

Introduction

The Niger-delta region, Nigeria's oil belt has been the site of a generalised ethnic and regional struggle for self-determination since 1998, the location of often-violent confrontations between local ethnic communities and agents of the Nigerian state and oil companies involved in the extraction and exploitation of oil in area. What began as community agitation has undoubtedly undergone several transformations. The first profound transformation was the flowering of civil society, which mobilised a popular civil struggle. In the second, the agitation was extended from that against multinational oil companies (MNCs) to include the Nigerian state. The third transformation involved the elevation of the agitation from purely developmental issues to include the political demands such as federal restructuring, resource control and the resolution of the national question through a conference of ethnic nationalities. The current and fourth stage of the transformation has seen the entrance of youths, youth militancy and youth militias with volatile demands and ultimatums that has elevated the scale of confrontations and violence with the multinationals and the state.

The youths presently spearhead and constitute the vanguard of Niger-delta conflict. They chart the course of methods, tactics and strategies and define the conflicts. They drive and run the conflicts and determine the very essence of its momentum, vitality, vocalisation and diction. The insurgency has involved diverse youth militias, well armed, fairly well trained and equipped, using largely speed boats and operating fairly freely in the swamps, creeks, estuaries, rivers and coastal areas of the region, who engage the Nigerian military and seize oil facilities, ships barges, workers and equipment.

Increasingly, the youth militancy has become criminalised, with the region being transformed into an arena of economic crimes, violence and wars between ethnic and communal groups.

The present youth-led collective action in the Niger-delta draws inspiration from the 1966 declaration of a Niger-delta republic by a group of educated youths led by cadet sub inspector Isaac Adaka Boro that involved an armed insurrection against the Nigerian state and the seizing of oil facilities. The conflicts have witnessed massive deployments of the Nigerian Army, Navy and other

security agencies and represent the «most prolonged, extensive and intensive internal military action since the Nigerian civil war», with devastating negative impact on local and national security and stability, and on global economic growth.

The negative impact of violence associated with youth-led self-determination struggles in the Niger-delta raises the need for an in-depth examination of the youth, militias and self-determination nexus in the Niger-delta. In other words, there is a need to understand the history, changing contexts and local and social processes and dynamics of the conflicts in the Niger-delta to guide policy-making. Who are the main parties to the conflict? What are their perceptions, values, attitudes and interests? What has been the role of civil society, gender, local elite, traditional governance structures in the prosecution, sustenance and management of the conflicts? How do youths perceive, formulate and respond to the resource control struggles? What social, economic, cultural and political processes conduce with youth responses and methods? What are the methods, strategies and consequences of youth engagement? What is the nature of state, corporate and international perceptions, responses and interventions? What are the efforts and results of conflict containment, management and peacemaking efforts and peacekeeping efforts?

The objectives of the study are to examine:

- a) The resource struggles and conflicts in the Niger-delta region and the role of youths in it;
- b) The objectives, methods, strategies and conducts of youth engagement;
- c) The youth movements and militias and their confrontations with the Nigerian state, MNCs and other ethnic groups/communities;
- d) The results, ramifications and implications of the conflicts;
- e) The interventions and policies, their effectiveness or otherwise and efforts at peacemaking.