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**Introduction**

**E**xcept the Middle East and a few other flash points, particularly in Asia as a result of the global war on terror, no other region in the world has, perhaps, with consistency, been a hot spot in the last two decades as the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. From the early 1990s when the late environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, led the Ogoni struggle for the redefining of relations between the Federal Government and oil companies on the one hand and oil producing communities on the other, the Niger Delta and the issues which define and colour the region have been on the front burner of world news. Based on this spotlight, however, the region appears to be in the news on the negative scale: poverty, environmental degradation, abductions and blackmail, murders, cry for justice and equity, vandalism of oil installations, near-genocide, divide and rule tactics, etc. Some of the issues are sometimes exaggerated though, but, essentially, the region remains a real volatile spot that has been thrown up by the long, seemingly indifferent disposition to the plight of the region and apparent faulty policies by successive administrations and oil companies in the country. This article is arguing that for policies aimed at redressing the conditions in the Niger Delta to be effective, there is need for media support and, by extension, public support for such policies.

**Defining the Niger Delta**

The Niger Delta is an area comprising nine states of the Federation of Nigeria, namely Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. A home to the mangrove rainforest, the Niger Delta derives its name from River Niger, flowing primarily from west to east, through Guinea, Mali, Niger, Benin and Nigeria, to the Gulf

of Guinea. The river is the third longest in Africa (after the Nile and Congo) with a length of 4,180km. As it empties into the Gulf of Guinea, the river forms a wide fan-shaped delta, dividing into dozens of channels that wind through a maze of swamps and low-lying islands and depositing most of its sediment load. About 190km long, the Niger Delta is believed to be the world's third largest mangrove and fresh water swamp, a third of which is wetland. Largely inaccessible as a result of its difficult terrain, the Niger Delta remains one of the least developed regions in Nigeria. Yet in its belly and in the deep of its waters are buried the precious resources of oil and gas which are the chief source of contention in the region. The region accounts for about 90 percent of Nigeria's total annual earnings. Since the first successful drilling at Oloibiri in 1956, the region is estimated to harbour nearly 200 oil fields with well over 400 oil production and storage facilities scattered within its swamps and creeks. Nigeria is Africa's leading oil producer and the seventh in the world, with a production capacity of about two million barrels per day. The Niger Delta is the petrochemical hub of the continent of Africa. Just as the Niger Delta is a multi-state region, it is multi-ethnic. The Ibibio, Ijaw, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Igbo, Yoruba and others are some of the dominant ethnic groupings in the Niger Delta. Particularly in the state of Delta, the multi-ethnic arrangement often leads to bitter and murderous struggles among the major ethnic groups in the region. The oil and gas facilities in the region are operated by multinationals such as Shell – the largest player, Mobil, Chevron, Elf, Agip and Texaco, in joint venture operations with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, NNPC.

The Niger Delta region is a living paradox perpetually in motion. While it sustains Nigeria with its oil and gas resources, the Niger Delta languishes in age-long poverty, environmental pollution and degradation (resulting from sustained activities in the petroleum sector since 1956), low level of physical as well as human capital development. This

has, predictably, infuriated the region which now acts like someone pushed to the wall, in desperation, violently many times, to draw attention to the prevailing conditions in the area. The funding of development and ostentatious living in other parts of the country, particularly the Nation's Capital, Abuja, with funds from the region, contrasted by abject poverty and lack of development in the Niger Delta, plays a wicked mind's game on the psyche of people in the region.

As a result, the Niger Delta has become a hotbed of self-expression and self-preservation as well as criminality with international dimension, especially as the people watch helplessly as air as well as the myriads of rivers, creeks and farmlands are polluted daily. Expectedly, the Federal Government responds to acts of criminality with an iron fist, with a full-scale battle against the militants and ethnic militias on every front. And the fronts are indeed many: the Niger Delta Vigilante Movement (NDVM), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, MEND, the Coalition for Militant Action in the Niger Delta, COMA, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, MOSOP, and the Niger Delta Vigilante Services, etc. The multiplicity of fronts translates into a multiplicity of agenda, some of them shallow and vaguely articulated as well as inter-militia violence. The level of criminality and the publicity that attends every act of violence tend to project struggles for the betterment of conditions in the region from the point of militancy. Thus, it is daily becoming difficult to convince the man outside the Niger Delta, both nationally and internationally, that there are indeed non-militant campaigns to attract development to the Niger Delta. The immediate consequence is that genuine efforts are overlooked, and sometimes pass un-highlighted by the media, while acts of criminality are presented as the totality of the struggle for better conditions in the region.

The appalling conditions in the Niger Delta lead some people to believe that government has no concrete, measurable policies for the region. Those who take this view

anchor their position on two reasons. First, until the bitter and violent agitations started, there was no conscious attempt to address the conditions of the region. Second, the situation in the region, in spite of the intervention by government, appears grim and almost solution defying. That is to say, the intervention is yet to produce any remarkable effect in view of the enormity of the problem. Over time, government's policy in the Niger Delta could be said to be a mixed grill of stick and carrot, half-hearted and mischievous in intent and negative in manifestation, leaning towards incremental or disjointed implementation theory of policy making. The stick and carrot approach policy of the government comes through the use of palliatives, cushions and the gun.

Under the guise of fighting militancy, the government now points a gun at the region with the fingers permanent on the trigger. Occasionally, the trigger is pulled. An example was the killing of inhabitants of Odi village in Rivers State by the Obasanjo Administration. Palliatives do come though. In 1960, the Constitution established the Niger Delta Development Board to cover the Western Ijaw Division of Delta Province (Western Region) and Yenagoa Province, Degema Province and the Ogoni Division of Port Harcourt Province (Eastern Region) (Bassey, 2006).

Apparent successors to the Board are the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission, OMPADEC and the Niger Delta Development Commission, NDDC as well as the Ministry of Niger Delta. Unabated agitation in the region has compelled President Umaru Yar'Adua to announce a 15-year Master Plan for the region. All these policies, to say the least, are incremental and therefore suffer from disjointed implementation. Adebayo (1986) explains incremental policy as a situation where a policy maker, "uses practical devices which do not pretend to search for comprehensive solutions that may be difficult, or even impossible, to achieve. In adjusting one policy after another, the whole sequence may appear disjointed, and each tried solution is another incremental of the other, hence the name disjointed".

In 1971, the Federal Government, through the Offshore Oil Revenue Decree, deprived the littoral oil states of any revenue that accrued from offshore oil. This Decree vests all offshore oil revenues and the ownership of the territorial water and the continental shelf in the Federal Military Government (Bassey, 2006). This decree was as mischievous as it was negative. Attempting later to right this injustice and assuage the ill feelings caused by the 1971 Decree, the Federal Government promulgated the Allocation of Revenue (Federal Account, etc.) Amendment Decree 1992 which abolished "the distinction hitherto made between onshore and offshore oil mineral revenue for the purpose of revenue sharing." However, government was half-hearted in its solution as the decree provided thus: "An account equivalent to one percent of the Federation Account derived from mineral revenue shall be shared among the mineral producing states based on the amount of mineral produced from each state...."

The failure to canvas media support robbed policies in the region of the vital input that could make the difference between success and failure. It is not surprising that lacking in media and public support, the policies are tried, altered, tried in the altered form and tried again. The process is indeed disjointed and the implementation rightly so.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this article is the Agenda-setting Theory which credits the media with the ability to affect the perception of the audience. First highlighted by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the theory presupposes that audiences not only learn about public issues and other matters through the media, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media place upon it.

McCombs and Shaw believe that the mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agenda to the public agenda. They further write: "Here may

lie the most important effect of mass communication, its ability to mentally order and organize our world for us. In short, the mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about," (McCombs and Shaw, 1995, p.154).

The basic idea, according to McQuail and Windahl (1993), is that among a given range of issues or topics, those which get more media attention will grow in familiarity and perceived importance over a period of time, and those which get less will decline correspondingly. McQuail and Windahl stress that attention to some issues, and neglect of others, will have effect on public opinion, as people tend to know about those things which the mass media deal with, and adopt the order of priority assigned to different issues.

O' Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders and Fiske (1983, p.6) explain that agenda-setting deals with: "The question of what topics the media present to the audience, and secondly how information on those topics is presented. This relates to the dynamics of coverage; for example what spectrum of viewpoints, symbols and questions and so on are selected to construct a particular news item or documentary programme and crucially, how they are ranked, or accorded legitimacy and priority."

Agenda-setting is closely linked with "gate-keeping" as expounded by McQuail (1987). Watson and Hill (1993) press the point further when they hold that agenda-setting "defines the context of transmission, establishes the terms of reference and the limits of debates... Interviewers...are in control of pre-set agenda. They initiate, formulate the questions to be asked and have the chairperson's power of excluding areas of discussion."

The critical importance of this theory to the success of policies in the Niger Delta region lies in the fact that through the "process of interpretation, shaping, selecting, editing, emphasizing, de-emphasizing – according to the perception and the previous experience of those involved in the reporting of the events; and in accordance with the

requirements and characteristics of the means of reporting" (Watson and Hill (1993, p.115), the mass media bring the policy issues to the attention frame of the people of the Niger Delta. The functions of surveillance and correlation provide the mass media a window to simplify the issues involved for the audience to understand.

The success of the mass media in the agenda-setting role is also contingent upon the interaction of three agendas conceptualized by Manheim (1987) as cited by Severin and Tankard (1992, p.226), namely media agenda, the public agenda and the policy agenda.

- (i) Media agenda – the three dimensions are visibility (the amount and prominence of coverage given an issue), audience salience (the relevance of news content to audience needs), and valence (the favourable or unfavourable coverage given to an issue).
- (ii) Public agenda – the dimensions are familiarity (the degree of public awareness of a given topic), personal salience (interest perceived relevant to one's self), and favourability (the favourable judgment on the topic).
- (iii) Policy agenda – has the dimensions of support (action more or less favourable to a given position), likelihood of action (probability that a governmental body will act on the issue) and freedom of action (range of possible actions).

Manheim's conceptualization emphasizes the interplay of media agenda, public agenda and policy agenda to bring about conditions that enable the mass media to engender successful policies in the Niger Delta. Thus, the question must be asked: what amount and prominence is given an issue and how relevant is such an issue to the audience? This relevance depends on the extent that the public is aware or interested in the issue raised. Of equal importance is the question: what possibility exists that these issues will be supported or acted upon wholly or in a modified manner by a governmental body?

Thus policy issues should have audience salience as well as prominence in the media. This in turn engenders both public familiarity with, and support for, the issues at hand. Public support, then, encourages policy makers to take policy decisions that are in the perceived interest of the public as canvassed by the mass media.

### **The Mass Media and Broad-based Support for Policies**

The mass media are very crucial to the success of government policies in the Niger Delta and, by extension, peace and stability in the region. The mass media are non-institutional policy actors or players - terms used by Cahn (1995) to refer to individuals or groups that are involved in public policy making. Cahn divides policy actors into two categories - institutional and non-institutional. The institutional actors, so called because the law has established them, include the legislature, the president, governors, executive, agencies and the courts.

As policy actors, the mass media help to define social reality and influence policy outcomes in the process (Cahn, 1995). Graber (1995) argues that through high quality, thoughtful comments and debates on public issues, the mass media play a key role in supporting good policies and building decent societies. According to McCawley (2003), the mass media create broad-based support for good policies. For policies to succeed, the mass media must give their support. Sometimes policies in the Niger Delta fail, not because they are not good policies, but because there is lack of public support for the policies through the media. Public support is generated mainly by the media through discussions of policy issues by well informed persons. Policies that lack media support are likely not going to have community support because it is media support that creates community support.

It is not enough for solutions to be drawn up by those who are not in anyway affected by the Niger Delta problems, without subjecting their proposals to informed debates in the mass media. Such proposals may end up as impracticable as the policy maker's visit to the region itself! Designed and

packaged without any local content or cross-fertilization of ideas, such policies, when delivered to the people of the Niger Delta, may not be sustained, since they hardly touch the people at their points of need. In one word, such policies lack a participatory approach. That the mass media help to define social reality and influence policy outcome places as much burden on the institutional policy actors as it does on the non institutional, particularly the mass media. The mass media can only influence policy outcomes if they have access to policy proposals and subject them to public debates. The implication is that policy makers for the Niger Delta should not enshroud their intending policy or policies in secrecy until the time of implementation. There should be nothing secret about ideas that are intended to develop a people. Both the targeted people and the mass media should have access to the proposals to enable them to offer their input before policy implementation.

Budge-Reid (1999) emphasizes the importance of public policy discussions and alerts on the dangers in the failure to debate policy publicly: "Making sustainable policy that is not subject to informed public debate is rarely sustainable. Media should be at the heart of policymaking reflecting and communicating debates". Sound, publicly debated policymaking requires good, accessible information on issues.

However, the mass media are not expected, professionally, to wait until the policy maker, who may be uncomfortable that the mass media may rival him or become too critical of his proposals, informs them on issues. The mass media, therefore, are expected to ferret for information on issues that, in their own opinion, can help the cause of the Niger Delta. The media must be proactive, not reactive; they must lead and not be led. Given the suspicion the citizens usually harbour about their government, the mass media can fill that credibility void with their detailed exposé on issues in the Niger Delta. As professionals, the media should set the agenda, and assume the role of a leader. Leadership does

suggest a claim that the media elite know more than their clients, that is, their audience. They are expected to lead in the discussions of issues, show the light to the audience and, from the stand point of being better informed, guide the audience into making rational decisions (Elliot, 1977).

As the Niger Delta terrain is complex so are the issues on the region. Even more complex are government's claims of its involvement and intervention in the region. Such claims should be tested against what is on ground. Much of the conflict in the region arises from rising expectations caused by the difference between government's claims and pronouncements on the one hand and the reality on ground. The mass media should hold government accountable and cause it to regularly audit its claims with a reality check. The ultimate goal is to check government's reckless claims and reduce the frustration on the part of the people.

The Umaru Musa Yar'Adua Administration has enunciated a seven-point agenda for the nation and 15-year Master Plan for the Niger Delta. The mass media should bring home the seven-point agenda by highlighting how they are going to affect lives in the Niger Delta region. For a people who had been neglected by government, they need to know and be convinced that the seven point agenda and the Master Plan are for real and were not mere paper work designed to hoodwink them. This in turn may rebuild the people's confidence in government.

The public media are irreplaceable as a mechanism for moving a problem to solution. It takes the media to legitimize a problem as an issue of public concern. The media are, therefore, indispensable in creating awareness about a problem and bringing it to the attention of the public. When an issue has been accepted as legitimate, it is then easy for the people for whom the policies are made to accept the policies wholeheartedly and also canvas support for them. In addition, they should expose badly run public institutions

related to the Niger Delta, or the failure of public institutions to enforce existing regulations, or discipline incompetent officials. They should act as whistle-blowers.

Mass media support for policies will enable the media to strive to build consensus as well as bridges of friendship and understanding among stakeholders in the Niger Delta. Issues of common interest should be highlighted as such, while those that tend to perpetuate divide and rule among the populace should be condemned. Media support and understanding will thus place the media in position to re-orientate indigenes of the Niger Delta who have long suffered from abandonment in spite of their contributions to the national treasury. Having been psychologically traumatized, when they contrast the level of development in the area with that obtained in other parts of the country, the people of the Niger Delta need to be de-conditioned and re-conditioned, but the reconditioning will work faster if it is backed up by positive development in the region.

### **Towards Media-Policymaker Understanding**

It is interesting to note that the bulk of reportage on the Niger Delta has centred on negative issues – kidnapping, pipeline destruction, murder and other criminal acts. One cannot entirely fault this trend because these acts, whenever and wherever they occur, are good news items, and in the Niger Delta they tend to occur daily.

Reflective of reality as the current reportage may be, it does not represent the entire situation in the Niger Delta. Such slant ignores, almost entirely, the daily efforts of government and non-governmental organizations to bring succour to the people of the Niger Delta through deliberate interventionist policies. Thus, the media are awash with news stories which do not see the Niger Delta beyond poverty, underdevelopment and criminal acts, when, indeed, there are on-going efforts to improve the situation in the Region. It is important, therefore, for the mass media to also

beam a searchlight on these efforts to bring succour to the Niger Delta. Constantly neglecting this positive aspect in the stream of the day's intelligence while at the same time prominently featuring the acts of criminality tends to portray that government neither does anything good for the region nor does it have a policy at all. Under these circumstances, the public can hardly support any policies that are proposed or implemented by government. This calls for balance, objectivity and fairness in news reportage.

As earlier pointed out, both the media and the policy maker are part of the policy making process, their differing status and roles notwithstanding. Essentially, the two are policy actors or players (Cahn, 1995). Hence, both the institutional policymakers and the media share a common frame of reference – that of ensuring good policies for better living in the society, and in this case, the Niger Delta.

It is thus pertinent that the two institutions realize and appreciate this fact to enable them to regard each other as a necessary factor in successful policies for the Niger Delta. There is no doubting the fact that the ultimate task of policymaking rests on the institutional policymakers, yet the media, and perhaps other non institutional policymakers, should be allowed to make input into the policy making process. If the media are encouraged to support policies, then they should be acknowledged and credited as also being able to make policy input into the system. In the light of this, the institutional policy makers should encourage the media to take interest in proposed policies meant for the region with a view to laying it before the critical audience for analysis, interpretation, suggestions and even condemnation. If policies for the region must succeed, such policies need not be conceived and implemented within the hallowed confines of the sitting rooms or offices of the policy makers; they must be subjected to public scrutiny, approval or disapproval through the mass media.

It is equally necessary for policy makers for the Niger

Delta to frequently interact with the operatives of the media institution. The essence is for the two categories of policy stakeholders to interact at the problem-identification or agenda-setting stage in the cycle of public policy making. The interaction will afford policy makers the opportunity to explain in detail the direction of public policy to the mass media operatives, not on the airwaves or pages of newspapers, but in a face-to-face interaction. At such an interactive forum, seemingly technical details on a policy at hand are better explained by policy makers.

The forum is not for policy harmonization between policy makers and media operatives but for a better and deeper understanding of the process and intricacies of policy formulation by the mass media so that they can become more knowledgeable and better policy advocates. Sometimes, mass media operatives have only but scanty information on a problem that is a potential policy issue. The much needed information can be obtained during such interactions. If the mass media operatives do not understand and appreciate the policy at hand, it may be difficult for them to sell the policy to the public, since the policy makers get to the public through the mass media. Regular interactions will enable the mass media to generate public support for policies so made, for without public support, policies cannot stand.

On several occasions, policy makers and journalists view each other with suspicion and as professionals working from parallel divide. A media-policy maker understanding will then create an atmosphere for the discussion and minimization of such attitudes and enable the policy makers to look at policy input from the mass media objectively, and not from one's personal attitude. The reality, however, is that both the policy makers and media professionals work for the same goal of putting in place good, workable public policies. Regular interactions will therefore act as a confidence-building measure between them, so that they can approach public policy not from the standpoint of group bias or ego,



but from the level of objective reasoning. This is not envisaged as a policy-making forum because the task of public policy formulation is the reserve of institutional actors. It is only meant as an interactive session between journalists and policy makers to assist the two groups of professionals in discharging their roles very effectively and in a complementary manner – all for the good of the Niger Delta and Nigeria.

### Conclusion

The Niger Delta region is invaluable to the existence of Nigeria as a nation. In spite of its unrivalled position as the region that sustains the nation, the Niger Delta is an area in shambles where environmental pollution, as a result of oil and gas activities, has left the inhabitants in abject poverty and despair. Policies that have been targeted at restoring dignity in the region have largely been incremental and disjointed but essentially lacking media support. Given the institutional functions of the media, particularly surveillance and correlation, and the growing worldwide dependence on the media for the day's intelligence, we conclude that media support is an essential factor if policies made presumably in the interest of the region are to enjoy public support.

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