Nigeria's amnesty program: An educational and cultural perspective

Festus E. Odubo and John O. Tobor*

American Society for Public Administration

ABSTRACT

The residents of the Niger Delta endure extreme poverty, polluted environments, poor infrastructure, and high unemployment in spite of their abundant resources. In the early 1990s, these problems led to a violent uprising against oil exploration. In 2009, the federal government of Nigeria attempted to end the uprising by implementing an amnesty program for the militants that was designed to address the region's problems. Studies indicate that education and culture are effective tools that can be used to guide social change efforts to build healthy, sustainable, and just communities in the Niger Delta region and thus bring about peace to that part of Nigeria. A better understanding of the importance of education and culture of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region may be useful to key decision or policy makers who will be involved in creating policies that will address core reasons for the incessant turmoil and turbulence that have persisted in the last several years. Failure to take into account the strengths of education and culture may result in short term impacts which could be an immediate return to violence or conflict thereby threatening the security and peace of the various communities in the Niger Delta region. In the long term, such violence and agitations would continue to hinder the political, social, and economic development of Nigeria.

Keywords: Amnesty initiatives, development, empowerment, militancy, militants.

*Corresponding author. E-mail: tobor_nero@yahoo.com.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's Niger Delta Amnesty Office (NDAO) describes the Niger Delta as the wealthiest region in Africa comprising of 90 percent of Nigeria's export earnings. NDAO also describes the region as rich in agriculture, aquaculture, solid minerals and the largest wetland in the world after the Patanal in South America and Mississippi in North America (NDAO, 2014). Asuni (2009) averred that the term "Niger Delta" describes the six states in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. From east to west of the South-South zone, the states include Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States. However, states like Abia, Imo, and Ondo have also been included in the Niger Delta as they are also oil producing states (Asuni, 2009).

Researchers agree that despite the huge oil revenue derived from the region that sustains Nigeria economically, it is still characterized by abject poverty, ecological destruction, polluted environments, impaired health, cultural destabilization, economic impoverishment, exploitation, dearth of serviceable infrastructure, inadequate provision of functional educational system, deprivation, destroyed source of livelihoods, and total neglect of the region by the Federal Government of Nigeria (Anele and Omoro, 2012; Badmus, 2010; Idowu, 2012; Ogbodo, 2010; Ogege, 2011; Okpo and Eze, 2012; Paki and Ebienfa, 2011).

The implication is that the initial struggle for developmental and environmental justice later metamorphosed into youth militancy with its attendant consequences. The youths in Niger Delta resort to violence in order to attract attention to their views, cries and agitations for social justice, economic equality, and share in the resources of their region. Such violent tendencies include kidnappings, hostage taking, oil

bunkering, and attacks on oil installations (Ogege, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methodology was used for these studies to explore the benefits of both the cultural and educational component of the Amnesty Program on the Niger Delta ex-militants that have graduated from the program. Phenomenological and ethnographical approaches were used for the educational and cultural perspectives respectively in order to focus on the participants' experiences and their expressions of such experiences in a way as close as possible to the experience (Rudestam and Newton, 2007). The studies focused on the ex-militants who have graduated from the program to allow them describe their experiences and how they have benefited from the educational component of the program. In addition, documents related to the program were reviewed and analyzed. These documents were provided by the NDAO. As stated earlier, the study targeted the Niger-Delta ex-militants involved in the Amnesty Program/DDR strategy. Over 30,000 ex-militants were involved in the program (NDAO, 2014). 8 ex-militants out of the 12,703 ex-militants that have graduated from the program participated in the educational study. While, 20 ex-militants of Urhobo speaking origin participated in the cultural study. The snowball strategy and a list of the ex-militants that have graduated from the Amnesty Program, program administrators, a former political leader, an instructor/contractor of the program, and a government official associated with the program were used as the sampling frame for the study. In essence, the educational perspective study involved a total of 14 participants. The list used for the data collection was obtained from the NDAO.

Furthermore, data was collected through interviews and extended conversations with the participants of the study using open-ended questions. The interviews involved face-to-face, one-on-one in-depth interviews with the ex-militants that have graduated from the program. Each interview session lasted for about 40 to 60 min. The length of period of the data collection was a minimum of 1 month. Participants for the interview were selected based on their knowledge, experiences, contribution, relevance, importance and oversight of the Amnesty program. Data was analyzed by coding the transcribed data according to participant responses to each question and/or to the most important themes/meanings from the research questions. After each interview, the voice recorded conversation conversations were transferred to a computer file with a distinct file name for each interview.

HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

Human capital identifies the composition of the skills and

knowledge of people in a community or society. This, in most cases, is as a result of the quality of education they acquire forming the foundation of development for the community. Human capital also has to do with personal assets (both innate skills and abilities) that can be gotten through training and education. Despite the price tag associated with investments in education, individuals can acquire certain skills or credentials that can help to improve their productivity. This in turn, adds value not only to the individuals but their employers in terms of employment benefits, advancement, and earnings (Graf, 2006).

Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961) placed significant importance on investing in human capital, especially through education. Specifically, they emphasized productivity, increased wages and earnings, knowledge and skill acquisition, adaptability, and marketability as some of the benefits in investing in human capital through education and training (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). The United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF) averred that through education generations are able to develop knowledge and skills to help better and develop their future economically, socially and politically (UNICEF, 2011).

Lack of human capital development and education – A contributing factor to unemployment in the region

Research indicates that the quality of human capital is low in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta region. A human capital development report of Nigeria by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2013, places Nigeria's Human Development Index (HDI) at 0.471 giving the country a low rank of 153 out of 187 countries with comparable data. UNDP averred that the HDI of Sub-Saharan Africa as a region is currently at 0.475, placing Nigeria's HDI below the regional average (UNDP, 2013). Some of the contributing factors to the violence in the Niger Delta region include the lack of training programs for youths, lack of educational opportunities, unemployment and inconsistent policy framework for youths, abject poverty, and hardship (Ofem and Ajayi, 2009).

Youth unemployment, in particular, poses the greatest challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria and contributes immensely to the conflict in the Niger Delta region. The fact that this mostly unskilled, uneducated and unemployed youths make up a good number of the local population in the region makes addressing the situation even more important and urgent (UNDP, 2012). According to Okonofua (2011), over 75 percent of the youths in the region are unemployed and almost half of the unemployed youths cannot gain employment because they lack skills that are applicable to modern industry. van der Berg (2008) equates lack of education as a direct contributing factor to poverty. This, in essence, means that education has a direct correlation in determining how much

contribution someone can make to their society. More, importantly, education can help with marketability, job opportunities, wages/salaries, and quality of life (van der Berg, 2008).

According to Development Partners International (2012), the Niger Delta lacks educational facilities with limited number of schools to provide quality education to children and youths in the region. Hence, there is no access to good paying jobs since lack of education results in inadequate skills and qualifications for the available jobs. There have been calls for free education from elementary to the university level in the region. There is also a demand for the establishment of a state-of-the art university that will provide quality graduates and the need for investment in infrastructure rehabilitation projects that would help provide employment opportunities for the youths in the region. Amongst the numerous recommendations of Development Partners International was for the government to provide vocational and technical education at all stages to enhance youth development in the region (Development Partners International, 2012).

The late former president of Nigeria, Musa Yar'Adua, made human capital development one of its "Vision 2020" seven-point agenda. Other components of the administration's agenda include infrastructure, security, food supply, housing, employment, and wealth creation (Akinwale, 2010). Specifically, the activities of the militants that led to the introduction of the Amnesty Program and the granting of amnesty to the Niger Delta militants, was an avenue to create an atmosphere for lasting peace and stability in the region. With this, human capital development is seen to be a necessary component of the Amnesty program in order to maintain peace and stability in the Niger Delta region (Akinwale, 2010; Davidheiser and Nyiayaana, 2011; Ibaba, 2011; Igini, 2011).

Education and conflict

Education plays a pivotal role in preventing and transforming violent conflicts as well as helping to form and shape behaviors and identities. Conflict-sensitive education is a powerful tool for developing ideas and can help in economic growth and development (UNICEF, 2011). Education can also restore peace and stability by helping to resolve conflicts as well as allowing an environment that encourages learning and community. Nevertheless, according to Davis (2013), if not planned properly, education can also result in further conflict if there are frustrations and tensions due to unmet expectations. While education in itself does not bring about conflict transformation, it does have the potential to do so. Education is seen as a long-term development process. Advocates of education believe it helps to preserve peace in post conflict environments and education that is focused on the development of children

and youth can restore peace in a conflict environment (Smith, 2011). Post conflict education helps in the reintegration process of ex-militants or combatants. This is even more pertinent as the acquisition of skills through training and education helps ex-combatants in obtaining relevant employment, as well as their transition from militancy to normal productive lives (Novelli and Smith, 2011).

Past efforts in the region

Efforts geared toward addressing the issues of education and sustainable development in the Niger Delta region have been made in the past. For instance, UNDP, in partnership with the United Nations Office of Project Services (UNOPS), the Delta State government and Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), established the Niger Delta Youth Empowerment Program (YEP) in Delta State in January 2007. The overarching objective of YEP is to ensure that the Niger Delta youths are given the necessary tools to overcome poverty and to enhance sustainable development through technical and vocational skills acquisition trainings and conflict management. YEP is focused on establishing adequate youth training centers to help improve the marketability and employability of youths in the Niger Delta region (UNDP, 2012).

Also, SPDC indicated that in 2000, it commenced a comprehensive youth empowerment program that targeted youths in several states in the Niger Delta region. This program was mainly geared towards youth and workforce training, and the promotion of non-violence and conflict management in the region. According to SPDC " in 2009, the SPDC-operated joint venture spent over $2.3 million to train 306 youths in different vocations and skills such as welding, pipefitting and carpentry, enterprise and leadership development and conflict management" (SPDC, 2012, para 4). Additionally, the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs (MNDA) reported in 2011, that "it commenced the training of 595 youths and women in agriculture, maritime, oil and gas sectors." The MNDA report also highlighted the completion of the 2010 training workshop/talent hunt for 900 youths and women in various vocations in the film and music industry with the aim of empowering youths in the region (MNDA, 2011, paras 3 & 4).

However, most of these trainings including other youth empowerment programs introduced in the region lack the consistency and sustainability required for them to succeed (Ofem and Ajayi, 2009). In addition, these trainings, especially those introduced by the government, have had very little impact on the youths in the region because most of them did not translate to employment. There are several factors including institutional, leadership, and organizational issues that have posed challenges to achieving success with these programs. For example, participants of a study conducted by the

Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) in 2011 revealed that youths in the region indicated a lack of interest in participating in trainings organized by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). According to the study, participants referred to NDDC trainings as a waste of time and money. The study concluded by identifying institutional problems associated with NDDC, such as instances of infighting and leadership instability as contributing factors to the lack of sustainability of the training programs (Bamgboye et al., 2011).

Education and the amnesty program

Consistent with the above, the Amnesty program was introduced to address some of these recurring problems of lack of human and capital development in the region. According to NDAO, as at February 2014, out of over 30,000 program participants, 12,703 graduated in various skills acquisition fields and 128 graduated with post-graduate degrees. NDAO also indicated that 1,040 trainees were allocated to the Oil and Gas Industry Foundation (OGIF). NDAO further asserted that 964 trainees graduated from the OGIF training while 76 were still in training. Further, NDAO revealed that a total of 5,296 participants were being trained in various forms of skill acquisition training or formal education in Nigeria and other parts of the world (NDAO, 2014). In addition, NDAO reported that 50 Welding and Fabrication trainees were offered employment in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on completion of their training. NDAO also reported that 49 participants who were trained in Italy were employed and a total of 3,250 graduates were provided with business set-up opportunities (NDAO, 2014).

Odubo (2014) averred that most of the participants of the Amnesty program expressed their appreciation to the Nigerian government for giving them an opportunity to acquire good and sound education and knowledge in their various fields of study. According to Odubo (2014), some of the ex-militants indicated that they have been able to obtain living wage employment as a result of the education and training they acquired through the program. Furthermore, some of them stated that while they have not benefited through gainful employment, they have been awarded contracts and offered political offices as a result of the training and education they obtained through the program. Additionally, participants that obtained foreign degrees or certificates believe it gives them an edge during job interviews (Odubo, 2014).

Culture

Culture is a system of shared basic assumptions, belief systems, behaviors, norms, tradition, values, and way of life that is unique and peculiar to a group of people.

Okuyade (2011) referred to culture as the distinctive way of life of a people, social group, community, or nation. Values and ideas that are shared include beliefs and views about what is morally wrong or what is culturally desirable. Brennan et al. (2009) emphasized that such values shape norms, ethics, rules, perceptions, views, or accepted ways of doing things that represent guidelines and conduct of the cultural group and how they act towards others.

Culture is an evolving phenomenon that a group has learned as it continues to solve its everyday problems of internal integration and external adaptation. These cultural concepts have worked well enough for them to be considered valued and therefore to be taught to new members as the right way to do things, think, perceive, and feel in relation to those problems. Based on their research in Ireland and the US, Brennan et al. (2009) suggested that appreciating the uniqueness of the local culture will have a significant impact on the success of any development initiative such as the Amnesty program. Accordingly, the culture of any group defines the attitudes, belief systems, and represents entire ways of life, including rules, values, and expected behavior. This analogy is equally important to stakeholders because an understanding of the cultural group is an essential and invaluable process that is a necessary requirement or pre-requisite to undertaking any meaningful development initiative such as the Amnesty program.

Culture and the amnesty program

Tobor (2014) demonstrate that commitment to social justice, equality, freedom, respect for authority, respect for elders, and human rights that emerged from his study of the role of culture in the implementation of the Amnesty program will contribute towards peace in the Niger Delta region. For instance, justice is an important weapon in the fight for freedom and growth for the people of the Niger Delta region and their communities. Tobor (2014) also suggest that the indigenes from the Niger Delta region joined militant groups because of their perception of being oppressed, as their main source of livelihood which is farming and fishing had been destroyed without adequate compensation. This perceived injustice can be properly addressed if the Amnesty program is successfully implemented. Additionally, the indigenes of the region would feel that their sense of justice had been accommodated (Tobor, 2014). The Amnesty program is perceived to be an adequate compensation for the destruction of their lands and also seen as an avenue of empowerment through job training and subsequent employment.

Another aspect of culture that can help restore lasting peace and stability in the region is community participation in the Amnesty program. Adopting the concept of community participation is a strategic and tactical approach to foster maximum community support and

cooperation throughout the implementation phase of the amnesty program (Tobor, 2014). The Amnesty program is well accepted by the residents of the Niger Delta region. However, for such a program to be successful in the long run, the federal government has to encourage community participation.

Consistent with the works of Aujoulat et al. (2007), Goodman et al. (1998) and Larkin et al. (2008), Tobor (2014) posits that involving community members in any development initiative is a form of empowerment for them to take leading roles to address their own peculiar issues, needs, and problems with the support of key stakeholders. Kamanda et al. (2013) supports this view and maintained that the involvement of the community would ensure that the content and format of any development initiative would better fit the cultural values, norms, and systems of the community. For instance, the involvement of the Niger Delta people would ensure the success of the Amnesty program. Development initiatives such as the Amnesty program needs to be educationally appropriate and culturally acceptable.

In line with these views, Oakley (1989) defined community participation as a means of including people in decision making processes, involving them actively in developing, implementing, and evaluating programs, and also sharing in the benefits derived from there. Meaningful participation of key stakeholders in the community can lead to an enhanced understanding of their communal obligations and their human rights. This is consistent with the research findings of Brennan et al. (2009), which suggest that appreciating the uniqueness of the local culture will have a significant impact on the success of any development initiative. Omotola (2010) also emphasized the importance of community participation and stressed that any meaningful attempt at addressing the root causes of the Niger Delta crisis needs to be a joint responsibility that involves the oil communities in the region including the militias, government at all levels, the multinational corporations, and the international community.

Culture has an important role that needs to be taken into consideration before and during the implementation process of the Amnesty program. The inhabitants of the Niger Delta region cherish their cultural heritage mainly because it is seen as their identity as a people. It represents who they are and this explains why respect for customs and traditions is an important communal obligation (Tobor, 2014). Drawing on their commitment to customs and traditions may contribute to optimizing the positive aspects of authority while minimizing the negative aspects.

CONCLUSION

Kuku (2012) identified youth development and empowerment as an integral part of the solution or resolution to the Niger Delta crisis. Kuku (2012) also averred that while the Amnesty program is one way of addressing this shortcoming, other youth development and empowerment programs should be implemented by the federal and state governments to sustain the relative peace and stability currently enjoyed in the region. Participants of the Amnesty program attested to how the training and educational component of the Amnesty program have helped to improve their livelihoods and how they feel empowered and equipped with skills that would enable them compete globally in various fields. This is pertinent as some of them were employed not only locally but in the various countries they were trained. Participants' civic and community awareness has also increased as most of them are currently engaged in peaceful civic and community activities. But most importantly, ex-agitators attribute their attitudinal changes to the training and education they acquired through the program. Nonetheless, some of the ex-agitators have indicated that they are yet to secure living wage employment and are hoping the government will create employment opportunities in order to enhance their absorption into the job market. This means, the Nigerian government needs to do a better job of creating more employment opportunities for graduates of the program to enhance sustainable human capital development and lasting peace and stability in the Niger Delta region (Odubo, 201).

Furthermore, Tobor (2014) indicated that culture can be used as an effective tool to guide social change efforts to build healthy, sustainable, and just communities in the Niger Delta region and thus bring about peace to that part of Nigeria. Culture is an exogenous factor that is likely to contribute towards the successful implementation of the Amnesty program or any other development initiative. Failure to take into account the strengths of culture may result in both short and long term impacts. Short term impacts could be an immediate return to violence or conflict thereby threatening the security and peace of the various communities in the Niger Delta region. Long term impacts could be that such violence and agitations would continue to hinder the political, social, and economic development of Nigeria.

Consequently, a better understanding of the culture of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region may bring about peace. For instance, such understanding may be useful to key decision or policy makers who will be involved in creating policies that will address core reasons for the incessant turmoil and turbulence that have persisted in the last several years. Moreover, an understanding of the role of culture may serve as an invitation to the multinational oil corporations, the communities, and policymakers including all tiers of the government to re-examine their perceptions, practices, beliefs, and behaviors with regards to how to approach the Niger Delta issue (Tobor, 2014). In addition, Kuku (2012) calls for the involvement of all the stakeholders in the region in the reconstructing and revitalizing the region economically, socially, and in creating an enabling environment that will help with the reorientation of the ex-militants/agitators and to accommodate the graduates of the Amnesty program.

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