NIGER DELTA: THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable development is a complex agenda. Not only does it include major social, environmental, and economic concerns, but it also includes the processes of how more complex choices are made. Sustainable development literature suggests that development is only possible if we move beyond the narrow confines of economic development to ensuring that peoples' basic needs are being met, that the resource base is conserved, that environmental and cross-sectoral concerns are integrated into decision-making processes, and that communities are empowered (Munslow & Fitzgerald, 1994).

There is nowhere that the attributes of sustainable development are most in need than in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Niger Delta has an enormously rich natural endowment in the form of land, water, forests, and fauna. However, these natural assets have been subjected to extreme degradation mainly due to oil prospecting. For many of the inhabitants of the region, this loss has been a direct route into poverty as natural resources have traditionally been the primary source of sustenance. The Niger Delta's poverty in the midst of vast oil wealth has frustrated expectations, fostered widespread indignation, entrenched deep-rooted and destructive mistrust, and incited unprecedented restiveness (UNDP, 2006).

Keywords: Sustainable development, governance, politics

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa is undisputedly one of the most richly endowed countries on the continent. It boasts of immense human and natural resources, which provide opportunities for national development (Ojakorotu, 2008). Prior to the discovery of oil in large commercial quantities in the Niger Delta in the 1950s, much attention was paid to rural transformation (UNDP, 2006). Substantial resources poured into agricultural facilities, basic education, and primary health care. The discovery of oil in commercial quantity shifted attention to urban industrialisation cum development. It must be noted that this coincided with the emphasis placed by the World Bank on urban infrastructure and development on the findings that urban centres account for more than 60% of national income. People were pulled from the rural areas to urban centres, which widened the gap between the two. As a direct result, agricultural productivity plummeted, while urban areas began suffering from strains on infrastructure, leading to widespread unemployment and a proliferation of social vices.

Governance and Sustainable Development in the Niger Delta

The growing disillusionment with the government and growing poverty on the face of massive oil revenues has led to calls for proper governance and sustainable development. Governance is not a topic that easily lends itself to precise definitions, although concepts and practices of governance are profoundly under-specified and are often associated with three dimensions – how and why governments are structured, what processes they employ in governing, and what results they are able to accomplish in serving their societies (Jreisat, 2002). The UNDP defines governance as, "*the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels, promoting social cohesion and integration and ensuring the well-being of is population*" (UNDPESCAP, 2007). According to this definition, *good governance* depends on public participation to ensure that political, social, and economic priorities are based on a broad societal consensus and that the poorest and most vulnerable can directly influence political decision-making in particular with respect to the allocation of development resources.

In recent times, *governance* and *good governance* are terms increasingly being used in development literature. According to Leftwich (1993), good governance within the context of the developing countries means an efficient, open, accountable, and audited public service which has the bureaucratic competence to help design and implement appropriate policies and manage whatever public sector there is. Olowu and Akinola (1995) describe *governance* as an approach, which focuses on the state and institutions crafted by the people, the relationships between them and how

rules are made in a society, which is accepted as legitimate by individuals and groups within the society.

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987 produced the most definitive report on sustainable development, arguing that many of the problems of resource depletion and environmental degradation arise mainly from the disparities in economic and political power. Sustainable development embraces cultural, social, economic, political, and ecological issues. It is a concept that concerns itself with the aspirations of the people, the culture, environment, democracy, health, and agriculture (James & Osuagwu, 2002). According to Fagbadebo (2007), governance issues are the bane of national development and political instability in Nigeria. Ali-Akpajiak & Pyke (2003), state that there cannot be any meaningful development where good governance is absent. For sustainable development initiatives to take root in Nigeria there must be a stable, democratic, and accountable government (Imade, 2001). One major challenge faced by the present political dispensation is that of promoting good governance, so as to rebuild people's confidence in the democratic process. Ake (1995) identifies two major governance issues, which have proved to be huge impediments to development. The first is the lack of participation and consensus building, which affects the sense of community; the second is a lack of accountability and transparency. This has a major effect on development as corruption and inefficiency are concealed and is evidenced by the spate of abandoned white elephant projects in the country.

The term *Niger Delta* refers to both the immediate area where the River Niger shreds into tributaries and empties into the Atlantic Ocean, as well as the contiguous zones and communities that are geographically defined by the tributaries and creeks that have formed as a result of the interaction of the River Niger and the Ocean (Abah, 2007). The region is comprised of all nine oil-producing states in Nigeria – Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers States – with a total land area of 75,000 square kilometres and 185 local government areas (UNDP, 2006). The region contains the world's third largest wetland with the most extensive freshwater swamp (Agbola & Alabi, 2003). Fishing and agriculture are the two main traditional occupations of the Niger Delta peoples. There has been a decline in these activities since the ascendancy of oil in the region. The region produces the oil wealth that accounts for the bulk of Nigeria's foreign earnings. In 2006, the Nigerian government estimated that it was earning $36 billion each year from the extensive oil and gas industry (Punch Newspapers, 2006). Estimates by international organisations, such as Human Rights Watch, put current annual earnings at over $45 billion. Inspite of the huge revenues from the oil sector, pervasive poverty persists in the region. This has created formidable challenges

to sustainable human development with the most pressing sustainable development challenge being improving the livelihood of the poorest. The Niger Delta today is a place of frustrated expectations and deep-rooted mistrust with frequent violent episodes, resulting from the restive state of mind of the youths and local indigenes (UNDP, 2006).

Human Development within the Niger Delta

According to the United Nations 1998 Human Development Report, Human Development is a process of enlarging people's choices. Expanding human capabilities and functioning ultimately helps to enlarge people's choices. At all levels of development, the three essential needs are for good health, education, and decent standard of living. If these basic needs are not achieved, many choices are simply not available and opportunities remain inaccessible to the majority of the population. Human development, thus, leads to the realisation of human rights – economic, social, cultural, civil, and political (UN-HDR, 1998). Similarly, economic development, which fails to enhance human rights, is not development because economic development should support activities like enterprise and growth, skills training, employment, and core government functions like planning. Effective development is also defined by collaboration and partnership necessary to all stakeholders including local authorities, businesses, the voluntary sector, and other statutory national bodies ensuring that all local residents benefit from growth in the economy.

Over a long term, a well-defined human development agenda has the potential to transform the Niger Delta region into an economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative, and politically peaceful region. However, nothing can be achieved in terms of sustainable livelihoods without the maintenance of lasting peace (UNDP, 2006). Examination of the various conflicts in the region shows that agitation for resource control is the predominant cause of most of them. All violent conflicts have, so far, constrained development efforts. The former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stressed that development cannot proceed in societies where militancy and conflict are the order of the day. The lack of development, on the one hand, contributes to the tensions that result in conflict and as such, this vicious circle must be broken before the regions development potential can be realised.

The Niger Delta is home to many small minority groups, each of which is composed of numerous clans and each clan cherishes its own independence. Given the preponderance of small settlements, the task of promoting sustainable human development in the Niger Delta makes it relatively more challenging to enforce participatory development, whether human or economic (UNDP, 2006).

According to Munslow & Fitzgerald (1994), it is only by developing the human resource base that the natural resource base can be better managed in both rural and urban areas as those who live in poverty have limited options to stop them from engaging in activities that contribute to environmental degradation in both rural and urban areas.

Development Efforts in Nigeria

According to Edoho and Dibie (2000) the predominant style of development in Nigeria is based on the promotion of industrialisation to attain the rapid growth required to bring about the desired well-being of the indigenous population. The principal premise upon which this development strategy was based was founded on the supposition that significant incentives to the industrial sector would bring about a highly dynamic increase in all production activities, which would in turn increase production, economic growth, and development throughout the economy. Such a modernisation process was expected to enhance the skills of both labour and management, thereby lead to an enabling environment for inward investments, as well as foreign direct investments. The problems with this growth strategy are reflected in the poor social and economic conditions that prevail in both the urban and rural areas. This is because there is no social safety net in place to deal with the vagaries of the market and to cater for the weak and poor, who only exist on the periphery of the market economy. Edoho & Dibie (2000), in their review of environmental policies in Nigeria, further stated that Nigeria as a country cannot lay claim to making use of its natural resources due to the fact that environmental policies have always been initiated at the urging of international development agencies and multilateral organisations. Consequently, the environmental policies fail to take into account the real indigenous social and economic characteristics of the country itself. This has led to confusion, rather than clarity, when discussing environmental policies.

Rural development is a veritable tool for fighting poverty and achieving economic prosperity at the grassroots level (Nwachukwu & Ezeh, 2007) as it is concerned primarily with the improvement of the standard of living of the low income population living in the rural areas on a self sustaining basis (Mabogunje, 1980; Lele, 1979). The rural areas of Nigeria are inhabited by the bulk of the nation's population (Olayiwola & Adeleye, 2005). They serve as the base for food production and are also the major sources of capital formation for the country as they engage in primary activities that form the foundation for economic development (Olatunbosun, 1975). In the Niger Delta region and Nigeria as a whole, inadequate and ineffective rural infrastructure is a major characteristic of the rural areas. Madu (2007) characterises the essence of rural development as the improvement of the spatial and socio-economic environment of rural space, which leads to the enhancement of the

individuals' ability to care for and sustain their well-being. Rural development relates not only to a sustained increase in the level of production and productivity of all rural dwellers, but a sustained improvement of their well-being, that should manifest in increased per capita income and standard of living. It should also lead to sustained physical, social, and economic improvement of the rural community (Titilola, 2000). Ensuring sustainable management of the natural resource base in order to meet people's basic needs requires two priorities for action. The first is human resource capacity building and the second is institutional strengthening and orientation (Munslow & Fitzgerald, 1994). Both require redressing the extreme inequalities experienced by the people of the Niger Delta through the neglect of basic infrastructure and failure to replicate infrastructures to areas of need. Thus, empowering communities emphasises the need for communities to be able to mobilise their own resources and command a level of outside support.

Capacity Building

To achieve sustainable growth and poverty reduction, developing countries need strong institutional capacity (World Bank, 2008). The theory of capacity building (or development) is understood in different ways, from economic capability for development, to institutional performance, to the more commonly understood individual (or personal) competence. Sustainable capacity development is a long-term investment in sustainability and, within the context of this research, includes a wide range of activities ranging from training programmes to institutional development. A key aspect of capacity development is a focus on *empowerment*. An empowerment approach involves increasing levels of access, participation, and control over the distribution of resources. This implies that capacity building should be aimed at enabling people and institutions to assert control over their development.

As stated earlier, capacity building is made possible through a variety of diverse but complimentary means. According to the 2008 World Bank report on building capacity for development, training is the primary means of capacity building. In order to evaluate how capacity building helps to foster development, it is necessary to understand how the resources and incentives presented in an institutional and organisational context affect the implementation of learning. Trained individuals can be effective only to the extent that organisational resources and institutional incentives enable them to apply what they learn. Training staff to use a computer software package, for instance, will build client capacity only if trainees have access to and are expected to use a computer in their workplace.

There have been several development strategies and development programmes initiated in Nigeria and the result of these have been mixed. A key constraint in the implementation of development programmes is a lack of attention to the local institutional capacities required. This is particularly important when resources are limited and the only real means for sustaining development is the local community. The process of building local institutional capacity could lead to an investment in the social capital and long-term sustainable development (McLenna & Ngoma, 2004). There has been a tendency by successive governments to centralise power, supposedly to control development.

Institutional Strengthening and Re-Orientation

Sustainable development requires sustainable institutions, a work force, which is both trained in professional competence and willing to meet the challenge of nation building (Munslow & Fitzgerald, 1994). To this end, there are current clamours amongst various groups within the civil society and community based organisations for a re-orientation of public service to meet the needs of the disenfranchised communities in order to ensure public accountability and transparency of civil service institutions and processes. The continuing high level of violence is a central problem, which needs to be resolved. It can be argued that the collapse of age-old institutions, such as traditional institutions, has contributed to the increased violence and restiveness within the various communities with rapid urbanisation, occasioned by the collapse of rural economies forcing competition between socially and geographically distinct communities over scarce resources. This has exacerbated the Niger Delta crisis, leading to a breakdown in law and order.

In the context of widespread violence within the Niger Delta, attempts have been made to use peace committees and talks to create conditions for sustainable livelihood initiatives. Nossel & Shaer (1993) state that without exception, violence-torn communities identify economic deprivation as a major exacerbation of unrest. Building peace goes hand-in-hand with community development (Munslow & Fitzgerald, 1994) and meeting the needs of people in strife-ridden communities could help to build a climate of peace and security, which is desperately needed to facilitate economic development. This point is stressed upon by Mbaku (2005) who states, in his review of sustainable development efforts in Africa, that in order to combat poverty and deprivation through wealth creation, the economy must not only have the necessary resources but also be provided with the appropriate institutional environment so as to forestall opportunistic behaviours.

The Development Challenge

Despite the political transition to democracy in 1999, Nigeria continues to face enormous challenges. Two-thirds of the country's population is estimated to live below the United Nations poverty threshold of US$1 a day; corruption is rife, unemployment growing in both the skilled and unskilled sectors, half of the adult population is illiterate (overall literacy in Nigeria is still only 57%, with only 41% of women being literate), healthcare is largely unaffordable, and 20% of children die before their fifth birthday (USAID, 2006). Although Nigeria is a major oil producer, oil revenues amount to less than US$100 per capita per year and provide little benefit to the majority of Nigeria's estimated 148 million citizens.

Revenues generated from oil exploration activities have increased the capacity of the federal government to finance much needed development projects. However, the pressure from government policies that rely heavily on commodity exports to generate foreign exchange has resulted in growing regional inequalities, impoverishment, underemployment, and environmental degradation (Afoaku, 2005).

The Niger Delta development dilemma is particularly marked owing largely to years of neglect, the near collapse of traditional norms and values, as well an extensive physical and environmental degradation. Most of the indigenous people generally perceive the oil companies operating in the area as the source of their woes (Samuel, 2008). The employment and livelihood opportunities provided are often beyond the capabilities of the vast majority of the population, owing to the high levels of illiteracy and low technical and managerial abilities. Ever since the launching of the first national development plan (1962 – 1968), the oil industry has been expected to play a major role. The overriding strategy from the first national development plan to the fourth national development plan (1981 – 1985) has been to deploy the financial resources realised from crude petroleum for the expansion of the economy in order to lay a solid foundation for self sustaining growth and development (Angaye, 1986).

The Niger Delta is home to a large number of communities amongst the ethnic minority groups spread over the South-South geopolitical zone and is home to Nigeria's oil industry. The lands and people of this region have borne the brunt of the environmental and social impact of oil exploration and production activities. Inspite of its huge resource endowment and immense potential for economic growth, the region remains in a pathetic state of underdevelopment. The arrival of the oil exploration companies has further exacerbated historical divisions and animosities within the region.

In the pre-colonial period and all through the colonial period, the mainstay of the Niger Delta economy was agriculture and fishing (UNDP, 2006). During this period, the production of timber, palm oil and palm kernels took place in much of the Niger Delta; rubber in mostly the current Edo, Delta, and Cross Rivers states; cocoa in Ondo and Edo states was at a high peak and earning considerable income for the region and Nigeria as a whole. These days, the dominant economic activity of the people is trading. However, since the advent of the oil industry, these local communities have lost statutory control over their resource-rich lands, especially with the promulgation of the Land Use Degree in 1978, which expropriates land from original owners and confers ownership on the Federal Government and its agent of the state - the executive governor of each state of the federation. This remains a primary source of tension as it nullifies the rights of indigenous landowners who still lay claim to their communal land (Akinola, 2006). Section 1 of the Land Use Degree states that, "all land comprised in the territory of each state (except land vested in the federal government or its agencies) are hereby vested in the governor of the state, who would hold such land in trust for the people and administer for the use and common benefit of all Nigerians in accordance with the provisions of the Act" (as reviewed by Akinola, 2006). This has resulted in the agitation for greater access to resource control by the Niger Delta communities with the emergence of social movements and militant youth groups and has gradually escalated from civil protestations to arms struggle with huge and very destructive impacts on oil exploration activities within the region.

CONCLUSION

The concept of sustainable development - meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs - as defined by the Brundtland Commission (WCED, 1987), is not only an ideal, which every nation is striving towards, but also a huge multifaceted challenge. Historically, there has been a general tendency to approach development as a process of acquiring and using Western-style systems, standards, expertise, and problem solving methods (Ukaga, 2005). However, this approach has proved to be problematic, as there is more to development than looking outward for solutions to a country or society's problems. Moreso, sustainable development, as practiced by the developed countries, is generally home-grown and specific to issues within such societies and, therefore, not readily exported from one place to another.

The Niger Delta is an area whose resource politics generates the most strident, poignant, and worrying questions about citizenship, participation, and accountability. In the absence of the

people's ability to access resources and claim their rights to the benefits of oil, the area has been torn by unrest between community and government and between community and oil company (Abah, 2007). To achieve sustainable development within the Niger Delta will require both the political will and capacity to formulate and implement strategic policies. The current process of democratisation, through which Nigeria is passing through, provides a great opportunity for the government to overhaul and reconfigure sustainable growth inducing and enhancing institutions by devising a people-centred (participatory) form of democracy that is committed to sustainable development. As such, certain key issues will need to be taken into account to ensure a viable sustainable development culture.

- There is a need to establish strong policy and program linkages between economic development and job creation activities through initiatives aimed at developing the skills and capacities of the local population to grasp opportunities to generate income.
- Economic policies will have to take into account the need to allow people the right to earn their own living by trying to support the creation of viable jobs and improving access to resources, such as education and health.
- Ensuring support and respect for indigenous peoples by maintaining the cultural diversity of each community through promoting an inclusive and participatory political culture.
- Facilitating schemes and programmes which seek not only to engage both community leaders and elders but also recognises the youths within the various communities as emerging leaders of the land and future custodians of culture.

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