

Niger Delta: young men face exclusion and violence in one of the most polluted places on Earth

July 13 2020, by Modesta Tochi Alozie

After nearly seven decades of oil exploration in the Niger Delta, the Nigerian oil industry now [makes up](#) 65% of government revenue and 88% of foreign exchange earnings. But this oil wealth has come at a [terrible cost](#) to the local people and their environment.

Decades of [oil spills](#) and gas flaring have transformed the Niger Delta into one of the [most polluted places](#) on Earth. [About 300 oil spills](#) occur in the region each year and in 2011, a spill at Shell's [Bonga oil fields](#) released 40,000 barrels. Over 350 farming communities were affected, and 30,000 fishermen were forced to abandon their livelihoods.

Although local people are supposed to be compensated for oil spills caused by technical failures, this rarely happens because of a flawed process for [determining the cause](#) of spills. The [6.5 million](#) local people whose livelihoods depend on fishing, and many others who survive on farming, have watched their futures drain away with the oil.

Faced with increasingly desperate prospects, many young men in the Niger Delta have turned to militant violence. When I've discussed my research on the experiences of young people in this region with friends and strangers, many have been quick to question my decision to focus on the grievances of violent young men. I have never felt that criminality is the only explanation for militancy. Instead, I wanted to shine a light on the experience of local young men to help tell the story of this exploited

part of the world.

Where exclusion and violence collide

In a country where many [young people are unemployed](#), feelings of economic exclusion are common. But for young men in the Niger Delta, unemployment is one problem among many.

The culture in which young men are raised expects them to marry and to become providers. But marriage is often an elaborate process in Nigeria that requires lots of money. For many young men lacking modern jobs and the ability to farm and fish, marriage is simply too expensive. "We are the head of the house, but we cannot control the house" is a popular analogy that I often heard said.

United by shared grievances, young men began launching attacks against the oil industry in 2003, torching pipelines, kidnapping oil workers for ransom and killing soldiers deployed to protect oil facilities. Politicians also found a way to use militants by [paying them](#) to terrorise opponents and help win elections.

In 2004 alone, [over 100 people died](#) in violent clashes between rival militant groups and security forces. By early 2007, oil production [had fallen by 40%](#), forcing the federal government to launch the [Amnesty programme](#) two years later which offered young men monthly payments of US\$400 (£318) and development projects in return for dropping their weapons.

But many of these projects—including oil contracts—were awarded to militant leaders. Many more young men became militants because of this programme and the lucrative settlements it offered. Through violence, they were able to insert themselves into the oil economy through the back door.

Finding a future

Aside from turning to violence, young men in the Niger Delta are responding to their experiences of environmental harm in different ways. Some have become activists, demanding improved regulations and campaigning for their polluted land to be restored. Others are asking for modern jobs in the oil industry to compensate for the rural livelihoods they've lost. Those with the means to travel are migrating to cities in search of a better life.

But for Ken, a young man from Bodo village, travelling is not an option. Township life is hard, he says, but he is deeply attached to his native home. He likes the mangrove forests. He enjoys watching the dances by women in his community. He likes the friendliness of the villagers, and relishes his wife's soup made with periwinkles and freshly plucked vegetables from their backyard. He enjoys rural life and doesn't want to leave.

Transforming the lives of local residents will require radical changes, starting with how the region's oil money is spent. Young men from the communities most affected by pollution shouldn't be passive recipients of oil revenue who are only brought into the oil economy when they resort to violence.

While money remains a big concern, my research indicates that many local people would rather have a healthy natural environment than financial rewards from oil companies. Despite near constant protests against pollution, and the [UN Environment Programme's call](#) for immediate remediation of contaminated lands and rivers, not a lot has improved in the last decade. The hope of a better life is waning for many, and most of the young men I spoke to are convinced that oil has meddled with their destiny.

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