

# Destitution in Niger Delta

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The Willink Commission, inaugurated by the British colonial government in 1958 to look into the fears of ethnic minority groups as Nigeria began preparations for independence, recognized in its report that the local communities of the Niger Delta were poor and lacking in virtually all infrastructure that conduced to development. The Commission recommended that the riverine areas of the delta be designated a 'Special Development Area' and that targeted development strategies be deployed to ameliorate the debilitating social condition of the people.

The Northern Peoples Congress-controlled Federal Government accepted this recommendation and went on to establish the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) in 1961. By January 1966 when a military coup displaced the government and put an end to Nigeria's First Republic, the twin goals of lifting the peoples of the Niger delta from poverty and improving the physical infrastructure of the area had not been met. Subsequent policies adopted by the Federal Government, beginning with the 1969 Petroleum Act that transferred the control of oil and the revenue deriving from it from the Niger Delta states to the central government, have combined to further entrench poverty and social anomie in the region.

The Niger Delta today is a study in destitution. Not only is this condition structural, it increasingly breeds epiphenomena that further deepen destitution and also work to make redress difficult. It must be quickly pointed out that poverty and destitution is a Nigeria-wide condition, becoming all-pervasive following the introduction of ill-thought out economic structural adjustment policies by the military government of Ibrahim Babangida in 1986. In the Niger Delta however, the ubiquitous presence of oil industry infrastructure and its devastating impact on the human ecology of the region, particularly farmlands and fishing waters, have made daily living a difficult proposition.

Widespread and long-running pollution of rivers, creeks and arable land have rendered the local people, whose major occupation is farming and fishing, economic refugees in their own land. In the rural delta, the people live in makeshift huts built with mud and wattle, and are at the mercy of the elements in the rainy season when their villages are flooded. These villages lack basic sanitation and piped water and electricity. There are neither schools for the children nor health centres for the infirm.

In such cities as Port Harcourt, Warri and Yenagoa, decaying infrastructure and inefficient or non-existent social services join hands with mass unemployment to sire social unrest. Slums, exemplified by the Port Harcourt waterfront, are widespread. Beginning in the mid 1990s these urban slums became a recruiting ground for youth gangs that have now transformed into armed militia groups increasingly contesting ownership and control of the region with the central government. While the bulk of these groups see themselves as legitimate social movements vigorously articulating the sundry grievances of the delta peoples, fringe elements engage in such

criminal activities as oil theft (bunkering), kidnapping people for ransom, and generally terrorizing the populace.

Three key central government policy interventions, NDDB in 1961, OMPADEC in 1992 and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2001 failed to reverse deepening destitution in the region. In a bid to nip the growing insurgency in the area driven by the youth militias in the bud, the government of President Musa Yar'Adua in 2009 established a new Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs and unfurled a policy of general amnesty combined with an accelerated development programme for the region. It remains to be seen whether this intervention will succeed where its predecessors failed abysmally.