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History, Conflict Management and Sustainable Development in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT
There is a convergent opinion by conflict and development scholars that the Niger Delta conflict and underdevelopment have roots in a long history of exploitation and dispossession of the region beginning from the British colonial era: initially for slaves in the 17th and 18th centuries, then for palm oil in the 19th century, and later for petroleum in the 20th century. Mismanagement of the oil and gas industry, which spans over decades in the Niger Delta, has resulted in massive amounts of land, water, and air pollutions. Communities living in the Niger Delta are frustrated and suffer the worst impacts of the oil industry and gain little of the potential development benefits. This paper probes the long history of conflicts, conflict management and decries the poor development state of the supposed inherent development potential of Niger Delta Region. It employs the qualitative field survey research approach as well as the frustration-aggression and conflict management versus conflict resolution theoretical frameworks to illustrate the conditions in the area.. The paper discovers that the devastation of the Niger Delta environment through oil pollution has occasioned poverty, social unrest, unemployment and resultant lack of development in the area. Poor funding, lack of government commitment to good governance, non- inclusion of environmental management in national development plan and other variables have further expunged sustainable development from the region. This paper consequently recommends that government commits more empirical funds, improve governance, and pay serious attention to environmental restoration, sanitation and conservation.
Keywords: *Conflict, Conflict Management, Sustainable Development, Niger Delta*

INTRODUCTION

If we exclude the excitement and buzzing of the federal capital, the most significant and important region in Nigeria is the Niger Delta. It is the economic hub of the nation as it is endowed with black gold: oil and gas, which have transformed the country into a world economic potential today. Unfortunately, these blessings have rather brought to the inhabitants of the area woes, economic sufferings, deaths and regrets.. These are due to the series of age long mismanagement, poverty, resultant conflicts and insincere resolution. This paper therefore probes the root of the non-sustainable development in the area and proffer empirical solutions.

Conceptual Framework

Conflict

The term conflict is originally derived from the Latin verb confligere, meaning to clash, engage in a conflict or strike together (Schnid, 2000:12; Albert, 2001:1). This realization is based on the literal meaning of the word. However, empirically, conflict refers to a confrontation between individuals or groups, resulting from opposite or incompatible goals and or means. Various definitions have been advanced by scholars on conflict. Albert (ibid: 2), Wright (1990:19) sees conflict as "an opposition among social entities against each"; Kriesberg (1993:17) also defines conflict situation as "a relationship between two or more parties, who feel they have incompatible goals"; Boulding (1977:26) interprets conflict as "a goal directed activity designed to improve the position of one party at the expense of tin- other". In the same sense, Burrell conceptualizes conflict as situation where each party seeks to achieve an agreed goal upon using a means that is perceived to be incompatible with the wish of the other party. Generally, these views about conflict portend the interaction of people in common environments or relationships.

Since all human beings experience conflicts, conflict is therefore conventionalized as being universal. The Concept of Universality of Conflict asserts that conflict is specie specific. This affirms that conflict is predominant to man (and every living thing) and his environment (Ohajanwa, 2023). This is what informs Zartman (1979:299) to conclude that "conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction". Yakubu also pulsates in the same sense when he explains that by nature, man is conflict prone; his basic needs lot survival and actualization make him selfish and he is ready to take opposition against anything regarded as not being consistent with such interests (2000:vi). As long as people and nation pursue different and incompatible interests, disagreement, disputes and conflicts cannot be completely circumvented. Momah (1993:34), in realizing this situation, consequently, laments that: "war (or dispute) cannot be wished away, decreed or legislated out of existence". This feeling is predicated upon the fact that the activities of man himself are characterized by intolerance, which in turn makes him vulnerable to tension or conflict. As Momah (Ibid: 34), further explains, "This is because rights are more precious than peace, and at limes, to preserve these rights, war ensues".

Conflict Management

The concept of Conflict Management Approaches has always generated divergent interpretations from various conflict theorists.. Some construe the concept in line with Handling Styles, while some describe it as a spectrum of various approaches to mitigate intransigent conflicts; yet others conceptualize it from standpoints of political, judicial and conciliatory. In the foregoing academic rage, the need for us to define our frame of interpretation here becomes imperative; even though it lays claim to no universally accepted paradigm, nevertheless, it provides for clarity and consistency necessary for our study.

In our description model, therefore, we use management approaches as a cover term which describes various strategies utilized in preventing, controlling or limiting conflicts. This begins from preventive to conflict temporary seization. At close review, they portend a conscious form of step by step arrangement of strategies applicable to conflicts at different phases. It can as a matter of fact, constitute a continuous process or effort applicable to get hold of an intractable conflict. The conflict Management efforts in the Niger Delta are series deliberate insincere processes by the federal government of Nigeria, aimed at avoiding appropriate conflict resolution processes, which demand fairness and equity in a mutual benefitting win-sum resolution and end the conflicts permanently.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs..

Niger Delta

This is the Niger delta of the Niger River sitting directly on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean in Nigeria. It is located within nine coastal and comprises of the states of Ondo, Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Imo, Abia, Akwa Ibom and Cross River.

Theoretical Framework

Frustration Aggressively Theory

The frustration–aggression hypothesis, also known as the frustration–aggression–displacement theory is a theory of aggression proposed by John Dollard, Neal Miller, Leonard Doob, Orval Mowrer, and Robert Sears in 1939, and further developed by Neal Miller in 1941 and Leonard Berkowitz in 1969. (Wikipedia, 2024). If the people out of anger take to violent protest, they are crushed to death. When they took to peaceful approaches, they were hanged.

Conflict Management Versus Conflict Resolution:

As explained by Ohajanwa (2023), the global quest for peace is increasingly taking, dynamic dimensions. Both realists and idealists' perspectives are exerting pressures and expanding their horizons. Conflict Management Theorists view violent conflicts as ineradicable outcome of differences of values and interests within and between entities. Resolving conflicts is consequently perceived as unrealistic; the best that can be achieved is management and containment or occasional historic cooperation in which violence may be put aside and normal business activities resumed. This is in tandem with Prescriptive conception of conflict management.

Conflict Resolution Theorists, in contrast, reject this perception, arguing instead that, it is possible to transcend violent conflicts if parties can be helped to investigate, analyze and reframe their positions, interests and needs. And this agrees with the Elicitive theory of conflict resolution.

While prescriptive approach recommends new techniques and strategies for dealing with conflicts, the elicitive approach addresses the root causal uniqueness of conflict contexts and gives room for validation and employment of facilitative or jointly reached accords that recognize the core needs of all parties. Conflict resolution therefore emphasizes intervention by skilled third parties who work unofficially with conflicting parties to proffer new deals, win-sum waves and new relationships. The conflict management efforts in the Niger Delta are not meant to resolve the host versus Federal Government of Nigeria conflicts permanently, but to smoothen up emotions and keep the festering injustices against the people ongoing.

The Root Challenges to Sustainable Developed in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta region, which is a major oil-producing area in Nigeria, has faced several challenges to achieve sustainable development over the years. Some of the challenges include: Environmental degradation, Oil exploration and exploitation activities which have led to severe environmental degradation in the region; this has further resulted in soil erosion, water pollution, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity.

Inadequate infrastructure: The Niger Delta region lacks basic social amenities such as good roads, water supply, and electricity. The inadequate infrastructure in the region makes it difficult to attract investment, which is necessary for economic development.

Insurgency and conflict: The region has witnessed a high level of insurgency and conflict, resulting in the destruction of property and loss of human lives. These conflicts have made it difficult for businesses to thrive in the region, leading to underdevelopment.

Poverty: Despite being a major oil-producing area, the Niger Delta region still has high levels of poverty. This is due to the lack of investment in the region, limited economic opportunities, and the degradation of the environment, which has made farming and fishing – the major sources of livelihood in the region – less productive.

Corruption: The Niger Delta region suffers from high levels of corruption, mainly due to embezzlement of funds meant for development projects. This has further exacerbated the problems of underdevelopment and limited investment in the region.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These environmental challenges have made it difficult to achieve sustainable development in the region. For sustainable development to be achieved in the Niger Delta region there is a need for concerted efforts

by the government, oil corporations, and the host communities in the region to address these challenges. There is a need for investment in infrastructure, better environmental management practices, and the implementation of policies that promote economic growth and development in the region. Transparency and accountability measures should also be put in place to reduce corruption and ensure that funds meant for development projects are utilized for their intended purpose. The government must be sincere and perform suitable conflict resolution approaches, rather than management, which only afford occasional heroic, but temporary reliefs and armistices.

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