

The Changing Political Role of Youths in Oil Producing Areas of Delta State

Atare Otite and Andrew I. Ohwona

Department of Political science, Faculty of the Social Sciences, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

KEYWORDS Marginalization. Leadership. Governance

ABSTRACT This paper focuses on the factors and forces responsible for youth political ascendance in the oil producing areas of the Niger Delta region, with particular reference to Delta State. To enable us achieve this, we used the questionnaire, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and the Key Informant Interview (KII) techniques, coupled with the secondary method of data gathering to collect data for this study. In the final analysis, we discovered that the youths in the oil producing communities of Delta State have changed from that of merely implementing policies and decisions taken by the elders of the various communities to that of taking active part in the formulation and implementation of these decisions. We therefore, suggest that the youths should continue to be recognized in political and leadership structures of the various communities.

INTRODUCTION

Various definitions have been advanced by different authors as regards the meaning of youths. The United Nations Organization uses age categorization as the criterion for differentiation of youths from other members of the society. Rau and Lindley (1985) and Swanson and Claar (1984) maintain that the United Nations' definition of youth includes people aged between 15–24 years. About 20% of the world's population falls in the youth category (See Table 1).

Other authors use social, economic and religious characteristics to classify youths. But in the final analysis and in consonance with Ovwigho and Ifie (2004), the various definitions can be collapsed into the under-listed key elements

- Youth could be regarded as individuals between the age of 15-24 years in cultures where marital and economic independence are not primary considerations in the definition of youth.
- In some societies, youth includes people between the ages 15-40 years.
- A youth can be regarded as a person who is economically dependent while yet to marry.
- An individual who may be above 40 years but quite sound in mind, heart and body. Physical health and body conformation are important in this definition.

With this definition of youth in mind, this study concentrates on Delta State, which is one of the thirty-six states of Nigeria. Delta State was

created in August 1991 from the defunct Bendel State. It is the old Delta Province of the then Midwestern region of Nigeria. Delta State is located between longitude 5°00' and 6°45' North and bounded in the South by Bayelsa State, in the North by Edo State, in the East by Anambra State and in the West by the Bight of Benin. The state is made up of 25 local government areas with Asaba as its capital. It occupies a total land area of 17,698 square kilometers and has a human population of 2,570,181, with the youths constituting a sizeable proportion of this (Inoni 2004).

Agriculture had been the main economic activity of the people until oil exploration started in the state leading to the present shift in the economic focus to the mining (particularly crude oil) industrial sector. The State is among the largest producers of crude oil in Nigeria. And on account of this, there has been a thriving petroleum industry, especially in the southern part – which constitutes the main area of concern of this study. The four decades of oil exploration in the area has, to a large extent affected a changing political role of the youths in the oil-producing communities of the state.

The youths hitherto played roles that were more specific and community-determined in processes that were directed more by the elderly members of the various communities in the area. For instance, they were involved in the farming activities especially the initial clearing of farmlands, hunting, fishing and environmental sanitation. They were also engaged in civil

Table 1: Youth population in some developing countries

S.No.	Country	Total population	Youth population	Youth population (15-24 in %)	Median age (Yrs)
1.	Algeria	30,245,000	6,575,000	21.7	21.1
2.	Angola	12,386,000	2,365,000	19.1	16.2
3.	Benin	6,222,000	1,263,000	20.3	16.5
4.	Botswana	1,725,000	387,000	22.4	18.5
5.	Cameroon	15,117,000	3,073,000	20.3	18.0
6.	Central African Rep	3,715,000	736,000	19.8	19.0
7.	Cote D'Ivoire	15,827,000	3,361,000	21.2	18.0
8.	Egypt	67,784,000	13,911,000	20.5	22.2
9.	Ethiopia	65,590,000	12,629,000	19.3	16.5
10.	Gabon	1,258,000	252,000	20.0	20.7
11.	Gambia	1,312,000	241,000	18.4	19.5
12.	Ghana	19,593,000	4,193,000	21.4	18.6
13.	Guinea	8,117,000	1,634,000	20.1	16.4
14.	Guinea-Bissau	1,367,000	256,000	18.7	19.1
15.	India	1,016,938,000	189,356,000	18.6	24.0
16.	Kenya	30,549,000	6,959,000	22.8	17.7
17.	Liberia	2,943,000	591,000	20.1	17.9
18.	Malaysia	23,001,000	4,327,000	18.8	22.5
19.	Morocco	114,749,000	22,899,000	20.0	17.4
20.	Nigeria	114,749,000	22,899,000	20.0	17.4
21.	South Africa	44,720,000	9,110,999	20.7	22.0
22.	Sweden	8,856,000	1,014,000	11.4	39.7
23.	Togo	4,562,000	917,000	20.1	17.1
24.	Tunisia	9,519,000	1,989,000	20.9	23.8

Source: United Nations World Population. Prospects for 2002, as cited in Ovwigho B and Ifie P (2004). *Principles of Youth Development: A Reference Manual for Developing Countries*. Lagos: Excel Publishers.

defense duties and other age-set activities such as enforcing of community laws. By and large, the youths and their numerous activities were under the guidance and direction of the older members of the various communities.

Our field survey shows that since the discovery of oil by the Royal Dutch Shell in the late 1950's the role of the youths in these oil producing communities of the Niger Delta, with particular reference to Delta State, has continuously been changing from that of submission to community laws and orders to that of actually determining these laws for the various oil-producing communities. Good examples of this can be seen from the activities of the Uvwie Youths Association in Uvwie Local Government Area. The Itsekiri Youths Association mainly from the Warri South, Warri North and Warri South-West Local Government Areas; the Afiesere Youth Association from Ughelli North Local Government Area, Erhoike Youths Association from Ethiope East Local Government Area to mention but a few.

METHODOLOGY

Survey data for this study were gathered

using the purposive sampling technique of selected communities in the oil producing areas of Delta State, where specific number of youths, elders/leaders, women leaders alike were picked and interviewed through the Key Informant Interview (KII) system. Structured questionnaires were combined with coordinated Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), to provide targets with a free-response opportunity and interaction. The subsequent data were then analyzed using the Chi-Square coefficient and results discussed against prevailing literature and documents relevant to the subject matter under study.

Theoretical Framework

The Marxist dialectical materialistic framework as regards the class structure and interrelationship between the different classes that make up the state is used in this study. This is modified in a manner, to clearly bring to light the relationship between the elders/leaders of the various oil producing communities and the youths of the communities to lime light. A relationship which is being determined by the current economic trends in the area, occasioned especially by the activities

of oil producing companies and oil exploration in the various oil producing communities of Delta State.

Marx (1987) wrote in the Communist Manifesto that:

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes... The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones. Our epoch, the epoch bourgeoisies, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.

In line with the above, this is viewed from the perspective of the relationship between the Bourgeoisie class (elders/leaders) which are in control of most economic activities of these areas and that of the Proletariat class (youths) seen as the oppressed, and which constitute the more vibrant class of the various communities that want this oppressive relationship changed. It is important to point out at this stage, that apart from the Marxist approach to the understanding of the changing roles of the youths in the oil producing communities in Delta State, there are non-Marxist explanations to this as well. But in our view, the utilization of the Marxist theory acting in complement with the dominant socio-cultural formation gives a more incisive analysis of the changing role of the youths in the oil producing communities in Delta State. What follows is a dialectical analysis of the impact of the shift from agriculture to petroleum driven economy, and the impact of this on the relationship between the youth and their elders and indeed a shift in power configuration in the various communities in the Niger Delta region.

The Changing Political Role of Youths on Oil Producing Communities

Since oil exploration started in the oil

producing communities of Nigeria, with special reference to Delta State, decision- taking and implementation have mostly been centered on the elders and other affiliated leaders of the oil producing communities. This mostly constitute the team that relates with the government and oil and gas companies that carry out the exploration and exploitation of crude oil in these areas. And in most occasions, the dealings between these group of elders and its affiliate that constitute the local bourgeois class, on the one hand; and the government and oil producing companies on the other hand; end up benefiting the local bourgeois class, the government and the oil producing companies at the detriment of the other indigenous population of the oil producing communities, especially the youths which constitute a great majority. Like Alamieyeseigha (2005) a former governor of Bayelsa state has confirmed, the oil producing communities are worst for it, because of the shady deals between the local bourgeois class and the oil companies that operate in the area. The negative impact of these shady deals on the people and environment of the Niger Delta region can be summarized thus:

- a. Serious neglect of the development of the oil producing communities, because of the unwholesome activities of the oil and gas companies which have employed a range of antics, particularly divide and conquer, to deny the communities growth and development. These companies identify key opinion leaders in the class of the elders of their host communities and use them, in most occasions, against the rest of the communities.
- b. Lack of political will at different levels of community leadership and government to effectively monitor the oil and gas companies in order to ensure that they maintain universal standards of environmental protection as they do elsewhere.
- c. Compromise with oil companies by a few local bourgeoisies in the communities against their own best interests.
- d. The deliberate refusal of oil companies to honor their obligations to communities as contained in various Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), which they voluntarily signed with their host communities. This they do with impunity because of their close association with the local bourgeoisie class and their oppressive moves and

- e. The absence of basic necessities of life such as electricity, potable water, housing, communication, health and leisure facilities in the oil bearing communities in sharp contrast to all the good things of life found within the environment of the flow stations and platforms of oil companies operating in their various communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All these and other extraneous factors put together, motivated the different youths in the oil producing communities to redefine their roles in their various communities. This goes a long way to corroborate the finding from the field that led to the rejection of the null hypothesis, that there is no significant relationship between the role played by community leaders / oil and gas companies operating in the oil producing area and underdevelopment of the oil producing communities. As indicated in the table 2, the calculated χ^2 value for the contribution of community leaders and oil and gas companies towards the development of the oil producing areas was 29.17 at the degree of freedom (df) of 3.

In line with the above, it was also established

from the field, that the youths in the oil producing communities were not really involved in most of the dealings with the oil and gas companies operating in these oil producing communities, especially in the formulation and implementation of the process that guides their operations. In other words, the youths from the oil producing communities in Delta State are marginalized when it comes to the formulation and implementation of the policies that guide the operation of oil and gas companies in their various communities.

From table 3, the χ^2 value of oil producing communities' leadership structures and oil and gas companies was 8.16, while the table value was 7.82 at 0.05 significant level. The calculated χ^2 value was higher than the table value. Thus the hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between the leadership structure of oil producing communities, Oil and gas companies' activities and the marginalization of youths in Delta State was rejected.

From the foregoing and the glaring inability of the elders and other class of leaders that constitute the local bourgeois class, to properly represent the interest of the youths and the oil producing communities, especially in their dealings with the oil and gas companies, the

Table 2: Community leaders and oil and gas companies role in the underdevelopment of oil producing communities

Response		Sex		Total
		Male	Female	
Yes	Count	123	98	221
	Expected Count	117.9	103.1	221
	Residual	5.1	-5.1	0
No	Count	66	32	98
	Expected Count	52.3	45.7	98
	Residual	13.7	-13.7	0
Not really	Count	49	62	111
	Expected count	59.2	51.8	111
	Residual	-10.2	10.2	0
Not too sure	Count	2	18	20
	Expected count	10.6	9.4	20
	Residual	-8.6	8.6	0
Total	Count	240	210	450
	Expected count	240	210	450
	Residual	0	0	0

Source: Fieldwork 2006

Chi-square Test					
Statistic	Calculated value	Critical value	Df	Asymp. sig(2-sided)	Decision
Chi-square	29.17	7.82	3	.001	Significant Ho = Rejected

a. o cells (.0%) has expected count less than 5. the minimum expected count is 9.66.

Table 3 :Oil producing communities leadership structure and oil and gas companies aid the marginalization of youths.

Response		Sex		Total
		Male	Female	
Yes	Count	96	87	183
	Expected Count	88.4	94.6	183
	Residual	7.6	-7.6	
No	Count	78	82	160
	Expected Count	77.3	82.7	160
	Residual	.0.7	-0.7	
Don't know	Count	34	42	76
	Expected Count	36.7	39.3	76
	Residual	-2.7	2.7	
Sometimes	Count	4	16	20
	Expected Count	9.7	10.3	20
	Residual	-5.7	5.7	
Total	Count	212	227	439
	Expected Count	212	227	439
	Residual			

Source: Fieldwork 2006

Chi-square Test					
Statistic	Calculated value	Critical value	Df	Asymp. sig(2-sided)	Decision
Chi-square	8.16	7.82	3	.044	Significant Ho = Rejected

various youth bodies in the oil producing areas of Delta State now deem it necessary to take-over a number of critical functions from the local oppressive class. And because of this, the youths in the various oil producing communities in Delta State now redefined their role from being that of passive decision- makers and implementers to that of playing central role in formulating and implementing various decisions that affect their communities and the oil companies that operate in their various domains. In some instances, the youths take to militancy, like is witnessed in some of the oil producing areas today. In spite of all these, the various communities that have oil in their area do sometimes put in place some bodies made up of elders/leaders of the area. An example is the Ugborodo Community Trust Fund - a body that projects the interests and executes all activities of the community relating to oil companies' matters on behalf of the entire community. One company, Chevron Nigeria Plc is the main company that controls the major share of oil exploration and exploitation activities in and around the Escravos area and their various communities. Even in such situations, the youths are still placed in very important positions and to a large extent treated with much recognition. The youths are the more vibrant group always agitating for radical changes in the communities, especially when it comes to

situations that require some element of force to be applied in the dealings with the various oil and gas companies operating in their communities. The elders/leaders of the communities consciously make some effort to include the youths of the communities in the current trend of things. This is done to enable them get involved in the formulation and implementation, so that they can have a sense of belonging in the various oil and gas producing activities in the communities. To a large extent, the elders/leaders of the different oil and gas producing communities have come to realize and accept that the youths of their different communities are no longer prepared to play their former passive roles.

In the course of our field work, it was observed that the various youth organizations in the oil producing communities are now taking over the role of negotiating the conditionality of their communities' engagement with the various oil and gas companies operating in the areas. The youths now negotiate employment, and some other essential services that affect them directly with the oil and gas companies. This is however being done without the elders reneging on their dominant leadership roles especially in taking some crucial decisions that affect the operations of the oil and gas companies. By and large, the elders are still very much involved in formulating and implementing policies that have far reaching

effects on the communities. For example, the elders/leaders are still very much involved in the signing of Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with the oil and gas companies that operate in the various communities. In line with this, the youths in the oil producing communities of Delta State still play a significant role in environmental sanitation, civil defense and enforcement of laws/rules made by the elders.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In this paper, efforts have been made to analyze the changing role of the youths of the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta region particularly in Delta State. The youth stage of human development is a transition phase often characterized by the nuances of adolescence and introspection into the challenges of adult life. The youth stage calls for proper management on the part of the elders/leaders to prevent problems that could annihilate the oil producing communities, especially by quickly realizing the present dynamic roles of the youth in the oil producing communities, and involving them as such. Youths have a lot of potential energies which when properly harnessed, especially by involving them in the formulation and implementation of policies in the oil producing communities, will lead to the much desired

development in the area and give the youths some sense of belonging and fulfillment. The study outcome shows that the youths of the oil producing communities of Delta State occupy a very important segment of the society. Any attempt to marginalize them can precipitate resistance and upheaval. The research recommends that policy makers should continue to integrate the youth into development activities of the oil producing communities of the state, as was the case when agriculture was the mainstay of the economy.

REFERENCES

- Alamieyeseigha D 2005. The Niger Delta Crisis. *TELL* , No 5, February 2, 2005, P. 16.
- Inoni O E 2004. *Socio-economic Analysis of Fisheries Resources Exploitation in the Niger Delta Hydro-Ecological Zone of Nigeria*. Ph. D. Thesis, Unpublished. Abraka: Delta State University.
- Marx K 1987. *In Lenin on Marxism*. Moscow, Novosti Press Agency Publishing House.
- Ovwigho BO, Ifie 2004. *Principles of Youth Development: A Reference Manual for Developing Countries*. Lagos: Excel Publishers.
- Rau WR, Lindley WI 1985. Rural Youth: Some Broad Characteristics. In: *FAO Training for Agriculture and Rural Development*. Rome: FAO.
- Swanson BE, Claar JB 1984. The History and Development of Agricultural Extension. In: BE Sivanson (Ed.): *Agricultural Extension: A Reference Manual*. Rome: FAO.