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Governance And The People's Mandate: A Reassessment Of The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)

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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria represents a paradox where wealth coexists with widespread poverty, underdevelopment, and neglect. Despite being rich in crude oil deposits, the region's inhabitants endure severe poverty, environmental degradation, and policy disregard. Using a historical survey method, this paper examines earlier instances of agitation for attention prior to Nigeria's independence, along with more recent efforts by the region to highlight its abandonment, policy inconsistencies, and near-total neglect. The paper discusses government efforts to address its failures, the irresponsibility of oil exploration and processing companies, and the severe environmental hazards caused by these activities. It argues that addressing the region's challenges should be a mandate for every government, as it has become an ongoing policy concern. The paper further emphasizes that the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) has a clear mission to develop the region and that the current administration's "Renewed Hope" agenda need not look far for a blueprint. Additionally, it advocates for a polycentric approach to policymaking, where stakeholders, governments, communities, and the people of the region can work collaboratively for mutual benefit.

Keywords: Governance, Niger Delta, political power, mandate

INTRODUCTION

Governance can be best understood as the process of exercising political power to manage the affairs of a nation. It encompasses both the measurable aspects of service delivery and the essential principles of political responsibility. This means that public policies should improve outcomes, with policy implementation by all stakeholders adhering to established principles and processes to ensure that policies serve the interests of all citizens (Eze, 2020). According to recent scholars, the key elements of governance include the rule of law, freedom of expression and association, electoral legitimacy, accountability, transparency, and development-oriented leadership (Ogunleye, 2021). Governance is concerned with the effectiveness of a state's institutional arrangements, decision-making processes, and its capacity for implementation. Meanwhile, democracy reflects popular sovereignty, equality, and representativeness. In this context, good governance facilitates participation, transparency, accountability, efficiency, equality, and the rule of law. It presumes that political, social, and economic priorities are shaped by broad societal consensus, ensuring that the voices of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups are included in decision-making (Adewale, 2022).

Good governance is inherently linked to good leadership, which, in turn, fosters equity, fairness, and development. This paper is grounded on the premise that effective leadership leads to good governance, which promotes development, peace, and social justice while upholding the social contract (Okoro, 2023).

Ideally, governments are meant to serve the people, not make their lives more difficult. The people of the Niger Delta fought fiercely, with great sacrifice, for the creation of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) (Nwachukwu, 2020). This struggle represents a social contract between the people and their leaders, a contract that must not be betrayed.

Literature Review

Revisiting the Mandate

The Niger Delta has a long history of neglect and injustice, dating back to the pre-independence era. In 1958, the Willinks Commission was established to address the ecological concerns of the region. The commission acknowledged the unique ecological challenges of the Niger Delta, calling for specific attention and intervention. As a result, the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB) was founded in 1962 to address these issues. However, the oppression faced by the people of the Niger Delta continued, as evidenced by Isaac Adaka Boro's revolt in 1966. This revolt, known as the Twelve-Day Revolution, came at the cost of lives lost. Similarly, the struggle for environmental justice continued into the 1990s, with the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 for his advocacy against the environmental degradation caused by oil exploration.

In 1976, the River Basin Development Authorities were created, and the Niger Delta received its own, the Niger Delta Basin Development Authority (NDBDA). Despite its establishment, the authority had little or no impact on the lives of the region's inhabitants, leading to its dissolution by 1984. According to recent accounts, by the early 1980s, there was an intensifying wave of agitation in the Niger Delta due to the persistent underdevelopment. This unrest led to the creation of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) in the mid-1980s, which managed 1.5% of the federal revenue for regional development. However, this initiative also proved ineffective and was dissolved in 1984. Subsequently, the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) was established in 1992 to mediate between oil companies and communities and manage monthly allocations from the federal government. Yet, OMPADEC's poor performance continued to fuel dissatisfaction and unrest in the region (Adagbabiri & Osumah, 2020).

The ongoing agitations, violence, and militia movements in the Niger Delta can be traced to the region's long history of deprivation. At various constitutional conferences before 1960, the Niger Delta was acknowledged as an area needing special development. The pre-independence constitution stipulated that 50% of oil and gas royalties should be paid to the producing areas. However, successive Nigerian governments modified these provisions, leading to a reduction of the royalty percentage and eventually replacing it with the derivation principle. The derivation rate was reduced from 50% to 20% in 1975, further reduced to 1.5% in 1982, and later increased to 3% in 1992 (Mukoro, 2021). This historical context highlights that the Niger Delta's wealth, while significant in terms of national revenue, has not translated into development or prosperity for its people.

The formation of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in December 2000, in response to protracted conflict and the loss of lives and property, was a direct outcome of these agitations. The NDDC was established to address the developmental needs of the nine states in the Niger Delta, including Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers. Nigeria's position as the 8th largest oil producer globally, with vast reserves of natural gas, underpins the rationale for the NDDC's formation (Barrett, 2020). The region contributes over 90% of Nigeria's national revenue from oil production, but the local governments and states in the region continue to receive disproportionately small allocations from the federal budget (Definone, 2021).

NDDC's Mission: The Mandate of the People

The NDDC's mission statement reflects the outcomes of sustained agitation by the people of the Niger Delta. Previous interventionist agencies had failed due to inadequate funding, political interference, poor leadership, and ineffective planning, leaving many projects incomplete. In response, President Olusegun Obasanjo proposed the NDDC Bill to the National Assembly in December 2000. Section 7 of the NDDC

Act (1999) set forth a comprehensive plan for the physical and socio-economic transformation of the Niger Delta into a region of equity, prosperity, and stability (Emerhi, Nicholas, & Wolf, 2021).

The NDDC's mission includes formulating policies and guidelines for the region's development, executing projects in areas such as transportation, health, education, electricity, and telecommunications, and addressing environmental issues related to oil exploration. Additionally, the commission aims to monitor and assess projects funded by oil companies and ensure that resources allocated for these projects are effectively used. The NDDC is also tasked with tackling the ecological and environmental challenges arising from oil exploration and advising on measures to prevent and control pollution (Mukoro, 2020).

Despite the lofty objectives of the NDDC, its success depends on political will, efficient management, and the commitment to overcoming the systemic barriers that have hindered previous agencies. The NDDC should remain a tool for the sustainable development of the Niger Delta, free from political interference or factional interests, driven by the broader goal of uplifting the region's people.

The Renewed Hope Agenda, NDDC Mission Statement, and the Mandate of the People

The mission of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) is to facilitate the rapid, even, and sustainable development of the Niger Delta into a region that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative, and politically peaceful. This vision is in alignment with the core aspirations of the people of the region, who have long sought emancipation from marginalization, exploitation, environmental degradation, and systemic neglect. The frequent protests and agitations by the Niger Delta populace stem from a deep-seated desire to draw national and international attention to their plight and to effect tangible changes in the exploitative practices of oil-producing firms operating in the region.

This collective yearning for justice and equity underscores the social contract between the governed and the government. As Mukoro (2008) posits, government is a functional institution rooted in the general will of the people, and public office holders are trustees responsible for implementing policies and delivering public goods. Citizens have relinquished the brutish state of nature by entering into a civil contract premised on peace and governance. Accordingly, leadership must reflect this mandate by embracing responsibility, accountability, and genuine commitment to service delivery.

Democracy, by its very nature, is anchored on the consent of the governed. The legitimacy of any administration is derived from the people's collective will and expectations. Therefore, any policy agenda—including the current Renewed Hope Agenda—must uphold and reflect the aspirations of the citizenry. Fundamental rights such as security, freedom, property ownership, and equitable service delivery are not mere aspirations; they are constitutional imperatives rooted in the sovereignty of the people. Any leadership that neglects these obligations risks inciting civil dissent, resistance, or systemic breakdown.

Identified Problems and Proposed Solutions

1. Inadequate Funding of Development Initiatives: A major challenge confronting governance in the Niger Delta is poor and inconsistent funding. Development efforts have been frequently hindered by budgetary constraints, resulting in inadequate infrastructure, rising poverty, insecurity, and ecological crises (Mukoro, 2011). These issues have deep historical roots, as evidenced by the Willinks Commission of 1958, which recognized the ecological uniqueness of the region and called for tailored solutions.

2. Ethnic Marginalization and Internal Fragmentation: Ethnic sentiments and identity politics have historically influenced policy-making and resource allocation in Nigeria. The Niger Delta, as a minority ethnic region, has often been politically and economically sidelined. The multiplicity of languages and internal divisions further weakens regional unity and hinders collective bargaining. This disunity has been exploited by both internal and external actors, further deepening the region's marginalization.

3. Ecological Challenges and Difficult Terrain: The region's complex and fragile ecology poses a unique developmental challenge. Project implementation in the swampy and riverine areas of the Niger Delta demands higher costs and logistical complexity than in upland areas of the country. These

ecological factors have partially contributed to the underperformance of previous interventionist agencies such as the NDDDB, River Basin Authorities, OMPADEC, and even the NDDC.

4. Lack of a Coordinated Master Plan: The absence of a coherent and consistently implemented development master plan has led to fragmented and ad hoc responses to regional issues. This lack of coordination results in inefficiencies, duplication of efforts, and waste of resources.

5. Official Profligacy and External Exploitation: Financial mismanagement, corruption, and elite capture—both by local actors and outsiders—have undermined the developmental agenda. Federal responses to local agitations have often been militarized, with tragic outcomes, such as the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Nine, the Odi massacre, and other forms of state-sanctioned repression.

6. Revenue Allocation and Legal Framework Issues: The progressive reduction of the derivation principle—from 50% in the First Republic to the current 13%—has significantly disadvantaged oil-producing communities. Legal instruments like the Land Use Act of 1978 and the Petroleum Act of 1969 have stripped indigenous communities of their land rights and resource ownership, vesting exclusive control in the federal government. This has further fueled discontent, as majority of oil wells are owned by elites from outside the region (Aghalino, 2008).

7. Calls for Resource Control and Constitutional Reform: There is a persistent and legitimate call for resource control and the revisitation of laws that undermine indigenous ownership and participation. The principle of resource ownership should reflect the political economy theory, which posits that land, capital, and entrepreneurship should be owned and managed by individuals and communities. Property rights are central to environmental accountability, economic efficiency, and long-term development.

The Way Forward: Policy Recommendations

Adoption of a Polycentric Governance Model: Policy-making and implementation should be inclusive and consultative, reflecting the interests of all stakeholders. A polycentric framework—where power and responsibility are shared across multiple actors and institutions—promotes local ownership, patriotism, and better governance outcomes (Mukoro, 2020).

Revisiting the NDDC Master Plan: The NDDC master plan, originally developed by GTZ of Germany and modeled after successful cases in Alaska and Alberta, envisioned a phased approach: development (2006–2010), expansion (2011–2013), and consolidation (2016–2020). It was designed to reduce rural-urban migration and align with Nigeria's Vision 2020 and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Akinwale & Osabuohien, 2008). Unfortunately, this plan was poorly implemented. The NDDC leadership must re-evaluate and possibly revive this strategic blueprint.

Constitutional and Legislative Reforms: Critical laws such as the Land Use Act and Petroleum Act need urgent review to restore community rights and promote justice. Reforms should reflect equity, decentralization, and subsidiarity in resource governance.

Promotion of Unity and Regional Integration: Efforts should be made to foster internal cohesion among the various ethnic groups in the region. This will strengthen collective bargaining and reduce external manipulation.

Strengthening Transparency and Accountability: The NDDC and other intervention agencies must enforce strict accountability mechanisms to reduce corruption, elite capture, and administrative inefficiency.

Urgent Ecological Restoration: A focused and well-funded environmental regeneration plan should be designed and implemented to address decades of oil pollution, loss of biodiversity, and habitat degradation in the region.

CONCLUSION

Extensive research affirms that the Niger Delta region serves as Nigeria's economic powerhouse, accounting for over 80% of the nation's foreign exchange earnings and nearly 90% of national budget financing. Much like the Middle East's significance in global energy supply, the Niger Delta is central to Nigeria's survival and growth. Consequently, any threat to the continuous extraction of oil has typically

been met with severe state-backed suppression. While local resistance and internal uprisings led to the formation of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the comprehensive blueprint that guided its establishment—the Regional Development Master Plan—has been abandoned. The NDDC Master Plan, hailed as Nigeria’s first all-encompassing stakeholder-driven development framework, covers key sectors such as education, healthcare, transportation, and agriculture. Its objectives were aimed at driving economic transformation, reducing poverty, promoting industrial growth, and creating social stability (Eke & Ogbuehi, 2022). Endorsed by the administration of the late President Umar Musa Yar’Adua, the plan was intended to address long-standing issues such as unemployment and regional violence.

This document refers to the NDDC Master Plan as the collective mandate of the Niger Delta people. The leadership of NDDC must urgently return to this plan, which was modeled after similar frameworks used in regions like Alberta, Canada, and Alaska, USA—where royalties are reinvested directly into community development. Similar arrangements, including counterpart funding from oil and gas firms operating in the region, should be institutionalized to support sustainable growth (Okonjo & Erhaboh, 2023). Additionally, the approach to development must shift from top-down bureaucratic methods to grassroots participation. A bottom-up strategy fosters inclusion, transparency, and ownership of development initiatives. Community stakeholders must be seen not merely as beneficiaries, but as active partners in the development process (Ibrahim & Kio, 2021). Learning from global best practices is not a sign of weakness but a strength—especially when contextualized to meet local needs.

Key developmental priorities such as power supply, education, infrastructure, and communication should be placed at the forefront of the NDDC’s agenda. A well-informed and empowered population is critical for regional prosperity. Mismanagement of public funds, exclusionary politics, and repression only deepen socio-economic divides and stifle long-term progress. The Niger Delta people have suffered, resisted, and made sacrifices. The time is ripe for collective action, unity, and genuine leadership to dismantle the systemic structures that have perpetuated poverty and underdevelopment in the region.

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