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The Presidential Amnesty Programme and Marginalization of Isoko People in Isoko South Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria,2009-2020

Steve Ibuomo LARRY

Abstract

This paper examines the marginalization of Isoko people of the Niger Delta from the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) with a corresponding effect on the development of Isoko South Local Government Area in Delta State, Nigeria. With about 80% of Nigeria's total government revenue coming from the oil and gas output in the Niger Delta region, an expectation of prosperity was rife. However, the bulk of the people in the region live in constant need, making the area a prime example of an extremely poor and underdeveloped location in the midst of abundant resources. Demands for an improved standard of living and human security from the Nigerian government and international oil firms operating in the area to improve the lot of Isoko people consequent upon the aforementioned realities, were met with official brutality and persecution which led the people to turn to violence in order to secure a just portion of the oil wealth. Yar' Adua's administration was forced to declare an amnesty because of the existing realities in the area. Through an analysis of primary and secondary evidence and utilizing both descriptive and analytical approaches, this study fills a significant knowledge gap by identifying the effects of marginalizing Isoko people from the PAP on the overall development of the area.

Introduction

The natural flora, fauna and traditional natural means of livelihood of Isoko people was significantly punctuated with the discovery of crude oil which came with attendant oil exploration and mining, leaving behind a wave of environmental (marine, land and air) pollution. Several non-violent agitations failed to attract the attention of the Federal government and its multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta of Nigeria to the plight and fright of Isoko people who suffered from the "paradox of plenty". Violent alternatives under the social movement of the Niger Delta militants between 1999 and 2009, first attracted kinetic governmental responses and later a non-kinetic response in the form of a Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP). As expected, the PAP relieved the Niger Delta of armed violence and engaged in a significant human development plan that was directed towards peace in the region. However, gleaned from the beneficiaries of the PAP, the people of Isoko appeared to have been marginalized from the PAP and discountenanced from the developmental benefits that accompanied the socio-economic program.

The Location, Geography and People of Isoko South Local Government Area

Isoko South is one of the local government areas in Delta State, Nigeria that has a homogenous Isoko population. The headquarters of the local government is situated at Oleh. It is one of the two local governments that make up Isoko land as shown by Mapnail (2020). Isoko South Local Government Area and the Isoko people in general were part of the defunct Mid-West Region. At the creation of Bendel State, Isoko South became an integral part of Bendel State. Isoko South LGA was created on 23 September, 1991 by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida.

In addition to having stretches of mangrove forests and a forest reserve alongside the Aviara clan, Isoko South Local Government Area is situated in an area with evergreen forests. It consists of rivers, canals, and streams and encompasses a low-lying area of the greater Niger Delta Basin. The region contributes significantly to Delta State's oil and gas resources (Wikipedia, 2020). The majority of the people living in the area are Isoko. Eleven communities make up the area: Olomoro, Aviara, Emede, Enhwe, Erowha, Igbide, Irri, Okpolo, Oleh, Umeh, and Uzere (Ikime, 1980). The Isoko language is spoken by the Isoko people (Wikipedia, 2020).

The flora of the area is characterized by abundant cash crops such as Raffia Palm, Oil Palm, Mahogany, Cotton, Abura, White and Black Afara, to mention but a few. These trees served several purposes to the people of Isoko South as they were used to carve canoes, build and roof houses, firewood for cooking and so on. The fauna consisted of Grasscutters, Antelopes, Bush Pigs, Crocodiles, Elephants, Squirrels, Iguaina, and so on. The Elephants were found in the thick forest in the locality (Pulse Lifestyle, 2020).

The traditional occupation of the people of Isoko South is fishing and farming. There is a vast arable land suitable for agriculture. More so, the people farm on the water linings when the flood has receded and leave behind fertile silt suitable for cultivation. Similarly, there are lakes, ponds and swamps in the area which contribute to the economic well-being of the people. The economic activities undertaken by the people traditionally were largely determined by their environment (Welch, 1934).

The people of Isoko South Local Government Area and the Isoko people in general are said to have historically migrated from the Benin kingdom in nearby Edo State. The administration of General Ibrahim Babangida created Isoko South and North Local Government Areas on 23 September, 1991, when the former Isoko Local Government Area was sub-divided (Wikipedia, 2020). According to Obaro Ikime (1980), the Isoko clans of Iyede, Emevo, Owhe, Emede, Ariara, Uzere, Okpe-

Ozoro claim Benin origin. The reasons given was the hostility of an Oba, and their consequent flight from the wrath of the Oba for some misdemeanor and the likes. Most of the migrations were independent movements, through links developed later on. Thus, for example, both the Owhe and Emevo groups settled for a while with the lyede before increasing population and pressures forced them to branch out and found separate settlements. Similarly, some traditions claim that before Aviara was finally settled in its present location, lyede and Erohwa elements joined the Aviara. Consequently, there exist a special pact of friendship between the Isoko clans of Aviara, lyede and Erohwa and this tradition may well be an attempt at rationalizing this pact (Ikime, 1980, Welch, 1934).

According to historical records, Erohwa (the eldest), Uzere, and Okpe were the first Isoko ancestors to travel from Benin to the region of Delta State where they currently reside. A second group is known to have departed Benin during Oba Azuala's rule (1483–1814). The lyede ancestors headed this second group of migrants (Welch, 1934, Ikime, 1980). Sub-groups within the first and second groups migrated again later; in some of these cases, the migrants were children leaving their family settlements for uncharted territory. Therefore, Effurun in Uvwie clan migrated from Effurun-Otor, while the ancestor of Effurun-Otor in Ughelli Local Government Area originated from Erohwa in Isoko South Local Government Area. From Effurun, Ekpan and Ugborikoko would relocate to their current locations. Oleh would relocate from Irri, and Irri would relocate from Uzere to its current site. The proximity of the two settlements could be explained by this according to Ikime (1980).

Same explanation is given for the migration of Okpe in Urhobo to Okpe-Isoko alongside Ozoro and other Isoko towns. However, Olomoro in Isoko South Local Government Area is said to have migrated from Olomu in Urhobo, the only clan with such history in the area. The ancestors of Igbide and Enhwe are said to have come from east of the River Niger, a location spanning through present day Anambra, Bayelsa and Rivers States (Welch, 1934, Ikime, 1980).

The main economic activity of Isoko South Local Government Area is farming. The major food crops produced by the people are cassava and yams. They also produce palm oil and palm kernel in abundance. The people also engage in low-key hunting and fishing is also done. They also engage in short and long-distance trades from time immemorial. Although the Isoko people are predominantly Christians today, traditional means of worship still flourish inspite of the strong inculcation of Christian ideas and values. The Isoko people call God, Oghene (Welch, 1934).

The Initiative and Establishment of the Presidential Amnesty Programme

Although Isoko South Local Government Area of Delta State lies above abundant gas and oil resources, infrastructure and amenities in the area are lacking. The Nigerian infrastructure crisis appears to be unrelated to the endowment of natural resources. However, some scholars argue that the Niger Delta situation is the consequence of discriminatory, exploitative, and oppressive policies implemented by the federal government with the intention of marginalizing and disregarding the Niger Delta people (Oloya and Ugeyavwighren, 2009). Even though the viewpoint above looks extreme, it might make sense. This is the point at which the Niger Delta could be compared to the proverbial goose that lays the golden eggs. The locals' main complain seems to be that the goose is treated disrespectfully and could perhaps be in danger of dying. Osaghae (1995) claims that despite the Niger Delta being Nigeria's primary source of crude oil money, the region is home to some of the nation's most economically and politically disenfranchised communities. The threat of environmental degradation exacerbates the picture of infrastructural neglect that was previously mentioned. The destruction brought about by gas flaring and oil spills has made it virtually impossible for the people to eke out a living.

Long before Nigeria gained its independence, responses to these issues of environmental degradation, marginalization, and neglect were being made. The Nembe people's 1895 activities against the Royal Niger Company, King Jaja of Opobo's deposition for opposing British merchants' direct interactions with his subjects to prevent their exploitation, and other acts demonstrated these reactions. The oppression of Nigeria's leading ethnic groups led to Boro's declaration of the Niger Delta Republic on February 23, 1966 (Erezene, 2013). The fundamental motivations remain the same even after a long time has passed since Boro's revolutionary struggle as the area has not developed.

In his Seven Point Agenda, President Umaru Yaradua listed the Niger Delta issue as part of what his administration will handle after taking office in May 2007. In accordance with the advice of Niger Delta elders, Yar'adua established the Niger Delta Technical Committee, keeping his pledge. This 45-member committee was established on September 8, 2008, with the goal of compiling and reviewing all previous Niger Delta reports, evaluating their recommendations, and formulating additional suggestions that will assist the federal government in achieving the Niger Delta's goals of sustainable development, peace, and environmental and human security (Ukiwo, 2010). On December 1st, 2008, the committee led by Ledum Mitee turned in its report to the federal government. Among the committee's recommendations were the following: designating a mediator to mediate talks between the government and militants; pardoning some militant leaders; initiating

a campaign of disarmament, demobilization, and rehabilitation; raising the oil revenue percentage to 25% from 13%; enacting regulations requiring insurance bonds from oil companies; exposing and prosecuting those responsible for fraudulent environmental clean-ups of oil spills; and ceasing gas flaring by December 31, 2008, as directed by the federal government earlier (Ukiwo, 2010).

In keeping with the government's resolve to deal with the Niger Delta issue, on May 5, 2009, the government established a Presidential Panel on Amnesty and Disarmament of Militants in the Niger Delta to carry out the recommendations regarding the granting of amnesty to Niger Delta militants. This was a partial yielding to the technical committee's report. The group outlined the conditions, guidelines, and steps involved in giving the insurgents from the Niger Delta amnesty in its recommendations. Accepting the recommendations, in compliance with section 175 of the 1999 Constitution, President Yara'dua extended an unconditional pardon and amnesty to everyone who had personally contributed to the committing of crimes associated with militant operations in the Niger Delta (Ibaba, 2011). Announced on June 15, 2009, the amnesty was scheduled to run for sixty days, from August 6 to October 4, 2009. The amnesty was contingent upon the militants' readiness and desire to give up any illegal weapons they may possess, completely renounce militancy in all of its forms, and submit to a guarantee to that effect (Larry and Osusu, 2019).

The Marginalization of Isoko People from the Presidential Amnesty Programme

In the preceding section, we have discussed the initiative and establishment of the Presidential Amnesty Programme. In this section, our concern is to investigate how the people of Isoko South Local Government Area were marginalized from the Presidential Amnesty Programme. It can be seen, as a matter of fact, that a major drive for the use of amnesty in the management of oil related conflicts in Nigeria is the belief that it is only through peace that sustainable development can be guaranteed in the Niger Delta. One of the most crucial strategies for resolving disputes and overseeing post-conflict circumstances worldwide in order to maintain peace is disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR). The United Nations and other organizations of a similar nature have employed this in a variety of ways to promote peace (Ibaba, 2011). The Nigerian government included this in its amnesty programme for the Niger Delta. The amnesty programme was divided into four phases: disarmament, demobilization of militants, rehabilitation and reintegration of former militants, and the Post Amnesty package, which was the last phase. The demobilized militants came from six Niger Delta states and were

promised N65,000 per month in addition to rent and after-career training (Oluwaniyi, 2020).

It will appear that Isoko South and by extension, the Isoko people in general who constitute Isoko North and Isoko South Local Government Areas were not included in the amnesty programme. This assertion is made because of the calls made in various quarters for the inclusion of the Isoko people in the amnesty programme after the window of amnesty was closed. In the thinking of some Isoko writers, the Post-Amnesty Phase of the programme has become an Ijo affair which should not be. One of such writers is Godday Ogidi, a Public Affairs Analyst. According to him, the Post Amnesty programme is not for the Ijo nation only but all Niger Delta communities, hence the Isoko people must rise to the occasion to challenge the situation before it degenerates into another Boko Haram fiasco in the region (Godday, 2017). Accounting for the contributions of the Isoko people to the Nigerian State, he stated that the Isoko region was the second place where crude oil and gas were discovered in 1959 after Oloibiri in 1956. Despite Fourteen million barrels of crude oil produced annually from the region with over 45 percent of gas flaring stations in Uzere, Olomoro, Oleh, Owhelogbo, Ellu and others, the people of Isoko suffered abject poverty. However, the author of this work found this claim concerning the discovery of oil in Isoko land to be false as records show that Afam in Rivers State was the second place that oil was discovered (Ikuli, 2012, Azaiki, 2006).

Lamenting that the Post-Amnesty Phase of the Amnesty Programme is now an Ijo affair rather than a Niger Delta affair, with the Ijo as the greatest beneficiaries of the programme, he stated that the Niger Delta militant insurgence was not only carried out by the Ijo youths alone but also Niger Delta youths from Isoko land, and by implication, Isoko South Local Government Area. Though the key agitators were mostly Ijo leaders, the players at the creeks were made up of Niger Delta youths from various ethnic extractions. The militant insurgence was successfully carried out as a result of federal government neglect of the region; hence it is sad that Isoko people are not included in the Amnesty Programme which was created by late President Yar'adua in 2009 (Godday, 2017).

Addressing journalists in Asaba, the Delta State capital on 12 September, 2017, one of the leaders of the Isoko National Youths Assembly Worldwide, Ejiro Akpo, encouraged the Federal Government to include the group in the Presidential Amnesty Programme in the Niger Delta State. He claims that despite being the country's fifth-largest oil-bearing community, the Isoko nation has been placed in the background. He said the youths might be forced to resort to arms struggle if the government fails to address their condition. He stated that, "the Federal

Government needs to urgently open talks with the elders and youths in Isoko nation to enable them to enroll in the Amnesty Programme. Any peace process that excludes the Isoko nation cannot be said to be all – inclusive and may after all be futile" (Owen, 2017).

Similarly, the Host Communities of Nigeria Producing Oil and Gas, Isoko Ethnic Nationality Chapter, has expressed disapproval over the purported exclusion of young people from the Isoko nation from the Presidential Amnesty Programme. In a correspondence addressed to Brigadier-General Paul Boro (rtd), the previous coordinator of the programme, the HOSTCOM chapter expressed that "it would be gross misplacement for Isoko ethnic nationality not to be included in the programme just like every other ethnic nationality in the Niger Delta region." The letter, signed by Justice Camp's Mr. David Ogwegbe, Secretary Prince Joshua Otekpo, and Chairman Mr. Odin Akpode, stated that "in 2011, we did not hesitate to enroll into the programme of the Federal Government by surrendering our guns. Since that time till now, series of letters have been written to different authorities of government on the need to include Isoko ethnic nationality in the Amnesty Programme of the Federal Government. We are still appealing to the Federal Government to include Isoko ethnic nationality in the programme" (Ochuko, 2017).

On Friday, November 22, 2016, the House of Representatives demanded the inclusion of Isoko youths in the programme. The legislators centred their request for the government to acknowledge the "peaceful disposition of the people" in their development programmes on a resolution brought forth by Leo Ogor, the House Minority Leader at the time. The Representatives argued that the Isoko youths had been keeping an eye out for vandalism along long stretches of pipelines, oil facilities, and flow stations within their territories. They urged the Federal Government to include the youths on the list of 30,000 Niger Delta ex-militants who have been pardoned for their militant activities. In order to do this, House Speaker Yakubu Dogara requested that the House Committee on Governmental Affairs communicate with Brigadier General Paul Boroh (rtd), the Presidential Adviser on Amnesty Programme, in order to ensure their inclusion and provide a report to the members in a fortnight (Inemesit, 2016). Unfortunately, this initiative produced no tangible results.

Impact of the Marginalization on the Development of Isoko South Local Government Area

The impact of the PAP on Isoko people has been very marginal given their relative inclusion in the program. This was made possible by few sons of Isoko land who worked with the Ijo militant leaders and were enrolled in the programme under the

camps of such militant leaders, thereby enjoying the benefits accruing from the exercise (Oke, 2022, Oseibe, 2022). However, it must be noted that such personal benefits accruing to a few persons cannot be used to assess the impacts of the programme in the entire Isoko South Local Government Area.

In light of this, between August 6, 2009, when the disarmament process began, and October 4, 2009, when it was concluded, 20,192 militants made up of 20,049 men and 153 women renounced militancy and applied for the amnesty program. Security personnel retrieved the weapons of war from those who accepted the amnesty offer and turned them in at prearranged collecting points. The opportunity to relinquish violent agitations was thus provided to the militants. Unambiguously, it is important to acknowledge that the amnesty initiative succeeded in temporarily ending militancy and instability in the area (Agbo, 2009).

It is a recognized fact that the Niger Delta region is experiencing a semblance of peace following the declaration of amnesty. With the return of some normalcy to the country's economy, the Federal Government has succeeded in reestablishing peace and safety. Nigeria produced 700,000 barrels of crude oil per day at the height of the crisis in 2009, but due to the amnesty, output rose to 2.4 million barrels per day in 2013 from 1.9 million barrels per day in 2009. The number also went up to 2.6 million in 2014 and then to 2.7 million barrels per day in 2015 (Omokhoa and Ikelegbe, 2016). Furthermore, former agitators who accepted the amnesty offer had been disarmed and demobilized since the declaration and execution of the amnesty programme.

The programme sought to enhance Nigeria’s growth of human capital, especially in the Niger Delta Region. The initiative has, in a sense, given young adults the chance to develop their potential and, as a method for fostering confidence, reintegrate restive youths from the Niger Delta into Nigeria's mainstream while progressively tackling the underlying issues that had provoked the conflict (Omokhoa and Ikelegbe, 2016). More so, the stipends given to the former agitators who are included in the amnesty programme now serve as a means of livelihood for them (Efe, 2022, Otobo, 2022). That being said, there is no denying the fact that amnesty has had a tremendous impact on people's socio-economic activities and quality of life by stabilizing the Niger Delta. However, the direct benefits on Isoko people appears absent which makes for a functional development gap which this paper examined.

Conclusion

As evident from the study, the Amnesty Program is a temporal solution to the Niger Delta crisis because it failed to address the root causes of the Niger Delta crisis.

Though the policy made the region peaceful for the execution of international oil business void of violent disturbances, the Niger Delta people remained impoverished and their environment and infrastructure dilapidated. The PAP also failed to be an inclusive development agenda as it was non-inclusive of the people of Isoko South LGA and by extension, the entire Isoko ethnic nationality.

The government needs to go back to the drawing board and examine all of the policy's flaws in order to prevent the Niger Delta militancy from continuing to be an illness whose symptom is being treated while the illness persists, which suggests that the illness will eventually resurface and possibly in a worse form because it is left untreated. Going back to the original reports that gave rise to the amnesty policy and addressing the sections that were overlooked in those reports should be part of this assessment. Government should also consider empowering the teeming unemployed youths in the region who are not militants.

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