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BEYOND THE REBELLION: ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES OF VIOLENT CONFLICTS AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACEBUILDING IN THE NIGER DELTA

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AFRICAN PEACEBUILDING NETWORK
APN WORKING PAPERS: NO. 5

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ABOUT THE SERIES

“African solutions to African problems” is a favorite mantra of the African Union, but since the 2002 establishment of the African Peace and Security Architecture, the continent has continued to face political, material, and knowledge-related challenges to building sustainable peace. Peacebuilding in Africa has sometimes been characterized by interventions by international actors who lack the local knowledge and lived experience needed to fully address complex conflict-related issues on the continent. And researchers living and working in Africa need additional resources and platforms to shape global debates on peacebuilding as well as influence regional and international policy and practitioner audiences. The APN Working Papers series seeks to address these knowledge gaps and needs by publishing independent research that provides critical overviews and reflections on the state of the field, stimulates new thinking on overlooked or emerging areas of African peacebuilding, and engages scholarly and policy communities with a vested interest in building peace on the continent.

BEYOND THE REBELLION: ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES OF VIOLENT CONFLICTS AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACEBUILDING IN THE NIGER DELTA

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FEBRUARY 2016

The Niger Delta region, with an area of about 70,000 square kilometers, is Africa's largest delta and the third largest in the world (World Bank 1995). Although the region is geographically made up of the Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers States in Nigeria (Willinks Commission 1958), its geopolitical definition has extended to all the states that produce oil within the southern part of the country. These include, in addition, the Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Imo, and Ondo States (NDDC 2004).

In fact, the Niger Delta has largely been defined by the natural resources with which the region is endowed since its indigenous people's first contact with Europeans. Initially, its seaside towns served as ports for the shipping of slaves from hinterland Nigeria across the Atlantic. After the slave trade was abolished, the region served as a point of contact during the "legitimate" trade carried on in natural resources, particularly palm oil and rubber (Obi 2010).

Today the Niger Delta remains at the heart of the Nigerian economy, as it produces crude oil, which is the economy's mainstay. The region produces an average of two million barrels of crude oil per day, and its reserves stand at 30 billion barrels, with prospects for growth. The region also has abundant

reserves of natural gas, amounting to about 166 trillion standard cubic feet. These resources give it strategic importance in a global political economy that depends on energy from fossil fuels (National Petroleum Investment Management Services 2014).

Intense competition for the control of these resources has led to disputes between indigenous, national, and international actors. While the international actors have often represented the extractive industries in the prevailing global energy economy, national actors who are not indigenous to the region struggle to maintain legal control of its resources through the instrumentality of the Nigerian state. This control is designed to maintain the state and preserve the primary revenue stream of the ruling class that sits at the top of the country's patronage system.

In short, the history of resource extraction in the Niger Delta is a history of conflict, as every epoch, from the palm oil trade to the crude oil trade, has put the people and the state (or sovereign authority) in conflicting—often violently conflicting—positions. This struggle for resources between the local people and those who seek to exploit their resources has shaped the formation of the society and state in the region by shaping authority and societal relations (Alagoa 1970). In turn, the conflicts themselves have evolved from one resource epoch to the next (Obi 2010; Ako and Okonmah 2009).

The study of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta has concentrated on the insurgency that took place in the region between 2005 and 2009 (Watts 2007; Courson 2009), just as the peacebuilding efforts directed at resolving the conflict have focused there. The attention has been on the confrontations between armed rebels and the state armed forces. Here I argue that the insurgency's labeling as an "oil conflict" has had an impact on the scholarship of the conflict as well as on the peacebuilding efforts. In fact, the conflicts in the Niger Delta go beyond a rebel-state dimension, and the other dimensions are crucial to sustainable peacebuilding. The rebel groups in the region did not arise spontaneously from conflicts induced by grievances. Instead, other forms of violent conflict, predating those between the rebels and the state, provided the opportunities for their emergence. I argue that these other forms of conflict are still prevalent in the Niger Delta region, even though the rebel-state confrontations have been put on hold by the amnesty and the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program introduced by the federal government in 2009.

THEORETICAL CLARIFICATIONS

Violent conflicts, political violence, and the mobilization of armed groups have been topical among social scientists, whose engagement with these issues has produced a burgeoning body of literature. Prominent in the discourse is a debate that presents greed and grievance, respectively, as the dominant variables determining armed mobilization and the outbreak of violent conflicts. The arguments for the first variable—greed—hold that actors in violent conflicts are motivated by the consequential benefits of participating in them, and this increases the likelihood of their outbreak (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Berdal and Malone 2000; Reno 2000). The arguments for the second suggest groups are mobilized into violence as a result of longstanding grievances and unresolved latent conflicts. This strand of the conflict literature has been enriched by research on relative deprivation and horizontal inequalities as causes of violent conflicts (Brush 1996; Douma 2006; Stewart 2002).

The greed and grievance theses have enhanced the understanding of violent conflicts and the mobilization of armed groups. A consensus is emerging, however, that they do not provide a nuanced view. On the greed thesis, Ukoha Ukiwo wrote that

the so-called “new political economy perspective” is replete with too much economism, too little politics and no history at all. This is partly because there is no attempt to put the so-called elite kleptocracy and mass opportunism in their proper social contexts. (2009: 2)

Similarly, Cyril Obi (2010) has explained that the study of violent conflicts within clear-cut binary lines of greed and grievance does not adequately capture the fluidity of such phenomena as criminality and dissent.

This essay calls, therefore, for a more contextualized study of conflicts, as the focus on linear factors does not sufficiently explain them; rather, the multidimensional nature of most is captured by the complexity of politics and the multiplicity of narratives that define history. To understand conflicts and effectively build peace, policymakers and scholars need to deconstruct the politics and history of the context in which each takes place—a process that will facilitate the understanding of the fault lines inherent in societies experiencing them.

The heterogeneous nature of violence in given contexts of conflict creates different narratives of the issues in particular cases. Yet, some issues receive more attention than others. Often, scholars and policymakers focus on a predominant narrative as they deem fit, while downplaying or paying less attention to others that are part of the conflict dynamics. The tendency toward a selective disposition to certain narratives while ignoring others in attempting to understand violent conflicts has been theorized by Stathis Kalyvas (2003), who noted there is often a “master cleavage” behind political violence (civil wars in particular), but that actual violence manifests as private vertical conflicts between individuals and groups within a given community. This view presents violence during conflicts as a mixed bag involving multiple actions.

The plausibility of Kalyvas’s argument has been confirmed by others who have argued that the drivers of violent conflicts at one level are not necessarily what drive them at another (Regan and Norton 2005). The different factors that account for violence in a given conflict—the conflict’s dynamism and fluidity—need to be taken into account to understand the complex narratives behind it. In the Niger Delta, Gore and Pratten (2003: 211–40) identified different narratives that fuel youth movements and lead to insurgency, criminality, engagement, and complicity with the state. Yet what is predominantly seen and discussed is the overarching violence associated with militancy or rebel-state violence in the region—that is, the “master cleavage.”

The “master cleavage” of the violent conflict in the Niger Delta has been conceptualized around the rebel-state violence mainly because it directly affects the oil industry. Conflict in Nigeria, a typical petro-state, poses a direct threat to the oil industry—the mainstay of the country’s economy. Consequently, state response to the violence has concentrated on protecting oil industry operations, as well as on the cessation of violence targeting the industry. Globally, the rebel insurgency in the region fits well into an ongoing discourse on rebel groups and natural resources. The study of the region has been influenced by these global intellectual agendas, and the local and international response to the violence there has been shaped by the presence of oil and rebel groups.

What this focus on rebel-state violence overlooks is the literature on the evolution of militant groups in the Niger Delta. Studies note that the oil rebels originated as political thugs and members of ethnic militias, fraternal cults,

and criminal syndicates (Ukiwo 2007; Watts 2007; Joab-Peterside 2007; Nyiayaana 2011). Indeed, elements of all of these precursors are found in the character of most militant groups in the region. As will be explained, however, the emergence of rebel groups did not decisively resolve the other violent conflicts in which their members had been prominent actors. Instead, rebel violence pushed these other conflicts into the background and took center stage, leading to a failure to address the other sources of conflict and a consequent negative impact on long-term peacebuilding in the region.

TYPES OF VIOLENT CONFLICT IN THE NIGER DELTA

The struggle for natural resources in the Niger Delta has not only pitted the people against the state; it has also created internal conflicts that form part of the overarching conflict narrative in the region. Apart from the rebel-state dimension, communities are divided by intracommunal, intercommunal, interethnic, political, and criminal violence, with rebel groups featuring prominently (see table 1). Even as armed hostilities between the state and the rebel groups have been drastically reduced, the other forms of conflict have not been decisively resolved.

By examining each type of conflict in turn, the sections below attempt to demonstrate that the mobilization of rebel groups to confront the state is actually the outcome of other dimensions of conflict that policymakers in the region have ignored.

TABLE 1: Types of Violent Conflict in the Niger Delta

Type of violent conflict	Key actors	Issues
Rebel-state	Rebels, military, and oil multinational companies	Oil rents and rights
Intracommunal	Chiefs, youth groups, and armed militias	Community governance, chieftaincy tussles (power struggles), and land
Intercommunal	Chiefs, youth groups, and armed militias	Land, power struggles, and oil rents
Interethnic	Chiefs, youth groups, and armed militias	Land, power struggles, and oil rents
Political violence	Youth groups, political interest groups, and armed gangs	Elections, political interests, and power struggles
Criminal violence	Fraternities, armed gangs, cult groups, and criminal gangs	Criminality

Intracommunal Conflict

Conflicts within communities involve different factions of the ruling groups (chiefs) and youth groups. Often about power and land, in some cases they involve a struggle for control of community resources or disagreement over how the resources are shared. The frequent use of violence in these local struggles creates the foundation for groups to be mobilized for further violence in some communities.

One community where such use of violence has occurred is Peremabiri, in the Southern Ijaw local government area of Bayelsa State. In 1998, intracommunal conflicts between different factions over control of the leadership of the community led to a deadly conflict. Community youths, mobilized by chiefs who were in disagreement over how to manage payments from the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC),¹ engaged in factional confrontations that led to the deaths of over thirty young people.² The first confrontations led to the emergence of the first sets of armed youth groups in Peremabiri community.

Starting from disagreements over distribution of compensation payments from SPDC, the conflict morphed into a disagreement over the rightful leadership for the community,³ involving two youth factions. Most of those actively involved in the struggle were aligned with one of these factions, and

the ascendancy of one would mean the expulsion from the community of key members of the other. This made the struggle even more desperate and intense.

In 1999, members of one of the youth factions organized themselves to overthrow the community leadership. They succeeded. The ensuing conflict led to the destruction of the properties of those considered to be aligned with the opposition leadership and also the death of over twenty community members.⁴ In one case, a house was burned because its owner was said to be the uncle of a prominent member of the opposing youth group.

The continuous violent conflict in Peremabiri led to the intervention of the state government, which set up a judicial commission of inquiry to look into the claims of the opposing parties. The commission sat for two weeks and did not produce any report.⁵ The failure to uncover any evidence that could have led to the indictment of those who committed atrocities in the village generated more grievances among those whose families suffered casualties.

The emergence of armed youth groups and the exile of some community youths, including the youth who had led his group to take over the community in 1999, took on a different dimension when group members started to engage in organized criminality.⁶ Community members recounted how youths involved in communal violence turned to criminal activities on the neighboring rivers in the region,⁷ which led to regular incidents of sea piracy. A full-fledged criminal group that appeared in Diebu, a neighboring community, was led by an indigene of Diebu but had support from some members of the youth faction that had hijacked Peremabiri's leadership in 1999, according to residents of that community. The Diebu group continued to operate for about two years without any intervention by Nigerian security agents, terrorizing local community people and traders traveling on the river Nun and its tributaries, and heightening the sense of insecurity among the villagers and travelers in the area.

These criminal groups operated up to the point of the emergence of armed rebellion in other parts of the Niger Delta. Although some youths left Diebu to join militants in Western and Eastern Niger Delta,⁸ the Diebu group did not itself evolve into a full-fledged militant group. It was not affiliated with any of the umbrella platforms of militancy, such as the Movement of the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta Volunteers

(NDV), or the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), and it did not attack oil facilities in the area; its focus was mainly on organized criminality. Consequently, it gained less recognition than the larger militant groups from the media and even the state.

In September 2007, the Diebu group held a member of another militant group, one based in Ologbobiri, hostage along the Diebu creek. The member was returning from Yenagoa, where he had gone to negotiate the release of some hostages held by his group. He had thirty million naira⁹ in the boat, a ransom payment for the hostages. According to him, he was held for three hours in Diebu. He convinced the leader of the Diebu group that his own group would not seek retaliation against the Diebu leader if he were allowed to go unharmed.¹⁰ That the leader agreed to release him after this reassurance is plausible because the Diebu group, having fewer weapons than the Ologbobiri-based militant group, would have wanted to avoid a conflict. Both Diebu and Ologbobiri are in Southern Ijaw Local Government area, but the Ologbobiri-based militant group was more dominant in the area. Had the Diebu group harmed the member of the Ologbobiri-based group, it would have attracted a direct confrontation, which might have led to disastrous consequences for the smaller group. This situation highlights the fluidity of violence and interface between different groups in the region. In this case the Diebu group, a smaller organization identified with criminality against the local people, recognized its limitations when dealing with the area's dominant armed group and other groups directly involved in the insurgency.

The operations of the criminal group in Diebu came to an end following an attack on it by Firstman Pere,¹¹ a leader of one of the armed groups involved in communal violence in Peremabiri. Pere had been part of the Diebu gang but had parted ways with its leader, Gibson Kala (aka Prince Igodo) (CEHRD 2008). Although some accounts suggest the conflict between Pere and Gibson Kala grew out of a disagreement over a ransom payment (CEHRD 2008), it is important to note that the Diebu group had not carried out any kidnapping at the time. What had actually happened is that the Bayelsa State government had established the Bayelsa State Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee (BSPCR), a duplicate of a federal government committee established to negotiate with rebels operating in the region. The Bayelsa State committee patronized armed groups to ensure they did not attack the oil industry, providing them with cash payments and other benefits often disbursed as "security allocations" and giving them boats. The group at

Diebu was paid as well, even though it had no known affiliation with the recognized militant groups in the region and had not directly attacked oil installations or workers.

While it may be argued that the payment to the Diebu group was precautionary, it generated conflicts that led to more violence within both the group and the community. The fallout between Pere and Gibson Kala was an outcome of disagreements over the distribution of funds from the BSPCR¹² that forced Pere to leave the Diebu group with some others he had brought to it and later join Ateke's militia, the NDV, in Rivers State. When, in June 2008, Pere returned to attack Gibson Kala and other members of his gang, Kala died in the process and Pere took control of the area, establishing a rebel camp that he named after the NDV.

After the successful decimation of the Gibson Kala group and the establishment of the NDV in Diebu, Pere returned with his newly established group to Peremabiri, his hometown, and seized a community space—the Teachers Training College facilities—to establish a base there. This is one of the few cases in which a rebel group existed inside the community rather than in a camp in the forest.

The progression of Pere from a factional leader of communal violence to leader of a militant group had an impact on the communal conflict in Peremabiri. Other youth members of his faction were also recruited into his armed rebel group. Their return to the village as armed rebels made it impossible for the victims of their previous violence to confront them. Also, their new status as an armed rebel group that fed into the popular Niger Delta narrative of rebellion gave them the leverage to claim leadership of the community. Thus, what they could not have achieved easily as factional members of community-based militias they had successfully achieved as armed rebels “fighting the Niger Delta cause.” The contradiction this creates in the conflicts in the region has an impact on the entire peacebuilding process. This will be discussed in the section on peacebuilding.

Intercommunal Conflict

Intercommunal conflicts involve more than one community. In the Niger Delta, communities were involved in this type of conflict long before Nigeria's independence. They have been common across different groups elsewhere

in Africa, as well, since before the advent of colonialism, with the issues instigating them mainly being economic and cultural in nature.

In the contemporary Niger Delta, most recent conflicts between communities have been mainly economic, with the struggle over land ownership lying at their core. While this contention arises from the need for land for such economic activities as farming and fishing, the presence of oil on some of the disputed lands increases the stakes by attracting patronage to communities. The communities tend to engage in intense confrontation, often leading to violence, when crude oil is discovered on land that is already in dispute. Conflicts over land may also be caused by oil exploration activities or the construction of oil facilities or pipeline passages.

A typical example of violent intercommunal conflict in the Niger Delta predating the emergence of large-scale armed rebellion is the fighting between the people of Koluama and Sangana in Bayelsa State, adjoining the Atlantic Ocean. These neighboring Ijaw communities on the Atlantic coastline share not just territorial borders but also a common history. A lack of arable land in the area they occupy, however, and continuous erosion as a result of the ocean surge have caused their populations to move further inland in search of places to establish new settlements. This has often led to encroachment and trespass on lands from one community to the other.¹³

Violent conflict arose between the Sangana and Koluama people over land ownership in Fish Town, a popular fishing settlement that had historically been associated with the Sangana people of the Akassa clan. Although the settlers were from Sangana, Koluama people had made claims to the same land. On November 6, 1999, armed indigenes of the Koluama clan attacked Fish Town. Several settlers fled to Sangana town, thus identifying themselves as indigenes of Sangana community. In defense of their community members and their claim to the land, youths and leaders from Sangana mobilized to confront Koluama indigenes, leading to further loss of lives and the destruction of properties in Koluama town.¹⁴

Although these events did not lead to the establishment of a criminal group or armed rebel group, they fueled the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in that part of the Niger Delta, which, along with the combat experience gained, played a fundamental role in the formation of armed rebel groups during the period when rebellion gained momentum.

For instance, MEND commander Ebikabowei Ben, also known as General or Boyloaf, established his rebel camp in Ezetu community, neighboring Koluama. While not all the Koluama youths who had participated in the intercommunity conflict joined the MEND rebel group, most of the weapons used in that conflict had remained in the community.¹⁵ Those Koluama youths who did join the militant group in Ezetu were more prone to do so because of their experience in armed conflict.

The point is that militant groups do not only recruit from their immediate communities; they also accept fighters from neighboring communities. In the case of the intercommunity conflict between the people of Koluama and Sangana, the implication is that membership in the Ezetu militant group makes the youths from Koluama community more powerful on the creeks and in the villages in the area than the Sangana youths, who did not join it. While no attack on Sangana during the militancy is on record, any possible attack would have involved the militants who were from Koluama. Thus, they would have fought not just as militants but as community warlords.

Interethnic Conflict

The history of ethnic groups in Nigeria has been one of ethnic conflicts—a constant struggle for conquest and for self-determination of each identity group within the area. In the Niger Delta, ethnic identities have been in conflict over natural resources and, in recent history, over political issues that determine the distribution of resources. These conflicts have led to mobilization for violence by the different ethnic groups involved, which has led to the militarization of some communities and created the foundations for rebel mobilization in the region. The crisis between the Itsekiri and Ijaw is an example of rebel mobilization through interethnic conflict.

The violent conflict between the Ijaw and the Itsekiri started over the relocation to Ogidigben (an Itsekiri community) of the headquarters of a local government from Ogbe-Ijoh (an Ijaw community) in March 1997 (Ukiwo 2006). Ijaw communities under the aegis of the Federation of Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC) mobilized to confront the Itsekiri, whom they accused of political domination (and marginalizing the Ijaw, who were greater in number), and the Itsekiri retaliated by confronting the Ijaws. This process generated more conflicts, sometimes resulting in fatalities, as both ethnic groups began to lay claim to land and creeks within the area.

The ownership of space within this area as a source of conflict between the Itsekiri and Ijaw people is not new. In research carried out in 2009, interviewees in Ugborodo and Okerenkoko (Itsekiri and Ijaw villages, respectively) revealed that indigenes of one village referred to members of neighboring or other communities by names the latter did not recognize. It was subsequently discovered that the communities referred to by these “different names” by the different ethnic groups are in dispute, with both groups laying claim, particularly to the uninhabited land. These competing claims are a source of recurring conflicts.

The violent conflict between armed Ijaw and Itsekiri youths that claimed lives and properties, with many communities completely burned and destroyed, left people of these communities with physical scars, and it remains part of everyday political conversations, which are often prefaced by the phrase “before the crisis.” Although the conflict was resolved by state military intervention, little was done to address its root causes and resolve historical disagreements between the affected ethnic nationalities.

The Ijaw and Itsekiri conflict provided a narrative that led to the mobilization of armed groups in the region (Ukiwo 2007). As hostilities against the ethnic “other” ceased in Warri South West Local Government area, Delta State, through state intervention, Ijaw youths organized themselves and participated in the resource-based activism that was prevalent at the time. Their participation gained momentum as an Ijaw cause that attracted youths from all over the Niger Delta and provided the initial foundations for nonstate violence in resource activism in the region.

A case in point was popular Ijaw militant John Togo, who started as a fighter against the Itsekiri in March 1997. Initially a hunter working in the villages around Burutu area of Delta State, Nigeria, Togo joined the campaign against the Itsekiri following the outbreak of the ethnic crisis in the Gbaramatu area of Warri. He continued his participation in militant activities afterwards and became a prominent fighter due to his experience as a hunter and shooter. There is a shared perception among people in the region that John Togo continued fighting owing to his belief that Ijaws were marginalized. Togo is also believed to have engaged in criminal activities leading to the death of fellow Ijaw after the Ijaw-Itsekiri crisis. Among those with knowledge of the issue, however, there is a consensus that the Ijaw-Itsekiri crisis was the primary reason he joined the armed struggle in the Niger Delta.¹⁶

Just like John Togo, many Ijaw youths saw that crisis as a question of ethnic nationalism. Thus, the mobilization for violence against the state by those in the Warri area was seen by their communities as bravery, and the rebel groups that emerged as “freedom fighters.” They were joined by Ijaw youths from other regions who came to support them. Although the resource-based activism emerged from mainly Eastern and Central Niger Delta (Rivers State and Bayelsa State), the Ijaw from Western Delta brought to the fight experience gained from the violent struggle in their area, where they had fought against other ethnic groups in defense of their own. The perception was that the fight against the Nigerian state was similar to the fight against the Itsekiri ethnic group.

Political Violence

The return of Nigeria to democracy in 1999 led to an intense competition for power among rival political parties and structures, and the 2003 elections provided a foundation for intense political violence in the Niger Delta region. Political parties and politicians mobilized and provided arms to youth gangs to support their political aspirations. To demonstrate their loyalty to these politicians, the youth gangs violently intimidated voters and opposition politicians, attacking perceived opponents and often annihilating them.

This spate of political violence was observed in Rivers State, where youth gangs loyal to political parties were supported by politicians in causing mayhem among residents (Human Rights Watch 2007). The ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) had recruited and armed youth gangs that helped the party rig the elections. After the elections, however, these gangs turned against each other and struggled for the control of political patronage and space in Port Harcourt. Although seen as a series of clashes between two rival youth groups, the conflict created a foundation for the emergence of rebel groups in the Niger Delta. One such clash took place in August 2004 on the Njemanze waterfront between groups that later metamorphosed into the NDPVF, led by Asari Dokubo, and the NDV, led by Ateke Tom. The result was the destruction of lives and property (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

The arms and ammunition acquired by these youths during their campaign for political violence provided the initial startup support to carry out large-scale violence targeting oil infrastructure and expatriate staff, and the continuous engagement in criminal activities, such as oil theft and hostage taking for ransom, increased their financial capacity. By 2005, these erstwhile cult

groups recruited for political violence had fully evolved into rebel groups that fed into the overarching narrative of the state marginalization of ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta.

Criminal Violence

The Niger Delta, like most parts of Nigeria, experiences criminal violence that undermines the security of citizens within the region. The insurgency has provided an umbrella for all forms of violence to thrive, including those associated with crime. As everyday criminal activity in the community has increased, the rebel groups have also used acts inherently criminal in nature—such as armed robbery, kidnapping, and hostage taking—as strategies to finance their operations (Ibaba 2011). The consequence is that it has become difficult to differentiate between criminal violence and the ongoing insurgency.

The line between criminal violence and the Niger Delta insurgency is further blurred by the fact that some individuals belong to both urban criminal networks and the rebel groups, and their connections with both are often used to perpetrate violence in different contexts. Often, they hide under the cover of the rebel groups to engage in criminal activities in urban areas. Thus, although many are responsible for everyday crime in the region, they are also seen as members of the rebel groups, which has qualified them to benefit from the presidential amnesty and the DDR program.

Another criminal activity that has fueled conflict in the Niger Delta is illegal oil bunkering (oil theft). While this was a major source of revenue for militant groups in the region during the armed insurgency, they were not the only ones involved in it. As an activity, oil bunkering involves multiple actors, including government officials, civil servants, politicians, and security personnel.¹⁷ In recent times, entire communities have been known to participate in the illegal refining of oil that has been stolen from transport pipelines in the region. Many local individuals involved in oil bunkering were not mainstream militants; their involvement in the process was for economic gain. Yet, their participation has embedded them in the violent networks in the Niger Delta, placing them among the conflict actors in the region.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACEBUILDING IN THE NIGER DELTA

Despite the implications the different forms of violence and conflict have for peacebuilding in the Niger Delta, their existence has not influenced the current peacebuilding process there. This is a shortcoming that places the sustainability of peacebuilding in doubt. The current process is focused on the rebel-state conflicts, and the amnesty and DDR process initiated by the Nigerian government under late President Yar'adua was intended to end hostilities targeting the oil industry—an approach that did not take other forms of violence into account. Thus, although the hostilities toward the oil industry ceased, the other forms of conflict remained latent in the region.

Intracommunal, interethnic, and other forms of conflict created divisions within communities and between different ethnic groups that were only overtaken by the rebel insurgency. These other conflicts were not decisively resolved, and key issues, such as the struggle for community leadership in intracommunal conflicts and the struggle for land in interethnic conflicts, remain unresolved to this day. That they were not taken into account by the amnesty and DDR process makes it a shortsighted one, focusing on the eventual outcome of a long, nonlinear conflict process instead of dealing with the root causes of the different trajectories of violence that lead to large-scale insurgency against the state.

These conflicts that predate the rebel-state insurgency are beginning to resurface in the Niger Delta. Communities and areas where the rebellion took a manifest role are currently experiencing renewed forms of violent conflict at the local level. Yet again, these are not reported as crucial to the stability of the region and Nigeria at large. They are, rather, reported as localized issues, with no attention paid to the fact that the armed rebel insurgency in the Niger Delta was fueled by them.

The amnesty and DDR decriminalized all rebels without taking into account the different routes these individuals took to radicalization. It did not take into account the fact that some emerged as community warlords, others as political thugs, and some as members of criminal syndicates. It also went ahead to offer amnesty to opportunists who had participated in criminal activities in urban centers, who then took part in the amnesty and DDR process as “free riders” (Nwajiaku-Dahou 2012). Upon acceptance of amnesty and DDR, these individuals return to the society to face the same challenges that had fueled their violent indoctrination.

The struggle for leadership and land in communities is still part of the socioeconomic and political struggle in the Niger Delta communities from which ex-rebels are not insulated, despite their participation in the amnesty and DDR program. This has been demonstrated recently in repeats of confrontations in two communities that had militant groups: Peremabiri and Warri.

The history of the NDV-affiliated militant group that emerged in Peremabiri highlights how the privileging of militants in the Niger Delta conflict discourse undermines the understanding of other actors who are not participants in the rebel-state violence. The emergence of one of the key actors in this community conflict as a militant leader, recognized by government and empowered by arms, suppressed other factions in the community that had participated in the conflict, thus giving him the opportunity to dominate community politics and governance structures—the contentious issues that had led to the communal conflict to begin with.

The amnesty and DDR process led to the “civilianization” of armed rebels in Peremabiri and thus gave other factions of the conflicts that predate rebel insurgency an opening to reassert themselves in community governance. The ex-rebel group would not relinquish governance voluntarily, however. This set off a bitter struggle for power between ex-rebels and other indigenes that has claimed at least one life and led to a gun battle between the two groups (Vanguard News 2014). Other youth groups revolted against the continuing dominance of the NDV leader, who was forced away from the community by this attack and has not since returned.¹⁸

This renewed confrontation between different youth factions in Peremabiri over community politics and leadership issues similar to those that were previously in dispute demonstrates that the conflict that produced the NDV-affiliated leader still exists there. Hostilities might seem to have ceased and peace to have returned, but in visits to the community in January 2014 and November 2014,¹⁹ I found these tensions persist. Community members and victims recount their ordeal during the crisis that predates the militia insurgency, focusing on the communal conflicts instead of on the dominant rebel insurgency that informed the amnesty and DDR.²⁰ Unlike the Nigerian state and, to a large extent, the academic literature on the Niger Delta conflict, the local people are more concerned with the conflict narratives that affect their personal lives. Since these narratives differ from community to community, a peacebuilding effort that focuses on the overarching narrative

of rebel insurgency without paying attention to the nuanced and contextual issues in each community cannot be seen as sustainable.

The recurrence of conflicts in the Niger Delta has not been limited to intracommunal disputes. This same challenge has been presented by conflicts with an interethnic dimension in the Warri axis of the Niger Delta. The insurgency gave the armed rebels an advantage in the power structure in the Niger Delta, as they controlled communities and posed a threat to oil infrastructure and production. During its height (from January 2006 to August 2009), rebel attacks reduced oil production dramatically and forced the federal government to adopt a “carrot and stick” approach. The stick was direct military assault on rebel positions, and the carrot was indirect communications between politicians and representatives of oil companies that aimed to pacify the rebels so they would cease hostilities toward the oil companies. The pacification included the rebels’ empowerment through cash inducement and political patronage, which gave them a political advantage over other groups with whom they had been in conflict.

This advantage is seen in the dominance of the Ijaw in the struggles in the Warri area. Although both the Ijaw and Itsekiri shared experiences in development deficits and oil industry-induced pollution in the area, the predominance of Ijaw youths who had previously participated in the interethnic conflict there made the Ijaw the critical stakeholders in the peace process. Ultimately, the opportunities they gained from the rebellion suppressed other ethnic rivalries against them. The Ijaw youths were better armed and had a standing army of fighters that would more likely emerge victorious in any outbreak of interethnic violence.

In the aftermath of the insurgency, however, the struggle between the Ijaws and Itsekiris over the ownership of land and the location of the local government headquarters of the Warri South West Local Government area resurfaced, thus renewing the possibilities for violence over the same issues. When the Federal Government of Nigeria proposed to construct a multibillion dollar gas project in the Gbaramatu and Ugborodo areas of Delta State, the Itsekiri claimed complete ownership of the land, while the Ijaw argued that part of it belonged to Ijaw communities (O’Neil 2014). This disagreement was based on contradictory claims to land within Gbaramatu clan (particularly a place named Ikpokpo) in Delta State. The dispute is being led by two prominent leaders in those conflicts, Government Ekpemupolo aka Tompolo (Ijaw) and Ayirimi Emami aka Akulagba (Itsekiri),²¹ and it has

delayed the takeoff of the gas project. Ayirimi Emami's claim that the land belonged to the Itsekiri before it was annexed by the Ijaw demonstrates that, although the interethnic hostilities have ceased, the grievances and issues behind the conflicts remain unresolved.

The current struggle over the ownership of land could lead to another spate of interethnic violence in the Warri area—a situation arising from the failure of the peace process to take into account these unsettled grievances. By focusing on the rebels in the area, the amnesty and DDR process further empowered them over their previous rivals. Yet, the “civilianization” of these armed rebels opened up the space for those rivals to confront them in the face of a dispute in the region. This situation emphasizes the need for ex-rebels who are aligned with the Ijaw ethnic group to remain prepared for confrontations with other ethnic groups if the need arises.

In short, the peacebuilding process has been far from comprehensive. It has not addressed the root causes of conflict, nor has it addressed all forms of conflict in the Niger Delta. Instead, it has focused on the rebels in the region because of the insurgency's direct impact on the oil industry, and for this reason it will prove unsustainable.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis highlights the shortcomings of the current peacebuilding process in the Niger Delta. It demonstrates that the focus on main cleavages often misleads policymakers and scholars in the analysis of conflicts and also in proffering solutions to the challenges facing sustainable peacebuilding. In the Niger Delta, the misdiagnosis and shortsighted policy interventions that focus on the rebel-state insurgency are largely influenced by the desperation to stabilize the oil industry without addressing the root causes of the conflicts and by the different conflict narratives in the Niger Delta.

Further research to determine how these different narratives of conflict manifest in the aftermath of the amnesty and DDR process is crucial to understanding the “post-conflict” situation in the Niger Delta. Also important is to find new solutions for addressing the internal conflicts in the region, which laid the foundation for mobilization of rebel groups against the state. It is not enough to address the attack on the Nigerian state; the state must also initiate a comprehensive peacebuilding process that addresses all forms of violent conflict in the Niger Delta.

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NOTES

1. Interview with community member (1) in Peremabiri, Bayelsa State, on January 22, 2014.

2. Interview with community chief (3) in Peremabiri, Bayelsa State, January 19, 2014.

3. Interview with Community Development Committee (CDC) member (1), Peremabiri, Bayelsa State, January 19, 2014.

4. Interview with CDC member (2), Peremabiri, Bayelsa State, January 22, 2014.

5. Interview with community chief (3), Yenagoa, February 20, 2014.

6. Interview with community youth leader, Peremabiri, January 30, 2014.
7. Interview with community member (5), Peremabiri, January 16, 2014.
8. Interview with ex-militant (1), Yenagoa, December 29, 2013.
9. About 150,000 USD.
10. Interview with ex-militant (1), Yenagoa, December 29, 2013.
11. This is a pseudonym for an ex-militant leader. I have used it in this work to protect the informants that participated in my research.
12. Interview with ex-militant (1), Yenagoa, December 29, 2013.
13. It is noteworthy that other coastline communities in Bayelsa State, such as Agei, Ezetu, Fish Town, and Foropa, share cordial relations. The difference between their relations and those between Koluama and Sangana is that the latter two share a land boundary, while the others are far from each other and separated by tributaries and rivers.
14. *Utusan Online*, "Residents Return as Hope Grows for End to Nigeria's `Delta Wars,'" November 20, 2001, http://ww1.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2001&dt=1120&pub=Utusan_Express&sec=Features&pg=fe_02.htm#ixzz3SxcatWKc.
15. This became an issue during the amnesty and DDR process, which was an opportunity to get rid of the SALWs in the area.
16. Private conversations with former MEND member, January 10, 2015.
17. "The Amnesty, Illegal Oil Bunkering and Local Refining," roundtable report and briefing note, UK Niger Delta Study Group, University of Oxford, England, September 28, 2012.
18. Interview with CDC member, Peremabiri, November 20, 2014.
19. I conducted field research in Peremabiri under the PhD project "Reintegration of Ex-militants as a Condition for Sustainable Peacebuilding in the Niger Delta?" from December 2013 to February 2014 and October 2014 to January 2015.
20. This is seen in interviews I conducted across different villages in the Niger Delta.
21. Tompolo became the prominent warlord and general leader of MEND in the Niger Delta.

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