

NIGERIAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW

Vol. 3 Nos. 1 & 2

ISSN 1596 - 6151



A SPECIAL EDITION OF NSS JOURNAL ON: THE NIGER DELTA

ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS, RESTIVENESS AND CRIMINALITY AMONG NIGER-DELTA YOUTHS: A REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY

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Introduction

Several millions of Nigerians live below poverty line and a substantial portion of the population live in extreme poverty. One half of Nigeria's youth suffer deprivation as a result of neglect and closure of opportunities (World Bank, 2007). The problem remains pervasive and its implication for progress cannot be under-estimated. Deprivation and neglect varies from one geographical region to another. The youths in the rural area suffer twice neglect and deprivation than urban youths (Jones and Wallace, 1992). The problem of youth neglect, deprivation, economic closure, social inequality and poverty in Nigeria is a clear reflection of disparities in socio-economic opportunities. Major developments in the area of Nigeria's infrastructural base remain unequal when assessed from region to region. The high rate of unemployment, discriminatory rewards, literacy disparities, environmental hazards, sub-standard housing, and inadequate resource base severally explain the magnitude of youth neglect and simultaneously exposes the inherent contradictions in Nigeria's socio-economic and political structure. While the above mentioned variables necessitating youth neglect and deprivation appear to be high among all ethnic groups in Nigeria, there exists a variation in the prevalence of youth neglect and deprivation across or among major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Nigeria, unlike other developing countries is facing challenges in her attempt at integrating youth into the mainstream of economic plans. There are many factors explaining the non-integration of youths in national development programmes and such factors are products of bad economic policies, political leadership related problems, unplanned or mismanaged demographic structure, infrastructural imbalance, technological deficiency and disillusioned populace (Aluko, 1998). Analytically, Nigeria's socio-structural arrangement exhibits a clear defect in major areas enumerated above and this contribute significantly to youth neglect and deprivation. Considering Nigeria's demographic composition, there exists a steady growth rate in human population and declining rate of economic growth with its negative impact on human standard of living and quality of life. When assessed, Nigeria's socio-economic environment suffer setback in relation to major indices necessary for youth development. Looking at population size for instance, the 2006 general census count put the country's population at one hundred and forty million with more than half of the population being youths and children. State projections by expectation ought to tilt towards youth empowerment programmes directed at channeling youth potentials for development purposes but unfortunately the reverse is the case since there is a steady growth rate in unemployment.

Viewed from another angle, youth neglect is made worse by dwindling economic prospect which is often attended by large scale corruption associated with public administration. This is further complicated by high rate of unemployment and astronomical increase in crime related activities

among youths, thus making the group more vulnerable. In Nigeria, many youth live in twilight of joblessness and the degree of which is strongly conditioned by demographic factors. The country is quite large with few industrial structures capable of absorbing the chunk of her population. In the transitional stage of youth to adulthood, there is total dependence on the use of energies and youthful zeal to guarantee survival but when such energies fail to find expression in gainful employment, the resultant effect is restlessness or violence. Unemployment has been viewed as a problem all over the world and according to Erik (1988) unemployment is too simple a term to describe the situation in most developing countries. In his view, one should speak of ill-employment as a dominant feature of life.

Youths prone to restlessness include those with cumulative disadvantages such as low or lack of educational attainment, unemployed, deprived, frustrated or disillusioned as a result of socio-economic closure, thereby culminating into the adoption of innovative strategies inherent in crime related activism. As earlier stated, neglect and deprivation are not evenly distributed across ethnic boundaries and its consequences for groups vary from region to region. In Nigeria there is no exception to this rule. The variable nurturing deprivation impact people differently and group response varies. The examination of this variation as it generates crime constitutes the driving force of this paper.

It is important to acknowledge the fact that the less visible groups in Nigeria with high level of unemployment and deprivation consists of youths in Niger-Delta area (Wangbu, 2005). When assessed from region to region, the plight of the youth in Niger-Delta region is incomparable with that of others outside the region. This may in part account for the prevalence of violence and crime. It is in view of the negative impact created by economic closure caused by oil exploration that the paper examines the plight of the Niger-Delta youths. It also anchors youth restiveness which often occasions criminality on frustration induced by this closure. The paper also presents the sociological reflection on Niger-Delta crisis from inferential perspective of youth in the affected area and concludes with suggestions that are likely to broker peace that had remained elusive in the region.

Locus of Youth Problem in the Niger-Delta

Considering the background conditions that encourage youth restiveness with attendant representation in pipeline vandalization, bunkering, disorderliness, hostage-taking and other overt manifestation of conflict, it becomes pertinent to trace the immediate and remote causes of conflict in the Niger-Delta area. The major strength of youth restlessness draws its potential extensively from the socio-structural distortions and oil resources related conflicts. The later is closely tied to the country's experience of colonialism and when examined from Babawale's assertion, Nigeria is an aggregation of several nationalities lumped together for colonial convenience and unavoidably enmeshed by circumstances of independence (Babawale, 2006). Colonialism brought together diverse nationalities, with varied past historical and cultural background which do not only generated incompatibility but also form the bedrock of grievances often noticeable when a slight form of deprivation is assumed, felt or suffered by any of the ethnic groups (Akinkuotu, 2005). An informed explanation of Niger-Delta conflict will necessitate the repositioning of the current Niger-Delta dynamics in phases. The three phases that readily come to mind include the critical start-up period preceding conflict outbreak, stone walling period with noticeable resilience on the part of both parties

preceding conflict outbreak, stone walling period with noticeable resilience on the part of both parties and climaxed by the face saving period depicted by elusiveness of social order.

Considering each of the stages, the critical start-up period which occasioned youth restlessness in the Niger-Delta rest on perceived deprivation rooted in Economic closure. Basically, economic closure and limited means for survival made Niger-Delta youths a problem. The problem of youths in this region has its root in oil exploration, a development which generated negative consequences and a disruption of socio-economic progress in the region. The measurable effect of oil exploration can be located in environmental degradation, water pollution, agrarian land contamination, etc. which not only inhibits the pursuit of economic life but make life meaningless to vast majority of youths in the area. With several unacknowledged representations to government especially during past military administrations, the stage was then set for the re-definition of situation. The most vulnerable were the youth who classifies government posture as deliberate attempt meant to underplay the genuineness of major claims of acute deprivation and neglect. Related to this is the underestimation of the potentials of the aggrieved youth. Consequently, the magnitude that youth restiveness assumed under democracy may be due to compressed anger which failed to have expression under military era but became manifest as result of freedom of expression democracy offers. The incessant statements and overt actions of the "Egbesu group" embedded with sufficient threat to national cohesion fire the salvo of current imbroglio (Bebibiafai, 2007).

The defensive posture of the Nigerian state which generated claims and counter claims created the avenue for restlessness, attack and counter attack. The content of the state defense to douse the tension generated by Niger-Delta youth include several claims of purported implemented development programmes that are capable of alleviating the plight of the aggrieved. The pathetic aspect of those involved in the veracity of claims put forward by the state since it is a noticeable fact is that government programmes all the while consists of elephant projects laden with corruption from the point of issuance (Approval) to the implementation stage. It then became an uncontested fact that the government is just out to conceal or justify prevalent injustice, deprivation and dehumanization affecting the oil communities. The rename of the agitators as militants set on motion uncontrolled tension and triggered the assumption of the derogatory label by the so called group. This transited to the stone walling stage of current conflict.

Stone Walling Stage: This stage is depicted by the chronological account of series of youth hostile attacks, conflict engagements and other palliative measures that failed in the course of conflict. The state undermines pressure from the affected youth, ignored demonstrations, overlooked campaigns and adopted stiff-neck strategy towards the contentious issues at stake. The state regarded the group and their agitations as non-issue and the next approach of the state to youth restiveness is the increasing tempo of dissatisfaction registration necessitating attendant increase in fire arms and the use of deadly force. With successive stages in the escalatory spiral, the situation became upward and onward with more damaging ends recorded in pipeline vandalization, open hostility with government troops and lately the adoption of terrorism measurable in hostage-taking. Reliance on overt power manipulation became the hallmark of youth-state conflict practiced under attack-withdraw pattern or pursue-flee retaliative strategy.

The current is the Face Saving Stage characterized by outright resistance to state intimidation, persistent announcement of the root cause of conflict grounded on the claims that the state is taking undue advantage over Niger-Delta resources and the resolve to resist unjust treatment represented in discrepancy in benefit enjoyed in oil sale and revenue allocation and thereby seeking support or sympathy from local and international bystanders. Face saving strategy of the state centres on ignoring all entreaties and the resolve directed at black-listing the youth as insurgents and at best objects to be eradicated. The resolution of both parties hinged on not stepping back from the avowed decisions to right their wrongs.

Sociological Reflection on Niger-Delta Restiveness

In the fourth volume of *Cour de la Philosophie Positive*, lecture 51, Comte hypothesized that youth is a factor of social change. He believed that youth is endowed with the 'instinct of change'. Although Comte was critical of the disruption of the basic social order, he however strongly believes that youths are instruments of positive change. Examining the industrialized and post-industrialized societies especially within preceding and post-revolutionary phases, Comte views youth restiveness as an affront against existed social order. He argues that the development of youth propelled revolutionary change is not only peculiar to Europe but equally attainable in other regions of the world. In the same vein, Niger-Delta youth precipitated conflict secure a place under Marxist conviction that restiveness forms the basis upon which youth status transforms from the social category of "youth in itself" to "youth for itself." The adoption of violence or disruptive agitation is meant to take the frustration to the door step of the perceived causative agent. Youth restlessness is an overt consciousness of the peculiarity of the social condition of the Niger-Delta area persistently functioning as inhibitors to economic self-discovery.

In considering Youth resilience, sociological founding fathers believed that scholarly efforts must take cognizance of the overall social structure within which youths are born, nurtured and sustained. In this view, the strain generated by various social structures serve as stimulants for revulsion and forms the bedrock upon which youth actions are based. Socio-ethically, Niger-Delta youth restlessness is not only normal but a right step along the right direction. Within this sentimental justifying argument one may be apt to regard prevailing destructive restiveness as devoided of social deviational content or criminality, frankly speaking, this is absolutely no since the quality of actions involved are criminally embedding. The moral admissibility of youth restlessness lies in the fact that it is a product of frustration largely induced by the state but the existence of visible criminal burden cannot be compromised. It then become pertinent to establish how economic generated frustration along Niger-Delta area nurtures criminality.

Establishing the Basis of Criminality in Youth Frustration-Aggression Response

Furlong and Cartmel (1997) argue that the life experiences of the young people in modern societies have changed quite significantly and Baudrillard (1988) also argues that as we enter post-modern era, patterns of behaviors and individuals life chances have lost their predictability. In this regard, the breakdown of ontological security among the Niger-Delta youths account for disorder and crime. Reflexively, actions directed at oil facilities, government properties, etc. are closely informed by the feeling of risk and in this wise economic risk related to unemployment. Risk generates frustration which always has open manifestation in restiveness.

In tracing the dimension and magnitude of crime occasioned by youth restiveness, it is pertinent to explore this under Dollard et al (1939), Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis. In this hypothesis it was argued that people are motivated to act aggressively by a drive induced by frustration. The concept of frustration denotes condition that arises when goal attainment is blocked, while aggression constitute actions aimed at harming the perceived stumbling block. The stumbling block is currently represented in the state's expropriation of oil resources and its attendant revenues with measurable economic deprivation Niger-Delta youth (Oyerinde, 1998). The existence of these hypothetical situations remained endemic in the region. As a result, one can conveniently make these two under listed statements in relation to the Niger-Delta youth restlessness.

First, frustration always leads to some form of aggression (Although, this may not be in all cases since frustration tolerance level of each ethnic group differs). The strength of the perceived stumbling block is also a function of frustration projection. The relative power of the state as being physically formidable and socially powerful as in the case of Niger-Delta youth-government face-off often causes frustration displacement. Consequently, most youth violence are directed at symbolic representation of the imagined enemy and expressed in an indirect way (Hewstone and Stroebe, 2001). It involves overt destruction of government properties and in it extreme hostage-taking

Second, aggression is always a consequence of frustration. The socio-economic stress generated by neglect and deprivation is overtly expressed in fear and violence. The non-predictability of economic environment and extreme closure experienced by Niger-Delta youth account for crime related activities recorded in looting, hostage taking occasioning demand for ransom, robbery, and disturbance of public order.

In establishing the criminal base of restlessness, one might quickly need to ask three important questions. The first question one need ask is, why do youth offending occur and sustained? Second, how is the image of restlessness constructed and maintained? Third, can we classify restiveness a crime? In answering these questions, a researcher must know that the probability of classifying restiveness as crime is dependent on eyes of the beholder. It is also a function of driving philosophies underpinning state criminal definition and criminal justice process. From the angle of a moralist, restiveness occasioning crime hinged on injustice is non-violation of the penal code but from the point of view of law enforcement it constitutes a legal breach that need be sanctioned. It becomes a crime to the end that the quality of action move on a collision course with the interest of the state, custodian of laws and those benefiting from existing exploitative relationship endemic in oil exploration. Consequently, making it a crime diverts the attention of the exploited and bystanders from the root cause of injustice firmly institutionalized in the oil communities (Sumner, 1990).

Criminalizing youth restiveness is an attempt at applying social censor to complex socio-economic and political conflict and moral debates. By so doing, the wide range of behaviors which generated restlessness remains sub-merged and rarely considered when reflecting on youth disorder or when punitive strategy is considered. The problem of environmental pollution or degradation, socio-economic closure, deprivation and such other are unlikely to attract the same degree of moral condemnation that often attends youth related problem (Munae and McLaughlin, 2001). The tendency of state neglecting the reflexive evaluation of imbalance often generated by the

lopsidedness of Nigeria's socio-economic and political environment is also high. The abandonment of reflection becomes a cue for amoral pursuit of already battered youth. It is equally responsible for several uninformed actions taken by government to redress the perceived injustice. Restlessness is the voice of the oppressed and a demand for justice. It is not unique to Nigeria; youth expression finds relevance in all societies where extreme inequality and hopelessness dominate.

This position is corroborated in the submission of McRobbie (1993) when he argues that young people around the world are constantly making statement of one form or the other and such statements takes different shapes under different socio-economic conditions and the rhythm remains empiric. The major emphasis of the youth along Niger-Delta region is give us our place, accord us the honor that befits our existence, let our voice count in the projects that affect our lives and bequeath us what is just, right and proper. Simply give us a future. Young people need to be provided with a voice which actually addresses what it means to be part of the sort of environmental and socio-economic transformation that they experience everyday (Holland, 1995; Williamson, 1997). Suppression of dissent is a wrong approach to volatile issues clearly evident in the Niger-Delta area.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In exploring the most efficient way of dousing the tension generated by youths conflict along the Niger-Delta area, the paper suggest the adoption of Vulnerability Reduction Strategy (VRS) consisting of accommodative, compromise and collaborative strategies.

Accommodative Strategy

This approach involves the discontinuation of the current competitive approach which often generates exaggeration of value of granting concession on resource revenue allocation to the affected region, the use of latent and manifest threat built on fear of reprisals and the actual use of brutal force, argumentation, management of truth on the actual number of barrels of crude pumped from the Niger-Delta soil and the distortion of value of crisis. Accommodative approach that necessitate committed action from both parties will include an objective initiation of stake-holders conference, acceptance of the genuiness of the claims of deprivation, presentation of sincere and realistic demands and concessions and the stoppage of self inflicting risk.

Compromise Strategy

This will involve the manipulation of informal third party intervention (locally based) devoid of vested interest that will assist in the transformation of conflict elements. The collectively acceptable informal group will help douse the existing tension, facilitate formal round table conference between the aggrieved youths and the implacable state and further structure demands into realizable goals. The informal group will equally attempt solution to existing deprivation, perceived injustice and dehumanization. Finally, the group will neutralize elements of future conflicts.

Collaborative Strategy

Efforts at this stage will include the constitution of formal arrangement mechanism that will be more responsible for formal grievance handling. It will also involve the establishment of joint committees

who would oversee the implementation of jointly agreed resolutions. The major roles of the body responsible for the Niger-Delta crisis will include:

1. Provision of environment that will enhance negotiation characterized by enlightened self/collective interest. Reduce domination or stampeding of either of the party.
2. Foster common interest valuation and secure ultimate commitments to avowed promises made in the course of major deliberation. Demands should be accorded requisite respect and discussed to find a common ground.
3. Encourage the mutual embrace of the collective dependency of the Nigerian state and the oil communities. No one should see self as an highland or without which the other cannot survive because if that pervades the arena, the likelihood of reaching an amicable solution will be elusive
4. Total commitment on the part of the state towards the expansion of existing resources made available to the suffering masses especially youth becomes a must. This is the anchor upon which crisis solution finds expression. Major effort of government should be geared towards the provision of the following life saving items:
 5. Expanding the infrastructural base of the Niger-Delta region. The peculiarity of the Niger-Delta environment should inform government's decision on provision of good roads, water, electricity, pollution gadgets, industrial base that will stimulate employment etc to absorb youth.
- a) **Social Security:** A comprehensive assistance programmes directed at empowering Niger-Delta youth will go a long way in addressing the current trend. Programmes such as compensatory education, pilot projects for more vulnerable section among youth, generation of local investment scheme/community investment programmes that will spur the development of cooperative societies and resource shift.
- b) **Boasting Health Facilities:** Provision of cost effective primary health intervention, increased spending on drug acquisition, improvement of health facilities at all levels and making health services free for the people in the region under the auspices of state/local governments.
- c) **Improve Spending on Youth Education:** Government should make schools available and encourage youth enrolment. Increase spending on retention of Niger-Delta youth in school to be done by giving free meals and making provision for books and other logistics supported with scholarships.
- d) **Decentralization of Allocation:** Government should attempt the decentralization of administration and implementation capital projects in the affected area to forestall corruption viewed to be endemic in the area. Community participation should be encouraged, delivery of services needed for the development of the youth should not be impeded, efficient local ownership and client satisfaction should be vigorously pursued.

6. Resource allocation should be integrative, equitably shared and encouragement of unimpeded flow from the high to low ebbs be institutionalized. The circumventing of resource meant for Niger-Delta development by the elite should be arrested.
7. There must be commitment to agreeable solutions that will be fair to government, Niger-Delta youth and the oil multinationals so as to forestall the reoccurrence of the vicious cycle of conflict.

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