

Deprivation and Resistance: Environmental Crisis, Political Action, and Conflict
Resolution in the Niger Delta since the 1980s

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Abstract

The interlocking relationship between environmental degradation, poverty, and violent conflict has been a prominent theme contained within the literature on sustainable development and conflict resolution since the mid-twentieth century. While some analysts have argued that violence has not been limited to the poor and deprived, many have concluded from various studies that the devastation of the environment, poverty, and conflict are inextricably intertwined. This article examines this theme by analyzing the pattern of violence and nature of conflict resolution in the oil-producing enclave of the Niger Delta in the past three decades. A report of the United Nations Environment Programme on parts of the Niger Delta published in August 2011 reveals that the area is one of the most intensely polluted in the world. The report confirms the conclusion of several other earlier reports on the Niger Delta, which state that activities relating to the exploitation of oil and gas have led to intense environmental pollution and extreme poverty and that those conditions have spawned violence. The article is exploratory and analytical. It draws from diverse sources, including government records and reports of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations as well as oral information gathered by the author from fieldwork conducted across the Niger Delta between 2007 and 2012, to explore the nature of the Niger Delta crisis from the 1980s until the present. The article argues that environmental degradation is central to the Niger Delta crisis, as it has hampered rural economic activities and posed a threat to human security. The article concludes that the effective tackling of the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta would surely reduce poverty and violence in the area.

Background and Conceptual Framework

Since the early 1970s, the oil producing enclave of the Niger Delta has been one of the most intensely polluted areas of the world. The pollution, along with severe environmental degradation, has largely been a consequence of the region's oil production and has made it difficult for the inhabitants of the Niger Delta unable to carry out their traditional economic activities of fishing and farming, as local land and river systems have been too polluted to sustain such activities. This has caused extreme poverty and has also spawned violence. By the 1980s, developments in the Niger Delta clearly reflected deprivation of its inhabitants, who demonstrated resistance against the government and its oil producing agencies. This pattern confirms aspects of the assertion that Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler make in their analysis of the nature and causes of civil wars in Africa, namely that greed and grievance are the central issues in the outbreak of inter-state violent conflicts (2001). Their grievance argument certainly fits the experience of the Niger Delta, where intense violence against the Nigerian state and multinational oil firms took place for over three decades, until it began to abate in 2010, following steps taken by the government to address some of the fundamental causes of the deprivation of delta residents (e.g. by providing basic amenities and training Niger Delta youths). Though these steps are commendable, the government has yet to substantially address the environmental degradation that oil production has caused. For nearly forty years, most multinational oil companies in the Niger Delta have operated with very little consideration for the environment, which has negatively affected the rural economic activities of the people and led to an overall low quality of life (Jike, 2004, pp. 686-688; *The Guardian*, 1999, p. 3). Issues relating to pollution must therefore also be seriously addressed in order to maintain lasting peace to be achieved in the area.

In his concept of protracted social conflict, the conflict resolution theoretician Edward Azar establishes a link between deprivation of basic human needs and the potential for violent conflict, especially against the nation or state responsible for inflicting the deprivation. Azar describes basic needs as ontological and non-negotiable. Therefore, he says, the failure of a state to meet or protect its residents' basic human needs creates the potential for violence, which becomes protracted as long as the basic needs remain neglected (Azar, 1990, p. 155). Azar's ideas on the interlocking relationship between the absence of human security and protracted civil conflict are similar to the idea of grievance as an important factor in Africa's internal conflicts presented by Collier and Hoeffler and to an earlier corollary presented by Johan Galtung. According to Galtung, the simple absence of violence does not necessarily indicate peace, particularly if the condition of deprivation still exists; in other words, even a seemingly peaceful environment is not ultimately peaceful unless the apparent lack of violence is accompanied by social justice. Without social justice, argues Galtung, the best that can be experienced is "negative peace," a condition in which latent conflict exists even if hostilities are not taking place (1990, pp. 291-305).

Aspects of the perspectives of Galtung and Azar relating to the link between neglected basic human needs and violent conflict, as well as that of Collier and Hoeffler on grievance by a group as a cause of internal conflict are applied to the Niger Delta experience in this article. It is true that several other factors are discernible as causes of conflict in the Niger Delta, such as land disputes between some ethnic groups in the area

and disagreements over the location of amenities. It is indisputable, however, that issues relating to deprivation and economic injustice are some of the most significant contributors to violence in the Niger Delta. Azar's ideas about the conditions under which violence is likely to take place are also applied. After an analysis of about sixty civil wars, Azar also concludes that the vast majority of states that experience lingering internal conflict "tend to be characterized by incompetent, parochial, fragile, and authoritarian governments that fail to satisfy basic human needs" (Azar, 1990, p. 10). Azar's perspective here is very important to this study because it helps to explain aspects of the checkered fortunes of those involved in the Niger Delta crisis and the processes of conflict resolution under the Ibrahim Babangida dictatorship (1985-1993), the Abacha tyranny (1993-1998), and the civilian governments of Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007), Umaru Yar'Adua, and Goodluck Jonathan (2007-date) (Falola & Heaton, 2008, pp. 216-242). The concept of protracted social conflict also sheds light on the crucial role of governance and political action in both causing internal conflict and in carrying out effective conflict resolution. Aspects of the ideas of Galtung and Azar as well as those of Collier and Hoeffler thus refine the understanding of the Niger Delta violence.

Environmental degradation in the Niger Delta has accompanied the exploitation of oil and gas in the region since the 1950s. The pollution has hampered the traditional economic activities of farming and fishing, which have been the major sources of livelihood of the vast majority of the people (it is estimated that up to 70 percent of the population engage in fishing and farming). This inability to fish or farm has led to intense poverty and the inability of the people of the Niger Delta to meet the most basic of their needs. Potable water sources have also been polluted in the course of prospecting for oil and gas (Bakare, 2009, p. 3). These conditions have combined to pose a threat to human security in the Niger Delta. To worsen matters, only a small fraction (1.5 to 13 percent) of all oil revenues earned by the central government since the mid-1980s have been allocated for the development of the area (Aworawo, 2012, pp. 44-45; Akinyele, 1998, p. 83). It is for this reason that economic injustice and human security are regarded as central to the Niger Delta conflict and its resolution.

While a number of activities such as bush burning and the indiscriminate dumping of domestic and industrial waste have also contributed to the pollution of the environment in the Niger Delta, it is the exploitation and production of oil that has had the greatest deleterious impact on the physical environment, as indicated by several sources on the Niger Delta. As such, this paper examines the nature and impact of environmental degradation on the Niger Delta. It explores the interlocking relationship between environmental degradation, political action, economic crisis, and the level of success of conflict resolution efforts in the Niger Delta and contends that social unrest in the area has been caused as much by the delta's residents' desire for a greater share of the central government's oil earnings as it is by their inability to maintain economic stability and earn a decent living due largely to the environmental pollution caused by the government's pursuit of oil.

A number of studies have been carried out on the Niger Delta unrest and the efforts at conflict resolution in the area. Much of the research has focused on the people's agitation for the control of resources and the violence that has accompanied it. Some of the studies have also examined the impact of oil exploitation on the physical environment of the Niger Delta. (Okecha, 2000, pp. 51-61; Osuntokun, 2001, pp. 494-495; Imevbore,

1997, pp. 48). This paper presents an analysis of the agitation for of the central government's oil revenue and the call for it to be allocated to the regional government for the development of the oil-producing communities (Obi, 1995, pp. 16-20; Ukaogo, 2008, pp. 91-112). This work adds a fresh dimension to the study of the Niger Delta crisis by also focusing on the impact of environmental degradation on the rural economy, political action, and the overall conflict resolution efforts in the area (and not just the struggle for a greater share of the revenue from oil sales).

An important aspect of the environmental degradation and violence in the Niger Delta is that the causes and impact of the crisis are well known to political and business leaders whose policies and action are needed to tackle the problem. For instance, it is generally acknowledged that activities related to the exploration and production of oil and gas constitute the greatest obstacle to the maintenance of a healthy environment in the Niger Delta. There has, however, been a wide gap between knowledge and action. To illustrate, Nigeria's political leaders and executives of oil companies have agreed at various times to end gas flaring,¹ which contributes tremendously to environmental pollution and of which Nigeria is by one of the guiltiest of the world's oil producers. Several deadlines have been set to end gas flaring, but none have been met, and different excuses have been given for why the targets have not been realized (*The Guardian*, 2011a, p. 9). Some of Nigeria's oil companies have complained about the high cost of installing the required equipment necessary to end gas flaring, but different government agencies and the people of the delta region have described such excuses as unsatisfactory. Similar failed promises to provide infrastructure development and to address poverty reduction abound. Promises are made but not fulfilled, leading to violent reactions from the people of the Niger Delta. The number of failed promises and continued degradation of the environment has led to a general lack of trust on the part of delta people of the state leaders (be they business, political, or even local, traditional leaders). Indeed, a common saying in the Niger Delta about any promise made by leaders at different levels is that "it is in the pipeline," which is another way of saying that it will never be fulfilled. In fact, in an absurd but apropos episode a few years ago, some petroleum pipeline vandals who were arrested by security agents claimed that they broke the pipes to siphon petroleum products because the good life they had been promised by the government was "in the pipeline" (Mbu, 2011). This rather harmless incident is nonetheless a reflection of both the frustration felt by the people of the Niger Delta and the complexity of the crisis.

The trajectory of the Niger Delta crisis has been checkered. Violence has waxed and waned depending upon government policy and the level of deprivation experienced by the people of the Niger Delta. Political action and the nature of corporate social responsibility of the industrial establishments operating in the Niger Delta have equally influenced the pattern of unrest at different times. For example, oil spills, which pollute the environment and hamper economic activities, have always engendered violence. In contrast, government policies and programs that improve the quality of life of the people, such as the amnesty program of 2010, have led to a reduction of violence. The comparison in this paper of conflict resolution efforts under different governments since the late 1980s has been undertaken to establish a link between human security, social agitation, political action, and conflict resolution. The paper also draws insights from recent developments in the Niger Delta to explain the factors influencing the success (or the lack thereof) of conflict resolution efforts. We conclude by broadly analyzing the

approaches that have been adopted over the years and their respective levels of success. Some measures by which a healthier physical environment can be restored to the Niger Delta to improve the rural economy are also recommended. It is concluded that the adoption of the appropriate measures to maintain a healthier physical environment would help to substantially reduce violent conflict in the Niger Delta, as such measures would make it possible for the people to engage in fruitful economic activities and reduce poverty.

Environment and Pollution: The Niger Delta Experience

The origins of intense environmental pollution in the Niger Delta can be traced to the expansion of human activities in the area in the second half of the 19th century, when large quantities of palm oil were produced and exported to Europe. The name “Oil Rivers” came to be used to describe the Niger Delta in the second half of the 19th century. Extensive palm oil production naturally increased human activity in the area, and this put some strain on the environment. However, the natural regenerative power of the environment would seem to have been adequate to contain the negative effects of human activity on the environment at that time. This is because the flora and fauna remained intact, and farming and fishing (the people’s major economic activities) went on without any known threat posed by environmental pollution (Imevbore, 1997, pp. 37-39). In short, while palm oil production has been established to cause extensive pollution of the environment, the experience of the Niger Delta pollution arising from the exploitation of oil and gas has been far more devastating.

Extensive environmental pollution of the Niger Delta began to take place in the 1950s, following the installation of a number of industrial establishments and the commencement of oil exploration and production. Such oil production efforts were expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, and, by the 1980s, the level of environmental degradation in the delta region had reached the level of a crisis. Over the years, non-oil manufacturing industries in the Niger Delta have been few, and the damage caused by the emission of effluents from non-oil industries has been minimal (Durotoye, 2000, pp. 32-33). It has been oil exploitation and production that has ravaged the delta region’s natural environment; crude oil exports from the Niger Delta have averaged two million barrels per day since the mid-1970s. Additionally, a large amount of gas is also exported from the area. Together, the exploration and production of oil and gas constitute the single most devastating source of environmental pollution in the Niger Delta (Okecha, 2000, pp. 52-58).

All activities linked with the various stages of oil exploration and production negatively affect the environment. Petroleum production operations lead to pollution as a result of drill cuttings, drilling mud, the fluids used to stimulate production, the chemicals injected into the earth to control corrosion or to separate oil from water, and the production of general industrial waste. Added to all of this is the problem of gas flaring and incidents of oil spill and blow outs. Gas production is a natural by-product of crude oil production, but, in Nigeria, until 2005, about 80 percent of the gas associated with oil exploration was flared or “burned off” (Igwe, 2009, pp. 6-9). It is estimated that an average of two billion standard feet of gas was flared in Nigeria per day in the 1980s and 1990s, enough to provide electricity for the whole of West Africa (Akinyeye, 1997, pp.

93-94). Aside from the obvious issue of waste, gas flaring involves the release of significant quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which causes acid rain and contributes to global warming. The flame from the flaring itself destroys crops, and when the flame is put out, very thick smoke emanates, which causes air pollution (Igwe, 2009, pp. 3-5). This has been the daily experience of the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta, and it partly explains why the exploitation and production of oil and gas have so negatively affected the rural economy of the area, which is dominated by subsistence farming and fishing.

In addition to the damage that results from daily oil production activity, there is also the environmental impact of unexpected incidents of blowout and oil spillage. Blowout and spillage, though typically highly undesired by any oil producing entity, are a rampant feature of oil exploration and production in Nigeria. In a period of four years, from 1976 to 1980, about 800 incidents of oil spillage were reported, and from 1980 to 1990, about 2,000 incidents occurred. From 1990 to 1995, about 710 other cases of spillage were said to have occurred. In all, from 1976 to 1995, there were more than 3,500 incidents of oil spillage, resulting in the discharge of more than 2 million barrels of crude oil into the land, swamps, and offshore environments (*Petroleum News*, 1998, p. 1). The trend has not changed much throughout the first decade of the 21st century. From 2000 to 2010, about a thousand cases of oil spillage were also recorded in Nigeria's oil-producing enclave, resulting in extensive damage to the environment. This number of spills borders on absurd, and the impact of such carelessness and such devastation to the environment and the rural economy of the people of the Niger Delta cannot be overstated (Okere, 2013). To understand the deleterious impact of oil spillage on the physical environment of the Niger Delta, it would be instructive to consider some specific examples of the incidents of blowouts in the area.

One of the most well reported cases of oil spillage in the Niger Delta was the Texaco's Funiwa No. 5 oil blow out, which occurred on 17 January 1980. The spillage went on for thirteen days, until it burst into flames. About 250,000 barrels of oil were discharged, polluting and devastating everything in the path of the inferno. Four villages became uninhabitable, and the Sagama River became fouled excessively, with fish and other marine life destroyed. In addition, 350 hectares of mangrove were left dead, and for a long time, the people who inhabited the area around the fishing town of Funiwa subsisted on food and water provided by the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) in the form of relief (Mowoe, 1990, p. 174). This was only one of the 4,500 blowouts that have occurred in the Niger Delta from 1976 to the present.

Similar experiences were recorded in the Mobil Habo oil spill of January 1981 and the Jones Creek blowout shortly thereafter. The Mobil Habo blowout began on 12 January 1981, when an estimated 40,000 barrels of oil was spilled. Although this spill was considered small in comparative terms, the oil spread from the immediate environment in the state of Akwa Ibom to the states of Rivers, Cross River, Edo, Delta, and Ondo. It even spread 85 kilometers into the Atlantic going as far as Benin, Togo, and Ghana (*Petroleum News*, 1998, p. 1). As the spilled oil spread far and wide, so it polluted the soil and water in its path and destroyed flora and fauna. A similar experience was recorded in Shell's Jones Creek spill, which involved an estimated 20,000 barrels of oil. The Jones Creek spill occurred on land and affected some 28 communities, some of which had to be relocated. The spill fouled the soil, and Shell managed to recover only

4,000 barrels of the spilled oil around the Jones creek flow station (*Petroleum News*, 1998, pp. 1-2).

These few examples of oil spillage are indicative of the massive environmental degradation that has ultimately been caused by oil spillage in the Niger Delta region for nearly half a century. Oil spillage causes massive damage to the ecosystem. It damages the soil and destroys crops and mangrove forests. It also pollutes sources of drinking water and kills fish, birds, periwinkles, mollusks, and crabs. Since the rural economy of the people of the Niger Delta revolves around fishing and farming, the impact of oil spill on the people of the Niger Delta, especially the rural dwellers, has been grave. There is also the pollution caused to land and water by the emission of effluents from refineries emitted in the course of production, as well as the general industrial waste from the petrochemical and fertilizer companies in the Niger Delta. All these sources of pollution, combined with the massive gas flaring already noted, cause immense damage to the environment (Igwe, 2009, pp. 3-5).

The Nature of Niger Delta Rural Economy

It is important to describe the nature of the rural economy of the Niger Delta to understand the impact of pollution on human security in the area. First, the nature of the geography is described to provide an insight into the structure of the rural economy. The Niger Delta area of Nigeria falls within the coastal zone that lies along the Atlantic Ocean. The area is connected to the hinterland by a number of river systems that flow into the Atlantic in the south. Much of the area is composed of marshland and mangrove swamp, which is susceptible to flooding. The soil varies from the older, leached coastal soils, which comprise primarily sand and are found under forest cover, to younger, alluvial soils, which consist of unconsolidated sediments (including primarily silt and some sand) that have been eroded and reshaped by water and re-deposited inland. Rainfall is generally heavy in the Niger Delta. Due to these conditions, only a fraction of the land in the Niger Delta is arable. Nonetheless, the dominant economic activities of this rural area has always been farming and fishing. (To a lesser degree, the people of the Niger Delta area have also engaged in salt making and trading.) It is estimated that as much as 65 percent of the people of the area engage in farming and fishing, using traditional methods (Gbadegesin, 1998: p. 42). This has been the situation for centuries. Land is therefore crucial to the survival of the people of the Niger Delta, as are the rivers where the people carry out their fishing.

The crops of the Niger Delta ecological zone include cassava, yams, cocoyam, plantain, sweet potatoes, rice, maize, melon, and leafy vegetables. The tree crops include rubber and oil palm. The traditional tools of hoes, cutlasses, and axes are used for the cultivation of these crops. For fishing, the people use nets and all kinds of traps. From the salty water and the mangrove, too, the people engage in salt making. And through the numerous rivers and footpaths, the people carry the surplus of what they produce to be sold in the markets. The rural economy of the Niger Delta is thus simple, and it has generally met the needs of the people for centuries. However, the subsistence of the delta residents has changed in recent times, following the pollution of the soil and water arising mainly from the exploration and production of oil and gas. Thus, while food production was generally increasing around the world during much of the 20th century (as Green

Revolution programs were launched in many countries, as noted by Mc Neil in his *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the 20th Century World* (2000, p. 275), food production was decreasing in the Niger Delta. The 2011 report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on parts of the Niger Delta (Ogoniland) states, “While fishing was once a prime activity in Ogoniland, it was evident from community feedback and field observations that it has essentially ceased in areas polluted by oil” (UNEP, 2011, p. 10). Environmental degradation negatively affected human security in the delta region, as a large section of the population could no longer meet their basic economic needs as harvests dwindled from farms and rivers. It is therefore easy to understand the potential for violence in the area, particularly in the two last decades of the 20th century.

Information from different sources, including reports published by different intergovernmental agencies and non-governmental organizations, as well as the oral testimonies of delta residents collected by the author from fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2012, confirms that the deprivation caused by disruption to farming and fishing has been a major cause of violence in the Niger Delta (Obi 1995; Okecha, 2000; Onosode, 2000; Obaro, 2007; Osagie, 2012). It is noteworthy that the trend of deprivation leading to violence is not limited to the Niger Delta. The response of the people of the Gulf of Mexico, for example, to the massive BP oil spill of April to July 2010, which destroyed flora and fauna and negatively affected economic activities including tourism at a crucial time of the year, generated angry social ferment and resulted in significant compensation payments by BP (*New York Times*, 2013).

Environmental Pollution, Human Security, and Violence

The environmental degradation of the Niger Delta has negatively affected the economic activities of the people and, consequently, human security. Oil spillage and gas flaring are the two most significant causes of pollution in the Niger Delta. Indeed, entire communities have had to be resettled in many cases due to oil spillage. So pervasive has the negative impact of oil spillage been that the usually unconcerned Nigerian government set up a committee on National Oil Spills in 1996 (*Petroleum News*, 1998, p. 1). The committee has noted that not only has oil spillage done serious damage to the ecosystem but also that petroleum producing companies have been grossly ill-prepared to respond to oil spill emergencies. The Clean Nigeria Associates (CAN), an oil spill coalition group, is unable to handle emergencies involving a spill of more than approximately 30,000 barrels. It was partly for this reason that when the Mobil Idaho oil spill occurred in January 1998, the company had to fly in experts from Mobil Corporation in the United States to assist in the spill control efforts.

The environmental damage caused by industrialization and activities linked to the exploration and production of oil and gas in the Niger Delta has been extensive. A study carried out in 1995 revealed that between 1992 and 1993, the total area under major food crop production in the states of Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta (Nigeria’s major oil producing areas) had decreased by an average of about 25 percent (Gbadegesin, 1998, p. 45). The decrease in food production is generally attributed to the increasing incidents of oil spillage, which destroyed farmlands. Such a decrease in food production constitutes a serious threat to the security of delta residents. It is estimated, for example, that of the

2,185,000 hectares that make up the land area of Rivers and Bayelsa States, about half are swampland, leaving only half of each state viable for farming. In Delta State, about a third of its 1,769,800 hectares are similarly swampy. However, as viable farmland is lost to oil spillage and other activities connected with petroleum production, the means of livelihood for the people of the region is compromised, which raises serious questions regarding economic justice. The conviction of the people that their land is being exploited in a manner that hampers their economic pursuits and subsistence, with virtually nothing to replace their losses, has precipitated violent responses against the government and oil producing companies. The pattern of the acquisition of land by the government has also contributed to conflict. A decree by the central government promulgated in 1978 grants the government authority over all lands in the country, the implication being that government may acquire any land with mineral resource endowments; a paltry sum is sometimes paid to the original owners of that land after a great deal of effort to secure remuneration, though such land owners are often paid nothing (Obioha, 2004).

The impact of environmental degradation on the informal sector of the Niger Delta is clear and wide-ranging. The indigenous people, the oil producing companies, and the Nigerian State commonly acknowledge that petroleum production and other industrial activities in the area have had serious negative effects on the local economy. This is also confirmed by the report of the Niger Delta Environment Survey, which states that pollution has caused severe deprivation to Niger Delta people (Eteng, 1998, p. 20), and by the information given by people of diverse backgrounds in the area in the course of fieldwork by the author from 2007 to 2012 (Akpojeoto, 2007; Ifiok, 2009; Ebiowei, 2009; Okilo, 2011). In essence, the Nigerian government and the oil producing companies have not been responsive to the needs of the people of the Niger Delta despite the significant revenue made from the sale of oil exploited from the area, the production of which has hampered local economic activities. To worsen matters, the government and their oil producing agencies have also not allowed the people of the Niger Delta to help themselves.

The intense violence that has rocked the Niger Delta in the last three decades is linked to deprivation caused by the inability of the people to carry out fruitful economic activities. As indicated by different sources on the Niger Delta and the testimonies of the people, including community leaders, activists, women leaders, militant youths, and others, pollution has indeed been the bane of the rural economy (Edoka, 2007; Alesoghene, 2007; Preye, 2009). The seriousness of the impact of environmental security in the Niger Delta can be appreciated from a recent report which states that in Ogoniland (one of the major oil producing areas of the Niger Delta) in the 1990s, more people were dying than were being born. The same report notes that while the average life expectancy of Nigerians was 56 years during the same period, the Ogoni people had dropped to 12 years of age (*The Guardian*, 1999, p. 41). While this figure might be disputed by some, what it does indicate is the dire quality of life of the Ogoni people and of the vast majority of the oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta. It is therefore easy to understand why Ogoniland sabotaged oil production in the Niger Delta and presented some of the fiercest resistance to the Nigerian state for much of the 1990s.

One of the leading voices of the Ogoni people, the playwright Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa, was executed by the General Abacha dictatorship in November 1995 due to his relentless campaign against environmental degradation and for economic rights

(Aworawo, 2002, p. 226) The intensity of the agitations under his leadership eventually led to the suspension of oil exploitation in Ogoniland for some years, and some are of the view that this may have helped to save the Ogoni from a possible extinction. It is noteworthy that Shell BP, the major oil producing company in Ogoniland before the 1995-1996 crisis, worked closely with government as the crisis raged. It even had a detachment of the military and police at its disposal, which it ordered at will to protect its interests. It is for this reason that violence was directed at the oil companies as much as against the government at the height of the conflict in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The escalation of violence equally drew the attention of the international community, and the United States did take action by stationing US marines 150 miles off the Niger Delta coast (Ukaogo, 2008, pp. 102-107; Mbu, 2011). There has therefore been an extensive international dimension to the Niger Delta crisis.

The violence also affected the rest of the Niger Delta but in different shades and to different degrees. In Oto Owhe, in the Isoko North Local Government area of Delta State, for example, a 1985 report revealed the presence of a fairly large number of psychologically disoriented people who roamed the streets “baring their teeth and frowning as if to depict the anger of the gods” (*Newswatch*, 1985, p. 17). A few of them who volunteered to speak were reported to have complained about the disappearance of their means of livelihood due to the pollution of their land and water. If the condition of the psychologically disoriented people was actually caused by the deprivation of their means of livelihood due to pollution, then the impact of economic injustice to the people of this part of the Niger Delta should be unimaginable.

Other reports indicate that there is also now a gender angle to the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta (Agbu and Oche, 2012, pp. 47-54; Isoje, 1997). In 1984, there was the Oghafe women’s uprising, and in 1985, a group of women seized Shell’s Odidi fields in the Warri North Local Government Area of Delta State, disrupting production for ten days (Obi, 1995, p. 20). This group of women embarked on their militant action to protest the destruction of their crops by a spill that had taken place at that time. There was also the Ekpan Women’s uprising in 1986, which was linked to the disruption of their means of livelihood. One source notes that the protesting women were ordinarily peace loving. They resorted to violent protests having been compelled by the destruction of their means of livelihood largely because of the activities of the oil producing companies (Obi, 1995, p. 20). The action of the protesting women can be appreciated from the experience of Ughoton community (another oil producing area of Delta State) in November 1991. This community of 1,200 people woke up one morning to discover that their dwelling place had been cordoned off by men of the Dubri Oil Company because of an oil spill. The people were ordered to stay indoors. It was planting season. The people could not go to their farms, and most had no food at home. Tragically, farms were set to be destroyed by the blowout required to maintain the spill. The company responded by bringing 200 tubers of yam, 10 bags of rice, and two tins of palm oil for a community of 1,200, which was grossly inadequate. It should have been no wonder why the people were quickly up in arms against Dubri Oil (*Resolute*, 1992, p. 14).

These examples of violence in delta region communities show that oil production, though it is the most crucial factor in Nigeria’s economic life-line, has disastrously affected the Niger Delta people, especially the rural communities, threatening their

physical environment and biodiversity. This means a disruption of the people's fragile peasant economy and, consequently, their means of livelihood and survival. This disruption is also at the root of the violence in the Niger Delta, although in recent times, some individuals have attempted to capitalize on the situation and perpetrate criminal activities such as the kidnapping of innocent workers and school children from whose employers and parents they demand ransom. However, the general pattern has been that violence has occurred when some action by the government or the oil-producing companies negatively affects the economic fortunes of the people.

Political Action, Poverty, and Conflict Resolution in the Niger Delta

Extreme poverty has been a fundamental feature of the socio-economic development of the Niger Delta since the early 1970s. This is especially so for the rural populations whose productivity has become progressively compromised due mainly to environmental pollution. The revenue that accrues from oil sales goes to the governments, and so the government bears much of the responsibility for the environmental protection of the oil producing areas and the improvement of the standard of living for the people in the region. This makes political action central to the provision of human security and the protection of the environment of the Niger Delta, both of which are central to conflict resolution in the area. The role of government in the process of finding a lasting solution to the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta is a complex one, considering the fact that a government agency, the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), functions as a joint venture partner to the oil producing companies in Nigeria. The NNPC and its subsidiaries represent government interest and collect its rents in the production and sale of oil and gas. Therefore, the environmental hazard that oil production poses often comes against the interest of government (Ukaogo, 2008, pp. 104-107; Khan, 1994, pp.1-4). Further problematically, this conflict of interest is set against the background of a culture of corruption that has characterized public life in Nigeria, especially the oil sector (Falola & Heaton 2008, pp. 185-189, 272-274).

It is generally known that the oil producing companies in Nigeria do not meet the basic international standards required of agencies conducting oil exploration and exploitation. This is clearly indicated by the excessive percentage of gas flared in the process of oil exploitation. Neither do the oil companies have the capacity to prevent or manage the numerous cases of oil spillage. Most of the time, the little that is done to limit damage to the environment following an oil spill is undertaken only after violent protests by local communities. The Nigerian government has equally demonstrated a lack of will to compel compliance with the standards because of its own interests. It is only in the last decade or so that decisive steps have begun to be taken to protect the environment. Even such action was only inspired after massive violent action taken by the people of the Niger Delta region to compel the government to respond, and the response has yielded only modest results (Jike, 2004, pp. 686-688).

The first major step to establish an institutional framework for environmental protection was taken with the establishment of the Environmental Planning and Protection Division (EPPD) in 1975 (Thompson, 2000, pp. 63-64). It is instructive to note that the environmental problems of the Niger Delta were a major concern for the EPPD, as was desert encroachment in northern Nigeria. However, although the

government agency was conscious of the devastation of the environment in the Niger Delta, their efforts were limited by inadequate funds, facilities, and political support to deal with the problems. Its achievements were therefore modest. Nigeria's central government took another major step towards promoting a healthy environment in the Niger Delta region with the creation of the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) in 1988. Instructively, the establishment of FEPA was influenced by the dumping of toxic waste in the Niger Delta community of Koko by an Italian firm (Anyaegbunam, 2000, pp. 102-105). As if the environmental problems of the Niger Delta were not enough, the toxic waste from Italy was dumped in Koko, devastating the environment and causing near immediate deaths, killing village members, including the local chief who was said to have granted permission for the dumping.

FEPA was established to, among other things, advise the Federal Government of Nigeria on national environmental policies, prepare periodic master plans for the development of science and technology relating to the environment, set environmental guidelines and standards, and monitor and enforce compliance with environmental regulations (Thompson, 2000, p. 63). FEPA received far more government support than had the EPPD before it, and it generally performed well before it was replaced by the Ministry of the Environment in 1999. FEPA maintained a firm position and monitored compliance with environmental standards. It was also deeply involved in the commitment made by oil companies to adhere to deadlines to end gas flaring. (Incidentally, the subsequently created environment ministry does not appear to have been as active as FEPA in spite of its elaborate bureaucracy.) The not-too-impressive performance of the government agencies with the responsibility of protecting the environment and the lack of political will by the government have all but ensured that the Niger Delta environmental crisis will persist in spite of the apparent activities the government agencies have taken to curtail the crisis. The inability to substantially improve the condition of the environment has continued to hamper the availability of resources to meet the basic needs of the people of the Niger Delta.

The failure of the government and the insensitivity of the oil producing companies operating in the Niger Delta have led to violent reactions from the people of the area at different times since the early 1980s. In the second half of the 1980s, as the economic fortunes of the people worsened following government adoption of a structural adjustment program, violent agitation in the Niger Delta expanded greatly. At that time, the government was compelled to take action to respond to some of the demands of the people. A major response of the government was the establishment of the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992 for the purpose of undertaking infrastructure development for the Niger Delta, promoting a healthier environment, and improving the quality of life of the Delta people (Akinyele, 1997, pp. 83-84). The need to pay special attention to the development of the Niger Delta owing to previous neglect and the peculiarities of its environmental problems had been recognized for decades. Indeed, decades earlier, the Willink Minorities Commission, established by the British colonial authorities in 1957, had recommended that the Niger Delta be designated a special area with development boards or special agencies established to address its peculiar problems (Government of Nigeria, 1958, pp. 94-95). The government's failure to comprehensively address the environmental and economic challenges of the Niger Delta therefore arose from lack of political will and not

necessarily a lack of information on the problem and how to address it. This lack of political will on the part of the government was met with intense agitation on the part of the delta residents in the late 1980s, compelling the government to attend to the region and leading to the establishment of OMPADEC.

The objectives of OMPADEC included compensating the communities that had suffered ecological and environmental damage or deprivation as a result of oil mineral prospecting; opening up the affected areas and effectively linking them up socially and economically with the rest of the country by providing different forms of infrastructure and physical development; tackling ecological problems caused by the exploration of oil mineral; liaising with the various oil companies on matters of pollution control; and receiving and administering the monthly sums from the Federation account in accordance with the confirmed ratio of oil production in each area (*The Vanguard*, 1993, p. 11). (The government provided for the allocation of 3 percent of the central government's account to OMPADEC, double of the 1.5 percent that had been allocated for the development of the oil-producing areas before the establishment of OMPADEC.) Many perceived the establishment of OMPADEC to be a positive development and a reflection of the government's commitment to improving the quality of life of the Niger Delta people (Akinyele, 1997, p. 83).

OMPADEC was established by the Ibrahim Babangida government (1985-1993). Its structure was such that all the states in the Niger Delta were represented on the board of the commission. There was thus some feeling that with the creation of OMPADEC, the people had an authentic opportunity to participate in the running of their own affairs (*The Vanguard*, 1996, p. 18). Between 1992 and 1996, when its operations were suspended by the Sanni Abacha government, OMPADEC claimed to have undertaken projects including land reclamation and shore protection; the distribution of pipe borne water; the building of hospitals, health facilities, and schools; and the construction of drainage systems. It also claimed to have been granting loans to individual farmers and cooperative societies. However, it was not long before OMPADEC itself became rocked by corruption and scandal, and the reality was that the commission had erected numerous signposts of projects that were abandoned half way or not commenced at all (Osuntokun, 2000, p. 3). The failure of OMPADEC certainly represented another missed opportunity to enhance human security in the Niger Delta and reduce violence in the area.

The failure to find an effective solution to the environmental and economic problems of the Niger Delta led to an increase in violence and complicated conflict resolution efforts in the 1990s. Violence was worsened by Abacha's hostility to environmental rights activism, which culminated in the execution of playwright and activist Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa on 10 November 1995. The struggle in the Niger Delta quickly became a struggle against mass murder by the government (Falola & Heaton 2008, pp. 231-234). To worsen matters, Abacha transported people from all parts of Nigeria to the country's capital of Abuja in his ill-conceived "ten million man march" to give legitimacy to his bid to transform himself into a civilian president in 1996. Many of those that came from the Niger Delta saw how beautiful Abuja was and felt worse about their condition. They returned home and became more determined to fight the government. The 1990s thus represented a period of unprecedented expansion of the violence in the Niger Delta. To illustrate developments of the period, thirty-six oil rigs were active in the Niger Delta in 1991. By 1994, only fourteen were being operated, and

the number dropped to just ten in 1998 (Falola & Heaton, 2008, p. 23). In most cases, local communities had seized drilling rigs in the course of their protests, and the number of active rigs shrank progressively in the course of the 1990s.

A new civilian government was inaugurated in Nigeria in May 1999 after fifteen years of military rule. The new government took steps to address the conflict in the Niger Delta as soon as it took office. Yet another development commission, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was established as a successor to the OMPADEC in 1999. The government also increased the allocation from oil revenue to producing areas to 13 percent (Aworawo, 2012: 37-38, 44-47). Efforts were made to reach out to community leaders as well as women and youth organizations to reduce violence in the area to the barest minimum (Osuntokun 2000, 3). In spite of these efforts, violence continued apace in the Niger Delta in the opening years of the 21st century. Violent groups such as the Niger Delta Vigilante Force (NDVF), led by Tom Ateke, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), led by Asari Dokubo, and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), led by Henry Okah, emerged and brought sophistication to the Niger Delta crisis by leading the people in organized protests and helping delta residents clearly articulate and present their demands to the government and executives of the oil companies. Oil installations were sabotaged, and production was drastically reduced (Ukaogo, 2008, pp. 104-107). This compelled the government to intensify efforts to resolve the conflict.

The NDDC continued its activities of providing infrastructure in parts of the Niger Delta, and it recorded some achievements in this respect. It also embarked on human capacity development, which enhanced human security to some degree. The NDDC and its leadership were also involved in direct conflict resolution efforts, which included the amnesty program introduced by the government 2009. The program, which was introduced by President Yar'Adua to address the violence in the Niger Delta, granted amnesty to all militants who surrendered their arms and gave up violence. Rehabilitation and training programs have been established for former militants, with a measure of success (*The Punch*, 2010, p. 28; *The Guardian*, 2009a, p. 51). Although the amnesty program has had its difficulties, and indeed some have described the program as a quick fix (Abidde, 2011, p. 12), it has contributed to a drastic reduction of violence in the Niger Delta at least in the short run, and it can be said that the process of conflict resolution has received immense attention since the amnesty program was launched.

An important aspect that has yet to receive adequate attention in efforts to resolve the Niger Delta conflict, however, has been protection of the environment and the regeneration of devastated lands and polluted rivers (Osuntokun, 2012, pp. 508-513; Chokor, 2000, pp. 62-64). As already noted, efforts to end gas flaring in the Niger Delta have yielded only modest results, as the 2008 deadline set by government was not met. In addition, incidents of oil spill remain widespread mainly because oil-producing companies fail to comply with international safety standards. It is important that more attention be paid to environmental protection and that higher standards be adopted by oil companies in their operations. This would enable the people of the Niger Delta engage in fruitful economic activities and enhance human security. It is expected that these steps would also further enhance the conflict resolution process in the Niger Delta since, as local leaders, activists, women leaders, and militants have consistently maintained, deprivation has been a major cause of the violence in the area (*The News*, 2013; Okecha,

2000; Usiwo, 2007; Afebuamhe, 2012; Ogunbor, 2012). This is the kind of step that is expected of any government that is serious-minded and perceptive.

Since the declaration of amnesty for militants in 2009, (which has been accompanied by a small measure of attention to environmental protection of attention to environmental protection, along with some human capacity development and expansion of infrastructure in the Niger Delta), the government has had a more legitimate base from which to deal with the few people who have attempted to carry out violence in the area since that time. Indeed, reports indicate a drastic reduction in violent acts in the Niger Delta since 2010, which establishes the correlation between environmental degradation, deprivation, and violence. It is noteworthy that the reduced levels of violence in the Niger Delta since 2010 have made it possible for the government to increase its crude oil exports from just about a million barrels per day in 2008 to 2.3 million barrels per day in 2012 (Ukaogo, 2008, pp. 103-104; Dokpesi, 2012, pp. 119-122), perhaps incentivizing the government to continue to take further measures to ensure the wellbeing and security of the residents of the delta. It is in this way that paying greater attention to environmental protection and to the welfare of the people of the delta would provide an opportunity for the government to demonstrate enlightened self-interest. In many parts of the world today, environmental issues have become part of strategic thinking; they have also formed the basis for assessing the success or failure of governments and government agencies and constitute an important issue in election campaigns (*Petroleum News*, 1998, pp. 12-13). The Nigerian government would therefore need to pay more attention to environmental protection as it seeks to enhance human security and end the violence in the Niger Delta.

Conclusion

The analysis of the pattern of violence and dynamics of conflict resolution in the Niger Delta since the 1980s presented in this paper reveals the link between environmental degradation, poverty, and violence. Environmental pollution caused by oil exploitation in the region hampered the traditional economic activities of the people of the Niger Delta, and this intensified poverty and caused violence in the period studied. This violence is clearly revealed in origin, and the pattern of the conflict is clearly demonstrated. The protection of the environment and provision of human security should therefore be important issues to address in the process of conflict resolution. Protection of the environment and restoration of polluted lands and water to a healthy state are crucial because protection and regeneration of the environment make it possible for the people to be engaged in productive economic activities and improve their quality of life. Indeed, wherever deprivation exists, resistance against the forces responsible for that deprivation logically exists as well. It is therefore a matter of enlightened self-interest for the government and polluters of the environment in the Niger Delta work to ensure a healthier physical environment and improve human security. Certainly, no one has benefited from the unfulfilled promises made by different environmental protection agencies or agencies organized to establish infrastructure and implement programs to improve the quality of life of the people. Unfulfilled promises only serve to foment further violence.

The reality is that violence is reduced only when authentic measures are taken to improve the conditions that precipitated resistance in the first place. As such, violence in the delta region has been substantially reduced since 2010, when the government implemented a program that has expanded infrastructure and enhanced human security in the area. The substantial reduction in acts of sabotage against government and oil companies' facilities since government became more committed to the fulfillment of its promises to the people confirms that the provision of human security has a clear and direct relationship with conflict resolution. It also emphasizes the need for government to pay increased attention to environmental regeneration since, as has been established, pollution has contributed tremendously to poverty but not has not yet been broadly or systematically addressed. The United Nations report on the environment of the Niger Delta published in August 2011 recommends large scale activities to regenerate the devastated environment. The undertaking of such activities should be one of the most realistic and effective ways of further reducing poverty and violence in the Niger Delta. Efforts to resolve the violence in the area must therefore directly address both the improvement of the quality of life of the delta residents and the regeneration of the physical environmental. This is the only way to achieve enduring peace in the Niger Delta because it addresses the roots of the conflict.

¹ A gas flare (or flare stack) is a gas combustion device used in industrial plants (e.g. petroleum refineries, chemical plants, natural gas processing plants, or oil and gas production sites). Flare stacks are primarily used for burning off flammable gas; they are also used for the planned combustion of gases over relatively short periods. In areas of the world lacking pipelines and other gas transportation infrastructure, vast amounts of such associated gas are commonly flared as waste or unusable gas. Gas flaring constitutes a hazard to human health and is a contributor to the worldwide emissions of carbon dioxide. In 2011, Nigeria was the second highest contributor to world gas flaring.

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