

# Militancy in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: Interrogating the Issues and Challenges

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**Abstract:** *This article is a qualitative research on the recurrent militancy in the Niger Delta Region (NDR), Nigeria. Specifically, the papers scrutinized the various issues behind the unrest in the region as well as the danger posed by the militias, not only to the people of NDR but Nigeria as a composite whole. Many secondary data were utilized which include majorly; journal articles, media publications such as online Newspapers and reportages on the phenomenon and textbooks at researchers' disposal. Data gathered from various documented evidence were analyzed logically in themes and built on Relative Deprivation theory of Robert Ted Gurr. Findings from the study revealed that numerous issues have resulted in the Niger Delta militancy for decades. Evident in the various data analyzed, issues such as poverty in the region, marginalization, environmental degradation and destruction, air pollution, to mention but a few. Moreover, the challenges arising from the militants' activities include economic downturn, low patronage by local and foreign investors, job redundancy, youth unemployment, illicit oil bunkering, killings and kidnapping for ransom. The study recommended among others; an urgent need for Nigerian government to minimize or adequately tackle the issue of unemployment, uncontrolled environmental pollution and the perceived marginalization of the people of Niger Delta region.*

**Keywords:** Relative Deprivation; Marginalization; Militancy; NDR; Poverty.

## Introduction

Militancy has been prevalent in the Niger Delta region for decades in Nigeria. It is observed in literature that militancy in the Niger Delta Region (NDR) is traced to 1966, when Isaac Adaka Boro, a former police officer from the Delta, led a rebellion against the Nigerian state with aim of achieving liberation for the people of Niger Delta. Reported by Sampson (2009), Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), under the leadership of Boro, Onwonaru and some Privates attacked a police station in Yenogoa and kidnapped some officers in the police station; NDVF vandalized pipeline, attacked the security personnel (the Police) and announced the Independence of Niger Delta Republic. Nevertheless, the activities of the group were suppressed by the federal troop and the leader of NDVF was arrested and put on trial on a 9 count charge of treason by the Nigerian government. Observed in Okanaka & Douglas (2003), the primary aim of NDVF was to fight against marginalization, oppression, victimization and deprivation of the Niger Delta Region and its people over the control of natural resources (notably, crude oil). Militancy in the NDR resurfaced again in the 1990s, as a result of the unrest and tribal conflicts which erupted; notably, between the Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri tribes, given small arm which led to the militarization of the Niger Delta.

Ezeudo (2013) traced the origin of Niger Delta Militancy to the protest against environmental degradation and poor infrastructural development of the region. He observed that militancy has been a re-occurrence issue in the NDR but gained popularity in the late 1990s, following the new wave of agitations by the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) who issued an ultimatum to all the oil companies in the region to suspend their operation and vacate the NDR on or before 31<sup>st</sup> of December, 1998. This threat destabilised exploration of oil by various oil companies in the region. The IYC alleged that the activities of the oil companies endangered the NDR as environmental pollution, land degradation and shortage of food became prevalent. Observed in Olatunba (2010), is another complaint by the IYC that, the oil exploration in the region by various multi-national corporations such as Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), Shell, Texaco, among others have not contributed to improvement or development of both human and infrastructure in the NDR.

To Ibaba (2005), environmental degradation and lack of meaningful development in the NDR were the causative factors for the current militancy in the region. Noted by the scholar is the continuous marginalization via oil exploration in the NDR without any meaningful development resulted in the uprising of various militant groups in the region which include but not limited to Movement for Emancipation of Niger Delta, MEND, Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force, Niger Delta Vigilante and Icelanders Coalition for Military Action, ICMA.

## Statement of the Problem

Economically, NDR is an important region in Nigeria as it contributes largely to the Nigeria economy through the abundance of oil resource and if these oil resources had been properly utilized and channeled properly, Nigeria and the Niger Delta region would have been one of the most developed place in the world; however, the reverse has been the case for decades. Consequently, the recurrent militancy in the NDR is a result of environmental pollution, food shortage, land pollution among others coupled with

serious marginalization of natural endowment of the people with no human nor infrastructural development in the Niger Delta Region. This has for decades continued to pose serious challenge to the region and Nigerian economy at large as crude oil remains the only major natural resource for export in Nigeria. The menace arising from Niger Delta militant groups as known includes kidnapping of oil workers, oil bunkering, bombing of oil facilities, crude oil theft to mention a few, with deadly consequences on the region. Thus, series of attacks in the NDR result are evident in the activities of the militant groups in the region, particularly the Niger Delta Avengers. Observed in Mgbonyenbi & Emeni (2020), Niger Delta Avengers have been attacking the region with the motives of crippling the Nigerian economy.

The economic crippling activities of various Niger Delta militant groups have gained the attention of the Nigerian government which has resulted in series of legislations and policies by the Federal Government of Nigeria in a bid to curb the menace. Some of the policies include but not limited to Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, Niger Delta Development Commission, Joint Task Force operation and various Amnesty programmes. However, militancy in the NDR has defied all its solutions, hence, the continued militancy and security crisis which have continued to undermine development in the region and Nigeria at large.

### **Militancy**

Scholars have described militancy as synonymous to the activities of militant groups or militia. As observed by Odalonu & Obani (2018), militancy involves aggressive terror attack, kidnapping, killing, maiming, attacks on social and economic infrastructural installations among others. Alabi cited in Odalonu & Obani (2018) considered militancy as the use of confrontational or violent methods in support of a political or social cause. On a separate ground, militancy entails a violent mode of action of aggrieved people, groups or activists geared towards socio-political, economic or religious emancipations (Olori, Oyigbo, Ozurumba, Olori, Ugwuoke, Anigbogu & Onah, 2020). In the view of the scholars, violent mode of actions are purported at defending a cause for militancy but not limited to inequality, marginalization, deprivation, underdevelopment, injustice, unemployment, illiteracy, diseases, unemployment, abject poverty among related others.

Similarly as observed in Alabi, Aminu (2013), militancy denotes multi-prolonged violent tendency and action. Considering the assertion of this scholar, militancy encompasses taking violent and rebellious action against the constituted authority of a socio-political setting. In a more narrow description, Abraham (2011) asserted that militancy in Nigeria manifests in the form of disruption of activities of multinational oil corporations, vandalization of oil pipelines, illegal bunkering and hostage taking of expatriates.

Ojo (2015) described militant group/militia as armed non-state actors operating outside the formal state military. It was further asserted by the scholar that militancy; irrespective of its mode of operation, whether operating at ethnic, regional or national levels; militant group has the propensity to use violence for effecting a change within a society. In this regard, militancy can be considered as the free use of violence or indiscriminately use of sophisticated weapons or small arms to perpetrate unconventional warfare in target areas in order to press home a demand.

Ojo (2015) asserts that militias have gained more popularity in the recent time than ever ranging from paramilitary formation used as counter-insurgency forces, small localized village militias based on self-defence to militias that have spun off from failure within a state security sector and subsequently sought to counter state power structures.

More broadly, Ogundiya (2011) described militancy cum militant groups based on categories; these include ideological, politically-inspired or principled militants and non-ideological, criminally-motivated militants or opportunistic mercenaries. Further observed by the scholar is that ideological militants are those purpose-driven militants who display aggressive tendencies in reaction to real or perceived social injustice and other forms of marginalization which are considered as threats to their individual and or collective identity in a given political entity. In the view of this scholar, it is suitable to say that the Niger Delta crisis was propelled by ideological militancy as youths chose to take up arms against the state and society in their quest for redress of age long inequality, marginalization, environmental damage and political deprivation.

To Ojo (2013), non-ideological militants are those who perpetrate acts of violence against fellow humans without just cause. This category of militants heartlessly employs violence and criminal activities as means of survival. A larger percentage of non-ideological militants are religious fundamentalists, political thugs, and grassroots-based or campus cultists who make themselves available for commercialized criminality (Ojo, 2013), while criminally-motivated militants as described by Ogundiya (2011) are equipped by unscrupulous elements in the society such as unprincipled politicians to commit crimes including electoral violence, assassination of opponents, public unrest, and hostage taking, among others. By implication, the activities of non-ideological militants are an aberration in any given society as the rationale for their actions is not confined within the fringes of fundamental human rights and the rule of law.

### **Niger Delta Region, NDR**

Scholars through their theoretical perspectives have geographically described Niger Delta Region as the dominant oil region that cuts across many states of Nigeria and also based on the issues involved. Statistically, as pointed out in Azaiki (2007), the Niger Delta region extends over 70,000km and makes up about 7.5 percent of Nigeria land mass. In the view of the scholar, the Niger Delta region consists of nine (9) states which are Abia, AkwaIbom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers.

More so, scholars such as Mgbonyenbi & Emeni (2020) while making emphasis on the geographical size of the region asserted that Niger Delta Region has about 30 million population of people as at 2006 which is about 23percent of the Nigerian population while IMF cited in Mgbonyenbi & Emeni (2020) described Niger Delta Region as the geographical heart of crude oil exploration in Nigeria as the country earns about 99.7 of her export and 90percent of annual income.

Scholars have furthered described Niger Delta region based on its history and geographical location. According to Nse Abasi (2005), the Niger Delta Region derived its name from the River Niger and it is one of the largest wetlands in the world, Africa's largest delta and probably the second largest or third largest on earth after the Mississippi. According to the scholar, the Niger Delta region is situated in the southern part of Nigeria and bordered in the South by the Atlantic Ocean and to the east by Cameroon, occupies a surface area of about 112,110 square kilometers, cuts from the greater part of the South-south region and some parts of the southeast region of Nigeria.

In the view of Azaiki (2007), the Niger Delta region is regarded as one of the nine most difficult deltas of the world comparable to the Mekong, the Amazon and the Ganges. According to the National Bureau of statistics (2006), the Niger Delta area has a population of about 25 million people and more than 40 ethnic groups with links to the linguistic groups of Ijaw, Edo, Igbo, Efik, Ibibio and Oron. The NDDC Act (2000), Recognizes 9 states namely; Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers As comprising the Niger Delta.

While commenting on the Niger Delta region, Taiwo (1999) asserted that the people of the Niger Delta region were independently governed and that city states were with well-developed structures. Accordingly the scholar maintained that the city states of the Niger Delta had remarkably sophisticated structures and institutions that regulated commerce, religion, education, and family life and ensured groups survival.

In the view of Okonta & Oronto (2001), the primary occupation of Niger Delta people before the discovery and exploration of oil and gas in the region were fishing and farming. Unfortunately, the continuous exploration and exploitation of oil resources by the oil companies has destroyed the subsistence economy of the people. The scholars further maintained that testimonies from various quarters lend credence to the claim that environmental degradation occasioned by oil spillage has made life extremely difficult for the local people. As pointed out by the scholars, destruction of farmlands, fishponds and rivers had radically altered the economic life of the productive Niger Delta people.

In the same line of thought with Okonta & Oronto (2001), Agbu (2005) argues that Nigeria's Niger Delta and its human travails are indeed one where what may be regarded as potential 'paradise on earth' has over the years turned 'hell on earth' for the people of the area due to cumulative human practices that result in environmental degradation.

### **Methodology**

This paper is both qualitative and descriptive. It gathered data employed from various secondary sources. For this reason, the researchers gathered data majorly from journal articles, media publication, reports, presented them in themes and content analyzed them.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is built on Relative Deprivation theory of Garri Runciman and developed by Robert Ted Gurr. In his book "*Why Men Rebel*", Ted Gurr discussed why people commit political violence and how regimes (Government) respond to violent behaviours. Observed in Toolshero (2022), relative deprivation occurs when groups or individuals subjectively perceive themselves as unfairly treated or disadvantaged in relation to other people (Toolshero, 2022).

The central argument of Relative Deprivation theory, as observed in Salleh (2013), rests on the claim of Robert Ted Gurr who argued that the tension that develops from discrepancy between what "ought to be" and the "is" of collective satisfaction and this leads men to violence.

In Ted Gurr dialect, deprivation is primarily, a psychological issue. For this reason, if such sense of deprivation is confined to an individual, it invariably leads to crime. But when deprivation becomes a collective transformation of a region, community or as the case of Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, it assumes the form of collective activities. The deprivation of basic human wants by the Nigerian government in the Niger-Delta evidently led to frustration, agitation, discontentment and disillusionment leading to

militancy in Nigeria. Therefore, once there is negative increase in the socio-economic and political indicators such as unemployment, high level of illiteracy, high inflation, discontentment, poor governance, lack of freedom and violation of human rights amongst others, there will be tendency for agitation leading to destruction of man and other resources which has unprecedented effect on the economy.

Relating Relative Deprivation theory in explaining the relationship between Militancy and Niger Delta Region is found relevant in tracing the historical antecedence of militia agitations and frequent rise of individuals and groups in the NDR against the Nigerian government. Thus, it is fit to say that the failure of the Nigerian government to adequately respond to the developmental issues in the NDR may be responsible for recurrent cases of militancy and insurrection by armed militia groups in the region..

Moreover, many factors could be attributed to the frustration, anger and aggression that the Niger Delta people have towards the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Multi-national oil companies operating in the Region. These include social inequality, economic deprivation as a result of poisoned land and water sources due to oil spillage from explorations, marginalization of Niger Delta indigenes in Federal appointments as well as discriminatory employment policy in the oil companies, environmental pollution and degradation in the region, pervasive poverty in the Niger Delta among others have resulted in the quest for self-determination by the people of the region. For this reason, the discontentment over the exploration of oil resources coupled with marginalization and deprivation have resulted in militancy (as a form of revolution) in the region over the years. Thus, it suffices to say that the more the people of Niger Delta Region feel deprived of their natural resources, the more the emergence and activities of militia groups in the region.

#### **Causes of Militancy in the Niger Delta Region, NDR**

**Crisis of Leadership in the host communities:** Observed in Ike & Akukwe (2001), oil producing companies have tended to support whichever faction they believe had the capability of disrupting its operations as opposed to which groups or factions were properly constituted and traditionally legitimate. For this reason, the Shell Petroleum Development Company ignored the traditional rulers and elders and accorded more recognition, partnered and related with the youths as the youths have disruptive power on oil production than the elders. Moreover, the youths emerged as community leaders and they became the power brokers, the liaison with the Multi-national Corporations and the object of Multi-national Corporations patronage. Consequently, the realization by the youths that violent protests and disruptive actions elicited immediate actions and payments by the oil companies led to the emergence of several youth groups or militias. Subsequently, the youths became more daring in their tactics, from minor threats of disruption of activities, emerged full blown militancy activities and consequently the youths began to hijack ships and helicopters, kidnap oil expatriates and vandalize oil facilities in order to obtain pay offs, ransom and payments from the oil companies.

**Marginalization and Abject Poverty:** Affirmed by Ejibunu (2007), in spite of the huge amount of money that have been derived from oil export over decades, the Niger Delta region has continue t be subjected to severe land degradation, economic downturn, increasing poverty, misery among others. As observed in Nwogwugwu, Alao & Egwuonwun (2012), the marginalization and underdevelopment in the region is a result of the systematic disequilibrium in the production exchange relationship between the state, the Trans-national companies and the people of Niger Delta. From the assertion of these scholars, marginalization and poverty in the NDR has largely contributed to the decades of recurrent social unrest and uprising by the militants in the region.

**Air Pollution:** Gas flaring is considered another vital issue in the discourse of Militancy in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. For many decades, the oil companies in the region have been wrecking the ecosystem of the Niger Delta through uncontrolled gas flaring (Comet Newspapers, 2001), As reported in the Newspaper, gases flaring takes place twenty four hours and some are believed to be burning for about four (4) decades, thereby resulting in enormous release of hydrogen sulphide. In essence, the oil companies are not only destroying the Niger Delta region but also contributing to global warming. The issue of air pollution as it affects the people of the Niger Delta Region is also evident in the work of Okaba (2005), who observed that the pollution released and noises from the vibration in the course of exploration of crude oil and gas are injurious and deadly to the people of the Niger Delta Region. As evidently pointed out by the scholar, the chemical emissions from the gas flaring contribute to acid rain, diseases and trigger skin condition. Another instance of air pollution as it affects the people of Niger Delta Region is evident in the work of Nwaomah (2009) who claimed that fire resulting from leakages from the exposed and corroborated oil pipe lines that are scattered all over the region.

**Environmental Pollution cum Degradation:** Observed in Nwogwugwu, Alao & Egwuonwun (2012), environmental pollution is one of the five (5) plagues of mankind aside war, famine, death and pestilence. Affirmed by Ile & Akukwe (2001), the fragile ecosystem of the Niger Delta has been seriously affected by oil spills, gas flares and effluents from industrial wastes. Consequently, the unchecked exploration of crude oil and gas has affected the land of Niger Delta Region of Nigeria with irreparable ecological devastation. Mgbonyenbi & Emeni (2020), went ahead to argue that the oil spillage and gas flares from oil exploration in the Niger Delta Region have destroyed and devastated enormous land and water and has resulted in soil fertility loss, forest loss, decline in agriculture and fisheries among others. Ejibunu (2007) also affirmed that that the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region in the year 1957 has resulted in events that led to the political and economic marginalization of the Niger Delta region. In essence, the



continuous series of environmental pollution and degradation, land deprivation, air pollution and destruction of aquatic system in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria is one of the major causes for the uprising of militia groups cum militancy in the region.

**Destruction of Aquatic Ecosystem:** Another prominent cause of militancy cum militia groups' activities in the Niger Delta Region is the destruction of aquatic system. As pointed out by Nwaomah (2009), the destruction of aquatic ecosystem is enormously significant to be considered for the reason that it constitutes a severe threat to the economic hub of the lives-fishing in the region. As evidently asserted by the scholar, production materials such as drill cuttings, drill mud and other fluids that are used to stimulate production are discharged into the environment and most of them end up in the stream and rivers. By implication, these chemicals are not easily degradable and most of these oils might have sunk to the bottom of the water surface, leaving deadly consequences which can be categorized into three (3); firstly, surface and ground water quality deterioration in terms of portability, aesthetic and recreation. Secondly; destruction and reduction of aquatic life and seafood production of the water; and thirdly, destruction of acute and sub lethal toxicity of aquatic flora and fauna on water and benthic macro.

**Policy of Divide and Rule:** For years, the oil producing companies operating in the Niger Delta Region have adopted a divide and rule method in which they identify for compensation, people in the host communities they believe have the capability to influence the indigenes to ensure that they have a peaceful environment to operate in, at minimal cost (Kemedi, 2003). A part of the money that should have been spent on Corporate Social Responsibility in the development of the host communities, traditional rulers and local community leaders have become corrupt as they have become recipients of various contract awards and cash payments at the detriment of the communities they represent.

### **Challenges posed by militancy on Niger Delta Region, NDR**

**Kidnapping and hostage taking of oil workers in the NDR:** kidnapping, hostage taking among other unwholesome activities have being one the major tactics employed by the Niger Delta militias to victimize foreign oil workers. Observed in Amaize (2006), hundreds of oil expatriates had been kidnapped while most of them were released in exchange for ransom. By implication, there have been enormous challenges as a result of kidnapping and hostage keeping of foreign oil workers on Nigeria economy; one of such is the scaring away of potential foreign investors and development partners which could have resulted in development of the region. Akpan (2006) asserts that kidnapping and hostage taking of oil workers have resulted in low investments patronage and capital inflow in the NDR.

**Vandalization of Oil Pipelines/illicit oil bunkering in the NDR:** To Nwogwugwu, Alao & Egwuonwu (2012) one of the major threats by militancy in the NDR is illegal oil bunkering. Further maintained by the scholars, the operation of militant groups in the NDR has prevented the security agencies from adequately covering locations of oil facilities. Moreover, the same scholar equally argues that the emergence of militia groups in the NDR has resulted in illegal oil bunkering in the area. While commenting on the economic cost of illegal oil bunkering on the NDR, Oudemans (2006) affirmed that the losses range between 30,000 and 200,000 bbl per day. By implication, the illegal oil bunkering in the NDR remains an albatross to the social and economic security of the region

**Unemployment and Redundancy in the NDR:** One of the critical implications of militancy in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria is high rate of unemployment as a result of downsizing of oil companies' employees and disruption of business activities in the region. As reported on Sunday Trust Newspaper (2007: 14), many companies which include a Petrochemical company were shut down thereby rendering not less than 3,000 youth jobless. More so, Royal Dutch Shell production reduced significantly from 1million to less than 380,000 bpd while 40 base stations of MTN Nigeria were shut down due to militant activities in NDR. Observed in the report of Punch Newspapers(2007, July 8), over 80% of companies in the Niger Delta have stopped operations as expatriates had either gone to their home countries or migrated to a safer and secured environment. In essence, the continued increase in militants' activities in the Niger Delta Region over decades has significantly disrupted the operations of most oil companies in the region thereby resulting in high rate of unemployment.

**Decline in the inflow Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into NDR and Nigeria at large:** for Alaibe (2010), militancy in the NDR poses severe threats to economic activities of the region and Nigeria at large. Foreign Investors have over decades continued to divert their businesses to safer and secured environments. By implication, militancy has denied NDR and Nigeria at large, the opportunities of foreign investment patronage which have the tendency of improving the economic situation of the region. Further affirmed by the scholar is that militancy in the NDR has severely crippled the economy of NDR and Nigeria. Pointed out by the scholar, investment inflow of oil industry had declined remarkably while most foreign investors have diverted their investments to other African countries.

### **Conclusion**

The primary aim of this paper is to examine the issues and challenges arising from the militia uprising in NDR, Nigeria. Evident from the foregoing numerous issues have resulted in militancy in the region. Such issues include environmental degradation,

marginalization, poverty, and destruction of aquatic ecosystem, air pollution, to mention but a few. By implication, these unsettled issues have transpired into recurrent militancy in the NDR with deadly consequences on the region. Findings from the study revealed that militancy in the NDR has resulted in economic downturn, low investment patronage, massive unemployment and redundancy, kidnapping /hostage taking, illegal oil bunkering among similar others. Thus, an urgent solution is needed for the reason that militancy remains a serious threat to the NDR.

### Recommendations

Hinging on findings from this study, the researchers made following recommendations which equally serve as possible solutions to militancy in the Niger Delta Region:

- The Nigerian state should adequately tackle the issue of poverty and high rate of unemployment in NDR which have been considered by scholars as the major reasons for the militia uprising in the region.
- The Nigerian government should dialogue with leaders of the various militias group in NDR in a bid to resolve the menace.

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