

The Niger Delta - Crisis Prevention or Post-conflict Reconstruction?

By Sabella Ogbobode Abidde.

Niger Delta Rising. The struggle for justice in the Niger Delta in context.

Does the international community prefer post-conflict reconstruction rather than crisis prevention?

Events in the last three decades seem to indicate that the international community prefers post-conflict mediation and reconstruction, rather than crisis prevention. This appears to be the case especially by western governments. On the surface at least, instead of investing in crisis prevention, governments and institutions hedge their bets, measure domestic pulses, and engage in endless debates and diplomatic niceties insofar as a looming disaster is concerned. In other words, Washington, London, Brussels, Canberra, Tokyo and others are not likely to intervene when the political space is heating up; they wait until the combustion has begun.

But once the crisis unravels -- with thousands dead and wounded and thousands more displaced and with hunger and diseases on the horizon -- then, these governments allocate billions of dollars through their agencies and other non-governmental organizations to help stem the tide of the resultant human sufferings and ecological damages. At other times, they wait until man's inhumanity to man becomes a major feature on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), or on the Cable News Network (CNN). This was the case in Rwanda, in the Congo, Timor-Leste, Aceh, Kosovo, and in Somalia and Sudan and even in Ethiopia. We see similar pattern emerging in regards to the Niger Delta.

We know that quite a few organizations, at one time or another critically examined the region. Diplomatic dispatches also show that Western countries, along with their multinational oil corporations, are aware of the simmering tension; yet, they seem to be waiting for the region to explode -- suggesting that until such explosion occurs, substantial resources and meaningful efforts would not be injected into the region.

When the human suffering begins, then, western governments and several organizations then intervene. This approach, in whatever theoretical framework it is grounded, is not only dumb, it is counterintuitive and counterproductive. Commonsense indicates that prevention is far less costly, and far more beneficial, than post-conflict mediation and peace building. In other words, it is cheaper to invest in pre-conflict reconciliations, good governance, strong institutions and durable infrastructure than invest in reconstruction. And this is precisely the pitch one makes, and continues to make to organizations and to influential individuals with whom consultations have been made.

The conflict in the Niger Delta

Governments and institutions around the world would spend substantially less preventing the Niger Delta conflict than in wanting to build a "stable, secured, just and democratic Nigeria" once the war begins. Why intercede only after lives have been lost, properties destroyed, and aspirations crushed?

Since the conclusion of the Amnesty Program in October 2009, there has been a false sense of security. The stated and unstated message of the Nigerian government to the international community is that “all sides have reached an amicable agreement...there is durable peace... all is well and fair.” This is not true. This can not be the truth. With the passage of each week, the amnesty charade unfolds. We see the fissures. We see the loosening at the seams. We see for instance that the government is clueless as to what to do in terms of its immediate, midrange and long-term goals. In fact, there is a dearth of leadership when it comes to the amnesty and to the cause-solution of the crisis. No one thought about what to do a day before and a day after the amnesty.

We also see that most of the groups and individuals that willingly or unwillingly accepted the amnesty are now regretting their actions. They have come to realize that the amnesty program was nothing but a delay tactics on the part of the government -- a government that needed time to think, to consult and to come up with a program of action. Sadly, the Nigerian government has been thinking, consulting and fashioning solutions the last forty or so years, to no avail. The Yar'Adua government is not doing a thing because, amongst other factors, it simply does not know what to do.

And even if government knew what to do, she won't do it because it lacks the integrity and the capacity for effective policy formulation and effective policy implementation. In all of these, notable individuals within the government, and friends of government, are simply too proud and too arrogant to admit they do not know what to do and so needed help. In their minds, to ask for assistance is to admit to failure. To ask governments or non-governmental organizations around the world for direction and for capacity is, in their mind, tantamount to recognizing and surrendering to non-state actors like MEND.

The formation of the Aaron Team is seen as a deft political calculation on the part of MEND. After all, this was a move the Nigerian government never saw coming. How to counter this and other moves by MEND stumps the government. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta is willing to allow the Nigerian government save face if government is willing or does the right things -- including but not limited to cleaning and safeguarding the Niger Delta ecosystem, bringing the Multinational oil companies to order, infuse massive federal presence, demilitarize the region, engage in talks that leads to fiscal and political federalism, and the creation of more states within the region.

The aforementioned are not the kinds of things the Nigerian government is willing or has the capacity, the intention or the political will to do. Hence, MEND and other non-state actors within the region are not likely to let up. There are a lot of volcanic rumblings within the region. In spite of government's duplicitous moves -- pacifying groups and powerful personalities with monetary payments and political appointments, pitting one group or individual against another, engaging in subversive activities, etc, etc, -- the low intensity conflict will resume. Today, tomorrow or the day after, tempers will flare up again; back to square one. Only next time, the condition would be more deadly.

Western governments must help to find comprehensive solutions

In the end, therefore, western governments must intercede. Western governments, along with international organizations around the world, must engage both the Nigerian government and the Niger Deltans (as represented by the Aaron Team). There is an urgent need for

comprehensive solution -- a comprehensive approach that takes into account the fears, the needs and the aspiration of all groups whose lives have been touched by the extractive industry, the political imbalance, and the economic infidelity. These has to be done, and has been waiting to be done for more than forty years.

If they are not done -- if comprehensive solutions are not found to the Nigerian Question -- both the Nigerian government and the international community would pay a very high price. Why? A few example will suffice: (a) environmental degradation is not just a local problem, there are cross-boundary penalties to it; (b) poverty and social tension breeds and or encourages illegality and terrorism, both of which can be exported; (c) the US economy, and much of the global economy needs stability when it comes to oil supplies. Stability and predictability may become costly in the Gulf of Guinea; and (d) Africa and much of the world needs a stable, peaceful and bankable Nigeria.

Today, Nigeria is neither stable nor peaceful. Or even bankable. This is a country that does not have enviable traits of a nation-state. The structure is there, but it is browning. It is a weak, collapsing and decaying at the roots. May be Nigeria does not need saving; in which case a safe and orderly disintegration would be a better way to go. One however thinks We must stop this steady crawl to violent disintegration. It needs not be so. Because it needs not be so, domestic and global forces and powers must find ways to help Nigeria save itself. It makes sense to invest now, than later.

Crisis prevention makes more sense than post-conflict reconstruction. The Niger Delta and the Nigerian Question are dire and important and are in the long term interest of the international community, especially of the United States and Britain.

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