

Economies of Violence: Petroleum, Politics and Community Conflict in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

Principal Investigators

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The Niger Delta of Nigeria, the heart of the country's oil production, has become an archetypal case of what has been called a "zone of violence". Home to some of the largest, and highest quality, oil deposits on the planet, the recent history of the Niger Delta has been intimately associated with a commodity of unprecedented economic and geo-strategic significance and value that has, for the better part of three decades, been the lifeblood to the Nigerian economy. The meeting ground of unimaginable wealth – perhaps \$600 billion in oil exports since 1960 – and the unremitting economic and political marginality of a complex mosaic of ethnic minorities, the delta has provided the fertile soil in which youth militancy, communal violence and intense struggles over customary authority has flourished over two decades or more. A gradual slide into what the US State Department has referred to as political chaos in the Delta, poses very sharply the crisis of rule and legitimacy in the Nigerian Federation itself. Currently, *the* central political questions confronting President Obasanjo in the run-up to the April 2003 elections are "resource control", the minorities question and "self-determination", a trio of issues with momentous consequences for the entire architecture of the Nigerian constitution. The politics of resource control emerged precisely from the long struggles from below launched by historically marginalized ethnic minorities and oil producing communities in the face of what the famous Ogoni activist Ken Saro-Wiwa dubbed the "slick alliance" of transnational oil companies and the Nigerian state (more precisely, the Nigerian National Petroleum Company [NNPC] and its security apparatuses). In the wake of the Ogoni movement, the Delta oil complex has spawned a raft of self-determination movements: Ijaw (INC.), Isoko (IDU), Urhobo (UPU), Itsekiri (INP), Ogbia (MORETO) among them. Many of these struggles are environmental in some way, triggered by the terrifying costs of resource extraction. Nigeria has some of the highest spillage and flaring rates anywhere in the world; between 1976 and 2001 there were over 5000 spills amounting to 2.5 million barrels, equivalent to ten Exxon Valdez disasters within a confined deltaic zone. These political movements are however multi-faceted and complex because they are at once environmental, youth, human rights, ethnic, and democratization movements.

It is no exaggeration to say that the conflicts within the Niger Delta strike to the very heart of Nigeria's political future. While the ethnic character of the state and of formal party politics has been a staple of Nigerian scholarship, the genesis and trajectories of local and community conflicts across the Delta – arguably the geo-strategic center of the

Nigerian federation – remain wholly undocumented and not well understood. The US State Department refers to the minority and “anti-oil movements” as “terrorist” and to the “restive” youth movements as violent and undemocratic. A recent CIA report sees the crisis as a result of “environmental stresses”. Even those who champion the role of civic associations have seen the mobilization of youth and ethnic minorities in particular, as “negative and “perverse. Furthermore at the practical-political level, crises and conflicts within the oil producing communities are dealt with ineffectively by *ad hoc* government commissions in the absence of a cadre of local conflict mediators and local governance institutions. What is lacking are accountable local institutions and forms of governance through which communities can deal directly with companies and government agencies and resolve local disputes (to produce, in short, forms of governance capable of linking capital and community), and correlatively serious academic studies of the dynamics of conflicts in the oil producing communities themselves.

The central question addressed by this project is why are oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta – where communities here refer to villages, towns, ethnic territories, and in some cases urban communities in which some form of oil-related production and refining activity is located -- the site of intense conflict and violence (what we call “petro-violence”)? Community violence existed in the military period (1983-1999), and has deepened and proliferated in the period since the return to democratic rule in 1999, and in a number of well-publicized instances the conflicts and related armed violence have required state intervention and peace commissions to attempt to halt the political violence (for example Nembe, Warri and Peremabiri). We focus on six important case studies that are exemplars of the “oil complex”: that is to say a configuration of community, oil company, and state and local government institutions generative of conflict. Our central, and most general, claim is that the conflicts at the local level emerge from challenges to customary forms of community governance, precipitated by the presence and activities of oil operations, and expressed through struggles over land rights, and access to company rents and resources.

The conflicts among the sampled communities are, we propose, always locally rooted, reflecting the particular historical configuration of customary forms of rule and governance, company activity, the history of inter-ethnic relations, and local government and state forces. Conflicts, we predict, can be broadly of two sorts: intra-community and inter-community (recognizing that both may operate simultaneously, and one may spill over into, or be generative of, the other). The former involves struggles over customary and authority by youth groups, women’s organization, cultural groups, and ruling elites. The latter refer to inter-ethnic, and sometime inter-clan or inter-kingdom conflicts typically over territory and access to land and estuarine/marine resources. We hypothesize at least four different sorts of conflict patterns: first, conflicts within the community between chiefly rule and various insurgent social groups; second, conflicts between communities over property and territorial control of oil bearing lands or oil installations; third, conflicts engendered by communities struggling to create their own local government or electoral districts as a means of securing access to federal petroleum revenues; and fourth, conflicts in oil producing communities that spill-over into diasporic communities elsewhere in, and outside of, the Delta. Our goal is to understand the dynamics of petro-violence both to understand the nature of the governability crisis in the Niger delta but also to generate insights into the institutions and processes capable of

securing peace in a region characterized by long-standing marginalization, undemocratic forms of customary rule, corporate irresponsibility, and state corruption.

The research outputs are available at:

<http://geography.berkeley.edu/ProjectsResources/ND%20Website/NigerDelta/index.html>