



## Original article

## Oil governance in Nigeria's Niger Delta: Exploring the role of the militias

Ben Tantua<sup>a</sup>, Joe Devine<sup>b</sup>, Roy Maconachie<sup>b,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Economics, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Amassoma, Bayelsa State, Nigeria<sup>b</sup> Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, Bath, Somerset, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Oil governance  
 Conflict  
 Militants  
 Niger Delta  
 Nigeria

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex voices of militants associated with the capture of oil resources in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The persistent violent conflict surrounding the struggle over oil resources is a major concern for many within the country and the international community. Understanding the conflict over oil in the Niger Delta has triggered a wide range of discussions and debates among researchers, politicians and policy makers. However, these debates have overlooked the views of the militants themselves, who are actively engaged in the conflict over resource governance in the region. Drawing on new empirical data, this article builds upon insights from the New Social Movements literature to explore the experience and expectations of militants, and to then reflect on the significance of these for understanding the politics of oil governance in the Niger Delta. We argue that militia actions that appear to challenge the legitimacy and authority of the Nigerian state to control oil resources, are embedded in complex webs of formal and informal interactions involving political elites, militia leaders and primary citizens. This, we argue, offers a fresh and innovative perspective into the dynamics of militancy in the governance of oil resources in the Niger Delta.

## 1. Introduction

A number of social movement organisations have emerged in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria over the last decade. These movements, often positioned in opposition to state power and authority, have mostly been unsuccessful in claiming rights or changing the structure of oil governance in the country. Despite the actions of these movements, the State maintains a tight grip over the management and distribution of oil resources. As a result, the benefits from exploiting the resources are also carefully managed. This is significant, given the value of the oil and natural gas extracted from the region. While oil and gas extractions have helped multinational corporations and contributed significantly to Nigeria's foreign exchange revenues, local inhabitants of the Niger Delta have, on the whole, not experienced significant benefits. Furthermore, the process of extraction has had a profound negative environmental impact, with increasing evidence of water pollution, the destruction of fishing activities and the depletion of livelihood options. Local communities have been left to fend for themselves in squalid and precarious conditions (Tantua, 2009). The negative impacts of the oil industry, coupled with the lack of distribution of oil wealth, have nurtured hostility and distrust among local communities and led to the establishment of new movements, including militia ones, seeking changes in the way oil extraction is governed. Social movements, such as the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) in 1966/67, the Movement

for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1992/93, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in 2003/2004, and most recently, the Niger Delta Avengers in 2015/16, have all been established to secure local recognition over resources, and strengthen indigenous entitlement claims. These movements position themselves as leaders of struggle against injustice, and mobilise around an ideology of 'self-determination and local resource control'.

In terms of the Niger Delta, we adopt a broad understating of conflict that embraces the unequal distribution of resources and power, competition for money, power and status, and a situation in which societal values reflect the interests of a few rather than the interests of all (Mattewman et al., 2007; Vold et al., 2002; Buechler, 2000). In particular, resource endowed environments like the Niger Delta are arenas for contested entitlements, frustration and competition (Tilly, 2003; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Weinstein, 2009), in which protest or insurgencies emerge and have a significant impact upon eventual political outcomes (Ross, 2008). In this context, conflict can be violent or non-violent. Non-violent conflict refers to forms of civil disobedience by individuals or groups (Vinhagen, 2006), while violent conflicts indicate destructive forms of action which usually involve the use of arms (Jacoby, 2008). Although violent conflicts often occur between ethnic groups (Brown and Langer, 2012), it does not necessarily follow that all ethnic groups fight against each other (Stewart, 2008), as ethnically diverse societies can also cohabit peacefully with each other.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [agregha@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:agregha@yahoo.co.uk) (B. Tantua), [J.Devine@bath.ac.uk](mailto:J.Devine@bath.ac.uk) (J. Devine), [R.maconachie@bath.ac.uk](mailto:R.maconachie@bath.ac.uk) (R. Maconachie).

Furthermore, violent conflict can be directed against the state (Mason and Fett, 1996), as rebel groups fight either to replace an existing government or to create a new nation state. This reminds us that conflict is inherently context dependent (i.e. reflecting underlying political and economic conditions), as well as path dependent (i.e. reflecting historical composition and trajectory) (Turton, 1997; Fearon and Laitin, 1996). Likewise, violent actions labelled as ‘militant acts’ are mostly mobilised around collective identity (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004), as this propels people to fight, kill and if necessary sacrifice their own lives.

‘Militia groups’ operating in the Niger Delta region can be seen as collective and organised efforts by a group of people who feel alienated and oppressed, and who seek to effect or resist change by acting within and outside the laws of the state. They represent groups with common histories, shared geographies, similar life experiences and similar aspirations (Ruggiero and Montagna, 2008). Militia groups, however, also nurture feelings of belonging, shared beliefs, values and meanings, and mobilise action (Crossley, 2002). This article focuses on this capacity of militia groups. It examines the ways militias create room for manoeuvre to facilitate collective action, strengthen claims making, and secure greater legitimacy and recognition.

The Niger Delta has witnessed a prolonged history of conflict over oil resources, and this has intensified from the late 1990s onwards. As the conflict intensified, it has become more violent and the number of casualties has risen significantly. At the same time, the conflict has had great impact on Nigeria’s oil infrastructure, directly resulting in global economic consequences. It has also spawned an illicit but potentially lucrative industry in oil theft, home-grown refining, kidnapping and piracy. The emergence of armed groups further complicated the already contentious and volatile relationships between the main stakeholders involved in the governance of oil resources in the region. Thus, the ‘oil complex’ (Watts, 2004) now also includes a large number of militias and their commanders, as well as disparate elements of the Nigerian military. These relatively new actors have radically altered the political dynamics of the Niger Delta in recent years. Their actions have also impacted upon livelihood strategies locally. All resource conflicts provide incentives to wealth accumulation, which in the context of the Niger Delta, facilitates a wider distribution of favours and benefits through patronage networks. By their nature, these networks exacerbate inequalities on the one hand, but also offer ways for local communities to survive (Gore and Pratten, 2003; Osaghae et al., 2007). As Boas (2012), rightly states, we may associate militancy with greed, but that greed is anchored in a desire to address social injustice and create a livelihood pathway.

This article explores the complex voices of militants associated with the capture of oil resources in the Niger Delta region. In doing so, the analysis contributes to a rich body of discussion and debate on oil and development in sub-Saharan Africa that has been aired in the *Extractives Industry and Society* in recent years. Previous articles in this journal have covered a wide range of themes on oil governance and transparency (Hoinathy and Janszky, 2017; Olanya, 2015; Ogwang et al., 2018; Melyoki, 2017); Ovadia, 2014, livelihoods (Adusah-Karikari, 2015; Siakwah, 2017; Enns and Bersaglio, 2016; Obeng-Odoom, 2014), environmental degradation (Fentiman and Zabbey, 2015), participation and civil society contestation (Ablo, 2015; Symons, 2016), and politics and nation building (Pedersen and Bazilian, 2014; Holterman, 2014; Weldegiorgis et al., 2017). In the context of the Niger Delta, several articles have contributed to debates concerning struggles around oil and the mobilization of militants (Iwilade, 2017; Isumonah, 2015; Pegg, 2015; Demirel-Pegg and Pegg, 2015; Obi, 2014). However, none of these papers have explored the experiences of militants ‘from within’, or how the voices and agency of militants shape collective identity. Providing a rare vantage point from the militants themselves, this paper seeks to address this gap in the literature.

The analysis is informed by recent field-based research carried out between July 31st, 2010 and January 31st, 2011, in seven different study site locations across the Delta. These locations included: Port

Harcourt Town, Diobu and Abuloma in Rivers State, Yenagoa and selected communities within South Ijaw local government areas of Bayelsa State, and Obubura in Cross Rivers State. Adopting a purposive sampling framework, a total of 35 semi-structured interviews were carried out with key informants, including activists, militias, youth leaders and civil society members, whose ages ranged from 24–72yrs. Given the sensitivity and security concerns of this study, it was challenging to establish contact with the top hierarchy of militias known as ‘Generals,’ as they preferred to remain hard to reach. However, within the middle and bottom rung of the hierarchy, it was easier to make contact, build trust and establish relationships. Data were also generated by way of informal conversations and observations at newspaper stands, nightclubs/bar and eateries, where trust and interpersonal relationships could be established.

## 2. The emergence of militancy: charismatic leadership and collective identity

A significant feature linked to current militia action in the Niger Delta is the influence of charismatic leadership. The fear of domination and political oppression spurred the emergence of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), a movement initiated by a former school teacher and an undergraduate of chemistry, named Adaka Boro in 1966. The NDVF claimed to be a movement speaking on behalf of local communities excluded from decisions on the exploitation of oil and the distribution of subsequent benefits. As such, it adopted a strategy that included violent action and threats of secession in order to advance entitlement claims and demands of local inhabitants of the Niger Delta region. Importantly, the NDVF is perceived by many ethnic Ijaws (the NDVF is the first armed militia of only Ijaw extraction) as a symbol of unity and identity, a cause worth fighting and dying for. This gives contemporary militia forces a powerful mechanism and platform to mobilise people and trigger collective action. This also locates the current context of conflict in an important historical setting, specifically, a history of armed campaign for greater autonomy, resource control and self determination. The actions of Isaac Adaka Boro, founder of the NDVF, live vividly in the imagination of contemporary militia, and are called upon to rally support for the struggle against perceived injustices and oppression.

In many ways, Boro’s call for arms is a powerful motivational framework (Gamson, 1995) for contemporary militia. Current struggles are recast and aligned to Boro’s struggles. His language gives life to collective action, and unifies individuals. When carrying out fieldwork and when asking militia about the motivations that led to their involvement in the struggle, it was striking the number of times respondents referred to Boro. The following text from the Twelve Day Revolution and attributed to Boro was often cited:

Ijaws are seen as victims of a woolly administration. Year after year, we are clinched in tyrannical chains and led through a dark ally of perpetual political and social deprivation [...] the day will come for us to fight for our long-denied right to self-determination.

Boro’s statements often used metaphors to describe the oppression suffered by Ijaws and to justify militia action. He was quick to convert accusations of robbery, banditry and terrorism into justification for collective action and claims making. The fight over oil was a fight for freedom:

Today is a great day, not only in our lives, but also in the history of the Niger Delta. Perhaps, it will be the greatest day for a very long time.... We are going to demonstrate to the world, what and how we feel about oppression. Before today, we were branded robbers, bandits, terrorists, or gangsters, but after today, we shall be heroes of our land....Remember your seventy-year-old grandmother who still farms before she eats, remember also your poverty-stricken people, remember too your petroleum which is being pumped out

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7454118>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7454118>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)