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Institutional Structures for Poverty Alleviation in the Niger Delta Region, Nigeria: Who makes Decision and in whose Interest?

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ABSTRACT: Nigeria's Niger Delta Region has, over the past three decades, been the 'soul' and 'engine' of the country's economy. The delta is the seat of petroleum exploration and exploitation, accounting for over ninety percent of Nigeria's exports as well as government revenue. However, the pace of development in the delta region has been slow. There is lack of physical infrastructure and human capital, which has led to poverty and recourse of inhabitants to violence and conflicts. As a pacifying strategy, institutional structures have been put in place to address the development problems of the Niger Delta. This paper sees the measures as insufficient and ephemeral. 'Inclusiveness and governance have not been institutionally addressed. The paper argues that genuine commitments to the 'Niger Delta Question' should be founded on transparent and accountable governance, as opposed to political patronage. Political and social inclusions should form the basis of decision making and implementation.

KEYWORDS: Institutions, poverty alleviation, decision makers, Niger Delta, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In most literature, "institutions" and "organizations" are often used interchangeably, but it is useful to distinguish between them. In mainstream institutional theory,

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institutions are understood to be “the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North, 1990: 3), and consist of complexes of norms, values and behaviours that persist over time and inform action (Uphoff, 1986). In this view, institutions provide structure and regularity to everyday life by reducing uncertainty and providing a guide to human interaction. They are what Sir V. S. Naipaul calls “the contract between man and man.” A central tenet of this view is that institutions work to reduce transaction costs by reducing the costs of monitoring and responding to the behaviours of others (Svendsen et al, 2002). Organizations, on the other hand, are defined as “groups of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve objectives” (North, 1990: 5). Other definitions substitute the concept of “behavioural roles” for the whole individual, yielding a more realistic and accurate definition (Merrey, 2000).

Organizations are created intentionally within an existing web of institution. Hence, the broader network of institutions in which they are embedded fundamentally influences what types of organizations exist and how they evolve. Organizations, in turn, influence how institutions evolve over time. Organizations constitute a subset of institutions, which are distinguished by their purposive origin, maintenance and their hierarchically organized roles (Svendsen et al, 2002).

In this work, a combination of the institutions and organizations involved in poverty alleviation in the Niger Delta region is termed the institutional structures for poverty alleviation. As observed by Svendsen et al (2002), institutional structures for poverty alleviation thus include the following:

- The established policy and legal environment (policies, laws, rules, rights, regulations, conventions, and customs, both formal and informal);
- Organizations with responsibilities for poverty alleviation;
- Processes, mechanisms and procedures for decision-making, coordination, negotiation and planning, which border on poverty alleviation.

Mitchell (1989: 245) sees institutional structures as a combination of (1) legislation and regulations, (2) policies and guidelines, (3) administrative structures, (4) economic and financial arrangements, (5) political structures and processes, (6) historical and traditional customs and values and (7) key participants or actors. Poverty, on the other hand, is a multidimensional phenomenon that is measured in multidimensional ways. Studies have revealed that poverty can be approached from both subjective and objective perspectives. However, most conventional poverty measures are of the objective type (e.g. poverty lines, basic needs). This is because subjective poverty or degree to which a person or group actually considers themselves poor or deprived, can sometimes be misleading (Ekpenyong, et al, 2003). Poverty can also be viewed in absolute and relative terms. Absolute poverty is defined as misery linked to an insufficient resource base, lack of income,

hunger, disease etc. For instance, households incapable of obtaining sufficient food for survival are considered absolutely poor. However, the costs and composition of the food basket may vary considerably between households across different groups, regions and countries (Ekpenyong et al, 2003).

The World Bank (1996) used earning below \$50 per year as indication of living in absolute poverty. The World Bank also regards those people with per capita incomes below one-third of the average per capita income of their own countries as living in relative poverty (i.e. their income exceeds 50 but fall below one-third of their national average).

Even within so-called absolute poverty, we can distinguish between indigence (or primary poverty) and secondary poverty. Indigence usually refers to those who do not have access to the basic necessities for human survival while other forms of absolute poverty refer to degrees of deprivation above that threshold. Also, poverty may be temporary (short-term) and/or chronic (long-term). Chronic poverty may be associated with inter-generational poverty. Temporary poverty may be a result of one time decline in living standards, or fluctuations in well-being that result in declines in living standards below the poverty line. Typically, however, poverty in the rural areas tends to be a combination of all of the above forms of poverty.

Furthermore, poverty can be viewed as having four dimensions, namely:

- (1) Lack of economic opportunity due to scarcity of assets and low returns on those assets.
- (2) Lack of capability due for instance to ill health and inadequate access to education.
- (3) Lack of power to influence debates, decision-making and the control and allocation of resources.

In other words, a broad national definition of poverty will have a variety of components:

- (a) Household income/consumption (poverty lines and their associated indices).
- (b) Social well-being (social indicators including health, education, employment etc.).
- (c) Empowerment (indicators of political and decision-making participation, social mobilization, access to services, infrastructure, information etc.).

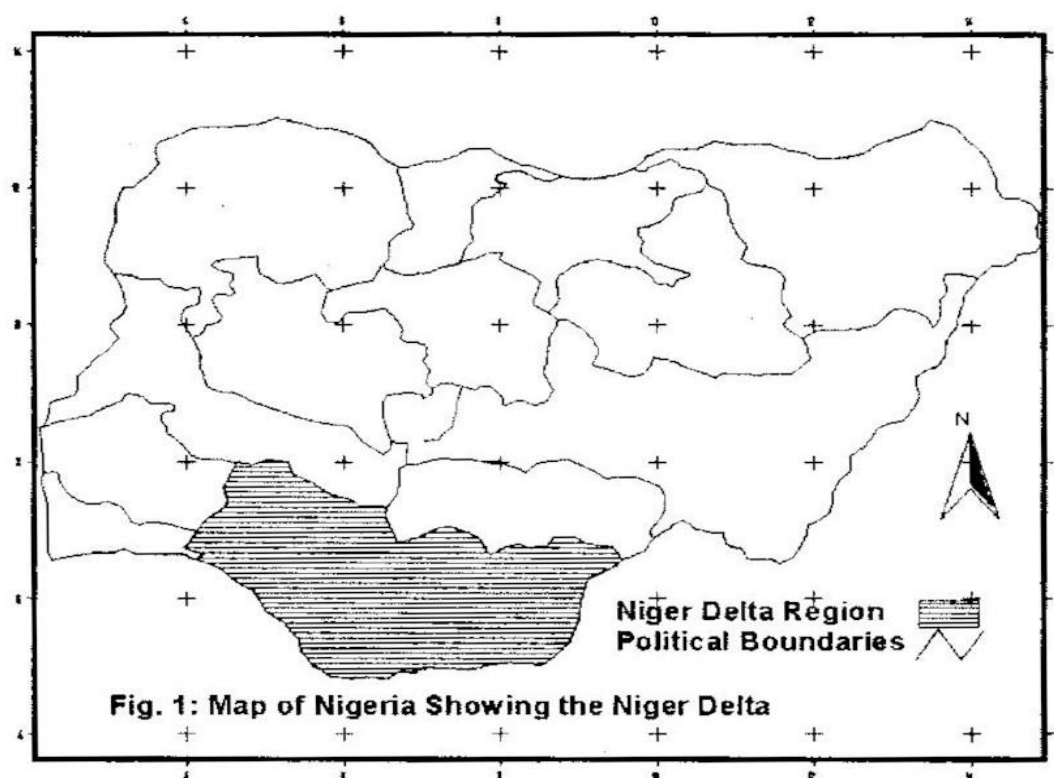
In summary, poverty is an extreme form of underdevelopment. As such, it is not surprising that many poverty indicators are the same as those used to measure development (Ekong, 1991, World Bank, 2000).

In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, poverty is manifested in many dimensions such as low income/consumption; lack of economic and political empowerment;

poor health; massive rural illiteracy and unemployment as well as very low level of infrastructural development in the rural and urban centres. For purposes of understanding, poverty alleviation programmes in the Niger Delta Region embody the general and specific developmental and life enhancement programmes directed at compensating and offsetting the impacts of petroleum exploration and exploitation in the region. The ultimate aim of such programmes is for the general improvement of the standard of living of the people in the Niger Delta. Based on these insights, this paper is an attempt to analyse the dilemma of institutional processes and governance in relation to poverty alleviation in the Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta

The area referred to as the Niger Delta Region was limited to the geopolitical zone occupied mainly by the minorities of Southern Nigeria, which currently comprises the six states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers. But in recent years, the Niger Delta Region was redefined and enlarged to include all nine contiguous oil-producing states. The new states of Abia, Imo and Ondo were therefore added to the original six (Fig.1).



Today, the Niger Delta people form the largest group amongst the ethnic minorities spread over the South-South geographical zone of Nigeria. It has a population of over 7 million people distributed in over 1600 communities.

The region has some unique characteristics, which tend to make development difficult. It has, for instance, the second largest delta in the world and the largest in Africa. The wetland covers an area of 70,000 square kilometers, associated with sandy coastal ridge barriers, brackish or saline mangrove, fresh water, permanent and seasonal swamp forests and low land rainforest. The whole area is traversed and crisscrossed by a large number of rivers, rivulets, streams, canals and creeks. The coastal line is buffeted throughout the year by the tides of the Atlantic Ocean while the mainland is subjected to regimes of flood by the various rivers, particularly the River Niger. The Delta is home to an extraordinary variety of people, mostly fishers and farmers with a proud history and cultural heritage.

The Niger Delta Region is also the main centre of oil producing activity in Nigeria and therefore the centre of Nigeria's economy, accounting for more than 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and more than 80 percent of government revenue (CBN, 1981). The inhabitants of this region heavily depend on the environmental resources for daily living, mostly in the form of fishing, farming and gathering. Consequently, oil exploration and exploitation has had far reaching negative environmental, social and economic impacts on the host communities (Akpan and Akpabio, 2003). Oil exploitation has manifested in environmental degradation and pervasive poverty culminating in a sense of relative deprivation and a perception of alienation within the host communities (Idemudia and Ite, 2006). Apart from manifest cases of violent conflicts, the general attitude of the host communities is that of aggressiveness and confrontation targeted at either the oil companies in the region or the Federal Government of Nigeria (see table 1).

Table 1: Cases of Kidnaps

Year	Cases
2003	<i>Troops are sent to the oilfields amid clashes between rival Ijaw and Itsekiri groups. Around 30 people die. In April, militants seize four Niger Delta oil rigs, taking some 270 people hostage, 97 of them foreigners. After negotiations, the hostages are released.</i>
2004	<i>Five Nigerians and two Americans working for Chevron Texaco are killed by pirates in the Niger Delta. Fighting between groups seeking to control the oilfields leaves some 500 people dead in Port Harcourt and surrounding regions, according to Amnesty International. In October, the groups reach a ceasefire agreement.</i>

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2005 *Six oil workers including two Germans are kidnapped, then freed three days later.*

2006 ***January:** Separatist gunmen kidnap four foreign oil workers and blow up a pipeline feeding an export terminal. Five days later, gunmen shoot dead several troops and attack a Shell oil plant. The four foreigners-an American, a Briton, a Bulgarian and a Hungarian-are freed at the end of the month, but the group threatened to take further hostages.*

***February:** An armoured government helicopter is brought in to fire on barges being used to smuggle oil near a separatist militant base. Militants strike back later, firing on the aircraft. Separatists kidnap nine foreigners-three Americans, one Briton, two Egyptians, two Thais and a Filipino-working for a Shell subcontractor. The attack forces Shell to suspend exports from a major terminal. Six of the hostages are freed after a week, but the other three are held until late in March.*

***April:** The US firm Exxon Mobil briefly evacuates non-essential staff from its Nigerian oil installations due to fear of an attack by militants. At the end of the month, separatists militants used a car bomb to attack oil tanker trucks, and warn China not to invest in the Nigerian oil industry.*

***May:** Three foreign oil workers, one an Italian, are seized but released after a day. A Nigerian court orders Shell to pay 1.5 billion dollars in compensation to the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta for environmental damage, but the company says it is appealing the ruling.*

***June 2:** Militants abduct six Britons, an American and a Canadian from a Norwegian-run drilling rig off the coast of Bayelsa state.*

***June 20:** Two Filipinos, workers of PGF Explorations Limited, an oil servicing contract company to Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), were on Tuesday kidnapped by unknown gunmen at P. W. J Jetty in Rumuolumeni area of Port Harcourt.*

Source: Various Nigerian Dailies

Idemudia and Ite (2006) have asserted that the oil industry in Nigeria has been dominated by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and the oil companies, while the host communities play a second fiddle in decision making processes within the oil industry. The FGN performs two key responsibilities namely: 1) negotiating and granting concessions for oil exploration to oil companies; 2) regulating the activities of the oil companies through the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), which was established in 1977. The major oil companies operating in the Nigerian oil industry are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2: Players in Nigeria's Oil Industry

Consortium	Shareholders	Joint Ventures Operator	Production barrels/day (2003 estimates)	Production (%)
Shell Petroleum Dev. Co. of Nigeria Ltd	NNPC (Nigeria, 55%) Shell (Dutch/British, 30%) Elf (France, 10%) Agip (Italy, 5%)	Shell	950000	42.2%
Mobil Producing Nigeria Ltd	NNPC (Nigeria, 58%) Mobil (USA, 42%)	Mobil	500000	21.2%
Chevron Nigeria Ltd	NNPC (Nigeria, 58%) Chevron (USA, 42%)	Chevron	485000	18.6%
Nigeria Agip Oil Company	NNPC (Nigeria, 60%) Agip (Italy, 20%) Philips (USA, 20%)	Agip	150000	7.5%
Elf Petroleum Ltd	NNPC (Nigeria, 60%) Elf (France, 40%)	Elf	145000	6.1%
Texaco Overseas (Nig.) Petroleum Company	Texaco (Nigeria, 20%) Chevron (USA, 20%)	Texaco	55000	2.7%
Other Producers	Ashland (USA) Deminex (Germany) Pan Ocean (Switzerland) British Gas (British) Sun Oil (USA) Conoco (USA) BP (British) Staoil (Norway) Coniol (Nigeria)	Various	35000	1.7%
Total			2323000	100%

Source: Idemudia and Ite (2006)

The role of the host communities has been categorized into three groups (Agim, 1997 as cited in Idemudia and Ite 2006) as below:

- (a) Producing Communities, in which onshore oil exploration takes place
- (b) Terminal Communities, which provide port or terminal facilities for offshore oil exploration
- (c) Transit Communities, whose territories transit pipelines pass through.

Some other Communities are neither producing, terminal nor transit, but are still classified as oil producing by virtue of general environmental impacts of exploitation.

INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN THE NIGER DELTA

The peculiarities of the Niger Delta region attracted the attention of even the colonial masters when her Majesty's government set up the Sir Henry Willink's Commission to recommend the best strategies for the development of the region which has the most difficult terrain in the country. When the commission turned in its report in 1958, it specifically recommended that the Niger Delta Region deserves special developmental attention and should therefore be made a special area to be developed directly by the Federal Government. This was before crude oil, which is abundant in the region, became the mainstay of the Nigerian economy. Based on the commission's report, the Federal Government established the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) in 1960 to cater for the unique developmental needs of the area. The NDDDB was at best moribund before the outbreak of the civil war seven years later. After the civil war, an omnibus body called the River Basin Development Authority was established not just for the development of the Niger Delta, but for the whole country which was a negation of the developmental ideas for the Nigeria Delta as contained in the Willink's Commission's report.

The Niger Delta Region, in the 1970s was already producing crude oil which accounted for a huge proportion of the nation's foreign exchange earnings. Realising their enormous contribution to the national purse, the people in the region continued to agitate for the restoration of the Willink's dream by requesting that special attention to be paid to their developmental needs. This resulted in a Presidential Task Force which recommended that 1.5% of the Nigerian Federation Account should be used to develop the Niger Delta Region (NDDC, 2001). This, again, did not make much impact on the region's development, though it lasted from the Shehu Shagari era to the earlier years of the Ibrahim Babangida regime.

As a result of the growing restiveness in the area, the Federal Government set up the Belmore Commission to identify the root causes of conflicts and disaffection in the oil producing areas and to suggest the best way of intervention. The commission

recommended the establishment of a developmental agency for the region to ameliorate the problems that arise from oil production. This led to the establishment of the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1993.

More than its predecessors, OMPADEC appeared better established to make some impact on the development of the region. But, it was to suffer from a number of factors, namely: lack of a Master Plan that would define its developmental objectives and strategies, inadequate funding, official profligacy and unfavourable political climate. Though its projects spread throughout the region, it was to suffer an untimely demise, with a lot of unfinished projects in its wake.

The failure of the Niger Delta Development Board and Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission as development intervention agencies worsened the economic woes of the people of the Niger Delta and the environmental and ecological degradation of the area. This was mainly because of the intensified activities of oil prospecting companies which adversely affected farming and fishing – the predominant occupation of the people of the region. Oil spillages and years of gas flaring impacted negatively on the environment, thereby making the inhabitants to demand for remediation and prevention strategies to resuscitate the rich ecosystems of the Niger Delta.

The long years of perceived neglect and deprivation, coupled with insensitivity of some previous government and oil companies and the failures of previous development intervention agencies, had created, by the late 1990s, a volatile atmosphere characterized by protest, agitation and communal conflicts. By 1998, the Niger Delta Region had become a lawless zone, where youths disrupted oil production activities at will and communities frequently engaged, with little provocation, in destructive inter, and intra community strife.

This was the scenario when Chief Olusegun Obasanjo made his first presidential campaign visit to the region. He made a promise that should he became the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, he would establish a programme that would deal urgently and fundamentally with the developmental needs of the Niger Delta and bring sustainable prosperity and peace to the area. Following his election and inauguration as President on May 29, 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo made good his promise and within two weeks sent to the National Assembly a bill to establish the Niger Delta Development Commission.

The NDDC is not set up to replace the State or Local Government. The President reiterated this when he said:

The Niger Delta Development Commission has the potential to offer a lasting solution to the socio-economic difficulties of the Niger Delta Region which successive governments have grappled with even before independence in 1960. The Commission is an

agency and one of the stakeholders in the development of the Niger Delta Region. Its activities do not preclude other federal government development programmes that are normally due to the states. Nor is the NDDC intended to inhibit local initiatives that are the normal responsibilities of state governments, local governments and local communities. The commission is not to take over constitutional responsibilities of any tier of government in the region: the federal ministries and agencies will continue to carry out projects in the region, just as states, the local governments, the oil companies etc.

Apart from the above specific programmes, the Niger Delta had benefited from the general development programmes of government. Between independence 1960 and 1980, the following development programmes which were tied to the Land Use Decree and River Basin Development Authorities were created. These include Farm Settlement Schemes, Agricultural Extension Services, Nigerian Roots and Cereal Producing programmes and Operation Feed the Nation. At post-1980 other rural development programmes which appeared more properly focused and conceptualized emerged to include the Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRI), Better Life Programme (BLP) and the Family Support Programme (FSP). The chief objectives of these rural-based programmes were to improve the quality of life and standard of living of the rural populace. The activities to realize the objectives included the provision of rural infrastructures (feeder roads, electricity, water and sanitation, housing); promotion of rural industrialization; enhancement of the living standard of rural women through empowerment and development and promotion of family well-being. States in the Niger Delta benefited immensely from the aforesaid programmes. In addition, some of the multinational companies operating in the region have contributed to infrastructural development in the Niger Delta through provision of educational facilities e.g. schools; roads, portable water and electricity supply and health services.

What may be deduced from the foregoing is that, by now, all these organizations and their development programmes should have left a considerable positive impact in the Niger Delta. However, this is not the case. Despite being the richest geopolitical region in terms of natural resource endowment, the Niger Delta's potential for development has remained under-utilized and unrealized, as it is daily being threatened by environmental degradation and worsening economic conditions. Compounding this ecological devastation is the political marginalization and total oppression of the people through denial of their rights; including land rights (see the Land use Act of 1978).

The federal and state governments of Nigeria and developmental organizations respond to these through series of intervention programmes such as economic empowerment programmes. Implementation of these programmes is usually fraught with problems and wrong target approach most of which problems centre on undue politics, ethnic domination and outright insensitivity by the leaders and implementers of programmes.

The Dilemma of Institution and Governance Processes

There is no doubt that the Nigerian economy has evolved as a function of natural resource and this has shaped the way in which governance is defined over the years. Consider this statement for instance (Newswatch, 5th May, 2003):

'When groundnuts were produced in the North (Hausa), Cocoa in South West (Yoruba) and palm oil in the South East (Igbo) were the main foreign exchange earners for Nigeria, the regions had absolute control over these resources, which contributed to the massive human and infrastructural development of the regions. But when oil assumed the position of foreign exchange earners for Nigeria, regional control of this resource was reduced to 13 percent simply because where this oil is found is in the minority region of the Niger Delta'.

The South-South People's Conference (an advocacy group for the Niger Delta Region) said it out when it accused the federal government of a "neglect" of the area in preference for another region of the country in terms of development. The group cited the ecological fund disbursement and the withholding of 40% of monies accruable to oil-producing states through the 13% derivation. The group stated:

In the disbursement of ecological funds for example, the Lagos Bar Beach Project and Ogunpa Rechannelization Project both in the Southwest alone have taken more than what has been disbursed to all the projects in the whole of the South-South (News watch, 5 May, 2003).

The constitution permits the federal government to set aside 2 percent allocation from the federation account for ecological funds, of which 90 percent should be channeled to address the ecological problems in the Niger Delta Region. From the above statement, it is clear that sufficient attention has not been given to the Niger Delta Region in terms of development as well as redressing environmental problems associated with oil exploration.

The Landuse Decree of 1978 is another institutional factor that limits the capacity for poverty alleviation in the Niger Delta. It has been argued that the

transfer of property right to the government by virtue of section 1 of the Act has caused a lot of problem. According to the World Bank Report (1990) 'without tenure of security, resources are overused or overdeveloped leading to environmental degradation and rural impoverishment'. According to Oyeshola (1995:66), by the Land use Act, the interests and concerns of the oil producing communities are placed beneath those of oil corporations and the Nigeria treasury, which limits communities' abilities to make their own decisions about their surroundings. Following Article 1 of the Geneva Convention on territorial sea and the contiguous zone (1958), it would appear that oil spills from offshore drilling and which causes damage and destruction that affects the territorial sea is the exclusive business of the Federal Government (Ndukwe, 2000:109) by the land use Act. In this matter, the coastal inhabitants are the direct victims in many ways. They suffer the loss of fish, which may not only be the basic source of their food but of their livelihood. In the same vein, oil spills that destroy crops on land will raise the question as to who has the radical title, whose enjoyment of land is being interfered with? Is it the Governor that claims for his fellow citizens as a constructive trustee or must the affected people show a statutory or customary right of occupancy as an evidence of interest in land? Arising from the above are the following questions: how just is the 1978 Land use decree? And can the people of the Niger Delta whose environment is being polluted by the government or its agents or collaborators demand a commensurable compensation and a halt to further damage to the environment? Bryant (1992) observed that policies are not developed in a vacuum. Instead, they emerge from interaction and struggle among competing interest groups who strive to influence the development and substance of policy. The problem with the minority groups in Nigeria is that they lack the capacity to participate in national and state decision-making processes, because of numerical disadvantage. Thus, emerging laws and policies encourage the control of resources and supply in the hands of major ethnic groups, leaving others in abject poverty.

There are problems within the institutional structures set up for poverty alleviation in the Niger Delta Region. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) illustrates a clear example. In appointments and awards of contracts, there were complains that patronage is given to relatives of the political class to the detriment of the intended beneficiaries. They also noted high discrimination in project targeting and location in favour of highly placed government officials. This results in most projects being cited at wrong places, where there is no need for them. Jairath (2006) observed that in every decision making industry, there is no guarantee of political neutrality and this boils down to the question as to 'who makes decision? How are decisions made and executed? It can well be argued from this point that decision-making processes bordering on the Niger Delta carry a particular agenda

and specific interest which are promoted by the decision-makers as the mechanism works itself out through practiced governance. Who gets what depends on the level of political and economic influence or power commanded, while the poor continues to be marginalized and excluded, with a sense of alienation and neglects, as well as placing the people at the risk if offending (see Shaw and Tschiwula, 2002).

The establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was meant to alleviate poverty in the region. The NDDC today is an arm of government for which development must pass to the people. This angle of attempting to address the massive poverty and ecological problems of the people fail often ignore problematic government and 'failed' or 'corrupt' state and institutions. For instance who constitutes the NDDC? Who are those in charge at NDDC? Whose interest are they advancing? At present there has not been any process in the NDDC that links the Boards with community institutions, making it look like the elites affair. If governance is the process by which stakeholders articulate their interests, their input is absorbed, decisions are taken and implemented, and decision-makers are held accountable (Institute of Governance in Canada-cited by Franks, 2006), then what processes define stakeholdership at the NDDC? These are fundamental issues bordering on governance in the Niger Delta Region.

Concluding Remarks

The search for a suitable definition of governance as well as the understanding of the working of institutions has been a subject of intellectual discourse, especially with reference to the problems in the Niger Delta. Governance is often conceived as the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences-(UNDP,2001). In analysing governance, there are key issues to note and these include stakeholders, decisionmakers, input, partnerships, institutions while accountability becomes the key parameter for judging governance. Discussions in this paper underlie the fact that the issue of governance in the Niger Delta is not politically neutral. Understanding of governance system for poverty alleviation in the Niger Delta-its characteristics, its dynamics, its consequences and possible strategies for change-thus has to take off from a standpoint of 'how' 'whose' agenda is nurtured and propagated by the existing governance structure and how this is played out in the overall poverty alleviation exercise in the Niger Delta. Designing change of institutional and governance structures can follow from such an understanding of how poverty alleviation measures of the country are developed and structured. It is on this basis

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one can assess how poverty is conceived, how decisions are taken for its alleviation and who are the decision makers and implementers. In today's Niger Delta region, there has been politics surrounding poverty alleviation measures and these have led to cases of social and political exclusions and marginalisations. Endemic institutional corruption and poor representation have serious consequences on accountability and transparency in the delivery of projects and alleviation of poverty. More research is needed in this direction.

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