

# Elites, Oil and Violence Mitigation in the Niger Delta

The crisis in the oil-rich Niger Delta in Nigeria is one of the world's forgotten conflicts in which thousands have been killed and the country's vital oil industry has suffered. In the past twenty years, environmental destruction, youth unemployment, poverty and organised crime (such as massive oil theft) have persisted or even increased. The federal government's brutal military intervention, ineffective development initiatives and a strategy of coopting powerful militant group leaders with judicial and economic benefits have failed to address the causes and drivers of conflict. A bolder, longer-term approach to building lasting peace in the Niger Delta is urgently needed, in which Nigeria's elite and their international partners commit to building a pro-development political settlement through far-reaching governance reforms.

## Violence in the Niger Delta

For over two decades, Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region has been affected by recurring cycles of violence in which several thousand people have lost their lives. Some of these violent episodes have been more devastating and virulent than others; yet all have been linked, in one way or another, to Nigeria's huge oil wealth, and the struggle over its appropriation and distribution between the region and the federal government in Abuja. As Nigeria transitioned from military to civilian-electoral rule in 1999, both those responsible for the violence and the political context in which it has played out have evolved. Earlier social mobilisation for 'resource control', development and a halt to environmental destruction was overtaken by armed militancy with close ties to organised crime.

Until the end of military rule, violence in the Delta was mostly driven by the federal state. Allied with powerful transnational oil companies, and heeding their calls for the maintenance of a trouble-free business environment, Nigeria's military governments brutally repressed protest and social mobilisation. With the military-controlled transition to civilian-electoral rule and the election of Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) – a retired army general, former military head of state and candidate of the newly founded, patronage-based Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) – the dynamics of violence in the Delta changed, but not for better.

Instead of opening up space for democratic politics, most elections were surrounded by bloodshed as corrupt politicians (more often than not associated

with the PDP) and their political 'godfathers' in Abuja and elsewhere jockeyed for power in the oil-rich region. They armed youth gangs to intimidate and assault political contenders and rig polls. In this increasingly violent setting emerged a new breed of armed militant groups capable of dealing serious blows to the vital oil industry and severely disrupting production. Their criminal activities, including kidnapping and the large-scale theft and illegal refining of oil, expanded significantly under the watch – and sometimes the participation – of members of state security forces deployed to the Delta, as well as regional and federal political elites.

Until 2009, when President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007–2010) of the PDP declared an amnesty for Niger Delta militant groups, the federal government sought to control the crisis through a mix of heavy-handed military interventions and top-down, largely ineffective development initiatives. Neither the deployment of a Joint Task Force (JTF), which has been accused of committing grave human rights violations, nor the establishment of a specialised commission and a federal ministry charged with addressing development issues in the Niger Delta have visibly contributed to improving the situation in the region.

The oil majors' corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, including quite significant community assistance and development programmes, could not fill the void generated by the Nigerian government's failure to deliver on development and improved governance. The oil corporations' practice of paying ▶

for local security services spurred competition and violent conflict between communities and ethnic groups. International aid donors found the situation in the Niger Delta for the most part too risky, dangerous and volatile to maintain anything but a low profile with minimum exposure.

While the amnesty and the associated disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme has produced a drop in violence in the Delta, and oil production has returned to pre-2006 levels, many of the socio-economic grievances and political demands of local populations that sparked protests in the 1990s have not been addressed. Unemployment and lack of opportunities for youth remain particularly pressing problems. The DDR programme was designed in a hurry; the effective reintegration of mid-ranking commanders and the rank and file of the militant groups into social and economic life has not been a priority. Rampant criminal activities in the Niger Delta, including oil theft and illegal oil refining, have not been contained. Kidnapping appears to be on the rise again.

More than anything else, the amnesty has been a means used by the federal political elite to co-opt a small group of militant leaders into Nigeria's post-1999 political settlement by offering them judicial impunity for their past misdeeds and lucrative financial opportunities in the oil industry. Likewise, the federal security forces have not been held to account for the serious human rights violations they committed in the Delta. President Goodluck Jonathan, an Ijaw from the Niger Delta who was Yar' Adua's vice-president and won a comparatively clean election in 2011 after serving as interim head of state following Yar' Adua's death, has also sought to maintain the peace through a strategy of rolling bargains with regional elites and ex-militant leaders. There is no accountability in these processes, and the magnitude of federal funds used to placate regional strongmen and their political 'godfathers' is open to speculation.

### **Nigeria's post-1999 political settlement**

Analyses of the emergence of social protest and, later on, armed militancy in the Niger Delta have focused on 'need' (grievances due to political repression and economic deprivation), 'creed' (feelings of selective discrimination and marginalisation based on beliefs and identity), and 'greed' (personal or group pursuit of economic gain). Combined, these approaches capture important elements of the picture but fall short of contributing to an understanding of the broader political-institutional and political economy factors that have underpinned and driven violence in the Niger Delta since the 1990s.

A focus on the nature and evolution of Nigeria's political settlement in the wake of the transition to civilian-electoral rule helps to shed light on the fundamental question of why violence involving a growing number of state and non-state actors escalated and receded at certain points after the political transition; and what would be the elements of a more effective strategy for addressing the causes and manifestations of violence or preventing its re-emergence. Political settlements can usefully be defined as formal and informal one-off events, such as political elite pacts, peace agreements and amnesties. But they also take the form of more dynamic and fluid processes of [overt and covert] negotiation, compromise, bargaining, accommodation, coalition and network-building between powerful individuals and groups.

Nigeria's dominant elite includes senior government and civil service officials, political (party) leaders and 'godfathers', influential businessmen, retired military officers, Nigerian and international oil industry bosses, and Niger Delta community chiefs. All of them have vested interests in maintaining or expanding their stakes in Nigeria's 'oil poker'. There are some contending, pro-reform elites in the democratic political opposition to the hegemonic PDP, in pockets of the state at the federal and regional levels, and in civil society and the media. But they have been a relatively weak minority since the transition to civilian-electoral rule.

While it is crucial to recognise that Nigeria is not a failed state, it is equally important to acknowledge that it is a polity which is underpinned by a political settlement that constrains democratic politics, legitimate and effective governance and pro-development reform – and drives violence in the Niger Delta and other parts of the country. For decades, oil and the appropriation of oil rents by domestic elites and their international oil business partners have shaped this settlement.

There have been numerous political and social reform initiatives and push-back from pro-democracy, human rights and social grass-roots organisations in the Delta and elsewhere – even from sectors within the federal state and some regional governments. But thus far these groups have been unable to influence and change dominant elite interests and incentives in any significant way. Rather, they have been sidelined and/or victimised by alliances and coalitions of powerful state and non-state groups that have shown themselves to be determined to uphold the existing settlement, and use unlawful and violent means in the process.

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## Building a pro-development political settlement through governance reform

Addressing development and violence in the Niger Delta requires profound changes in the way Nigeria's dominant elites relate to, and interact with, their own country and fellow citizens. Given the prominence of oil in the country's political economy the aim should be to harness natural resource wealth for the benefit of the majority, not the few – whose ranks have recently been swelled by former militant commanders who learned that violence pays.

In this setting it is essential to focus on reforming governance, that is, the 'processes of exercising public authority through the making of *collectively binding rules* and the *effective provision* of public goods and services by both *state and non-state actors*'. Emphasising the importance of governance reform questions the conventional assumption that it is the exclusionary nature of a political settlement that can promote violence. According to this view, a more inclusive or 'inclusive enough' political settlement reduces the risk of [contending] elites seeking recourse to violence, since they are included in authoritative political and economic decision-making and policy processes.

The Niger Delta experience reveals that 'inclusivity' on its own is a weak indicator for determining whether a political settlement is violence-prone or not. The 2009 presidential amnesty and the 2011 election of Goodluck Jonathan resulted in expanding the existing settlement through the co-optation of militant leaders into the conservative and predatory post-1999 political settlement, and the election of an Ijaw from the Delta to the highest office. Beyond contributing to the fragile pacification of the Delta, these processes have not led to any tangible changes in the way the federal and regional governments administer and distribute the country's natural resource wealth, nor how they address grievances, poverty, criminality and violence in the Delta and beyond.

It is therefore paramount to ask *how* a political settlement is expanded to include additional political and social groups; *who* is included and *why*; and *what the expansion of the settlement means* in terms of reducing violence – or the risk thereof – through better governance and public policies that are capable of addressing socioeconomic grievances and other major drivers of violence, such as criminal opportunities associated with oil theft and kidnapping. Arguably, in Nigeria such a process requires significant and coordinated governance reforms at the local, regional and federal levels.

## Policy outlook

Outside leverage for such reforms is limited. Issues of sovereignty and vested interests in the oil industry have led domestic political elites to resist international donor assistance on many occasions in the past. Consequently, donors have focused on low-key, small-scale interventions in the Niger Delta that have mostly been concerned with addressing regional and local governance, development and conflict mitigation issues. But they have shied away from engaging the 'elephant in the room', i.e. building a pro-development political settlement, which inevitably will continue to be oil-centred, through coordinated governance reform at the local, regional and federal levels. While the oil majors have evolved their engagement with communities in the Delta and are nowadays allocating significant amounts to community development, their business rationale continues to focus on profit-making and not governance reform.

Among progressive, reform-minded civil society and political and social sectors in the Niger Delta and Abuja there is a strong view that top-down and militarised approaches to development, conflict resolution and violence mitigation in the Delta have been counter-productive or outright failures. Strengthening accountability mechanisms at the local and regional levels are perceived to be crucial to improve service delivery, generate economic opportunities, particularly for youth, reduce public corruption and waste, and rein in the power of the massive patronage networks that feed on Nigeria's oil wealth. It should be added that there is also a great need for strengthening accountability at the federal level and exercising more effective oversight of the oil majors and their operations.

Further, there is awareness that without first boosting accountability, elections will continue to prompt political violence and slow economic development, particularly if the patronage-based political parties are not reformed, and if they refrain from strengthening internal democratic structures and processes, such as primaries. Judicial impunity is seen as another major problem. Profound reforms of Nigeria's ailing justice and law enforcement systems are required to rein in corruption and rampant [state-sponsored] criminal activities associated with the appropriation of oil rents.

The 2009 amnesty and the DDR programme are perceived as federal government measures to placate and co-opt the most powerful militant leaders without contributing to building lasting peace and advancing development in the Niger Delta. The effective reintegration of former militants and their support networks into economic and social life has to be addressed urgently. ➡

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## Opportunities and challenges for Nigeria and the international community

These are huge tasks for any country and they clearly are for Nigeria. However, if the country and its international partners, including the transnational oil companies, fail to think big and adopt a comprehensive and necessarily longer-term strategy to address serious governance problems that affect the situation in the Niger Delta, there is a real risk that the region will see the re-emergence of large-scale violence.

On a positive note, if Nigeria were to make progress on the governance front this would not only reduce the risk of violence in the Delta flaring up again, but also contribute to changing the intrinsically violence-prone

nature of the post-1999 political settlement. This time the inclusion of non-violent elites would not come about through the co-optation of powerful actors that are using violence and unlawful means to further their own economic and political goals, but through the strengthened democratic process and progressively more accountable and legitimate governance.

The international donor community should help Nigeria build a pro-development political settlement. It can do this by offering its good offices as a facilitator and supporter of political and policy dialogue between Nigerians, increasing development assistance in the policy areas identified below, and reducing the negative fall-out of the oil majors' interests and operations in the country.

## Policy recommendations

- Policy action in the following macro-areas is key to advancing violence mitigation in the Niger Delta.
- Strengthening accountability and mechanisms of redress at the local through to the federal levels of government and governance.
- Building the capacity of Niger Delta civil society as well as community and social organisations and movements to participate in decision-making processes related to local and regional development and oil production.
- Linking the reintegration into economic and social life of demobilised militants to local development efforts in the Niger Delta, with a particular focus on job creation and vocational training for youth.
- Democratising Nigeria's political parties, especially the PDP, to move away from patronage-based and godfather politics; and strengthening the electoral process.
- Strengthening Nigeria's justice system to reduce judicial impunity, corruption, human rights violations by state security forces and [state-sponsored] criminality, such as massive oil theft and illegal oil lifting.



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## Further reading

Schultze-Kraft, M. (2013) 'Nigeria's Post-1999 Political Settlement and Violence Mitigation in the Niger Delta', Brighton: IDS

## Credits

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