WHAT HAS CHANGED WITH DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA’S NIGER DELTA REGION? THE CHALLENGING TRAJECTORIES OF A CURRENT DAY INTERVENTIONIST INSTITUTION

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Abstract

The Niger Delta regional development question predates Nigeria’s political independence and the complexities that characterise it explains why the myriad of state responses to answering it has persisted. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) as one such response has over the years made attempts to provide viable and sustainable answers. However, given the current global uncertainties, the changing narratives with development in relation to how the NDDC has administered the needed socio-economic and infrastructural transformation in the region needs proper documentation. This is with the aim of underscoring current day institutional relational dynamics within the NDDC and how it affects development outcomes for people who are daily roped with multidimensional problems despite the avalanche of human and natural resources. The study employs an exploratory research design, using semi-structured Key Informant Interviews drawn from urban and rural based community leaders, women groups, youth groups, and Non-governmental Organisations whose activities relate to development in Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States. Other Key Informant Interviewees were two academic staff of the Department of Political Science, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, and two staff of the NDDC. David Easton’s Systems Theory is adopted to explain the input-output nexus between beneficiaries of interventions and the NDDC and how that affects development outcomes in the region. The study reveals the current administrative imbroglio between the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs and the NDDC as a new challenge and threat to achieving sustainable development in the region. This challenge as revealed by the study has aggravated issues of poor institutional planning, poor community interface mechanisms, poor monitoring and evaluation, and the aggressive nature of interventions. The study concludes that although these challenges do not subvert the relative transformation achieved so far by the NDDC, however, such relativity suggests that the desired change in development is not substantial enough to alleviate the excruciating socio-economic and infrastructural conditions of the people.

Keywords: Development, Institutional Interventions, Development Challenges, NDDC, Niger Delta Region’
Introduction
The Niger Delta regional development question predates Nigeria’s political independence. This did not go unnoticed in the fabrics of governance considering the economic significance the region implies. According to Isidiho and Sabran (2015), before and after Nigeria’s political independence, there existed intervention initiatives set up by the government to address pervasive socio-economic inequality, environmental despoliation, infrastructural deficit, poverty, and perceived marginalisation in the region. To Jack-Akhigbe (2013) these pre and post-independence development attempts can be traced to the setting up of the Henry Willink Minorities Commission in 1957 to look into the fears expressed by the region as well as other minority groups in the country. The outcome of Willink’s Commission Report of 1958 resulted in the establishment of different intervention bodies by different regimes in the past. According to Efebeh (2017:387), while these past institutions faced challenges of poor funding, poor planning, and outright corruption, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) is the latest of them saddled with the mandate to address regional socio-economic and infrastructural deficits which other agencies set up by the government before now could not achieve.

Emerhi, Nicolas, and Wolf, (2001), averred that the establishment of the commission followed the initiation of a master plan aimed at developing the physical and socio-economic landscape as well as speeding up the transformation of the region into a zone of equity, prosperity, and tranquility. The master plan was expected to match the provisions of Part IV, Section 14, subsection 2(a-e) of the (NDDC Establishment Act, 2000 which financially empowers the commission to source for fund from the federation account and other revenue sources to provide viable answers to the development question located in the region. However, Ekekwe and Ukachikara (2018:5, posited that such expectation is not far disconnected from available statistics that show how a high number of the region’s population still lived in unacceptable conditions.
Obiam and Amadi (2022:1) substantiated further that the region is still one of the world's most underdeveloped areas. Despite its enormous resources and contributions to the Nigerian economy, the Niger Delta region is nevertheless marked by people living in abject poverty, with short life expectancy, a high infant mortality rate, widespread illiteracy and significant unemployment. This is statistically corroborated by the United Nations Development Programme (2020) report on Human Development Index (HDI) of states in the Niger Delta region. All the entire states in the region are still below 7.0 United Nations’ HDI with Abia State at 0.650, Akwa Ibom State at 0.613, Bayelsa State 0.655, Cross River State at 0.619, Delta State at 0.667, Edo State at 0.632, Imo State at 0.653, Ondo State at 0.615 and Rivers State at 0.653. The report also projects a drop in HDI if structural reforms in the governance space are not put in place by state actors.

These conditions are projected to get worsened with evolving global uncertainties characterised by the global economic downturn, the rising spate of terrorism, and climate change impact (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Given these global complexities, what then has changed with development in relation to how the NDDC has administered the needed socio-economic and infrastructural transformation in the region? What new forms of development challenges is the Commission facing in delivering on its mandate? These questions are raised to underscore current day institutional relational dynamics within the NDDC and how it affects development outcomes for people who are daily roped with multidimensional problems despite the avalanche of human and natural resources.

Despite the avalanche of extant literature that has interrogated issues on ethics of posterity for environmental development of the Niger Delta (Otto, 2020), a critique of the NDDC from a development perspective (Ekekwe and Ukachikara, 2018), the state and development interventions in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria (Jack-Akhigbe, 2013), environmental insecurity and poverty in the Niger Delta: A case of Ilaje (Abosede, 2017), the Niger Delta problem and the Yar’Adua
administration’s response: from state repression to development, promoting policy choices (Obiyan, 2009), oil extraction, dispossession, resistance, and conflict in Nigeria’s oil-rich Niger Delta (Obi, 2010), however, documented studies that interrogate new forms of development challenges within the NDDC, given current day global uncertainties, remains inadequate. The study will contribute to expanding the development alternatives required in the Niger Delta region as well as spur public policy imperatives where necessary.

**Conceptual Review**

**Development**

The concept of development is consistently replete with diverse meanings, explanations, and theoretical frameworks. Peet (1999) cited in Du Pisani (2006) conceptualised development as an evolving process in which human capacity expands in terms of creating new structures, addressing problems, coping with change, and being creative to attain articulated goals. Reyes (2001), understood development as a social condition within a country in which its natural resources and structures are rationally and sustainably utilised to meet the needs of the populace. In a broader view, development entails a consistent lifting of the social conditions of men. Todaro and Smith (2006) on their part, see development as a multidimensional process that depicts key alterations in social structures, behaviours, and institutions with an expanding or thriving economy, inequality reduction, and eradication of poverty. Todaro and Smith (2003:21), asserted that development is not stagnant but progressive and that such changes are always affected by challenges. Rodney (1973:1), explained the entire gamut of development from the individual perspective. For Rodney, development comprises the individual’s approach to values such as self-discipline, freedom, well-being entrepreneurial skills and creativity.

Jack-Akhigbe (2013:256), opined that the scope of development includes the incorporation of functional institutional structures, rebranding and shifting of both socio-economic and political
activities that are targeted at improving human lives. From a political point of view, Jack-Akhigbe (2013:257), understood development as being characterised by different expansive attempts to strengthen power relations both internally and externally. This study conceptualised development as the process which recognises the freedom, capacity, and self-worth of the individual in shaping social and institutional structures and processes that guarantee a qualitative life.

**Niger Delta Characteristics and Challenges**

The Niger Delta is Nigeria's largest wetland and the world's third-largest wetland. With a population of over 40 million people as of 2006, it accounts for more than 23% of Nigeria's overall population of over 160 million people (National Population Commission, 2006). With 265 people per square kilometer, with one of the world's highest population densities. The region, which spans over 2000 square miles and includes nine Nigerian states, has the greatest crude oil reserves in the Gulf of Guinea (Balouga, 2009:8). For administrative, political, and development purposes, the Niger Delta region includes states such as Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Ondo, Abia, and Imo (United Nations Development Programme, 2006).

The oil-rich region provides the government income from oil exceeding $600 billion since the 1960s (Amnesty International, 2009). The current oil and gas reserves in the region are estimated to be 34 billion barrels and 160 trillion cubic meters, respectively (Powell, Mariott and Stockman, 2005). The Niger Delta, which is Africa's greatest wetlands and marine ecosystem after the Mississippi River, is one of the country's most significant wetlands and marine ecosystems. The creeks and swamps are crowded with birds, marine life, giant ferns, tall mangrove plants, with the creeks and swamps being crowded with birds, marine life, giant ferns and tall rainforest plants (Amadi and Abdullahi, 2012). With over 40 ethnic groups speaking 120 different dialects, the region is quite diverse. The Ijaw cultural group is the largest, with important sub-groups such as Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ibibio-Efik, and a minor Igbo-speaking group. Over the years, fishing,
agriculture, and craft-making have traditionally been the region's two principal occupations (Francis, 2011).

The Niger Delta region’s development narrative has over the years been characterised by challenges that are directly related to the adverse effects of oil exploration and exploitation. Oil activities in the region have resulted in huge environmental degradation, which has harmed people's life-sustaining economic activities such as farming and fishing. It cannot be overstated that the Niger Delta residents who have lost farmlands due to the installation of oil facilities or oil spills have received inadequate compensation. This has been suggested as the cause for the multiple documentation of the negative impacts of oil projects, gas flaring, oil spills, water pollution, and other factors on the lives of Niger Delta inhabitants (Ejobowah, 2000:38; Frynas, 2000; Obi, 2006; UNDP, 2006).

In their poverty intervention programme on cassava, fisheries, palm oil, leather and poultry, the Market Development in the Niger Delta Programme (MADE) and Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) (2018) used a mixed-method design to assess the level of poverty in the Niger Delta region. Their findings showed the level of poverty which is unconnected with environmental challenges in the region, is caused by limited access to finance, new markets, modern agricultural equipment and effective distribution channels.

Jack-Akhigbe (2013) examined the forces that have made state interventions improbable in tackling the deepening developmental crisis in the region. The study located these challenges within the failing character of the Nigerian state characterised by deep-seated corruption, poor citizen participation, and oblique connectedness between the state, multinational oil firms and oil-producing communities. From an ethical perspective, Otto (2020) employed an analytical methodology to reveal the unethical approach of oil exploration by oil firms and its attendant threat to environmental sustainability and livelihood in the region. Obiam and Amadi (2) investigated
some of the challenges confronting the Niger Delta region as well as the response made by the Nigerian government. The secondary data gathered and analysed showed that the region is still faced with a plethora of challenges such as unemployment, poverty, environmental despoliation, lack of quality education, healthcare, power supply and an effective transportation system. These are attributed to weak political will and commitment to development issues by the ruling class.

**Historical Overview of Development Responses in the Niger Delta Region**

The economic significance the Niger Delta region has in the Nigerian state makes special development intervention imperative. As a mechanism to protect and sustain the nation’s source of wealth which is abundant in the region, the recommendations by the Willink Commission set up by the British Colonial Government in 1957, recommended the establishment of an agency that would address regional development conundrums Jack-Akhigbe (2013). The Committee’s report gave birth to the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB) in 1960 which was approved by the British Government, especially in the area of agricultural development. Although the Board achieved a few of its objectives, however, it was plagued with the challenge of inadequate funding before its final collapse as a result of the outbreak of the civil war in 1967 in Nigeria (Obiam and Amadi, 2020).

The NDDB was replaced with the Niger Delta Basin Development Authority (NDBDA) in 1976 with the aim to address water and other environmental challenges in the region. But with the increased number of similar institutions across the country which was largely caused by excessive politicisation, like its predecessor, it faced the challenge of inadequate funding. This caused the authority to lose focus of the objective for setting up the body. In 1982 the Shehu Shagari administration established the Presidential Task Fund for Niger Delta (popularly known as the 1.5% Committee) to initiate solutions to the development challenges of the region. The Committee was to be funded with 1.5% of the federation account (Ibaba, 2005). With a commensurate funding
system, the Committee could also not achieve so much because members of the Committee were not in tune with development challenges issues in the region. This was the case till the Supreme Court in a judgment (following a contention by the government of the old Bendel State) put a stop to the utilisation of the fund (Paki and Ebienfa, 2011).

Interestingly, between 1982 and 1988, two Presidential Committees were set up. While that of 1982 could not achieve a wholesome objective, the 1988 Presidential Committee on the development of communities was able to employ some of the funds to execute a few projects. Challenges such as the non-inclusion of the people of the region as well as the Committee’s lack of strategy in formulating and completing projects led to its dissolution in 1992 (Azaiki, 2007). In the same year 1982, the Oil and Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) was established by the Ibrahim Babangida Administration with Decree No. 23, to achieve rehabilitation of oil communities, tackle environmental problems caused by oil spills and engage oil communities on priority projects. While it was argued that the Commission suffered due to poor funding, it is also true that challenges such as poor planning, poor stakeholders’ engagement, maladministration, contract proliferation and outright corruption impeded the success of the Agency in the region (OMPADEC. Quarterly Report, 1993).

In a bid to fulfil his campaign promises of transforming the Niger Delta region into a more befitting zone, former president Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 set up a committee that led to the creation of the Niger Delta Development Commission on the 21st of December, 2000. As the thrust of this study, a synopsis of the NDDC will be provided in the next section, but it is noteworthy to also mention that the succeeding Government also established similar agencies to address the peculiar challenges of the region such as the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs in 2008 and the Presidential Amnesty Programme in 2009. While these development mechanisms are still ongoing, they are not devoid of perceived and real challenges which are outside the scope of this study.
A Synopsis of the Niger Delta Development Commission

The NDDC is a creation of Act No. 6 of 2000, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria with the core mandate of conceptualising, planning and implementing projects and programmes, in accordance with set regulations and rules, for the sustainable development of the Niger Delta region (FGN, 2000). The project areas were transportation, health, agriculture and fisheries, employment, industrialisation, housing, electricity, water supply and telecommunications in order to change the fortunes of the region in the areas like environment, empowerment, health, security, etc.

According to the Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan (2005:104), the Act establishing the Commission provides fora Governing Board of twenty members. Ten of the members were to be appointed by the Federal Government (The Presidency) including the Chairman, the MD/CEO, two Executive Directors, three Representatives of non-oil producing states, one representative each from the Federal Ministries of Finance and Environment; and one representative each from the oil companies, with teach of the nine oil-producing states appointing one member and other supporting administrative and technical staff.

To effectively execute its vision and mandate, the Commission as contained in Part IV, Section 14, subsection 2(a-e) of the (NDDC Establishment Act, 2000), is to be financially empowered by the Federation Account and other revenue sources such as 3 per cent of the total annual budget of any oil-producing company operating on-shore and off-shore in the Niger-Delta are, including gas processing companies; 50 per cent of monies due to member states of the Commission from the Ecological Fund; such money as may from time to time be granted or lent to or deposited with the Commission by the Federal or a State Government, any other body or institution whether local or foreign; all monies raised for the purposes of the Commission by way of gifts, loan, grants-in-aid, testamentary disposition or otherwise; and proceeds from all other assets that may, from time to time, accrue to the Commission.
With the above financial provision, the Niger Delta Development Commission is expected to initiate and implement a myriad of development projects and programmes in its nine states namely Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. According to Emerhi, Kotschoubey, and Wolf, (2001), the establishment of the Commission followed the federal government’s initiation of a master planning process for the physical and socio-economic development of the region.

The master plan has greater emphasis on agricultural activities in rural areas, such as farming and fishing to boost production and economic growth, facilitate the removal of impediments for effective economic endeavours in metropolitan regions, improve the availability and standards of essential physical infrastructure, enhance the capacity of institutions and the people of the region to use resources efficiently and effectively, protect biodiversity, raise education standards to world standards as well as research and development of beneficial materials (NDRDMP, 2005:221).

The synopsis above suggests a Commission with a well-thought-out design and resources capable of redirecting the development path of the region. It is from this standpoint that the study draws attention to the big development questions of, what has changed over the years. What are the impediments to development since the establishment of this interventionist Agency, the NDDC? The study provides answers to these questions in the subsequent sections.

**Theoretical Framework**

The study employed the systems theory to explain regional demands for an improved life, given its abundant natural resources and policy outcomes from an interventionist institution such as the NDDC. David Easton’s (1966) systems theory differs from others in that it attempts to explain the interplay between the political system and its surrounding social environment (Easton, 1966:147). David Easton identified significant environmental effects and converted these to numerical
numbers in order to make them more understandable. Easton defined inputs as effects that travel from one system to another, and outputs as influences that move from the receiving system to another. To put it another way, this technique illustrates how a system's input-output connection works (Fisher, 2010:73).

Easton recommends concentrating on two key inputs: demands and support. A broad variety of environmental actions can be directed, replicated, summarised, and made to focus on political life via them. As a result, they are important indicators of how environmental factors and conditions affect and influence the political system functions (Easton, 1966:51). Similarly, outputs aid in the interpretation of impacts arising from system members' behaviour rather than environmental actions. Easton defines political outcomes as the authorities' decisions and acts (Fisher, 2010:74).

In sum, Easton explains the systems theory using the following steps:

**Step 1.** Changes in the social or physical environment surrounding a political system produce "demands" and "supports" for action or the status quo directed as "inputs" towards the system, through political behaviour.

**Step 2.** These demands and supporting groups stimulate competition in a system, leading to decisions or "outputs" directed at some aspects of the surrounding social or physical environment.

**Step 3.** After a decision or output is made (e.g., a specific policy), it interacts with its environment, and if it produces a change in the environment, there are "outcomes."

**Step 4.** When a new policy interacts with its environment, outcomes may generate new demands or support, and groups in support or against the policy ("feedback"); or a new policy on some related matter.
Step 5. Feedback leads back to Step 1, as its cyclical process forms a continuum.

The Niger Delta region development paradox is still a point of reference in public discourses. This is hinged on the region’s demand for development which has been the recurring agitations in the region. These agitations spring from all groups in the region (including men, women, and youths). The region has been abused environmentally, its economic base (agriculture) destroyed, cultural heritage dislocated, and overwhelming poverty and underdevelopment ravaging it.

While there have been deliberate responses by the Federal Government to create different development intervention bodies in the past, none of these bodies or agencies could deliver effectively on pressing development imperatives in the region (Jack-Akhigbe, 2013:254).

When compared, the large difference between input and output processes (regional demands and Commission policy outcomes) is essentially what causes the region's periodic outbreak of violent unrest. In this regard, given its mandate, the NDDC is required to strategically utilise and efficiently control existing resources via effective decision-making mechanisms in order to move the region out of its present socio-economic situation. Any deficiency in this area will almost certainly result in a dysfunctional system and subsequent underdevelopment.

Methodology
The study adopts an exploratory research design by relying on primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was collected, using semi-structured interviews conducted with thirty-seven (37) purposively selected Key Informant Interviewees (KIIs). Interviewees were purposively selected from three Niger Delta states namely; Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers. For Ejumudo (2018), these states are considered zones of agitation and how this could negatively affect development efforts thereof. The Interviewees were selected from urban and rural-based community leaders and Non-governmental organisations. Other KIIs were the academic staff of NDDC. The breakdown
is as follows: twenty-seven (27) respondents were drawn from representatives of Community Development Councils, women leaders, and youth leaders across the nine senatorial districts of the three selected states.

Three KIIs were also drawn from three active Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) whose activity relates to development in these states, and two Scholars of Development Studies from the Department of Political Science, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island. The last group of KIIs were two staff of the NDDC who are saddled with regional development roles. Secondary data were sourced from relevant literature sources like textbooks, journal and magazine articles, official gazettes and documents, and the Internet. Data collected were subjected to discourse analysis. According to Prasad (2008: 173), this method of data analysis is commonly used as a result of its systematic, objective and qualitative manner of measuring communication variables in a particular study.

Results/Discussions

What has changed with Development in Nigeria’s Niger Delta Region?

Since 1958 when the Willink Commission’s report gained momentum, expectations were that 61 years after, its major concerns should have been addressed. While the government’s response to development challenges as observed in the creation of different intervention bodies seem to have doused perceived marginalisation in the region, other glaring challenges of poverty, unemployment, poor social services, infrastructural deficit and environmental dislocation have questioned the rationale for the establishment of the current NDDC. A member of a Non-governmental Organisation (NGO) based in Yenagoa reacted to certain structural issues that explain the rationale for the establishment of the NDDC:

NDDC just like other interventionist institutions established in the past was created to tackle not just only development challenges but also to correct historical wrongs that can be attributed to an unbalanced federal structure.
Although, compared to the degree of tension caused by exclusion and marginalization in political processes as seen in the past, the creation of the NDDC and the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) has tackled a great part of it. But then how do we sustain this and make it more productive is another thing entirely (KII/Male/NGO).

To other research participants, the rationale for the establishment of the NDDC is premised on the government’s responsibility to provide its citizen’s basic social services and their general welfare which include the provision of quality healthcare, education, housing, transportation, water, electricity, and other forms of economic empowerment opportunities. This is even more crucial for a region that has for more than 61 years built and sustained the entire nation. To Isidiho and Sabran (2015), “the NDDC gets its funding basically to address these socio-economic concerns in the region”. The clamour for the development of the Niger Delta region should be a collective initiative across the public and private spaces. The Nigerian state and its political class should be conscious and deliberate about strengthening intervention institutions, especially those that are created to develop an economically viable region such as the Niger Delta.

A Community Development Council Chairman in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State was asked if NDDC had created the desired socio-economic and infrastructural change expected of it in his community responded thus:

First, I want to tell you that to get any project or programme from NDDC, it is based on “man know man” or else nothing for you. You can see the solar lights and this newly constructed road because our son is a big man in the NDDC. Our neighbouring community does not have the kind of projects we have here. But it is not supposed to be so. While we have this little, they have nothing to show. So NDDC should do more by carrying everyone along. (KII/CDC Chairman/Male)

The findings affirmed that while there are efforts to transform the region socio-economically, not much has been achieved. The region is still engulfed in pervasive underdevelopment, poverty and infrastructural deficits. Many communities in the region are better described as sites of
uncompleted and abandoned projects and programmes that should contribute in improving the material conditions of the people. This corroborates Obiam and Amadi (2020) assertion that most of the social-economic needs of the people in the region are yet unmet despite the efforts of different intervention institutions including the NDDC. The Niger Delta region is still faced with relative administrative neglect, deteriorating social infrastructure and services, high unemployment, hardship, deep poverty, dirt, degradation and continuous insecurity. The great majority of the people in the region lack sufficient access to clean drinking water and healthcare. In contrast to the wealth generated by oil, their poverty is a prime example of hardship in the face of plenty.

The inability of the Nigerian government through the NDDC to provide adequate economic empowerment for the teeming youths in the region has been linked to the pervasive soot pollution caused by illegal oil refining in the region. A community youth leader in Gokana Local Government Area of Rivers State averred:

It will be a joke for the state and federal governments to want to clamp down on illegal oil refining when they have not shown the requisite leadership will to gainfully empower the youths of Gokana. I will not want to disturb you with issues of the Ogoni cleanup programme because that is almost failing. My focus is on the NDDC and how it has been selective in all its economic empowerment programmes. Yes, we have seen ample development attempts in this local government council, but this does not in any way measure up to the financial resources that the Commission gets monthly. (KII/Youth Leader/Male)

Akinyoade (2017:62), described the NDDC as one of the wealthiest Federal Government parastatals, given its funding provisions that translate into an annual budget of billions of naira. How these resources translate into concrete transformation of the socio-economic conditions of the people is often questioned with attendant provocations and counter-reactions. Rather than experience real development, the physical environment deteriorates at an alarming rate. The Niger Delta environment narrative and its corollary advocacy for quality seem to have been doused, but
the socio-economic realities still suggest evident disarticulation and dispossession of the people’s
means of livelihood. The NDDC can be said to have misplaced development priorities by not
identifying this environmental degradation. A woman leader in a community in Yenagoa Local
Government Area of Bayelsa State narrated the economic devastation oil spills have caused
farmers in the community:

It is quite sad that people think oil pollution is no longer in existence. Last year
many women and men lost their cassava and cocoyam to “kpo fire” business
(illegal oil refining). Two years ago, a pipeline belonging to Agip Oil Company
had a leakage and destroyed many crops. It is so painful and the government and
NDDC do not care. The government is thinking they have to tackle the challenge
of oil pollution. Even the NDDC that is expected to liaise with the federal
government to stop this problem is doing what they like. NDDC really does not
know what is happening in our community. All that NDDC knows is to come and
build projects, some of which are not really what we see as the most important.
They should please come down to our level and listen to us. *(KII/Community
Woman Leader/Female)*

Ewubare, Agbugba and Kpeden (2021) opined that soot pollution which is majorly caused by
illegal oil refining has not only caused public health challenges for residents in the Niger Delta
region, but also socio-economic hardship as many business and farming activities are adversely
affected. Kanee et al (2021:1280), blamed it on the lack of air quality monitoring stations, poor
vegetation cover and poor rating of governments’ intervention and policies towards air pollution.
In a differing opinion, a staff of the NDDC in the Performance, Management and Reporting Unit
of the Planning, Research and Statistics Directorate, relayed some of the meaningful efforts made
by the Commission:

The Niger Delta Development Commission has a mandate to transform the Niger
Delta into world class status through the formulation and implementation of
pertinent development policies. While this must be achieved, the Commission is
putting all available human and material resources together to make sure that the
region is developed. Again, for the Commission to achieve its mandate it must be
resourceful and strategic enough to make sure that priorities are not misplaced. This
is the reason the Commission cannot be at all places at the same time. Therefore, it will not be rational enough to assess the performance of the Commission based on the fact that some communities in the region have not felt its socio-economic impact. It is very correct and factual that some communities in the Niger Delta have not attracted the presence of the NDDC, but that cannot debunk the position that the Commission has not carried out various projects and programmes in terms of the provision of motorable roads, pipe-borne water, electricity, transportation, schools, health centres etc. in the region. (KII/Staff of NDDC/Male)

In a similar reaction, another staff of NDDC in the Strategy, Planning and Coordination of the Planning, Research and Statistics Directorate opined that:

The NDDC has over the years commissioned different social amenities and economic empowerment programmes that have benefitted the people in the region. If you visit the Commission’s website or our statistical base, you will find out for yourself the level of infrastructural development the Commission has achieved so far. For example, the Commission sends on a yearly basis, Niger Delta graduates to pursue foreign postgraduate programmes in their respective fields of study. The Commission organises from time to time vocational training for the youths and skills acquisition and economic empowerment programmes for the women in the region. Although I cannot say we have totally revived the region socio-economically, but the Commission has done well and has improved the living standard of the people. (KII/Staff of NDDC/Male)

These views corroborate Isidiho and Sabran (2015) claim that the NDDC has substantially improved the socio-economic life and infrastructural needs of the people in the Niger Delta region even if much still needs to be done. However, to some of the research participants, the extent to which these projects and programmes have impacted the development of the people is not much. They suggest that such change can only be possible when issues of need assessment, process evaluation, outcome evaluation and context evaluation of available projects and programmes are thoroughly reviewed and critically explicated. This will to a large extent provide a robust assessment of the gains and impacts of the NDDC.
The Challenging Trajectories of a Current Day Interventionist Institution

The trajectories of development challenges as observed, suggest possible impediments on NDDC’s attempts to provide the qualitative life desired in the region. Ekekwe and Ukachikara (2018), contend that the NDDC like past interventionist institutions, is also faced with certain daunting challenges. However, given the current day NDDC and its relational development imperatives, the often-asked question is what dimension, scope and nature do these challenges take? A member of the academia in the Department of Political Science, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, was quick to mention the current decision of the federal government of Nigeria to place the NDDC under the supervision of the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs (MNDA) as the present major challenge facing the Commission:

First, the decision to place the NDDC under the supervision of the MNDA is an outright breach of constitutional status. The NDDC was established by an Act of Parliament and whatever alterations that will be made should be subjected to thorough constitutional reviews. Second, the Commission by such activity is limited to a large extent in executing its mandate. For example, the NDDC will not be able to freely approve the implementation of projects and programmes without the approval of the minister. Before now the NDDC Board under the Chairmen freely and speedily accessed funds meant to develop the region. It reports directly to the presidency without any bureaucratic encumbrances. The idea of using a sole administrator to manage the affairs of the Commission will not encourage effective accountability and transparency which directly truncates development efforts in the region. (KII/Academic Staff IAUE Port Harcourt/Male)

Findings reaffirmed that apart from the controversies of placing the NDDC under the supervision of the MNDA, the frequent change of Board members is also a perceived challenge to the Commission’s activities. The consequence of this frequent rejigging of the Commission’s management structure is what affects project and programme planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This means when a new group of Board members emerge, they tend to reinvent their ideas on how the Commission should be managed, thereby relegating or dumping
brilliant policies and programmes initiated by the former. This discourages the principle and practice of transparency and accountability. Most times as the former Board members are relieved of their duty, they are not probed and held accountable for misappropriation of funds. This is one main reason why the Commission is constantly linked with issues of corruption.

The issue of political patronage as revealed in the study is closely related to the challenge of political interference. The present NDDC is said to be bereft of technocrats who understand and appreciate effective administration. Interventions are used as resources for political patronage. Politicians in Abuja see the NDDC as an avenue to appease political clients during election periods. Most NDDC contractors are either party loyalists or blood relatives of the political elite. These views were affirmed by Akinyoade (2017:63-65) that influential actors lobby, maneuver and negotiate in sharing and exploiting the resources of NDDC’s interventions in an environment of non-transparency, endemic corruption and bad corporate governance that eventually leave a permanent dent in the whole intervention programme. The challenge faced by past interventionist bodies and the NDDC today is poor funding. A staff of NDDC in the Strategy, Planning and Coordination Unit of the Planning, Research and Statistics Directorate stated:

It is not new that poor budgeting processes and procedures are a serious challenge to development not only in the Niger Delta region but also in the entire nation. Yes, it is true that the NDDC accrues its funds from different sources, yet, how often or regular do these funds come? The constant political imbroglios between the executive and the legislature in budget passage often causes a delay in the accessibility of funds to execute projects and programmes. Again, sometimes when the allocation comes it is not paid in full. I can authoritatively tell you that the Federal Government of Nigeria is still owing the NDDC monies that amount to 1.3 trillion naira, although the process of off-setting the money is ongoing. It is also pathetic that the Oil Companies do not remit their quota when due. All these put together have adversely affected the Commission’s pace in the execution of projects and programmes. (KII/NDDC Staff/Male)
Efebeh (2015:390), also observed that apart from delays in the release of funds due in parts to a prolonged face-off between the Executive and National Assembly which delays passage of appropriation bills, there is evidence that the Commission does not receive even the approved allocation. In contrast, when asked about the issue of poor funding as a major challenge facing the NDDC, a Convener of a Non-Governmental Organisation based in Port Harcourt posited:

I beg to differ with that assertion that NDDC is underfunded. I think there is something going on within the NDDC that politicians are very much benefiting from. The Commission is being milked as a Cash Cow. I often interact with the oil companies and they say look “the communities keep asking us for roads and other things and we ask what is the NDDC doing with the 3% statutory allocation we pay to them? To me, this is a valid question the NDDC must answer. I can tell you that 3% of the GDP of Shell Petroleum Company runs into billions of naira. So, if Shell, Agip and other top oil companies contribute 3% to NDDC, it is obviously a huge money. It is in NDDC that you will discover that contracts are awarded to someone in Abuja who extracts about 70% of the money and sublet the remaining 30% for the execution of standard projects. This is the reason why you frequently see substandard projects executed by the NDDC littered everywhere. All these are issues the NDDC must tackle in order to bring development to the region. (KII/NGO Convener/Male)

This supports Akinyoade (2015:65) submission that to a lesser or greater degree, corruption and bad governance are features of the Commission. The non-transparent and publicly unaccountable practices characterising the Commission have a general effect of reducing the overall effectiveness of its intervention. The spate of poverty caused by unemployment and dispossession of the agricultural base of the people have mobilised a resourceful section of youths into all forms of vices including kidnapping for ransom in the region. While there are arguments that insecurity in the Niger Delta is currently heightened by other regional infiltrations, Ebiede (2021) asserts that most confirmed cases of kidnapping for ransom and outright murder are associated with different cults and armed groups located in the region.
Insecurity is seriously an impediment to the successful execution of projects and programmes by the NDDC. This challenge cannot be unconnected with NDDC’s poor support base from community leaders and youths. As beneficiaries of interventions, community leadership should to a large extent be responsible for the security of both contractors and projects. The consequences of this sad development are the frequent delay experienced in the execution of projects and programmes, and sometimes outright abandonment. There are several occasions where contractors are kidnapped, maimed or injured, and dispossessed of their valuables. The challenge of insecurity has not only affected project implementation but also project monitoring and evaluation. The Commission’s efforts to monitor and evaluate projects and programmes are in most cases hampered by vandalisation and theft. Table 1 below shows a summarised collection of currently vandalised projects across different communities in the selected states for the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>LGA</th>
<th>Senatorial District</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Type of Project/Year</th>
<th>Project Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Okolomade</td>
<td>Abua/Odual</td>
<td>Rivers West</td>
<td>Rivers</td>
<td>Construction of Water Project with a storage capacity of 7000 litres (2014).</td>
<td>Partly vandalised/Non-functional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Author’s field compilation

These discoveries substantiate Isidiho and Sabran (2015) findings on vandalised and stolen NDDC projects in selected local government areas of Imo State by armed groups caused by poor security structures. The study also revealed that part of the challenges facing current day NDDC is poor stakeholder engagement practice in the initiation and execution of projects among benefitting
This negates the very principle of effective community interface. Some of the respondents identified the inability of the NDDC to relate with them about certain projects and programmes of choice as the reason they lack the interest in assisting them to monitor and maintain some of these projects.

The NDDC was not established to serve elitist interests but the people at the community level who face real socio-economic difficulties. Therefore, any attempt to relegate their impact on decisions that affect them could result in inefficiency. The NDDC in its activities has not recognised the importance of working with Community Development Committees (CDC) to achieve its objectives. Community leaders through the CDC help to encourage every community member to participate in community development endeavours because the ties that bind relationships in a community reinvigorate the spirit of togetherness. A community leader in Okolomade Community in Abua/Odual Local Government Area of Rivers State buttressed this point thus:

When a bottom-top approach rather than a top-bottom is employed in dealing with the rural populace, the people tend to develop a great sense of self-worth and belonging. When this happens, the NDDC enjoys the total support of the people. When compared to the oil companies, it is easy to understand the underlying differences. The oil companies have a better community interface practice than the NDDC. Oil companies most times come to consult community leaders on certain projects and programmes they intend to execute and opportunity is given to the communities to make preferable choices. The reason why most NDDC projects are not zealously monitored by the community people is that such projects and programmes do not reflect their immediate and most times pressing needs (KII/Community Leader/Male)

This approach does not only discourage exchange of ideas, but largely lacks popular support. Poor institutional planning was identified by the study as a challenge facing the Commission. The NDDC on several occasions operates on short-term plans in an attempt to address long-term issues. For example, the economic empowerment programmes executed are mostly short-term oriented.
They feel the people need economic empowerment at certain periods and impulsively act. The people are most times trained and left to fend for themselves without providing the long-term enabling resources that can sustain the process. This happens because the planning process is not elaborate and robust enough to accommodate unforeseen circumstances that might arise. The study also identified the oppressive nature of most interventions; a situation whereby contractors threaten to withdraw projects when there are reactions from beneficiaries about the relevance and standard of the projects, which have denied many communities of crucial projects and programmes (see also Otega and Danni, 2015, Jack-Akhigbe, 2013).

Finally, it was revealed that difficult terrain (topography) and environmental degradation also poses serious challenges to the NDDC. While the swampy and water-logged environment make it very difficult and cost-intensive to construct projects, the degraded environment of the selected states due to oil pollution has made economic empowerment programmes through agriculture defective (see also Moro, 2018 and Okon, 2010). Given these challenges, development and its corollary positive changes in the region is stagnated. The federal government’s will in providing the needed answers to the long-lived development question could remain unattended if the NDDC does not consult the benefiting communities before embarking on any project.

**Conclusion**

The development complexities that characterise the Niger Delta region rest on a plethora of factors that demand a corresponding sustainable institutional framework such as the NDDC. However, when assessed on how it has created the needed socio-economic and infrastructural change desired of the region, the challenging trajectories reveal current issues such as institutional crises, excessive political interference, poor funding, insecurity, poor community base interface, and poor institutional planning, monitoring and evaluation of projects and programme. These development conundrums put together undermine the relative transformation achieved so far by the NDDC;
however, this relativity suggests that the desired change in development is not substantial enough to alleviate the excruciating socio-economic and infrastructural conditions of the people.

**Recommendations**

The Niger Delta development imperative is peculiar and multidimensional and as such demands a comprehensive and robust approach. To this end, the study recommends the following:

**For the NDDC:**

The Commission needs to institutionalise good governance and effective managerial practices by injecting technocrats and experts into key project management decision-making processes as this will help optimise project outcomes. The NDDC is expected to prioritise long-term institutional project planning, monitoring and evaluation with laws that back it so as to guarantee quality, objectivity, sustainability, accountability, and transparency of projects and their implementation. A viable and sustainable community interface mechanism should be incorporated into project planning and execution. This improves wide community support system and discourages conflict of interests between contractors and intervention beneficiaries.

**For the Federal Government:**

The current administrative crises between the MNDA and NDDC can be resolved by empowering both institutions to operate independently. Rather than aggravate institutional crises as observed by the study, it will curb excessive political interference and expand development opportunities, given the different sources of funding they both attract. The Federal Government should not only ensure that the required funds for the effective functioning of the Commission are provided, but also employ legal frameworks to compel oil firms to remit their monthly financial quota to the NDDC. This should be followed up with the right political will to regularly audit the Commission’s
expenditures. Such a process should be constituted by people with proven integrity and seasoned financial experts. This will to a large extent guarantee accountability and transparency. The Federal Government should also be more proactive and responsive in addressing the security challenges located in the region. This could be achieved when strategic security collaboration with local security structures are encouraged.

For the Community

Borrowing from the systems theory, the inputs which come as demands from the community into the political system should have a corresponding support system that facilitates viable and sustainable outputs. This can be in the form of compliance with the terms of agreement, readiness to support project contractors and helping in the provision of security and maintenance of such projects.

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