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Rural Economy, Development Opportunities and Constraints in Oil-Producing Communities of the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT - Oil-producing rural communities in Nigeria, no doubt, occupy strategic economic position in Nigeria's development opportunities. However, it is disheartening that this recognition is not accorded its prime position in designing strategies for achieving development goals. The rich oil and other resources in the area have rather generated controversies and the fallouts have constipated efforts towards exploiting opportunities for sustainable enterprise-oriented rural economy. This paper therefore, explores the forces that have sustained poverty, crises and constrained development in the area. Using a sample of three hundred and thirty respondents from six rural communities in the sampled Niger Delta States, the investigation observed that inconsiderable feeling of neglect by stakeholders in oil exploitation (27.27%), oil exploitation that dislocated the people of the area from their traditional economic engagements (28.18%), politicization and blocked access to productive assets (32.72%) are among the factors that have sustained poverty and crises in the area. Opportunities for enterprise-oriented rural economic development exist if the major constraints are addressed and certain institutional structures and support are provided. It recommends that for an enterprise-oriented economy to thrive and poverty and crises incidences mitigated, projects for development must be community-driven while their selection should

be community specific, taking into consideration the different peculiarities and comparative advantages.

Key words: Rural economy, Development opportunities, Development constraints, Niger Delta.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria has constituted a bug in the development policies and programmes of successive governments in Nigeria. Presently, the Yar' Adua's administration loses no sleep in ensuring adequate control and security in the region, at least to ensure peace and to make the place investor-friendly. The strategic position the Niger Delta occupies in the economy of Nigeria explains why every measure is taken to curtail incidences of crises there (Ikporukpo, 1998; Dumoye, 2002).

In spite of the abundance of oil and other natural and human resources in the Niger Delta area, particularly the rural communities where most of the oil is exploited, the people of the area have remained poor. The ecology of the area presents difficulties for penetration in the face of improved technology. The youths especially have remained unemployed. Crises of all sorts have characterized the area; kidnapping and terrorism have become a trade for the jobless youths who partly succumb to the material quest of some greedy Ijaws who recruit them for kidnapping escapades. There is insecurity of lives and property to the extent that the area has become a haven for kidnappers as well as being investor-unfriendly. The wealth in the area continues to generate controversies and quest for recourses control (Dumoye, 2002). Contributions of rural women to GPD have not been empirically quantified and statistically documented. In a way, the efforts and contributions of these women are hampered because they lack access to productive assets (Fowler, 1997; Iheriohanma, 2005).

Exigencies of Development Opportunities and Rural Economy

The presence of dormant and untapped enormous resources and potentials for development in the area implies that appropriate information and targets have not been exploited for sustainable Niger Delta rural economic development opportunities let alone for sustainable enterprise-oriented rural economy (Ekpebu, 1990; Iheriohanma, 2005). This underscores the relevance of the tenets and goals of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) (FGN, 2004). Sustainable development in the present Millennium does not allow capacity waste; rather it is people-driven (Mansuri and Rao, 2004). This is made real when the critical mass acquires the requisite knowledge, skills and capabilities needed in growing enterprises for the

benefit of current and future generations. The acquisition of requisite knowledge by this critical mass becomes necessary if all are targeted at developing critical catalyst for the exploitation of the abundant resources found in the area. A review of the conceptual foundations and evidence on the effectiveness of development programmes in the area reveals that projects do not elicit community participation neither do they effectively target the rural poor. They do not incorporate the participatory element of community-based nor community-driven development projects. (Antonie, 2001; Mansuri and Rao, 2004; Iheriohanma, 2005). The area lacks the critical development wheel that is a sine quo non in this technology- and knowledge-driven age characterized by global economy, internationalized development policies and interdependence. The crises situation in the Niger Delta, particularly the core oil-producing rural communities, is critical if the above mission of enterprise-oriented rural economy is to be realized. The security situation is more critical because it distracts rather than allows the institution of a people-driven development process and the development of enterprise-oriented rural economy that are foundation for sustainable economic growth and competition required for participation in the global economy (The World Bank, 2002). A glowing rural economy with identified exploitable resource, people participatory development economy and conducive environment for investment is fundamental and a pivotal requirement in a global economy. The crises situation colossally constrains development opportunities in the Niger Delta.

The above challenges constitute a problem in the present work. They unfold the need to develop and link rural sector economy of the oil-producing rural communities in Nigeria with global markets through identification and strengthening of the productive capacity and activities of the people. They direct attention to the establishment of institutions to support people- and knowledge-driven economic growth and poverty reduction strategies by identifying and exploiting the abundant human and material resources of the people with a view to promoting export-oriented productivity and activity in the sector. They challenge policies that would facilitate the institution of community-driven development projects where communities have direct control over key project decisions including management of investment funds (Mansuri and Rao, 2004). The assumption here is that, if the above are not addressed, government propositions on Niger Delta development will not achieve the Millennium Development Goals in line with NEEDs, SEEDs and LEEDs (FGN, 2004; 2005). Neglecting these issues stalls opportunities created for expansion of human resources and enterprise space and the building of capacity of the people to maximize these spaces in generating wealth.

One critical problem to be addressed is that productivity increases depend largely on the identification of locally based productive assets. It is argued that oil exploitation has destroyed the traditional economic activities and engagements of

the people and devastated the environment of the area (Ekpebu, 1990; Fowler, 1997; Iheriohanma, 2005). Yet there are still enormous untapped resources to be exploited. The adoption of systematically improved production practices, challenging attitude and perception, competitive access to productive assets, capacity building processes (Iheriohanma, 2005), assured community mobilization and participation programmes (Ikporukpo, 2001) and community-driven production processes and activities (Mansuri and Rao, 2004) depends on this identification of locally based productive assets of the people. This systematic approach is argued to institute appropriate strategies for sustainable enterprise-oriented rural economy, poverty and conflict reduction in the Niger Delta region. The assumption is that the adoption enables empowerment and capacity for collective actions which in turn provide for community self reliance and small-scale enterprises development.

Against the above backdrop, the following questions direct the focus of this argument.

- (a) Why have the people in the resource endowed Niger Delta remained poor, the area crises ridden and constrained in terms of development?
- (b) Is the Niger Delta crisis sustained by possible neglect and non-exploitation of development opportunities in the area?
- (c) What is to be done to ensure sustainable Niger Delta rural economy through improved development opportunities?

The general focus of this paper is the identification of appropriate strategies for sustainable Niger Delta rural economic development opportunities. Specifically, the focus includes the examination of the appropriate strategies for sustainable enterprise-oriented rural economy and the identification of constraints that have impacted on job creation, improved rural livelihood, poverty and conflict reduction.

These measures are expected to identify possible interventions for sustainable rural economic development opportunities in the oil-producing rural communities in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria.

METHOD

Sample: The purposive sampling technique was used to select two oil-producing rural communities in Rivers, Imo and Bayelsa States. These are Okwuzi and Aggah communities in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area in Rivers State; Assa and Mmahu in Ohaji/Egbema Local Government Area in Imo State; and, Iminigi and Akasa communities in Brass Local Government Area in Bayelsa State. These communities have oil wells where oil drilling is currently taking place. The systematic sampling method was used to select a hundred and ten (110) respondents from the selected two communities in each state. With this method, 60 respondents

from each state aged 50 years and above were selected thus 20 (33.33%) males and 40 (66.67%) females. Youths numbering 50 aged between 18 and 49 were selected thus 30 (60%) males and 20 (40%) females. Their educational qualifications ranged from Senior Secondary Certificate to University degree.

Procedure: Six trained field assistants, three males and three females collected the data. Two of them, a male and a female were sent to the two rural communities in each of the states. They administered the questionnaire on the respondents individually. Part A of the questionnaire was on personal information of the subjects while part B contained twenty close-ended questions related to the topic under research. Data collection for the whole exercise lasted for one month (March, 2004). All the copies of the questionnaire administered were returned, collated and found valid for analysis. This gives a hundred percent response rate. Data analysis was by descriptive statistical measures from where inferences and conclusions were drawn.

RESULTS

The major causes of poverty in oil-producing rural communities in Nigeria are indicated in Table 1. The results indicate that the devastation of the environment caused by oil exploitation takes the lead (28.18%). Neglect of the desires and development needs of the people, as occasioned by the major stakeholders in oil exploration and exploitation-the government and oil prospecting companies such as Shell, Chevron, Agip, etc, - has 27.27% response.

Table 1: Indication of Major Causes of Poverty in Oil-Producing Rural Communities in the Niger Delta

Causes of Poverty	Frequency	%
Environmental/Natural vegetation	54	16.36
Neglect by stakeholders in oil exploration	90	27.36
Poor human resources development in the area	74	22.42
Laziness	19	5.76
Oil exploitation and degradation	93	28.18
Total	330	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2004

Table 1 indicated that only 5.76% accepted laziness among the people as a cause of poverty in the area.

Table 2: Indication of Major Causes of Conflict and Crises in the Niger Delta

Major Causes of Conflict	Frequency	%
Feeling of neglect and deprivation	61	18.48
Cultural factors	20	6.06
Greedy leaders	40	12.12
Idleness	36	10.91
Blocked access to productive assets	58	17.58
Politicization of government policies	50	15.15
Insensitivity to the plight of Niger Deltans	65	19.70
Total	330	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2004

The responses in Table 2 indicate that major causes of conflict, crises and restiveness in Niger Delta include government and oil companies insensitivity to the plight of the people in the area (19.70%) and the people's feeling of neglect and deprivation (18.84%). Only 6.06% of the respondents indicated the cause to include cultural factors.

On possible constraints on job creation, improvement of livelihood and reduction of poverty and conflict, the results are indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Constraints on Job Creation, Improved Livelihood, Poverty and Conflict Reduction.

Variables and Constraints	Frequency	%
Poor infrastructural development	60	18.88
Politicization of government policies and development programmes	56	66.97
Militarization of youth vanguards/groups	27	18.18
Greedy leaders	25	7.58
Stakeholders poor response treatment to people's plight	56	16.97
Unexplored alternative resources	40	12.12
Neglect of capacity building in the area	66	20.00
Total	330	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2004

The respondents observed that stakeholders' neglect of capacity building opportunities alone constitute 20% of the constraints. About 52% of the respondents indicated that the constraints vary from poor infrastructural development in the area, politicization of government policies and development programmes and stakeholders' response treatment to the plight of the Niger Delta people.

Table 4: Identified Development Opportunities for Enterprise-Oriented Rural Economy in the Oil-Producing Rural Areas.

Identified Enterprise-Oriented Activities	Frequency	%
Mechanized agricultural production	65	19.70
Fresh water fishing and Aquaculture	84	25.46
Pottery and enamelware	53	16.06
Plantain farm	50	15.15
Art, crafts and iron work	56	16.96
Others (mentioned)	22	6.67
Total	330	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2004

The result in Table 4 shows that about 26% of the respondents identified fishing and aquaculture and related activities as alternative development opportunities to lift the area into an enterprise-oriented rural economy. About 35% indicated that despite devastation, environmental degradation and destruction of farm lands caused by oil exploration, the area is still fertile for agriculture more so when it is mechanized. Mechanized agriculture in this case involves engagement in production of food and cash crops and commercial plantain farming for exports. Only 6.67% of the respondents indicated engagement in electrical works, carpentry and other artisan and foundry economic activities.

Table 4: Institutional Support and Structures for Rural Economic Development Opportunities.

Institutional Support and Structures	Frequency	%
Establishment of cooperatives and self-Help movements	50	15.15
Access to loan facilities	65	19.70
Capacity Building and Skills Acquisition Centres	71	21.52
Establishment of SMEs/Industrialization	38	11.51
Assistance by major oil stakeholders	68	20.61
Establishments of Community Development Institutions	38	11.51
Total	330	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2004

On the institutional support and structures that would facilitate the establishment and sustainability of rural economic development, the opportunities include institution and free access to Capacity Building and Skills Acquisition Centres (21.52%) and fervent support for the people's economic needs, activities and programmes by major oil stakeholders (26.61%). About 20% indicated the need to have access to loan facilities.

Table 6 indicates strategic opportunities for leap-frogging and sustaining rural economic development in the oil-producing rural communities in line with the demands of global economy.

Table 6: Strategies for Sustainable Rural Economic Development in Oil-Producing Rural Communities.

Strategies for Development Opportunities	Frequency	%
Improved agricultural and agriculture related inputs	68	20.61
Improved infrastructural development	70	21.21
Improved response from major oil stakeholders	67	20.30
Establishment of export outlet for products	59	17.88
Skills acquisition and capacity building structures	66	20.00
Total	330	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2004

The result of investigation on strategic opportunities for the establishment of sustainable enterprise-oriented rural economy and Niger delta rural economic development opportunities shows that improved infrastructural development (21.21%) in the area ranks highest among the strategies. The table however, indicates that each of the strategic opportunities is as important as any other in this regard.

DISCUSSION

A major agitating question in this investigation is the examination of why the oil-producing rural communities in the Niger Delta region have remained poor despite the abundance of human and material resources found and some palliative investments made in the area. The exploration reveals that oil exploitation in the area (28.18%) has caused tremendous environmental degradation, pollution etc. and through its effects, has dislocated the people from their traditional agricultural and other activities (Ekpebu, 1990; Ikporukpo, 2001; Iheriohanma, 2005). This dislocation has further thrown the vast rural population into joblessness and at best to certain unproductive economic activities that cannot sustain the type of families found in rural illiterate communities. The devastating blow is further sustained by some other factors such as the neglect by stakeholders in oil exploration, poor human resource development programmes of government and oil explorers particularly and the peculiar environmental or natural vegetation that seems insurmountable to the type of technology used for development. Improved technology is used to exploit the oil found in the area yet it remains inadequate for development purpose. This implies exploitation and subjugation of the area to the position of economic periphery status that sustains the advanced economy of the North (Koo, 1981; Galtung, 1981). These rather perpetuate the poverty in the Niger Delta region. It further creates inequality in economic development where the region supplies only raw materials to the technologically developed North and earns paltry foreign exchange. The realization of this situation by the affected region/residence, it is argued, engenders feeling of deprivation and ill feeling. The inequality

Iheriohanma

inhibits enterprise-oriented rural economic development as the identified ill feeling undermines implementation of good public policy as well as discourages competitive processes. The persistent poverty therefore subsists in a structural form.

Inequality, ill feeling, economic peripheral status of the Niger Delta are further aggravated and sustained by other causes of conflict and crises. Such factors as insensitivity of major stakeholders in oil exploration to the plight of the people, the unquantifiable people's feeling of neglect and deprivation, blocked access of the people to productive assets and politicization of government policies and programmes on Niger Delta development are implicated as causal factors to conflict. They systematically therefore, agitate the minds of the people towards patterned conflict and crises against perceived enemies in the quest for real needs such as infrastructural and sustainable development, jobs, security, environmental protection and subsequent interest in resource control as a way forward. These findings are in agreement with the positions of Ikporukpo (1998), Naanem (2002), Ugochukwu (2002) and Iheriohanma (2005; 2006) on the causal factors to conflict and crises in the Niger Delta. The findings support earlier works of Ikporikpo (2001) and Iheriohanma (2005) with respect to the people's positions, interests, wants, needs, fears and possible sustainable solutions to their plight. The findings further explicate the various works of Koo (1981) and Galtung (1981) on the relationship between stakeholders' neglect of their sources of wealth, their environment of operation, non-exploitation of development opportunities and capacity building structure for the people on one hand and crises on the other. The perceived feelings of marginalization and neglect, and subsequent expectations from government and stakeholders in oil exploration are results of poor institutional framework, inefficient and poor political will. It is argued here that the monopolistic nature, constitutional provisions and government stance on provision of palliative measures in the form of infrastructure to cushion the effects of oil exploitation and environmental degradation rather retarded competition and private sector initiative and investment in the oil-producing areas particularly. The position taken here is that an institutional framework that proliferates the idea of expectations and compensation, in the manner it is done in the Niger Delta situation, destroys the known basis of human progress. These basis of human progress includes competition and entrepreneurship. The response on cultural factors as causes of conflict and crises situation dismisses the position of major stakeholders in oil exploitation. They present the idea that the people are: lazy and enjoy idleness expecting government and oil companies to provide manna for them always, phobic, prevalently polygamous and have poor orientation and attitude towards development, government policies and programmes (Iheriohanma, 2005). This argument is used to justify the structural poverty inflicted on the oil-producing rural communities.

In an environment infested with structurally persistent poverty, crises situation remains unabated, development and investment are scared. These constrain job creation, improved livelihood and poverty reduction. This position substantiates Ikporukpo's (2001) and Iheriohanma's (2005) arguments that the plea of stakeholders on the 'undevelopable' environment of the Niger Delta has frustrated efforts at alleviating poverty, job creation etc. If this position is held, how can improved technology be used to exploit oil in the Niger Delta, yet the same technology is frustrated in developing the "undevelopable environment" where oil is exploited? It further clarifies Onwuka's (1992) position that the multinational oil companies are business structures whose survival instinct is principally towards earning profit from its operations. The argument of this investigation is therefore, that the existence of these constraints are purposive and as such can be used to defend the poor infrastructural development in the Niger Delta region, politicization of government policies and development programmes, poor stakeholders' response treatment to the people's plight, militarization of youths' vanguards, inability to explore alternatives in the area of possible economic engagement. It presupposes that the efforts at development neglect capacity building opportunities, especially among the youths. Neglect of possible alternative economic opportunities therefore, sustains these crises in the Niger Delta region.

The objective that investigated the identification of strategic opportunities for sustainable enterprise-oriented rural economy and Niger Delta Development Opportunities observed that despite devastation done to the environment by oil exploitation and, in spite of people's disengagement in traditional agriculture and related economic activities, some other opportunities still exist. The land still remains fertile for agriculture if it is mechanized. Food and cash crop production is advocated if stakeholders can assist. A lucrative opportunity exists in fish farming and aquaculture, especially in Bayelsa and Rivers States where a greater mass of the land area is fresh water for fish farming. The argument is that fresh water fish farming, aquaculture and related economic activities such as pottery and enamelware – by-products of aquaculture – can be commercialized for enterprise-oriented rural economy in the area if the relevant institutional structures and support are put in place (see Tables 5 and 6). What is needed are the relevant institutions, the political will or enforcement mechanisms, the structures and the organizations that must support market transactions. This underscores the importance of an established market economy framework for competition and private sector that drive the process of economic development in the area. The identification, selection and implementation of the projects and alternative economic engagements should involve the people at all stages. They should be community-driven to elicit participation and mitigate issues of suspicion.

The strategies for sustainable rural economic development opportunities in the oil producing Niger Delta area and which can launch the nation into an enterprise-oriented rural economy indicate improved agricultural and agriculture related inputs, improved infrastructure which is the bedrock or pillar for economic development, skills acquisition and capacity building structure for the teaming and roaming youths especially who are pulls for militant recruitment by faceless power- and wealth-mongers and expatriate hijackers provision of export outlet for products from the area, a creation of a market economy framework etc. A country of about 140 million people, with a greater percentage of its poor in the rural areas needs diversification in its economy. The energy sector requires a serious overhaul. It is discouraging that a country that needs about 40,000 MW of electricity generates barely 1,700 MW. This affects infrastructural development and job creation in the rural areas especially in the oil-producing Niger Delta. The need for improved response to distress calls for economic and financial assistance, infrastructural provisions and development and security by government and oil companies cannot be over emphasized (Ikporukpo, 2001; Iheriohanma, 2005; 2006). These strategies do not only reduce poverty and conflict (Ikporukpo, 2001), they expand economic opportunities by increasing production capacity, creating jobs, creating wealth and transforming the rural communities in the Niger Delta from a near subsistence – based economic sector to a commercially competitive and formidably sustainable enterprise-oriented economy. It will also affect positively the attitudes and perceptions of the people towards the need to accommodate and implement government policies and programmes and assist in development programmes of oil companies. In all, crises, conflict and poverty will be attenuated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the above indications, the following recommendations and interventions are proposed.

- Government and oil companies operating in Nigeria are expected to re-enforce and implement their poverty alleviation policies and programmes by exploring alternative economic engagements and opportunities for the rural dwellers in the oil-producing communities. The issues of capacity building in the area should take the centre stage.
- Projects for development of the area should not only be community-based to actively involve beneficiaries in their design and management but community-driven so that the communities have direct control over these key project decisions as well as their management and investment funds. This is expected to elicit tacit and overt participation by the people, reduce problem of information gap and suspicion and allow the people to identify projects and eligible beneficiaries.

Rural economy, development opportunities and constraints

- The identification of alternative development opportunities for enterprise-oriented rural economy presents an array of activities in their specific areas. The selection of intervention projects and programmes should investigate the peculiarities of the target areas, identify the comparative advantages and the abundance of relevant human capacity to pursue such economic activities. The selection of any enterprise-oriented economic activity demands the provision of the necessary institutional support and structures to enable it thrive. It also demands an unflinching political will from the relevant government.

CONCLUSION

The problem of the oil-producing rural communities or especially, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is not insurmountable, as some stakeholders and beneficiaries of the crises situation would want us to believe. It only demands a conscientious and systematic approach that accommodates the need to position the place rightly in the economic scheme of the nation, a sincere and responsive political will by the government and articulation of the potentials and development opportunities that abound in the area. It is argued that these measures, when properly implemented, will curtail the incidences of crises, conflict and poverty and establish a sustainable Niger Delta rural economic development blueprint.

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