

# Agitations and Intergroup Relations in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

by

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## Abstract

This paper proffers answers to questions that concern the changing contexts and results of agitations, and how resource-oriented agitations in the Niger Delta influence inter-group relations in the country in relationship to its impact on conflict transformation and nation-building efforts. This also paper maintains that the agitations by various ethnic groups in the Niger Delta, despite the responses of the Federal Government of Nigeria to the grievances of the region are usually fuelled by the quest for power symmetry, and therefore, there is need for an indigenous, organic, and long-term sustainable nonviolent process of conflict transformation and peace building aimed at a constructive holistic change.

**Keywords:** Agitations, Niger Delta, Intergroup relations, Conflict transformation

## Introduction

The Niger Delta is a region that has witnessed series of agitations. Such agitations have positive and negative effects on intergroup relations within and outside the region. The people of Niger Delta are naturally peaceful, resourceful and hospitable. The turbulence being witnessed in the region are traceable to internal and external factors, some of which have links with the dynamics of power relations and perceived economic injustice or deprivation of basic human needs. Some scholars have argued that various groups agitate in the Niger Delta as a result of the situation they find themselves, that of “suffering in the midst of plenty”. The existing literature on the region has concentrated on oil exploration, cultural crises, instability, disarmament, amnesty, and corporate social responsibility.

These include Onuoha (2006), Okolie-Osemene (2007), Aghalino (2009), Oboreh and Aghalino (2010), Obi (2010), Davidheiser and Nyiayaana (2011), and Okolie-Osemene and Tor (2012). But most of the studies have not linked agitations in the region with intergroup relations. According to Oromareghake, Arisi, and Igho (2013:47), the “Niger Delta region is one characterised with violence and disharmony of various dimensions from ethnic to religion, economic to political patronage and accommodation.”

In all parts of the world, people agitate for various reasons. Some groups agitate to express their displeasure for perceived government policies that are not people-oriented or to compel government to rethink its policies or rescind decisions taken on political, social and economic issues against a political leadership or any leadership that cannot see it has gone wrong. Others also agitate through peaceful, nonviolent or violent protests or domestic demonstrations to call on stakeholders to debate issues of national, regional and community concerns.

Agitations are accompanied by social, economic and political costs, especially when not properly managed. As responses from leaders vary, individuals or groups also exhibit different actions in the process of agitating to get their demands addressed. For instance, the political instability in the Arab world occasioned by demonstrations against leaders in 2011 with mass violence and crackdown on agitators by governments that followed marked a watershed in international relations. Similarly, prior to the Arab spring, many lawyers were wounded in Pakistan on 5 November, 2007 when the police descended on them for protesting against the state of emergency declared by the country’s president, Pervez Musharraf (*The Guardian*, November 6, 2007:1).

In Africa, various governments have had to adopt a confrontational approach to containing violent agitations while some adopted peaceful means of addressing both violent and nonviolent agitations either in the form of protests or peaceful demonstrations.

In the case of Niger Delta, the disjuncture between government’s intervention programmes, in the form of human and material resources, oil companies’ corporate social responsibility projects and oil-producing states, is responsible for the agitations in the region (Udeke and Okolie-Osemene, 2013). The following issues inspired agitations in the region: state creation, resource control, oil exploration and exploitation, environmental degradation, underdevelopment, insecurity and militarisation. According to Ibaba (2011), “agitations in Nigeria’s Niger Delta dates back to the colonial era when the fear of domination and neglect by the major ethnic groups in the country, inspired demands for state creation, seen by people of the Niger Delta as a guarantee for development and a shield from ethnicity-based political domination.”

Ozekhome (2007:239) attributes agitations and youth restiveness in the Niger Delta to “the lack of development programmes, lack of youth participation in decision making, poverty, practices of multinational companies, unemployment, oppression and marginalisation, government’s insensitivity, unitary nature of Nigerian state, mistrust of elders, lack of resource control, domination of minorities by major ethnic groups.” Oluwaniyi (2011) notes that there was increase in the spate of violent agitation despite the setting up of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000, leading to the establishment of Joint Task Military Force (JTF) to protect oil companies and their facilities in the region.

It has been observed that the root cause of hostilities/agitations revolve around the issues of resource control and socio-economic development of the region (Eze et al., 2009). The responses/attitudes of individuals and groups in every society towards resource use are conditioned by time, location and culture (Jimme, Kagu and Yahya, 2010). For instance, the people of the Niger Delta now respond aggressively through protests and litigations to environmental pollution and ecological damage occasioned by the operations of multinational oil companies. In terms of location, they are aware of the strategic nature of the region in global oil market. In addition, the culture of the host communities does not appreciate environmental abuse because land is sacred to them.

Some questions are pertinent here: Why must stakeholders, including policymakers, wait until the people agitate before addressing their basic needs in the region? How have the agitations influenced intergroup relations? Therefore, this paper focuses on the effects of Niger Delta agitations on intergroup relations in the region and Nigeria as a whole.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Agitation refers to a mental state of extreme emotional disturbance or disturbance in the form of protest by individuals and groups. Agitations and intergroup relations are the features of interaction in every society but the approach to handling any agitation can influence the intensity of such agitation. Intergroup relation refers to the interaction that exists between different groups that have different historical experiences, backgrounds, among others (Muojama, 2012). Intergroup relations also mean that cooperation in form of socio-economic and political exchanges that characterise interactions between various groups, associations or classes of people in society. This study is anchored in the theories that inspire agitations by neglected groups in every society. Faleti (2006) posits that various theories are used to explain the causes, nature and effects of conflicts. Most conflicts are underpinned in, realism, frustration-aggression, and human needs theory. The theory of horizontal inequalities by Frances Stewart (2002) is also an important.

The situation in the Niger Delta finds its roots in different theories, especially human needs theory, economic and horizontal inequalities, to the extent that denial or failure to address them intensifies frustration-aggression that climaxes in either violent or nonviolent agitations. Nyityo (2012:341) avers that widening distributional inequalities is a source of disenchantment of groups towards a dominant group. Such disenchantment creates negative peace, as seen in the Niger Delta enclave.

Human Needs Theory could be the reason for agitations in Niger Delta. Most people believe that they are denied their needs and never get what they deserve. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of human needs shows that humans require various resources to guarantee their development and safety. Just like social contract which empowers the state to protect the citizens, the provision of basic necessities of life strengthens government's legitimacy, especially when good governance tackles all forms of agitation by the people. Human needs theory offers insights into a range of peace-building processes that are involved in the reduction of both direct and structural violence. Human needs theory helps to explain why needs for security and identity is often preponderant in intrastate wars and in destructive identity conflicts (Burton, 1990:71). Niger Deltans agitate to attract national/international attention; end underdevelopment crisis, ecological damage, as well as rising insecurity caused by armed banditry and militarisation; and curb what they describe as plunder of their resources by oil companies.

### **Agitations in the Niger Delta: Contexts, Responses and Management Framework**

The emergence of social movements in Niger Delta communities heightened agitations to initiate transformation in the region, environmentally, economically, politically and socially. Some of the impacts of agitation by social movements are various committee reports, including those of Willinks Commission, Etiebet Committee, Popoola Committee, and Ogomudia Committee, as well as the Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan, which aimed at tackling the regions' underdevelopment and instability. Agiobenebo and Azibaolana (2001) opine that resource control has been a major political and economic issue in Nigeria even though it has disguised itself as conflict over revenue allocation formula from 1946 (cited in Egwaikhide and Alabi, 2002).

According to Social Action (2009: 7):

In 1990, the Ogoni took stock of their condition and concluded that in spite of the stupendous oil and gas wealth off their land, which has fed the Nigerian ruling elite; they were extremely poor, and had no social amenities.....The Ogoni felt that their existence as a nation was threatened by environmental degradation, political marginalization, economic strangulation and slavery adopted the Ogoni Bill of Rights, which was presented to the Government and people of Nigeria in October 1990. It is as a result of the Nigerian government's insensitivity to their demands that SPDC was sacked from Ogoniland on 4 January, 1993.

Apart from the Ogoni Bill of Rights, there was also the Kaiama Declaration. This gave birth to the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC). The brains behind the Kaiama meeting and the formation of the IYC were Oronto Douglas, Robert Azibola, Von Kemedi, T.K. Ogoriba and Duo Kalsuo. Both the Ogoni Bill of Rights and the Kaiama Declaration are landmark documents for the Niger Delta struggle and reference documents on Niger Delta affairs. The Niger Delta agitations inspired the Ijaw struggle for self-determination in Nigeria. The aim of the agitations is containing the domination of the Niger Delta people by other groups and multinational oil companies through mass action against ecological damage (Banigo, 2012).

After Abacha's Constitutional Conference of 1994, the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others by the military government of General Sani Abacha on 10 November 1995 exacerbated protests against government and oil companies in Rivers State. In Ogoniland, for example, it was said that the nature of protest was peaceful until 21 November 2004 when four prominent sons of Ogoniland, namely: Edward Kobian, Albert T. Badey, Samuel Orage, and Theophilus Orage, were brutally murdered by youths suspected to be loyal to Ken Saro-Wiwa. It was further suspected that they acted on the instruction of Ken Saro-Wiwa (Etekpe, 2007).

Agitations still scar the region due to selective implementation of committee reports. For instance, the 2001 Ogomudia Report recommended that the three tiers of government should endeavour to develop oil-producing communities instead of the oil companies (Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta, 2008:29). However, timely payment of compensation as a result of environmental destruction occasioned by oil spillages remains a source of dispute between multinational oil companies and host communities, and a source of grievance against the Federal Government for failing to enforce stiff penalties in the oil industry.

The Ogomudia Committee further recommended an upward review of the 13% derivation to not less than 50% and the repeal of a number of laws, including the Land Use Act of 1978 and the Petroleum Act of 1969. This recommendation is being resisted by other groups in the country. Emphasis by the Nigerian state is largely on how to make the Niger Delta safer for oil exploitation and not on sustainable human security for the people of the region.

The failure to address the fear of the Niger Delta people has given rise to the Niger Delta struggle. Criminal elements took advantage of the situation by abducting and kidnapping oil workers, siphoning fuel from pipelines and, sometimes, organising mega bank robberies. There are several major confrontations between armed gangs, known as “militants” in the riverine areas. The consequences for women in the Niger Delta conflict have been disastrous; since the 1990s, more than 1,000 cases of rape have been reported. Compounding the hardships of the Niger Delta women is sexual exploitation by the Joint Task Force officers. Cases of survival prostitution have been increasing, with women trading sex for safety, food, and shelter. The consequences of such high rates of sexual violence have included unwanted babies from rapes, prevalence of abortions, and extensive physical and psychological injuries.

Oromareghake, Patrick, Arisi, and Igho (2013) describe militancy as a form of agitation in Delta State and other parts of the region. The situation was not properly managed by the Federal Government. It rather adopted force to suppress nonviolent agitation against under-development, making it to become “violent oil agitation”. This was as a result of the fact that some indigenes of oil-producing communities compared their lives and the level of development around them with those of other regions and other non-oil-producing areas but discovered horizontal inequalities; they found themselves at the receiving end despite being the communities that generate the highest revenues for the nation’s economic survival.

Niger Delta agitators seek to curtail the lopsided developmental approach, which is evidenced Federal Government’s deployment of revenue from oil towards the development of states, towns and villages of the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo majority ethnic groups to the neglect and consternation of the oil communities. The people also express their displeasure over huge federal funding of extensive dam and irrigation projects, as well as heavily subsidized agricultural and social development programmes in northern Nigeria (Adeyeri, 2012:99). This pattern of lopsided development heightens mutual suspicion and further sustains Niger Delta grievance against the major ethnic groups in the country.

Furthermore, Niger Delta agitations made supposed neighbours in the region to be engulfed in unnecessary disputes over resources and/or exclusion from the scheme of things. The disputes occasioned by agitations pitted communities against their neighbours, as well as elders and youths against multinationals and government officials. For instance, during and after the national amnesty programme, some of the groups in Delta State were involved in accusations and counteraccusations over the ethnic groups that had the right to agitate for exclusion. Some of the ethnic groups in Delta State include the Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ijaw, Ndokwa, and Isoko.

Inadequate evaluation of the dynamics of various socio-economic challenges in the region is one of the sources of grievance against the state and agitations (Okolie-Osemene and Udeke, 2013). Exclusion of genuine ex-militants from the national amnesty programme caused agitations by some groups. Okolie-Osemene and Udeke (2013) divide the excluded groups into two: (a) those that surrendered their arms and were neither demobilised nor included in the rehabilitation training; and (b) the people that were disarmed, demobilised and excluded due to institutional lapses and documentation problems, including the Itsekiri and Urhobo ethnic groups in Delta State as well as others in Akwa Ibom State.

The Itsekiri, under the aegis of Itsekiri National Youths Council (INYC) petitioned the House of Representatives in 2012 over the segregation of 2,000 former militants of Itsekiri extraction from the amnesty programme. The ex-militants of the Urhobo ethnic group threatened to return to the creeks unless they were included in the third phase of amnesty vocational training. But the repentant militants of Ijaw origin, under the aegis of Niger-Delta Liberation Force (NDLF) described the clamour by their Urhobo and Itsekiri neighbours as provocative, and vowed to confront them if found carrying out any protest on the streets of Delta State. Members of Ijaw NDLF questioned the agitations of Urhobo and Itsekiri youths, arguing that they did not take part in militant activities for which the Federal Government proclaimed an amnesty programme in 2009 and therefore should not reap from where they did not sow (Okolie-Osemene and Udeke, 2013).

Agitations influenced the configuration of minority and majority relations in the context of resource control and revenue allocation. The impact of Niger Delta agitations on controversies over fiscal federalism cannot be downplayed. Agitations influenced government policies to the extent that successive regimes listed Niger Delta affairs as one of the core areas of transformation. For example, the Federal Government led by Yar' Adua declared the Niger Delta as part of its 7-point agenda. This was political pacification at a time when youth militancy and the campaign for self-determination by the Niger Delta people was growing stronger. It has been difficult to track the significance of the Niger Delta Ministry in the area of youth-focused human development initiatives.

In terms of management framework, the government has been in the business of establishing commissions and setting up of committees to identify the rationale for agitations. These remain the features of government's response to Niger Delta issues. For instance, the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs is a product of the Report of the Technical Committee on Niger Delta that recommended the establishment of a ministry that would specifically address the region's development challenges.

In every society, corporate bodies, private sector and governments respond to agitations differently. In the Niger Delta, for example, various stakeholders are involved in managing Niger Delta affairs, including agitations by all groups.

Briggs (2007:91) discusses the undeserved neglect of the region that led to “growing agitations among the oil producing communities in the Niger Delta.” Most people in the Niger Delta protest to address or draw attention to some ecological problems, especially those caused by oil mineral exploration and exploitation. They also do this to accelerate human and infrastructural development in the region.

Agitations in the Niger Delta did not only motivate the militarisation of the region but also led to a shift in civil-military relations as a result of the way peaceful agitations assumed violent dimensions, thereby culminating in massive security checkpoints. Various inter-communal clashes greeted the disputes over royalties and recognition of communities and their leaders/youths/representatives over pipeline/land-related compensations from oil companies. The enmity generated from those clashes seriously affected the relationship among the communities. All this spurred civilian and military ethnic cleansing, breeding ethnocentrism and ethnocracy, hostility and fear in social life. Ethnocentrism is a new and infectious dogma plaguing the health of the nation.

Once ethnic differences have been established as symbols of superiority versus inferiority, they are used as weapons in later group conflicts. Thus in-group members become compelled to live in a constant state of readiness for aggressive response. The arguable defence becomes “do unto others before it is done unto me.” And so begins a vicious cycle of action-reaction-vengeance. The rise of ethnocentrism as a source or feeder for conflicts is largely attributed to the Niger Delta agitations and militancy, which compels sustenance of ethnic prejudice. Thus, there is frustration brewing aggression, aggressive behaviour and identification of the people to hate.

Some groups outside the Niger Delta region now regard some of the agitations as unjust, uncalled for and selfish. The implication is that this category of Nigerians always links such agitations to resource control and that the people are asking for too much instead of demanding for better environment and empowerment. This was observed during the 2005 constitutional reforms conference, where delegates from the South-South staged a walk out. The situation further aggravated the already mutual suspicion that characterised various agitations for more federal government attention in the Niger Delta.

Briggs (2007:135) states that “the military option and expedition adopted by the FG to quell some protests and agitations led to the use of force on Odi in Bayelsa State.” This military exercise aimed at enhancing the integrity of security forces ended up receiving global condemnation and being described as a massacre in view of human rights violations.

Investigations revealed further that security agents deployed to the facilities of oil companies have in several instances used arbitrary and excessive force against communities and the youth who often lead protests against their presence and practices. This expands the volume of grievance and the viciousness of retaliatory measures from the youth of such communities who become more radicalized.



Grievance is a major trigger for a large number of the violent actions directed at government interests, security agents and oil exploration companies across the Niger Delta region and beyond. For instance, on 12 July, 2009 the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) switched its consistent offensive, codenamed Hurricane Moses, outside the Niger-Delta region, setting ablaze the Atlas Cove Jetty in Lagos State in which three naval personnel and six civilians lost their lives (*Vanguard*, 13 July, 2009). The attack was a pointer that the petrochemical industry was facing unusual threat that required attention. This made the Lagos State Governor, Babatunde Fashola to warn the militants against such attack and to ask them to limit their activities to the Niger Delta.

The need for socio-economic transformation and addressing perceived deprivation made Federal Government to respond to various agitations in different ways. Briggs (2007) outlines some attention given to Niger Delta by government to include: Niger Delta Development Board, legalised through the Niger Delta Development Board Act of 1961; the Niger Delta Basin Development Authority, with Decree No. 37 of August 3 1976; the 1991 3 per cent derivation allocation; the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC), established under Decree 23 of 1992; Ecological Disaster Fund; Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), inaugurated by former President Obasanjo. Successive administrations made attempts to transform the Niger Delta, but most oil-producing communities still lament the crisis of underdevelopment to date. This is to say that most programmes designed to transform the region were inadequate or not well implemented.

Agitations and government's neglect also made various groups in the region to petition international organisations over the region's underdevelopment. For example, Restoration Niger Delta argued that the region has inalienable ancestral claim over these resources and assets. Agitations in the region contributed to the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The Niger Delta women have also been actively involved in expressing their displeasure over the activities of multinational oil companies in the area. For instance, over 150 Itsekiri women of Ugborodo communities in Delta State protested against what they described as "utter neglect and exploitation" orchestrated by Chevron Nigeria Limited in their communities. They complained that they were victims of internal displacements occasioned by ecological damage, while workers of the company enjoyed the basic necessities of life (Briggs, 2002).

It is true that the agitations by some Niger Delta youths made some ethnic youths outside the Niger Delta to hold the view that most Niger Deltans have the capacity to be aggressive. However, there would be tranquillity and effectual intergroup relations in the region when there is political will to articulate and implement people-oriented policies and programmes in the Niger Delta.

## **What Niger Delta without Agitations Entails**

Actualisation of peaceful and stable Niger Delta is not impossible. In fact, it is realistic and possible for Nigeria to witness relative peace in the region. Niger Delta without agitations would mean a region that enjoys positive peace, a peaceful Niger Delta where groups cooperate positively without any fear or suspicion, and a demilitarised region.

Taming the menace of agitations in the Niger Delta is beyond the National Amnesty Programme and youth empowerment. The issue of socio-economic justice needs to be addressed by policymakers to give all groups their entitlements and make the basic necessities of life available. High-powered industrialisation and human resource development remain the most reliable means of addressing Niger Delta agitations. Stakeholders should stop using funds to appease selected groups and end selective empowerment programmes. The lasting legacies would be that the Ministries of Labour, Niger Delta Affairs, and Petroleum Resources, the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and the NDDC partner the National Directorate of Employment to set up more sustainable community-based skills acquisition centres in the area.

## **Conclusion**

An attempt has been made to explore the nature and effects of Niger Delta agitations on intergroup relations. Before the commencement of oil exploration and exploitation, the region called Niger Delta today was characterised by socio-cultural exchanges between various ethnic nationalities; this was a major driver of intergroup relations.

The results of agitations include proliferation of restive groups; antagonistic and violent intergroup relations; civilian and military ethnic cleansing; rise of ethnocentrism; hostility and fear in social life; and the creation of the Niger Delta Development Commission the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, and the Niger Delta Master Plan to address development social justice issues that fuel agitations.

This study indicates that most agitations in the Niger Delta were more resource-oriented than political. So far, the high points of government's responses to various agitations in the region include the Niger Delta Master Plan, the Niger Delta Amnesty Programme, and establishment of the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, to address development and justice issues that fuel agitations. These approaches have not significantly addressed the chronic human security deficiencies in the Niger Delta. Advocates of "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want" argue that civil rights, cultural identities, as well as access to employable education and healthcare are fundamental to human dignity.

The prevalence of resource-based conflicts in Niger Delta is a pointer that the region requires more humane approaches to addressing both the roots of internecine conflicts and lapses in provision of basic human needs. Until this is done, the region would not see the end of nonviolent and violent of agitations. If not given adequate attention, conflict transformation and nation-building efforts of the three tiers of government will remain a mirage considering the dynamics of intergroup relations. There is urgent need to make peace education a force for sustainable peace and development in Nigeria.

This paper maintains that the prevalence of agitations in Niger Delta by various ethnic groups despite actions and responses of the Federal Government is usually occasioned by the quest for power symmetry and the assumption that the people are taken for granted by privileged few who are enmeshed in self-aggrandizement. Adequately dealing with such conflicts demands an indigenous, organic, and long-term sustainable nonviolent process of conflict transformation and peace building aimed at constructive holistic change. This is core to peace building and so apt for dealing with hostile intergroup relations created by persistent minority group agitations.

Nation building through credible democracy and good governance will promote sustainable conflict transformation. This ultimately will transform war economies to peace economies; build law and justice; promote human rights and discipline and mainstream peace building endeavour based on the principles of truth, justice, mercy, compassion, and hope for an enduring peace in Nigeria.

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