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Functional education, militancy and youth restiveness in Nigeria's Niger Delta: The place of multi-national oil corporations (MNOCs)

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The oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been in global focus for sometime due to youth restiveness and lately, militancy occasioned by the disruption of activities of multi-national oil corporations, hostage taking of both foreign nationals and Nigerians alike. This paper opines that functional education is the only panacea to the prevailing situation in the region. By functional education, the paper means such that will equip youths of the region to compete favourably with their peers from within the country and beyond, for job placements (at high levels) in oil companies. The paper calls on the multi-national oil corporations to take 'the bull by the horns' in this respect by building and equipping the primary and secondary schools in the region to international standards; and also, paying some reasonable allowances to teachers in such schools to avert their attraction to other sectors. The paper sees this as a long-term, but most effective instrument to curb the negative tendencies of youths in the region.

Key words: Functional education, militancy, youth restiveness, Niger delta, multi-national oil corporation.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is the Niger Delta region of Nigeria which for sometime has remained in global focus due to militancy and youth restiveness. The oil-rich region which unarguably is the pivot of the nation's economy has for sometime remained under siege. Militant groups have made the region insecure not only for foreign and Nigeria multi-national oil company workers, but for all and sundry. Companies and other business concerns which propel the nation's economy are folding up, with many relocating to neighbouring African countries. This has grave socio-economic consequences for Nigeria.

Prior to the on-going hostilities in the forms of youth restiveness and militancy occasioned by disruption of activities of oil companies, destruction of oil installations and hostage taking, the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region have been known to be (and indeed are still) hospitable. The writer posits that the major causes of the present unfortunate situation in the region stems from lack of functional education for the Niger Delta people, over time. This paper conceives „Functional Education“ as that which would equip Niger Delta youths with relevant

skills and knowledge to compete on equal pedestal with peers from other parts of the country and beyond for jobs in the oil industry and elsewhere. This is obviously lacking, hence the present expression in hostilities.

Functional education

Zeilberger (1961) in Obanya (2003) sees functional education as "education that comes from the child's needs, and that uses the child's interests as a mechanism for activating him towards his desirable activities". The purpose of functional education is to develop the life of the mind that acts from the wholeness of organic life, with relation to practical life in the present and in the future (Zeilberger, 1961; Obanya, 2003). This authority further contends that functional education enables the learner to gain thinking habits and develop the technical means needed in solving practical problems. According to the International Educational Strategist, and a foremost Nigerian educationist,

Obanya (2003), functional context education says that “the situation in which the child is growing, and the one he is going to live in, should determine the way education is carried out, including what is taught and how it is to be taught and learned”. This is in concert with the fourth National Education goal which is “the acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competencies as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of his society” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1998).

The purpose of education if it must hold any meaning is to acquire the skills of understanding life situations, adapting to it and acting to influence it by contributing to its development (Obanya, 2003).

Functional education could have different variants, namely: as applied in literacy programmes, vocational education, science education, teacher training, and in educating persons with disabilities. Which ever variant that is applied must lead to solving day-to-day problems as they come, as well as improve living conditions of recipients. This paper however is interested mainly in vocational and science education variants since the bulk of oil exploration activities are science and technology (vocation) based. Vocational education refers to skills needed by the oil companies and the rest of the labour market, while science education refers to the abilities needed to consolidate the habits of scientific behaviour (Obanya, 2003).

This writer contends that functional education in the context of this paper is that type of education which will equip youths of the oil-rich Niger Delta region with adequate scientific, vocational and cognate knowledge and competencies to compete effectively for job placements within their environments. This corroborates Obanya’s (2003) position that functional education focuses on the learner, within the context of him or her becoming a fully functioning member of society, and with a view to equipping him or her with meaningful manner.

Nigeria’s Niger Delta: Environment and terrain

The Niger Delta region within the context of this paper refers to the six (6) states of the South-South geo-political zone, namely: Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Edo and Cross River. According to SPDC (1999), the region is inhabited by some 1600 long settled communities. It hosts Africa’s largest and the world’s third largest mangrove forest” (Aaron, 2006). The region also hosts the most extensive fresh water swamp forest in West and Central Africa and most of Nigeria’s remaining primary forest concentration of high biodiversity and centres of endemism (Environmental Resource Management, 1997; SPDC, 1999; Aaron 2006).

Prior to the discovery of oil in 1956 and commencement of exploitation in 1958 at Oloibiri in present day

Bayelsa State, the Niger Delta people were predominantly fisherfolks and farmers who exploited nature’s resources for their daily needs (Aaron, 2006). The environment remained healthy, and so their lands were fertile, fishes were in abundance in ponds, rivers and seas since their activities were carried out in an environmentally healthy manner. They sourced water for drinking and other domestic uses from streams which were not polluted with harmful chemicals, or from rain water devoid of acid. At present, every water body or rain water in the region is heavily polluted with harmful substances, courtesy of oil exploitation activities.

The phrase „difficult ecological terrain“ is a well-known jargon in Nigeria as an excuse why the Niger Delta region has remained underdeveloped, whereas oil wealth from the region is constantly being used to develop other parts of the country. No doubt, the Niger Delta region has a “unique geographical terrain under harsh aquamarine conditions” (Ogbondah, 2005), but that is no good reason why the region had been subjected to abject poverty with the rape and degradation of its environment, and outright lack of infrastructural development. The difficult terrain which militated against infrastructural development “did not stop the oil companies from prospecting and exploiting crude oil, as well as laying the pipes across the mosquito infested swamps, mangrove forests and creeks to transfer the crude to safe harbours for exportation” (Okorosaye-Orubite, 2008).

The Niger Delta region has now become the proverbial axe that is used to split fire wood but sleeps outside while the pieces of firewood are taken into the kitchen for safe-keeping.

Oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta: Brief insight

The history of oil exploration activities in the geographical entity presently known as Nigeria dates back to 1903. According to Onuoha (2008), that was when “the Mineral Survey Company flagged off a flurry of activities in the Niger Delta in respect to studies as to the availability of oil in the region”. Related activities continued relentlessly to find oil. In 1938, the then colonial government granted Shell D” Archy prospective right for oil. It was not until 1956 that oil was found in commercial quantity in Oloibiri, in present day Bayelsa State (Aaron, 2006; Enweremadu, 2008; Ogbewo and Binuomoyo, 2008; Onuoha, 2008).

Exploitation in commercial quantity however, started in 1958 at Oloibiri, and soon, at every nook and cranny of the region. Commercial exploitation started with an initial daily production capacity of 6000 barrels (Owabukereyule, 2000; Aaron, 2005, 2006). Only in 1958, Nigeria exported 1,820,305 barrels of crude oil (Okorobia, 1999).

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria hosts 20 billion of Africa’s 66 billion barrels of oil reserves, and more than 3

trillion cubic metres of gas reserves (ERM, 1997; Aaron, 2005, 2006, Ogbewo and Binuomoyo, 2008). With daily production capacity of over 2.4 million barrels, and with prevailing oil prices, Nigeria nets it (as at 2003) over \$40 billion (Forty billion United States dollars) annually only from oil exports (Douglas et al., 2003; Aaron, 2005, 2006).

Rather than use the Petro-dollars to evenly develop the entire nation (the Niger Delta inclusive), only sections of the nation far from the Niger Delta were transformed while “the Niger Delta (to date) is a region suffering from administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructures and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, abject poverty, filth and squalor, and endemic conflict” (Niger Delta Human Development Report, 2006).

Oloibiri, the community where oil was first struck in commercial quantity in 1956 (fifty-two years ago) is still very poor, without social amenities and in fact, wears the looks of an uncared-for great grand mother. Such is the lot of virtually all major oil producing communities like Ogoni communities in the very productive Bomu field, Egbubu, Afam, Umuechem, Aluu, Gbaran to mention only a few.

With most of Nigeria’s communities, suffering acute lack of social amenities, Nigeria during the oil boom era paid the salaries of all civil servants in Grenada in the 70s (Owugah, 2000). The writer wonders why that level of governmental madness and stupidity. Ihonvbere (1994) reports that around the same period, a top government functionary stupidly boasted that money was not Nigeria’s problem but how to spend it. Till this day, a nation whose problem was not availability of money but how to spend it still cannot provide basic amenities of potable water, electricity and roads for its populace.

The Niger Delta region which has a very healthy natural environment prior to oil exploration and exploitation activities are worse off. Its land, water bodies and forests have been so badly polluted, degraded and devastated to the extent that the lives and sources of livelihood of the inhabitants are badly threatened.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (1987) once confessed that “attention has been drawn to the very deplorable conditions of all oil-producing communities...whole communities have been reduced to penury following the combined activities of oil prospecting and extracting companies which have driven the fishes to the ocean...”.

Education in the Niger Delta region

Quality of education in the Niger Delta can best be described to be abysmally low. Being predominantly rural with outright absence of social amenities such as potable water, electricity and safe access (by road), coupled with the daunting aquamarine terrain, teachers refuse posting to schools in most parts of the region. As Abraham and Leigha (2007) rightly note, “teachers everywhere in the

world are important agents of human and national development”. The absence of teachers in any education institution means that no school exists there.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) conveys its recognition (at least on paper) the place of education in national development. It states in the National Policy on Education that: *Education shall continue to be highly rated in the national development plans because education is the most important instrument of change, any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society have to be preceded by an education revolution* (FRN, 2004).

Not much has been done however, by the Federal Government to ensure that qualified teachers are attracted and retained in good numbers in schools located in rural Niger Delta communities.

Kadzamira (2006) in a study on „Teacher motivation and incentives in Malawi” made a finding which vividly describes the situation of most schools in rural Niger Delta communities that “remote rural schools are chronically understaffed due mainly to high teacher turnover and the refusal of teachers to be deployed to schools in these areas”. The reason for their refusal has merit, the absence of all social amenities coupled with the fact that “living in thatched houses with mud walls without running water and electricity is not an attractive prospect” (Kadzamira, 2006).

Apart from dearth of teachers, schools in the Niger Delta, particularly the rural oil-bearing communities lack conducive environment for learning. The conditions under which pupils/students and teachers learn and work respectively can best be described as daunting and very challenging. In rural Niger Delta communities that really bear the crude oil and gas reserves, “the working environment... is deplorable with dilapidated school structures, insufficient teaching and learning materials” (Kadzamira, 2006).

With the poor quality of education in the Niger Delta, most youths lack the requisite preparation to compete for more prestigious job placements in oil companies working in and around their communities. They settle for the menial jobs, when available. It is the practice of multi-national oil companies to set highly demanding recruitment tests which the ill-prepared Niger Delta youths readily fail, and hence lose out in the quest for employment.

Militancy and youth restiveness in the Niger Delta: Possible causes

„Militancy” and „youth restiveness” are new vocabularies in the Nigerian political, social and economic lexicon, coming into prominence since about AD 2000. According to OKorosaye-Orubite (2008), with the exception of the Major Jasper Isaac Adaka Boro’s „Twelve-day Revolution” when he declared „the Federal Republic of the Niger

Table 1. Federal-State Percentages in oil revenue, 1960-2005.

Years	% to producing state	% to Federal Government	Distributable pool 30%
1960-1967	50	20	30
1967-1969	50	50	-
1970	-(0)	100	-
1970-1971	45	55	-
1971-1975	45% minus offshore proceeds	55% plus offshore proceeds	-
1975-1979	20% minus offshore proceeds	60% plus offshore proceeds	20
1979-1981	-(0)	100	-
1982-1992	1.5	98.5	-
1992-1999	3.0	97	-
1999-2005	13	87	-

Source: Text of World Press Conference issued by delegates from the South-South Geo-political Zone to the National Political Reform Conference (2005).

Delta" in 1965, there was no violent dimension to the demands for a better deal in the oil exploitation business by the Niger Delta people. The Niger Deltans are known for their hospitality. Youth restiveness in the Niger Delta is the "violent activities embarked upon by the youth to back up or press further the demands of the indigenes for a fairer deal in the crude oil business" (Okorosaye-Orubite, 2008).

Military and youth restiveness manifest in the forms of disruption of activities of multinational oil corporations, vandalization of oil pipelines, illegal bunkering and more recently, hostage taking of both expatriates and Nigerians alike, and destruction of oil installations.

Let pause and ponder. Have the Niger Deltans been unreceptive of the multi-national oil corporations (MNOCs) since 1956? Have they been hostile all along? If not, why have they suddenly „gone mad"? The writer believes that all honest Nigerians know the answers to the above questions. The Niger Delta people are not mad. Let us briefly look at some possible causes of the present posture.

Destruction of the environment

Ecological devastation caused by oil exploration and exploitation activities has so destroyed the environment of the Niger Delta such that the very existence of the people is under severe threat. Acid rain and effluent discharges from activities of the MNOCs have polluted the streams from which inhabitants got drinkable water, killed fishes in the ponds, streams, creeks and rivers. Furthermore, the land has been rendered unproductive (ERM, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 1999; Owugah, 2000; Aaron, 2006).

Militancy and youth restiveness in the Niger Delta may not be unconnected with pent-up anger arising from destruction of the environment of the people's homelands and sources of livelihood and lack of reasonable benefits

from huge oil revenues from the region (Watts, 2005).

Insensitivity of government

Government saw big oil money and abandoned all other revenue earners, particularly from agricultural produce. Revenue allocation to producing states moved from 50% in 1960 (prior to real big oil money), to 0(zero)% in 1979, 1.5% in 1982, 3.0% in 1992 and 13% presently. Table 1 gives a vivid explanation of injustices against the oil producing Niger Delta States.

The gradual withdrawal and seizure of revenue from oil due producing states is gross injustice considering that in the days when agricultural produce was major revenue earner, allocation to producing states was 100%, and they merely paid taxes/royalties to the Federal government.

Insensitivity of multi-national oil corporations (MNOCs)

The environment and livelihood of the Niger Delta people were destroyed by activities of MNOCs. The MNOCs have remained insensitive to the plight of the people who "in spite of its phenomenal contribution to national wealth remains the poorest region in the country" (Aaron, 2005). No region in Nigeria's history had ever been so rich in resources, yet so poor (Aaron, 2005). The MNOCs who see the people dwell in squalor and penury, without potable water and electricity sink boreholes in their flow stations and other production sites, have uninterrupted electric power supply and flare excess gas which could be used to better the lots of the rural poor Niger Deltans. They prefer to further devastate the environment through gas flaring and other oil exploitation related activities. Rather than think of the people's welfare, they bribe top government functionaries to close their eyes and ears to

the hues and cries of the people, and in some cases, use agents of government who are paid from the tax-payers money to mete out inhuman treatments, sometimes resulting in loss of lives, just for speaking out against the prevailing injustices (Ogbene and Binuomoyo, 2008).

The place of multi-national oil corporations (MNOCs)

MNOCs can be said to be at the very root of the crises in the Niger Delta. This is because rather than make the oil-bearing/producing communities feel the positive impact of oil exploration and exploitation, they chose to sponsor discord, and even use the military against the people. Examples that stand out are:

The arrest, detention, trial and hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa, an Ogoni leader of thought and his kinsmen for using the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) to fight against environmental degradation and other injustices perpetrated by MNOCs

The Odi Massacre of November 19, 1999, where soldiers moved in with sophisticated weapons, including armoured vehicles and rocket launchers and raided the community in search of a handful of Ijaw Youths (Eseduwo, 2008). The scenario was described as using a machine gun to kill a housefly by Bulou Tari (2001).

The MNOCs must turn a new leaf, and discharge their corporate social responsibilities to oil-bearing/producing communities with honesty and sincerity. This they must begin by ploughing back directly to these communities a reasonable part of oil proceeds in making the environment safe and habitable. Basic social amenities must be provided for the communities.

As a long-term measure for solving the problem of militancy and youth restiveness, functional education is sine qua non. Therefore, the MNOCs must do the following:

Build and equip primary and secondary schools in the region to international standards.

Pay some reasonable allowances to teachers in the region to avert their attraction to their sectors.

These will raise quality of education in the region, and youths will become adequately equipped to compete for jobs in the oil sector.

Conclusion and implications for sustainable development

Education is the most veritable means for achieving sustainable development. There is need for infrastructural development, but if there are no well-trained (well-

educated) persons, such infrastructure may rot away for lack of maintenance.

Crude oil wells will one day dry up. The only legacy that will subsist is Human Capital Development. As Okorosaye-Orubite (2007) advised, we should begin to shift our attention from the illusory crude oil and gas because they will become history someday; to the development of human resource, especially the youth through functional education, because there lies the sustainable development of the Niger Delta, and panacea to militancy and youth restiveness.

The truism that crude oil and gas in the Niger Delta will one day become history is already self-evident. The Oloibiri oil well where crude oil was first struck in commercial quantity that catapulted Nigeria to the international crude oil market has dried up and the well-head which pumped crude oil is now an artifact being managed by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, and not the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) (Okorosaye-Orubite, 2007).

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