A Study of the Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan And Conflict Management

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Introduction

Since 1999, when the Fourth Republic commenced in Nigeria, the Niger Delta has remained the hotspot of instability and conflict management. The region was more volatile than other parts of the country prior to the escalation of insurgency between 2009 and 2013 in northern part of the country.

The relevance of peace to stability and intergroup relations explains why Maduabuchi (2017) notes that peace made it possible for mankind to survive in the 21st century, and that the devastating effects of war has made peace necessary for the propagation of human species. Failure to give attention to the measures that can prevent conflicts is responsible for the instability being experienced in many parts of the world, including the Niger Delta.

For more than three decades, the Niger Delta region has become synonymous with frustration, aggression and instability to the extent that different non-state actors have accused the government and oil companies of greed and neglect. For instance, Mitee (2012:5), former leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), observes that "the failure to properly evaluate and positively respond to the challenges facing the Niger Delta resulted in an overwhelming community feeling of anger and frustration".

Oil-related conflicts which dot the Niger Delta pose security challenges to both the state and the transnational oil companies in the country. Unfortunately, resource distribution by the government has not taken care of the special development needs of the oil-bearing communities (Nwosu, 2010). Nwankwo (2010:139) has aptly captured the dynamics of the Niger Delta insecurity:

> The state management of oil conflicts had commenced with the conflict control approach. This approach is built essentially of force. It consists constant harassment, militarization of the area of conflict and other forms of state violence.

Alabo-George (2012) sees the past decade in the Niger Delta as chaotic for both its dwellers and the Federal Government. According to Asuni (2009), Niger Delta inhabitants are united by a sense of grievance about the exploitation and neglect of their region. It should also be noted that apart from non-violence by some genuine agitators, the grievance is always meted out to the oil companies which directly feel the heat of their actions that often take a restive dimension. In his assessment of the situation, Ibaba (2011) points out that 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 triggered demands for state creation, seen by

the people of the Niger Delta as a guarantee for development and a shield from ethnicity-based political domination.

Helmen (2011) notes that "a strand of the youth criminal groups are helping to deepen the political problem in Nigeria's Niger-Delta; evidence shows that youthful criminal gangs are engaging in illicit activities such as oil bunkering, gun running and kidnapping." On the motivations of non-state armed groups in the Niger Delta, Asuni (2009) asserts that some armed gangs in the Niger Delta are criminally motivated, others politically and ideologically driven, but the genuine groups aim at addressing the grievances of the people arising from environmental pollution, economic underdevelopment and political marginalisation.

Oil fouls everything in southern Nigeria. It spills from the pipelines, poisoning soil and water. It stains the hands of politicians and generals, who undermine their offices and the desires of the people and would go to any length to suppress the agitation of the masses just to siphon off its profits. As averred by Asuni (2009:8), "many of the politicians in the Niger Delta, especially Rivers and Bayelsa States, are known to be members of confraternities, particularly the Vikings." It taints the ambitions of the young, who will try anything to scoop up a share of the liquid riches—fire a gun, sabotage a pipeline, kidnap a foreigner (O'Neill, 2007). Even with the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000, violent agitation increased, pitting the militants and criminals against the Joint Task Military Force (JTF) set up by the state to protect oil facilities and companies in the region (Oluwaniyi, 2011).

Prior to the launch of the Master Plan, the government responded to the problem in the Niger Delta with a combination of strategies, including the establishment of various commissions, such as the Niger Delta Development Board (NNDB), in 1960; the Presidential Task Force to manage the reduced derivation allocation of 1.5% of the federation account for tackling the special needs of the region in 1982; the Oil Mineral

Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC), in 1992; and the Petroleum (Special) Trust Fund (PTF), in 1995. It has been argued that the Niger Delta was worse off in terms of positive development impact on the oil-rich communities (Oluwaniyi, 2007; Aghalino 2012).

The relationship between the Niger Delta Master Plan and the human needs theory is that when the Master Plan is adequately implemented, the people's basic human needs would be met. This initiative is apt because human needs, which the Master Plan also aims to achieve, are a significant peace-building process. Peace-building has human development value. As pointed out by Abraham Maslow and John Burton (1949), the essential needs go beyond just food, water and shelter, but also include both physical and non-physical elements needed for human growth and development, as well as those things they strive to satisfy (Coate and Rosati, 1988). The place of security or safety need is significant in this regard.

The human needs in Nigeria's Human Development Index (HDI) value (comprising three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living) for 2011 stood at 0.459, positioning the country at 156 out of 187 countries and territories (cited in Oluduro and Oluduro, 2012). This explains the relevance of decent standard of living.

This study covers the period 2007 to 2017. The year 2007 was when the administration of Olusegun Obasanjo launched the Master Plan, while 2017 marked the year when the resurgence of militancy propelled post-conflict peace-building initiatives in the region from when the Master Plan was launched.

Statement of the problem

Peace and conflict management remain critical to sustainable livelihoods in every society. Conflict sensitivity and management initiatives are significant to containing crimes and youth restiveness especially when human development is given adequate priority. When stakeholders respond early to the drivers of conflict, it would be easy to achieve the needs of different groups. A number of scholarly works have explored the significance of peace, conflict management and disarmament to stability in the region (Imobighe, 2003; Okolie-Osemene, 2012; Prasad, 2012). While some identified the force of youth-focused development in preventing violent behaviour in the Niger Delta, given that when youths are empowered, they would not be involved in criminality in view of the associated risks (Nwobueze, 2015), others examined the Niger Delta question, militancy and environmental degradation occasioned by oil exploration and exploitation activities, how the amnesty option has shaped conflict dynamics in the region, activities of pipeline vandals and the socio-economic and security costs (Aghalino, 2009; Nwafor, 2011; Okolie-Osemene and Tor, 2012; Aghalino and Okolie-Osemene, 2014). Most of these works have not established the linkages between the Niger Delta Master Plan and the management of the Niger Delta question, especially how the successful implementation of the programme can enhance stability in the region. Determining the components of the Master Plan that have conflict management value demands scholarly attention. This study, therefore, addresses the salient issue of how timely implementation of the Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan can facilitate conflict management with appreciable impact on peace education. Linking peace education and conflict management to the provision of the human needs that are components of the Master Plan remain significant to history studies.

Objectives of the Study

The general aim of this study is to examine how successful implementation of Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan can sustain peace and security in the Niger Delta. In specific terms, the objectives of the study were to:

1. examine the components of the Niger Delta Master Plan which have conflict management value;
2. explore how stakeholders should use the components of the Master Plan to engage in conflict management; and
3. determine the potency of the Master Plan in de-escalating tensions in the region.

Significance of the study

This study has conflict prevention and peace-building value, as it will help to offer more insight into government intervention through the Master Plan. The fact that conflict occurs in society makes this study applicable in investigating whether human development initiatives are antidotes to youth restiveness. The study, therefore, contributes to knowledge on how timely implementation of development aster plans can de-escalate conflict in rural and urban areas. In addition, the study also contributes to the existing literature for scholars and students of history, international studies, peace, security and development studies and others.

Method and Sources of Data Collection

This study relied mainly on primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources included books, policy papers, and journal articles. Data were also got from the Niger Delta Development Commission; and the 2008 Report of the Technical Committee on Niger Delta chaired by Ledum Mitee, to identify the socio-political and economic contexts of the Niger Delta question. The primary sources were newspapers.

The Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan

Various experts, practitioners and scholars have suggested ways of improving the situation in the Niger Delta. Government's efforts in containing criminality are not unconnected with such opinions and responses which have stability value as far as sustaining Nigeria's status as an oil-producing nation is concerned. In terms of human security challenges, there is no gainsaying the fact that oil-bearing communities have become synonymous with youth violence in rural and urban areas.

The activities of restive youths motivated the launch of a master plan for development in the oil-rich region. However, it was timely for the government to realise that militarism is not a realistic conflict management strategy. The Master Plan was designed to address the developmental challenges facing the people. According to Essien (2010:162), "placing emphasis on use of government's security agents to manage violent conflicts and restore order without considering other social welfare approaches is a source of tension and could produce negative peace because it is restored through the barrel of gun." The commencement of hostage-taking in 2006 along with attacks on oil installations as strategies to draw attention to the neglect of the host communities might have made Obasanjo launch the Master Plan, which was coordinated and published by the NDDC in 2004. The Master Plan that was launched by Obasanjo laid the foundation for the creation of the Ministry of Niger Delta on 10th September, 2008 by President Umaru Yar' Adua to demonstrate government's interest in addressing the region's economic and development challenges (Aghalino, 2012).

The fact that all the oil and gas activities in Nigeria take place in the Niger Delta makes it necessary for a regional development master plan to be implemented without playing politics with it. What makes the Master Plan unique is that it is the first regional development plan of any sort in Nigeria's history and has different phases of implementation. While other

stakeholders look up to the NDDC and Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs to play a leading role in coordinating the implementation of the widely applauded Master Plan, the Ministry seems to be on bringing the NDDC under its control thus bringing about reduced effectiveness of the agencies in tackling the business of addressing the Niger Delta situation. Agbu (2011) observes that the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs was created to add more impetus to the activities of other agencies of government that are already on ground and partnering them for the benefit of the region.

The Major Areas of the Niger Delta Master Plan Strategy

S/No.	Areas of Focus
1.	Poverty Reduction
2.	Rural Infrastructure
3.	Rural Community needs
4.	Human Resource development
5.	Policies and Institutions
6.	Natural Environment conservation
7.	Economic Growth
8.	Urban and Industrial Infrastructure
9.	Natural Environment Control and Protection
10.	Urban Community needs

Source: *Tell* (June 4, 2007:28).

The three phases of implementing the Master Plan are the foundation phase (2006-2010; the expansion phase (2011-2015); and the consolidation phase (2016-2020) (Nwafor, 2011; Okolie-Osemene and Tor, 2012). The period that is supposed to be the consolidation phase is characterised by insecurity due to the resurgence of militancy. The failure of governments and multinational oil companies to optimally develop and productively

utilize human capital and its manifestations in the form of poverty, backwardness, unemployment, widespread insecurity and human underdevelopment, is a startling paradox in view of the geopolitical significance of the Niger Delta (Nwobueze, 2015).

Adeyeri (2012:103) claims that "the best mechanism for peace, stability and progress in the Niger Delta, and indeed throughout Nigeria can be located in sincere, comprehensive and effective institutional measures of poverty alleviation, and in policies that would ensure a level playing ground for all Nigerians to be able to achieve progress and happiness irrespective of their ethnicity, origin, religion or creed."

The counterproductive nature of neglecting the Master Plan has manifested in intractable conflicts in the Niger Delta despite peace initiatives. So far, components such as urban community needs, rural community needs, human resource development, economic growth, urban environment control, poverty reduction and rural infrastructure have not been achieved as desired. This explains why the region still records militancy and series of agitation by different groups.

Findings and Discussion

This study found that after more than ten years after the Master Plan was launched, most parts of the Niger Delta are still affected by insecurity and development crisis. Most of the components of the Master Plan are yet to be fully actualised. For instance, the issue of poverty reduction, human development and provision of rural community needs have been neglected, as many communities still struggle with the lack of basic human needs that would have made life more enjoyable. By implication, it has worsened life expectancy in communities that already had low standard of living.

Despite the Presidential Amnesty Programme that began in 2009, the region has remained fragile owing to poor human development initiatives, arising from the failure to address the root causes of grievances. Nwobueze (2015) claims that the neglect of youth-focused and human development initiatives accounts for why the government and multinational oil companies have not adequately harnessed the potential of the youth for peace and development.

Most militant groups have intensified peaceful and violent protests, with a good number of them accusing the Federal Government of insincerity and insensitivity to the Niger Delta question. The inability of the government to fully implement the Master Plan has contributed to the resurgence of militancy since 2015. The way forward is not for government to tag the agitating youths' jobless and disgruntled elements but to consider ways of ensuring that the issue of human development remains a priority.

Considering the prevailing circumstances in the region, comprehensive implementation of the Master Plan will build sustainable peace. Nwobueze (2015) argues that conflict transformation and peace-building initiatives are aimed at enhancing change and addressing developmental challenges facing any society. Development projects should be designed for the youth in the society to make it difficult for them to become agents of violence and all forms of criminality. This is because, when people are resourceful in creating wealth, or are productive, they cannot have the time to plan evil.

All the components of the Master Plan have conflict management values. Nevertheless, poverty eradication, rural community needs, environmental sustainability and human resource development are critical and must not be neglected.

From all indications, the Master Plan is a positive force that has the potency to de-escalate tension in the region considering the role of human development in the economy. Ensuring sustainability of development will require political stands to harmonize the needs of humanity and nature. The most important issue in any development effort is to ensure that whatever approach is adopted will be sustainable in the long run. The goal of sustainability sometimes refers to the resource base itself, and sometimes to the local livelihoods which are derived from it. Sustainable development is not necessarily identified with increased consumption and production but an improved quality of life for local people whose lifestyles are impacted by factors beyond their immediate control. Therefore, sustainable development in the context of the Niger Delta requires an inescapable commitment to inter-regional equity and entrenchment of environmental considerations in policy-making.

The emphasis is on sustainable development of essential human needs rather than on the trade-offs between economic and biological systems. Sustainable development in the Niger Delta should actually be based on a participatory and people-centred approach to development planning and implementation. Also, the need for peace and character education, which is key to sustainable development in the region, has been left unattended to in many of the development plans.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has examined conflict management in the Niger Delta through the region's development master plan. It has identified how successful implementation of the Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan can sustain peace and security in the Niger Delta.

The study observed that many components of the Master Plan still remain unachieved more than a decade after its launch. In particular, urban community needs, rural community needs, human resource development,

economic growth, urban environment control, poverty reduction and rural infrastructure are critical to the actualisation of sustainable development goals and must not be neglected by the stakeholders implementing the Master Plan.

There is a linkage between regional development, peace and security. This study has demonstrated that law enforcement in the Niger Delta cannot be achieved by focusing on criminals and their activities. Rather, it is achievable through adequate priority for human development, particularly the key components of the Niger Delta Master Plan. A combination of the Master Plan and the Presidential Amnesty Programme will create stable environment for peace and human rights education that would address the issues of conflict. Ultimately, a lawful, peaceful and prosperous Niger Delta will materialise.

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