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Research and the Niger Delta Crises, Way Forward Towards Achieving Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This paper is focused on the Niger Delta Crises and the need to use structured and coordinated academic research in finding answers to the numerous questions surrounding the persistence of the conflict. The paper maintains that the politically motivated policies and ideologies of government toward resolving the crises has failed and advocates the need to resort to academic research by professionals in the field of Social Sciences, Arts, Humanities, Environmental Sciences, etc. The paper further discusses sustainable development and the Niger Delta Crises and concludes that academic research work would provide enduring solution to the conflict. Finally, recommendations toward ameliorating Niger Delta conflict and achieving sustainable development in the region are proffered.

Research is a concept that had attracted series of definitions from scholars in all areas of academic endeavour. According to Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary (6th) Edition, Research is seen as a careful study of something (subject or event), especially in order to discover new facts or information. Nkemakolam (1995) defined as the way in which one sets out to seek the truth and acquire knowledge for solving one's problems. Basically, research is a process of finding out or generating information for

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the solution of problems in order to acquire new knowledge and skills that would place people or society in better position to control their lives and the environment.

Emory (1980) in Nkemakole (1997:7) reported that research an inquiry carried out to secure information for solving problems which it shares with other ways of generating knowledge, such as experience and reasoning. This definition differs from the other ones structurally. This implies that research is empirical, controlled, logical, replicable and systematic and follows the scientific method of inquiry while the other methods of acquiring knowledge of solving problems do not have these structural characteristics. Possibly, for this reason, Kerlinger (1973) in Aghulor (2004:10) defines research as a “systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation of hypothetical prepositions about the presumed relations among natural phenomena” Best (1985) defines research “as the systematic and objective analysis and recording of controlled observations that may lead to the development of generalizations, principles, or theories, resulting in prediction and possibly ultimate control of events. It is obvious that from the definitions above, the goal of research is the same as science since they both lead to description, explanation, prediction and control of phenomena such as the Niger Delta Crises, Ethno-Religious crises and other political crises in Nigeria, Africa and world over.

Research both in the field of pure and natural sciences, the social sciences and Arts are geared towards the solution of problems. Research is concerned with finding the truth about an event or object. Such truth as would lead people or society to better understanding of the problem. In the course of the search for the truth or solution to a problem, the researcher often sets out to discover cause – and – effect relationship between variables related to the problem. Research, though painstaking and demands a lot of courage and perseverance from the researcher is the only sure way of solving the problems of man in his environment in general and the Niger Delta Crises in particular.

Validity and Reliability of Social Science Research

Validity and reliability as scientific concepts require that research result be both valid and reliable. Validity, according to Aghulor (2004) refers to the degree to which the result of an investigation reflects the true insight of the phenomenon under study. For example a valid measure of worker’s productivity would accurately indicate how much they had produced over a specified period of time. Reliability on the other hand refers to extent to which a measure provides consistent results (Aghulor 2004). A reliable measure of workers productivity would lead to the same results, even when used by different researchers. To be reliable, a study should provide detailed information concerning the research methods used, thereby allowing other researchers to test the conclusion at a later date. The problem of survey technique (or the problem of the social sciences) is the issue of ensuring validity and reliability, that is, researcher relying on people supplying information.

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In the survey technique, people at times disguise their real feelings or activities when they believe them to be socially unacceptable especially those having to do with race, ethnicity, sex and religion. Further, many people lack the required insight to provide certain kinds of information. Again there is no perfect correspondence between attitude and behavior (Vander 1983; Zander 1987, in Omar (2007). This explains the difficulty in designing good questionnaires and this is by implication, the problem of validity and reliability in field data. Once the questionnaire is properly designed backed by structured interview, the data is most likely to be valid and reliable.

Research and Resolution of the Niger Delta Crises

Research usually goes beyond the specific subjects in most investigations, thus it emphasize the development of generalizations, principles, or theories that will be useful in solving the present and prevalent problems and have the ability to forecast future occurrence. Research is purely based upon observable experience or empirical evidence, thus rejecting revelation and dogma as methods of establishing knowledge of issues affecting man in his physical and social environment. The situation in Niger Delta demands a well tailored and all-embracing scholarly research such that research findings would help to understand, analyze and proffer an enduring solution. One of the errors in the discourse on the Niger Delta issue is the tendency to articulate the problems of the region as wholly exceptional or unique. Some militants and political activists from the region even advance conspiracy theory which suggests that other parts of the country, especially Northerners, conspire to destroy and impoverish the people in the Niger Delta. The truth about this position will only be unraveled through a well co-ordinated academic research work. It is necessary to state that environmental degradation of natural resources are not restricted to the Niger Delta. For example, many communities in Niger, Kwara and Kogi lost their means of livelihood due to the construction of dams at Kainji and Jebba to generate electricity for the country. The communities along the banks of river Niger in Niger and Kwara State frequently experience flooding and submergence of houses and the entire villages due to activities at the dam. Attempt to mitigate the economic hardship of the people of those state through the dredging of River Niger were temporal measures and recorded little success.

Stating emphatically that the case of Niger Delta has taken this dangerous turn does not necessitate the gathering of politicians on round table in a jamboree to pop champagne; lodge in a five star hotels and share money in the pretence of resolving the Niger Delta Crises. The presentation of the problems in the Niger Delta as unique and essentially caused by conspiracy against the region has prevented national consensus. Further, while environmental degradation and loss of livelihood as a result of oil production are limited to the oil producing states, the problems of poverty, unemployment, insecurity, lack of access to essential facilities and services (housing,

safe drinking water, health care, education, electricity, communication, road, etc) are widespread in all parts of the country due to bad governance. Therefore, the crises in Niger Delta are not in any way unique, but constitute a variation in the crises of governance. By implication, good governance demands efficient management of crises of whatever form and of the national economic and socio-political resources and relations. Proceeding on the basis of this understanding demands a well articulated research rather than regional agitation. To this extent, research is necessary to provide the missing link. Research deals with finding the truth concerning an event or object. Such truth often leads the society to a better understanding of problem. In academic research, the researcher sets out to discover the cause and effect relationship between the variables related to the problem. The study involves careful collection, organization and articulation of what is already known about the problem and what is yet to be known. Academic research is characterized by rigorous application of logic and objectivity in the procedures employed, in the data collected and the conclusion reached (Best and Tuckman 1978). The researcher tries as much as possible to eliminate personal bias and emotional involvement in the analysis and conclusion.

The problems in the Niger Delta and in other parts of the country should be seen as a consequence of several interrelated political and economic forces that have engendered and entrenched weak state capacity and bad governance in the nation and the way forward is to employ social science research strategy in dealing with the situation.

The Niger Delta crises may continue to persist in the region so long as the effort of government to mitigate on the problem remains politically and emotionally motivated. There can be no meaningful solution to problem without identifying the cause and effect relationship of the event or problem. Academic research is a panacea in identifying the remote and immediate factors (cause) and the environmental degradation, marginalization and exploitations (effect) relationship in the issue or variables related to Niger Delta crises. The existing gap in knowledge concerning the conflict needs to be properly filled through well articulated research by professionals in related disciplines. This is necessary to clarify the incomplete state of knowledge/understanding of the Niger Delta Crisis and guide the society towards better understanding which is essential for informed decisions and policies.

The people of Niger Delta have made their plights and demands known to the Federal Government through various means, yet the government responses failed to satisfy the people's agitation. The causes is that, each time the people increase their demands either peacefully or through violence, the government usually reacts with promises. Some of the promises have been fulfilled through development policies, but they are usually not honestly implemented to sustain prolonged peace in the region.

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Moreover, a few individuals in government in the area and beyond and some big-wigs in the areas are benefiting financially and getting enriched as the crises in the Niger Delta persists. To say the least, the tougher the crises, the more the money they make and so they will resist all efforts to resolve the crises. On this back drop, prolonged peace in the region will only be achieved through the use of research in finding out all the unraveled truth about the Niger Delta Crises.

Although many authors have written on this issue, it is proper to continue with the discourse because of the persistent conflict and the continued kidnappings of oil workers and vandalism of oil facilities in the area. A case at hand was the bomb blast in Warri during the meeting of public stake holders at the government house annex over the implementation on the amnesty deal of the Federal Government. These are enough evidence that the current strategies being employed in the resolution of the Niger Delta Crises have failed and therefore the need to use research findings to re-assess the situation and proffer a long lasting solution to Niger Delta Crises. As an in-road in knowing why the poor implementation of these policies, this assumption is that the policies of the government are imposed on the people from the top. In view of this, the implementation is at variance with the peoples needs. This implies that the conflict in the Niger Delta has gone beyond political manipulations.

Conflict usually arises from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and/or groups in defined social and physical environments. Changes in the social environment such as contestable access to new political positions, or perceptions of inequitable distribution of resources in the physical environment are fertile grounds for conflicts involving individuals and groups who need these positions or resources to achieve their goals or pacify their aspirations Otite & Isaac (eds) (2004:1).

Conflict is synonymous with pluralism (Smooha, 1975:69). Kuper and Smith (1971) regard pluralism as multi disciplinary and multi-dimensional and defined pluralism in the context of cultural diversity and social segmentation of an encapsulating society. Plural society is characterized by co-existing by distinct cultural diversities and compulsory social institutions, which determine and guide the individual and group behaviours of the incorporated people (Kuper and Smith, 1975). Conflict is a normal process of interaction, particularly in complex societies in which resources are usually scarce. Hence Coarser (1968) in Omar (2007) defined conflict as a struggle over values or claims to which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values, but also to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals. Such conflicts may take place between individuals a between collectivities. Inter-group as well as intra-group conflicts are perennial features of social life.

Conflicts are inevitable in human societies as long as there is existence. Their causes and effects are numerous and varied, their resolutions are more challenging than one could ever imagine. It should be comprehended that conflict is usually a product of human needs and fear in society. In other words conflict is propelled by unfulfilled needs, rights of individuals and so on. Therefore, the truth about all these needs, rights and fears of the people of Niger Delta will only be discovered through a well structured academic research. Most of these needs are of collective character and are often provoked by official neglect, persecution, and denial of human rights. Conflicts manifest themselves as political, social, economic, religion, as well as territorial conflicts over resources or natural interest. Although conflicts originate in a local framework, they are often connected at regional, national and international levels. Conflicts are usually complex in structure and history, they impact public interests and good, including non-represented interest (e.g.) future generation).

Sustainable Development and Niger Delta Crises

Conflicts and sustainable development are two parallel lines that can never meet. Development has been discussed by different scholars from different backgrounds. In the opinion of Awoyemi (1970) in Fadeiye (2005) development involves a departure from the past to the new situation, which is related in the economic, social, economic, political, educational and political aspects as a nation. Fedeiye (2005) defined development as the positive and meaningful changes in the areas of social, economic, political, educational and cultural aspects of life which usher in progress and enhance better quality of life for the overall benefits of the people.

Sustainable development is defined as a form of progress in the society involving the use of natural products and energy in a way that does not harm the environment and portend no danger for future generation (Onyesom.2004).

The Niger Delta crises have made development a mirage. The continuing violence in the Niger Delta area has become a major source of concern as a result of its negative impact on national development. The intensity of the conflict attracted many people to express their views on the cause and implication of the conflict in the Niger Delta area. Onosode (1998) in Eregha (2004) argued that 40 years of oil exploration in the Niger Delta has left in its trail, decaying and inadequate infrastructure that lack maintenance. The quality of life and development in the region is an outright catastrophe and the people suffer environmental degradation, intense conflict and social dislocation. The people have continued to complain bitterly about the dearth of infrastructure, high level of natural resource degradation, environmental pollution, displacement and loss of traditional means of livelihood.

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The exploration and exploitation by oil companies in Niger Delta and their attendant abuse on the environment has been more conspicuous. It has been empirically affirmed that the oil producing areas suffer from grave damages as a result of the activities of the oil companies. Thus serious damage has been done to the aquatic and marine life of the riverine communities. The corporate responsibility and the operating standards of the oil companies and other businesses in the region are below the international acceptable standards. A situation where oil companies and allied businesses were carried out in addition to intensive oil exploration and exploitation for over four decades without a standard environmental impact assessment. This would be absolutely unacceptable in the advanced nations of the world. Niger Delta region is the only oil zone in the world where the people are subjected to cope with oil spillage without adequate compensation or even protection of their environment. It has been argued that the Federal, State and Local Government are the catalysts that are providing protection for the oil companies lack of social responsibility which is an aberration to international standard.

Conclusion

A comprehensive and well coordinated research studies involving research professionals in the field of social sciences, arts, humanities and environmental science is the only machinery through which the permanent resolution of crises in Niger Delta area of Nigeria will be achieved. The causes of conflicts in the Niger Delta have not been properly addressed hence it persists. The political strategies, ideologies and policies of the federal government towards resolving the Niger Delta conflict have failed to achieve the desired goals hence the need to employ research findings (results of enquiry carried out to secure information) for solving problems. Consequently, the Niger Delta conflict is not divorced from such problems that could be resolved through academic research.

Recommendation

The resolution of conflict is an activity that deserves special attention and not widow-dressing. As a result of continued conflict characterized by militancy, pipe line vandalisation, seizure of oil well installations and kidnapping of oil workers as well as devastation of the environment of Niger Delta Region, it is imperative that efforts to resolve the conflicts in Niger Delta should be based on the genuine consideration of the desires and needs of the people. Essentially, the identification of the sustaining power of the conflict which can only be unraveled through academic research is the sure way to enduring peace in the region.

Notwithstanding the contribution of the oil sector to the Nigerian economy, there is urgent need for permanent conflict resolution in Niger Delta in order to pave way for sustainable/development. Oil and Gas activities in the region must be regulated

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to make them more environmentally friendly. Thus, the following policies and strategies should be adopted.

1. Government at all levels should give priority attention to research findings in the formation of policies aimed at resolving the Niger Delta crisis in particular and other ethno-religious and political crisis in Nigeria.
2. Strict environmental standard for air, land and water pollution be enforced. The Environment Protection Agency should be strengthened for this task.
3. Market based instruments like pollution taxes and effluent charges should be utilized. Revenue obtained from pollution taxes should be ploughed back into development projects or used to compensate inhabitants of the Niger Delta who have suffered and are still suffering as a result of environmental damage in their communities.
4. An attempt should be made to mainstream environmental concerns in national economics policies. This will promote the development and sustainability of environmental policies.

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