

## CONFLICT AND PEACE-BUILDING IN A FRAGILE REGION: EVIDENCE FROM THE NIGER DELTA IN NIGERIA.

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### ABSTRACT

*Significant conflict is a defining feature of the Nigerian Niger Delta area, which is caused by a complex interaction of political, economic, and environmental variables. Despite having abundant oil resources, this area has extreme poverty, environmental degradation, and social instability. This is mostly because to past neglect, corporate greed, and poor government. Using secondary sources of data, this paper investigates these processes by looking at both effective and ineffective initiatives. The conflict has taken the form of armed militancy, intercommunal strife, and criminal activity, resulting in widespread bloodshed and economic damage. With varying degrees of success, a number of peace-building programs have been put into place, such as military operations and the Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP). Even while certain initiatives have succeeded in short-term reduction of violence, fundamental problems like marginalization, corruption, and environmental destruction still need to be addressed. The results highlight the need of a more open, inclusive, and community-driven strategy to establish long-lasting peace in the area.*

**Key words:** Conflict; Fragile region; Niger-Delta; Peacebuilding; Security

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### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's Niger Delta has long been known as one of the most unstable regions of the nation, beset by a complicated web of conflicts fueled by environmental, political, and economic variables. The Niger Delta, which produces the majority of Nigeria's oil, is paradoxically characterized by extreme poverty, marginalization, and environmental degradation, which feeds a vicious cycle of discontent and violence. The exploitative tactics of multinational oil firms and the historical neglect of this area by successive administrations have contributed to the region's vulnerability by fueling broad discontent among the local populace (Watts, 2004; Ojakorotu, 2022). The Niger Delta has seen conflict in a number of ways, including insurgency, intercommunal disputes, and criminal activity including abduction and oil bunkering. Deep-seated dissatisfaction with the federal government's management of resource distribution and control is reflected in the rise of armed Organisations like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) (Obi, 2010). In recent times, there has been a comeback of militant Organisations like as the Niger Delta Avengers. These groups persist in attacking oil infrastructure, which causes disruptions to oil production and has substantial economic consequences on both a local and national level (Ukpe, 2021).

The Niger Delta, with its abundant oil and gas resources, is the backbone of Nigeria's economy and a major source of both government income and export profits (Helbert, 2020; Wils, 2018). Notwithstanding its richness, the area has extreme poverty, deteriorating environmental conditions, and social instability. Rather than fostering local development, the money created by the Delta has exacerbated violence, corruption, and a serious lack of essential services and

infrastructure. Due to this imbalance, a resource-rich area has resulted in a population that faces one of the worst rates of poverty in the nation, enduring filthy and violent living conditions. There is no denying the Niger Delta's economic importance—it makes a substantial contribution to both Nigeria's government income and export profits. The local populace, who nevertheless faces poverty, environmental damage, and social upheaval, has not profited from this prosperity, however.

A range of peace-building measures have been put into place in response to the ongoing conflict. These include military interventions as well as more all-encompassing strategies like the Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP), which sought to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate militants into society (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). Although there have been brief successes for some projects, the area is still unstable, with political will lacking, corruption rampant, and real involvement with the impacted populations undermining peace attempts (Ibaba & Etekepe, 2020). Using data from the area to evaluate the success of previous and ongoing initiatives, this paper aims to investigate the intricate dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. The article tries to contribute to a fuller knowledge of how fragile places like the Niger Delta might go from violence to peace by looking at the underlying reasons of the conflict, the opinions of numerous authors on the subject, and the current difficulties to sustainable peace.

### **ORIGINS OF CONFLICT IN THE NIGER-DELTA: COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL LEGACIES**

The colonial period, when the British established authority over Nigeria, is when the violence in the Niger Delta originated.

Due to its advantageous location along the coast and abundance of natural resources, the area was first used in the colonial economy for the production of palm oil and thereafter other resources. Partitions and animosity were fostered by the British colonial government's frequent favoritism of certain ethnic groups over others. Through the use of local chiefs, many of whom were not representative of their communities, they imposed indirect authority, which caused resentment and discontent among the populace (Ikelegbe, 2005). These colonial legacies continued to influence politics in the area even after Nigeria attained independence in 1960. The sense of abandonment and isolation was exacerbated by the federal government's concentration of power and the Niger Delta communities' ongoing marginalization. Further unrest resulted from the federal government's control over the region's resources, especially oil, and its unequal distribution of money among the local populace (Watts, 2004).

An important turning point in the history of the area was the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta in the late 1950s. Oil was once seen as a possible source of wealth but soon turned into a point of dispute. Oil production resulted in environmental damage, such as gas flaring, oil spills, and the devastation of farmlands and fisheries, which provided the majority of the local residents' income. The area remained impoverished with insufficient healthcare, weak infrastructure, and few educational possibilities even with the oil revenue (Obi, 2009). It was believed that the local communities were losing out on the money created by oil to the federal government and international oil corporations. This feeling of unfairness stoked complaints and gave rise to calls for more authority over the area's resources. In response, a number of ethnic

groups in the Niger Delta organized and demanded political participation, recompense for environmental damages, and a more equal division of oil income (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Over many decades, the Niger Delta war intensified, with numerous significant incidents highlighting the worsening crisis: One of the first coordinated uprisings in the Niger Delta was the “Twelve-Day Revolution” of 1966 headed by Isaac Adaka Boro, who proclaimed the Niger Delta Republic and demanded independence from Nigeria. As Watts (2004) noted, the uprising established a precedent for future resistance movements even though it was promptly put down. In the 1990’s, the Niger Delta’s predicament gained worldwide attention when Ken Saro-Wiwa founded the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). The region’s violations of the environment and human rights were brought to light by MOSOP’s nonviolent campaign against environmental degradation and the exploitation of the Ogoni people by oil firms, especially Shell. Tensions were heightened by the harsh reaction from the Nigerian government, which included the 1995 death of Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists (Okonta & Douglas, 2001; Ikelegbe, 2005). In order to allay the frustrations of militants, the Nigerian government launched an amnesty program that offers monetary incentives, educational opportunities, and vocational training in return for disarmament. Although there was a brief decrease in violence as a result of the program, many underlying problems persisted, and occasional violence persisted (Obi, 2009).

## **DRIVERS OF CONFLICT IN THE NIGER DELTA**

For many years, Nigeria’s conflicts have been concentrated in the oil-rich Niger Delta. This dispute has several underlying

causes, including political, economic, and environmental issues. In order to address the underlying reasons of instability and promote long-term peace in the area, it is imperative to comprehend these factors.

## **POLITICAL FACTORS**

### **Governance Issues and Marginalization**

The Niger Delta’s marginalization and problems with governance are at the heart of the region’s strife. Nigeria’s federal form of government has always centralized authority, with the central government controlling the majority of the country’s oil earnings. Communities living in the Niger Delta are no longer included in resource-related decision-making processes as a result of this centralization. Deep-rooted concerns have been exacerbated by the perceived and actual marginalization of the Niger Delta population, who believe their contributions to the national economy are not sufficiently valued or acknowledged (Watts, 2004). The absence of infrastructural development in the area exacerbates the marginalization even further. The Niger Delta is still among Nigeria’s least developed areas, with poor access to essential amenities like clean water, healthcare, and education, despite the region’s oil fortune. Due to the local population’s desire to claim their rights and demand a fair part of the region’s riches, this has exacerbated sentiments of neglect and contributed to the emergence of militancy (Ikelegbe, 2005).

### **Corruption and Inadequate Political Representation**

Another important political reason fueling strife in the Niger Delta is corruption. Corrupt federal and state authorities, as well as elites, have siphoned off most of the oil riches in the area, leaving little for local development. The public’s disenchantment has been heightened by this corruption,

which has reduced confidence in government institutions. There is a general feeling of unfairness and discontent due to the administration of oil profits' lack of accountability and transparency (Obi, 2009). An important factor in the conflict is also inadequate political representation. The Niger Delta's inhabitants have long believed that their representation in the nation's political systems is insufficient. Because of this, they are now less able to influence laws that directly impact their lives and means of subsistence. Many have turned to supporting violent Organisations as an alternate way of attaining their aims due to their exclusion from meaningful political engagement (Watts, 2004).

## **ECONOMIC FACTORS**

### **Resource Control Struggles and Inequitable Distribution of Oil Wealth**

The main causes of violence in the Niger Delta are economic issues, including the fight for control over resources and the unequal distribution of oil revenue. When oil was discovered in the late 1950s, the area was expected to develop. The reality, however, has been quite different. It has been claimed that the federal government, which is in charge of the bulk of oil earnings, only gives the Niger Delta a little share of these earnings. Widespread discontent and calls for more authority over the area's resources have resulted from this (Ikelegbe, 2005). Many Organisations in the Niger Delta have used the issue of resource control as a rallying cry, which has resulted in demonstrations, court cases, and military confrontation. Militant Organisations that support a larger portion of oil earnings and reparations for environmental losses have formed. One such Organisation is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Violence against government troops and oil

firms has often erupted from these fights (Watts, 2004).

### **Unemployment and Poverty**

Two important economic causes fueling the violence in the Niger Delta are unemployment and poverty. Even though the area is rich in oil, unemployment is rampant, especially for young people. Many young people feel disenfranchised and despairing due to the lack of work possibilities, which leaves them open to recruitment by militant Organisations (Obi, 2009). The Niger Delta is rife with poverty, with many villages experiencing acute suffering. Due to the destruction of traditional livelihoods like farming and fishing, oil exploration has further worsened poverty by degrading the environment. People are turning to militancy and criminal activity as a way of surviving, which has produced a fertile foundation for violence (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

## **ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS**

### **Environmental Degradation Due to Oil Exploration**

An important factor contributing to violence in the Niger Delta is environmental deterioration brought on by oil development. The area has seen significant environmental harm, such as gas flaring, oil spills, and deforestation. The local ecology has been severely harmed by these actions, with farmlands, waterways, and ecosystems all being destroyed. The local population's livelihoods have been threatened by environmental deterioration, which has also increased animosity and hostility against the government and oil firms (Watts, 2004). One of the main causes of contention has been the government's and the oil firms' inability to appropriately handle environmental concerns. Communities impacted by pollution, including oil spills, have often been left without assistance or compensation,

which has sparked demonstrations and, in some situations, violent altercations. Thus, the Niger Delta's environmental disaster is not just an ecological problem but also a major contributing element to the war (Obi, 2009).

## **MANIFESTATIONS OF CONFLICT IN THE NIGER DELTA**

Over time, the Niger Delta conflict has taken on several forms that are indicative of the region's intricate dynamics and long-standing complaints. These manifestations include the rise of violent Organisations, different types of violence, and notable effects on the social and economic spheres.

### ***Emergence of Militant Groups***

The rise of militant Organisations, which have been a major contributor to the instability of the area, is one of the most noticeable signs of war in the Niger Delta. Among the most well-known militant Organisations is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which was founded in 2006. MEND was created in reaction to what was seen to be the Nigerian government and international oil firms' exploitation and disregard of the Niger Delta. Through armed conflict, the group attempted to resolve these concerns by requesting more authority over the area's resources, restitution for environmental harm, and community development (Watts, 2008). Attacks on oil facilities, kidnappings of oil workers, and production disruptions were among MEND's actions, which had a major effect on Nigeria's oil output. Due to the group's efforts, the Niger Delta situation received worldwide attention, and the government was compelled to hold talks (Obi, 2009; Ojo, 2017).

### ***Communal Clashes***

Conflicts between communities are another kind of violence in the Niger Delta, often resulting from rivalry for resources and ethnic conflicts. There are many different ethnic communities in the area, and each has its own concerns and interests. Violent confrontations between communities are usually the result of disputes over political representation, local resource management, and property ownership (Ikelegbe, 2005). These conflicts fuel cycles of revenge and increased violence, exacerbating the already precarious situation in the Niger Delta.

### ***Kidnapping***

In the Niger Delta, kidnapping has grown to be a profitable criminal activity that often targets foreigners, notable locals, and oil workers. Kidnapping has evolved from being a political act—such as pressuring the government to comply with militant demands—to an increasingly profitable enterprise. Kidnapping-related ransom payments provide a substantial revenue stream for criminal gangs and terrorist Organisations (Obi, 2009). Both locals and international investors are impacted by the fear and insecurity that has been fostered in the area by the frequency of kidnappings.

### ***Oil Bunkering***

The illicit tapping and theft of oil from pipelines, known as "oil bunkering," is another violent crime that has detrimental effects on the environment and the economy. Oil bunkering is a tactic used by criminal networks and militant Organisations to raise money for their operations. Due to frequent oil leaks, the practice not only costs the Nigerian government and oil firms large sums of money but also degrades the environment (Watts, 2008). The Niger Delta's unrest and violence have been

exacerbated by the oil bunkering-related devastation of ecosystems and livelihoods.

There has been a great deal of unrest in Nigeria's Niger Delta for a long time, mostly because of problems with environmental degradation, oil exploitation, and socioeconomic marginalization. To address the disputes in the area, a number of peace-building measures have been put into place throughout time. These programs fall into two main categories: non-governmental activities and governmental interventions.

### **TOWARDS A LASTING PEACE-BUILDING IN THE NIGER-DELTA REGION**

In order to put an end to instability in the Niger Delta, the Nigerian government has regularly resorted on military operations and security actions. One important aspect of the government's strategy has been the deployment of the Joint Task Force (JTF), which is made up of personnel from the Nigerian Army, Navy, Air Force, and other security Organisations. The objectives of these operations were to protect oil sites, quell insurgent activity, and uphold law and order. But rather than addressing the root causes of the problems, these military actions have often come under fire for escalating hostilities. Opponents contend that the military activities have resulted in violations of human rights, community uprooting, and increased estrangement from the local populace. Because it ignores the fundamental reasons of the conflict, such as unemployment, poverty, and environmental damage from gas flaring and oil spills, the use of force has sometimes increased anger. As a result, whereas military actions have sometimes brought about a brief return to peace, they have not resulted in regional stability over the long run.

Also, the Nigerian government initiated the Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP) in 2009 with the aim of fostering peace in the Niger Delta via a more moderate approach. For militants who consented to give up their weapons and participate in a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process, the program granted them complete amnesty. Ex-combatants were compensated with stipends, possibilities for additional education, and vocational training.

At first, the PAP was successful in lowering crime and enhancing security in the area. Attacks on oil infrastructure decreased dramatically, and many ex-militants were reintegrated into society. Nevertheless, a number of issues have limited the program's long-term efficacy. For former fighters, one significant barrier is the absence of long-term employment options. Beneficiaries were frustrated and disillusioned as a result of the PAP's vocational training programs' frequent failure to provide gainful employment. The initiative has also come under fire for lacking local community involvement in decision-making processes and for being top-down. The PAP has reportedly experienced financial mismanagement and corruption, with money being taken from its designated uses. Consequently, the fundamental socio-economic issues that drive violence in the Niger Delta continue to go mostly unresolved.

Beyond government effort, international Organisations and civil society have been vital to the Niger Delta's attempts to promote peace. These groups have often concentrated on campaigns, discussions, and capacity-building projects meant to advance regional peace and development. For instance, groups that actively support environmental justice, human rights, and

sustainable development include the Niger Delta Human Development Initiative (NDHDI) and the Centre for Environment, Human Rights, and Development (CEHRD). International agencies that support infrastructure development, education, and economic diversification, including the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have also helped to foster peace in the Niger Delta. By offering other sources of income and improving living circumstances in the area, these programs aim to address some of the core drivers of violence, such as unemployment and poverty.

However, obstacles such as lack of financing, poor coordination between parties, and the intricate sociopolitical realities of the Niger Delta have hampered the efficacy of these initiatives. Moreover, the efficacy of these endeavors often hinges on the Nigerian government's readiness to collaborate and execute suggested policies, a disposition that has not always been shown.

## **CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINABLE PEACE IN THE REGION**

A number of intricate issues have made it difficult for the Nigerian Niger Delta area to achieve lasting peace. The following subheadings may be used to assess these challenges:

### **Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Peace-Building Processes**

In the Niger Delta, attempts to promote peace have been severely hampered by corruption and a lack of openness. Numerous intervention initiatives, including the Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP) and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), have targeted the area. However, financial theft, ineffective bureaucracy, and a lack of accountability have seriously

impeded these initiatives' efficacy. Numerous officials associated with these programs have faced accusations of misappropriating funds intended for community development into their own accounts, resulting in the targeted villages being impoverished and neglected. The local populace views peace-building initiatives as a means for the elite to benefit themselves rather than as sincere attempts to address the situation in the area, which breeds mistrust among them. Human Rights Watch (2019) claims that corruption in these procedures has caused a collapse in community and government confidence, making long-term peace impossible.

### **Limited Community Participation and Engagement**

The low level of community involvement and participation in peace-building efforts is a major obstacle to long-term peace in the Niger Delta. The people who are most directly impacted by the war have not contributed much to the majority of top-down peace initiatives. Because of this exclusion, policies and initiatives that do not fully take into account the needs and goals of the local populace have often been implemented. Communities are less likely to support and maintain peace programs when they are not actively engaged in their creation and execution. Resistance or indifference towards peace-building initiatives has often been caused by the absence of local ownership of these initiatives. According to International Crisis Group (2020), fostering peace in the Niger Delta requires a more inclusive strategy that includes substantive discussions and cooperation with local stakeholders like as youth Organisations and community leaders.

### **Inadequate Addressing of Underlying Grievances**

Another significant barrier to long-term peace is the inadequate resolution of the Niger Delta residents' underlying complaints. There has been insufficient progress in resolving the fundamental problems that sparked the war, such as economic marginalization, environmental degradation, and political marginalization.

The region's ecology has been severely damaged by environmental degradation brought on by gas flaring and oil spills, which has also destroyed livelihoods and stoked unrest. The effect on the people is still severe, and progress in cleaning up the impacted regions and compensating the communities has been delayed despite repeated pledges from the government and oil firms. Despite the region's abundance of natural riches, the economic marginalization of the area feeds locals' feeling of unfairness and animosity. According to a 2020 Amnesty International assessment, the Niger Delta's cycle of violence and instability is sustained by the neglect of these problems.

### **CONCLUSION**

Decades of warfare have been exacerbated by a complex combination of political, economic, and environmental issues that the Niger Delta area continues to face. Sustainable peace has proven elusive despite a plethora of peace-building attempts, including non-governmental and state interventions such as the Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP). The fragility of the area has been exacerbated by ongoing corruption problems, a lack of openness, low levels of community involvement, and a failure to effectively address underlying complaints. Niger Delta data shows that although certain programs, like the PAP, have temporarily reduced violence, they often fall short in addressing the underlying

causes of conflict. Furthermore, the return of violence and militancy exposes the shortcomings of these initiatives in bringing about sustained stability. Peace initiatives are hampered by persistent environmental deterioration, economic marginalization, and insufficient political representation. These factors also foster hostility.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Addressing the underlying causes of the ongoing strife and instability in the Niger Delta requires a multipronged strategy. The suggestions that follow come from a thorough examination of the difficulties and earlier efforts in the area:

#### **Enhance Transparency and Accountability in Peace-Building Initiatives**

Programs aimed at promoting peace, such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP), should have strong control and accountability systems. The mandated implementation of independent audits and consistent reporting is necessary to guarantee the efficient and transparent allocation of resources. In order to promote better openness and develop confidence, include local communities in the monitoring and evaluation of these activities. By becoming involved, you can make sure that the programs serve the needs of the people and don't only serve as platforms for corruption.

#### **Promote Inclusive and Participatory Peace-Building**

All relevant parties must be included in peacebuilding initiatives, including youth Organisations, women's groups, and local authorities. For peace efforts to be successful in the long run, their active involvement in

their conception, execution, and assessment is essential. bolster local government systems to improve their ability to allocate resources and settle disputes. This entails assisting established Organisations and regional administrations in taking a more proactive part in efforts to promote peace.

#### **Address the Root Causes of Grievances**

Establish and implement economic programs that diversify the region's economy beyond oil, creating sustainable employment opportunities for the youth. These could include investment in agriculture, fisheries, and small-scale industries, which can provide alternative livelihoods to those affected by environmental degradation. Establish and implement infrastructure projects that prioritize the development of necessary infrastructure, such as roads, schools, and healthcare facilities. Establish and implement programs that prioritize access to clean water and electricity. Reducing poverty levels that fuel conflict and improving the quality of life.

#### **Strengthen Security and Rule of Law**

In the Niger Delta, security operations should move away from militaristic tactics and toward tactics that prioritize community policing and communication. To prevent escalating tensions, security personnel should get training on human rights and conflict resolution. Tougher laws should be put in place to stop illicit operations like oil bunkering, which contribute to environmental damage and bloodshed. The government, regional authorities, and foreign partners must work together on this.

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