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Relative deprivation and insurgency: What lessons from Nigeria's flawed federalism?

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Abstract
In the heyday of insurgency in Nigeria's oil-rich but poor Niger Delta region, much scholarly effort was made to explain this conflict as being borne out of relative deprivation. This paper contests the logic of using relative deprivation as the cause, as opposed to the reconfiguration of power in Nigeria's national politics. This has seen the emergence of a president from the once marginalized Niger Delta region and the resultant dynamics of post-conflict peace-building. We also examine the consequences of a return to peace in the Niger Delta, in spite of the failure of the Nigerian state and oil transnational corporations to address the grievances that were widely canvassed as the reasons for rebellion. I conclude that insurgency in Nigeria is spawned not so much by conditions of relative deprivation, as by the nature of Nigeria's fundamentally flawed federalism.

Keywords
Relative deprivation, insurgency, Nigerian federalism, Amnesty Programme, Niger Delta, Nigeria

Introduction

The debate on the causes of political violence has a long history. It has become all the more intense as scholars struggle to make sense of the post Cold War world, which is defined largely by intra-state, as opposed to inter-state conflicts, and often expressed as civil war, insurgency, or terrorism. Two theoretical explanations stand out in interpreting insurgency, namely the hypotheses of greed and grievance. Theories based on greed take the position that what fuels conflict is largely economic: a desire to do well out of war by warlords (Collier and Hoeffler, 1998). On the contrary, grievance-based theories explain political violence as borne out of a desire to seek justice for the hurt done by relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970, 1993, 2000; Horowitz, 1985; Stewart, 2008). However, a growing

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number of scholars advance the argument that a strong need exists to look beyond this binary in explaining political violence (Sen, 2008; Keen, 2008, 2012).

In the heyday of insurgency in Nigeria's oil-rich but poor Niger Delta region, much scholarly effort was made to explain this conflict as being largely borne out of relative deprivation (Aaron, 2005; Ibeanu, 1997; Ibeanu and Luckham, 2007; Obi and Rustard, 2011; Okonta, 2006; Ukeje, 2001; Ukiwo, 2007; UNDP, 2006; Watts, 2004).The narrative of the Niger Delta struggle, which sought to right so many wrongs, provided a logical justification for relative deprivation as a framework for analysing the Niger Delta insurgency. These 'wrongs' included: (1) the longstanding marginalization of the region in national politics; (2) the widespread oil-induced environmental degradation; (3) the structural inequities in oil revenue-sharing; and (4) the palpable crisis of development and wrenching poverty in a region whose oil wealth sustains the rest of the nation.

But as insurgencies in resource-rich African countries threw up new dynamics such as conflict entrepreneurs and criminality, so scholarly and popular commentary shifted attention away from grievance to the hypothesis of greed, or even a combination of both greed and grievance, to explain insurgency (Collier and Hoeffler, 1998; Ibaba and Ikelegbe, 2010; Ikelegbe, 2005a). This paper contributes to the growing body of literature that questions the potency of relative deprivation as a framework for analysing the Niger Delta conflict in the light of recent developments in Nigeria's national politics. These developments are: (1) the reconfiguration in the architecture of power in Nigeria's national politics, which has resulted in the emergence of a Nigerian President from the once marginalized Niger Delta region, as well as the appointment of Niger Delta indigenes into key national, political and administrative positions; and (2) the dynamics of post-conflict peace-building following the amnesty programme, which have led to a return to peace in the Niger Delta in spite of the failure of the Nigerian state and oil transnational corporations (TNCs) to address the key environmental and developmental challenges that were widely canvassed as the reasons for the rebellion.

More to the point, the concerns of environmental degradation and crisis of development as well as structural marginalization around which militants mobilized against the Nigerian state and its partner oil TNCs have taken backseats in contemporary discourses on the Niger Delta. Specifically, until the protest on 9 December 2013 by members of the Ogoni ethnic nationality over the federal government's non-implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Report (2011) on environmental remediation in Ogoniland, little has been heard of the once vocal environmental rights groups that sprang up in the Niger Delta in the struggle for environmental justice. Even less vociferous are calls for a recalibration of the oil revenue-sharing formula and resource control.

This is not to suggest that much has changed. Indeed, the emergence of a Nigerian president of Niger Delta extraction, would appear to a very large extent to have addressed the concerns raised by the Niger Delta people about political marginalization or political underrepresentation. This, however, has not translated into a mitigation of the crisis of development in the region. The utter poverty, backwardness and neglect captured in the description of the Niger Delta in *The Willinks Commission Report* (1958) would appear to retain contemporary resonance, despite almost six years of an indigene of the Niger Delta as president. Besides, there is a worsening crisis of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region. Apart from the traditional modes of environmental degradation by the oil TNCs, the discontentment thrown up by a flawed post-amnesty programme has engendered a rising tide of oil theft and artisanal oil refining by aggrieved ex-militants, resulting in adverse consequences for the environment. The analysis that follows revolves around the following fundamental question: If the Niger Delta insurgency was thrown up by conditions of relative deprivation, why is there peace in the region in spite of the failure of post-conflict peace-building efforts in addressing the core developmental and environmental challenges that animated militancy? This paper takes a critical look at the return to peace in the Niger Delta, in spite of the failure of post-conflict peace-building

efforts to address the grievance factors around which Niger Delta militants mobilized against the Nigerian state and the oil TNCs. It argues that insurgency in the Niger Delta and indeed all ethno-regional and inter-religious violence that often challenge the legitimacy of Nigeria's central state, should be seen within the wider context of the pathologies of Nigeria's over-centralized federalism. Identity, be it in the form of religion, ethnicity or social movement is merely instrumental in the fierce contest for control of the all-powerful centre by the federated regions.

In this regard, the paper contributes to a growing body of literature that looks beyond grievance, and instead seeks to explain political violence in Nigeria as being borne out of the crisis of the post-colonial state (Fawole and Ukeje, 2005; Nwajiaku-Dahou, 2012; Okumu and Ikelegbe, 2010; Ukeje and Adebanwi, 2007). While the theory of relative deprivation has important implications for the onset of political violence, and has been widely utilized to explain the Niger Delta conflict, recent developments in Nigeria compel a strong need to think outside the box about its core assumptions. Accepting relative deprivation as sufficient explanation would appear to be a misdiagnosis, which blurs our understanding of the phenomenon of political violence in Nigeria in ways that undermine the possibility of a resolution at its roots.

The rest of the paper is in five sections. Following this introduction is the theoretical argument. Here we present the theory of relative deprivation as deployed in analysing the Niger Delta insurgency, and offer a rebuttal which shifts attention away from conditions of relative deprivation to the fundamentally flawed nature of Nigeria's federalism as the real reason for insurgency. The three sections thereafter explore the reconfiguration of power at the centre, post-conflict peacebuilding, and the transformation of insurgency in the Niger Delta in the light of the nature of Nigerian federalism. Thereafter, we reflect on and draw our conclusions.

Relative deprivation and insurgency: theoretical arguments

Attempts at explaining political violence from the perspective of relative deprivation is not new – it dates back to ancient Greece, particularly in Aristotle's attempt to explain revolution. Aristotle (in Richardson, 2011: 5) makes the point that: 'revolution is driven by a *relative* sense or feeling of inequality rather than an absolute measure'. In modern times, the theory of relative deprivation became hugely popular with Gurr's publication of *Why Men Rebel* (1970). In its simplest form the theory of relative deprivation in explaining political violence, of which insurgency is a variant, seeks to advance the argument that, instead of absolute deprivation, the key driver of political violence is the discrepancy between expected and achieved welfare. In other words, Gurr (in Richardson, 2011: 5) posits that political violence results from: 'collective discontent caused by a sense of relative deprivation'. It is: 'the tension that develops from a discrepancy between the "ought" and the "is" of collective value satisfaction … that disposes men to violence' (Richardson, 2011: 5). Using the frustration–aggression mechanism originally developed by Dollard, Miller et al. (1939), Gurr (in Richardson, 2011: 6) makes the point that: 'the anger induced by frustration is … a motivating force that disposes men to aggression…'

Perhaps because of the emergent shift in the arena of conflict from inter-state to intra-state following the end of the Cold War, a lot of scholarly contributions have followed the pioneering effort of Gurr (1970) in the economic interpretation of violence. Specifically Auvinen and Nafziger (1999), as well as studies by Fearon and Laitin (2003), suggest important linkages between poverty, slow economic growth and the onset of violent conflict. This concern with the economic roots of violence is widely shared by The House of Commons International Development Committee (IDC) (2006) report. Citing Professor Robert Piciotto's submission to the IDC, the report notes that: 'on average, a negative growth shock of 5% increases civil war risk by about 50%' (p.8). This is in consonance with earlier findings by Li and Schaub (2004) in which they

advance the argument that economic development tends to reduce the likelihood of terrorism. Specifically, after a comparative study of several countries, their conclusion was that countries with higher levels of gross domestic product are the least likely to experience transnational terrorist attacks on their soil. It has been suggested that foreigners within nations who feel a relative sense of deprivation may develop a feeling of inferiority, which may compel them to resort to terrorism to express their anger. On a more empirical note Paxson (2002), in a study of terrorism in Northern Ireland, finds a significant inclination to terrorism by the poor, less-skilled, and less-educated, a point refuted in later findings by Krueger and Maleckova (2003), Sageman (2004), and Krueger and Laitin (2008).

Some scholars focus attention on the consequences of welfare policies, particularly their redistributive effects on political violence. Azam (2001), for instance, sees the occurrence of civil conflict in Africa as inextricably linked to the failure of government to engage in public expenditure in sectors such as education and health that have strong redistributive effects. Similarly, Burgoon (2006: 177) argues that generous social welfare policies that are targeted at reducing poverty, inequality and socio-economic insecurity and which hold out the potential for 'weakening extremist political and religious organizations and practice that provide economic and cognitive security where public safety nets are lacking', may serve as a disincentive to commit or tolerate terrorism by individuals and groups. In the same vein, Taydas and Peksen (2012: 274) suggest that social welfare spending by the state can serve as a disincentive toward the inclination to violence, as the improved standard of citizens' lives may raise: 'the opportunity cost of insurgency'.

As it relates to the Niger Delta insurgency, a great deal of scholarly contributions explained away conflict as being the result of a host of grievance factors ranging from poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, resource rights violation and political marginalization of the region (Aaron, 2005; Aaron and George, 2010; Clark et al, 1999; Gore and Pratten, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 1999; Ibeanu, 1997; Owugah, 2010). Beyond scholarly contributions, the theme of relative deprivation dominated the articulated positions of the myriad ethnic and militant groups that sprang up in the heyday of insurgency in the Niger Delta. There were (and still are) several overwhelming facts that lent credibility to the theory of relative deprivation. One example among many is the vast earnings from over 50 years of crude oil and gas production in the Niger Delta region, variously estimated at over USD400 billion (Amundsen, 2010) and USD600 billion (Amnesty International, 2009), which have made no positive impact on the development landscape of the region. In addition, the externalities of oil production have unleashed environmental degradation of phenomenal proportion, described by Amnesty International (2009) as: 'a human rights tragedy'.

Scholars and activists alike attribute this to a range of obnoxious petroleum development laws and policies, including policies and laws that vest oil mineral rights in the federal government and not oil-bearing states. Further policies include the institutionalized inequity arising from the manipulative recalibration of the revenue-sharing formula to the disadvantage of the Niger Delta region by successive administrations in which the Niger Delta people were either underrepresented or not represented at all (Aaron, 2005; Aaron and George, 2010; Clark et al, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 1999; Ibeanu, 1997; Owugah, 2010; Ukiwo, 2007).

This framing of the Niger Delta insurgency from the perspective of relative deprivation compels a rethink, particularly in the light of two recent developments in Nigeria's national political life. The first is the change in the architecture of power at the centre as a result of the emergence of a Nigerian president from the once politically marginalized Niger Delta region. The second is the dynamic of post-conflict peace-building efforts following the presidential offer of amnesty to Niger Delta militants and the subsequent peace-building process. Abati (2010: 71) suggests the need for a rethink in his review of a book on the Niger Delta that largely draws inspiration from the theory of relative deprivation. He remarks that: '(t)he emergence of a President of Niger Delta

extraction and the control of the Ministries of Petroleum and the Niger Delta by persons from the region may well compel a future review of the extant notions in this regard' (Abati, 2010).

While a theory of relative deprivation sounds logical and has implications for the ready supply of recruits for insurgency, it is doubtful if it is very helpful in explaining the contradictory realities attendant with the two aforementioned recent developments in Nigeria's national political life. More to the point, the cessation of hostilities in the Niger Delta, in spite of the failure of the national government to address the core issues that animated the insurgency, would appear to question the explanatory potency of relative deprivation as a framework for analysing the Niger Delta conflict. That apart, threats are often expressed by ex-militant leaders to go to war against any individual or group that insists President Jonathan should not re-contest the election in 2015, but hand over to a candidate from the North. This is in spite of the failure of his government to address the crisis of development in the Niger Delta region and cannot be fully accounted for by the logic of relative deprivation. More importantly, the unqualified support President Jonathan continues to enjoy from ex-militants despite his unwillingness, or more appropriately inability, to push for a fairer revenue-sharing formula and repeal of extant petroleum development laws and policies that deprive the Niger Delta people of resource rights, defies the logic of relative deprivation. Significantly, our understanding of the deafening silence of critical Niger Delta voices in the face of worsening environmental conditions brought about by the rising tide of oil theft and the artisanal refining activities of marginalized ex-militants cannot be promoted by the narrow prism of relative deprivation.

Against this background, this paper suggests a strong need to look beyond relative deprivation as a key explanatory variable for the emergence and sustenance of insurgency in the Niger Delta. At the risk of repetition, I would argue that insurgency in the Niger Delta, and indeed all ethno-regional and inter-religious violence that often challenge the legitimacy of the central state, should be seen as aspects of the struggle for control by the constituent groups of the all-powerful and domineering centre thrown up by the pathologies of the Nigerian federal system. I lay no claim to originality in making this argument. Ukeje and Adebanwi (2007), Nwajiaku-Dahou (2012) and Obi (2014) have explored various aspects of mobilization of identity as instruments with which to contest power by Nigeria's constituent groups. However, the application of this argument in the analysis of post-conflict peace-building efforts in the Niger Delta throws up fresh insights. Calls in some quarters for amnesty as a strategy to end the Boko Haram insurgency compel a strong need to investigate the linkages between the nature and character of Nigerian federalism – which manifests all known centralizing tendencies associated with unitary systems – and insurgency.

A key argument advanced in this paper is that the restoration of the federal principle in intergovernmental relations in Nigeria, by which I mean actual devolution of powers to the sub-national units – which is grossly lacking at the moment – will serve as a disincentive to rebellion by the constituent groups. I would not be blazing a new trail in recommending federalism as a panacea to conflict management in deeply divided societies such as Nigeria. For a number of reasons, which have been summarized in Martinez-Herrera (2008), a growing number of scholars, notably Linz and Stepan (1992), Gurr (1993), Hecter (2000), Saideman et al. (2002), Bermeo (2002), Bakke and Wibbels (2006), Brancati (2006) and He (2006), have advanced the argument that substantial political decentralization holds out the potential to address the grievances that often actuate ethnic and minority nationalisms. He (2006: 35), for instance, recognizes the potential of federalism as a mechanism for dealing with secessionism and ethnic division. With insights drawn from a number of countries, including India and the Philippines, he points out that increasing implementation of the federal principle has helped to 'quell violent nationalism…' Similarly, Bermeo (2002) writes of the 'peace-preserving' value of federalism, as her findings suggest that federal, more than unitary systems are better at diversity and conflict management. In the same vein, Brancati (2006)

recognizes the potency of decentralization as a useful mechanism for reducing ethnic conflict and secessionism.

A counter argument, however, is that decentralization can, in fact, serve as a conflict fuel (Hale, 2000; Leff, 1999; Roeder, 1991, 1999; Saideman et al, 2002; Snyder, 2000; Treisman, 1997). The typical argument that runs through the works of these scholars is that decentralization may provide secessionist entrepreneurs with resources to mobilize along ethnic, religious, or cultural lines, which may lead to the disintegration of the central state. Bunce (1999), for instance, attributes the collapse of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia to the federal nature of those states.

The picture that emerges from the review above is that neither federal nor unitary systems are immune to conflict. The extent to which federalism dampens or fuels ethnic conflict and secessionist tendencies is highly context-specific, a point Brancati (2006) admits. According to him, ethnic conflict and secessionist tendencies in multinational societies may be decreased directly by bringing the government closer to the people, as this opens up opportunities for participation in government. His evidence suggests, however, that the converse may be the case if decentralization coincides with the emergence of strong regional parties, as this may reinforce ethnic and regional identities which may be easily mobilized by groups with tendencies for secessionism and ethnic conflict. Interestingly, Nigeria is mentioned in his study as one country where ethnic conflict and secessionist tendencies continue to resonate despite decentralization. In a similar vein, in their study of decentralization in Indonesia and Nigeria, Diprose and Ukiwo (2008) observe that while decentralization can be a vehicle for conflict-mitigation and diversity management, its interaction with conflict dynamics and impact on horizontal inequalities may fuel conflict.

It is worth emphasizing in relation to Nigeria that while federalism inherently tends toward devolution of powers to the sub-national units, the federalism on offer in Nigeria, for reasons that shall be specified in a later section, tends toward centralization. Indeed, the centripetal forces in Nigerian federalism are so overwhelming that any reference to Nigeria as a federation would be an absurd distortion of the word. More pointedly, while administrative decentralization has resulted in bringing government closer to the people, in the sense that physical governmental presence in the form of a local government secretariat can be found in many local areas in Nigeria, the centre retains all economic powers, distributing handouts to the sub-national units on a monthly basis. With insights drawn from the implementation of the amnesty programme, I insist that while a sense of relative deprivation has a capacity to trigger insurgency, the key driver of political violence in Nigeria arises more from intergroup struggle to control the centre. It is in this regard I argue that the challenge of insurgency in Nigeria can be addressed by decentralized governance, mainly because of its inherent potential to make the centre less attractive as an arena for a fierce struggle for control by the constituent groups. The idea of decentralization advanced in this paper is federalism proper, namely, an institutional arrangement that vests substantial economic and administrative powers in the sub-national units. For a better appreciation of this postulation, I take a closer look in the next section at the narrative and dynamics of the Niger Delta struggle before and after the amnesty offer.

A narrative of grievance

The history of insurgency in the Niger Delta region dates back to 3 February 1966 when Major Isaac Adaka Boro and his colleagues took up arms against the Nigerian state by declaring the Niger Delta region as a republic. Major Boro and his colleagues rebelled against the Nigerian state because of alleged political marginalization and economic exploitation of the Niger Delta region by the majority ethnic nationalities that controlled the Nigerian state. In a recent interview Sam Owonaru, Boro's second-in-command and only surviving member of Boro's Niger Delta Volunteer Service, confirms

this when he stated that: "(t)he inability to control and manage our resources was the reason our agitation took place…" (*Vanguard*, 2011). In other words, the 'revolution' was actuated by the political underrepresentation of the Niger Delta people on the one hand and the petroleum development laws that dispossessed the oil-producing communities of access to oil wealth on the other. Coming against a background of a more equitable revenue-sharing regime that was in place in the pre-oil era, when agricultural produce from the majority ethnic groups was the mainstay of the nation's economy, the case for deprivation and economic injustice would appear to be self-evident.

The narrative of grievance was also to dominate subsequent resource-related conflicts in the region. Thus in 1990 at Umuechem, a rural community where Shell has been drilling oil since 1957, protesters demanded an end to oil pollution that threatened the livelihood of local people and development benefits from the company through responsible corporate social responsibility practices. In response, Shell allegedly called in Nigeria's security forces, which unleashed mayhem on the community.

Similarly, the Ogoni uprising was loaded with powerful overtones of grievance. In 1993 the Ogoni ethnic nationality, through the Ken Saro-Wiwa-led Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) mounted a sustained non-violent struggle against Shell and the Nigerian state. MOSOP alleged that sustained environmental degradation unleashed on Ogoni by the environmentally insensitive conduct of Shell amounted to genocide, as the Ogoni had lost their traditional life-supporting sources of livelihood due to oil pollution (Saro-Wiwa, 1992). It is important to note that, as early as 25 October 1970, the Ogoni ethnic nationality had written to the Rivers State Governor pointing out certain important details about how the operations of Shell, which had scant regard for the environment, threatened the survival of local people. Apart from environmental degradation with adverse consequences on the loss of livelihoods, that petition also captured the narrative of marginalization of the Ogoni ethnic nationality. It noted that:

> The current Petroleum (Drilling and Production) Regulations of 1969 still suffers from the immoral political thinking of the First Republic. It is a sad irony of our history that none of the areas providing this greatest source of our national wealth has ever had the privilege of having a strong voice in the processes of law-making in this country. The result has always been that no attention has ever been paid to the fate of the poor people who bear the full weight of the national economic burden on their backs (Saro-Wiwa, 1992: 103).

More than 20 years after MOSOP internationalized the Ogoni struggle by articulating the long-standing grievance of the Ogoni people against Shell and the Nigerian state. In response to a well-coordinated peaceful campaign by MOSOP, the Nigerian state deployed its arsenals of war on the Ogoni people in what was calculated to serve as a disincentive to rebellion. The human rights consequences of the state's response on the Ogoni people, and the flawed judicial process that led to the hanging of MOSOP leader, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and his compatriots, are well documented (Christian Aid, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 1999). While the hanging of Saro-Wiwa no doubt instilled fear into the hearts and minds of the Niger Delta people and thus provided temporary respite for oil production to continue, it failed woefully to address the core issues that were largely believed to be central to the conflict, namely environmental degradation, economic injustice and political marginalization.

As was to be expected, less than a decade after the gruesome murder of Saro-Wiwa and his compatriots, a plethora of groups sprang up in the Niger Delta region singing the same old song: inequities in the extant revenue-sharing formula of oil wealth, life-threatening environmental degradation unleashed on the region by the activities of oil TNCs and marginalization typified by a crisis of development. The state clamped down heavily on several occasions leading in some cases to the utter destruction of communities, as was the case in Odi town in 1999.

Continued use of force against protesting communities, however, produced a backlash. According to Owugah (2010), the Niger Delta people, realizing that the state had failed in its responsibility to protect them, resorted to the use of arms to protect their lives and property. Thus more daring armed groups emerged to challenge the Nigerian state's monopoly of violence. The emergence of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in 2006 transformed the landscape of the Niger Delta conflict. MEND coordinated a variety of militant groups and waged a sustained battle with sophisticated weapons against the Nigerian military forces. A full-scale insurgency had emerged, creating impossibly difficult conditions for oil production to continue. Needless to say the narrative of grievance dominated the articulated positions of MEND. Coming at a time when many influential non-governmental organizations and groups had published damning reports on the activities of oil TNCs in the Niger Delta, it was all too easy for MEND to wear the toga of a liberation movement.

Efforts at a violent imposition of peace by the Nigerian state were thwarted on two fronts. First, the difficult terrain of the creeks of the Niger Delta, which the militants understood better than the Nigerian soldiers, provided a natural bulwark for the militants. Second, reprisal attacks on insurgents by the Nigerian military often hit the wrong targets, especially women and children, with consequences for displacement of civilian populations in targeted communities. This created reputational damage both for the oil industry and the Nigerian state, as civil society groups quickly raised human rights and humanitarian concerns in the conflict. Caught between a rock and a hard place – not confronting the militants and risking the loss of badly needed oil revenue and perhaps legitimacy; or confronting the militants and risking reputational damage for both the state and its partner oil TNCs – the Nigerian state, under the leadership of the late President, Yar'Adua, opted for a unilateral proclamation of amnesty on 25 June 2009 for Niger Delta militants who were willing to lay down their arms.

The above review is intended to underscore the articulation of the so-called grievance factors that lent credibility to relative deprivation in explaining the Niger Delta insurgency. Why these grievance factors have taken a backseat even when they remain largely unaddressed, is critical to the central argument explored in the remainder of this paper.

Amnesty, power dynamics and the transformation of insurgency

The contradictory realities of a convergence of two factors, namely the reconfiguration in the architecture of power at the centre and the dynamics of post-conflict peace-building in the Niger Delta, compel a critical reevaluation of the power of the theory of relative deprivation as a framework for analysing insurgency in the Niger Delta. The analysis begins with the presidential pardon or amnesty to Niger Delta militants.

The idea of amnesty, or state pardon, for militants was contained in the *Report of the Presidential Technical Committee on the Niger Delta* (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008) set up earlier by the Yar'Adua administration to study existing proposals aimed at addressing the Niger Delta question. Its implementation so far, however, can hardly be said to be in strict compliance with the recommendations contained in the report. More pointedly, while the Committee recommended the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) as the first phase of a multi-phased process of peace-building and development in the Niger Delta, the implementation so far would appear to suggest that the DDR is the first and last phase of post-conflict reconstruction in the Niger Delta.

Perhaps in recognition of the nexus between development and conflict, the federal government also committed itself to a 'Marshal Plan' to fast track development in the region. The disarmament, demobilization and weapons destruction phases witnessed the surrender of 26,760 guns of various specifications, 287,445 rounds of ammunition, 18 gun boats and 1090 dynamite caps (*Daily*

Champion, 2009). In return, the Presidential Committee on Implementation of Amnesty paid some undisclosed sums for the arms returned and paid monthly stipends to ex-militants.

More importantly, a grand strategy of selective cooptation of key ex-militant commanders through various structures of patronage has been worked out. Specifically, four of the ex-militant leaders, namely Government Ekpumopulo (Tompolo), Asari Dokubo, Ateke Tom, and Ebikabowei Victor Ben (Boyloaf) are widely reported to be drawing stupendous benefits from the Nigerian state and its partner oil TNCs (Ayorinde and Ibileke, 2011). The Nigerian National Petroleum Company reportedly entered into a pipeline protection/surveillance contract valued at a staggering ₦5.6 billion with the above-mentioned four ex-militant commanders. This is besides 'protection' fees which the oil companies have been paying to the ex-militants. In addition, the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) has, as Odunlami (2012) reports, awarded a contract of USD103.4 million (over ₦15 billion) to Global West Vessel Specialist Limited, a firm reportedly owned by Tompolo for the supply of 20 vessels for use by the nation's military in policing the waterways. This is in addition to the weekly sum of ₦49 million NIMASA pays him for the hire of the vessels. The lifestyle of ex-militant commanders speaks of stupendous wealth: Tompolo reportedly bought a private jet while Asari Dokubo is believed to have established a university in neighbouring Benin Republic.

Not accidentally, these structures of patronage have transformed the character of militancy. Ex-militant commanders who were once enemies of the Nigerian state now hobnob with managers of the state. The state and oil TNCs, once seen as symbols of exploitation and oppression to be subverted whenever possible, are now the allies of ex-militants. Militants, once seen as energy infrastructure attackers, are paid heavily to protect it; whether actual protection takes place or not is a different matter altogether.

As pointed out earlier, the core issues around which the militants mobilized against the Nigerian state and oil TNCs would appear to have been abandoned even when nothing has been done to address them. Marginalized militants, who dare to sing the same old song are, as Nwajiaku-Dahou (2012: 305) puts it, dismissed by integrated ex-militants as: 'rogues … and in so doing, legitimize military strikes against them'. She sees this as the: 'state's "capture" of rebellion, transforming it in its own likeness' (Nwajiaku-Dahou, 2012: 305). A more nuanced analysis would perhaps reveal a *mutual capture* of a sort – the state captured ex-militants and is in turn captured by the ex-militants. While it is certainly true that the character of rebellion has undergone a transformation in the desired direction of the state, a fact which the above analysis supports, close watchers of the Nigerian political scene would agree with the notion of the emerging 'capture' of the state, and perhaps society, by the ex-militants.

This capturing of the state may express itself in one of two ways. The first is the gross incapacity of the institutions of state to function as they would otherwise have done for fear of upsetting the balance in the relationship between the ex-militants and the state. For instance, following the amnesty offer, there was a vast reduction in oil infrastructure attacks by militants. Oil production figures, which plummeted to about 700,000 barrels per day (bpd) from 2.6 million bpd before 2006, also peaked at pre-2006 levels in the immediate aftermath of the amnesty offer (Okere and Musari, 2011). This was short-lived. Ex-militants, highly placed government officials, the military, the national oil company workers/oil multinational personnel, and oil traders have all been allegedly involved in oil theft and pipeline vandalism that is threatening to cripple the nation's economy (Nwajiaku-Dahou, 2012). Specifically, John Ameh (2013), quoting the nation's Finance Minister and coordinating Minister for the Economy, Dr Okonjo-Iweala, reports that Nigeria loses about 400,000 bpd of crude due to the activities of oil thieves, pipeline vandalism and production shut-ins. This haemorrhage on the nation's economy is threatening the capacity of the federal government to implement its budget. Although the bulk of the oil is not directly stolen by ex-militants,

it does take place under their superintendence given the fact that they are responsible for coastal waterways and crude oil pipeline surveillance. In spite of the failure of the ex-militants to successfully police the pipelines and waterways, the government has not had the courage to terminate the contract due largely to a perceived fear of upsetting the balance in ex-militants–state relations, which might see the resumption of hostilities against the state and oil TNCs by the ex-militants. The House of Representatives ordered the Inspector-General of Police to probe a threat issued by an ex-militant Commander, Asari-Dokubo, and a presidential Adviser, Kingsley Kuku, that there would be crisis in Nigeria if President Jonathan were denied a second term in 2015. This was met with threats by ex-militants to storm the House of Representatives (*Thisday*, 2012).

This capturing of the state may also be seen by the penetration of state institutions by integrated ex-militant commanders to extract the maximum level of benefits, even when such extraction defies rationality or logic. This may take the form of sponsorship of candidates for lucrative political appointments by ex-militant commanders. The malfeasance at the NIMASA illustrates this. It is widely reported that the appointment of the Director-General of NIMASA was influenced by Tompolo, one of the integrated ex-militant commanders. As indicated earlier, the lucrative contract for the surveillance of the nation's waterways and collection of maritime revenue was awarded to a company owned by Tompolo. After several months of revenue collection by his company, the expected revenues were not transferred to NIMASA's coffers (*Naija Standard Newspapers*, u.d.). The state was powerless to compel him to do so.

On the surface, it may be hard to understand the logic of the decision of NIMASA to contract the policing of the nation's waterways to a private firm in a nation that maintains a naval force. Equally puzzling is the decision to contract the responsibility of pipeline protection to ex-militants, who only a few years before had made a fortune from pipeline vandalism. Even if the logic were to officially entrust the safety and security of oil infrastructure to would-be vandals in the hope that this would serve as a disincentive to steal, it is hard to understand why such arrangements are sustained when they have been counter-productive.

Attempts to comprehend these puzzles lead us to a key theme which this paper aspires to explore, namely that the Niger Delta conflict, and indeed all ethno-regional and inter-religious conflicts, is more the result of a struggle to control the omnipotent and over-centralized central state than a genuine commitment to right the wrongs done by relative deprivation. President Jonathan, it may be recalled, first served as Vice-President to President Yar'Adua who won the election in an informal zoning arrangement that produced a president and a vice-president from the Northern and Southern regions respectively. The arrangement was truncated following his sudden death and the Vice-President, now Nigeria's President, stepped in to complete the tenure as the constitution demands. Following the completion of that tenure, President Jonathan decided to run for a fresh tenure as President. This did not go down well with most politicians from the North, as critical voices from the region felt shortchanged. Threats to make the country ungovernable should President Jonathan be elected were followed through with a sudden outburst of violence in some states in the North shortly after President Jonathan was declared the winner in an election he transparently and convincingly won. There is a sense in which the escalation of the Boko Haram terrorist organization may be seen as part of the broader agenda of the North to make the country ungovernable, which may pave the way for its control of the centre. The recent ultimatum issued to the President by the Northern Elders Forum to rescue the girls abducted by Boko Haram militants by October 2014, or abandon his 2015 re-election bid, would appear to support this claim.

In making this claim, I by no means suggest that Boko Haram terrorism sprang up after the election of President Jonathan. Indeed this extremist sect has been around since 2002, but posed little security challenge until 2009 when the Bauchi State Government's attempts to enforce a law on the use of crash helmets by motorcyclists was resisted by members of the sect. The tacit support that

Boko Haram allegedly enjoys from a former military head of state and a former vice-president (Aghedo and Osumah, 2012), both of whom were presidential candidates in the 2011 election that brought President Jonathan to power, and the sophistication and scale of Boko Haram terrorism suggest that there is something more to it than a rebellion borne out of conditions of relative deprivation. If it is true that Boko Haram sprang from conditions of relative deprivation and is concerned with the need to rid the society of corruption as its leaders often claim, why would the group be drawing support from politicians who were known to be corrupt and whose malfeasance while in office contributed to making the North desperately poor?

In the politics of plunder and patronage that defines the Nigerian state, critical voices from the Niger Delta, home region of the President, increasingly see Boko Haram terrorism as attempts by the North to frustrate one of their own from recontesting the 2015 presidential election. Although President Jonathan has yet to categorically commit himself to standing for election again, his body language speaks volumes in this direction. Ex-militants, already used to the politics of plunder and patronage, have risen to the challenge of providing him with the backing he needs. As Akasike (2013) reports, ex-militant leaders have issued threats of the possible disintegration of Nigeria should Jonathan not be allowed to run in the 2015 presidential election.

As pointed out earlier, ex-militants who previously mobilized against the central state and its oil partners are not supporting President Jonathan because much has changed in the Niger Delta under his rule. Indeed, the state architecture of structural inequities that militants mobilized against remains intact. Specifically, there is no indication that the federal government under the leadership of an indigene of the Niger Delta region is about to repeal the obnoxious oil mining legislations. Neither are there concerted efforts to raise the percentage of oil revenue due to oil-producing states. The proposed Petroleum Industry Bill, which concedes a mere 10% of profits of oil companies to oil-producing communities, has not been passed into law by the National Assembly since 2009. This is due in large part to a convergence of plots, conspiracy and blackmail by legislators from the Northern region and oil TNCs and their home governments (Nzeshi and Ogbodo 2012; Ogbodo and Momoh, 2012; Okojie, 2012).

Besides, there has been no commitment on the part of the oil TNCs and the Nigerian state under the leadership of President Jonathan to address the crisis of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. For instance, the Nigerian government has consistently failed to follow through on gas flaring deadlines as a result of a combination of plotting and blackmail by oil TNCs. Not accidentally, after several years of laying claim to a commitment to a gradual reduction of gas flaring, Jan De Haan (2011) reports that Shell admitted it has actually increased the volume of gas flaring in the Niger Delta. This is in spite of the huge environmental and economic cost of the practice. Gas flaring is implicated in acid rain, and Nigeria reportedly loses USD2.5 billion annually as a result of gas flaring (*Punch*, 2012).

Furthermore, a report by the UNEP (2011) on Ogoni demonstrates that oil pollution, exacerbated by a combination of decrepit pipelines and rising incidents of oil theft-induced sabotage activities, has worsened environmental conditions in the Niger Delta. There is also a new dimension to environmental degradation that is related to the amnesty programme, namely the phenomenon of artisanal refineries, which have been on the increase in the creeks of the Niger Delta in the post-amnesty era. In light of the inability of the amnesty programme to accommodate all the ex-militants, they have returned to artisanal refining which was once a key skill for survival in the heyday of militancy. Worse, clean up of oil pollution by oil companies remains characteristically slow. For instance, more than three years after the UNEP (2011) released its report, which was by all means damning on the oil industry's operations in Ogoni, the vastly devastated Ogoniland still remains as polluted as it ever was. This is in spite of the UNEP report's recommendation that environmental remediation action should proceed without delay.

Furthermore, as indicated above, it is hard to advance the argument that the development landscape of the Niger Delta has been altered for the better as a result of President Jonathan's rise to power. Indeed, the material conditions of the Niger Delta people have not suddenly improved. In addition, reconstruction work on the dilapidated east-west road has been painfully slow. It should be pointed out that this is a key access route to and from the region, and for many years was a prime example of neglect and marginalization of the region when the country was ruled by Presidents from other regions. Interestingly, the reconstruction of the road is handled by the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, which is under the superintendence of a Minister from the Niger Delta region.

At the risk of repetition, the inference to be drawn from the foregoing is that the grievance factors, around which militants mobilized against the Nigerian state and oil TNCs, have not changed. What should be curious is the silence of previously vocal voices from the Niger Delta region and the unqualified support the Nigerian state now enjoys from them. These paradoxes, I insist, may be located within the nature of Nigeria's fundamentally flawed federalism.

The nature of Nigerian federalism and insurgency

Following independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited a three-region federal structure, with each region dominated by Nigeria's majority ethnic nationalities, namely the Hausa-Fulani (Northern region), the Yoruba (Western Region) and the Ibos (Eastern Region). Given the pathologies that define Nigeria's contemporary federal practice, namely the concentration of power at the centre and a high and unhealthy level of economic dependence of the sub-national units on a centre that supervises the distribution of oil wealth produced from one region of the country, scholarly and popular commentary tend to look back at the pre- and immediate post-independent era as the golden era of Nigerian federalism. During the pre- and immediate post-independence era, the various regions became involved in healthy economic competition, generating wealth and retaining substantial portions of the wealth so generated. This led to regional specialization in commodity production. Thus the North specialized in the production of groundnuts and cotton, the West cocoa and rubber, and the East palm oil and coal.

But this romanticism with that golden era is not to suggest that the Nigerian federation was a perfect union. Indeed, while regional economic competiveness engendered a diversified economy, the structural imbalance in the Nigerian federation in which the North was larger than the East and West combined, both in terms of land mass and official population figures, tended to promote political instability as the North often felt strong enough to pull out of the union at the slightest provocation, real or contrived.

A convergence of factors, namely the military incursion into politics and the ascendancy of oil as the mainstay of the nation's economy, transformed the landscape of Nigerian federalism. The promulgation of the Unification Decree of 1966 by Nigeria's first military head of state, General Ironsi, effectively made Nigeria a federation only in name. Though his regime was short-lived and the Unification Decree abrogated by his successor, many years of unbroken military rule left a legacy of centrist tendencies inherent in the central command system of military organization. Besides, the appropriation of oil resource rights by the centre, and the ascendancy of oil as the nation's main source of foreign exchange earnings, have made the centre extremely powerful. The power of the centre has been accentuated not only by its appropriation of oil resource rights but also the utter erosion of the capacity of the sub-national units to meaningfully engage in wealth-generating activities. What has resulted from this is what Aiyede (2009: 249) describes as: 'fundamentally distributive orientation of Nigeria's fiscal federal system' in which the centre hands out revenue to the constituent states.

With vast oil resource wealth at its disposal, and with so many areas where it could lay claim to exclusive jurisdictional competence, whoever controls the centre controls much else. This has

engendered a markedly fierce contest for control of the centre by myriad Nigerian ethnic groups. In a society where more governance and ethical values are observed to have been breached by people in control of state power, the control of the central state structures could mean a number of things. In particular, while under military rule, Nigeria's military oligarchs (ab)used their privileged positions to undertake a number of activities. By decree, states and local government areas that were recognized as revenue-sharing units, were often created to favour those in power. Oil blocks, the symbol of Nigeria's petro-wealth, were allocated to their cronies and fronts. Decisions that are entirely economic are often influenced by politics, and those in control of state power have often utilized their privileged positions to channel benefits to their ethnic or regional homelands. A comprehensive listing of such politically motivated economic mistakes would leave little space for anything else in this paper. One example, however, stands out – the decision to site a petroleum refinery in Kaduna, several thousand kilometres away from the Niger Delta where oil is produced. Various unmerited appointments to public service positions is another example. In one word, the institution of the state has been (ab)used to promote personal and other special interests by managers of the Nigerian state. Ethnic groups who have their people in power have a field day in drawing benefits from the centre, while those out of power complain of marginalization. Even after military rule, the central state remains overwhelming and totally overbearing. Not accidentally, the struggle for control of the centre has been markedly pursued with a consuming passion by the constituent ethnic groups.

As 'one of the most deeply divided states in Africa' (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005: 5), one easy way to struggle for control of the center in Nigeria is through the mobilization of identity. Among the salient identities are ethno-regional and ethno-religious. In Nigeria's contemporary politics, these identity markers have been utilized by a variety of groups. Denied of an opportunity to rule as a result of the annulment of the election on 12 June 1993, which was won by MKO Abiola, a Yoruba, his kinsmen formed the Oodua People Congress (OPC) to advance their cause. In the wake of the mayhem that typified the activities of OPC, it would appear the Northern military oligarchs felt it was in their enlightened self-interest to concede the presidency to a Yoruba man. Shortly after the emergence of President Obasanjo, a Yoruba, the reforms he embarked upon, which in most cases amounted to dislodging entrenched interests of the North, sharia law was promoted by the North in order to cause problems. It is within the same vein that Boko Haram insurgency may be contextualized. Similarly, the Niger Delta insurgency would appear to have been started in order to bring into power a president of its own extraction.

In stating that insurgency is often started to pursue control of the central state, I by no means suggest that there has always been a clearly agreed agenda, a common ground between the insurgents and the political establishment in the regions. There may never have been, but in a society where everybody is conscious about these identities it would appear that people are merely content that their own is in power. This claim is predicated on the fact that even when what would appear to be the core grievance factors are left largely unaddressed, insurgency fizzles out anyway just at the moment when a president emerges from the aggrieved region. A few examples would help make the point. The OPC became dormant a few years after Chief Obasanjo became Nigeria's President. When Yar'Adua was Governor of Katsina State, he gave in to the frenzy for the implementation of sharia law. When he became Nigeria's President, not only was he known never to have talked about the implementation of sharia law on a national scale but the whole idea of sharia died down naturally when a president from the muslim North was in power. Similarly, the narrative of the Niger Delta insurgency was heavily laden with tales of marginalization, absence of development benefits, deprivation of resource rights, environmental degradation and the paradox of poverty in a region that produces the wealth of the nation. After nearly six years of a president from the Niger Delta region being in power, it is hard to sustain the argument that much has changed. Yet, as we pointed out earlier, not only have vocal voices failed to give expression to the largely unaddressed issues around

which militants mobilized against the Nigerian state and oil multi-nationals but Nigerian society is now threatened by ex-militants of a return to insurgency should President Jonathan be prevented from contesting the 2015 election.

Conclusions

With the exception of recent literature that articulates a case for greed in explaining insurgency, the case has been powerfully made that political violence, for which insurgency and terrorism are variants, is largely borne out of grievance. In the Niger Delta insurgency, the self-evident grievance factors lent credibility to the theory of relative deprivation as a framework for analysis. A critical review of a convergence of factors that have transformed the Niger Delta insurgency compels a rethink not only of the fundamental assumptions but also of the utility of relative deprivation in explaining insurgency in Nigeria. These are: (1) the change in the architecture of power which has brought about a Nigerian president of Niger Delta extraction with important national, political and administrative positions filled by indigenes of the once marginalized Niger Delta region; and (2) the dynamics of post-conflict peace-building following the amnesty programme, which have led to a return of peace in the Niger Delta in spite of the failure of the Nigerian state and oil TNCs to address the key environmental and development challenges that were widely canvassed as the reasons for rebellion.

Against this backdrop, we ask: Was the Niger Delta insurgency just a moment? Was insurgency in the Niger Delta really driven by conditions of relative deprivation? Was it as a result of the Niger Delta region's political class advancing its fortunes in the complex politics of control of the over-centralized centre? Was it a mere pawn in the hands of militant warlords for accommodation in Nigeria's politics of plunder?

A more nuanced analysis of these questions yields the following conclusions. Relative deprivation, while it has important implications for violence, is an inadequate justification to explain the Niger Delta insurgency. Another interpretation is that relative deprivation, at least in the case of Nigeria, represents a misdiagnosis and blurs our understanding, undermining the possibility of resolving the phenomenon of political violence at its roots. While the salience of poverty and inequality may not be discountenanced, the Niger Delta insurgency and indeed all ethno-regional and inter-religious violence that often challenge the legitimacy of the central state, must be seen within the wider context of the pathologies of Nigeria's over-centralized and fundamentally distributive federalism. It thus appears perfectly normal to conclude that insurgency in Nigeria is spawned not so much by conditions of relative deprivation as by the nature of Nigeria's fundamentally flawed federalism. It is the flawed nature of Nigerian federalism that compels the utilization of identity in the fierce and often unwholesome struggle for control of the centre. A renegotiation of the terms of the Nigerian union and, more importantly, a return to the federal practice of yore which created a weak centre and strong regions may well be the solution to Nigeria's incessant insurgencies.

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