INTER-COMMUNITY CONFLICTS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN THE NIGER DELTA, NIGERIA: THE POLITICS, THE GEOGRAPHY AND THE PROSPECTS FOR ENDURING PEACE

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Abstract
Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the country has experienced various kinds of violent conflict and these have hindered its quest for development. The experiences cut-across the six geo-political zones of the country. Conflicts in the South-South geo-political zone (the Niger Delta region of Nigeria) are of various categories and the management strategies of these conflicts are determined by the type of conflict. This paper examines the various factors surrounding the occurrence and recurrence of inter-community conflicts and the gaps in the management strategies. The scope of the paper is to identify the inter-community conflicts management strategies and provide answers to why those strategies have not effectively curbed some of the recurring inter community conflicts. To achieve this, we conducted interviews and focus group discussions stakeholders and actors in four communities in Delta State. The choice of the communities beyond the fact that they have been involved in recurring conflicts was because studies have shown that the causes and management strategies of inter-community conflicts in the Niger Delta are significantly the same. Therefore, the views of actors, victims, and stakeholders in the conflicts in these communities are insightful and detailed for our analysis. In addition, a survey of academic publications and reports, government gazettes and reports of some Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were utilized.

Key words: Community Conflict, Management strategies, Niger Delta, Politics

Abstrait
Depuis l'indépendance du Nigéria en 1960, le pays a connu divers types de conflits violents qui ont entravé sa quête de développement. Les expériences touchent les six zones géopolitiques du pays. Les conflits dans la zone géopolitique Sud-Sud (la région du delta du Niger au Nigéria) appartiennent à différentes catégories et les stratégies de gestion de ces conflits sont déterminées par le type de conflit. Ce document examine les différents facteurs liés à la présence et à la récurrence de conflits intercommunautaires et aux lacunes dans les stratégies de gestion. L'objectif de ce document est d'identifier les stratégies de gestion des conflits intercommunautaires et de fournir les réponses aux raisons pour lesquelles ces stratégies n'ont pas efficacement limité certains des conflits récurrents intercommunautaires. Pour ce faire, nous avons mené des entretiens et des

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discussions de groupe avec des parties prenantes et des acteurs de quatre communautés de l'État de Delta. Le choix des communautés au-delà du fait qu'elles ont été impliquées dans des conflits récurrents s'explique par le fait que des études ont montré que les causes et les stratégies de gestion des conflits intercommunautaires dans le delta du Niger sont sensiblement les mêmes. Par conséquent, les points de vue des acteurs, des victimes et des acteurs des conflits dans ces communautés sont révélateurs et détaillés pour notre analyse. En outre, une enquête sur les publications et rapports universitaires, les journaux officiels et les rapports de certaines organisations non gouvernementales (ONG) a été utilisée.

Mots-clés: conflit communautaire, stratégies de gestion, delta du Niger, politique

Introduction
Conflict is inevitable in every society. It is universal as it occurs in all climes and places. As long as there are interactions amongst individuals, conflict is bound to occur. It is a fundamental human and societal trait. In human societies, most conflicts end in some sort of agreement or accommodation or in the fusion of the two opposing groups. Conflicts are often classified into environmental, economic, social and political conflicts. Generally, the Niger Delta region has a long history of conflicts wrapped up in the agitation for development and recognition (Etekpe & Ibaba, 2013). Consequently, Etekpe (2008) traced the root causes of conflict in the region to colonialism. In his words, "With colonialism in the 1900s, the Niger Delta became a conflict-ridden region due mainly to unfair trade practice and marginalization of the people of the region." He added that the post-colonial state controlled by the three majority ethnic nationalities of Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo adopted the British colonial policies that prompted conflicts in the region especially with the oil boom form 1970 (Etekpe, 2008).

Similarly, Ibaba (2017) believes that conflicts in the Niger Delta began as agitations against oil companies by oil producing communities in the 1970s and that the agitations are centered on demand for development attention, environmental protection and payment for adequate compensation for damages caused by oil companies such as oil spills. Ibaba (2010) noted further that the conflicts in the region have witnessed several transformations and these have elevated the agitations to political demands (such as restructuring of the Nigerian federation, resource ownership and self-determination).

Studies have linked the level of conflicts in the Niger Delta to under-development. The argument is that the enormous wealth from the region exists side by side with extremely poor communities (Asuka, 2010). This is so when one realizes that oil exploration has very devastating impact on the environment, unfavorable climatic conditions and a widespread discontentment among the people. More so, the Nigerian state's neglect of communities in the region have created dislocation of traditional, social and family values leading to compromised leadership where communities are less organized and sometimes resort to violent clashes to settle differences among themselves or to claim benefits they perceive belong to them but in contention. The inevitability of conflict has made scholars to be very concerned about what to do about it. This paper is an attempt in that direction. The Niger Delta is today, a region of intense crisis, hostilities and violent confrontation: intra and inter-ethnic and community conflicts.

The remaining part of the paper is divided into seven sections which include; conceptual clarification, an insight into inter-community conflicts in the Niger Delta. The third section examines the causes of inter-community conflicts in the Niger Delta while the one after discusses

the strategies for inter-community conflict management. Other sections examined the politics, geography and the possibilities for enduring peace in the region.

Conceptual Clarification
This section attempts to clarify the basic concepts in this study in a bid to reduce the ambiguity that would be associated with different interpretation of the concepts.

Conflict/Inter-Community Conflicts
The concept "conflict" is used interchangeably with war, clash, strife and many others. The concept conveys many meaning and carries many connotations. Alapiki (2008) believed that in defining conflict, some have focused on manifest behaviour while others emphasis either difference in goals or perception. Deutsh (1973) posited that conflict exist whenever incompatible activities occur, that is an action that is incompatible with another action and prevents, obstructs, interferes, injures or in some ways makes the later less likely to be effective. Conflict arises when there are incompatible or mutually exclusive goals or aims or values exposed by human beings". In the third category of definitions which focus on perceptions, Pruitt, Jeffrey and Rubin, (1986) asserted that "conflict means perceived divergence of interest or a belief that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously.

In his attempt to define conflict holistically, Bujra (2002) used the term to mean a violent and armed confrontation and struggle between groups, the state and one or more groups and between two or more states. In such confrontations and struggle, some of those involve are injured or killed. Generally, conflict implies the use of organized force between different segments of society pursuing contradictory policies, goal and or ideology with each group seeking to impose its position on the other.

Conflict occurs in all areas of life and can occur within a community or between communities. Intra-community conflict involves the struggle of groups or individuals over values, scare resources, power and status within a community in which the aim of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or at most eliminate their rivals. This may be due to long standing marginalization, embezzlement, land disputes, etc (Okoh, 2005). Inter-community conflicts on the other hand have to do with a situation where there is a long standing dispute between two or more separate communities over unsettled boundary problems, incursion into community land or dispute over oil bearing/producing land as often the case in the Niger Delta (Ibaba, 2008). Intra community or inter-community conflict are basically local conflict organized along shared community identity and are not formally categorized rebel groups or militias.

Analysts believe that intra/inter community conflicts lack formal military organization but may still involve a high level of coordination. Notably, all parties involved in these conflicts are subject to the state.

The Niger Delta
The Niger Delta situated in the southern part of Nigeria and bordered to the south by the Atlantic Ocean and to the East by Cameroon has acquired multiplicity of meaning in recent times. There are however two broad view points of the Niger Delta, one that describes it as a geographic entity and the other which sees it as an oil producing region. Whereas the geographic definition list six (6) states (Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo and Rivers) as component states of all

the region, Abia, Imo and Ondo States are included in the conception of the Niger Delta as oil producing region (Ibaba, 2017).

In the first of a four volume report of the Niger Delta Environment survey (NDES) (1997) cited in Tamuno (1999), the Niger Delta was defined based on political, cartographic and ethnographic setting. The NDES cartographic definition placed the limits of the area thus:

- North at Aboh
- West from the Benin River estuary
- East to the Imo River estuary
- South to palm pout, below Akassa and the Nun River estuary.

It is not our intention in this paper to be part of the controversies surrounding the description of the Niger Delta, neither are we disproving the validity of army, however, the six-state structure defined by geographic considerations defines the Niger Delta in this paper.

Inter-Community Conflicts in the Niger Delta

There have been more inter-community conflicts involving the use of firearms than either inter-ethnic or intra-community conflicts in the Niger Delta. Ikporukpo (2008) identified nineteen of such conflicts in Bayelsa State, thirty three in Delta State and twenty three in Rivers State. Whereas, some of these cases are past and more or less, extinct, some have been like active volcanoes ready to erupt at any time.

The most significant ones in Bayelsa State are: Okpoama vs Ewoama, Amadike vs Epebu, Kaiama vs Beletiama, Beletiama vs Egweama, and Sangana vs Koluama. In the case of Delta State, they include, Emede vs Igbide, Esanma vs Gbarigolo, Aladja vs Ogbe-Ijoh, Ogidigbe vs Okerenkoko, and Odimodi vs Ogulagha. The following are the most significant in Rivers State: Emohua vs Ogbakiri, Bille vs Ke, Okrika vs Elesa Eleme, Soku vs Kula, and Abuloma vs Okuru-Ama. Other recently recorded inter-community conflicts within the region include:

Akwa-Ibom State
- On May 2012, Ebughu Vs Effiat Communities in Mbo Local Government Area.
- January, 2013, two communities in Esit-Eket Local Government Area.
- In 2014, Communal Clash between Nkari People in Akwa-Ibom and the Arochukwu people in Abia State.
- In 2014, Communal clash between Anakpa and Nnaenin communities in Uruean Local government Area.
- Oku Iboko Community in Akwa Ibom and Ikot Offiong in Cross River States.

Cross River State
- In 2014, a communal clash between Usumutung and Ediba
- In 2016, Inyima community in Yakurr and Onyadama Community in Obubra Local Government Area.
- Mkpani and Nko communities in Yakurr Local Government Area.
- Oyoba Village in Wanikade and Ehetezi in Wanihem.
- In Obu du LGA, the clash was between Kutai and Okurtong communities.

Delta State
- Oviri Olomu and Ukuawama communities, both in Ughelli LGA
- Isselegu and Ibabu communities in Ndokwa West and east LGAs respectively
- Umusadege and Umasam
- Ugborodo and Gbaramatu

Edo State
- Sasaro Vs Igarra
- Igarra Vs Emwan
- Ekpedo in Akoko Edo LGA Vs Ogori Magongo in Kogi State.
- Bukuma and Ekpedo in Akoko Edo LGA
- Okha Vs Uroho communities, Ikpoba-Okha LGA

Rivers State
- Nweebiara Vs Barako communities both in Gokana LGA
- Deken Vs Deyor communities in Gokana LGA
- Kporghor community in Tai LGA and Wakama community in Ogu/Bolo LGA
- Korokoro community in Tai Vs Afam in Oyigbo LGAs

Causes of Inter-Community Conflicts in the Niger Delta
The causes of inter-community conflicts in the Niger Delta region like in several other places are centered around ownership of land/boundary disputes, Kingship and chieftaincy tussles, benefits/rewards derivable from government or multi-national companies, location and site projects, greed and corruption. In extreme cases, disagreements between two or more individuals can lead to inter-community conflicts.

Whenever these conflicts occur, they cause untold economic, political, social and humanitarian havoc in the communities and its environs. Such havoc includes distrust and lack of cooperation amongst the people that have lived together for decades. Ogbe-Ijoh and Aladja are two communities that have lived together, bought and sold in same markets before the conflict over ownership of land occurred. The conflict had not only stopped the cordial relationship that existed before them, people from both communities now live in fear of being ambushed and killed. Inter-community conflicts have resulted in the loss of lives and properties which in turn impoverish families leaving lasting pains and hatred that trigger off violence anytime. In any conflict situation, people are killed through direct violence or indirectly through the consequences of conflict such as malnutrition and increased risk of communicable diseases. While it is possible to estimate the number that died through malnutrition, increased risk of communicable diseases and violent crimes that are associated with conflicts cannot be estimated. Studies have equally showed how difficult it is to obtain accurate estimate of the total number of people that died in a conflict. More often than not, the numbers presented are either increased to attract sympathy or reduced to reduce tension; depending on the position of the analyst or the availability of data in one's possession.

For instance, Coghlan, Brenman and Ngoy (2008) estimated the total death toll from the Congolese war at about 3.9 million. Their total death toll differs markedly from Lacina and Gleditsch (2005) who put the total at 2.5 million. The comparison of these numbers shows how widely figures of total death for same war differ. However, in spite of the various discrepancies, the fact that conflicts of any nature result in deaths and displacement of people as well as longer term consequences and spillovers to neighboring communities should be of concern to everybody. That most of the communities involved in conflicts are yearning for development make it more worrisome because conflicts stall development of the economy and infrastructure of the affected communities. This is in addition to the tragedy of capital flight. There are several devastating impacts of inter-community conflicts in the Niger Delta that are beyond the focus of this paper.

Conflicts Management Strategies

Conflict management refers to the techniques and ideas designed to reduce the negative effects of conflict and enhance the positive outcome for all parties involved. The processes of conflict management involves the establishment of mechanisms that detect early warning signals and record specific indicator that may help to predict impending conflict, this is undertaken in order to avoid the occurrence of violence and its escalation and occurrence. Others include peace promotion and consolidation, conflict control and abatement and conflict resolution (Ikporukpo, 2016). Just as the causes of conflict are diverse, so also are the strategies to curb or manage it. The challenge facing any government is not the elimination of conflict but rather how to effectively address it when it arises. In line with this, Opukri and Etekpe (2008) recommended a multi-dimensional approach viz; adoption of a modified multi-track approach, demonstrating political will on the part of the state and federal government, limiting the proliferation of arms and with reference to the Niger Delta, they suggested that the region should be demilitarized.

Specifically, the Niger Delta is prone to different forms of conflict largely linked to the underdevelopment of the region. The federal government in its efforts to manage the underdevelopment induced conflict established interventionist agencies and ministries such as the Niger Delta Development Commission and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs; these interventionist efforts have not curbed conflict in the region hence, the continued agitation for resource control, threat of secession and disruption of the operations of oil companies.

The reports of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta inaugurated by the Yar'Adua/Jonathan administration on September 8, 2008 and charged with the responsibility of resolving every crisis situation in the Niger Delta equally identified under-development as one of the causes of crisis in the region and came up with various short-term, medium term and long term recommendations (see report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta) that are centered on improving the standard of living of the people of the region. The federal government equally militarized the Niger Delta and the monthly payments of ex-agitators are strategies for conflict management. The question is, do these strategies also address inter-community conflicts in the Niger Delta?

During the pre-colonial period especially between 1340 – 1899, each village, town or city state had internal instruments or strategies for conflict resolution, management and peace building (Opukri & Etekpe, 2008). Citing Alagoa (2003), Opukri and Etekpe (2008) noted that during the period, some communities and rulers acquired reputation for fair and equitable settlement (resolution) of disputes and the efficacy of traditional instruments (strategies) for management and resolution within a city-state was at the time regarded as an indicator of its strength or weakness. Unfortunately, all these values have been eroded by circumstances that have remained topical among scholars' discourse.

Inter-community conflict management strategies in the Niger Delta involve:

- Judicial intervention
- Government intervention through the establishment of peace and resolution committee
- Military option
- Third party involvement

These strategies are reactive in approach and do not have the capacity to ensure enduring peace. While judicial intervention is considered a viable option in resolving inter-community conflicts, the duration it takes for cases to be resolved makes it undesirable. For instance, the conflict between Aduku and Ikpidiama in Sagbama LGA over land dispute and claims over oil well. The same can be said about the Isongufuro and Isenagaododu and Oye Oluasin clan in Nembe LGA over chieftaincy tussle.

A major constrain in this option is that many parties to conflicts are limited by their economic situation as they cannot afford the costs of transport, lodging and feeding which are necessary in order to attend court (frequent adjournments of cases makes this even more expensive). Some of these cases get as far as the Supreme Court and last as long as ten years in some instances and even more than ten years in other times, by which time circumstances that can result in an irksome situation could have occurred (Adan & Pkalya, 2006).

State government often summon leaders of warring communities to round-table discussions and in some instances, communities and institutions are given responsibilities of settling conflicts, such committees sometimes go by the name, "Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee" and is normally headed by the Deputy Governor of the state or a prominent individual of the state. In an interview session, the researchers had with leaders of thought from Ogbe-Ijoh and Aladja communities, all in Delta State, that have been involved in recurring inter-community conflicts, it was obvious that the government of Delta State had repeatedly set up different committees to resolve the issue(s). The blame game was strong, concerns were expressed and it was obvious that much more than consultations and negotiations are needed to make progress in settling the conflict between these communities. In such circumstances, the military option becomes necessary to ensure cease-fire, hence, the presence of military personnel in any conflict zone is sometimes inevitable. The big question (whether the intervention is by third-party involvement where Non-Governmental Organization [NGOs], Not-for-Profit organizations [NPOs], Civil Society Organizations [CSOs] or groups and individuals try to broker peace among warring communities).

The Politics of Conflict Management: A Panoramic of Ogbe-Ijoh and Aladja Conflicts
Inter-community conflicts do not occur in a vacuum. Communities that had co-existed for decades would not suddenly take up firearms against themselves and live in fear and distrust. The strategies applied in managing conflicts, inter-community conflicts in particular, only lay the foundation for further conflicts among these communities. The researchers conducted a focus group discussion among individuals of communities of Odimodi and Ogulagha, Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh. The summary of the findings revealed some levels of insincerity and hidden intentions on the part of those charged with the responsibility of managing the conflicts.

Ogbe_Ijoh is an Ijaw community and currently the headquarters of Warri-South West LGA, while Aladja is an Urhobo community in Udu LGA, both in Delta State. Both communities are neighbors and are linked by a motorable road but had been involved in violent clash over a land. Aladja community claimed that the Ijaws in Ogbe-Ijoh have been their tenants for over 100 years. The Ijaws in Ogbe-Ijoh disputed the claim and both parties have engaged themselves in a fierce conflict for quite some time now.

The conflict has created fear and distrust among them, disrupted economic activities and there have been accusations and counter-accusations among them, attacks and counter-attacks. It was therefore very commendable when the Delta State government set up a panel of inquiry to suggest ways the conflict can be managed, the people equally pointed out that governors and several government representatives have visited both communities but that various recommendations submitted to the government have not been implemented; hence, the current tension in the area after several years of the first confrontation. Where recommendations are not implemented and the conflict persists, it gives credence to the allegations that there are hidden intentions, perhaps on the part of the conflict managers. The Ogbe-ijoh and Aladja experience explains the experiences in several other communities that are engaged in conflicts.

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Studies have shown that in some instances, third parties that are engaged to broker peace among warring communities tend to be sympathetic to one of the communities and in such cases, their involvement further fuel the conflict. One other finding of this paper is that government has not been proactive towards conflict situations, decisions are made to favour certain interests even when such decisions have the capacity to worsen the conflict. The conflict between Ogbe-Ijoh and Ogidigben that resulted in the inter-ethnic crisis between the Ijaws and the Itsekiris explains this. The siting of the headquarter of Warri-South West LGA at Ogbe-Ijoh and later relocating it to Ogidigben which resulted in the conflict before the headquarter was brought back to Ogbe-Ijoh was avoidable. The general opinion was that these decisions were more political.

While it was also agreed that judicial intervention in inter-community conflict management is a viable option, the points raised earlier in this paper and the fact that judicial pronouncements are not errors-proof should make conflict advocates look further in their efforts to ensure enduring peace in the Niger Delta.

The Geography

Ikporukpo (2007) described the Niger Delta as a difficult environment largely because of the complex network of distributaries, creeks and extensive swamps making up the region. The researchers could not have agreed less with the description. In an attempt to interrogate the challenges of inter-community conflict management in the Niger Delta, it was revealed beyond the fact that geographical factors such as boundary discrepancies, challenges of accurate land survey are causes of inter-community conflicts but that the difficult terrain is a burden on the shoulders of inter-community conflict managers in the region.

There are two points to note in this argument; first is the fact that the large part of the Niger Delta region is made up of water as such, land is a very scarce resource. Consequently, boundary disputes often erupt within and between communities. These disputes are taken very seriously irrespective of how big or small the land space is. The sentimental attachment is aggravated by the fact that land scarcity in the region is accompanied by serious environmental degradation attributed to unethical environmental practices and climate change induced which have caused serious gully erosions in the region.

The second point to note is that the geography do not only cause the conflict but it also makes it very easy for conflicts to thrive. The region is crisscrossed by creeks and swamps which make it difficult for policing and management of conflicts. Similarly, communication network is very poor, especially in communities which are not accessible by land. This allows conflicts, no matter how small, to take devastating turns before they are arrested.

Prospects for Enduring Peace in the Niger Delta

There has been no shortage of proposed solutions to the Niger Delta conflicts and the task of achieving enduring peace in the region. Ibaba; (2005, 2007, 2010 and 2017) extensively interrogated the crisis situation in the region and came up with initiatives for peace-building. On its part, the Nigerian state had in the past established various committees and panels for the same purpose, such committees had presented detailed short, medium and long term suggestion to the challenges in the Niger Delta (the Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan, 2004, the report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta).

Government of all levels have demonstrated enough political will to implement most of the recommendations/peace initiatives and in some instances, there were selective implementation that has resulted in suspended crisis. The challenges of ensuring enduring peace in the Niger Delta are complex but not insurmountable. It is a duty for everybody the various communities.

Oil companies and government off all level, for a start, the government must show commitment and demonstrate its readiness to implement suggestions/peace initiative and be proactive in crisis situation. It is easier to prevent conflict than to enforce peace. There are warning signals in any conflict situation, the various committees for peace and conflict resolution should take advantage of these signals.

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