

## The Amnesty Programme: Integrating Youths as Drivers of the Agricultural Transformation Agenda for Peace Building in the Niger Delta

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**Abstract:** The Niger Delta – the geographical heart of oil production in Nigeria has been a breeding ground for militants and impoverished ethnic groups for some years now. This is because the discovery of oil and its exploitation has ushered in conflicts. Devastated by the ecological costs of oil spillage and the highest gas flaring rates in the world, the Niger Delta has become a centre of violence. In an attempt to solve the Niger Delta crisis, the Federal Government introduced the policy of amnesty to militants as the solution to the Niger Delta Crisis. The amnesty programme because of its robust nature and mode of implementation are faced with challenges. There are fears of a resurgence of the crisis. This article proffers a better solution and strategy for sustainable peace in the region. Hence, agriculture and the agriculture transformation agenda plan of President Goodluck Jonathan has been x-rayed to provide better possibilities for building peace and engineering youth-centered development in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

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### 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that there were crisis of monumental proportions in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and that this crisis needed to be resolved urgently because of its implications for development and socio-cultural relations in the Niger Delta in particular and in Nigeria in general. The crisis was as a result of accumulated problems such as poverty, neglect, environmental degradation, and transport bottlenecks (Naanen 1995; Obi 2004). There was ethnic and political unrest which continued throughout and persisted in the region (Forgotten Dairies, 2008). Hence the essence of the amnesty programme was to stabilize, consolidate and sustain security conditions in the region. The amnesty programme was seen as a prerequisite to promote economic development in the area and in the country as a whole (Kuku, 2011). There had however, been some challenges on the fate of the amnesty programme implemented by the Nigerian Government.

Consequently, this article charts a course of action that the Federal Government of Nigeria can take in order to consolidate the gains of the amnesty programme. It tries to proffer measures through which agriculture and the agricultural transformation agenda plan can help in building peace and engineering youth-centered development in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

### 2. The Niger Delta Crisis in Retrospect

Nigeria's Niger Delta also referred to as the South – South geo – political zone is organized politico-administratively into nine states of the current thirty six states of the federation. These states are Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers (Otite, 2009). The region is made up of a medley of ethnic nationalities referred to as minorities in relation to the three major ethnic groups in the Nigerian Federation (Obi-Ani, 2004). The region is regarded as the seventh largest producer of oil and gas in the world and the largest in Africa (Otite, 2009). It contributes over 40% to the Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with total annual earnings of 90% and 80% of the national gross income (FGN, 2008). Despite its population of about 33.5 million which accounts for about 23.0% of the national population (FGN 2008), the Niger Delta is characterized by accumulated problems such as poverty, neglect, environmental degradation, and transport bottlenecks (Naanen, 1995; Obi, 2004).

In spite of its strategic economic importance, the demographic picture of the region as shown by the Human Development Index (HDI) is deplorable (Akinola, 2011). Reports from studies revealed that the HDI of the region is as low as 0.564, compared with other regions and nations with the same oil and gas resources such as Saudi Arabia (0.800), United Arab Emirate (0.846), Kuwait (0.844), Libya (0.799), etc.

(Akinola, 2011). These problems were consequential upon the public sphere being dominated by the few elite with “particularistic” concerns at the exclusion of the people. Similarly, the affluence exhibited by many workers of the oil companies and political office holders in Nigeria sharply contrasts with the social deprivation of most residents of the oil communities whose livelihoods were threatened (Akinola, 2008; Obi 2004). In response, the people of the oil communities resisted this oppression of the Federal Government and oil companies in various ways. For instance, conflicts arose in the early 1990s due to tensions between the foreign oil corporations and a number of the Niger Delta’s minority ethnic groups who felt they were being exploited, particularly the Ogoni as well as the Ijaw in the late 1990s (Obi 2000). There has been a resurgence of ethnic and political unrest which continued throughout and persisted up to 2007 (Forgotten Dairies, 2008). Competition for oil wealth fueled violence between innumerable ethnic groups, causing the militarization of nearly the entire region by ethnic militia groups (militants). The rightful agitation for an equitable deal from the Federal Government was criminalized. The hijacking of this demand for financial and development inputs into the woefully neglected territory, was brought about by offenders who engaged in illegal oil bunkering, fire arms business, kidnapping and hostage taking, piracy and armed robbery (Otite, 2009). These criminal diversions involved both militants and foreigners (Forgotten Dairies, 2008). The militants were mostly unemployed youths disengaged by political elites, who had used them as political thugs and general supporters at the 1999, 2003 and 2007 moments of elections to high offices at the three tiers of Government: the Local council, the State, and the Federal Governments (Otite, 2009). Not having anything else to do as products of a failed state, in a drab socio-economic environment, they fall as easy recruits to engage in local defense fights and inter cult rivalry struggles to put the region under chaos (Otite, 2009). At this time there had been a lot of ammunitions and high rate of criminality and insecurity. The use of military might engaging the Joint Tax Force (JTF) (a combination of the Air force and Navy) as an approach to resolve the crisis was an erroneous move (Forgotten Dairies, 2008). Similarly, critics felt that this Government approach was an irony: “the money used to maintain the military is sourced mainly from the nation’s petroleum wealth derived from the Niger Delta”. Hence the Odual People Congress (OPC) condemned the approach as a lawless violation of the people’s right. Its leader Gani Adams urged the National Assembly to prevail on President Musa Yaradua to withdraw federal troops from the Niger Delta. This consequently led to the designing of the Amnesty programme. This programme called for

disarmament and re-orientation of the youths to embrace peace (Otite and Umukoro, 2010).

### **3. Philosophical Bases of the Amnesty**

#### **3.1 Programme in the Niger Delta Region**

Amnesty described by Otite and Umukoro (2010) as a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme was one of recommendations of the 2008 Mittee Committee report. It was borne out of the need to achieve sustainable development, peace and human and environmental security in the Niger Delta region (The News, 2009). This was because the people of the Niger Delta had suffered various forms of hardships and injustice over the years resulting in violence and the destruction of lives and properties. Amoda (2009) espoused the view that the amnesty approach to security, politics and conflicts is a legal approach and asserts that amnesty is a general pardon of offence by government and a deliberate overlooking of offenses against government. To pardon is to release the criminally-culpable from the just punishment of the law; it is to cancel or not to exert punishment due for an offence. Thus, the relationship assumed by government between it and the Niger Delta militants is juridical; the militants are pardoned instead of being punished (Otite and Umukoro, 2010). Based on this conception, the amnesty programme was conceived out of the need to prevent insurgents who ought to have been punished for engaging in criminal activities from facing the wrath of the law in order to foster peace and progress. In other words, the amnesty programme was an explicit or implicit acceptance by the government that militant activities in the Niger Delta is the product of neglect and underdevelopment which can be attributed to corruption and lack of political will (Otite and Umukoro, 2010). The amnesty programme was based on the understanding that violent conflict can easily develop if large numbers of people become convinced that taking up arms is not only legitimate but may perhaps be the only way to secure the necessities of life. In other words, they felt that they were in an unjust situation and must therefore decide to rectify it (Smith, 2002).

This contention was buttressed by President Yar’Adua’s statement in his 2009 Independence Day broadcast that, “with a view to engendering lasting peace in the area, we proclaimed a general amnesty and granted unconditional pardon to all those who had taken up arms as a way of drawing attention to the plight of the people of the Niger Delta”. He further stated that “on this day and in the spirit of rededication, we renew our commitment to confronting the challenges of critical infrastructures in the Niger Delta, food security, security of lives and property, human capital development, land tenure and wealth creation”

(The Guardian, 2009). The amnesty programme therefore was not a solution to the Niger Delta crisis but a means for ensuring ceasefire in order to correct the wrong of the past (Umukoro, 2010).

### **3.2 The Gains and Challenges of the Niger Delta Amnesty Programme**

The key objectives of the amnesty programme was to stabilize, consolidate and sustain security conditions in the Niger Delta region as pre-requisites to promoting economic development in the area and in the country as a whole. Expectedly, since the proclamation of amnesty for the agitators, peace, safety, security and sustainable development had returned to the once volatile Niger Delta region (Kuku, 2011). Economic benefits had also accrued. For instance from a paltry of less than one million barrels per day pre – amnesty period, the peace that prevailed aided a remarkable growth of the Nigeria’s production to between 2.4 to 2.6 million barrels per day. Hence at a bench mark of \$ 72 per barrel in the 2012 budget, the country’s revenue increased to \$ 187.2 million per day (Punch News, 2012).

A survey of the career aspiration of the ex-militants shows a wide preference for about ten (10) sectors for training ranging from Oil and Gas, Maritime Services, Fabrication and Welding Technology, Exploration and Production and Processing Engineering. The projected duration of training ranged from 3 - 18 months and after their completion of training the ex-militants could chose between wage employment and self-employment (Akinwale, 2010).

However, there had been some challenges on the fate of the trainees on graduation from these skills acquisition/training centers. The question is how they can get these militants gainfully employed after offering them skills? (Kuku, 2011). Similarly, the flexibility of the programme goes with extra budgetary challenges. For instance, the reintegration phase in particular requires huge financial injection as it is typical of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes globally that, reintegration efforts are constantly reviewed and very often these reviews require the injection of fresh funds which consequently altar the budgetary projections. The amnesty office was also confronted with the challenge of securing visas for the trainees to travel to home countries of selected reintegration centers. This challenge stems from the fact that the amnesty programme’s trainees are understood by a section of international community as terrorists. The reintegration phase of the programme was also confronted with the challenge of getting the Oil and Gas Industry (OGI) group to accept trainees who have elected to return to formal education, but are still compelled to go through artisanship training (Kuku, 2011).

It shows that the Nigerian government has not really learnt any lesson from the previous failed developmental programmes such as the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB), Niger Delta Basin Development Authority (NDBDA), Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC), which has failed to deliver on its mandate for sustainable peace and development in the Niger Delta (Ako, 2011). There is a renewed call for the youths in the Niger Delta to resort back to agriculture. The reorientation of the youths to embrace agriculture is paramount due to the challenges of the amnesty programme and the need to ensure food security and lasting peace in the region.

### **4. The Potential of Agriculture and the Rationale for engaging the Niger Delta youths of Nigeria into the sector**

The call to engage the Niger Delta youths in agriculture is paramount at this point in time based on the various reasons:

- 1) The strong promulgation of the agriculture transformation agenda and the call by President Goodluck Jonathan for Nigerians to invest in agriculture to grow food, create jobs and ensure security.
- 2) The availability of 84 million hectares out of Nigeria’s total land area of about 91 million hectares found to be arable, out of which only 40% of the cultivated area was farmed. Much of this land is needed to be farmed to ensure food security
- 3) The availability of 279 billion cubic meters of surface water and the untapped irrigation potentials with 3 of the 8 major water systems in Africa.
- 4) The compelling evidence of an ageing farmer population in the country which must be addressed to facilitate sustainability in agricultural production. Reports reveal that the average age of farmers in Nigeria is 65 years. If young farmers do not replace the ageing producers, the production of food within the country will be seriously compromised in the next 10 – 15 years.
- 5) An estimated 110 million youths as potential work force due to their latent energy by the year 2020.
- 6) Over the past five years, growth in the oil sector has declined, while the non-oil sector especially agriculture has been the main growth driver.
- 7) The oil sector accounts for only about 16% of Gross Domestic products and has limited multiplier and linkage effects.

- 8) Agriculture currently contributes about 41% of GDP and employs over 60% of the population.
- 9) The continual increase of the country's food import bill of over \$ 11 billion in wheat, rice, sugar and fish annually.
- 10) The large and expanding internal markets for primary and secondary agricultural commodities due to a Nigerian population of 165 million people projected to grow to 470 million by the year 2050.
- 11) A school of thought which perceives the youths as ideal catalysts for changing the mind sets of people that see farming as derogatory rather than being prestigious.
- 12) The prevailing incentives by the Government to agriculture through the various agricultural credits guarantee schemes, the launching of the Nigerian Incentive Based Risk Sharing System (NIRSAL) to de-risk and improve funding of Agriculture, making agricultural machinery to attract zero duty, as well as enhancing the effectiveness of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS).
- 13) The new financing framework for agriculture by the central bank of Nigeria to unlock \$ 3 billion as affordable loans from banks for agricultural value chains.

These thoughts and statistics presented above have indeed proven that the agricultural sector is a worthwhile venture to be embraced by the youths in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

##### **5. The Agricultural Transformation Agenda: How can the Niger Delta Youths of Nigeria participate**

The Agricultural Transformation Agenda with its vision to grow the Nigerian's agricultural sector has stopped to treat the sector as a development project. It has rather isolated projects that do not clearly grow the sector in a clear and measurable way. Hence, the way forward is to treat agriculture as a business by integrating food production, storage, food processing and industrial manufacturing by value chains. It focuses on value chains where Nigeria has a comparative advantage in the production of particular crops based on climatic adaptability to ensure food security, create jobs and wealth (Adesina, 2012).

Consequently, going by the target commodity value chains for investments by zones as recommended by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, there are clear indications that the Niger Delta youths can find solace in the production of primary agricultural commodities such as oil palm, cocoa, rice and cassava as well as livestock

and fish farming. The production of these agricultural products by the Niger Delta youths shall predictably enable them to be big time entrepreneurs. This is as a result of the various incentives put in place by the Government. For instance, with the investment facility concluded by the Federal Government in February 2012, for 100 large scale integrated rice processing mills, with a total capacity for 2 million MT of milled rice, per year (located across the major rice producing states of Nigeria) large scale rice production can be enhanced with the full assurance that the products after being produced can be processed and packaged for value addition as well as ensure better market opportunities. Similarly, the cassava transformation action plan aims at making Nigeria the largest processor of cassava in the world. The production of cassava is aimed at driving a new industrial growth because of its numerous value chains through:

- 1) The High Quality Cassava Flour (HQCF) which shall replace wheat flour for bread making.
- 2) The Native and modified starch production enhanced by processing plants with a combined capacity of 20,000 MT that are currently operating below capacity.
- 3) The production of dried cassava chips that is expected to meet both internal and external market demands. Favorably, China's demand is expected to exceed 12 million tons by 2015/2016 due to their large ethanol production and Nigeria could be her major supplier.
- 4) High Fructose Cassava Syrup (HFCS) production that shall be of high demand. For instance, the total sugar requirement for soft drink bottlers and juice manufacturers in Nigeria is estimated at 200,000 tons of sugar per annum. A replacement of half of this by HFCS from cassava would create a 100,000 ton demand.
- 5) Fuel Ethanol (E10) production, which presents a viable market opportunity. Currently, Nigeria has adopted the E-10 policy, which is aimed at blending gasoline with 10% ethanol. This represents a potential one billion liter per year market of fuel ethanol.

This agenda if well implemented is expected to deliver within 4 years. Its outcome shall be the creation of 3.5 Million jobs across all agricultural value chains, create an additional income of \$ 2 billion in the hands of the Nigerian farmers, and inject \$ 2.2 billion into the economy from rice self sufficiency and injecting \$ 380 million into the economy from substituting 40% of bread wheat flour with cassava

flour. Finally Nigeria shall be food secured by increasing the production of key food staples: rice, cassava and sorghum by 20 million metric tons (Adesina, 2012).

It is envisaged that the Niger Delta youths can benefit a great deal from this agenda rather than depending on the paltry financial rewards during amnesty and the inability of the Oil and Gas Industry (OGI) to employ them after training. The benefits they shall get from agriculture are multidimensional: full employment, wealth and food security. The full assurance of getting these benefits by the youths can bring about lasting peace in the region.

#### **6. Suggestions for increasing the involvement of youths in agriculture for socio-economic benefits and peace in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria**

- 1) There should be a complete re-orientation of the Niger Delta youths (through the media and other very practicable medium) on over dependence on the revenue from oil. Their thoughts should be re-directed "back to the land" (agriculture) which has several multiplier effects: job and wealth creation as well as food security and peace.
- 2) Agriculturists working in both the Federal and State Ministries of Agriculture, teachers and those in the Agricultural Research Institutes should be well motivated through the provision of better working incentives (good housing, salaries, official vehicles, etc) to improve the image of agriculture. This can encourage the Niger Delta youths to be interested in agriculture.
- 3) There should be a strong campaign to enlighten the Niger Delta youths to see agriculture as a prestigious profession rather than seeing it as being derogative. They should be encouraged to imbibe the spirit of "dignity in labour"
- 4) There should be a provision for improved access to training and capacity development. Proper training should be provided to the youths by all the tiers of governments, private organizations and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs). This can be achieved through seminars, workshops, apprenticeships, internships or industrial attachments.
- 5) Policy makers in education should try by incorporating the teaching of agricultural science. It should be made a compulsory subject in the curriculum at both the primary and secondary school levels.
- 6) Colleges and Universities of Agriculture should introduce enterprise development

(agri-business) trainings particularly in value added activities such as food processing, packaging and marketing as part of their curriculum. This will make the profession more attractive.

- 7) Exposing the Niger Delta youths to improved and easier access to resources such as land, capital, technology and information to encourage commercial production.
- 8) The Government should encourage private investors to set up food processing plants in clusters around farming areas in the Niger Delta. This will help to link farmers in the various farm settlements, reduce current high levels of post-harvest losses, and add value for increased local content of foods.
- 9) Facilitating market opportunities through the establishment of Marketing Corporations and Commodity Exchange outlets for primary and value added agricultural products produced by the young entrepreneurs.
- 10) The Government should provide an enabling environment that will encourage the private sector and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to facilitate networking among the youths of the Niger Delta on innovations that will improve agricultural productivity. This will encourage collaboration, information sharing, and group activity among their contemporaries.

#### **7. Conclusion**

There is an urgent need for decisive action to be taken to solve the developmental problems in the Niger Delta area since it is the root cause or justification for militant activities and violent conflicts in the area. The relative peace experienced in the Niger Delta area as a result of the amnesty programme has made major impacts on the Nigerian economy in terms of increased revenue for development. However, the amnesty programme has not been seen as a means of completely solving the Niger Delta crisis to forestall peace. Agriculture and the Agriculture transformation plan shall open a door for the youths for job creation and economic empowerment for peace in the region. There is therefore a serious call for the Niger Delta youths of Nigeria to re-orientate their minds to the agriculture profession. The Government also has a major role to play in this direction. They should put adequate machineries on ground to attract the youths into agriculture for lasting peace in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

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