

PERSONAL INTEREST VS. GENERAL INTEREST: A BARRIER TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS

¹Ahmad Nizar Yaakub and ²Ayandeji Lateef Akanbi

Email: nizar@unimas.my; +6082-592755/ ayandejila@fuotuo.ke.edu.ng; +2348032264055

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Abstract

The Niger Delta conflict is a complex issue characterized by competing interests and stakeholder dynamics. Through the lens of social exchange theory and conflict theory, this study examines how personal interests can lead to conflict and hinder conflict resolution efforts. The research highlights how stakeholders in the Niger Delta region crisis engage in exchanges that prioritize personal benefits over collective well-being, resulting in a lack of trust and cooperation. Conflict theory also employed to analyse the underlying power dynamics and resource competition that drive the conflict. The findings suggest that addressing these underlying issues and promoting more equitable exchanges can help overcome the barriers to conflict resolution and achieve sustainable peace in the region of Niger Delta and rapid development in Nigeria as a nation.

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been plagued by conflicts for decades, with various stakeholders vying for panacea solution to the crisis. Despite several efforts to resolve the dispute, the region continues to experience violence, displacement, and environmental degradation. One major obstacle to conflict resolution process is the prioritization of personal interests over the general interest. This study explores the role of personal interests versus general interests as a barrier to conflict resolution in the Niger Delta crisis, examining the challenges and potential solutions to this complex issue. The Niger Delta conflict is highly complex in nature with deep historical roots. The region is rich in oil and gas resources, but the benefits of these resources have not been equitably distributed. This has led to widespread of poverty, unemployment, and frustration among local communities. Various stakeholders, including government agencies, oil companies, and local communities, have competing interests and agendas, which have contributed to the conflict. The prioritization of personal interests over the general interest is a significant barrier to conflict resolution process in the Niger Delta crisis. Personal interests

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

² Department of Political Science, Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa, Nigeria

often focus on economic gain, power, and influence, while the general interest prioritizes the well-being and development of the region as a whole. When personal interests dominate, conflict resolution efforts are hindered, and the region continues to experience violence and instability.

Historical Background of the Niger Delta Crisis

The Niger Delta crisis has its roots in the region's complex history, which spans several decades.

Here is a brief overview:

Pre-Colonial Era (Before 1800s)

The Niger Delta region have a rich and diverse history that predates European colonization. The region is strategically located on the Atlantic coast, it thrived as a vibrant trade hub, attracting European powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch, and British. These nations established trade posts and forts in the region, which significantly influenced its dynamics and laid the groundwork for the complex cultural and economic landscape that exists today. The pre-colonial era's legacy of trade and commerce continues to shape the region's identity and inform its interactions with the global community.

Colonial Era: The Niger Delta region was a major hub for the slave trade and later became a key area for British colonial exploitation. The region is highly rich in natural resources, including oil, that were exploited by colonial powers without adequate compensation or benefits for the local communities.

Post-Colonial Era: Following the Nigeria's independence in 1960, the Niger Delta region continued to be exploited for its natural resources. The region's oil wealth became a major source of revenue for the Nigerian government, but local communities receive little benefit from the oil wealth.

1960s-1980s: The Niger Delta region began to experience significant environmental degradation due to oil exploration and production. Local communities suffered from oil spills, pollution, and lack of access to basic amenities.

1980s-1990s: The Niger Delta region became a hotbed of militant activity, with groups such as the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) emerging to demand greater control over oil resources and revenue.

2000s: The Niger Delta crisis escalated, with increased in militant activity, kidnappings, and attacks on oil facilities. The Nigerian government responded with military force, leading to further violence and human rights abuses.

2009: The Nigerian government established the Amnesty Program, which offered militants a chance to surrender and receive training and rehabilitation. While the program had some success, while the underlying issues driving the conflict remained unresolved.

Present Day: The Niger Delta crisis continues, with ongoing issues related to environmental degradation, lack of development, and human rights abuses. The region remains a major source of oil revenue for Nigeria, but local communities continue to demand greater control over oil resources and revenue.

The Niger Delta crisis is a complex issue with deep historical roots. Addressing the crisis will require a comprehensive approach that takes into account the region's history, the needs of local communities, and the establishment of peaceful relationship and cooperation with the oil industries in the region.

Nature of the Niger Delta Crisis

The Niger Delta crisis is a complex and multifaceted issue, encompassing various dimensions, including:

Environmental Dimension

Environmental Degradation: The region's richness in biodiversity is under threat due to environmental degradation caused by oil exploration and production, while frequent oil spills and pollution have devastated the environment, which also affecting the local ecosystems and livelihoods.

Economic Dimension

Resource Control and Economic Marginalization: The crisis revolves around the control and ownership of oil resources, with local communities demanding greater control and revenue sharing. Despite being the backbone of Nigeria's economy, the Niger Delta region remains economically marginalized, with limited access to basic amenities and infrastructure.

Social Dimension

Human Rights Abuses: The crisis has led to numerous human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary arrests. The conflict has resulted in the displacement and migration of people, exacerbating social and economic challenges.

Political Dimension

Governance and Accountability: The crisis highlights issues of governance and accountability, with concerns about corruption, lack of transparency, and irregularities in management of oil resources. The implementation of policies aimed at addressing the crisis has been inconsistent and sometimes ineffective.

The Niger Delta crisis requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the environmental, economic, social, and political dimensions. This includes ensuring sustainable development, promoting human rights, and improving governance and accountability.

Strategies Applied to Curb Niger Delta Crisis

The Nigeria's government and stakeholders in the crisis has embarked several strategies and efforts to curb the Niger Delta crisis which include, involvement of both military and non-military approaches.

Some key strategies include:

Amnesty Program: The amnesty program Introduced by the Yar'Adua-led government in 2009, this program encouraged militants to renounce violence, surrender their arms, and receive skills acquisition training, stipends, and gradual reintegration into society. Although, the program succeeded in reducing violence, while the concerns issue remains about its sustainability and the impact on non-militant community members.

Collaborative Problem-Solving: This approach emphasizes on the participatory conflict management, giving stakeholders an equal chance to express views, generate options, and influence decisions. It's seen as a more effective alternative to traditional control and adversarial methods.

Operation Safe Corridor: A rehabilitation program for ex-militant, aiming to reintegrate them into society through vocational training and psychotherapy. However, concerns have been raised about the potential for reintegrated fighters to turn against their communities.

Policy Initiatives:

Nigeria Police Gender Policy: Mainstreaming gender issues into police structure and administration.

Violence against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Law: Enacted in 2015 to address pervasive sexual and gender-based violence.

Operation Safe School: Enhancing security and enrollment in schools, particularly in conflict-prone areas. Despite all these efforts, challenges persist, including:

Insecurity and Human Rights Abuses: Ongoing violence, displacement, and human rights abuses.

Poor Policy Implementation: Weak frameworks, inadequate funding, and poor coordination among donor agencies.

Corruption and Lack of Accountability: Limited capacity among policymakers and absence of credible indicators to measure performance.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the application of social exchange theory and conflict theory. These theories provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics driving the Niger Delta conflict and the role of personal interests versus general interests in conflict resolution process. Social Exchange Theory according to George C. Homans, widely regarded as the founder of social exchange theory. He first introduced the concept in 1958 in his essay "Social Behavior as Exchange," where he applied the principles of behavioral psychology and sociology to social interactions. Homans' work emphasized on individual behavior in the interactions, focusing on dyadic exchanges and their associated rewards and costs. Social exchange theory posited that social behavior is the result of an exchange process between individuals or groups. In the context of the Niger Delta conflict, social exchange theory can help explain how personal interests drive conflict and hinder conflict resolution efforts. However, the stakeholders in the Niger Delta region engage in exchange relationships that prioritize personal benefits over collective well-being. For example, government agencies prioritized economic benefits over environmental and social concerns, while oil companies also prioritized profits over community development. While the individuals and organizations involved in the conflict resolution process may also be willing the conflict to be prolonged due to their personal gain and benefits in the ongoing crisis.

Reciprocity: The principle of reciprocity is a key aspect of social exchange theory. In the Niger Delta context, reciprocity can be seen in the way that local communities may respond to what they perceived as an injustice or lack of benefits from oil extraction. If communities feel that they are not receiving fair benefits, they may engage in protests or violence.

Power Dynamics: Social exchange theory also highlights the importance of power dynamics in exchange relationships. In the Niger Delta, power imbalances between stakeholders can also contribute to the conflict and hinder conflict resolution efforts. For example, government agencies and oil companies may have more power and influence than local communities.

Another significant factor contributing to the ongoing crisis in the Niger Delta region is the widespread allegation of corruption and embezzlement of funds meant for regional development, specifically, funds allocated for the rehabilitation of ex-militants have constantly been reportedly misappropriated and embezzled by the stakeholders while some culprits are arrested and sanctioned for their misconduct. Furthermore, there are also allegations that empowerment programs intended for ex-militants have been diverted to benefit the families and associates of stakeholders, while the actual ex-militants have been marginalized. This perceived corruption and nepotism have exacerbated the mistrust and frustration among local communities, fueling the crisis. Addressing these issues is crucial to build trust and achieving lasting peace in the region.

Conflict theory has its roots in the works of several key thinkers. Some of the most influential founders of conflict theory include: Karl Marx. Marx is often credited with developing the foundational ideas of conflict theory. He argued that social conflict arises from the competition for limited resources and the exploitation of one class by another. Marx's work focused on the conflict between the bourgeoisie (those who own the means of production) and the proletariat (those who do not own the means of production).

George Simmel: Simmel's work on conflict theory emphasized the role of conflict in shaping social relationships and structures. He argued that conflict can be both positive and negative, depending on the context and the parties involved. Max Weber: Weber's work built on Marx's ideas, but he also emphasized the role of power and authority in shaping social conflict. Weber argued that conflict can arise from a variety of sources, including economic, social, and political factors.

These thinkers, along with others, have contributed to the development of conflict theory as a distinct sociological perspective. Conflict theory continues to be important framework for understanding social conflict and its role in shaping society. Conflict theory also posits that conflict arises from competing interests and resources. In the context of the Niger Delta conflict, conflict theory helped in explain the underlying causes of the conflict and the challenges of resolving it.

Competing Interests: The Niger Delta conflict is driven by competing interests between stakeholders, including government agencies, oil companies, and local communities. These competing interests can lead to conflict over resources, benefits, and decision-making power.

Resource Competition: The Niger Delta region is rich in oil and gas resources, which can contribute to conflict over access and control. Conflict theory can help explain how resource competition drives conflict and hinders conflict resolution efforts.

Power Imbalances: Conflict theory also highlights the importance of power imbalances in contributing to conflict. In the Niger Delta context, power imbalances between stakeholders can contribute to conflict and hinder conflict resolution efforts.

Integration of Theories

By integrating social exchange theory and conflict theory, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics driving the Niger Delta conflict. Social exchange theory helps explain how personal interests drive conflict and hinder conflict resolution efforts, while conflict theory provides insight into the underlying causes of the conflict and the challenges of resolving it.

Personal Interests vs. General Interests: The integration of social exchange theory and conflict theory highlights the tension between personal interests and general interests in the Niger Delta conflict resolution process. Personal interests often prioritize economic benefits and power, while general interests prioritize the well-being and development of the region as a whole. *Conflict Resolution:* The integration of these theories also provides insight into the challenges of conflict resolution in the Niger Delta. Conflict resolution efforts must take into account the competing interests and power dynamics at play, and prioritize equitable exchanges and fair distribution of resources and benefits. By applying these theoretical frameworks, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the Niger Delta conflict and the role of personal interests versus general interests in conflict resolution. The findings of this study can inform the development of more effective conflict resolution strategies that prioritize equitable exchanges, fair distribution of resources and benefits, and the well-being and development of the region as a whole.

The Niger Delta conflict resolution process has been inconsistent and persist due to several factors:

Key Issue Driving the Conflict.

Lack of Understanding of Conflict's Causes: The Nigerian government and stakeholders have failed to fully grasp the underlying causes of the conflict in the Niger delta region, leading to ineffective management strategies.

Inadequate Community Engagement: The top-down approach to conflict management has not involved local communities sufficiently, resulting in a disconnect between the government's efforts and the people's needs.

Inconsistent Policy Implementation: Policies aimed at addressing the conflict have been poorly implemented, and sometimes, the implementation has been half-hearted and characterized by the irregularities of the stakeholders in the conflict resolution process

Ineffective Management Strategies

Use of Force: The government's reliance on force to quell violent uprisings but, has only exacerbated the situation, leading to more violence and human rights abuses.

Ad Hoc Measures: Quick-fix solutions, such as judicial commissions of inquiry and special committees, have not been able to provide lasting solutions to the conflict.

Community Development Projects: While well-intentioned, community development projects have been perceived as insufficient by local communities, given the scale of environmental degradation and economic deprivation in the region.

Stakeholder Perspectives

Host Communities: Communities have employed various strategies, including verbal agitation, protests, and violent combat, to demand greater control over resources and improved living conditions in the region.

Oil Companies: Oil companies have also attempted to address community needs through corporate social responsibility initiatives, but these efforts have been seen as inadequate and ineffective.

Government: The government has oscillated between using force and implementing development projects, but a comprehensive approach to resolving the conflict remains elusive.

Implication and consequences of Niger Delta Crisis on Nigeria's National Development.

The implication and consequences of Niger Delta crisis on Nigeria's program of national development is enormous, particularly, considering the lives and properties that lost in the conflict. Other factors as following:

Economic Consequences:

Loss of Revenue: Following the frequent crisis in Niger Delta region, the production of oil has been affected, leading to drastically reduced revenue for the government. In 2016, Nigeria's oil production fell to its lowest level in 20 years due to militant attacks.

Impact on GDP: The crisis also affects Nigeria's GDP, as oil exports account for a significant portion of the country's revenue.

Discouraging Foreign Investment: The conflict deters foreign investment in many projects of development, particularly in the economic development programme by foreign investors.

Environmental Consequences:

Oil Spills and Pollution: Frequent oil spills devastate the environment, affecting local ecosystems and livelihoods. Over 240,000 barrels of oil are spilled annually in the Niger Delta region.

Health Implications: Oil spills contaminate crops, leading to increased exposure to toxic substances like lead, which can cause cancer, anemia, and other health issues.

Loss of Biodiversity: The region's rich biodiversity is under threat due to environmental degradation, with over 250 fish species and 20 endemic species at risk of extinction ¹.

Social Consequences:

Displacement and Migration: The conflict leads to displacement and migration of people, exacerbating social and economic challenges.

Human Rights Abuses: The crisis is marked by human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary arrests.

Increased Poverty: The region experiences high levels of poverty, with limited access to basic amenities and infrastructure.

Developmental Consequences:

Hindering National Development: The persistent crisis in the Niger Delta region has negative implications for national development, affecting the country's economic, social, and environmental progress.

Undermining Infrastructure Development: The conflict hinders infrastructure development in the region, perpetuating poverty and inequality.

Fostering Corruption: The crisis is often linked to corruption, with allegations of embezzlement and mismanagement of funds meant for development projects in the region.

Conclusion

The Niger Delta conflict is a complex issue driven by the tension between personal interests and general interests. The region's rich oil resources have fueled competing interests among stakeholders, including government agencies, oil companies, and local communities. Personal interests often prioritize economic benefits and power, while general interests focus on the well-being and development of the region as a whole. The conflict resolution process in the Niger Delta has been hindered by the dominance of personal interests over general interests. This has resulted in the ineffective management strategies, inadequate community engagement, and inconsistent policy implementation. To achieve the sustainable peace and development in the region, it is essential to address the underlying causes of the conflict and promote a more inclusive and equitable approach to resource management. Personal interests vs. general interests: The conflict is driven by the tension between personal interests and general interests, with personal interests often prioritizing economic benefits and power.

Ineffective conflict resolution: The dominance of personal interests has hindered the conflict resolution process, resulting in ineffective management strategies and inadequate community engagement and the need for inclusive approach: A more inclusive and equitable approach to resource management is essential to address the underlying causes of the conflict and promote sustainable peace and development.

Recommendation

To address the clash between personal interests and general interests in the Niger Delta conflict, the following recommendations are proposed:

Policy Recommendations

1. Establish a transparent and accountable revenue management system: Ensure that oil revenue is managed in a transparent and accountable manner, with clear guidelines for revenue allocation and distribution.
2. Implement equitable resource sharing: Promote equitable sharing of oil revenue and benefits among stakeholders, including local communities, government agencies, and oil companies.
3. Foster community engagement and participation: Engage local communities in decision-making processes and ensure that their interests are represented in the management of oil resources.

Institutional Recommendations

1. Strengthen institutional capacity: Strengthen the capacity of institutions responsible for managing oil resources and resolving conflicts, including the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC).
2. Establish an independent conflict resolution mechanism: Establish an independent mechanism for resolving conflicts related to oil exploration and production, with representation from local communities, government agencies, and oil companies.
3. Promote stakeholder dialogue: Foster dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders, including local communities, government agencies, and oil companies, to promote mutual understanding and cooperation.

Community-Based Recommendations

1. Support community development initiatives that promote economic empowerment, social welfare, and environmental protection.

2. Empower local communities: Empowerment local communities to take ownership of their resources and manage their own development initiatives.

3. Support community-led conflict resolution initiatives that promote peaceful resolution of disputes and conflicts. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can work towards addressing the tension between personal interests and general interests in the Niger Delta conflict and promoting sustainable peace and development in the region.

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