

Activism and the Emancipation of the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines militancy as one of the tools of activism in the Niger Delta region geared towards addressing pervasive inequity and marginalization in the region which predates independence in 1960. The spontaneity culminates to 12 days revolution in the Niger Delta region led by Isaac Adaka Boro in 1966 and, this however increased in intensity since the return of the democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999 with the emergence of movement for the survival of the Ogoni people (MOSOP) Niger Delta volunteer group (NVG) Egbusi Boys (EBs), movement for the emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND). This activism extends to different parts of Nigerian states such as; Indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) in the south eastern, Boko Haram (Islamic jihadist fundamentalist) and lakurawa in the Northern part and the Oodua people's congress (OPC) in the Western part and other anomic groups such as EndSARS in 2020 to address police brutality. However the study adopted anomic theory as the theoretical lens while data was sourced through secondary and primary source. The primary data were sourced through semi structured interview where 25 respondents' were purposively selected from the three states of Delta(8), Bayelsa (8) and Rivers(9) while the secondary data were sourced through journal articles, periodicals, government reports, newspapers and internet based materials, and data analyzed in thematic content. The study found that activism is a useful tool for the advancement of any society that deployed it for social justice, and the study concludes that activism whether it metamorphose to militancy or not is a critical instrument for addressing societal injustice and, as well as to hold government accountable

Keywords: accountable, environmental degradation, development commission, marginalization, sub national activism

Introduction

Niger delta region occupies a strategic place in the history and developmental strides of Nigeria. The region's pivotal role predates independence when it serves as the oil hub known then as the rich oil delta region (Tangban & Umoh, 2014). Prior independence the region has contributed to the development of Nigeria's economy. The significant role of the region were visible with the discovery of crude oil in large quantity at Olobiri in 1956 (Awofeso, 2021).

Despite the pivotal role of region, Niger Delta has continued to experience human and environmental strangulations challenging the ecosystem of the region (Alaibe, 2007).

Originally the region Niger Delta comprises eight states of; Imo, Abia, Cross River, Akwua Ibom, Delta, Rivers, Ondo and Bayelsa states. However by 2007 Lagos state was included as a state in the Niger Delta region. The region covers about 112,000 square kilometers and the third wetland after Mississippi and Pantanal (Tangban & Umoh, 2014). Environmental degradation, injustice and deprivation triggers an avalanche of activism in the Niger-Delta region in particular and to other parts of Nigeria in general.

Activism is one of the critical tools deployed by individuals or organizations or communities to effect socio-economic and political changes in their societies around the world, and this can be carried out in several ways through: boycott, demonstration, lobbying, violent conflict (insurgence and militancy) aimed at ventilating their grievances or to support a government/community and its policies (Tangban & Umoh, 2014).

Again activism serves as a conflict resolution mechanism and propels societal/governmental transformation, as well as provide platform through which people promote their secession such as; Hamas group in Palestine, IPOB in the Eastern Nigeria, Boko Haram / Lakurawa in Northern region of Nigeria and the militant groups in Niger Delta region; movement for the survival of the Ogoni people (MOSOP) Niger Delta volunteer group (NVG) Egbusi boys, movement for the emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) (Ikelegbe, 2009; CEDCOMS, 2003) This paper is divided into nine sections. The first section is the introductory remark, followed by the statement of the problem as section two, theoretical framework forms section three. Consequently section four identified different types of activist movements within the Niger-Delta region while section five examines the operational methods of activism in the Niger Delta region. Furthermore section six highlights the role of activism or militancy to bring about transformation within the region while section seven the paper methodology and section eight the discussion of findings. Again section nine is the conclusion and section ten the recommendations.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Several scholarships in activism focus on the destructive effect of activism and by implication characterize activism as antithetical to development and peace. It is to correct this perception that this paper seeks to argue that activism which manifest in either militancy

or demonstration serve as useful method and drives ethnic or national development in Niger-Delta and elsewhere.

Theoretical Framework

Anomic Theory

Anomic theory was propounded and popularized by Emile Durkheim a sociologist around 19th century which x-rayed the implication of social misfit or formlessness' and the concomitant consequences to instability. The theory posits that lack of social and economic justice and structured value system may likely trigger deviant behaviors and crime in any society especially in Niger-Delta region where the region is largely marginalize and alienates from the resource in the region.

Robert Morton extensively extrapolates the anomic theory that inability to meet the group, region or peoples social and economic needs as a result of societal inequality triggers a system of lawlessness and can only be assuaged when social and economic equity prevail. Thus all anomic groups come into being to address a given socio-economic and political circumstances that inhibit their functionality as a group or region and when that aspiration or expectations are met they will cease existence to resurface when they have other needs.

Since the agitation of equity, oil revenue and autonomy in Niger Delta the region has witnessed different anomic groups from Isaac Adaka Boro Niger Delta volunteer force of 1966(NDVF), to Ken Saro Wiwa Movement for the Survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP) 1990, Movement for the emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) 2000, the Egbusi Boys (EBs) and other splitter groups within the region (Ikelegbe, 2009).

Selected Activist Movements within the Niger-Delta Region from 1966-2025

Since independence in 1960 activists movement has dominated the landscape of the Niger-Delta region especially as the region occupy strategic economic center of Nigeria's economy. Despite its strategic economic importance the region has continued to experience different degrees of systemic and structural maldevelopment despite its large mineral deposit.

It is to address these obvious but despicable contradictions that individuals and groups within the region have organized themselves as militant or activist movements to confront the misnomer. The foremost group was the Niger-Delta volunteer force(NDVF) formed by Isaac

Adaka Boro in 1966 that declared war against the Nigerian state that lasted twelve days, popularly known as the 12days revolution in Nigeria's political history(Ikelegbe,2009; CEDCOMS,2003).

The Niger-Delta volunteer force was made up of Ijaw ethnic extraction who wanted to secede from the Nigerian state because of the perceived marginalization and oppression which consistently undermine its development. Though the group leadership was apprehended and tried by the Nigeria force they remained recalcitrant. As this was happening in Niger-Delta region the Eastern region followed suit which led to several accords between the federal and Eastern region within and outside Nigeria and, finally the declaration of Biafra republic in 1967 (Awofoso,2021).

The Biafra faction was led by Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu that culminated to the 30 month civil war from 1967 to 1970. Again in 1990 the Ogoni ethnic group occasioned by the environmental degradation and other associated challenges within the region issued Ogoni bill of right which included among other things; political autonomy , effective representation of Ogonis in national institution and development of Ogoni communities and environmental protection of ecosystem.(Agbanifo & Aghedo,2012)

It was the Ogoni bill of rights (OBRs) that eventually led to the formation of Movement for the survival of Ogoni people(MOSOP) by Ken Saro Wiwa as a socioeconomic and cultural conscious movement for the advancement of Ogoni development and environmental remediation of Ogoni land destroyed by Oil exploitation and exploration. By 1993 over 300,000 Ogonis were engaged in a protest against the state and Shell Oil company for a total neglect and devastation of their environment which Ken Saro Wiwa externalized by taken the matter to the United Nations and peoples organization (UNPO)(Agbonifo & Aghedo, 2012)

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Subsequently the killing of four prominent Ogoni Chiefs and the arrest of Ken Saro Wiwa and its execution in 1995. In 2000 the Ijaws youth met in Kaiama and issued Kaiama bill of rights eventually led to the formation of different armed youth wings such as the Egbusi Boys, Niger Delta volunteer force(NDVF) and movement for the emancipation of the Niger-Delta people(MEND) and other splitter groups((Ikelegbe,2009)

Activism and Mode of Operation in Niger-Delta Region

There has been this contestation that activism is different in several degrees from militancy although the arguments seems to be porous yet the causes of both activism and militancy seems to be the same while the only slight difference that exist between militancy and activism is that militants deployment arms with the intention to overthrow the government.

The activist groups in Niger-delta region have consistently deployed different methods to ventilating their grievances such as; demonstration, protest, boycotts and arm confrontation. The paper argues that militancy/activism appear in two broad two broad categories; the peaceful and violent, but observed that the violent is more prevalent within the region with the deployment of small and light weapons.

Although in conflict resolution there are four methods to handle conflict, by denial, by acceptance, by confrontation and by peace building. The latter method is seldom used but can only be apply when other phases are exhausted. The activities of these sub national militant activist groups' has greatly contributed to the development of the region through establishment of various regional development commissions; Niger Delta development commission (NDDC) in 2007, North East development (NEDC) in 2015 and South east development commission (SEDC) in 2024. However often times the activities of these groups are categorize as security danger (Dalby, 2022) and measures devise on how to seriously check their activities.

They are sometime called name to discredit their transformative role for societal development in Nigeria by calling them bad name in order to gag their socio-economic reengineering. However Niger delta region has been the pathfinder of agitations on how the Nigerian government/state can equitably treat its sub national entities fairer yet the Nigerian state tend to criminalize their activities (Tangban &Umoh, 2014; Yusuf, 2012).

The region's argument has been that when groundnut, cotton and cocoa were the mainstay of the Nigerian economy the revenue formula was based on 50/50% derivation but since oil became the mainstay of the Nigerian economy the revenue formula has not favored the region instead the region kept receiving negligible percentage from 2% to currently 13% (Ogbu, 2007; Abia, 2014; Atemie1996)

Environmental degradation occasioned by oil exploration and exploitation inundated the youth took to militancy and subsequently the government granting of amnesty to the youth and, measures initiated for the remediation of the region. Despite the government initiatives some communities have insisted that the government and their transnational corporation partners can not resume operation until there is a total remediation of the region (Ikelegbe,2009)

Since then there have been stakeholders meetings between the government and the communities on one hand and transnational corporation and the communities on the other hand while the communities have described those meetings as insincere as government and their transnational corporation partners were not serious and cannot be taken serious in the lackluster manner they kept engaging the communities (CEDCOMS,2003).

Activism /Militancy for Transformation in Niger-Delta

Activism plays very critical developmental role in modern society especially in the Niger-Delta region which enables the establishment of development agencies particularly the Niger Delta development commission (NDDC) and also helps to forestall autocratic and despotic rule within the region.

Activist movements serve as socio economic and politico-cultural drivers for development reforms in Nigeria since 1930s.In early 1930s several groups emerged in Nigeria and other parts of African nations that charted the way forward for Africa's independence in early 1950s and late 1990s. Without these groups the attainment of independence would have been in fiasco. Eventually when independence was achieved various ethnic groups who felt marginalized in Nigeria pushed for a separate state structure from the four regional arrangements to a 12 state structure and subsequently the 36 states structure.

Even at that, regions within the Nigerian state particularly the Niger Delta region has been the most virulent group that are persistent on the fight against marginalization and expropriation of their region's natural resource and, the Eastern region's IPOB sped its emancipation drive against the region's systemic and structural marginalization of Ndi Igbo which Mazi Nnamdi Kanu has been incarcerated for three and half years.

However there is this general believe that the death or the incarceration of the activist leaders kill the movement this of course not usually case, rather it help to radicalized the movement,

as the killing of Mahammed Yusuf, the leader of Boko Haram group, Ken Saro-Wiwa in Ogoni struggle, Isaac Adaka Boro and many others show.(Agbonifo & Aghedo,2012;Kola,2015).

It is on this premise that activist groups have continued to play crucial role in Nigeria since the of emergence of independence for social, economic and political justice which necessitates the increase in their numbers in Nigeria particularly in the Niger-Delta such as; Movement for the survival of Ogoni people(MOSOP), Egbsu Boys, Niger Delta Volunteer (NDV) movement for the emancipation Niger-Delta (MEND) where systemic injustice perpetuates the annihilation of the entire region blessed in mineral resources especially in crude oil(Alaibe,2007).

The geo-oil politics precipitates several the numbers of agitations in the face of neglect and marginalization. Thus activism in Niger-Delta is of two kinds; the entrepreneur /spoiler activist and populist activist. The majority of activist groups in Niger-Delta region falls within the range of entrepreneur conflict stakeholders categories who probably deploy activism as a weapon for economic and political gains with the support of political elites who used them for electoral rigging, results manipulations and thugs (HRW, 2005) while the populist groups are groups who are obsessed on the poor state of social provisioning within the region and yearn for better region (Anayochukwu,2007).This includes activist groups such as; movement for the survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP) movement for the emancipation of the Niger-Delta (MEND) and other movements within the Niger-Delta region. As argue by Ross(2006) Lujala(2010) and Tangban and Umoh(2014) regions with rich natural resource are prone to violent conflict due largely to unequal distribution and deprivation

Methodology

The paper adopted a qualitative research design method and data sourced through primary and secondary sources. The primary data were sourced through semi structured interview of 25 respondents from three origin states of Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers state. Eight (8) respondents from Bayelsa, Eight (8) respondents from Delta and Nine (9) respondents from Rivers state were purposively interviewed while the secondary data sourced through extant literature: Books, journal articles and internet based materials and data analyzed in thematic content

Findings and Discussion

Twenty-five (25) respondents were selected and purposively interviewed from three (3) states of Bayelsa(8). Delta state (8) and River state (9).that are part of Niger-Delta region. The choice of these three states from the pool of Niger-Delta states is because the states constitute the epicenter states of activism within the region; also as the environmental disaster occur in these three states quite often. Respondents #7 & # 6, #9 and #22, (Bayelsa) #8 #14. #16 & #23 (Delta state) and #24 &25 (Rivers state) stated categorically that activism in the Delta Niger Region were the only the means to promote development within the region. Respondents #1. #3. #4. #10. #11 and#15 alluded;

‘That it was the Adaka Isaac twelve (12) days revolution in 1966 that led to the creation of Rivers state in 1967, and subsequently none of the development in the Niger-Delta region that is not a product struggle or demonstrations’

. The respondents views were corroborated by Gurr (2010) relative deprivation theory, Tangban & Umoh (2014), Lujala(2010) and Ross(2006) that regions rich in natural resources particularly oil are prone to agitations/ confrontation owing to deprivation and unequal distribution of resource.

To buttress this stark reality the respondent collectively opine that different activists struggle in the region gave birth to the creation of Niger-Delta Development Commission in 2007 to cater for the development needs of the region, regrettably the NDDC has become another conduit piper through which the region are undeveloped as cases of corruption amongst the NDDC managing directors are running into several billions of Naira. In recent time one of its managing directors allegedly collapsed when he was being interrogated by the National Assembly as an escape-tactics. Respondents #1,2,&3 from(Bayelsa) #19,15 & 17 from ((Delta)and #16,18 &21 from (Rivers state) argue that enough money is earmarked for the development of the region but that the water lock nature of the region makes development a little bit slower, but also accused the ruling elites an been imprudent

Conclusion

The paper concludes that the promotion of socio-economic development requires collective effort on both the federal level as well as the sub national levels in the Niger Delta region in

order to ensure that enough revenue is allocated to the region for developmental purposes by this activism would be minimize if not reduce to the barest minimum within the region

Recommendations

Extant literature on natural resource show clear instances of deprivation, social exclusion and marginalization as some of the major triggers of activism and can be addressed if those regions where the resources abode are treated fairly and have some levels of autonomy on the resources within their region. The study recommends that the 13% oil derivation revenue to the Niger Delta region should be increased to 60% to able to cater for the environmental needs of the region faced with degradation and extinction cases that has been the triggers of activism, and punitive measures meted to those that have might misappropriate the revenue for stiff penalty such as life imprisonment to serve as deterrent. .

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