

Amnesty Program as a Peacebuilding Initiative in Niger Delta, Nigeria by John Oghenero Tobor and Festus Odubo

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Abstract

The Niger Delta crisis is due to the absence of development in the region both on human and infrastructure levels. The ability of ex-militants to transition to peacetime activities by getting employed, becoming entrepreneurs, and functional civic involvement after their training in the amnesty program would go a long way in addressing the development issues. The amnesty program was introduced in 2009 by the Nigerian government to curb violence in the region by engaging the militants. The program focused on empowerment, human and economic development that will help the ex-militants refrain from militancy and become useful and productive citizens in their various communities with the resultant aim to help restore and sustain peace in the region. This paper assesses the extent to which the amnesty program has addressed the underlying problems in the region including the peaceful transition of the ex-militants to ensure sustainable peace in the region. Content and thematic analysis of data was utilized. Results of the study showed that while there is some improvement in terms of the ability of the ex-militants to become productive and peaceful citizens, there is a greater need for employment of graduates of the program. The findings could be used by the Nigerian government to address youth employment and education issues in the region. This may, in turn, discourage violence and future militant activities, thereby enhancing a stable social and political landscape in the region.

Keywords: Agitators; Amnesty program; Conflicts; Crisis; Disarmament; Ex-militants; Niger delta; Nigeria; Peacebuilding; Reintegration

Introduction

This paper focuses on how the program participants have benefited from the program. The paper also focuses on whether the training, education, and skills acquired through the program have helped in the peaceful transition of the participants and restored peace and stability to the region. This underscores the goal of the program, which is to restore and sustain peace, security and stability in the region and the economic mainstay of the country. The fact that the Nigerian economy is dependent mainly on oil further heightens the need for a peaceful and stable Niger Delta [1-6]. A significant number of the multinational oil corporations with multiple oil fields and oil wells operate in this region.

Becker [7] and Schultz [8] highlighted the significance of human capital investment through education by placing emphasis on the immeasurable returns from such investments [7,8]. Specifically, they highlighted the vital role education plays in restoring peace and stability to conflict-prone communities. In his report on peacebuilding in 2009, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, emphasized on the role of education in peacebuilding, particularly, in post-conflict transition. Hayes and McAllister [9] also addressed the importance of education and its ability to restore peace and improve community relations in Northern Ireland. Particularly, education geared toward addressing conflict is vital for economic growth and

development [10]. Researchers believe education can help secure and sustain peace in post conflict environments [11].

The peacebuilding theory (PBT) of Paul Lederach [12] was used as the theoretical framework of this study. Paul Lederach's theory centers on enhancing sustainable peace by tackling of key contributors to conflict in society (UN Peacebuilding Commission, 2005). According to Adams [13], the PBT helps remove tension between conflicting parties by addressing the core cause of the violence. PBT is a compatible platform through which an assessment of the amnesty program can be viewed and determined if it indeed helped the ex-militants to transition successfully into peacetime activities. For instance, PBT places emphasis on resolving conflict by tackling the underlying issues as opposed to just bringing an end to conflict. This means, the focus of peacebuilding is not only to stop the violence but to also put in place mechanisms that address the underlying social, economic, or political factors to sustain peace [14]. Similarly, the goal of the amnesty program was to address the underlying factors that brought about the Niger Delta crisis. Also, Lederach's [12] concept of the PBT is applicable to this study as the Amnesty Program was introduced to tackle the human development problems in the region to ensure sustainable peacebuilding. This is especially important as the vocational trainings, skill acquisition and formal education provided to the participating ex-militants is premised on the belief that the education, trainings, and skills acquired will steer the ex-militants away from militancy and help them become productive citizens in their various communities and the country in general. This, will, ultimately, help bring about peace in the region and increased economic activities both in the region and the nation¹.

¹ http://www.nigerdeltaamnesty.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=54&Itemid=55

Methodology

Much of the empirical evidence to be presented derives from the doctoral dissertations of Tobor [15] and Odubo [10]. Benet's polarities of democracy model [16-18] served as the theoretical framework for the ethnographic study of Tobor [15]. According to Benet, this unifying theory of democracy is consistent with the philosophical perspective of critical theory which seeks to overcome oppression and achieve human emancipation. The research findings of Tobor [15] suggest that the polarities of democracy can be used as a unifying model to plan, guide, and evaluate the amnesty program that is designed to build healthy, just, humane, and sustainable communities.

The studies of Tobor [15] and Odubo [10] utilized the qualitative research method to explore the benefits of the educational, skills acquisition, and training component of the amnesty program on the Niger Delta ex-militants that have graduated from the program. This method is justified because the study involves research with humans and their worldviews [19]. The studies have to do with gaining an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon that is carried out within the natural setting of the participants of the study [19]. Data collection method involved using semi structured in-depth interviews and open-ended questions on the study participants (ex-militants) personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, especially as it relates to how the ex-militants have benefited from the educational, vocational skills acquisition, and training component of the amnesty program. Field notes were taken during the interview sessions. The study utilized purposeful sampling method from a list of study participants obtained from the NDAO.

The case study research design was adopted in conducting the study. This approach enabled the study to capture the experiences of the ex-militants in recounting their perceptions about the training, education, and vocational skills acquired through the amnesty program. Case study in this inquiry offered the opportunity for the study to examine and describe data in the real-life environment of the ex-militants. Also, case study was useful in gathering broad information through inductive, qualitative methods, and representing data from the perspectives of study participants. A total of 30 ex-militants who have graduated from the amnesty program [10,15] were interviewed for this study. Odubo [10], however, also interviewed an additional 4 participants (3 program managers and one government official linked with the program). Data was collected over a period of one month while interviews lasted between 40-60 minutes per interview session. Themes in the interview text that conveys the benefits of the educational, vocational skills acquisition, and training piece of the program were identified and then the transcriptions were then converted to computer files. The researchers also reviewed and analyzed related documents, which were mostly obtained from the Niger Delta Amnesty Office.

History of the Niger Delta Crisis

The U.S Energy Information Administration [20] avers that Nigeria is the largest producer of oil in Africa. As of January 2013, there were 37.2 billion barrels of proven oil reserves located along the Niger River Delta and offshore in the Bight of Benin, the Gulf of Guinea, and the Bight of Bonny" [20]. Based on the Energy Information Administration's (EIA's) assessment, Nigeria is endowed with vast natural gas, coal and renewable energy resources that could serve as sources for generating electricity in the country. However, the current electricity rate is as low as 50%, affecting electricity supply and

infrastructure to approximately 80 million people [20]. The Energy Information Administration (2013) also indicated that in 2012, Nigeria exported 19.8 million metric tons (950 Bcf) of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) in 2012, making it the fourth largest LNG exporter in the world. The Energy Information Administration [20] further averred that Nigeria's LNG also makes up 8% of the total LNG supplied to the world market.

The Energy Information Administration [21] also stated that in 1999, there was an amendment in the Nigerian Constitution that allocated 13% of oil revenue from onshore production directly to the nine states that produce oil in the region. States like Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Rivers, Abia, Imo, and Ondo States comprises the oil producing states in the region. Other allocations are; federal government (47.2%), states (31.1%), local government councils (15.2%), and Natural Priority Services Fund (6.5%). Some of the conflicts in the region is a consequence of these allocations, the result of which is the formation of militant groups demanding an increase in onshore revenue share to 50%, and extension of the revenue sharing to offshore production [21]. Additionally, the Energy Information Administration [21] indicated that since December 2005, Nigeria experienced an increase in militant activities including vandalizing and disrupting oil producing facilities, kidnappings of staff of oil companies, oil thefts and several other disruptive activities by militant groups.

There were threats to life and property in the region as a result of the activities of the militant groups in the Niger Delta region. These threats bothered not only the people of the region but the oil companies and the Nigerian state as a whole. More importantly, the militants in the region were constantly involved in killings, kidnappings, hostage takings, destruction of oil installations and facilities, and confrontations with law enforcement [22]. The agitations and militancy in the region are rooted in the quest for development, an improved environment and a better quality of life for the people of region [23]. Several violent or repressive measures and non-violent measures had had been undertaken by previous administrations in Nigeria in responding to the crisis in the region but proved futile [23,24]. Nonetheless, the introduction of the amnesty program by the Nigerian government in 2009 was aimed at placating the militants and resolving some of the issues in the region. The amnesty was contingent upon the ex-militants dropping their weapons and embracing peace. Amnesty can be viewed as formally granting pardon to offenders or those involved in illegal acts in a political environment to promote peace or reconciliation. This means granting amnesty purges all records of accusation, trial, conviction, imprisonment, and grants the culprits the opportunity of starting from a clean slate [25].

The Amnesty program included a transformational training that involves education, training, and vocational skill acquisition to help reintegrate the ex-militants. Participants of the program are currently being trained locally and internationally. Some have already completed the training program. This study is aimed graduates of the training program. Per the Niger Delta Amnesty Office (NDAO) as of February 2014, 12,703 have graduated in various skills acquisition fields and 128 have graduated with post-graduate degrees, out over 30,000 participants. The Oil and Gas Industry Foundation (OGIF) also absorbed over 1,040 trainees, producing 964 graduates from the OGIF training and 76 still being trained. Data from the NDAO also indicated that 5,296 participants that are being trained in various areas of skill acquisition and education locally and abroad [26]. According to the

NDAO, 50 graduates, as well as 49 additional graduates have been employed in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Italy, respectively.

The study

The findings of Tobor [15] and Odubo [10] indicated that most of the participants successfully utilized the training, skills, and education to improve themselves by way of obtaining gainful employment, starting up their own businesses, participate in civic and community activities, and have become productive citizens of their respective communities rather than getting involved in militant activities. These findings are consistent with Becker [7] and Schultz's [8] view of human capital theory that an educated population is a productive population. It also highlights the importance of the human capital theory which states that individuals and their communities obtain economic benefits when they invest in their people [7,8]. They specifically 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 [7,8].

The findings of Tobor [15] and Odubo [10] are also consistent with Lederach's peacebuilding theory. For instance, the participants in both studies implored the federal government to address the core issues of the region through infrastructural development. This will be an avenue for securing employment for graduates of the program as well as restore sustainable peace and security in the region [15,10]. Tobor emphasized that the overarching theme of lack of development in the region was frequently mentioned by the study participants. These assertions are consistent with the literature reviewed. For instance, Oluduro and Oluduro [27] and Ibaba [23] called on the federal government to address the core issues that have since plagued the region. The result of this cycle of hardship, despair, and agony led to protests (initially peaceful) by the indigenous people which were met with both violent/repressive and non-violent responses from the federal government. The direct result of neglecting the Niger Delta region by the federal government of Nigeria is a reflection of the crisis that has engulfed the region [3,28]. Omitola [29] argued that the inability of the federal government to provide the basic needs of its citizenry such as food, water, employment, hospitals, and good roads amongst others are contributing factors to the root cause of the Niger Delta crisis. According to Odubo [10], findings of the study are centered mostly on the benefits of the program on the participants, as well as tackling the underlying issues in the region. Participants of the program believe marginalization of the region by the federal government is a major contributing factor to militancy in the region.

Tobor [15] and Odubo [10] support the importance of training, skill acquisition, and education in the reintegration of ex-militants, especially in terms of being productive citizens of their communities as opposed to returning to militancy. Odubo [10] averred that majority of the study participants were grateful to the government for coming up with such a dynamic training and skill acquisition program. While, Tobor posited that all the study participants indicated that they have been able to obtain living wage employment as a result of the training and skills they acquired. These assertions are consistent with the literature reviewed. For instance, Graf [30] maintained that the skills obtained through education, adds value to the individuals and their employers in terms of employment benefits and lifetime earnings. Similarly, Novelli and Smith [31] emphasized that skill acquisition training and education helps ex-combatants obtain applicable employment and facilitates transition to peaceful livelihood. Odubo [10] also asserted that while some of the graduates have not been

gainfully employed, they have availed themselves to other opportunities including contract awards and running for a political office. The findings of Tobor [15] demonstrated that all of the participants agreed that the concept of the amnesty program was a very good initiative of the federal government promulgated to address the issues that plague the Niger Delta region. In agreement with these findings, Kuku [32] explained that the amnesty program represents the strongest link for success in Nigeria. However, it is noteworthy to mention that the responses of the participants' suggested that the program can be better structured to achieve greater effectiveness [33,34].

Conclusion

The disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and sustainable reintegration component of the amnesty program was aimed at restoring peace and security to the Niger Delta region. The study highlights the purpose of this paper by demonstrating that the program helped contributed to the peaceful transition of the ex-militants through their employment in various facets of the Nigerian economy, which ultimately, resulted in the restoration of peace and security to the region and the Nigerian polity. This is the first of such programs in the country and seems to have significantly addressed the Niger Delta crisis. Nonetheless, further studies on the program are recommended so as to identify viable ways to improve the program. Findings from Tobor [15] support this assertion. For instance, Tobor posited that the study participants suggested that the program can be better structured to achieve greater effectiveness. This study adds to the body of literature that fills this identified gap. This study is an assessment of the program and how it can be improved to better serve the needs of all key stakeholders including the participants and graduates of the program, the Niger Delta region, the Niger Delta states, and the federal government in restoring lasting peace and stability to the Niger Delta and the Nigerian economy. This study puts into perspective the importance of exploring the benefits of training, formal education and vocational skills acquired by participants of the program. It is even more pertinent to have the ex-militants that have graduated from the program and other parties associated with the program to describe the benefits of the program.

The significance of this study is that it may serve to spur key stakeholders such as the federal government, multinational oil corporations, policy makers, and the local communities to re-examine their views and cooperate, collaborate, and coordinate efforts that are geared towards creating policies that will address core reasons for the incessant turmoil and turbulence that have persisted in the Niger Delta region. The study is limited to the experiences of the Niger Delta ex-militants that have graduated from the program. Other parties associated with the program in some capacity were also relied upon to provide complementary information. Therefore, the findings of this study will not be generalized to amnesty programs in other countries or regions.

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