

Unemployment and Persistent Poverty in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: A Constraint to Sustainable Development in the 21st Century Nigeria

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Abstract: *This paper examines the phenomenon of unemployment and persistent poverty in Nigeria with special reference to the Niger Delta region. Having diagnosed the episode of unemployment and poverty in the region, the paper unfolds that unemployment and poverty have devastating effect on individuals, society and economy at large. This paper identifies that one of the core causes of poverty in the Niger Delta today is the inability of many job seekers to secure gainful employment. It also reveals the increasing level of poverty which has conditioned many people to a very low and undignified standard of living in the region. The paper identifies unemployment and poverty as impacting negatively on the lives of the people and sustainable development programmes in the region. Economic growth, which is supposed to be a solution to the problem of unemployment and poverty, appears not to be in this region. In view of this, the paper recommends that the government and all stake-holders must work together to get over the hurdles of unemployment and poverty and create more poverty alleviation programmes in order to promote maximum investment and employment opportunity to the rural dwellers for sustainable development at the rural setting.*

1. Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is endowed with multifarious and multitudinous resources in both human and material resources. Notwithstanding the magnanimous contributions of the Niger Delta region to the wealth of Nigeria, the people of the remain unemployed, impoverished, underdeveloped and blighted by environmental and health hazards. However, due to gross mismanagement, profligate spending, kleptomania and adverse policies of various governments of Nigeria, these resources have not been optimally utilized nor adequately channeled to profitable investments to maximum economic benefits to the communities. As a result of the foregoing, the region has been bedeviled with unemployment and poverty. And so, considerable agitation, tension and violence have accompanied the attempts by oil producing communities in the region to seek redress against the alleged neglect by government and the oil multinationals. The Niger Delta, a massive and densely populated area of tropical rain forest and swamps located on the South-South geo-political zone of the country, has always been an important centre for natural resources extraction, and has become one of the most economically and strategically important territories in Africa since the discovery of oil there in the 1950s. Economic growth, which is supposed to be a solution to the problems of unemployment, poverty, corrupt politicians and civil servants, violent political agitation, and rampant lawlessness, the Niger Delta region continues to languish, despite being one of the most oil-rich regions in the world. The region is recognized with bad roads, low infrastructural development, high level of unemployment and poverty, female prostitution and low industrialization rate. The Niger Delta is blessed with abundance of physical and human resources, including the majority of Nigeria's oil and gas deposits, good agricultural land, extensive forest,

excellent fisheries as well as a well developed industrial base and a vibrant primary sector (Duru, 1999). The future of the region is threatened by incessant incidents of militancy, kidnapping and insecurity as a result of unemployment and poverty which in essence has grossly affected the tremendous potential for economic growth and sustainable development in the area. "Violence, provoked by conflicts, has often turned the people's attention from creative production to creative destruction (Nnoli, 2003:3)

2. Conceptual Framework

This section of the paper considers relevant issues of unemployment, poverty and sustainable development. There are various types of unemployment ranging from frictional, structural, cyclical, disguised and underemployment. Frictional unemployment usually grows into long term unemployment. This is often described as equilibrium unemployment (Lindbeck: 1999). Structural unemployment refers to a mismatch of job vacancies with the supply of labor available, caused by shifts in the structure of the economy (Bannock et al, 1998). Cyclical unemployment is an unemployment resulting from lack of aggregate demand in the business cycle (Bannock, 1999). While disguised and underemployment describes the incidence of underpaid jobs. This is a core problem in the Niger Delta region that has many graduate job seekers to take to under-paid and menial jobs. Poverty has become a major socio-economic problem in present day Nigeria. A disturbing observation about poverty in Nigeria is that it is on the increase, both in incidence and intensity despite the wide variety of national and international measures that have been attributed to a multiplicity of causes, of which the most frequently mentioned and emphasized include: inadequate conceptualizations of poverty and development, failure to identify the root causes of the problem, lack of adequate organizational requirements for effective programme implementation, wrong prescriptions given as solutions to the problem of poverty and various combinations of these shortcomings. Poverty is a comprehensive socio-economic virus that constitutes one of the greatest afflictions of mankind. Generally in the Niger Delta region, poverty appears endemic and at least its reduction has remained an inextricable part of the policy and its excruciating impact is pervasive and palpable on the people especially the rural dwellers.

According to Stanley (1995) the concept of sustainable development is a scientific notion capable of precise, unequivocal measurement. The World Commission on Environment and Development (The Brundtland Report, 1987) in our common future defines sustainable development as "Development that meets the needs of future generations" (World Development Report, 1992). The report argues that unemployment, poverty, resources depletion and environmental degradation therefore is a socio-economic and political concept which largely incorporates the twin objectives of human development and environmental protection. It is obvious from the analysis given above that the process of national development centers on man's well being and therefore entails finding solutions to the problems of health, unemployment, poverty, human settlement, education and the exploitation of natural resources for a better and more meaningful life.

3. Unemployment and Poverty in the Niger Delta Region – A Time Bomb For The Country

One of the causes of poverty in the Niger Delta region today is the inability of many job seekers to secure gainful employment. It is an inescapable fact that more than 70% of the Nigeria populace is currently unemployed or underemployed. Those who are employed are earning starvation wages that cannot feed them, let alone meet their various needs. More alarming is the fact that the burden of this huge unemployment is borne by the youths and other energetic adults. See table 1 & 2b below.

Politically, youth is defined as a transitional period from childhood to adulthood marked by events such as completing schooling and further education, entering the world of work, achieving financial and residential autonomy from family, engaging in close personal relationships and in some cases, marriages. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes the youth as anybody between the ages of 15 and 24 years. In consonance with this, Ibovbere (1989) says youth is conventionally conceptualized as a social category

made up of people whose chronological age falls within 15 and 24 years bracket and who also possess certain distinct psychological and socio-cultural characteristic and constitutes over 20% of the population. The African Youth Charter in Briggs (2008:18) sees a youth or young person as somebody, male or female between the ages of 15 and 35 years. India also adopt this definition. Uzoeshi (2006) says that the period of youth is the time to plan and execute, the time to aggregate, the time to give, the time to display energy and the time to gather knowledge and avoid ignorance.

Table 1& 2 of the paper provides an insight into the distribution of unemployment in Nigeria. In the tables, the age and sex distribution of unemployment are presented. The tables show that unemployment incidence affects the job seekers within the ages of 20 – 24 and 25 – 44 years more, while there is less incidence of unemployment within the ages of 55- 59 and 65 years and above.

Age group	December 1998		March 1998		June 1999		September 1991		December 1999		March 2000		June 2000		December 2000	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	F	
15-19	16.7	16.3	18.3	18.4	17.5	23.3	18.1	22.7	18.1	32.2	19.7	25.4	NA	NA	17.4	20.0
20-24	29.8	30.6	35.2	31.6	30.7	27.2	30.5	26.7	27.6	31.2	29.4	32.9	NA	NA	36.1	31.9
25-44	48.8	42.9	36.6	44.7	44.7	35.00	32.2	34.7	41.5	29.8	38.3	27.2	NA	NA	36.91	34.9
45-54	3.6	4.1	5.6	2.6	5.3	11.7	6.8	6.7	3.2	1.3	3.4	5.6	NA	NA	4.2	7.2
55-59	1.2	6.1	4.2	2.6	1.8	2.9	1.7	2.7	3.2	2.6	4.6	1.0	NA	NA	3.1	2.6
60-64	.2	.1	.2	.2	.3	.7	10.2	6.7	6.4	2.6	4.6	7.9	NA	NA	3.1	3.4
65+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	NA	NA	-	-
ALL PERSONS	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	NA	NA	100	100

Table 1. Percentage distribution of unemployed persons by age-group and sex, December 1998- December 2000 (urban centres)

Age group	December 1998		March 1998		June 1999		September 1991		December 1999		March 2000		June 2000		December 2000	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	F	
15-19	16.7	16.3	18.3	18.4	17.5	23.3	18.1	22.7	18.1	32.2	19.7	25.4	NA	NA	17.4	20.0
20-24	29.8	30.6	35.2	31.6	30.7	27.2	30.5	26.7	27.6	31.2	29.4	32.9	NA	NA	36.1	31.9
25-44	48.8	42.9	36.6	44.7	44.7	35.00	32.2	34.7	41.5	29.8	38.3	27.2	NA	NA	36.91	34.9
45-54	3.6	4.1	5.6	2.6	5.3	11.7	6.8	6.7	3.2	1.3	3.4	5.6	NA	NA	4.2	7.2
55-59	1.2	6.1	4.2	2.6	1.8	2.9	1.7	2.7	3.2	2.6	4.6	1.0	NA	NA	3.1	2.6
60-64	.2	.1	.2	.2	.3	.7	10.2	6.7	6.4	2.6	4.6	7.9	NA	NA	3.1	3.4
65+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	NA	NA	-	-
ALL PERSONS	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	NA	NA	100	100

Source: Federal Office of Statistics. Labour Force Sample Survey

N.A.: Not Available

Table 2. Percentage distribution of unemployed persons by age-group and sex, December 1998- december 2000 (rural centres)

Age group	December 1998		March 1999		June 1999		September 1999		December 1999		March 2000		June 2000		December 2000		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
15-19	25.4	18.6	9.5	14.3	31.6	26.1	30.0	25.7	25.8	23.1	22.5	18.7	NA	NA	27.5	20.1	NA
20-24	28.5	28.4	21.6	23.1	31.6	26.1	30.0	31.4	35.9	33.7	31.88	48.8	NA	NA	34.9	42.4	NA
25-44	36.9	33.3	52.6	52.7	31.6	40.6	30.3	28.8	27.6	27.8	30.8	21.4	NA	NA	32.2	26.4	NA
45-54	3.1	12.5	11.2	7.7	5.2	2.9	2.7	3.8	4.2	8.7	3.0	5.3	NA	NA	2.5	3.9	NA
55-59	4.9	7.2	5.1	2.2	NA	4.3	2.7	5.3	2.3	NA	5.2	2.6	NA	NA	1.7	3.6	NA
60-64	1.2	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	4.6	5.0	4.2	6.7	6.7	6.2	NA	NA	1.2	3.6	NA
65+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	NA	NA	-	-	NA
ALL PERSONS	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	NA	NA	100	100	NA

Source: Federal Office of Statistics. Labour Force Sample Survey

N. A.: Not

AvailableThe age distribution of unemployment in the urban centres signals a great threat to the domestic economy and the survival of the Nigerian nation. This is because many energetic youths with dynamic resources wander around without gainful engagements. For instance, in December 1998, the urban centre unemployment within the age bracket of 25-44 years was as high as 48.8 percent for males and 42.9 percent for females. In December 1999, a figure of 41.5 and 29.8 percent were recorded for males and females unemployment rate respectively while the corresponding time in 2000 had a record of 36.1 percent for male job seekers and 34.9 for females in the urban centres. In the rural centres, official records in December 1999, indicated a total of 27.8 percent unemployment rate within the ages of 25-44 years for males and females respectively. The 2000 figure saw the rates for males increasing slightly to 32.2 percent with a slight decrease in female unemployment to 26.4 percent within the same age bracket. Despite the various efforts of government, stakeholders and economic players, by establishing a number of programmes such as the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), the National open Apprenticeship Scheme (NOAS), the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), The Better Life, Family Support and the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) during the life span of various administrations to address the hurdles of poverty and unemployment, this monster among Nigerians is still on the speed lane. The World Bank and associate agencies have been part of the poverty problem. Their Structural Adjustment Programme, (SAP), relieve and poverty alleviation programme have only succeeded in diversity the attention of the poor from the real causes of poverty (World Bank, 1975; Abasiokong, 1994; Abiodun, 1998). Millions of Nigerian youths who graduated from the Universities, Polytechnics and other tertiary institutions cannot find jobs and appropriate avenues to positively utilize their youthful energies. This segment of the populace is at the height of their physical and mental powers. Normally, they should form the productive foundation of the economy of any nation, but in Nigeria you find them roaming the streets in search of livelihood and employment opportunities everyday and their frustrations keep mounting. The increase in both the frequency and intensity of bank robberies is an outcome of unemployment and glaring social inequalities. No amount of police equipment or training can rein crime unless the society strives to reduce the number of the frustrated. It does not take much thinking to realize that an explosive mix of high volatility is brewing in the country especially in the Niger Delta region, and it is being fuelled daily by elite insensitivity. If this vicious cycle of poverty and unemployment continues unabated in this region, every unemployed, frustrated and pauperized citizen of the region, becomes a potential social time bomb waiting to explode any moment. Nigerians are demanding governmental accountability and good governance like never before and the results are trickling in. Someday these trickles will turn to gales of mass discontent that will sweep bad leaders out of power at the pools. Inch by inch that is the direction Nigeria is heading.

4. Poverty Alleviation

Indeed, the Nigerian landscape is crawling with a rapidly mutating population of jobless able-bodied men and women who are angry, ill, frustrated and whose disempowerment accounts largely for the reign of cynicism in the land and a high mortality rate. Unemployment and poverty have assumed a different and worrisome dimension in view of the effects of the current global financial and economic crisis of the people. The unemployment crisis in the Niger Delta region is linked to galloping poverty and of course, this is obvious. But to put Nigerians to work, the solution lies in a reinvention of the nature and purpose of government. Once upon a time in this country, Nigerians were a busy people, jobs were available, unemployment was low. Companies used to rush to the universities every year and later to National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) camps, to recruit skilled workers. Then, a certificate guaranteed a job and a better life. It is a common practice now to see young graduates on newspaper stands, hotels and internet cafes in search of jobs openings. Unemployment and poverty have social consequences as it increases crime rates in the country.

Poverty alleviation has been slow in developing nations such as Nigeria, and most African countries because of the role of external power actors such as the World Bank and other "aid" donors. A number of institutions, agencies and programmes established to alleviate poverty such as National Directorate of Employment (NDE) Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), Better Life, and Family Support Programme (FSP), National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) have not been able to meet the enormous demands of the population. People and Community Banks are typical examples. Instead of alleviating poverty, they mop up the little resources of the poor only to go distress leaving the poor depositors in more difficult financial situations.

Again, instability in government and its parastatals is a crucial factor of poverty alleviation because when development policies change suddenly with regimes, it becomes difficult if not impossible for rural development and poverty alleviation to be implemented effectively (Ekong, 1991; Aziz, 1978).

It is regrettable that in spite of these efforts, socio-economic indicators continue to show that the number of men and women joining the ranks of the unemployed working and those in vulnerable groups is perpetually on the increase.

5. The Effect of Unemployment and Poverty on Sustainable Development in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

In his book "Economic Development in the Third World", Torado (1981) defines development as the process of improving the quality of all human lives. This includes raising people standard of living, creating condition conducive to the growth of people self esteem and increasing people's freedom to choose by enlarging the range of their choice variables. Sustainable development on the other hand refers to the basic of all people that must be met in a way which provides for their needs with security and dignity and without absolute limits to development. It also means a conscious and dignity and without absolute limits to development. It also means a conscious and deliberate effort aimed at helping communities recognize their capacities to participate fully in the life of the nation (Ekong, 2008). By implication therefore, sustainable development involves active participation by the people themselves in efforts to improve their level with as much reliance as possible on their own initiative and the provision of technical and other services in ways which encourage initiative, effective self help and mutual help that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Standley, 1995).

Central to the Niger Delta crisis is poverty and unemployment amidst unimaginable oil wealth. The oil producing communities do seek to control their oil or at least participate actively in decision making on matters affecting their areas. Over the past two decades, environmental degradation, including land degradation has continued to worsen, exacerbating further poverty and food insecurity. This region is too rich for her citizens to be poor. There has been a transformation in people perception of the poverty and

unemployment problem in the region. Until recently, the international community and national government have tended not to appreciate the need for integrated rural poverty alleviation and environmental management programmes in marginal areas.

Increasingly, the Niger Delta people are realizing that the fragile environment on which they depend for their survival is being neglected and over exploited and it is now necessary to rehabilitate it and manage it sustainably. The environment belongs primarily to them, and they must take the responsibility, for the land and organize themselves in groups, cooperative, village development associations and other local associations to defend it. They therefore have demanded for compensation to be paid to them by the oil multinationals and for them to be sincerely committed towards the expansion of infrastructural facilities for sustainable development. Sustainable development is not possible in a hostile environment where the oil companies and community relations is highly contentious.

Tense atmosphere of conflict and violence in the region between the three major stakeholders had a negative effect on sustainable development. Again, the presence of unemployed youths and poverty stricken people and the exploitation of oil and valuable non-renewable natural resources is associated with increased social unrest and youth restiveness in the Niger Delta Region. Oil and mineral extraction in the region promoted the looting tendency by various government in Nigeria and have linked with unusually high poverty rates, poor health care and high rate of mortality (Rose,20011). This means in effect that sustainable development can hardly be achieved under this unfavorable and in secured environment.

The adverse effect of high unemployment and poverty on the domestic economy cannot be quantified. The availability of abundant human resources if utilized could serve as great catalyst to sustainable development but if otherwise, could exert negative influence on the economy. The unutilized large quantum of human resources in the Niger Delta region due to unemployment has continued to impede the prospect of growth. The resulting effect of unemployment and poverty such as perpetration of violence and general insecurity threatens sustainable development to a large extent. It is no longer news that insecurity; instability and uncertainty are the hallmarks that characterized the Niger Delta region due to youth restiveness. The energies of the youths of the regions have not been meaningfully harnessed leading to sordid experiences in the area (Agina-Obu,2008:47) .

Oil extraction in the region has worsened poverty and other negative behaviors by denying the oil producing communities employment and access to oil revenues. Taken together, these trends have severely jeopardized the socio-economic growth and development of both the economy and human capabilities in the region. This has brought about violence and kidnapping which are desperate acts of desperate people who have completely lost all sense of hope for a better future in the country. When environment and economic development conditions deteriorate to unbearable level, the oil bearing communities naturally reacts. Instead of the multinational responding to the plight of the people positively they rather respond by securing the assistance of the Federal Government through the use of the Nigeria Police or military to terrorize and brutalize the protesters. Most of their complaints relate to unemployment, poverty, environmental degradation, destruction of means of livelihood and health. The deepening unemployment and poverty rate in the region is already leading to mounting instability. Unemployment and poverty are the tinders which ignites the resentments and fears that the oil communities harbour. Sustainable development and buoyant economy can hardly be achieved in an atmosphere of crisis and hostility more so when the governments in the past have always sidelined this region from meaningful development. The overall situation in this region till now has been very hostile to economic growth and sustainable development.

6. Challenges of Unemployment and Poverty

Combating the challenges of the rising level of unemployment and poverty in the Niger Delta in particular and Nigeria in general is a major task for stakeholders, policy makers and economic managers alike. Unemployment and persistent poverty have been identified as the major hindrances to sustainable

development programmes in the region. The unemployment and sufferings among the youth of the Niger Delta Region should be addressed spontaneously, as the increase in armed robbery, hostility to company's staff and properties, female youth prostitution and ritual killings are becoming alarming. Lack of employment opportunities for many Nigerians has resulted in large number living in poverty. To enhance rapid economic growth, increasing employment opportunities and heightening industrialization, the agricultural sector should be revitalized.

The widespread unrest, turmoil, kidnapping, hostage taking and violence which is now afflicting an unprecedented number of the oil producing communities is linked by one common thread of growing economic malaise and underdevelopment. In order to eradicate unemployment and poverty in the Niger Delta region, requires the development and implementation of more poverty alleviation programmes that will directly benefit the poor, by restructuring sources of Nigeria's gross domestic product (GDP) to significantly include varieties of industries that are labour intensive, such as cottage industries. Also, governmental organizations and landowners should be encouraged to make land available to poor Nigerians on a more equitable basis for agricultural related industries such as farming. Until such radical steps are taken, agriculture for sustainable development will continue to be unviable source of employment opportunity and poverty alleviation for most Nigerians. Government should also make land available to private and public organizations to set up cottage industries in the most economically depressed areas and provide training to unskilled or economically deprived Nigerians which make ownership of small scale industries a viable source of employment and building wealth for many Nigerians.

The agitation for resource control pursued by the Niger Delta people is without doubt, informed by actual and perceived injustice, where the oil multinationals taking the oil from their land and giving them virtually nothing in return and the complete marginalization and neglect by the Federal Government. Resource control by the Niger Delta has to be influenced by some imperative political considerations which are intimately connected with socio-economic rights of members of this region who have been consistently and systematically neglected by the Federal Government. It is easy to observe that the monies earned by the Federal Government from mineral resource-yielding communities are denied adequate funds for sustainable development projects while other sections of the system are continually developed. Since the Federal Government uses promulgated laws to control resources located in the Niger Delta region, and the proceeds from the exploitation of such resources are not equitably shared or managed, the affected "people" are justified in demanding control of their God given resources.

Various environmental problems arising from the impact of oil exploration and exploitation are manifestations of the disharmony between development and the environment and they threaten to destroy the basis of development itself. The lack of commitment by the Federal Government towards the enforcement of standards in the oil companies has encouraged the oil companies to operate without hindrances. Nigeria is a signatory to a number of International Conventions on environmental standards maintainable in the oil and gas industries. These conventions have been honored in the breach than in their observance. Policies of government should therefore, be streamlined to check the blatant oil exploitation and flaring of gas which are associated with exceptionally low human development and poverty rates, conspicuously poor performance on a range of important social welfare indicators and depressed rates of sustainable development. The Ministry of Environment should not abandon their statutory role of policing the oil and gas companies. The environmental impact assessment standards used in the United States of America and Europe should as well be applied in the Niger Delta region.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

From a historical antecedent of past reports and recommendations on the Niger Delta region, fifteen such reports and recommendations have been initiated, from Henry Willinks Commission of 1958 to Ledum Mittee led Technical Committee on the Niger Delta of 2008, without their implementation. We recommend that the

distilled recommendations raised by the Ledum Mittee led Technological Committee should be implemented without undue delay. Again, the newly created Ministry of the Niger Delta Affairs should be provided with enough funds to execute its master plan and to carry out integrated sustainable development programmes in the oil producing communities to revitalize the Niger Delta economy by providing viable options to combat unemployment and poverty that will help the Federal Government achieve sustainable development, peace, human and environmental security in the Niger Delta region.

Unemployment and poverty crisis which manifest in layoffs, retrenchment, lack of jobs for young school leavers and graduates, always intensify social distributional conflicts and economic contestations. As already observed, the spate of conflict in the region will continue unless the Federal Government provides appropriate remedies for the devastating consequences of unemployment and widespread poverty. Such remedies should include improvement in the level of social provisions and infrastructures such as roads, water, electricity, health care, housing, education, food production and distribution which are basic to the realization of genuine rural development efforts for the people, as well as the introduction of other measures such as setting up of cottage industries that would reduce the level of unemployment and poverty in the Niger Delta region. The institution of a drastic land reform measure to ensure equitable distribution or redistribution of land and land resources particularly in areas where gross inequalities in land ownership existed should be put in place. Unemployment and poverty are serious constraints to sustainable development of the Niger Delta Region of Niger's socio-economic resources in the 21st Century Nigeria. The time to reverse this ugly and unpalatable situation is now.

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