

## FEATURE

# The Wealth and Pain of Nigeria's Niger Delta Region: Moving from Exploitation to Accountability

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*'Despite fuelling much of Nigeria's economic growth, the Niger Delta is somewhat marginalized from Nigeria's national development. Essentially, there is a significant disconnect between the wealth the region generates for the Nigerian federation and the transnational oil companies extracting oil from the region, and the region's human development progress'*  
– Oviasuyi and Uwadiae (2010: 118)

*The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is remarkable not only for its magnificent ecology as one of the world's largest wetlands but for its richness in natural resources, which include extensive oil deposits that make for over 90 per cent of the country's oil. It is also one of the most threatened and rapidly deteriorating natural habitats in the world.*

*More than four decades of resource-exploitation have created incredible wealth for transnational oil corporations and turned Nigeria into a petrol-dollar state; by the same token, they have left the local population deeply impoverished and devastated the environment. It is an unjust and inequitable situation that stems from, on the one hand, corporate greed and irresponsibility, and, on the other, governmental arbitrariness and indifference.*

*The result has been a tit-for-tat conflict between militants in the region and the Nigerian government. While the militant groups rightly or wrongly protest against human rights abuses through criminal activities, the government in turn unleashes military forces to 'curb' the violence. Hence, the conflict has spread like wildfire, threatening the social, economic and political security of the region and the country at large.*

*The principal contention in this article is that conflict and abuses persist in the region chiefly because the Nigerian government and oil corporations fail to be accountable for the exploitation. After an overview of the Niger Delta's history, the article sets out the major economic, social and cultural rights violations that have occurred and examines the government's attempts at developing the region.*



**The discovery of oil in the 1950s raised great expectations about development, but this was short-lived.**

## Historical overview

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The Niger Delta area is one of the most diverse regions in the world and has a landmass of about 70,000 square kilometres. The exploration of its huge oil and gas deposits provides more than 95 per cent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings (Oviasuyi and Uwadiae 2010: 111). This region consists of the federated states of Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Imo and Ondo, which are located in the country's South-South, South-East and South-West geo-political zones.

Prior to the discovery of oil, the local population, predominantly subsistent farmers and fisherfolk, depended entirely on farmlands and waters for their livelihood. The discovery of oil in the 1950s raised great expectations about the development of the region and its people, but this was short-lived. The dramatic increase both in the power of oil corporations and in the revenues that accrued to Nigeria was accompanied by economic depression and poverty, ecological degradation – including gas flaring, oil spills, the contamination of soil and water, and indiscriminate dumping of industrial and toxic waste – the political marginalisation and discontentment of local communities, and human rights atrocities.

In the 1990s, conflict erupted between militants, the government, oil corporations and communities and has escalated ever since, with the turbulence concentrated in Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states, particularly so among the Ogoni and Ijaw communities. Activists such as Isaac Boro and Ken Saro-Wiwa sought justice, but the inhumane treatment they received stands as

proof of the government's disregard for the rule of law.

Grievances led to the creation of armed groups, among them the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force and the Niger Delta Vigilantes, which joined forces as Niger Delta militants. They adopted all manner of ways to protest against human rights abuses and oil exploration, including destroying oil rigs with explosives, kidnapping foreign workers, sabotaging facilities, and vandalising pipelines, deeds that led to serious environmental pollution and economic decline.

In 2009, the government granted the militants amnesty, with monthly stipends, cash incentives and training. This appeased them and reduced the violence for a while, but in recent years it intensified. In 2016 and 2017, a new group, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), set out to cripple Nigeria's economy, causing a shutdown of oil terminals that saw oil production decline to its lowest in 20 years (*The Economist* 2016). Subsequently, a coalition known as the Reformed Niger Delta Avengers (RNDA) emerged and has been waging a so-called 'operation no mercy' attack. The group is also threatening secession to enable the region to control its own resources (Daily Post 2017).

## Economic, social and cultural rights violations

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While oil revenues continue to account for more than 85 per cent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings, the host communities of this massive economic operation are deprived of the most basic social and economic infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, potable water, health-care facilities, schools, adequate housing, and employment – all of which are recognised as human rights in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria of 1999, as amended (CFRN), the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Oil exploration has caused severe ecological



## Oil pollution violates the economic and cultural rights of the people of this region

damage, primarily through spills that pollute the rivers which produce fish for trading and which are also a means of inter-communal transportation. It is estimated that about 45.8 billion kilowatts of heat are discharged into the atmosphere from flaring, along with 1.8 billion cubic feet of gas every day (Oviasuyi and Uwadiae 2010: 116). Amnesty International (2015) has confirmed that oil spills have a devastating impact on fields, forests and fisheries, which are basic sources of food and livelihoods.

Oil pollution violates the economic and cultural rights of the people of this region, as their means of livelihood are contaminated and their communities have become ecological wastelands. Many lack pipe-borne water points, as a result of which they have to get drinking water from their once pure but now contaminated river. Electricity supply is erratic in the few communities that have it, while fish festivals – once a colourful part of the cultural and commercial life of local communities – are also hard-hit by the reality of insufficient and contaminated produce.

The government's indifference to the region's basic needs and unregulated oil exploration activities has resulted in gross violation of the human rights of these communities, especially their right to life, right to dignity, right to family life, right to freedom of expression, right to health, right to a healthy and adequate environment, and right to a fair hearing.

Moreover, the government's deployment of military forces has compounded the infringement of these rights, making the region a theatre

for some of the most gruesome human rights atrocities committed in Nigeria. In short, the government violently represses the communities' demands for attention to their welfare and for greater operational and social responsibility by the oil corporations.

### **'Accountability'? What accountability?**

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The government, oil corporations, militants and local communities blame one another for the deteriorating situation. Local communities say it is due to a conspiracy of greed between the government and multinationals, while the government blames it on the militants for committing crimes and fomenting conflict. In turn, the oil corporations attribute it to the ideological perspectives of the local communities.

For example, in an interview with Friends of the Earth International, Shell Development Petroleum accused them of being resistant to change (Oviasuyi and Uwadiae 2010: 114); meanwhile, observers from other countries – among them, governments, researchers and NGOs – contend that it is the oil corporations which, in cahoots with the government, are responsible for the violence and poverty.

Be that as it may, human rights violations persist – and remain the reason for the region's poverty and its violence of the past and present; if these violations had been nipped in the bud, matters may well not have escalated to their current extent.

In terms of section 14(2)(b) of the CFRN, the government has the sole responsibility to uphold the security and welfare of its citizens, but the Niger Delta region is the very last place in the country to benefit from this statutory obligation. Its inadequate, poorly managed infrastructure and amenities are out of kilter with the huge revenue it generates, and the government remains unable to justify this unfair exploitation.

Furthermore, security forces assigned to curb

violence in the region also perpetrate human rights abuses, such as arbitrary arrests and detention, forced disappearances, rape and extra-judicial killings, actions that commonly target outspoken community representatives (World Report 2017). The staged trial and execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa marked a high point in the crackdown on local communities.

The proliferation of harmful actions has not only denied communities any meaningful benefits of oil exploration, but prevented the government and corporations from being able to conduct operations under conditions of peace. This dilemma has spawned conflicts that in turn threaten the security and economic well-being of Nigeria as a whole.

## The journey so far

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Undoubtedly, various administrations in the past have made attempts to develop this region, but their efforts were unsuccessful. After the civil war, an omnibus body, the River Basic Development Agency, was established in this regard; subsequently, the Petroleum (Special) Trust Fund was established, as was the Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission, which was charged with managing ecological problems associated with oil exploration and production. Unfortunately, abandoned and poorly implemented development projects dot the landscape of the region today, courtesy of these botched endeavours.

The failure of all these development intervention agencies (presumably due to greed and corruption) merely added to the region's economic woes and ecological degradation. So far, the present-day Niger Delta Development Commission, which faces similarly bleak challenges as its predecessors, has been unable to revitalise the devastated hopes of the people of this region.

The government also established a ministry to address development in the Niger Delta, but it was set back by lack of funds and the same old allegations of misappropriation. There was an unsuccessful policy, too, that aimed

to achieve zero flaring by 2008 in compliance with millennium development goal 7 regarding environmental sustainability. More recently, an attempt to enact laws to revive the region and grant amnesty to militants was a fiasco. Although the amnesty programme whittled down the violence for a while, it did not eradicate human rights abuses or alleviate poverty. Hopefully, the current administration's commitment to end the insurgency by building infrastructure will succeed.

The government's efforts clearly need to extend beyond lofty rhetoric and initiatives that wind up being shelved whenever there is a change in administration. It has to adjust its ad hoc approach to critical issues and ensure that the rights of the region's inhabitants are not sacrificed on the altar of economic gain. Oviasuyi and Uwadiae (2010: 124) aptly note the irony that the God-given oil and gas with which the region is endowed has been not a blessing but a curse to its people.

## To be or not to be: The question of the future

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The government's neglect of this bounteous region raises the question: What is the use of immense wealth when the wealth-producing communities are ignored and their environments polluted to the detriment not only of their health and well-being but of national security?

Most of the government's paper visions have either not been pursued or pursued but achieved, for the reason that the government, the oil corporations, the militants and the communities are, one and all, chasing shadows and focusing on the wrong thing: on wealth rather than the pain of the region.

As well-intentioned as these policies may be, they will, even if vigorously pursued and achieved, be unable on their own to resolve the problems destroying this region. The incessant violence over the years now goes beyond issues of mere infrastructural development. Militant 'criminals' have been raised and trained over time; idle young minds have tasted the sweetness of easy money,

power and control; and even in the amnesty deals, it was they, not the people of the region, who enjoyed pride of place in terms of benefits. It will be a Herculean task to get to them to surrender in the face of vaunted infrastructural development that they or their families might not control.

The fact remains that this is a deprived region, notwithstanding the many intelligent recommendations that have been made in regard to transparency and independent monitoring of oil activities, inclusive or participatory policy-making and implementation, ceasing to resort to deploying security forces and committing human rights abuses in response to peaceful protests, and giving constitutional guarantee of the protection of economic and social rights.

So, the future does not look good for the *modus operandi* of the government: its use of tit-for-tat military force is not going end conflict, nor will it eradicate poverty and restore justice to this region.

The need for accountability has been cast aside thanks to greed, self-interest, negligence, nationalistic feeling and an acute lack of socio-political vision, taking us right back to where the violence all started – barring that no group leaders have been executed as yet. An amnesty programme is not the solution, merely a cosmetic measure that reduces unrest but which will fade as circumstances change.

As a democracy, Nigeria needs to stop playing the blame-game and fixating on unrealistic solutions. ‘Change’ is about more than paper-based policies, amnesty deals, military intervention or focusing on particular communities because they have international connections or stronger representation than others in government. Change, in this context, requires putting the horse before the cart.

What will save the country is a genuine accountability framework for justice, one framed without fear of losing economic power and without showing favours to foreign investors, because all other efforts taken without securing accountability have failed, and all those that attempt it in the future will simply be wild-goose

chases. The future can only look good from a place where there is accountability by all stakeholders, especially by the Nigerian government. This is what should be our starting-point.

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