

INCENTIVIZING VIOLENT BEHAVIOURS IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION: THE COMMODIFICATION HYPOTHESIS

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Abstract

The Niger Delta represents a strategic economic interest for oil companies, Nigeria and the World. However, widespread violence mostly involving able-bodied youths continue to act as disincentives for business operations and deficit governments' revenue. What seemed to have calmed with the Amnesty Programme is now more viciously felt as new militia groups continue to wreak havoc on the installations of International Oil Corporations (IOCs) in the region with significant loss of lives, properties and adverse impacts on the environment. While all these violent behaviours pose social risks to business and society, they nevertheless have a history in the manner with which the government/society create enabling conditions that incentivize and reinforce violence instead of peaceful behaviours. The paper examines how government/society incentivizes violent behaviours through deliberate actions that commodify violence and how this undermines the collective capacity for peaceful behaviours in the Niger Delta and Nigeria in general. The paper relies on a content analysis of extant literature on violent conflicts and governments' response to such behaviours pointing out how this response reinforces rather than mitigate violence. It submits that governments' reaction to violent conflict has created a cycle of violence scenario where violent behaviour is recycled and given a commodity status that youths are in a rush to sell. As a result, the paper calls for a significant shift in how the Nigerian government addresses youth related insurgencies, by focusing on policies and actions that incentivize peaceful behaviours as a way of de-emphasizing violent behaviours in the Niger Delta region.

Keywords: Incentivizing violent behaviour, commodification hypothesis, cycle of violence, Niger Delta region.

Introduction

The Niger Delta region represents a strategic economic interest for oil companies, Nigeria and the World at large. Nevertheless, social, political, economic, and environmental and human rights have dovetailed to undermine human development realities causing challenges that now place the region in a vicious cycle of violence. These adverse social circumstances have equally led to significant distortions in business operations and a fall in revenue for the government. Activities of government and corporate entities are more than ever before nested on a socio-political context that has adopted an antagonistic orientation. This social antagonism that is mostly perpetrated by aggrieved youths in the region and fueled by two disconcerting factors. On the one hand, the social antagonism is built on a long history of discontent that necessitated the emergence of warlords, cult gangs and militia groups across oil producing areas in the country. These groups in question seemingly rely on the tacit support of local communities that share their anger at the exploitation of their region by oil companies as well as the federal and state governments (Council on Foreign Relations 2009 cited in UK Border Agency, 2010) without commensurate human and infrastructural development. On the

other hand, the social antagonism is built on fragile governance structures that create an enabling environment where the activities of International Oil Corporations (IOCs) undermine the natural eco-systemic balance of the region with adverse consequences for the indigenes who increasingly find it difficult to have access to their traditional livelihood sources due to high level environmental degradation.

The long history of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta region and in Nigeria in general represents a major social alert for corporate operators. Perhaps, this is why Menas Nigeria Focus (2012) opine that the volatile security situation and political complexity of Nigeria render it imperative for investors in the country to keep ahead of the risks that may impede their commercial activity and undermine the security of their personnel and assets. It becomes clear therefore to understand that violent conflicts generate multifaceted risks that threaten a significant aspect of business and social life among others, thereby creating adverse social and political context. These negative social and political contexts increasingly translate into risks that are detrimental to healthy social existence as well as the deterioration of security situations in the region. Thus, the Niger Delta which is home to oil and gas resources in Nigeria represents a unique example of where adverse impacts of business activities as well as inadequate political will for development by successive governments have provided the impetus for multi-stakeholder's aggression with grave consequences for peaceful coexistence.

In the midst of the outcry concerning the relative neglect of the Niger Delta with regards to human as well as infrastructural development and frustrated by insufficient benefits from oil production, youth militia groups continue to target the installations of oil companies demanding better public services and a greater share of government revenues. Despite numerous palliative measures by government and IOCs, the unrest continues to assume worrying dimensions resulting into criminal movements which feed on massive illicit socioeconomic activities such as crude oil theft or illegal bunkering and refining or what has been locally referred to as "*Kpo Fire*", kidnapping for ransom, political assassinations among others. While this trend is worrisome, it is clear that high rate of unemployment coupled with widespread poverty and hunger are major drivers of violent agitations and conflicts in the region.

As a result, it is clear that the enabling environment for violent conflict in the Niger Delta region is triggered by a vast army of unemployed youths who channel their energy into anti-social activities such as cult gangs, armed ethnic militia among others. This abnormal social scenario provides the necessary condition for violent conflicts to thrive and vice versa. In other words, while a significant degree of the motive to engage in violent conflicts is traceable to economics, scenarios of conflict, instability and political chaos provide a near perfect avenue for criminal activities to flourish. The Niger Delta and indeed Nigeria represents a key social laboratory for any analysis on conflict and just putting it mildly, the region maintains a major force of academic gravity (Raimi, 2017) with regard to theoretical and empirical works on the subject matter. One only needs to punch a single key on any search engine on the Internet to be confronted with a whole library on the subject of conflict in the Niger Delta region. Perhaps, the reason for this lies on the salient fact that the region is known to be the major economic mainstay of Nigeria given its endowment as the host of the black gold (crude oil).

The Problem

There is the growing understanding that natural resource governance is at the heart of many violent conflicts in most parts of Africa. In this sense, the character and method for administering natural resources is believed to have significant impact on peace or conflict. Hence, when governance frameworks disempower indigenous people as well as undermine the capacity of host communities to maintain decent livelihood despite these natural endowments,

chances are that the feelings of marginalization would arise and conflict becomes inevitable. This is perhaps why the International Center for Peace Initiatives (ICPI, 2009) in its report on the causes of conflict and the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa, reiterated that among the key economic factors identified as fueling conflict is the illegal exploitation of natural resources especially by International Oil Corporations (IOCs). In agreeing with this position, the World Bank continental report for Africa also points out that natural resources especially black gold and the way it is governed continue to be one of the major causes of conflict and of its recurrence. The report moved on to cite examples of Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Nigeria's Niger Delta region as places where natural resources have provided major funding for the perpetuation of wars, civil unrests and other forms of violent conflicts (World Bank, 2010). But this is not to say that exploitation of natural resources alone provides any social justification for violent conflicts especially under a good governance framework. Instead, widespread injustice associated with the exploitation of such natural resources especially when local or indigenous people are marginalized in the process, tend to provide a good reason for agitations like the ones found in most parts of the Niger Delta region.

Persistent conflicts in the Niger Delta has earned the region titles such as conflict hotspot (World Bank, 2003), economy of conflict (Ikelegbe, 2005) among others. Ikelegbe clearly drew attention to the chain of social conflicts arising from perceived and real negative outcomes of the economics of oil in the region. It is noteworthy to mention that beyond Ikelegbe's work, a robust body of literature exists on the conflict in the region (see for instance; Ikelegbe, 2006; Obi, 2009; Oromareghake, Arisi & Igbo, 2013). Although these studies represent significant academic milestones in the understanding of the conflict in the region, very little is still known about how conflicts are progressively reinforced through monetary or other economic incentives handed down to the leaders of conflict groups under the guise of amnesty.

While it can be argued that the Federal Government Amnesty for ex-militants that was launched in 2009 seemingly provided relative peace (Raimi, Bieh & Zorbari, 2016), the renewed appearance of different sets of militia groups who have viciously attacked the installations of mostly International Oil Corporations (IOCs) in the region clearly shows that the relative peace is gradually waning. It is the argument of this paper that, the reward of leaders of conflict groups or conflict war lords who self-style themselves as '*generals*' without providing solutions to the historical circumstances that gave birth to the conflict scenario in the first place, unite to provide the necessary conditions for a cycle of violence where material incentives serve to enable the progressive substitution of one set of conflict groups by another. This cyclic conflict scenario provides justification for the fact that the peace-building initiative of the government of Nigeria aided by oil and gas corporations in the Niger Delta region is counter productive.

As a result, this paper questions this peace-building approach of the government especially one that is founded on incentivizing or rewarding as well as reinforcing violent behaviours. It is the guiding assumption of this paper, that by according violent conflicts a commodity status, the stage becomes set for the cycle of violence to be entrenched. As a departure from the current tradition of peace-building, the paper presents a new argument for the need to reverse this trend and provide enabling structures to ensure that youths and communities who maintain peaceful behaviours are rewarded with state and national honours as well as proactive development projects as a way of spreading a new culture of peace in the Niger Delta and Nigeria at large.

How do we reinforce violence? The Cycle of Violence / Commodification Hypothesis

A good number of studies have been done in the past with outstanding narratives that lead to the understanding of the emergence of violence and conflict in the Niger Delta region. Mostly, the literature is clear on the fact that the primitive exploitation of the natural resources in addition to the marginalization of the indigenous occupants of areas with such endowments dovetail to incentivize as well as deepen the violent conflicts in the Niger Delta region. Thus, while the exploitation of natural resources without any meaningful human and infrastructural development in host communities is in itself enough to generate social antagonisms, additional distortions of the natural ecosystem/environment of the people to the extent that their indigenous livelihood systems are adversely affected continue to exacerbate violent social conflicts in the region. The conflicts create enabling environment for a vast army of conflict actors to emerge with significant control of territories and a good chunk of natural resources even though illegally. Revenues from the illegal exploitation of natural resources are not only used for sustaining armies but also for personal enrichment and building of political support. As a result, they can become obstacles to peace as leaders of armed groups involved in exploitation are unwilling to give up control over these resources. Even when conflict gives way to a fragile peace as was occasioned by the Federal Government Amnesty in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, control over natural resources and their revenues often stay in the hands of a small elite and is not used for broader development of the region (Kidani, 2015). This presents a scenario where access and control of natural resources especially crude oil provides a platform for this class of people to also control the means of violence and by extension, use conflict to sustain their newly found status and wealth.

Discussing the Niger Delta conflict is no longer a new issue for academics, however, the worrisome dimension of the numerous conflicts in the Niger Delta region is the fact that despite all academic and policy endeavours, the problem has persisted. Hence, a careful observation of the nature of the conflict shows that it presents a cyclic character where more powerful and dreaded conflict actors leave the scene wealthy and powerful only to be replaced by another set of conflict actors waiting to be materially appeased. This emerges from the fact that wielding the instrumentality of conflict is the surest way to attract the attention of government and a certain route to becoming wealthy and powerful. This creates an ungodly social relations situation where other youths in the society try to also seize the instrumentality of violence and use it as a medium to get rich through illicit socio-economic activities such as illegal crude oil refining, oil bunkering among others or get rewarded by the government with massive pipeline surveillance contracts, political appointments or both. Consequently, the 'cycle of violence' in the Niger Delta has necessitated the emergence of a handful of warlords now turned militia capitalist (Amadi, Imoh & Obomanu, 2016). Major conflict actors or those who have control over a large army of militant youths, tend to emerge at the top of the economic pyramid. Hence, Amadi, Imoh and Obomanu in their work provided a very telling narrative of how Nigerian leaders use state resources to enrich conflict actors especially the leaders of militant groups popularly referred to as '*Generals*'. For instance, the awards of monstrous size pipeline surveillance contracts to these individuals, as well as cash incentives quickly transform them into militia capitalist or conflict bourgeoisies (Raimi, 2017) with great consequences for the Niger Delta region and Nigeria in general. This is because creating conditions that make billionaires out of militants out-rightly raises violence to a status of 'commodity that can be bought and sold in the market. In one sentence, violent behaviours are now subject to the same economic laws of demand and supply where the government demands violence and the youths are more willing to supply. This, therefore, leads us into coining a sociological concept known as the "*Commodification of Violent/Conflict Hypothesis*" representing a scenario where youths are the sellers and the State/Federal Government are the buyers of the distinctive commodity known as conflict. The commodification hypothesis

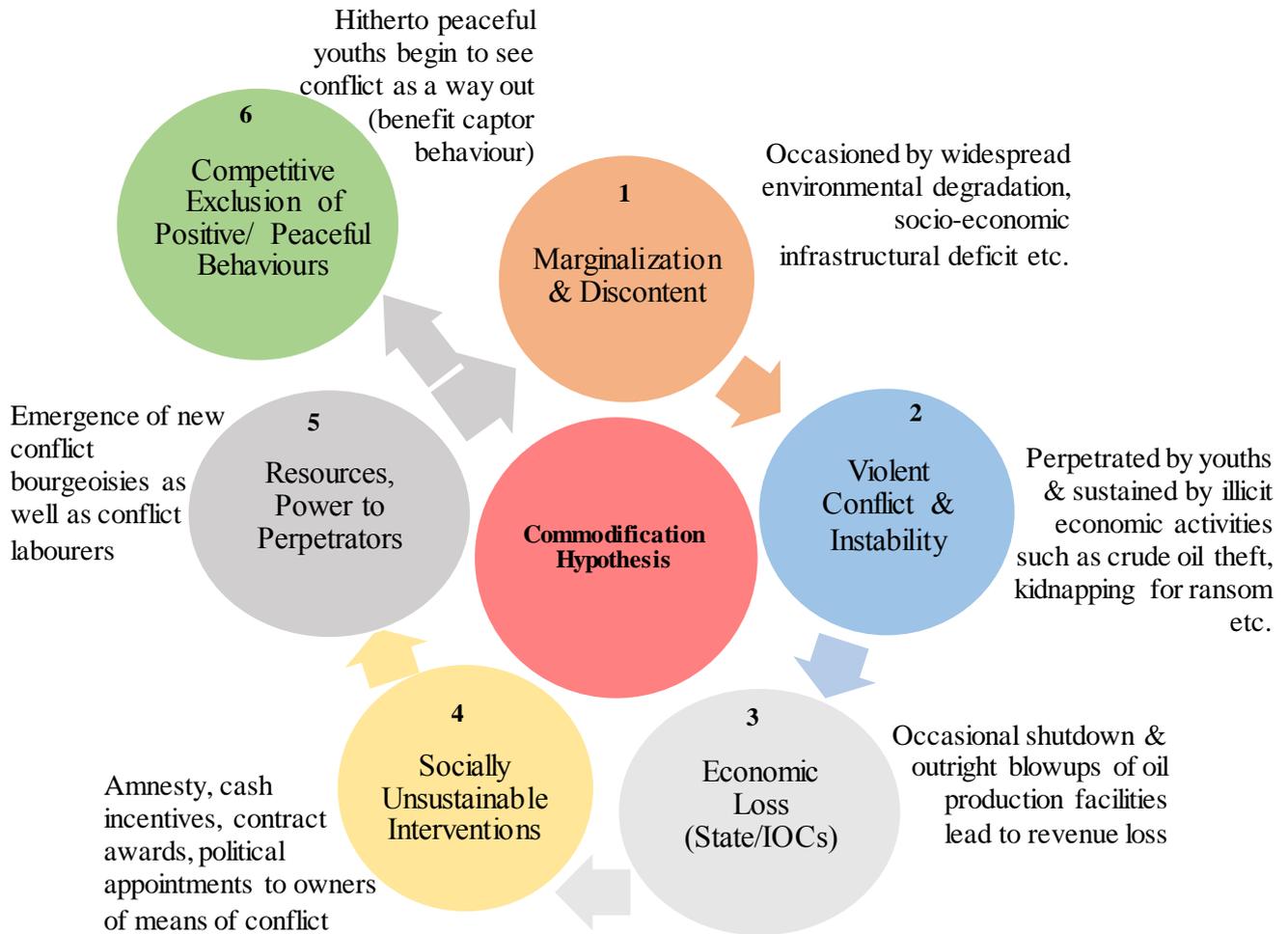
gives significant meaning to Professor Ikelegbe's (2005) *Economy of Conflict* and Amadi, Imoh and Obomanu (2016) *Militia Capitalists*. These two works that are almost a decade apart provided a clear Marxist picture of the conflict in the Niger Delta region. However, a careful examination revealed that the two literatures omitted a major ingredient in Marxist analysis which is the issue of a commodity. This is because, to have an economy and a class within that mode of production, there must be a commodity that determines the relations of production. This study therefore defines that commodity as "violent conflict". Thus, while the first scholar talked about a distinct economic system defined by violent conflict, the latter authors helped in conceptualizing the dominant social actors in this economic system. What this immediately tells us is that this kind of skewed social systems provides justification for conflict actors to gain entry into the domain of society's ruling class or elite via the instrumentality of violent agitations and conflict. This is made possible through the outright purchase of violence from restive youths by the government. However, the danger in this type of negative social scenario is that violent conflict now becomes some kind of object of production used by mostly youths for the purpose of becoming economically and in most cases politically relevant in society.

What are even worse, benefactors of the illicit economic system arising from the commodification of violent conflict inevitably constitute an emerging power bloc that threatens the status-quo while edging out youths who engage in peaceful behaviours. The end result is the institutionalization of violence over peaceful behaviours, leading to a competitive exclusion of the latter. This translates to severe brain-gain for illicit socio-economic activities and brain-drain from positive socio-economic behaviours which reinforces the cycle of violence. This shows clearly, that as previous warlords emerge as conflict bourgeoisies and new youths continue to make an inroad into the emerging social relations defined by conflict, the conflict mode of production which has violence as its commodity becomes easily sustained. In other words, when youths who were hitherto non-violent in nature continue to see that violence pays, they will gradually adopt violent conflict as the best approach to wealth, power, and fame. Fig.1.1 below provides a graphic illustration of how violence is incentivized through the commodification hypothesis otherwise known as the cycle of violence framework. In essence, the model shows that the transformation of conflict warlords into militia capitalists (Amadi, Imoh & Obomanu, 2016) or conflict bourgeoisies (Raimi, 2017) through the award of lush contracts and other socio-economic and political rewards reinforces conflicts and by extension, sustains the commodification/cycle of violence hypothesis in the Niger Delta region.

Given a commodity status, conflict in the Niger Delta assumes a distinctive mode of production (Raimi, 2017) where those who own the instrumentality of violence now represent the owners of this means of production. In essence and as distinct from the understanding of militia capitalist discussed by Amadi, Imoh and Obomanu (2016), the conflict mode of production actually has its own unique social relations with conflict bourgeoisies and conflict labourers emerging. The conflict bourgeoisies thrive on the sale of conflicts while relying on the conflict labourers to produce and reproduce violence whenever they are required to do so. On the other side of the social relations, are the buyers of conflict notably the government and International Oil Corporations whose willingness to reward conflict warlords creates both a static and dynamic reason for the progressive perpetuation of violent conflicts thereby creating a cycle of violence scenario in the Niger Delta region. The cycle of violence scenario is nested on the theoretical underpinnings of the commodification hypothesis because it is the latter that provides the incentive for the former to be sustained. Hence, given the materialist nature of the country, youths who ordinarily were peaceful actors gradually begin to see conflict as a way out of their economic misery or as a get rich quick model. Perhaps, this would not have been so if violent conflict was not initially accorded the status of a commodity by the Nigerian government and their multinational cohorts who are quick to enrich violent conflict actors at

the detriment of those who are peaceful and society in general. This situation of normlessness makes conflict overly rewarding and attractive to youths especially those that are unemployed in the region.

Fig. 1.1: The Cycle of Violence Framework



Source: Adapted from Raimi 2017

The Figure above represents cycle of violence as captured by Raimi (2017) in another article titled environmental degradation, benefit captor behaviour and the emergence of new class relations. From the narrative of the author, it is clear, that the cycle of violence as shown in Figure 1.1 above starts with an initial widespread discontent among the people as a result of the lack of proactive development interventions on the part of the government which readily is translated and rightly too as marginalization. This discontent is viewed as a product of history since the perceived and real exploitation of the region began a long time ago and the associated discontent was left to fester without any genuine attempt to address the problem. The discontent, generated peaceful agitations that have now turned violent given the region names such as an economy of violence (Ikelegbe, 2005) where corporate entities become the target and the fall in government revenue the outcome. However, in the midst of this conflict scenario, illicit economic activities sustain conflict actors now turn warlords and militia capitalists (Amadi, Imoh & Obomanu, 2016) in the making. These illicit economic activities such as kidnapping, oil bunkering and illegal refining of petroleum products enjoy the tacit support of communities on the one hand, and local as well as international businessmen and women

who benefit from the illegal petroleum market. This whole illicit economic system is sustained by the chaos created through violent conflicts. As a result and in a bid to ensure relative calm in the region, what follows are usually unstable interventions that sees government throwing carrots in the form of amnesty (with cash) and huge contracts to a section of a burgeoning militia capitalists, usually the warlords or leaders of militant groups who begin to wield powers and resources that stand in sharp contrast with the basic tenets of their struggle and the overall values of the masses in the region. The end product is the creation of a misplaced value system where violent behaviours are incentivized or even rewarded and reinforced over and above peaceful behaviours or positive societal values.

This is perhaps why Raimi, Bieh and Zobari (2017) in their discussion of the amnesty programme of the Nigerian government, did argue that as a peacebuilding framework, the amnesty project was fundamentally flawed given its insistence on cash reward instead of addressing the structural historical circumstances that gave birth to the Niger Delta region's development problems. Although the amnesty programme cannot be entirely ruled out as a failed peacebuilding attempt because it represented a radical shift in attempts to address the cycle of violence in the region as violence in the Niger Delta subsided remarkably after the amnesty declaration, illicit economic activities accompanied by militia operations are on the rise again. This suggests that there is something fundamentally wrong with the amnesty project. Perhaps its emphasis on cash for guns or the general logic of buying back violent conflicts represents more of a hidden incentive for more violence rather than a good strategy for peace. What this certainly tells us is that we need a paradigm shift from appeasing violence to incentivizing peaceful behaviour both at the individual and community level. This is because, the more the system rewards violence, the more others especially youths see it as the most viable way of gaining access to quick wealth, power, prestige and the elite status especially in a highly materialistic society like Nigeria.

Reversing the Trend: Rewarding Peaceful Behaviours in the Niger Delta region

The understanding that violent conflicts in the Niger Delta region have assumed a commodity status because of the material reward system attached to it has been well established above. Clearly, any attempt at rewarding negative behaviour over positive behaviour directly undermines genuine conflict transformation efforts. In the Niger Delta, policies and practices have actually contributed to the commodification or cycle of violence hypothesis. This skewed social scenario reinforces the market for violent conflict in the region with more youths willing to use it as a medium for wealth and recognition in the larger society. Given the current reality of perpetrating conflict through actions that serve as incentives to reinforce the cycle of violence, we have the opportunity to incentivize positive behaviour and reverse the entrenchment of illicit economic activities in a sustainable manner by working in partnership with local and international stakeholders to establish a reward system and incentives for peaceful actors in place of conflict actors. By incentivizing positive behaviours, we create the opportunity for a sustainable role modeling process where individuals and communities are rewarded for positive behaviours and others strive to be like them. Most importantly, we institute a new paradigm and methodology that entails the convergence of human resources around values and endeavours that promotes peaceful enterprises and positive investments. Doing this, could trigger a new sense of responsibility among the youths and perhaps, promote a social scenario where we start to witness a reverse movement into ties instead of illicit ones.

There is the need therefore to mainstream the new paradigm of incentivizing peaceful behaviours through de-commodification of violent conflicts into the socio-cultural landscape of the people to the extent that we begin to witness social exclusion or marginalization of illicit socioeconomic behaviours and violent conflict actors. In other words, incentivizing positive behaviours in society either through deliberate government policies or through culturally held beliefs and practices at the community level presents opportunity for society to taboo negative behaviours and socially exclude conflict actors irrespective of the gains that comes from them.

Resting on the grand understanding of one of the sociological oracles Emile Durkheim, that social facts constrain the behaviour of individuals, the following idea on how to reverse this trend on two structural fronts are provided:

- i. **Government:** One of the first steps to incentivize peaceful behaviours is for the government to be proactive in delivering the dividends of democracy as a way of bringing timely development interventions to the people before agitations begin. The human development reality in the Niger Delta region presents a dismal picture. This is because being the region that defines the economic wellbeing of the country, widespread poverty, unemployment and hunger when compared with other regions with similar natural endowment continues to exacerbate agitations that degenerate into violent conflicts. Hence, the old model of reactionary interventions should be discarded and a conscious and proactive development programme should be deployed in the region to address youth unemployment and poverty. By reversing the trend of reactionary intervention, government will gradually gain the trust of youths and the entire citizens. Hence, the government should create an enabling environment for young graduates to be gainfully employed. The government has to ensure that job creation is topmost on its development agenda. The fact that a significant number of young graduates end up without jobs goes a long way to undermine the value of education in the country. Youths no longer see education as the normal path to a meaningful life in Nigeria. In addition, the government can put a reward system in place where youths who achieve in all works of life are given national honours while ensuring that conflict actors are sanctioned publicly and made to face the law. This will help to give marginal status to violent conflict actors thereby making it less attractive to youths in the Niger Delta region and Nigeria at large.
- ii. **Community Level:** At the community level, chiefs and elders should as a matter of urgency promotes cultural ideas and values that deemphasize violence but preach peaceful behaviours. At most, they should drive a new ideology that educates young people on the values of non-violent change as a way of attracting the attention of government or corporate organizations. Rather than preach violence, those responsible for traditional administrations at the community level should endeavour to always profess peace and ensure that violent conflict actors are socio-culturally ostracized.

Conclusion

The understanding of how violent behaviours are reinforced does not in any way mean that there are societies without conflicts anywhere in the world. The scenario painted in this paper is distinctively associated with the Nigerian society especially the Niger Delta region. This notwithstanding, the submissions in the paper have gone a long way to explain why violent behaviours persist especially when it is accorded a commodity status. The commodification of violent conflict is a major reinforcing factor for the cycle of violence in the Niger Delta region which further justifies the willingness of youths to use the medium as a way of getting wealthy and attracting a unique kind of social prestige to themselves. This is only made possible because the government of Nigeria adopts reactionary rather than proactive methods to

development in the region. Hence, the understanding is that the only language the government understands is violence and the youths are readily available to sell violent conflict while the government consciously or unconsciously buys the product from them as a way of maintaining relative peace.

It is important to mention that the task for all government, community leaders and the general public is to ensure that the current cycle of violence situation is reversed by negatively sanctioning conflict actors and stop the outright trading on conflict as if it is a commodity subject to the laws of demand and supply. If this is not done, society can be rest assured that the current trend in violent conflicts across the Niger Delta region and Nigeria in general will continue, because more youths will have no choice but to cash into the conflict economy as a way of getting rich and powerful.

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