

Greed and Grievance in the Niger Delta

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Abstract

This paper examines the roles of greed and grievance in the cause and persistence of the conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Under Greed Theory, Nigeria's primary export economy based on oil and its low income level are causes of conflict. For Grievance Theory, the role of unmet human needs and intergroup fighting are very important. Both theories have sufficient cause and work to maintain the conflict. Based on the Nigerian Government's growing neglect of its citizens, the further centralization of its power, and globalizing trends that are and will continue to place an emphasis on Nigerian oil, the outlook on attaining positive peace are bleak.

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Introduction

Greed and grievance factors have both played major roles in causing the conflict in the Niger Delta. Many experts, such as Paul Collier from the World Bank, point to greed as the primary contributor because of Nigeria's dependency on primary commodity exports, low income, and low growth. However, Grievance Theory provides an equally compelling argument for causation. It points to Nigeria's inability to provide food, water, health, and security to a majority of its citizens. Grievance theories also look to increasing intergroup violence as a cause. While both theories play an important role, the continuing global demand for oil will likely increase the potential for greed and grievance factors to make the situation worse in years to come.

Greed Theory: Primary Export Economies

Greed has played a major role in the Niger Delta conflict. Two greed-oriented factors in particular have had an important causal influence on the conflict: dependence on primary exports and income level. Violence can become the rational means of supporting oneself where these factors are present (Mac Ginty, 2008: 70). The role of primary export commodities is of much significance to the Niger Delta conflict because of Nigeria's huge dependency on exporting oil as a means of obtaining wealth. In this context, Paul Collier's statement that, "civil wars happen where rebel organizations are financially viable" is of particular use (Mac Ginty, 2008: 70). One reason that primary export commodities facilitate an environment that is prone to conflict is because they "require little manufacturing or marketing expertise" (Englebert and Ron, 2004: 63). The acquisition of these resources can provide one of the only ways to obtain currency and

thus build a legitimate force (Englebert and Ron, 2004: 63). Another reason a dependency on primary export commodities creates an environment susceptible to conflict is the fact this dependency is usually associated with a weak state (Fearen, 2005: 487). One reason for this is that weak states lack the incentive to develop administrative capacity because of high revenue (Fearen, 2005: 487).

In the case study of the Niger Delta conflict, one can see these patterns emerging. Collier and Hoeffler write that a country is at “peak danger” when primary export commodities comprise 33% of the total GDP (2004: 580). In Nigeria, the percentage is 40. This makes Nigeria especially vulnerable to intrastate conflict. When primary export commodities make up 26% of the GDP, looting through resource predation and extortion are much more likely to occur (Watts, 2004: 52). In Nigeria looting and extortion are big business. The equivalent of 200,000 barrels of oil a day is siphoned consisting of about 10% of the total daily output (Ifeka, 2008: 145). While extortion is also a major factor in the conflict, oil bunkering (looting) groups that are very organized can make up to US \$1 billion a year (Oyefusi, 2008: 543). This is not surprising given the diverse involvement in this activity. Although one might think it was only the poor trying to earn a living, wealthy businessmen, politicians, and armed forces officers are often very involved as well (Ifeka, 2008: 145). These people often own barges offshore that receive barrels and cans of oil daily by canoe (Ifeka, 2008: 145).

The impact of primary export economies on governance also plays a major role in the conflict. Michael Watts (2004: 61) describes a “double movement” that oil-fuelled capitalism has created in Nigeria. This double movement is a unity of modernity and capitalism that are at odds with each other. This movement has to do with the centralizing effect primary export commodities (in this case oil) have on governance. This affect can make the country more visible

in a globalized world as well as lay the foundations for secular state building (Watts, 2004: 61). But the effects of state centralization can also have a negative aspect. As I mentioned before, states with a centralized government very often have weak institutions, and when money is transferred through these institutions, corruption and poor implementation often prevail and the state is discredited (Watts, 2004: 61). Watts argues that in Nigeria, this type of oil-fuelled governance created certain types of governable spaces, and these spaces are “antithetical to the very idea of a developed modern nation state that oil represented” (Watts, 2004: 61).

One example of how oil-fuelled capitalism produced an undemocratic space is in Nembe. Nembe, along with many other Delta communities who were further marginalized with the discovery of oil, has been often subject to lawlessness and high insecurity (Watts, 2004: 64). Because of this, the government and oil companies are often willing to negotiate with leaders on security issues that may have an impact on their interests. In Nembe, this produced a mafia-type rule which certainly fuelled the conflict because of its undemocratic and authoritarian nature. In 1994, a militant group called Insongoforo was formed with the goal of exploiting weaknesses in the compensation system that Shell Nigeria had in place (Watts, 2004: 64). Gradually, an even more dangerous and lawless environment was created with the creation of more competing militant groups all vying for limited compensations from Shell, as well as with the police who came and attempted to intervene (Watts, 2004: 64). The oil companies wanted protection from this environment and eventually resorted to funding Insongoforo for security (Watts, 2004: 64). They ruled the area with mafia-like characteristics like the collection of money for protection and authoritarian rule. As one can clearly see, the spaces created by primary export commodities and its governmental logic are major factors in the cause of violence in the region.

Greed Theory: Income Level

Another greed-based factor that has a causal effect on the conflict in Nigeria is income level. According to Collier and Hoeffler (2004), “rebellions occur where foregone income is unusually low” (p. 569). People in these situations make a rational choice between engaging in productive labor and joining rebel forces. People faced with this predicament often have very low social capital and thus, very low income. Simply put, if the potential income of joining rebel forces outweighs the income of continuing in productive labor, the person is much more likely to join (Oyefusi 543). The reverse then is also true; the higher the social capital of people, the less benefit they will obtain by joining rebel forces.

According to these theories, the Niger Delta is fertile ground for recruitment and violence. In Nigeria, 54% of the people live below the poverty line and 70 million live on less than \$1 a day (Higgins, 2009: 2). What is more unsettling is that “the rise in poverty and inequality coincides with the discovery and export of oil in Nigeria” (Higgins, 2009: 3). The effect that oil has had on income, unemployment, and poverty thus has helped to create conditions susceptible to violent conflict. Shell has recognized the relationship between low-income and violence. In 2003, the company allocated \$60 million to help generate employment in order to “calm restive youth” in the Niger Delta (Ifeka, 2008: 144). The implication here is quite clear. People with little or nothing will continue to see joining rebels as a rational option as long as income levels remain low.

Grievance Theory: Unmet Human Needs

Grievance is also seen by many as playing a very big causal role in the Niger Delta conflict. The two conflict-causing grievances -- unmet human needs and intergroup conflict -- are very visible in the Niger Delta situation. Looking first at the human needs theory of conflict

causation, one must first look into the different levels of human needs presented by Abraham Maslow for the satisfaction of individual needs. These needs change slightly when applied to the group level, but have the same underlying ideas. Important to note is that a higher level cannot be satisfied until the previous level has been fulfilled (Simons, 1987).

The first level of group fulfilment consists of physiological needs (Simons, 1987). This includes the need for food, water, and health services among others. Next is the need for safety (Simons, 1987). This can include the need for shelter, but just as important on the group level are the need not to be exposed to things like disorganization to the social structure and the constant threat of violence (Simons, 1987). The third level has to do with the need for love, affection, belongingness, the need to be a part of something, the need to feel welcomed, and to feel important to a certain group or cause (Simons, 1987). The fourth level has to do with esteem. Humans need both self-esteem and respect from others (Simons, 1987). On the group level this is frustrated when groups are marginalized or seen as unimportant. The final level is the need for self-actualization. On this level, the group is completely free to act and live how it chooses because all previous needs have been satisfied.

Looking at the first level of the human needs theory from the perspective of the conflict in Nigeria, one can see that many of people have not even been able to obtain the first level of human need: physiological needs. From the perspective of human needs theory then, conflict is always a major possibility because human behavior is geared towards the satisfaction of these needs. In Nigeria, 47% lack access to an improved water source while 27% of children under five suffer from malnutrition (World Bank, 2009). Around 1/3 live in extreme poverty which is characterised by the inability to obtain the minimum 2,900 calories a day needed for basic healthy living (Higgins, 2009: 2). Overall, 54% live below the poverty line, but interesting to

note is that a self-assessment of Nigerians reported that 74.8% believed they were in poverty and should be doing better (Higgins 2). This clearly reflects one of the major themes in human needs theory relating to the fourth level, esteem, in that it is the difference in how a person or group perceives itself and how they believe they, or it, should be (Mac Ginty, 2008: 75). Continuing with the first level and the need for good health, one can see that Nigerians often are not able to achieve this level either. Around three million in Nigeria are living with HIV, and levels in the Delta region where violence is most prominent are as high as in any other region (Higgins, 2009: 6). 34% say that access to basic health care is a major problem (Higgins, 2009: 6). With so many failing to achieve the first level of human needs, it should be no surprise that Nigeria is ridden with conflict.

Looking into the second level of Maslow's pyramid, the need for safety, Nigeria once again struggles to provide an environment into which this need can be fulfilled. Violence in the Delta Region comes both from intergroup conflict and from the state (Ifeka, 2008: 145). Regardless of the source, the need for a basic sense of security in one's homeland is torn by violence. Even if the violence is stopped temporarily, the traumatic effects of seeing such violence towards men, women, and children can have lingering effects and make one more likely to join rebel movements (Oyefusi, 2008: 542). People who have suffered or have experienced psychological issues such as seeing or being part of violence in the past may have extra motivation and experience a greater satisfaction by joining a rebel cause for his or her people (Oyefusi, 2008: 542).

The failure to secure the next level of human need, the need for love, affection, and belongingness, also has serious consequences for conflict. Social, political, and economic exclusion is perhaps one of the greatest grievances the Nigerian people in the Delta voice. The

political process in Nigeria is often not trusted and is seen as illegitimate among many Nigerians. The first two democratic elections that took place in 1999 and 2003, after military rule was overturned, were largely seen to be fraudulent, especially with vote counting in the Niger Delta region (Higgins, 2009: 6). This most likely further frustrated the marginalized people in the Delta Region after a certain degree of rising expectations, and then once again seeing the government fail to govern legitimately. Thus, the political process is seen to be corrupt, and more importantly is its exclusionary nature (Higgins, 2009: 6). Mac Ginty explains that in intergroup conflict, a group that feels their status position is inadequate has two choices. They can compete more with the out-group or engage in violence against the out-group, which in this case, is the government (2008:76). In Nigeria, the first option is an impossibility given the vast disparities in wealth and power. So according to Higgins (2009), the “youth have turned to violence and militancy to challenge the government and extort oil from oil companies” (p. 6).

Similar themes are seen in the area of economic and social exclusion. In the Ogoni, a region in the eastern delta, the government has extracted \$30 billion in profits from the natural resources in the area while “whole communities (are) pinning away in poverty and neglect” (Ifeka, 2008: 147). According to many, the fight for resource control is about the native peoples’ belief that under tradition and international property rights, the resources that lie beneath them is rightfully theirs (Ifeka, 2008: 144). From this view, the fighting is an effort to control areas through violent means in order to eventually create sovereign, ethnic jurisdictions (Ifeka, 2008 144). The fundamental issue is that the people in the Delta believe what is beneath them is theirs. This, compounded by the government’s unwillingness to distribute the profits evenly, creates a mindset of neglect among the people and thus further escalates the conflict. The final two needs on Maslow’s pyramid are the needs for esteem and self-actualisation. The concept of esteem is

best used in explaining intergroup conflict which will be presented in the next section. The need for self-actualization in the Nigerian Delta is far from being attained. Because the previous need must be met before the next can, most Nigerians in the Delta are still on the first level while levels two and three continue to frustrate the issue and fan the flames of conflict. Unmet needs have played and will continue to play an instrumental and causal role in the Delta conflict.

Grievance Theory: Intergroup Fighting

The final factor examined for its role in conflict causation in the Delta region is intergroup fighting. According to Mac Ginty, the group can serve the purpose of providing a source of identity, mobilization, discourse, and fellowship in grievance (2008: 75). One of the very important factors relating to intergroup competition is group esteem. Mac Ginty writes that groups tend to engage intensely in social comparison and that in a fragmented society the frustration and conflict can be even more intense (2008: 75). Going back to an earlier point, the group that perceives itself as inadequate, or receiving inadequate attention from the government in the form of resource distribution has two choices; compete more with the out-group or engage in violence with the negatively perceived out-group. While violence is often directed towards the state and oil companies, fighting among ethnic groups has recently become a major problem. The violence is not only limited to male forces. Ifeka (2008: 147) writes that one particular battle between the Urhobo and the Itsekiri in the Western Delta left ten defenseless males, seven children, and two elderly women dead. Clearly, this is not just a conflict of oppressed people versus the powerful elites in government and business. Fighting is often a reflection of groups trying to obtain for their own what little resources are available for the deprived people living in the most populous country on the African continent.

Before observing modern interethnic group conflict, it is important to know the history of relations between the groups. Did they fight historically? If not, at what point did they start? Why or what provided the necessary motivation to engage in physical contact with one another? These are all important questions that have revealing answers as to the nature and causes of the Niger Delta conflict. During the pre-colonial period, fighting did occur over issues such as farmland and fishing areas (Aghalino, 2009: 154). However, the nature of British colonialism changed the nature of conflict drastically in the region. Boundaries were redrawn among ethnic groups for effective rule but not much else. Historic animosities and fair distribution of land or resources were not taken into account (Aghalino, 2009: 154). The effect of colonialism in the Niger Delta thus had a paradoxical effect. On one hand, it led to a drastic reduction in separate identity among people by all being put in a similar situation. But on the other hand, it brought out existing differences (Aghalino 2009: 154). These differences then come to play a major role in conflict with the issue of resource distribution. In a society like Nigeria where not enough resources are made available, ethnic differences come to be of much significance to the conflict.

The era of post-colonialism and discovery of oil brought significant changes but also magnified already existing problems associated with colonialism. Oil intensified battles and conflict within emerging groups and within communities themselves (Aghalino 2009: 156). Also important to remember is the statement made by Higgins that “the rise in poverty and inequality coincides with the discovery and export of oil in Nigeria” (2009: 3). This means that the furthering of greed and grievance factors associated with low income, joblessness, and health were also worsened with the discovery of oil. The fight for a comfortable place within Nigeria thus continued but with more intensity with the addition of oil.

The underlying reason for intergroup fighting is “the struggle over the sharing of benefits from oil” (Aghalino, 2009: 157). Because ownership of certain land is crucial to receive what little compensation the government and oil companies give out, most of the intergroup conflicts in the modern area are over land disputes (Aghalino, 2009: 156). One example of this type of violent conflict took place in 2000 between the Kalabari and the Bille over who had the ownership of land where two Shell flow stations were located (Aghalino, 2009: 156). Whichever group owned the land would receive the royalties paid by Shell for the Liquefied Natural Gas facilities that went through the region. Similar situations occurred around the same period between the Arogbo Ijaw and the Ugbo Ilaje. In this case, the two groups had lived peacefully together for hundreds of years. Aghalino (2009: 156) writes that without the discovery of oil, animosity and existing differences would have not likely surfaced.

Like in the last example, differences in identity and discourse are often magnified when scarce resources are at stake. Identity and discourse are often then used for a mobilizing purpose. Scapegoating, or blaming, the out-group and criticizing them for all their past misdeeds provides a unifying discourse to ethnic groups and legitimizes violence against that group (Ifeka, 2008: 148). The members of the group “identif[y] strongly with their group's beliefs, and each group prepares its members to defend their beliefs and identities” (Ifeka, 2008: 148). Thus, identity, ethnicity, and fellowship in grievance do play a major role in the Niger Delta conflict but not in a mobilizing role or a causal factor. This coincides with Mac Ginty’s theory that the grievance factors of ideology and ethnicity are very important in sustaining and fanning the flames of conflict as well as serving as a tool for mobilizing people (2008: 71-72). However, these factors by themselves are not sufficient causal factors for conflict.

Both greed and grievance play major roles in the causes of conflict in the Niger Delta region. It is difficult to say whether greed or grievance has played, or continues to play, the larger role. In some ways the question is unimportant and even dangerous for the reason that at times when one factor is deemed most important, the other is not addressed. In this final section, I examine what future roles the different factors may play in the continuing conflict starting with greed and the role of Nigeria's dependence primary export commodities.

The Future Role of Greed

For all intensive purposes, there is no reason to believe Nigeria's dependence on exporting oil as the primary means of generating wealth is going to end or slow any time soon. In fact evidence suggests that the pressure on Nigeria to produce will soon increase. The U.S. already receive one fifth of its oil from Nigeria and has called The Gulf of Guinea "an area of vital interest" (Ifeka, 2009: 149). With the instability of the Middle-East and fear of Middle-East terror, Nigeria will most likely be providing increasingly more oil to the U.S. This means that the huge availability of primary commodity will only increase, allowing more economic opportunity for looting and extortion. Low income and joblessness most likely will continue to play a huge role in the conflict. Poverty levels have increased in recent decades as well as the overall level of inequality (Higgins, 2009: 2). It is then difficult to see how the income situation will improve. This lack of improvement means an increasing number of people will see the choice of joining rebel forces as a viable and rational economic option.

There are some ways or possibilities to improve the income of Nigerians in the Delta. The first option is that more private donors contribute to the creation of jobs. The case of Shell giving \$60 million to help increase employment opportunities is certainly a hope that other companies may copy. But when one looks at how \$60 million stacks up to the \$128 billion Shell

makes globally a year, as well as contracts it often signs with governments for installing a pump that have exceeded \$870 billion, the effort in job creation seems very minimal (Ifeka, 2009: 147). Furthermore, much of this money did not trickle down because of weak state institutions (Ifeka, 2009: 147).

Another option for decreasing joblessness may come in the form of simple awareness and international support. Governments and big business often do not respond to humanitarian crises until the government's or business's legitimacy is threatened by their non-action. The situation in Nigeria has not received the same amount of attention in places like the U.S. and Europe as the crisis in Darfur and civil war in the Congo. With awareness, people globally and the international community can apply more pressure to Nigeria and oil companies like Shell to distribute resources more evenly.

A third option is Nigeria choosing to further democratize and focus on equality. This is not a likely option considering the increasing demand for Nigerian oil, and the negative effect increased demand has historically on democracy and inequality. Most likely, any improvement to income and equality would first come through awareness, forcing businesses and politicians to distribute more evenly in order to maintain their legitimacy. With a more equal distribution of wealth, less people in the Delta would be faced with an appealing decision to join rebel forces as opposed to staying in productive labour. The conflict would then be reduced under the greed theory, and the Nigerian government would have a greater foundation for democracy.

The Future Role of Grievance

Ridding the Delta of the grievance factors in the conflict may prove to be just as, or even more difficult, than dealing with greed factors. Unmet human needs do not get met overnight. Even with a more equal distribution of resources, grievance issues may linger for many years

making the lessening of conflict a very long process. While basic physiological needs such as better access to food, water, and clothing could be met relatively quickly with the right backing and focus (although this is highly unlikely), health issues such as HIV have the potential to cause the frustration of the basic level of human needs for years to come. Safety and a feeling of comfort would also prove to be difficult to attain. Direct violence may lessen if basic human needs are fulfilled, but the psychological trauma associated with living amongst such violence for years may also provide a lingering effect. As seen in many parts of the world including South Africa, it often takes years for people and groups to get past violence and hate they experienced.

Evidence also suggests that social, economic, and political exclusion show no signs of lessening any time soon. The delivery of Shell's \$60 million is an example of why even when money is allocated for a good cause, the weak institutions often prevent it from getting the money where it belongs. An estimated two thirds of the money stayed in the hands of Shell contractors (Ifeka, 2009: 147). It then becomes clear that change within the political system is crucial to improving the situation. However, modern history has taught us that weak states often struggle or fail to make successful transitions to fully functioning democracies and strong states. In Africa, a functioning democracy has never emerged from a weak state; only partial or hybrid democracies have surfaced (Bratton, 2005: 14). When it comes to the decision of holding together a weak state by force or introducing democratic reforms, weak states almost always choose force (Bratton, 2005: 14). Bratton's argument about weak states comes into clear play in the case of Nigeria. The government has chosen to address intergroup conflict and extortion with increased authoritarianism (Ifeka, 2009: 5), and chosen not to address unmet human needs, while continuing to hold the state together to serve the purpose of making profits from oil.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Greed Theory, specifically the concepts of dependence on primary exports and low income, have been a major factor in the Nigerian context. Both of these greed oriented factors provide substantial and reasonable evidence for causation. There is also sufficient evidence that suggests grievance played a major role in causing the conflict. As Mac Ginty stated, the question is not really about greed *or* grievance, but about the role that each plays, as most conflicts are caused by a combination of both (2008: 70). Current trends in Nigeria and the global market suggest a bleak future for any resolution or attainment of positive peace.

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