Taming the oil-city "Avengers": Reconsidering the Nigerian strategy to environmental degradation, corruption and criminality in the Niger-Delta

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Abstract

Before now, the main issue in contention in the Niger Delta has been massive exploitation of oil and gas by transnational oil companies, in connivance with the Nigerian state with little or no regard for the development of the people and the environment of the Niger Delta. With the establishment of various development agencies in the region by the central government, focus is being shifted to how community leaders/youths connive with the multi-national companies to short-change their people through grand corruption. With the advent of the new political administration in Nigeria, restiveness and destructive militancy have returned through the activities of a new group that calls itself Niger Delta Avengers. In addition to oil exploration, activities of ethnic militias have significantly contributed to environmental problems in the region. Attacks on oil facilities in the oil rich region may not be new, but the fact that the renewed zeal of the Federal Government of Nigeria to engage the militants in dialogue continually suffers a major blow presents an interesting research problematique. An amnesty programme put in place by the government in 2009 helped in reducing violence in the region. The programme however, failed woefully to address the inherent causes of violence such as poverty, youth unemployment and environmental pollution caused primarily by oil spills. The Nigerian government's top-down approach to the development of the oil-bearing areas has not been people-centered and participatory. Thus, the nature of current and future environmental problems requires new governance mechanisms that alter incentives in favour of environmentally sound choices.

Keywords: Oil-City; Environmental Degradation; Approaches; Criminality; Niger Delta; Corruption

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1. Introduction

Environmental problems such as climate change, rainforest loss, collapsing fisheries and water scarcity represent some of the most serious challenges facing society and it seems likely that many will get worse in the future. The seriousness of the situation is illustrated by the growing number of reports highlighting environmental degradation as threats to the national security of the countries (Council on Foreign Relations, 2007). Nigeria offers a strong enabling environment for the large-scale theft of crude oil. Corruption and fraud are rampant in the country's oil sector. A dynamic, overcrowded political economy drives competition for looted resources. Poor governance has encouraged violent opportunism around oil and opened doors for organized crime (Katsouris and Sayne, 2013).

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and is one of the world's leading oil producers due to the vast oil and gas reserves in the Niger Delta (UNDP Project Document, n.d). Since 2006, petro-violence has for strategic, economic and political reasons brought the Niger Delta to the forefront of international energy and security concerns (Obi and Rustad, 2011). Since gaining independence, ruling elites have tilted the entire governance system of the country towards informal patronage networks that extract oil rents and protect privileged business interests. Exploitation of this system means that the benefits of the crude oil resources being extracted from the Niger Delta- and from other national economic activities – have not been abundantly available to develop capacity at different levels of government.

Nigeria's Niger Delta is endowed with vast reserves of oil and natural gas. Despite these resources, the region is marked by deprivation and underdevelopment. The paradox of underdevelopment in a resource-rich region has played a role in increasing violence and instability in the Niger Delta, particularly since the late 1990s. The Niger Delta, as opined by Lopez-Lucia (2015), has been plagued by a conflict that arose in the early 1990s between a number of minority ethnic groups on the one side; and foreign oil companies and the Nigerian government on the other. The Niger Delta has thus been a theatre of oil theft, pipeline vandalism, and kidnappings for a long time. This essay examines varied strategies to tame the militias (avengers) through reconsidering the Nigerian strategy to environmental degradation and criminality in the Niger-Delta.

The thrust of the essay is that while an influx of oil in Nigeria encourages rent-seeking behaviour, graft and questionable business deals with corporate partners, the connivance of the community and political leaders readily puts a dent on the hitherto genuine agitation of the region and thwarts efforts aimed at addressing environmental degradation in the region. Thus, it seeks to establish how corruption among community elders and youth leaders has impeded development in the region. It contends that a new global environmental governance paradigm that is more inclusive holds the promise not only of innovative governance strategies, but also of expanded cooperation among social actors that were previously outside the policy process: corporate interests, interest groups, local leadership and non-governmental organizations. Drawing from both secondary and tertiary types of data from relevant sources – local documentation and library research –the study also proposes a comprehensive programme, largely based on community-driven reconstruction methodology, capable of assisting local communities in listing their development concerns as the basis for local development policy.

2. The Niger Delta Region: An Overview

The Niger-delta region has continued to attract scholarly attention in view of devastation of its environment and people due to failure to manage the negative consequences of oil exploitation and underdevelopment it has spawned in the region (Ighodalo, 2013). The Niger Delta is defined both geographically and politically. The former comprises of states in the South-South geo-political zone, namely, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom and Cross River States; while the political Niger Delta extends to the neighboring oil producing states of Ondo, Abia and Imo, for reasons of administrative convenience, political expedience and development objectives (UNDP, 2006). It is a region made up of a number of ethnic nationalities mainly, Ijaw, Ekwere, Ibo, Efiks, Mbembe, Ejagham, Yakurr, to mention but these few. Several studies on the Niger Delta revealed a number of socio-economic crises such as environmental degradation, widespread unemployment, absolute poverty and a dearth of socio-economic infrastructure to mention but these few (Dakjumbo, 2006, Banigo, 2005).

The region is a vast coastal plain in the southernmost part of Nigeria, where one of West Africa's longest rivers empties into the Atlantic Ocean between the Bights of Benin and Biafra, in the Gulf of Guinea. Estimated to cover about 75,000 square kilometers, it is the largest wetland in Africa and one of the largest in the world, supporting a wide range of biodiversity (Obi 2010) and home to about 140 ethnic groups in the nine states included in a broader definition of the region. In common with other parts of Nigeria, this ethnic diversity has often led to competition for resources in the form of land, economic benefits, or political power (Asuni, 2009).

The Niger Delta derives its name from the River Niger and is one of the world's largest wetlands and Africa's largest delta. The Niger Delta is one of the largest deltas in the world, probably the third largest on earth. The region is regarded as one of the nine most difficult deltas of the world comparable to the Mekong, the Amazon and the Ganges. It is situated in the central part of southern Nigeria (Azaiki, 2007, Ile and Akukwe, 2001). The region has for long remained a hotbed of political activism and agitation for minority rights. The area acquired this reputation even before the advent and discovery of oil at Oloibiri in 1956.

Known for its large deposits of crude oil and gas, the Niger Delta accounts for over 95% of Nigeria's total export annual earnings and about 65% of government revenues (IMF data cited in UNDP Project Document, n.d). To describe the socio-economic context of the Delta is to describe a paradox of extreme wealth (over US$ 50 billion in revenue is generated annually by the O&G sector) with the extreme poverty of the majority of the Delta's residents. After more than fifty years of exploitation, the region's wealth in O&G reserves has not resulted in improved standards of living for local communities. Less than 50% of the communities within the Niger Delta have electricity, running water or clean drinking water. On nearly every measure, the Delta's economic condition is poor in comparison to the rest of Nigeria. Per capita income in this resource-rich region is below the national average of $1,980 and most villages in the Niger Delta continue to lack basic services such as running water, sanitation, health care and schools (UNDP Project Document, n.d).

Several developments after the civil war ended in 1970 had implications for the struggle of the Niger Delta ethnic minorities. These included the increased transfer and centralization of the control of oil revenues from the regions to the federal military government, and the vast expansion in local oil production and its impact on the fragile Niger Delta environment. This provided some justification for renewed agitation by the ethnic minorities that felt that the federal military government had shortchanged them: they supported it during the

civil war, only to lose access to a considerable proportion of the oil produced from their region. Rather than having a right to 50% of oil revenues on the basis of the derivation principle of revenue allocation, their share was progressively reduced until it dropped to a mere 3% in the early 1980s (Obi, 2010).

Various ethnic minority groups such as the Ijaw, Ogoni, Urhobo, Isoko, Ilaje, Egi, Ikwerre, and Itsekiri had begun to remobilize using peaceful methods to protest against the activities of oil companies and neglect by the government. These took the form of petitions, reports, and articles in local newspapers. Pressure groups also emerged to demand the creation of new states in the region and greater representation in federal institutions. The expansion of the oil industry, the economic crisis following the fall in world oil prices in the early 1980s, and the adverse socio-economic effects of economic reform policies contributed to worsening conditions in the Niger Delta. These in turn contributed to the intensification of the struggles in the Delta (Obi, 2010).

Perhaps due to the fact that 13 percent of the national oil revenue is paid back to oil-producing states, corruption is perceived as being more of a problem in the Niger Delta than in other parts of Nigeria. While ethnic cleavages are intense in the Niger Delta, its inhabitants are united by a sense of grievance about the exploitation and neglect of their region. The people of the Niger Delta do not feel that the government of Nigeria has a contract with them. The federal government virtually ignored the Niger Delta during the 1990s, leaving development in the hands of the oil companies. The oil industry exploited and polluted the area, wiping out the traditional livelihoods of fishing and farming and providing few jobs or benefits in return (Asuni, 2009).

The Niger Delta violent conflict can be explained as a microcosm of the larger Nigerian state within the context of equity, access to oil resources and power by oil-rich communities, self-determination, ethnic autonomy, lack of political participation and democratic accountability, underdevelopment and widespread poverty (Obi, 2006 cited Oluwaniyi, 2009). The alienation of the people from their land and the oil produced from it feeds local grievances. While the federal government is seen as neglecting and slowly 'killing the goose that laid the golden eggs', the oil MNCs are seen as its partner and the visible and actual perpetrators of neglect and exploitation of the region's resources, and the pollution of its lands and waters (Obi 2010). Thus, despite the stupendous amount of resources extracted from this region, it remains grossly underdeveloped. According to the Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan:

> *Despite the largely riverine terrain of the region, the state of water transport infrastructure is so poor that the cost of water transport for goods and people is typically higher than for road transport, and transport time is often longer by water than by road. Even so, 40 per cent of the total length of paved roads in the region remains in poor condition, with most of the wetland areas being without roads and therefore inaccessible. The region lacks rail transportation, possesses very poor housing stock, and over 36 per cent of the households therein lack access to electricity supply and over 60 per cent to potable water respectively. Only about 10 per cent of the region is served by the national postal system and the number of telephone users per 100 people is one of the lowest in the world* (NDDC 2006).

Traced to the colonial era, the struggle over the sale and regulation of the prices of palm oil pitted British traders and Niger Delta indigenous traders against each other. The struggle, which led to the death of many natives and almost wiped out an entire community, created the milieu for the Niger Delta subjugation that has lasted till now. The discovery of oil in commercial quantities at Oloibiri (now in Bayelsa State) in 1956, and subsequent expansion into other areas in the Niger Delta, changed the mode of conflict from palm oil to fossil oil and put the region in a strategic position, both nationally and internationally (Oluwaniyi, 2009).

3. Environmental degradation and criminality in the Niger-Delta: Historical and current perspectives

Nigeria has experienced decades of underdevelopment and the Niger Delta has particularly experienced a chronic phase because of the side effect of drilling and oil exploration. From the late 1980's, the region occupying an area of 75,000 sq km; has been bedevilled by communal unrest, crime and violent conflicts, so much so that international interventions through NGOs, international organizations and civil society (amongst others) has yielded nothing or unappreciable result. The crisis of development in the Delta involves political, economic, social, environmental and security. The Niger Delta is highly susceptible to adverse environmental changes occasioned by climate change because it is located in the coastal region of the world. It is also a truism that oil extraction has impacted most disastrously on the socio-physical environment of the Niger Delta oil bearing communities. It massively threatens the fragile subsistent peasant economy and bio-diversity of the region and hence, their entire social livelihood and survival. It has also led to deforestation and ecological degradation, threatening the renewable natural resources and the ecosystem services in a number of ways. This, combined with increasing spate of disasters and predicted sea level rise, provide intermediating catalysts of organized violence.

With the commencement of oil exploration in commercial quantities in Oloiribiri in the Niger Delta in 1956 came great excitement and tall hopes for rapid development and accelerated civilization. But little was known of the pains associated with the exploration of oil such as Spillage, deforestation, noise pollution, sundry and other ecological effects. These adverse effects have been more of the lots of the people of the Niger Delta area since then until a time when it dawned on them that the government was not willing to yield to their demands for adequate attention to their polluted and depreciating environment. The persistent neglect was to result in unrest by the people, which eventually almost got out of hand. Long years of neglect and conflict have promoted, especially among the youths a feeling of a bleak future and thus see conflict as a stratagem to escape deprivation (Niger Delta Human Rights Reports, 2006).

Another important environmental problem facing the Niger Delta is gas flaring. Decades of gas flaring and its impact on the environment remains a contentious issue, a sore point in the relationship between oil communities, oil companies and governments in Nigeria. Gas flaring is a major contributor to climate change and because of the huge oil infrastructure in Niger Delta; it contributes more emissions of greenhouse gases than anywhere else in Nigeria. The Nigerian government has not enforced environmental regulations

effectively because of the overlapping and conflicting jurisdiction of separate governmental agencies governing petroleum and the environment as well as because of non-transparent governance mechanisms.

For over five decades, the Nigerian State has connived with the oil multinational in ruining the Niger Delta in the name of oil exploration and production. The people of the region have been exposed to sundry socio-economic, political and ecological malaises for which there has been no proper recompense (Okoli, 2013). Thus, environmental degradation caused by the oil spill and other oil and gas activities has worsened the economic levels of the people by destroying the once abundant fishing grounds and decreasing availability of quality agricultural land, thereby furthering impoverishment of those affected (Kingston, 2011).

The Niger Delta communities, as a result of the criminal neglect on the part of the Federal government and the oil exploring companies, responded initially through road blocking and shutting the gates of oil companies. When these did not produce the desired results, pipelines vandalisation, blowing up of oil installations, bunkering and hostage taking were resorted to. As a result of the crises, volume of oil exploration, is assumed to have reduced, oil workers operate in an insecure and hostile environment ,and frequently, the Nigeria Joint Military Force (JMF) and the Niger Delta youths had clashed leaving casualties on both sides. The government responses since 1957 when oil was first discovered in commercial quantities at Oloibiri had not abated agitation in Niger Delta. That is, Willinks reports of 1959 to the creation of Ministry for Niger Delta in 2008 (Idowu, 2012). The Nigerian government, particularly the military regimes have never been fully committed to confronting the multinational oil companies with the view to implementing the international best practice in the Petroleum Industry

Poor operating practices, weak law enforcement and an active illegal oil economy contribute to hundreds of oil spills a year in the Niger Delta. This environmental disaster destroys traditional livelihoods, breeds mistrust and resentment and undermines the operational security of oil companies and Federal Government. Gas flared every day in the Niger Delta is equivalent to the daily gas consumption of Brazil. This multi-billion dollar waste not only leaves communities without effective energy solutions, but is the single, biggest contributor to CO_2 emissions in Africa (Stakeholder Democracy Network, n.d).

The utilisation of waste associated gas has the potential to address Nigeria's acute domestic energy crisis and stimulate economic diversification and growth in the Niger Delta. In addition, the utilization of flared gas to address energy poverty is an important part of creating an enabling environment in the Niger Delta. Provision of localised and reliable electricity will also reduce one of the primary drivers of illegal oil refining (Stakeholder Democracy Network, n.d). Edokpayi and Metaferia (2005) explain that the activities of the multinational oil and gas industries have increased the level of poverty in the areas as pollution from the oil and gas activities affected water, air, soil, animals, human safety, health and the environment leading to the drastic decline of the quality of life. The government contributed to improper regulation of the oil and gas activities and for colluding against the people and for laws and policies that engendered ethnic clashes and complicated the crises. Social groups protested against the heightened oppression as the oil and gas industries and the government policies and actions failed to protect the people.

Factors that account for the high perception of relative deprivation include the inflationary effects of high incomes in the oil industry, declining opportunities for gainful employment in the oil industry for youths from

oil-producing communities, and high levels of corruption in public service and oil companies (Ukiwo, 2011). In a study on environmental degradation and its impact on the Niger-Delta region, Aluko (2004) affirms that oil exploration activities in the region- which lead to environmental degradation- are responsible for the high degree of poverty thereby generating a situation of resource conflict in the area. Incidentally to, and indeed compounding this ecological devastation is the political marginalisation and total oppression of the people, especially the denial of their rights, including land rights. In spite of the enormous wealth accrued from their land, the people continue to live in pristine conditions in the absence of electricity, pipe borne water, hospitals, housing and schools (Ogadi et al, 2012).

Facilitated by poverty, political disenfranchisement, and the easy availability of firearms, armed groups fought each other over the control of illegally acquired oil (so-called "bunkering") and engaged in violent acts against oil companies, such as kidnapping their officials (Bekoe, 2005).). Violent crimes such as armed robbery, hostage taking, and kidnapping in the Niger Delta region became a product of the liberation fight that has characterized the region. Direct action in the Niger Delta thus emerged from the context of heightened inequalities, hardened ethnic identities and ethnicised perceptions of oil ownership. These characteristics were evident in the Ogoni protests of the early 1990s, which set an important precedent for later Ijaw action. The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), headed by poet Ken Saro-Wiwa, utilised Gandhian tactics of peaceful protest and demonstrations against Shell in an attempt to ensure a fairer allocation of resource wealth and increased autonomy for the Ogoni people (MOSOP 1990).

Since 1999, the power struggle between the political class, militants and gangs in the Niger Delta has contributed to violent conflicts in the region. While the politicians armed thugs and colluded with cultists to overwhelm the opposition to gain access to political power and the pecuniary gains from derivation allocations, armed gangs fought for control of the creeks to benefit from oil bunkering (Human Rights Watch, 2005). Community and ethnic leaders 'recruited youth leaders and provided them with money and weapons' to facilitate the competition for leadership positions and the control of communities (Human Rights Watch 2005). At the local level, communities have come into conflict with oil companies, with each other, and with the security forces over a range of issues including payments to communities, land acquisition, and environmental damage. The complexity, violence and intractability of these conflicts has been growing, especially in recent years, as communities of the Delta have become increasingly militant, with armed groups waging systematic campaigns against the government and oil companies to further their demands.

Today, the crises in the Niger Delta is no longer limited to the region but has become an international concern that affects oil and gas activities, workers as well as families whose relatives work in the location all over the world. Oil and gas industries are spending to protect their workers and facilities that have become subject to kidnapping and vandalism (Abidde, 2009). Central to this struggle is the quest of the local forces of resistance to contest, repossess, and control their natural resources, particularly oil and gas. Resistance in this context refers to "a collective action directed at blocking further alienation, expropriation, and environmental degradation. It represents a mass project of restitution and self-determination" arising from the exploitation of the region's oil by multinational oil corporations (MNOCs) backed by the Nigerian state (Obi 2005).

4. Stakeholders' engagements: The corruption narratives

The Nigerian oil industry is plagued with endemic corruption. In a scandal involving the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), the country's official audit revealed that around $19 billion of oil revenues went missing through corruption and oil theft in 2014 alone(Global Risk Insights, 2016). Earlier, in September 2013, the Chatham House of United Kingdom Think Tank reported our crude oil was being stolen on an industrial scale with ready buyers in the Gulf of Guinea, the United States, Europe and several Asian countries. The Report said that Nigeria loses $8 billion a year to theft by politicians, security forces, militants, oil industry staff, oil traders, and members of local communities, most of who have no interest in stopping it (Atumah, 2013). According to some estimates, around $400 billion has vanished in a similar fashion since the country gained independence in 1960, making oil industry crime the second largest industry in the country, right after the oil industry itself. It is estimated that around 200,000 barrels a day are stolen by a sophisticated network of former warlords, local businessmen, and corrupt officials (Global Risk Insights, 2016). Crude oil makes up more than 90 percent of exports and 70 percent of state revenues, but despite being a net exporter of crude oil, the country imports most of the oil consumed domestically because the inefficient refinery system is unable to meet demands(Global Risk Insights, 2016).

This, alongside the devastation of oil exploration in the Niger Delta, skewed national government policies and corruption among state and local government officials have been deemed responsible for the underdevelopment of the Niger Delta (Ewharieme and Cocodia, 2011). Corruption around government circle involves the interconnectivity or alliances between government bodies (ranging from Federal, State to local government levels) and closely supported by both international and a section of indigenous interests. There exists a clearly defined sharing principle benefiting the parties in alliance. This practice creates a polar between what the affected communities are expected to have towards the amelioration of the plight of the suffering masses on one hand and that which is needed for the development of their degraded environment on the other.

The effectiveness of governance, especially at the local government level, is an issue warranting concern. For both state and local governments, accountability, transparency and integrity have not necessarily kept up with the increased flow of resources in the delta—politicians and local officials flaunting ill-gotten gains in fact help to fuel conflicts (UNDP, 2006). Politically, corrupt syndicate consists of state political elites mainly public office holders and their acolytes represented within the indigenous communities. It is worth noting that the phenomenon of corruption is not limited to politicians or executives alone but also of relevance are locales in the affected area (Jegede et al, 2012). The elders/elites and youths are also identified by Osaghae et al (2007) as major actors in the Niger-delta Self-determination struggles. The elders/elites are the businessmen, retired civil servants, traditional leaders and political leaders in the Niger-delta. They dominate the political, economic and traditional power structures of the region. Their prominence flows from their role as intermediaries between the ordinary people of the region and the state/multinational corporations exploiting the oil reserves of the region.

It should be noted that their constant agitations have led to the establishment of different Niger Delta-focused institutions and commissions as palliative measures by successive administrations. However, rather than addressing the development needs of the common people, "all the various intervention measure and

projects were avenues created for the political elites to access the treasuries. Majority of the money and resources allocated for the various projects ended up in the private pockets of political elites and their cronies" (Trans, 2012; Walker, 2012; Dode, 2011; Ibaba 2005, 2008; Ibaba and Ikelegbe, 2010). For instance, the Federal Government established the Niger Delta Development Board to manage the developmental needs and challenges of the region. The achievements of the board were marginal. Following mounting agitation for a renewed focus on the development of the region, the President Shehu Shagari Administration set up a Presidential Task Force Account (popularly known as the 15 percent committee) in 1980 and 15 percent of the Federation Account was isolated to the Commission to tackle the developmental problems of the region. The committee like the boards was ineffective. It was eventually emasculated and collapsed under the crosscurrent of military and partisan politics (Daily Times, 2008 cited in Akpomuvie, 2011).

Similarly, between 1992 and 1999 when it was scrapped, OMPADEC completed several projects but bequeathed very many abandoned/unfinished projects and huge debt, most of which were dubious. Investigations into the accounts of the Commission depicted lack of focus, inadequate and irregular funding, official profligacy, corruption, excessive political interference, lack of transparency and accountability, high overhead spending (Ojameruaye, 2004 cited in Omololu et al, 2012). The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) set up in 2000 was a reaction of the Obasanjo administration to invigorate the need to address the governance crisis in the region. Again, the operation and activities of the commission was more of politics rather than genuine attempt to rectify the status of the area (Omololu et al, 2012).

Also, International Development Organizations have in times past complemented government's efforts in the Niger Delta. Agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), European Union (EU), DFID, the World Bank, USAID, e.t.c have supported various communities in such areas as in the improvement of access to health care facilities, provision of potable water, skill acquisition programmes and delivering of qualitative education etc.

It is important to note that in addition to the federally allocated revenue to all the 36 states of the federation, the states that make up the Niger Delta enjoys special allocation of 13% as specified in the revenue sharing formulae based on derivation as fixed by section 162 (2) of the 1999 Constitution (Akinola and Adesopo, 2011). Although, as argued by Enweremadu (2009 cited in Jegede et al, 2012), there is a volume of literature on oil and violence in the Niger-Delta, there is paucity of studies highlighting the role and nexus of corruption in all these conflicts. Yet, the increasing frequency and the intensification of corrupt acts among political actors, community leaders and private oil companies operating in the Niger-Delta have for some time been the hallmark of politics in the region. It is necessary to note that out of the four past governors of Nigeria's major oil producing states (Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, Delta and Rivers) three have either been accused or convicted of large scale corruption (Jegede et al, 2012).

For instance, former governor of Bayelsa state, DSP Alamieyeseigha was detained in London on charges of money laundering and in September 2005 (Sahara Reporters, 2007). He was detained in London on charges of money laundering in September 2005. At the time of his arrest, Metropolitan police allegedly found about £1m in cash in his London home. Later they found a total of £1.8m ($3.2m) in cash and bank accounts. He was also found to own real estate in London worth an alleged £10 million. He was widely accused of stanching away his

state's monthly federal allocation and enriching his family members and cronies indiscriminately (Odufowokan, 2015).

Also, James Onanefe Ibori, former governor of Nigeria's oil rich Delta state, was in 2012 sentenced to thirteen years in jail by a London Judge for stealing government funds in Nigeria. Ibori got the sentence for stealing at least $250 million of public funds within the period he served as governor of the rich Delta state (Premium Times, 2012). Lucky Igbenedion, former governor of Edo state is the first Nigerian ex-governor convicted of looting public funds. The EFCC charged him with 142 counts of corruption amounting to $24 million (£12m) using front companies. Lucky entered a plea bargain with the commission in 2008 and refunded a fraction of the amount he was said to have embezzled – and went home (ibid). One could imagine the remedial efforts the funds accruing to the Niger Delta states would have achieved had they been judiciously used to solve some of the problems confronting the region.

The corporatist ties between local leaders and MNCs have not gone unnoticed, with communities and militants labelling local elders and leaders 'selfish, opportunistic, sycophantic, corrupt and compromised' (Osaghae et al. 2007) and accusing them of taking bribes and colluding with oil companies. Local leaders and elders did not simply fail to prevent the current environmental devastation and marginalisation of the oil minorities; they form a part of the oil complex which caused this catastrophe, through a reciprocal relationship with MNCs. Local youth correctly perceive their elders as connected to the clientelist networks of the oil complex in ways which have led to the further privation and marginalisation of their position (Osaghae et al. 2007).

Ikelegbe (2005) argues that decades of neglect of oil producing communities by the Nigerian State and the environmental degradation is mainly the trigger of armed resistance in the region. The resistance further gave a chance for criminal syndicates to infiltrate the movement. At first glance, evidence for the blatant greed and criminality of youth militants appears convincing. Many militant groups are involved in illegal forms of economic predation including oil bunkering, where oil is tapped from pipelines and sold on the black market. The money raised is used to buy arms, fund further militant activity and enrich militants, particularly leaders (Asuni 2009a). Watts (2008) explains that political intrigues within the political class provide seamless opportunity for militant groups to unleash violence. Politicians in the region hire thugs to checkmate political rivals using public money, and this patronage has substantially increased the might of militant groups in the region.

Today, due to the violence, several billionaires have been created from the ranks of formerly unemployed young people triangulated into militancy by influential powerbrokers (Okonofua, 2011). At the same time that these important stakeholders are profiting from the Niger Delta oil complex, host communities and peoples continue to suffer the cumulative negative impact of oil production, including pollution, unemployment, poverty, and disease (Okonofua, 2014). Rent seeking has come to dominate the economy of the Niger Delta through political patronage, extortion and illegal oil bunkering (Wilton Park, 2015). Indeed, oil theft industry is almost becoming the biggest economy in the region contributing to employment and income generation in communities. The rouge industry is a monopoly business with established command and control structure

comprising the ex-militants and segments of state security force established for protection and security of oil and gas infrastructure in the Niger Delta (Joab-Peterside, 2015).

5. The emergence of the oil city avengers

Several militant groups sprung up in the Niger Delta after the inauguration of the present administration in 2015, with the Avengers as the most daring. The group declared insurrection against the Nigerian state in March, 2016 and since then has destroyed oil installations in Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Akwa Ibom and Rivers states. The group, like many before it, based its actions on accusations of government's indifference to issues of development in their region. The major aim of the Avengers is to cripple the nation's economy by halting oil exploration and export.

Niger Delta Avengers is the name of a new group of militants in the Niger Delta who claim to be different from the former agitators and militants who operated between 2006 and 2009, largely under the umbrella of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) (Abati, 2016). The NDA came to international attention after claiming an attack on an underwater pipeline run by Shell in February, forcing the Dutch oil giant to temporarily shut down its 250,000 bpd Forcados terminal. The upsurge in attacks by the group has coincided with a dramatic fall in oil production in Nigeria, traditionally the continent's biggest producer. Petroleum Minister, Emmanuel Ibe Kachikwu said earlier in May 2016 that production had fallen by 800,000 bpd to 1.4 million bpd, the lowest in two decades (Gaffey, 2016). The violence shut down several oil wells, claimed dozens of lives and forced major companies such as Shell and Chevron to evacuate staff and halt production in some areas (ISS, 2016). The NDA had warned foreigners, PENGASSAN and members of the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers, to "leave all oil fields and terminals in the Niger Delta," saying things would "get dirty very soon" (The Punch, 2016).

The Avengers demand greater ownership of oil resources for the people who live in crude-producing areas. They want environmental repair and compensation for damages inflicted by oil producers. And they want continued government funding for an amnesty program that is largely credited with halting the last round of Delta violence, which mostly ended in 2009 (DiChristopher, 2016). The Niger Delta Avengers are in the business of destroying oil infrastructure — working in teams, carrying small arms and explosives, blowing up pipelines and sabotaging facilities — taking advantage of the Delta's complex, creek-filled terrain to stay one step ahead of the Nigerian soldiers chasing them(DiChristopher, 2016).

Economic losses are colossal as government spends more money for pipeline repairs. The greater problem is the damaged environment from oil spills (Atumah, 2016). The Avengers claim on their website to be young, educated and well-traveled. They say they are better armed and more civilized than past militants (DiChristopher, 2016). Their illegal activities had, expectedly, impacted negatively on the finances of the country. Specifically, unlawful actions of the militants had hampered activities of oil producing companies, making it almost impossible for Nigeria to reach its oil production capacity.

More than any of the emergent groups, the Niger Delta Avengers have used their online resources to articulate the basis of this vengeance mission in such posts as "Operation Red Economy", "We shall do whatever

is necessary to protect the Niger Delta interest" and "Keep your threat to yourself, Mr. President" (Abati, 2016). The NDA follows the pattern of other groups, such as the Movement for the Emancipation for the Niger Delta (MEND), which led the militancy campaign in the mid-2000s. MEND and some of its most notorious leaders, such as Government Ekpemupolo- an ex-militant also known as Tompolo who is wanted on money laundering allegations totaling 46 billion naira ($231 million) -disassociated themselves from the NDA. But according to Malte Liewerscheidt (See Gaffey, 2016), the group's membership is likely made up of disaffected ex-militants who have not benefited from the presidential amnesty program that brought the previous campaign to a close in 2009.

The Niger Delta Avengers looks more like an amorphous, ad hoc group comprising a blend of ex- Niger Delta militants who embraced the offer of presidential amnesty by the late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua, and some unrepentant militants. On the face value, it appears it presently has no structured leadership, but operates in a guerrilla fashion with no known operational base. Meanwhile, the group possess-es high-tech equipment including underwater and surface long-range weapons that could be used to blow-up pipelines effortlessly, thus taking the security forces unaware. The group's website: www.nigerdelta-avengers.com contains scanty in-formation about it, visitors to the site can only go with press statements on the group's warnings and attacks on oil facilities (Alade et al, 2016).

An amnesty programme put in place by the government in 2009 with the aim of making the militant to sheath their sword and given training on a particular trade so as to rehabilitate them to the society actually tamed the violent agitation. According to Abati (2016), "for about seven years, under this programme, introduced by President Yar'Adua and sustained by President Jonathan, Niger Delta militants were demobilized and disarmed. The top hierarchy soon became security consultants to the Federal Government, monitoring pipelines, and helping to check oil theft. The middle cadre was placed on a monthly stipend while those who could be trained were sent to technical colleges and universities in Southern Africa and Eastern Europe.

The militants became rich and gentrified, and with their kinsman in office as President in Abuja, the people of the Niger Delta began to feel a sense of ownership and belongingness that no one in that region had felt since 1960". Under the program, the government handed out multimillion-dollar contracts to the top leaders of the last round of militants, paying them to guard oil infrastructure. The rank and file were compensated with stipends and job training (DiChristopher, 2016). With the advent of the new political administration, restiveness and destructive militancy have returned through the activities of the new group (Niger Delta Avengers) in spite of the fact that the new government readily buys into the existing programme.

In another twist, the governors of the South-South recently met with Vice President Yemi Osinbajo and had requested that majority of the corruption cases being prosecuted in the region should to be dropped by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The governors were said to have singled out the Federal Government's anti-corruption initiative as the reason why Niger Delta Avengers are blowing up pipelines in the region. Surprisingly, the governors reportedly asked the Federal Government to discontinue charges against former militants accused of corruption and to prevent EFCC from investigating the campaign fund scam

that was allegedly mismanaged at the expense of being used to fight Boko Haram menace in the country (Kupoluyi, 2016).

6. The Nigerian state and other alternatives for consideration

Over the years, successful administrations in the country have instituted different programmes aimed at transition to peace, but these efforts had recorded minimal successes as the root causes of the struggle remained unaddressed (Ikelegbe, 2010). Instead, the government's response has merely been to flood the region with military troops to secure peace at all cost (Osaghae, 2011; Agbede, 2010). Several ad-hoc government interventions programmes have not impacted on the rural dweller. Many managers of these ad-hoc agencies, who mostly are from the Niger Delta, saw such funds as their share of the national cake. Unfortunately governments acquiesce to it with little or no monitoring of such programmes (Atumah, 2013).

The response of the government to the claims of the oil producing areas has been classified by Suberu (Suberu, 1996) into three forms: redistributive, reorganizational and regulatory state responses. According to Suberu, 'redistributive policies are state decisions that consciously dispense valued resources to one group at the expense of other claimants to state resources. Reorganizational policies refer to state efforts to restructure or reconfigure political or administrative institutions and relationships in order to accommodate group demands or strengthen the efficacy of centralized state power. Regulatory policies entail the mandatory imposition of sanctions or restrictions on individuals or groups that are perceived to pose a threat to state cohesion and order.'

However, several development initiatives have been taken by the Nigerian government to enhance socio-economic and social political development of the region, such as the establishment of development boards, provision of basic infrastructural facilities among others. While some of these initiatives are laudable and need to be strengthened (Ukiwo, 2010) they have however failed to achieve endurable peace in the region because they failed to address the root causes of the Niger Delta conflicts. Thus, concerted action is urgently needed at the local, national, regional and international levels to address the menace of environmental degradation, criminality and corruption in the Niger Delta. Requirements include improved intelligence gathering, stronger policing and the prosecution of suspected criminals.

Indeed, the country is now reeling under stressful conditions which need new strategies/ approaches to resolve. The Federal government has taken a bold step to opt for dialogue, a response to calls by both foreign governments and various interest groups within Nigeria. President Buhari went further to call for a cease fire. This is a positive step, a measure to halt the age long official resistance to the development of the perturb region (Orie, 2016). Having examined the complex interactions between the social, political, economic, environmental, and security factors that drive and sustain conflict in the Niger Delta, it should be noted that Nigeria's ability to resolve the violent conflict in the region will require considerable investment in human capacity and institutional strengthening, environmental justice, economic diversification, peacebuilding mechanism, conflict transformation, among others as discussed below:

6.1. Economic diversification and regional collaboration

Nigeria is today at a point where it is being compelled not only by economic and technical imperatives, but also by social considerations to seek alternative development paradigms. The combination of a significantly low price of crude oil and an increasing population, plus current threats to peace and stability in the region implies that a new path must be pursued towards self-sustainability (Adjogbe, n.d). As the largest investment and revenue generator for government, the oil and gas industry has become an unhealthy preoccupation in the region. Thus, new strategies for socio-economic development must promote growth without increasing dependency on oil and gas, such as solar or hydro energy and agri-businesses (Wilton Park, 2015). There is today an urgent need for an industrial policy for the region knowing that oil and gas, which is the mainstay of its economy, is getting more exposed to technical, economic, environmental and social risks. Adjogbe (n.d) offers more perspective on this:

> *There is no doubt that the industrialization of the Niger Delta region will offer immeasurable gains that will affect almost every facet of life in the society. It will increase agricultural and manufacturing outputs, allowing people to take jobs in many other sectors, while increasing the amount of food, consumer goods and services available to the populace. While increasing economic output, industrialization will also result in population migration and the associated positive and negative consequences within affected areas. It will spur technological and scientific advances that can change the economic, social and political landscape of the entire region.*

Solutions to the myriad of problems earlier identified require a holistic strategy that begins with building common agreement and trust around how these issues must be tackled and galvanizing support for building peace and development. Thus, collaborative efforts and regional integration of the Niger Delta states will provide opportunity to generate regional knowledge to understand the root causes of economic instability and forge community-owned, market-driven results. State governments, in partnership with the federal government and the private sector, should focus on large infrastructure development, creation of new urban areas and towns to serve as growth centers, inland waterways development, coastal roads constructions and revamping of large agro-plantations and local cottage industries, environmental remediation and management etc.

From its stock of natural and human resources, the Niger Delta region offers immense opportunities for developing a diversified and growing economy. Using existing assets, including oil and other natural resources, a diversified economy would reduce the heavy focus on oil and gas—a non-renewable resource—while providing a basis for growth clusters within the region (UNDP, 2006). Pro-poor economic growth would expand the employment, productivity and incomes of poor people; unleash human and institutional capacities; eradicate poverty through improved livelihoods; and stimulate industrial development through increased access to basic public goods.

The country's political leadership must take interest in diversification of the economy away from heavy reliance on oil and gas as chief sources of public revenue. The governors of the oil producing states have generally neglected the need to develop other viable economic activities and collect taxes. According to Akintunde and Hile (2016), the Niger Deltans face additional productivity challenge due to deep-rooted

extortionist practices, militancy and a culture of reward without work. These challenges can become even deeper when more petrodollars are retained in the region.

6.2. Public accountability and sustainable development

Development experts and policy makers have engaged in many debates about the delta's human development dilemma, questioning why abundant human and natural resources have had little impact on poverty in the region (Akpomuvie, 2011). Given the frustration and disillusionment with the present development failures in the delta, a more focused effort on human development is clearly desirable. There is clearly the need for a new development approach that makes people the centre of all development goals and actions in the area. A people centered or participatory approach to development, planning and management involves peoples' active participation in decision-making on issues that pertain to their livelihoods and interest. This helps people to realize their potentials and play active role in the social and economic transformation of their communities. As suggested by Akpomuvie (2011):

> *Overall, the region should embark on a realistic and mutually agreed long-term development agenda that can be rigorously monitored by stakeholders. Strategies to improve the quality of governance should focus on enhanced service delivery, checks on corruption and the engagement of people in shaping policies for their well-being. In addition, existing compensation to communities for oil production and pollution needs to be examined.*

The essence of the thesis of sustainable development is geared towards the improvement of the quality of life in all its ramifications, provided that environmentally sound policies are pursued, and adhered to by society (Natufe, 2001). Thus, if development is to have any positive meaning, it is essential that its fundamental goals be the proper blending of technology and energy that will contribute to the improvement of society and the environment. Development is a complex and multi-disciplinary process, and perhaps the first step in articulating a way forward for the region, as captured in the report of the Niger Delta Development Forum (2016), is in "re-imagining a possible future, beginning with changing the narrative of the Niger Delta. A Niger Delta that ranks high in inclusive citizen participation in governance; where state governments operate with the concepts of transparency, accountability, and effectiveness at the forefront; and where diversity in economic pursuits are championed by state governments and executed openly".

It is worth mentioning that the Niger Delta Development Commission and the Ministry of Niger Delta have failed woefully principally by unmindful manipulation of these two key agencies by greed and avarice of the wicked few, making NDDC to lose focus. They have to be refocused and retooled. What will usher in a lasting peace in the region is holistic execution of projects required to uplift the lives of the people. Adequate funding of the NDDC and the Niger Delta Ministry and close monitoring of 13 percent managers and State Governors who largely contributed to the under development of the region (Orie, 2016). Successful intervention measures in the Niger Delta region must be rooted on a value system of transparency both in the design and implementation processes but also in the decision making process under the program. This will require openness in contracting as well as reporting on the development processes in the region

State governments are the main parties responsible for providing public services, and in the delta their resources are substantial, comparable to the national level budgets of other developing countries. Annual budgets in the four main oil producing states of Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa-Ibom, and Delta total $7 billion, roughly Ghana's federal budget (Newsom, 2011). Transparency enables government monitoring and allows citizens to hold government officials accountable. Government spending now needs to be more than just accountable; it also needs to be clearly focused on the results of interventions and the quality of key services. This will require stricter anti-corruption measures to be implemented alongside rewards for MDAs and civil servants who are able to collaborate with communities and associations to produce far stronger development outcomes.

6.3. Human capacity building human capital development (Self-Help Groups)

The idea of self-help groups (mostly comprise of local youth and women) who come together with a common interest of developing their social-economic standards, is also a good initiative. Many scholars, according to Wakhungu (2016) have studied the role of these groups in promoting peace and combating criminality. The objectives of self-help groups differ but the common among all self-help groups are: providing an avenue where ideas, activities and information can be shared on a Membership Map through meetings and regular events, to capture the expertise of members on various issues in social-economic building; offers members collective influence and experience to support social-economic building, help address major causes of human suffering and promote the shared interests of humanity.

Most self-help groups' Programmes promote a culture of peace and are essentially transformative. They cultivate the knowledge base, skills, attitudes and values that seek to transform people's mindset, attitude and behaviors that in the first place have created or exacerbated violent conflicts. It seeks such transformation by building awareness and understanding; developing concern and challenging personal and social action that will enable people to live relate and create conditions and systems that actualize non-violence, justice, environmental care, improved living standards and economic growth.

Today, the future of Nigerians, particularly, the youths in the Niger Delta brings to mind the report of Mo Ibrahim Foundation which noted that the future of youths in many African countries, including Nigeria may be grim unless governments and policy makers take urgent steps to improve good governance, provide quality education, health and create employment for the youths. To get Nigerian youths, particularly, those in the Niger Delta, on track, there is need to ensure peace in the region which will in turn bring about youth competitiveness, right skills, adequate tools and attainment of social and political responsibility (Obinna, 2012).

The amnesty programme introduced by the late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in 2009 which was to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate armed militants back into communities, initially resulted in a sharp reduction of violent attacks against the oil industry, leading to an increase in production. The programme involved offering benefits – such as opportunities in education as well as money – to militants who gave up their weapons. Indeed, leaders of militant groups were also offered large and highly profitable contracts in the oil industry and other sectors of the economy. In the wake of the amnesty programme, ex-militant leaders gained political power and influence in the cities to which they returned.

A research project at the University of Leuven (Ebiede, 2017) identified why the initiative failed and highlights why programmes of this nature can fall apart. A major finding was that it wasn't accompanied by meaningful and durable reintegration and that deep-seated socio-economic problems weren't tackled at the same time. It appears, despite all its failures, that the only short-term option to get the county's oil production and exports back on track quickly is the continuation and possible expansion of the current amnesty programme to address the new groups that have emerged(Ebiede, 2017). This would help increase oil exports and revenues and buy the government time to develop more effective reintegration strategies. However, any new amnesty strategy will need to de-emphasise financial payments to ex-militants for it to succeed.

Excessive reliance on the public sector for the provision of socio-economic resources and the creation of jobs has been the bane of development efforts in Nigeria. It has now been fully realized that the public sector alone cannot provide these facilities because of the limited resources at its disposal. Thus, state governments in the region must realize their limitations and create an enabling environment for the private sector participation in this regard.

6.4. Conflict transformation and peacebuilding mechanism

For decades, peace meant mainly the silencing of guns and the renewal of formal politics as the way of governance. Ceasefires and demobilization were the main focus of peace processes. However, today it is recognized that peace is something far more than the 'absence of violence.' Peace has increasingly meant an inclusive political process, a commitment to human rights in the post-war period and an attempt to deal with issues of justice and reconciliation. For the Niger Delta today, as suggested by McDonald (2011), any plan or project must be rooted in practical and active understanding of the origins and risks of conflict in order to sustain the momentum of peaceful development and avoid planning that does not take into account the dynamics of conflict and its core causes.

Effective peacebuilding needs to be grounded in the integration and coordination of a wide range of local level actors as possible linking opportunities from divergent fields of interest in developing creative synergies for peace (Onduku, n.d). As Smith (2004) observes, many contemporary conflicts are protracted, marked by sporadic periods of violence and peace. In this case, conflict occurs in waves - rising precipitously until some accommodation is reached and then falling off dramatically (almost to the point that there is a marked absence of conflict) and then rising again. Thus, for conflict transformation, it embodies three distinct theoretical motions: conflict management, conflict resolution and conflict transformation.

A structural dimension of peace building focuses on the social conditions, which promote violent conflict. It is widely acknowledged that sustainable peace is a product of social, economic, and political opportunities on equal terms, which take care of the needs of the entire people or parties. The second integral part of building peace is to limit the effects of conflict-related hostility through the repair and transformation of damaged relationships. This relational dimension of peace building focuses mainly on reconciliation, forgiveness, trust building, and future imagining. Therefore, peace and stability can only be secured and sustained in the region through investment in the social and public sectors in the Niger Delta as only this will result in improvement

in the living standards and economic conditions in the region, and this will in turn assist in further consolidating security in the Niger Delta.

Nigeria must adapt conflict-avoidance, conflict management and conflict-resolution strategies (all embedded in conflict transformation) to end the oil conflict in the Niger Delta. Many African countries have been able to end diamond conflicts, including Sierra Leone and Angola (Akintunde and Hile, 2016). Having highlighted poverty, inequality and marginalisation as some of the major reasons for violence and criminality in the region, efforts of peace building -by addressing these factors- should be carried out, as a matter of routine by government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and even faith based organizations in the region.

In a statement endorsed by 29 individuals and organization in 2016, stakeholders advised the government to demilitarize and pursue a non-violent approach as well as adopting a sustainable long-term approach of peace-building and conflict transformation in the Niger Delta that does not merely focus on reducing the symptoms of social restiveness. They also emphasised an urgent need for multi-governmental security collaboration among the Federal, States and local governments, as well as the communities in the Niger Delta region for the adoption and implementation of a more efficient and effective security blueprint in the region (Ogala, 2016). Existing Niger Delta Peace and Security Strategy should genuinely focus on the causes of conflict and corruption in the region; how to increase corporate transparency, and how to more effectively enforce good policies.

6.5. Corporate social responsibility and environmental justice

This process of extracting wealth from the subcontinent while leaving its people impoverished and their environments ruined was made possible by a political process of systematically excluding local people from political and economic structures. groundWork Reports (which started in 2002) developed descriptions of specific mechanisms that related environmental injustice to the project of accumulation. These were: exclusion from decision making, enclosure of resources, and imposition of external costs on the poor, thereby deepening their poverty (Hallowes and Butler, 2004; Hallowes and Munnik, 2007). This is also about how civil society attains power to challenge inequality and organises to become powerful. This includes who communities choose to engage with and challenge to make change happen, and where communities organise for change to happen.

The present state of the Niger Delta environment is evident of the inability of both the government and the industry to effectively handle environmental problems. This calls for an enhanced and formalised role for NGOs and civil society in environmental governance through a strategic partnership involving the government, the industry and the civil society (Ekwere, 2010). To ensure adequate protection against the unforeseen effects of petroleum development especially in very sensitive areas, environmental monitoring and evaluation is a must for the oil industry. Monitoring and evaluation is a major tool in confirming corporate commitment to responsible environment management (Rosenfeld et al, 1998). The essence of monitoring and evaluation is to ensure that commitments undertaken during the planning process are being met. For example, it may take the form of measuring concentrations of discharges, emissions and wastes against corporate or statutory standards (UNEP, 1997).

Oil companies should be compelled to construct a base for close collaboration and consultation with the community, as well as assist the community in capacity building in all aspects of social and economic development (Natufe, 2001). To achieve this level of responsibility, every Multi-National Company must implement a transparent policy of working with the community to ensure that these core values are adhered to. They must also ensure that environmental protection is not compromised, and that any environmental risks arising from its project must be equitably distributed among all segments of the society, and must not be borne disproportionately by the poor. In its broadest terms, therefore, the concept of corporate social responsibility is inextricably linked to the notion of environmental justice (Natufe, 2001). Nwete (2007) suggests that:

> *The government and its public sector institutions…should rather provide the leadership through which it will in conjunction with business, work as mutually reinforcing partners to provide these things not only for project affected communities but the entire citizenry. The communities living along project corridors can be engaged through Participation Agreements and Good Neighbour Agreements, from the conception of the projects to decommissioning. The perception of 'ownership' on the side of the communities will reduce tension in project areas.*

Though it is posited that over the last decade, oil companies have also sought to fend off tensions with communities through increasing levels of direct community development and security spending, perhaps as much as $500 million per year (Newsom, 2011) George et al. (2012) argue that the Multinational corporations (MNC) operating in this region do not seem to take the issue of CSR and sustainability as seriously as they should because of lack of government regulations. The MNC are perceived to have support and complicity of the federal government (Orogun, 2010) which has made them neglect their duties, the conviction of these communities is therefore dashed. Unfortunately, the rent seeking behaviour of the public sector in Nigeria, especially in the area of being the pipe through which funds provided by the energy companies for some CSR projects are disbursed, stands in the way of effective legislation needed to checkmate environmental pollution.

Also, extraordinarily poor expenditure quality remains a critical problem. Development spending by all parties remains extraordinarily geared toward short-terms goals, such as reinforcing patronage channels, increasing political leverage, or ensuring steady oil production. The general population, as noted by Nwete (2007) therefore, benefits little from an oil and gas development regime that is not transparent. The World Bank in1988 estimated that the cost of providing safe water supplies in Nigeria's rural and urban areas, within 20 years was $4.3 billion. This amount pales into insignificance, when compared to over $400 billion stolen from oil revenue (Adebowale, 2006 cited in Nwete, 2007). Thus, strategies to improve the quality of governance should focus on enhanced service delivery, checks on corruption and the engagement of people in shaping policies for their well-being.

6.6. Consensual and reformist approach/meaningful community engagement

The Niger Delta needs more of a bottom-up approach with strong linkages with community benefits systems of governance that empowers and assists them in evolving [to the changing times]. Such a model will depend on shared opportunities and inclusive growth that materially improves the livelihoods of the people (Niger

Delta Development Forum, 2016). Adopting the consensual and reformist approaches with a view to achieving an alternative vision of addressing environmental challenges in the Niger Delta becomes imperative. This will not only enhance the development of the region and create new platforms that will bring ideas for combating extremism from the community itself, but ensure Nigeria's political and economic stability. According to Newsom (2011):

> *Investing in civil society needs to evolve into a medium- to long-term part of an overall strategy that will allow it to develop its role within a complicated and often hostile environment. Some of the best opportunities for engagement lie in the most neglected areas: the real sectors of agriculture, forests, and fisheries. Obvious economic opportunities, such as developing the power sector, could deliver benefits to all levels of the local economy even in circumstances where efforts to reform governance and development are struggling. Robust and detailed baselines of actual conditions in rural communities are desperately needed, both to understand pressing needs better and to measure the real effects of interventions*

One major problem is that the Nigerian government failed to tackle wider socio-economic grievances. These include the lack of social development in local oil communities, environmental pollution and the exclusion of local communities from the governance of oil production in the Niger Delta region (Ebiede, 2017). It is observed that violent contexts are characterised by trust gaps that inhibit constructive collaboration among social actors, between social actors and state agencies, and in some cases among different parts of the state itself. Spaces where these actors can converge are scarce, and "dialogic" traditions enabling direct communication are weak, if not inexistent (Unger et al, 2016). If quality of public expenditure and service delivery are to improve in the Niger Delta, the present arbitrary, top-down mode of government development spending must shift to a model allowing locals to participate in identifying needs and priorities.

A development process that is people-centred makes government and the industry learn more about public concerns and priorities, and about the environmental and social impacts of proposed projects (Ekwere, 2010). Creating bridges between the different social actors – community, civil society, state and international agencies – is a critical element in the development of effective and sustainable interventions. Therefore, government can fund and collaborate with civil society organisations that have good networks in the region to communicate the tenets of accountability to reinforce the process, and support use of the new tools. These organisations are best placed to broaden planning processes to include representatives of women groups due to their ongoing work together across the region.

7. Conclusion

The entire Niger Delta region has become an environmental disaster due to the activities of oil companies while other states of the federation enjoy the benefits of those activities without an understanding and/or appreciation of the impacts of oil spillages and environmental degradation caused by improper exploitation (Natufe, 2001). The region remains pitifully underdeveloped and its people have had to contend with the

destruction of their environment and their traditional livelihoods (Asuni, 2009b). Hence, for Niger-Deltans, the underdevelopment of their region is the consequence of deliberate policies of discrimination; deprivation and criminal neglect that minority groups in general have suffered from in the country (Osaghae et al, 2007). This has increased the crisis in the Niger Delta, and gave credence to the demand for a restructured federalism (Natufe, 2001).

However, while the Niger Delta conflicts have had its fair share of predation; exemplified by the unholy mix sometimes of insurgency and criminality as evidenced by the involvement of armed groups in oil theft and hostage taking (Emuedo, 2014), it is paradoxical that the 13% derivation principle, creation of Niger Delta-focused institutions and the amnesty programme have not been able to permanently tame the menace the region as pointed out in this study. In addition to militant activities in the region, most states in the region are witnessing an increase in the number and activities of street gangs, resulting in internal displacement of persons and reduced economic activities. Buhari has vowed to stamp out the Avengers, but the military has found it difficult in the past to hunt down militants in the Delta's maze of creeks (DiChristopher, 2016). But it is crucial for the government to march its commitment with action geared towards ending the crisis in the Niger Delta, considering the fact that there were huge commitment deficits inherited from previous administrations.

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