Managing the resource curse for a conflict free Niger Delta Region: Lessons and prospects

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Abstract

The study examined how abundant mineral wealth in Niger Delta can be harnessed to avoid conflict. In achieving this objective, the study was anchored on frustration aggression theory in a bid to understand the root causes of conflict and likely solutions. In meeting this theoretical need, the study x-ray the concept of resource curse and found that the massive exploitation, environmental degradation, untold hardship, poverty, etc meted on the inhabitants by oil multinationals, leadership and the government has triggered aggressive behaviours in the forms of massive killings, kidnappings, vandalization of oil facilities and properties. All these are attributed to the perpetual neglect of the region but since peace has remained a human pursuit and the prime value of the Niger Delta people, the paper therefore concluded that conflict in it totality is not evil but part of man's social life therefore, leadership should resolve conflict in a more functional manner. These leaders should develop necessary skills to manage conflict effectively. The paper recommended for monitoring the activities of oil multinationals operating in the province so as to stop the massive exploitation and devaluation of the environment as this will go a long way to reducing crises in the region. Furthermore, the proceeds generated from the abundant mineral wealth should be diversified towards developing other functional sectors in the economy.

Keywords: Aggression, Frustration, Oil multinationals, Niger Delta, Resource curse

Introduction

Ever since creation to date, man has always learned to live in companionship with his fellows and as such shares some common characteristics. This companionship cannot function effectively without individual differences in the form of misunderstanding, incompatibility of interest and disagreement. That is to say conflict is inevitable as it is presumed to be part of man's social life. However, as individuals continue to work as teams, they cannot avoid each other thereby giving credence to conflicting situations. As an outcome of behaviour, conflict is an integral part of the human life (Thakore, 2013) hence, societies cannot function effectively without conflict (Schellenberg, 1996; Bercovitch, 1983; Gulliver, 1963; Gluckman 1956) because of its relatedness to functional divisions, scarce resources, role differentiations and power relations (Bercovitch, 1983). Nevertheless, historical evidence proved that conflict in the oil rich region date back to Akassa raid of 1895 when the residents of Akassa resisted economic dominance by the British merchants (Nwankwo, 2015) and since then the situation has grown from bad to worse as conflict remains the dominant issue in the oil rich region. Nonetheless, leadership failure, economic dominance and oil related activities have being attributed to stirring up most of the violent related conflicts in the region (Arugu and Chigozie, 2017). Thus, since the discovery of oil in commercial quantity, individuals in the region have been subjected to untold hardship, abject poverty, underdevelopment, exploitation of all sort and deprivation of basic social amenities which has degenerated to frustration that now leading to pervasive violence in the form of kidnappings, killings, destruction of oil facilities, invasion of individual properties, etc (Kaur, 2013; Oshi, Ule and Ogah, 2017; Arugu and Chigozie, 2017).

The natural endowment in the region is supposed to be a blessing to humanity but the reverse becomes the case as scholars argued that these abundant natural resources has been more of a curse than blessing (Aunt, 1993; Di John, 2010; Kaur, 2013). However, some scholars attribute these positions (Curse and Blessing) to mismanagement and mass corruption as Norway has proven the opposite by turning their own God giving natural resources into blessings rather than curse as seen in the Nigerian case and its allied nations of the globe experiencing declining economic growth despite the abundant natural resources (Akylbekova, 2015; Okeke and Aniche, 2013; Engen, Langhelle and Bratvold, 2012). The presence of oil and other natural resources in the Niger Delta has proven to generate negative developmental outcomes including ineffective governance, declining economic performance and societal growth, massive corruption among public office holders as well as increased violence. The struggle by the people to benefit from the proceeds of their own natural resources that began as a mere agitation of right as a non violent means to achieve their goals has over the passage of time degenerated into full scale conflict between and among individuals, groups, communities, government, oil multinationals and militia groups leading to killings, kidnappings, displacement, insecurity, etc (Arugu and Chigozie, 2017).

Unfortunately, some of the root causes of violent behaviours witnessed in the region have been attributed to poor leadership recruitment processes and the elevation of mediocre to exalted positions of trust (Ule & Idemudia, 2020) political corruption, lack of accountability, institutional failure (Eketu &

Edeh, 2019; Okeke & Aniche, 2013; Ule & Idemudia, 2020) etc. Perhaps, the reason Eketu and Edeh, (2019) in their investigation contended that the promotion of mediocre to exalted positions in the Nigerian polity on the basis of religious and ethno-tribal bigotry has remained the breeding soil for corruption practices among public office holders. This has marred developmental stride in the economy such that, selective positions of honour often goes to persons with grievous allegations of public fund misappropriation. However, to attain true peace as positioned by the Johannesburg 2002 World Sustainable Development Summit, leadership in the region need proper utilization and management of the natural resources to benefit mankind and society and not as a medium to acquire personal gains.

Nevertheless, as the most pressing challenge confronting humanity in the twenty first century, peace has remained a human pursuit and the prime value for Africans (Best, 2017) and to promote effective development in the oil rich region, peace must be considered an integral part not as perceived as the absence of war but an atmosphere of tolerance, mutual understanding and harmonious co-existence among individuals, groups, societies, oil multinational and the government. Reflecting on these trends, the study seeks to examine how the large oil deposit in the region can be effectively harnessed to avert conflict as well maintain growth and development in the region and the Nigerian state.

Literature Review

Theoretical underpinning

The paper adopts as it theoretical framework, the frustration aggression theory of Dollard, Dood, Miller, Mowrer and Sears 1939. The theory holds the fact that violent behaviour emanates from individual's inability to fulfill set needs. These unfulfilled needs frustrating the individual provide the justification for aggressive behaviour. Johan and Van Der (2015) opined that thwarting these individuals' goal or blocking their attainment of a reinforcer by another party or circumstance results into annoyance which gave rise to aggressive behaviour towards that party or circumstance. Faleti (2016) in a broader spectrum believed that aggressive behaviour is not just an instinct or natural reaction undertaken by individuals as assumed by the biological and realist theorists but an outcome of frustration where the legitimate desires of an individual is denied either directly or indirectly. Such denial instigates individuals or society to express anger through violent behaviour that will be directed towards those responsible for or those they feel are responsible for their frustration. According to Zillmann (1979) frustration is not a sufficient but necessary condition for aggressive and hostile behaviour therefore, it instigate individual behaviour that may or may not be aggressive or hostile (Miller, 1941).

Even though individuals have the capability to demonstrate aggressive and hostile behaviours within their domain, this capability remains dormant until triggered by necessity. That is to say the Niger Delta conflicting situations is predated by the people's quest to benefit from the proceeds generated from the natural resources extracted from their soils. It is a glaring fact that after so many years of oil exploration in the region, the people still remain in abject poverty without access to basic social amenities of life. This situation coupled with underdevelopment, economic and political deprivation has generated to frustration which makes the region a fertile ground for various forms of conflict (Kaur, 2013). The widespread implication is that this ugly scenario has degenerated to barefaced criminality as the region is now prone to several forms of kidnappings, incessant killings, destruction of oil facilities, robbery, oil bunkering, etc (Arugu and Chigozie, 2017).

Despite subjecting the people to untold hardship, exploitation, mass destruction of the environment and source of livelihood (Igbeke, 2018; Nwankwo, 2015) government leadership and oil multinationals operating in the region owes the people an obligation to ameliorate the pains inflicted by their actions and activities. This can be achieved as suggested by Faleti (2016) that in a situation where individual's feelings of frustration becomes widespread among the populace as a result of the fact that people are getting less than they deserves, political leaders can find out the expectations of these individuals as well seek ways to negotiate with them. This singular act can go a long way to making the people have trust and believe that these leaders have them in mind. Instead of seeing to the expectations of the people, most leader in positions of authority tends to believed that entering into negotiation or giving into public demand denote a sign of weakness thereby giving rooms to more frustration.

Nature and Concept of the Resource Curse

The Resource Curse (Paradox of plenty) is one of the most influential ideas in contemporary discourse (Di John, 2010). The term represents significant socio-economic and political challenges that are peculiar to nations' with abundant natural resources (NRGI, 2015). The concept "Resource Curse" was first introduce by Richard Aunt in 1993 to explain a phenomenon of worsen economic situation faced by resource rich countries as against resource poor nations. The contention as to whether nations with abundant natural resources make judicious use of their God given wealth to improve the lives of its citizens brought about the resource curse. Okeke and Aniche (2013) argued that nations with abundant natural resources are prone to facing decline economic growth and performance, mass poverty, poor accountability, ineffective governance, increased political violence, etc. The argument here is that many resource rich nations have failed to attain their full potentials as a result of the abundant wealth gotten from natural resources and as such prone to more conflicting situations that tend to cause decline economic and political stability. The situation is not strange as seen in Nigerian State, Venezuela and other resource rich nations of the world whereas nations with little or none availability of natural resources demonstrate miraculous growth and performance as seen in the Asian tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea and Taiwan) whose standard of living have shown significant growth in their economy (Akylbekova, 2015).

Interestingly, while some nations with abundant natural resources tends to perceive their God given wealth as a curse than blessing, Norway, Botswana and Australia has proven the opposite as it utilizes these abundant resources to benefit each member their society (Engen, et al., 2012). Some of the secrets attributed to this success is as a result of the fact that multinational oil firms in these countries were not given the free hands to exploit the people as they wish as in the case of other oil rich nations due to strong opposition oil companies faced from civil societies, trade unions, community organizations and environmental movements (Akylbekova, 2015; Engen, et al., 2012). However, there is no universally accepted explanation to the resource curse theory as much of the evidence is inconclusive (Di John, 2010; Akylbekova, 2015) therefore, the paper takes a critical look on the three variant or models of resource curse which include the Dutch Disease, Rent seeking and the Institutions models.

Dutch Disease Model

The Dutch disease model depict an economic concept or situation referring to the potential negative effects natural resources accruals and accompanying appreciation of exchange rates have on the economy (Di John, 2010). Akylbekova (2015) view the term as an economic concept referring to the co-existence of booming sector and lagging sub-sectors of traded goods in an economy. The Dutch disease represents the situation in which a booming sector in an economy dominates the lagging sectors such that the sector becomes less viable (Di John, 2010; Corden and Neary, 1982). Following the works of Sachs and Warner (1995) in Akylbekova (2015) and Di John (2010) the manufacturing and non oil tradable sector in resource rich nations tends to be less viable and competitive as a result of natural resources booms thereby increasing de-industralization such that these nations often fail to pursue export related growth due to high price level and inadequate export promotions.

The basic challenge with this model as opined by Akylbekova (2015) is that it fails to explain the context for with which some nations managed to escape the concept as a curse than a blessing position as in the case of Norway, Botswana and Australia despite the unconditional negative correlation it has with resource abundant and economic growth and performance. Perhaps there are some significant preconditions not included in the model.

Rent Seeking Model

The rent seeking model of the resource curse emphasizes the role of powerful groups and institutional formation (Akylbekova, 2015). The model explains why nations with abundant natural resources make decisions that create and maintain growth restricting policies (Di John, 2010) such that the abundant natural resources are in distributive struggle among power groups as they tend to squeeze the sector because of harmful rent seeking activities (Lane and Tornell, 1999). That is to say the contest for rent seeking are seen to be uniformly negative in terms of the developmental outcomes it generate (Di John, 2010). Basically, the availability of abundant natural resources increases rent seeking and corruption such that these increment give way to lower economic growth and development that reduces the necessity of such State to tax its citizens due to the fact that oil rents provide enough fiscal base which becomes a source of major fiscal transfers to powerful groups (Akylbekova, 2015; Di John, 2010). Thus the citizens are less levied thereby feeling less invested in the national budget (NRGI, 2015). The result becomes critical as government and political office holders becomes less tied to citizens demand and request such that the bargaining power becomes less active as citizens become weaker to monitor government spending.

Di John (2010) argued that because most revenues in the oil economic State comes from the central government, the level of State discretion in allocating these resources tends to be higher compared to non resource nations. Though the extent to which these resources generate higher rent seeking and less developmental outcomes becomes an empirical issue as revenues are often wasted without gainful economic growth towards citizens' welfare (Akylbekova, 2015; Di John, 2010). Owing to this fact, it therefore indicates that public capital is not used efficiently for citizen's welfare. The challenge with the rent seeking model is that it does not explain long run variation and change in the growth of mineral abundant countries as well as non resource rich nations of the world rather it focus on the institutional context of rent seeking which did not incorporate institutions into the analysis.

Institutions Model

The shortfall in the rent seeking model gave rise to the institutions model which combines both analysis. The model focused on the role of institutions and rent seeking in resource abundant countries (Mehlum, Halvor, Moene, Karl, Torvik and Ragner, 2006) which seems to be less harmful. According to these scholars, the effects on economic growth by abundant natural resources are decisive factors of the institutions. That is to say, the institutions are put to some kind of interrogation or test by resource abundance such that these resources end up being a curse than a blessing in weaker institutional settings whereas a strong institution turns the situation around to a blessing as seen in the case of Norway, Botswana, Australia and others versus Nigeria, Venezuela and others that have weaker institutions dominated by corruption, unstable governance, political violence, etc. However, Akylbekova (2015) argued that difference in nations' institutional quality is the main reasons of diverging economic performance among resource rich nations. The implication of this assumption is that most resource rich nations operates a centralized government dominated by weak institutions that provide hug variation on how proceeds generated from natural resources are managed to increase economic performance.

However, the explanation given to the concept "Resource Curse" is not universally accepted due to the fact that what seems to be a curse in a particular setting becomes a blessing to others (Akylbekova, 2015) as seen in the case of Norway, Australia, Botswana and others versus Nigeria, Venezuela and others. This opposing view proves the fact that weaker institutions begat mass corruption, increased political violence, poor accountability, ineffective governance, etc whereas strong institutions pave way for better economic performance with stable governance and good policies (The case of

Nigeria versus Norway). Despite the models used in explaining the concept, there is a common disagreement between the Dutch Disease Model and the other models (Institutions and Rent Seeking). The disparity in the models is based on the fact that the former believed that there is an unconditional negative relationship between mineral resources abundance and economic growth whereas the latter rejects idea of this correlation.

Conflict and its root cause in the Niger Delta

Conflict is not only the absence of war but the perceived feelings of deprivation, exploitation and total neglect of the human person and his environment resulting from dissatisfaction and incompatibility of goals and interest. As an integral part of the human life, conflict refers to the disagreement between individuals and or members of an organization (Thakore, 2013) groups and society. Conflict therefore is the byproduct of incompatibility of goals and interest arising from opposing behaviour and as such need to be managed rather than eliminated. Conflict arises when the goals, values or interest of different individuals or groups are incompatible or thwarted (Jones and George, 2008). Thus Bercovitch (1983) defined conflict as the situation in which two or more parties have incompatible objectives such that their perceptions and behaviour are commensurate with such incompatibility. The definition suggests that conflict is the process of social interaction that involves the struggle over claims to resources, status, power, desires, preference and beliefs (Appelbaum, Abdallah and Shapiro, 1999). This position perhaps might be the instigating factor that propelled the Niger Delta people to resolve into aggressive behaviours in order to struggle for the claims and proceeds generated from natural resources extracted from their mother soil.

The situation in which the Niger Delta people come to possess incompatible goals of interest and their structure of interaction indicate that an understanding of the source of these conflicts will improve the probability of its management. Several factors have been attributed to the causes of conflict in the Niger Delta region ranging from marginalization, underdevelopment, mass poverty, environmental pollution and degradation, exploitation, improper management and utilization of oil proceeds, etc (Igbeke, 2018; Nwankwo, 2015; Kaur, 2013). Kaur (2013) argued that the growing disparity between the wealthy government and or political office holders and the impoverished inhabitants of the region has within a space of time widening the gap and thus generated a feeling of deprivation which has given rise to frustration. This frustration has resulted into pervasive violence witnessed within the region. The perpetual neglect of the region by its leaders and oil multinationals including successive government left the inhabitants no option than to resolve into arms struggle as seen in the various stages of conflicts witnessed in region.

In spite of the abundant mineral deposits, the inhabitants of the region wallow in abject poverty without access to basic social amenities of life. For instance, since the discovery of oil in commercial quantity in Oloibiri in the present day Bayelsa State in

1956 till date, the people has nothing to show as benefit accrued to them from the Nigerian state and its allied (oil multinationals) rather a mere signpost is positioned at the well to mock the people. All the proceeds generated from this place (Oloibiri oil well 1) were used to develop Lagos, Abuja, Kaduna, etc with some of the monies ending up in the pockets of few political leaders that seems to represent the people in disguise while the citizens remained in abject poverty with lack of access to good education, roads, portable drinking water and even electricity. These perceived feelings of frustration perhaps spurred the people of Niger Delta into aggressive behaviours. Perhaps, the reason Nwankwo (2015) opined that poverty and deprivation of basic needs are significant factors behind the agitation of the Niger Delta people. Corroborating this view Oviasuyi and Uwadea (2010) argued that during the period when the Nigerian State depends on Agriculture as the mainstay of her economy, the western region were given proceeds generated from cocoa to develop their region by providing the people with basic necessities of life. This, their leaders utilized judiciously to benefit her citizenry as against leadership in the Niger Delta region where blame game has become the other of the day. The ultimate question is what changes the situation of leaders in the Niger Delta as opposed to leaders in the Western Nigeria? This big question remained unanswered by leaders in the region as they keep blaming the Nigerian State for her woos despite receiving thirteen percent (13%) derivation from the centre.

Apart from the increasing marginalization from leadership and the system, oil multinationals are equally contributing significantly to environmental destruction and ecological disaster (Kaur, 2013) such that the inhabitants who are dominant farmers and fishermen cannot carry out their occupational activities due to dredging, indiscriminate dumping of toxic waste in the waters, oil spillages, etc (Ejibunu, 2007; Kaur, 2013; Nwankwo, 2015). This feeling has triggered so many aggressive behaviours that now manifested in the forms of kidnappings, killings, destructions of oil facilities, etc. Although these aggressive behaviours has been given different interpretation by different people. Notwithstanding the divergent interpretations by different people, it is believed that without a proper understanding of the real situation faced by the inhabitants of the region, it will be quite difficult to proffer lasting solution. In order words, conflict management will be in jeopardy if we are unable to carefully and correctly analyze the conflict we deal with (Best, 2016).

Leadership and the roles of oil multinationals towards averting conflict in the oil rich region of Niger Delta

In order to ensure that peace returned to the oil rich region, leadership, public office holders and multinationals operating in the region have varying roles to play and these roles need no compromise. The very fact that oil multinationals are in for profit motives is enough reasons for the leadership and public office holders in the region to seat up. Nwankwo (2015) acknowledges the fact that oil companies operating in the region are on daily basis carrying out their operations in reckless manner not respecting the dignity of the human person and this has adversely affected both the ecological systems and the society yet, government and these multinationals pretend not to acknowledge the plight of the poor people in the region. The regional leadership and successive governments need to come together and consistently checkmate the activities of oil multinationals so as to caution their actions and behaviour towards the inhabitants of the region as seen in the case of Norway. Engen, et al (2012) argued that one of the success in turning the resource curse into blessing was attributed to the fact that oil multinational were not given the opportunity to exploit Norwegian citizens as seen in the Niger Delta case were expatriate are worshiped at the expense of their brothers occasioned by leadership failure. This ugly behaviour has necessitated a big enmity between government, oil multinationals and the citizens which now resolve into massive destructions of oil facilities, killings, kidnappings and other sort of social vices.

In order to end these forms of social violence, multinationals should also look inward by embarking on positive social responsibility that will impact positively on the lives of the people and not by giving contracts to individuals that will end up exploiting the poor masses. Idemudia and Ite (2006) observed that failures in corporate social responsibility involvement was the major triggering factor for the Ogoni led protest of Ken Saro Wiwa that was met with massive human right violations and abuses. The case of other areas in the region were not left out as same happened in Aleibiri in 1997 were youths are deprived to partake in the cleanup exercise of an oil spillage that led to the massive protest by the host communities. If these measures are adopted, it will go a long way to bringing lasting peace in the oil rich region.

Conclusions

Peace has remained a human pursuit and to promote development in the Niger Delta region, peace must be considered an integral part not as perceived as the absence of war but an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual understanding among individuals, groups and organizations. That is not to say conflict in its totality is evil but part of man's social life, therefore leadership in the oil rich region must be able to resolve conflicts in a functional manner if Niger Deltans are to achieve their goals. It is relevant for these leaders to develop the necessary skills to manage conflict effectively as peace remains the prime value of the Niger Delta people in contemporary time. There is no denying the fact that the abundant mineral resources in the region has generated negative economic growth and development which has resulted into several forms of aggressive behaviours and social vices but this situation can be upturn if individuals and societal needs are met by leaders in positions of authority, government and oil multinationals operating in the region.

The aggressive behaviour which manifested in the forms of hostage taking, killings and destruction of oil facilities result as a function of deprivation, exploitations and total neglect of the region despite its contribution to the nations' sustainability. This situation generated a feeling of frustration among the inhabitants of the region and in order to quell this annoyance, government, public office holders and oil multinationals operating in the region must seek for ways to go into proper re-negotiation with the people on ground, not sending agents to represent them. This, they should do by encouraging community participation, stakeholders' engagement, transparency and accountability in their dealings and decentralization of powers within their operations. Furthermore, economic diversification should be encouraged and jobs should be created for skilled individuals and infrastructural development to open up the region for global opportunities.

Way Forward

Based on the conclusions, the following way forward are suggested;

- Government institutions in the region calls for better strengthening and accountability as weak institutions are fertile grounds for massive corruption and exploitation of the populace.
- The activities of oil multinationals operating in the region need to be properly checkmated by government, environmentalist, civil society organizations and other well meaning organizations in other to reduce or perhaps stop the massive exploitation and devaluation meted on the people and their environment as this will go a long way to reducing crises in the oil rich region.
- The massive proceeds generated from the stupendous mineral wealth should be diversified to establishing factories and other manufacturing firms so as to shift citizens' attention from oil generated funds.
- Increase communal participation should be encouraged by leaders and oil multinationals in the issues of development. This will help in reducing unethical practices of leaders who may perhaps have dubious intention.
- Oil multinationals carrying out corporate social responsibility should ensure that the projects embarked upon, impact positively on the people's lives, not just because they want to fulfill all righteousness and as such they should seek the people's opinion to actually know what they want.

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