of development in the region seems to be a curse to the region. The various crises in the area are traceable to the oil wealth in the region. The crises are not unexpected because the activities of the oil companies coupled with some obnoxious laws and decrees of the government, disconnects the people from the oil resources of the area. While the interventionist measures of the government are very commendable, the agencies and other agencies efforts have not achieved the desired objectives. The efforts towards developing the area are undermined by the politicisation of the activity of the agencies, corruption in the system, conflicts and crises that are consequences of the failed system. Corruption and greed of

political office holders of the Niger Delta is also a big challenge. Thus, the region and country at large will remain unstable, unless expectations and promises made to the people are fulfilled.

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