

# Oil, Community Resistance And The Need For Nonviolent Option

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*Abstract: Successive government in Nigeria has over the years being confronted with the challenge of halting the Niger Delta conflict which has remained protracted. The Yar' Adua's government and Jonathan's government appeared to have been more successful in all attempts throughout history to tackle the violent menace in the Niger Delta cauldron. The public sector cum private sector and the civil society among others are directly or indirectly being affected by the restlessness in the region with the largest deposit of oil in the country and upon which the nation's economy is anchored. The resource-based conflicts has passed through phases not without consequences leading to loss of lives, environmental degradation and pollution due to oil spillage, reduction in barrels of oils produce per day and by extension money following pipeline vandalism, etc. This paper explores the phases of community resistance in the region, and emphasis the need for nonviolent alternative in the struggle against social injustice in the region.*

**Keywords: Oil, Civil Society, Resistance, Nonviolent Option**

## I. INTRODUCTION

That oil is the mainstay of the Nigeria's economy cannot be gainsaid. The large deposit of oil and gas in the Niger Delta no doubt account for the considerable attention of the federal government and the Transnational Oil Company in their exploitation of the region. To a large extent and for understandable reasons, the majority of the oil bearing communities and people of the region tend to adopt a counter-hegemonic and anti-oil stakeholders discourse and orientation (Omeje, 2006: 1). What began as communal agitation for increased benefits from the several multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region in the 1980s, no doubt blossomed into ethnic confrontation with the state, as epitomized by the Ogoni and Ijaw crises. These crises were hijacked by militant groups, which since 1997 took over control of considerable number of oil installations and operations. The frontiers of confrontation in the region was extended with time, as showcase, firstly by the generalization of violent seizure installations in Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta states. Secondly, by the engagement of other ethnic groups, such as Ikwere, Ijaw,

Ogoni, Isoko and Urhobo in the violence.

The attacks on oil company installations by militants from the oil producing communities invariably provoked violent confrontations between the oil producing communities and law enforcement agencies. One of such confrontations led to the sacking of Umuechem communities in November 1990. The Umuechem "disaster" led to the death of 20 persons, including a law enforcement officer, the traditional ruler and two of his sons. Similar incidents were recorded in different parts of rivers state including the Ogoni village of Biafra, where the police opened fire on a peaceful protest against shell contractors during April 1993, leaving at least 11 people wounded and one person dead.

Considerate agitation, tension and violence have accompanied the attempts by minority oil producing communities to seek redress against alleged neglect by government and the oil companies. In sheer desperation, militants from these communities also resorted to the disruption or destruction of the operations or installation of the oil companies in order to win concessions from these companies. Between January and August 1990, for instance, shell installations were blocked at least 22 times, sometimes

several days at a time, by communities protesting neglect and expropriation of their areas by the companies and the government. Indeed, shell estimated that over 60% of spills and leakages affecting its installations are caused by sabotage.

The state is largely dependent on oil mining rents, taxes and royalties paid by Transnational Oil Companies (TNOCs), and on profit from its equity stakes in the sprawling investments of the TNOCs. Many scholars have propounded diverse theories on why the Nigerian state has a high propensity to violent conflicts, especially those related to oil. Scholars writing from Marxist political economy and dependency view point attributed the conflict to the configuration of interests within the Nigeria economy where the transnational capital interest appeared dominant. Terisa Turner 1978 classic study utilized the 'triple alliance' theory made popular by scholars like Andre Gunder Frank (1967) and Peter Evans (1975, 1977) in the study of Latin American dependent industrialization to the Nigerian situation. Turner 1978: 167 use the 'commercial triangle' concept to depict the dominant class forces in Nigeria, which Turner conceptualizes as a link between forces of international capital and their local Nigerian associates consisting of private sector middlemen (the compradors and the state officials).

## II. PHASES OF COMMUNITY RESISTANCE

Oil watch the global network of groups responding to the negative impacts of oil production sees nonviolence as the acceptable strategy of resistance to be adopted by an aggrieved group of people in defense of their collective environmental and human rights in order to achieve change. The initial response of any aggrieved people against any injustice perpetrated against them, especially by the state, usually assumes a nonviolent form (Owugah, 1997: 5). In some certain cases, Violent is only employed as a last resort and usually in response to the violence of the state that believes that it could intimidate the aggrieved into silence through the use of its repressive forces. Nevertheless, it has been found that whatever the situation, nonviolent is more rewarding than violent approach. In its prescription of nonviolence, Nnimmo Bassey, the chair of the Africa regional secretariat, Oil Watch, said, in the face of brutal effects by troops working at the behest of oil companies, it is not clear how long communities will adhere to this principle.

This in a way explains the evolution and phases of resistance in the Niger Delta, which have largely been in response to the actions of the state. We can roughly identify 4 phases of resistance from the late 1970s. In the first 3 phases, the demands focused on compensation of damages, provision of certain basis amenities, employment, scholarship etc. as a result of the failure of the state to come to their assistance and alternately becoming conscious of the collaboration of the state and the oil companies, the people lost confidence in the state. Hence, the resistance assumed a militant form in response to the violence of the state security forces. This loss of confidence also led to the demand for autonomy and resources control.

### THE PHASES

#### *FIRST PHASE: LATE 1970S- MID 1980S*

In the first phase communities still had enough confidence in the state and its instruments, especially in judiciary. The dominant strategy was that of legal action by the communities against oil companies for adequate compensation of damages. It was this confidence that informed their appeal to both the state and Federal Government to intervene on its behalf.

#### *SECOND PHASE: MID 1980S- MID 1990S*

This phase was characterized by a more action-oriented strategy as the people carried out peaceful demonstrations. Occupation of flow stations, disruption of workers from operation etc. The demands were for adequate compensation and the provision of basic amenities. The Nigeria state and the oil companies responded by calling in the military, police and state security operations, which the state had put at their disposal. These interventions often took the form of burning down villages, looting, raping, killing etc.

In what appears to be an attempt to impress on the people of its concern for their plight, the Federal Government set up the oil mineral production Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) to carry out its Projects in the oil producing areas. It was also in this period that Ken Saro-wiwa, the Environmentalist and Human Rights activist and 8 other Ogonis, were executed by hanging.

#### *THIRD PHASE: MID 1990S – 1998*

This phase was to respond more forcefully to the use of the military by the oil companies against the communities. To this end, they resorted to forceful occupation and shutting down of flow stations, destruction of equipment kidnapping of workers, seizure of vessels and vehicle. The oil companies continued with their use of state security agents against the communities.

#### *FOURTH PHASE: DEC 11, 1998*

The third phase quickly moved into the fourth and more openly militant phase with the issuance of the historic Kaima Declaration by the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC). In the tradition of the Ogoni Bill of Rights, the declaration called for self-determination within the Nigeria State and control of resources. In addition, it called for the Summoning of a Sovereign National Conference. The strategy was to shut down all flow stations and terminals in order to bring oil production in the Niger Delta to an end. The oil companies were given December.30, 1998 to leave the Niger Delta. The state, of course, responded with its military force resulting in the Yenagoa and Kaima Massacres and ultimately the complete destruction of Odi in November 1999.

Thus, the peaceful, legal-oriented resistance gradually evolved into its current militant phase as a result of the state and oil companies' resorting to violence, to perpetuate their

insensitive development neglect of the area, the reckless pollution and degradation of the environment and their accumulation of wealth at the expense of the lives and livelihood of the peoples of the Niger Delta.

### III. THE NEED FOR NONVIOLENCE AS ALTERNATIVE FOR THE STRUGGLE

Historical examples show the potential of nonviolent action. Since the 1950s, a number of researchers and advocates have investigated and promoted popular nonviolent resistance to aggression and exploitation as an alternative to violence or militant defense (Boserup and Mack 1974; Burrowes 1996; De Valk 1993; Edert 1968; Geeraerts 1977; King-Hall 1958; Martin 1993; Niezing 1987; Randle 1994; Roberts 1967, Sharp 1990; Keyes, G. 1981: 125-151). This involves means, such as strikes, boycotts, symbolic protests, non-cooperation and setting up alternative institutions, like non-violence defense or defense by civil resistance.

Nonviolence action could be seen as action based on the desire to end violence – be that physical violence – be that physical violence or structural violence of deprivation, social exclusion and oppression – without committing further violence, while forging for social justice. It also includes the desire to change power relations and social structures, an attitude of respect for all humanity or for all life, and for some philosophy of life or theory of social action. Nonviolent methods can be used in a coordinated fashion as an alternative to violence. This option, called social or nonviolent struggle or defense, has implication for skill development, technology policy, social organization and external relations. These are described as components of a programme in which social or nonviolent struggle or defense is a process as well as a goal.

The efficacy of nonviolent methods such as means of achieving justice in different parts of the world lays on the assumption that nonviolent action as a method alters power relationship in a way that makes social change possible without compulsion, violence, or bloodshed. In more recent decades, nonviolent has become a deliberate tool for social change, evolving from an ad hoc strategy associated with religious or ethical principles into a reflective, even institutionalized method of struggle.

The history of nonviolent struggle, at a particular period of time in the past, was cast into shadow by the attention given to battles and conquests. Even so, there abounds evidence to show nonviolent intervention have numerous potentials (Ackerman and Du Vall 2000, Cooney and Michalowski 1987; Crow et al 1990; Macmanus and Schlabach 1991; Powers and Vogeles 1997; Sharp 1973; Weir et al 1994). The key assignment is turning this potential into viable option in the Niger Delta struggle.

In this regard a better understanding of nonviolent struggle theoretical and practical underpinning can unequivocally help to mainstream its use in addressing the existing strife in the oil-rich region of Nigeria. Nonviolent action not only offers the possibility of achieving short term

political objectives, but can as well lead to a more stable and equitable long term results benefiting all parties to a conflict. It can improve the chances of reaching negotiations, transform a conflict into a manageable situation without destructive discord, and lay the groundwork for reconciliation. Its ability to do so, rest on the theory that a direct connection exists between means and ends. Gandhi never accepted the assumption that good ends can justify bloody means. He believes instead that in seeking a certain condition, the process must embody the ends. Gandhi insisted on the need to use moral means in order to achieve moral ends. If violence is used to achieve 'peace', its use will corrupt the victor so as to make meaningful peace unattainable. Incidentally, in terms of international status among African countries, there is an incompatibility between being regarded as a peacemaker and maintaining a high level of militancy (Harris, 2001: 67-74).

Nonviolent struggles is a realistic alternative to armed struggle, yet its use may even be more essential in democratic systems like Nigeria, where laws themselves may enshrine injustice, and when and when legal and parliamentary measures persists in ignoring the rights of minorities (as in case of the Niger Delta) or fail to bring about even handedness in representative government. In this situation it becomes germane to turn to extra-legal or extra-parliamentary theories and methods of resistance, this is the purview of nonviolent direction.

Historical examples show the potential of nonviolent action; from 1920s to 1947, the Indian independence movement led by Mohandas Gandhi is one of the best known examples of nonviolent struggle (Gandhi 1927, Sharp 1979). In 1944, two Central American Dictators, Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez (el Salvador) and Jorge Ubico (Guatemala), were ousted as a result of nonviolent civilian insurrections. In 1953 a wave of strike in soviet prison labor camps led to some limited improvement in living conditions of political prisoners. In 1986 the Philippines "people power" movement brought down the oppressive Marcos dictatorship (Thompson 1995; Zunes 1999a). In 1989, East European regimes collapsed in the face of popular resistance (Randle, 1991).

There are numerous examples of popular nonviolent insurrections that have challenged and often overthrown authoritarian governments (Parkman 1990; Zunes, 1994: 403-426) successful African examples include the toppling of Sudanese President Jaafar Nimeiry in 1985, the overthrow of the Military government of Mali over 1989-1992 and the overthrow of president Didier Ratsiraka of Madagascar in 1991-1993. Also, there have been less successful but still significant unarmed challenges such as the Niger's Government in 1991 – 1992 (Zunes, 1994: 403-426). Nonviolent Action played a key role in the ending of apartheid in South Africa, after earlier challenges by armed struggle had been defeated (Zunes, 1999b: 137-169).

In Nigeria, effective nonviolent struggle was carried by the late Ken Saro-Wiwa led Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) on January 4, 1993 during which 300,000 of Ogoni's estimated 530,000 people participated in a peaceful protest March that took place at four different centers in Ogoni. The action got Ogoni rapidly developed into

not just a national issue, but an international one as well, so much an international issue did Ogoni become that development in Ogoni received considerable publicity abroad.

Other associations that featured prominently in nonviolent agitations by the oil producing communities include Dappa-Biriye's Associations of Mineral Producing Areas of River State (AMPARS), the Association of Minority oil States (AMOS), the Ethnic Minority Rights Organisation of Nigeria (EMIRON), the Ethnic Minority Rights Organisation of Africa (EMIROAF), The Nigerian Society for the Protection of the Environment (NISOPEN), and the Movement for Reparation to Ogbia or Oloibiri (MORETO).

AMOS and MOSOP remained outstanding in the struggle. Before its proscription by the Federal Government in 1993, AMOS was the most inclusive ethnic minority association, incorporating leading elites from virtually all the southern ethnic minority states. To the litany of demands and goals of the oil producing communities, AMOS also sought to add the quite novel campaign that a future Nigeria's president should come from the oil producing area or should at least, be sympathetic to the special needs of the areas.

MOSOP, on the other hand, was quite remarkable for its role in internationalizing the struggle of the oil producing communities. Thus, under energetic direction of Ken Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP made representation to international Institutions such as the UNO, UN committee for the elimination of racial discrimination (CERD), the world conference of indigenous people, the Unrepresented Nations and People Organisation (UNPO), the British parliamentary Human Rights Groups (BHRG), Amnesty International, The Green Peace Organisation, and the London Rainforest Action Group. Indeed, the last named organization-London Rainforest Action Group, staged a peaceful protest on behalf of the Ogoni at the London premises of Shell in November 1992, and was among the international Observers that witnessed a mass rally organized by MOSOP in Bori the traditional headquarter of Ogoniland during January 1993.

Also nonviolent has been found rewarding as instrument used by the Ogoni women in preventing shell from operating in Ogoniland. In January 1999, nonviolence was also used by activist in the Niger Delta to launch 'Operation climate change' (Leigh Browhill and Terisa E. Turner report), which led to the shut-down of oil stations and gas flares in the Delta. In 2002, women through nonviolence also took over the oil platforms demanding change to benefit their families.

Even though, at times, repression can be powerful and used to crush nonviolent resistance, such as the case of Ogoni struggle which in 1995 led to the judicial murder of the celebrated environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, nonviolent no doubt still has more potential for positive result than violent approach. It has the potential to; lay the foundation for future strategies, generate sympathy among the target group, raise the profile of the cause, and/ or weaken the adversary's position.

Nonviolent resistance has a greater potential to undermine the popular support on which the aggressors

depends. Other advantages of nonviolent action over violent action include the fact that nonviolent action allows much wider participation. Also, everyone can be involved in planning and preparing for nonviolence approach. Instead of combatants being young fit Men, nonviolence is based on participation by all sectors of the populace, including Women, Children, the elderly and people with disabilities. Effective nonviolent approach has much greater scope for mobilizing resistance to aggression, as it does not induce a counter mobilization among the aggressors the way that violence does.

One other key advantage of nonviolence resistance is that it does not provide protection or justification for Government repressive attack (Roberts, 1975: 19-36). In Africa in for instance, as well as in most parts of the world, a country's troops are far more likely to be used against the local population than to defend against foreign enemies. Considering this tendency of the Government, violent resistant can easily triggers the Government to use the Military force against Militant youths and in the process, innocent Citizens may also be victim of such brutal attack.

The increasing cost of insurgency warfare or engaging the Government forces (e.g. JTF in Nigeria) using the violent approach is another issue worth putting into perspective. Such large amount put into purchasing arms and ammunitions use in the course of violent resistant, can however be channeled into promoting human development in the Niger Delta Region.

Also a common security community will be enhanced by introducing nonviolent principles and practices into all aspects of security (in the region). Nonviolent theory and practice offers an integrated analysis of violence and power and a peaceful means of transforming the structures, values and patterns of social relations that create and sustain conflict. There are many different conceptions of nonviolence that could inform regional security, including Sharp's typology and Burrowe's matrix (1996: 98-101)

At the level of the heart, humankind knows that the use of force or the threat to use force is not the appropriate way of dealing with disputes. Among the seven grounds which Glenn Paige (Paige, G., 1997, p.97-108) advances for the development of 'nonkilling' societies' are the strong roots which this has in the spiritual heritage of humankind.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Considering the aforementioned advantages of nonviolence over violent action, and especially looking into the potency of nonviolent action showcase in the historical examples of nonviolent action globally, it becomes germane and needful to reconsider the nonviolent action in the Niger Delta struggle as a viable to achieving the highly anticipated social justice in the region.

There is the need to reach out to all a sundry, including the religious leaders, community leaders, head of Schools, etc., to begin to package the message of nonviolence in their messages to their, members/followers. There is also the need to develop training programmes on nonviolence and promote

massive benefit of such programmes among the general inhabitants of the Niger Delta cauldron. The spirit of nonviolence must be given room to thrive in our society as we struggle for social justice.

There are many things People can do to build their capacity to defend their communities nonviolently, whether the communities are based in Villages, neighborhoods, workplaces, or ethnic or religious groups. The key first steps are making people aware of the relevance of nonviolent approach; increase their skills and building solidarity and willingness to act. Medium term goals include the use of systematic trainings on nonviolence and the establishment of intercommunity support networks. Long-term goals include restructuring the community political structures in order to beget the right representative in the national and state political settings, and to maximize the capacity for nonviolent resistance. The implementation of these steps in the case of the Niger Delta will unequivocally go a long way to entrench and appreciate the concept of nonviolence, in the struggle for social justice in the region.

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