

## **A Critical Review of Political Tokenisms and Placeboes in the Niger Delta Region**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

For some times now, there have been observed chaos, intermittent conflicts, and pockets of violence and resurgence of shadow economic activities owing to the pampering nature of Niger Delta crisis by the federal government. The reemergence of economic crimes is the perceived deprivation and human needs theory of frustration-aggression believes that all human beings have basic needs which they seek to fulfill and the denial of such needs by other powerful groups and individuals will amount to agitational conflicts in forms of violence and non-violent struggle. The paper examines that institutional measures to solving the Niger Delta crisis are only political tokenisms and placeboes instead of the elixir. There is need for a long term sustainable development approach that will put an end to the age-long crisis in the Niger Delta.

**Keywords: Niger Delta, tokenism, placeboes, conflict, development.**

### **Introduction**

The Niger Delta conflict has been long and enduring. It spanned from the colonial days to post-colonial period and till date it still lives with us. The people have suffered from oil exploitation and disempowerment achieved by wholesale wars, aggression and conflicts. The quest for justice, equity, development and equitable distribution of resources snowballed into agitations, protests, intellectual synergy and revolutionary violence. Before it precipitated into militancy and shadow economic activities, the Nigerian State has shown itself incapable of attending to the needs of the Niger Delta people. One hundred and eight years of Nigeria-Niger Delta relations has brought the Niger Delta people much pains and less gain. Institutionalism has not and will not help the Niger Delta people. Okowa (2007:47-48) critically espoused that putting the development of Niger Delta in the hands of the federal government is equivalent to putting the rehabilitation of a raped victim in the medical care of the rapist; to embark on such phenomenon is totally unnatural and senseless. The sexual assault would be unstoppable. This is the exact characterization of the Niger Delta dilemma. In a cat and mouse federalism instead of the

true and fiscal federalism practiced in the golden days of diversified economy in Nigeria, the cat dictates the rules of the game making it impossible for the mouse to survive let alone develop. This has been the reason for cultural stereotyping by the hegemonic political leadership and paternalism. Paternalism connotes that the people of the Niger Delta region do not have the capacity to organize their affairs and that they need the socio-economic and political assistance of numerically superior neighbours to guide and determine the direction they would follow until they are cultured, upgraded and integrated into the national mainstream. They have been termed fun-loving and easy going. Their traditional man is seen as lazy, idle, indolent, incompetent and expects their wives to toil in order to feed and care of his hedonistic attitude exemplified as he ties his cloth around his waist, sits at the verandah with his friends and neighbours chatting, reminiscing, and drinking local distilled gin-Ogogoro and breaking cola nuts with garnished proverbs to justify their actions (Banigo, 2006:504).

The perception above have presented the women folk as heroine and bread-winner of the family. These views are completely erroneous and incorrect because the man shows his manliness by engaging in clearing the farms, go for jobbing to feed the family, engage in white collar obs, pursue contracts, businesses and education. Historically, The Niger Deltans from a relatively simple economy of farming to fishing and then to trading or city-states and the traditional Niger Delta communities had revered civilizations of institution-building and centralized organization that maintain laws and order and had well advanced internal long distance trade between the coastal and hinterland communities (Asuk, 2013:2-3). It was this economism between them and the Europeans that created class of wealthy men and launched the coastal and hinterland communities into prominence, power and financial fortune (Dike, 1956, Okorobia, 2013, Osaih, 2020). This ill-orchestrated notion has culminated to prejudice, bias and arrogance against the Niger Delta people. It is apocryphal. The statement of Maitama Sule is apt here:

*God has wisely shared different talents among us Nigerians. The Easterners, the Igbos for instances, are the business entrepreneurs. The West, the Yoruba, make excellent administrators, civil servants and teachers. The North, the Hausas, are blessed with the gift of leadership and must be accepted as such (Udoidem, 2006:51).*

Where are the Niger Delta region and other ethnic groups in these categorizations? They perched hopelessly nowhere in this make-belief mentality. Gifts and talents from God are individualistic not ethnic-based. Is God partial? Certainly, no. He is the God of the Jews, as well as of the Gentiles, wise and the unwise, rich and the poor. Has this led us to our

desired place and nirvana in Nigeria? This myth of divinely-mandated role of leadership is the reason for the present state of under-development and perennial poverty in Nigeria. This view of subjecting the Niger Delta people as servants is the climax of negative stereotyping, stigmatism, revulsion, insensitivity and chauvinism. This denigration made the leaders of the internally colonized areas to clearly express their dissatisfaction in the system. To head this way is to put themselves under the power of the ethnic majors.

On the eve of the country's independence in 1960, the spate of minority agitations snowballed, due to the contradictions, domination exploitation, marginalization, structural and institutional imbalances in the emerging state and sought for a proper restructuring of the Nigerian state where all ethnic groups irrespective of size, religion, and creed would be secured. This call by the Southern minorities was a match towards freedom. In this case, the liberation from ethnic-based political domination. It is significant to note that consciousness involves a full awareness nurtured by truth by members of the exploited and marginalized groups, of the glaring evidence of grinding poverty and acute environmental degradation, a recognition of a common interests, the identification of a opposing group with whom their interest are in conflict and a realization that only collective action can liquidate exploitation (Ibaba, 2002:82). The Willink Commission, (a 6-man panel) was set up as a response to investigate the fear and recommend ways to allay them. The commission acknowledged the perennial dilemma of the unique environment of the Niger Delta region and suggested that instead of creating a separate state for the marginalized people as demanded by the actors and stakeholders of the area. The commission, therefore, recommended that the Niger Delta region deserved special developmental attention, and should therefore, be made a special area to be developed directly by the Federal Government. Following the Willink's report of 1958, the Federal Government constituted the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) in 1962 to spearhead the development of the region. The Board failed to allay the fears of the minorities and faded away following the military coup in 1966 and the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967-1970 or corruption of the leadership of the board. The board was also living at the mercy of the regional hegemony and lacked the courage to confront their misdemeanour and inefficiencies (Vincent, 2006). Since the board's activities were interrupted by the civil war years, the political class rather than use the substantial revenue accruing from the Niger Delta region for their developmental purposes, the resources were diverted to massively fund the rehabilitation and reconstruction programme of other areas of the country (Banigo, 2006:211). Other problems of the board was lack of political will to develop the Special Area, short life span of the board that made it inadequate for experts to do enough studies for concrete developmental plans and the Ijo leaders who constituted the majority in the board's membership were more concerned about their personal comfort

and gains than the teeming population they were meant to promote developmentally (Okorobia, 2013:98). The leaders ran away from the problems they were meant to solve due to lack of infrastructural facilities in the Special Area. Instead of confronting the challenges headlong as visionary leaders (the true test of leadership), they ran further afield to develop Port Harcourt and its environs, thereby adding to "one-city syndrome", which accentuated underdevelopment internally. NDDB wound up and was converted to the Niger Delta Basin and Rural Development Authority 1976. In 1980, the federal government constituted the presidential Task Force, also called 1:5% Committee and 1.5% was allocated to the committee to tackle the developmental problems of the Niger Delta people and revitalized the economy of the region. The committee also flaked due to the level of corruption, inefficiency and conflict between the aspirations of the people and the interest of the committee members. Institutionalism breeds corruption and is a many go round tactics by the political class to settle their followers to partake in their masters' inefficiencies and corruption. In 1993, the Nigerian state discovered that Task Force could not recover the backward people of the Niger Delta. Another institution was set up to upgrade the Niger Delta people to the status of national citizens, a major prerequisite for their admission into the Nigerian state.

The growing discontent and restiveness in the oil producing areas caused the Babangida regime set up Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC), attend to the developmental inadequacies of the Niger Delta region. The commission recorded huge failure. It was characterized by starvation of fund, poor focus, excessive political interference, corruption, official profligacy and lack of transparency and accountability (Adeyemo, 2008:18, Niger Delta Regional Dev. Master Plan, 2006:102). Banigo (2006) said that OMPADEC was long abandoned before it died naturally while Alagoa pointed that OMPADEC failed for lack of political will to succeed but made few people millionaires (1999:18). The failure of the various intervention agencies to develop the Niger Delta areas despite the huge resources allocated to them accounted for the prevalent poverty, socio-economic inequality, and ecological degradation and abuses of the area. This overwhelming clarity and evidence of unwillingness and insincerity of the Nigerian government to accord justice and equity to the people, spawned intense frustration, resentment and spate agitations for resource control, environmental protection, and self determination. This agitation took the form of non-violence, advocacy, grass-root mobilization, protest movements and lastly militancy.

Another institution, Niger Delta Environmental Survey, was set up to reconcile industry, environment and community interest in the Niger Delta. The initiative was prompted by increasing pressure from rapid deterioration of the ecology, socio-economic conditions

and community tension, which were not addressed by policies and action (NDRDMP, 2006:103). A study carried by the World Bank in the Niger Delta region warned that: "an urgent need exists to implement mechanism to protect the life and health of the region's inhabitants and its ecological system from further deterioration". It was against this backdrop that NDES was constituted in February 1995, spearheaded by SPDC and its joint partners (NNPC, ELF, AGIP) to undertake an environmental study of the region in order to provide the required database for planning and development of the region, which was funded by Oil Companies in Nigeria under the auspices of the Oil Producers Trade Section (OPTS) of the Lagos Chamber of Commerce (Ibid).

In 1999, former president of Nigeria, Obasanjo, during his electioneering campaign promised to address the developmental crisis of the Niger Delta people and in fulfillment of his campaign promise, constituted the Niger Delta Development Commission in December 21, 2000 through the NDDC (Establishment Act) 2000, No 6 Law of Federal Republic of Nigeria (Wilson, 2012:203). The commission was charged to conceive, plan and implement projects and programmes for the socio-economic development of the Niger Delta region. During its official inauguration, it was charged with a vision "to offer a lasting solution to the socio-economic difficulties of the Niger Delta Region" and a mission "to facilitate the rapid, even and sustainable development of the Niger Delta into a region that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative and politically peacefully (NDRDMP, 2006:103). Impressively, NDDC is seen as the archetype to or an elixir for all the development crises of the area. Thus, the final arbiter impression for sustaining a holistic development of the region is still a mirage. It is a place where the top-class government officials and their subordinates sink deeper and deeper into the mire of corruption. It is club for the economic and political kingpins enrich themselves the more to become more rich and the mighty. The Abuja factor (excessive control) cannot allow NDDC to succeed because of starvation of legally stipulated funds, thereby reducing drastically to a castrated he-goat unable to perform as expected. NDDC set up to translate plans into reality, is now a front burner and a hot bed for unimaginable frivolities, controversies and corruption. The only energy the NDDC mustered was the production of a document known as the Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan which has been condemned by analysts as faulty. In spite of its formation, the Niger Delta region has experienced vexed issues of criminality, violence, militancy and kidnapping of oil company personnel and children/parents of government functionaries. Over 188 oil workers were taken hostage in 24 militant attacks in 2006 while 129 oil companies' personnel were taken hostages in 33 militant attacks between January-July 2007 ( Elem, 2012:218). This figure is outside attacks by cult groups and criminal elements.

The United Nations Development Programme has flawed all these civilizing interventionist agencies:

*The greatest flaw in these strategies is their 'top-down' approach. The authorities have taken all the initiatives. The State and Local Governments were reduced to mere implementing authorities. Needless to add that involvement of the supposed beneficiaries both in the conception and the implementation of the programme were conspicuously negligible (UNDP, 2001).*

This top – down approach underscore our earlier assertion that the Nigerian state underscored the entire Niger Delta as a kid that needs the shoulder of the father to see far. According to Tamuno in his work, *The Niger Delta Question* (1999) cumulatively described the governmental institutions as follows: "Rulers in Nigeria at independence perpetrated the historic wrongs of the Willink Commissioners.... The Willink Commission left to their successors the false allure of disputable approaches through ineffective Boards and Commissions. The NDDB (later NDRBA) were ill-fated and proved an unmitigated failure... Quickly became the play thing of greedy politicians... OMPADEC, an agency to feather the nests of its club of contactors and their in-house and out-house collaborators than a body dedicated to the welfare of the several communities it was meant to serve... Represented the wrong top-to-bottom approach to development....A magnetic Eldorado for conscienceless carpet-beggars at home and abroad. NDDC is still unknown. Public criticism of its initial provisions gave it an unlucky start at birth". E. J. Alagoa avidly posited that the extraneous and extraordinary definitions of Niger Delta by the National Assembly was "merely a continuation of the politics of internal colonialism, that is, the confirmed tactics of the ruling groups to take over for their benefit any ideas for the development of the minorities" (1999:19).

The clamor for development resonated and grew louder as social movements raised ripples advocating for justice while the militants exploded with their rip-roaring activities of kidnapping and hostage taking of expatriates, as well as parents, wives, children and relations of political opponents only to amass more wealth. Some in position of trust collaborated with hoodlums to engage in the inhuman activities (Daybreak, 30th April-May 31, 2013). As the genuine struggle continues, criminals and enemies of the country hijacked the struggle to instigate more ripples on the Niger Delta region.

This crying need of the Niger Delta people, made former president Umaru Musa Yar'dua to establish the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs on September 10, 2008, charged to minister development in the Niger Delta area. MEND said that the Ministry would be another

avenue for corruption and political favoritism (Ogoni Star, January 22- February 4, 2010). This top to bottom methodology instead of down to top approach is still another disservice to Niger Delta people and a smokescreen for paternalism and the resources allocated to this ministry was/is infinitesimal relative to the resource being spent outside the region by government and the Oil Companies.

The money earmarked was/is substantial and whooping, but is largely stolen by politicians and their supporters, who benefit from continued upheaval. Obaro Ikime avidly said that the continued crisis in the Niger Delta was because the "soul of the Nigerian nation has ... little place for the benefit of the Niger Delta (Ikime, 2006:220). The continued constitution of conferences and commissions to oversee and superintend the development of the Niger Delta is a strategy adopted to safeguard the continuity of wealth transfer from resource-owners and to ensure ethnic hegemonic influences (bigotry). This leadership that basks on internal colonialism is objectively a fierce defender of interest of the bourgeoisie class and the ex-colonial companies. This plunges the people and country to stagnate deplorably in unbearable poverty while the ruling and dominant class rage in mire of corruption and pleasure (Fanon, 1963). This was what Achebe (1983:31) called a "Nigerian-styled materialistic woolliness and self-centred pedestrianism". This gives credence to Ken Saro-Wiwa aphorism, "Any nation which can do the weak and disadvantaged what the Nigerian nation has done to the Ogoni" in particular and to the Niger Delta in general "loses a claim to independence and freedom from outside influence. It not only lost the above, but it is bereft of the peoples' legitimacy and sovereignty but aggressively survive on dictatorship and bad governance in civilian garbs. Public outcry that forced government to set up ritual commissions and money-consuming conferences that ended up in mere rhetorics, gimmicks and briefing are waste of money, and Okorobia (2013:92) described as follows:

*An appraisal of these efforts shows however, that they are no more than tokenisms, designed to serve only as transient placeboes to relief the pains being inflicted on the land and people of this resource endowed but poor, backward and neglected region of Nigeria.*

Unless the government is sincere and willing to accord justice, equity, peace and development to the Niger Delta people of Orashi region by identifying their real needs through a down-to-top methodology and proceeds to aggressively address them, it will not transcend the tokenisms of its predecessors.

The Petroleum Trust Fund headed by General Muhammadu Buhari, 2006 Political Conference, Popoola Panel and the Niger Delta Development Panel under General Abdulsalam Abubakar regime, Special Security Committee on oil 2001 under the chairmanship of Lt. Gen. A. O., Ogumudia etc. All these commissions, summits and conferences were diplomatically-oriented intrigues and glaring unwillingness to not only to keep, but to aggravate even further the deplorable state of poverty of the Niger Delta. From all anatomical indices, the fight for resource control and self-determination x-rayed, conflict, injustice, underdevelopment, poverty, environmentally unfriendly, oil exploitation without commensurate benefits, is still a doom of repetition.

### **Amnesty**

It is the act of effacing and forgetting offenses committed by rebels against the state. It is also an official order given by government which allows political prisoners to go scot-free. Amnesty became necessary to guarantee freedom to militants, who by all standards have carried arms and ammunitions against the federal Republic of Nigeria. Militants may not be political prisoners but out-laws who constituted themselves as either freedom fighters or criminal elements for genuine struggle and/or self-gratification. A peep into it appropriately signified that Nigeria had known no peace. That long era of oil wars in the Niger Delta threatened the interests of the local and foreign stakeholders. The bad news was that Nigeria lost billions of dollars in revenue. There were incessant hostage-taking of foreign oil workers and politicians, lives were destroyed, local economic activities came to a halt etc which posed serious threats to national security. The Niger Delta and Nigeria were endangered by the activities of militants, opportunists and criminal malcontents, which led to escalation violence and counter-violence in the three oxygen-states of Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta (Tamuno, 2011). Johnson (2010) rightly said that this era brought terror and retrogression in the socio-economic development of the nation. The militants held the nation by jugular-threatening peace and order that brought the nation on its knees literally bleeding from punctures suffered from persistent attacks on critical oil infrastructures (Amnesty News, 2014). The federal government instead of playing the fool's game dropped the frontal option and adopted the carrot approach. A committee was set up called the 2008, 45 men Technical Committee set up by President Umaru Yar'dua to be headed by Ledum Mitee. The committee graphically x-rayed the development plights of the people and explained why the region has been so retrogressive, restive and catastrophic (Stephen, 2013).

Amnesty was recommended as one of the measures that would ensure relative peace. On 25<sup>th</sup> of June, 2009, President Umaru Yar'dua announced and granted amnesty to repentant militants with effect from August 6, 2009, had sixty days period (6<sup>th</sup> August -14<sup>th</sup> October,



2009) for the militants to voluntarily surrender their weapons at designated centres and renounce militancy. There was no planned and action framework properly articulated and documented by the government to follow up initial call for renunciation and disarmament. Government gave the excuse that they were in crisis due to the attacks on oil pipelines and other strategic facilities by the militants. About 20,192 ex-militant agitators and their arrowhead(s) registered to have submitted all their arms and ammunitions and renounced their faith on militancy unplanned for (Amnesty News, 2014, Eddy 2010, Stephen, 2013).

The acceptance of the amnesty deal by the militants brought gradual peace and tranquility in the troubled region of Niger Delta and its environs. Due to implementation crisis or the death of President Umaru Yar'dua, there have been delays and inefficiencies in its management. Promises were but heralded failure and the sixty five thousand naira promised ex-militants were irregularly paid, which resulted to renewed militancy. A reasonable and painstaking examination of amnesty deal has been revealed that it is usually earned and not given as the Nigerian case. Obulor (2013) put it this way that: "amnesty results from self-conviction, admittance of wrong doing and of penitence by the candidate who have formally indicated their willingness to turn a new leaf". In the religious parlance, forgiveness is not given to someone who had not asked for it. This was the reason why many analysts criticized it as not a good panacea to peace in Niger Delta region. Many asked what will be the fate of those who lost their dear ones and property to the militant and or the military officials. Others said they (militants) should receive stiff penalty for their crimes while others said that the federal government have the prerogative to efface and forget offence committed by rebels against the state. This is why amnesty is seen as a formal declaration or promulgation of decree by a constituted government that guarantees political prisoners freedom. Amnesty comprises many stages, viz: Disarmament, Demobilization and Re-integration (DDR).

The disarmament actually involves the penitence, renunciation and the deliberate surrender, documentation and control of the militants' arms and light weapons in such a designated centre in a regulated manner that would accentuate the disposal of such arms by the collection authority (Eddy, 2010). The first phase of this armament procedure yielded 20, 192 former agitators, in 2009, 6, 166 armed agitators were disarmed and demobilized in the second phase in 2010 while in 2012, 3, 642 ex-agitator were disarmed bringing the total to 30,000 (Amnesty News, 2014).

The demobilization process entails the calculated discharge of the militants (active/passive) from their ties and activities with armed groups and camps. Lectures, seminars and workshops were tactically organized aimed at changing their psyche, value

and moral re-orientations. Religious teachings that inculcated strong faith in God, obedience to the Holy Spirit, humility to constituted authority and the need for prayer to achieve ones desires were taught by pastors, moralists, scholars, psychologists etc. They were reminded about the sanctity of human life and of reward and punishment for good and evil respectively. Ex-militants were also enlightened national issue of unity, stability, co-operation brotherhood, patriotism and preservations and sustainability of the nation's progress while reintegration stage entailed the engagement of the ex-militants in training in various vocations such as welding, and fabrication, farming, driving, sewing, bricklaying etc., and offering of employment and scholarship in (foreign and local) in higher school of learning to those discovered to have proven academic aptitude and interest. Having under-went training, the ex-militants were reintegrated into the society as fully repentant souls ready to contribute to the development of the community. Included, in this process was the monitoring stage which requires a thorough monitoring of the ex-militants behavior and activities in the post-amnesty period for further necessary action. Analysts have criticized the amnesty as a programme that cannot comprehensively solve the problem of armed insurgency as well as restoring peace in the Niger delta. It only succeeded when viewed in the angle of temporary peace, it made the economy of Nigeria to progress steadily, as the sale of oil witnessed tremendous increase of about 1.5% million barrels per day and the international community saw Nigeria as a country that can solve her internal crisis without resorting to war and succession (Johnson, 2010). Asari Dokubo, the arrowhead of MEND expressed thus: "the solution of militancy in the Niger Delta goes beyond settling". Government and its amnesty committee is squandering colossal sums of public funds, accommodating thugs and ex-militants in luxury hotels and engage in bribery to convince Niger Delta Stakeholders and militants for peace settlement (Eddy, 2010), they are leaders without vision (Christopher 3/7/2015). It was an erroneous impression that mere surrendering of small arms and light weapons, struggle to liberate the Niger Delta would be laid to rest. My question is, have the discriminatory laws that are wittingly and unwittingly against the people of the Niger Delta being changed? This is the reason why the struggle outlived the deliberate surrendering of arms and ammunitions by the ex-militants. The mere engagement of shadow economic activities, illegal arms dealings and guerilla warfare engaged by the militants against Nigerian State were survival strategies to enrich themselves. The real revolutionaries in the Niger Delta struggle for justice, equity, resource control and true federalism are the intellectuals who do not only provide direction and strategies but also sensitize the army of unemployed youths to take up arms while they provide an international focus and finance for the struggle. The struggle for justice is unending.

## Conclusion

One point obviously lucid in this discourse is the insincere and passive approach to the age-long bulging problem in the Niger Delta. This attitude of the political leaders, multinational oil companies and their cronies is really unconscionable. Institutional measures will continue to fail because it breeds corruption. The commissions were only established to recycle money among the already rich people. There is need for a purposeful approach and the neglect to this bulging issue, is a timed bomb awaiting explosion because no enlightened being will be ready to condone evil and injustice for so long.

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