



## THE DEVELOPMENT OF UTOPIA OR THE UTOPIA OF DEVELOPMENT? A REALITY CHECK ON THE QUEST FOR SUSTAINABLE PROGRESS IN NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA.

BY

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### Abstract

*Development and the Niger Delta, are interrelated concepts that seems to elude intellectual comprehension because of the latter's 'slippery' reality due to allied terms such as 'coastal' and 'riverine' to 'delta' as well as the former's utopian foundations. While the Development's manifestation in the latter is a long sorted dream, the Niger Delta's state seems to defy the acceptance of the former despite several interventions as well as programmes for its operationalization. Some methodological problems have been identified. First is the problem of the Niger Delta delineation which combines human and physical geographic parameters, exposing a complex composition of the study area. Secondly, there is the misconception on the idea of development as only physical infrastructural provision, exclusively related, to roads, building of schools, hospitals, etc over the years. The above challenges have made it seem as though 'nobody' and 'nowhere' is actually being given attention or the attempt to advance the course of the people as well as environment, is a 'wild goose chase'. The paper is of the position that, the pursuit of the provision of information as well as support for the acquisition of skills, equipment and fund to pursue maritime related skills as well as businesses by the inhabitants of the inaccessible areas of the delta, is probably, the fundamental springboard for the development of the study area. The paper utilized the historical method with leaning towards ethnographic tools.*

**Keywords:** Development, Utopia, Niger Delta, Progress, Nigeria.

### Introduction

The concept of development is probably, the most sort after idea in human societies, as the idea of Niger Delta is in the intellectual circle in the Nigeria State. The grasp of the former idea, seemed to have eluded curious minds, who desire its constant manifestation in different areas of life. The quest to marry both concepts in actuality, had raised pertinent issues that had not being solved. In other words, the more one tries to comprehend the reality of what should be termed development in the Niger Delta, the less one's mind seem to understanding whether both concepts are sworn adversaries or are meant for each other.

The crises of definition, had rocked the Niger Delta as it had been viewed based on those scrutinizing issues at the time. Oil politics had basically played a major role in its present conceptualization. From the definition by the Independence Constitution of 1960 to the Presidential Directive No. 1, 1992, which formed the Oil Minerals Producing Area Development

Commission (OMPADEC), Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Cross Rivers, Edo and Delta, were included in its scope. The coming of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), altered the configuration to include Abia, Imo and Ondo in the Act establishing the Commission in 2000. Whether these changes were done based on environmental contiguity or political expediency, the idea of the Niger Delta has remained problematic as the issues of developing it.

The Niger Delta area which is seen as one of the largest delta in the world, boost of diverse flora and fauna considered beneficial to the lives of the peoples of the area as well as the Nigerian state at large. The emphasis of the area's description, would essentially be focused on its maritime nature which excludes other similar environment. Firstly, the Niger Delta's topography, is only two metres above sea level (Singh, et al, 1995:8). This places the study area, as the major drainage seat for discharge of the Niger River waters into the Atlantic

Ocean. In other words, the Niger Delta, comprises creeks, rivers and other water channels, that ensures proper evacuation of water and its 'passengers' to their respective destination, continuing the flow of the river cycle. It is important to note that, some of these 'passengers', are said to have been deposited into the body of the Niger Delta, forming fossil layers that had been exploited as 'black gold' ([www.offshoreengineering.com](http://www.offshoreengineering.com)).

Human interaction with this space, requires special set of skills to survive as well as meaningfully engage it as mobility is predicated on the river system. The Ijaw ethnic nationality, which is considered the fourth largest in the Nigerian state as well as a 'water bound' people, would be the focus of this study as they have 'arrogated' the idea of the Niger Delta to themselves over the years. Empirical evidences points to both moral and vocational training that had enabled inhabitants especially the Ijaws, to acquire existential stamina as virtues which include but not limited to; patience, respect for humans as well as nature, hard work, honesty, tolerance as well as discipline, to survive in the focus space (Okaba, 1999:168). These are worthwhile attributes, required of people enmeshed in the struggle for advancement. It is not therefore surprising that, the peoples of the area especially the Ijaw ethnic nationality, had been resilient not only in their ability to live in the area for unaccounted years but also, their consistence for self-determination in the Nigerian state.

The focus of the study area's historiography, had centred majorly on the development or underdevelopment of the Niger Delta as a result of the extraction of crude oil, gas and related resources to the detriment of activities that places the human personality as well as nature's sustainability as prime emphasis (Azaiki, 2009; Ibaba & Etekpe, 2013; Akpan & Etekpe, 2009; Diongoli, 2017; Ogbogbo, 2004). In other words, the writings on crude oil exploration and revenue allocation, had become the most valued thereby, neglecting attention on evaluating the progress of inhabitants in areas considered as their comparative advantage. It is this identified lacuna that occasioned the attempt of this article to swim against the tide of thoughts related to the advancement of the area by highlighting the place of the maritime economy to the betterment of the Nigerian state when enhanced according to its comparative advantage. The experimental specimen are the Ijaw people in particular, who have managed their environmental peculiarities for their continuous existence. Their progress should thus, be used as a benchmark to ascertain the level of development of the area that the Nigerian state cannot do without.

## Statement Of Problem

The continuous calls for the development of the Niger Delta since the colonial era, had been a regular one in the Nigerian state. The creation of specialized agencies which include, the Niger Delta Development Board (NNDB), Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC), as well as Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and recently, the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) as well as Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, had not ceased such calls despite the enormous fund allocated through them for her

advancement (Tamuno, 2000; Okoko, et al, 2006). This conjures the perception that, the 'abiku' nature of the agitations, was occasioned by either the strategies employed to engage the issues from the area by the Nigerian state over the years, had been counterproductive or the peoples of the area, had played significant roles in sabotaging the advancement of the 'water-logged' area (Ibaba, 2017). Whatever perspective one holds, might be 'partly' correct.

The reality check is that, the strategies and of course, the peoples of the area, have lost sight of the maritime comparative advantage, which should have laid the foundation for the region's development. In other words, the neglect of the maritime sector as well as relevant skills and knowledge, needed to survive, exacerbated the continuous underdevelopment of the Niger Delta. While home-grown solutions such as the CAABA<sup>ii</sup> had been proposed as development model for the study area's advancement (Etekpe, 2017), there is the obvious disconnect between the worldview of the people and the environmental representativeness of such ideas. It is this truism that warranted this paper's engagement of the elusive nature of development of the study area with special focus on supposed developmental activities, geared towards making the maritime sector and allied professions, more responsive to the yearning of the people (Alagoa, 1981).

## The Concept Of Development

The thoughts about development, evokes various mental picture that warrants comparing and contrasting the quality and quantity of life as well as amenities available in such given environment. It is sometimes interchangeably used with the idea of growth. In other words, economic growth is sometimes represented as economic development. It is thus, imperative to clear both terms before moving on. Growth has been described as a process of transformation (Goetz, 1991:905). It is essentially about the evolution of an individual or economy, from one stage to another. It has basic description such as growing, maturity and decadence. Put differently, it is likened to the cyclical explanation in history which explains the fundamental pattern of evolution of human societies in their rise, peak and decline stages (Sorgwe, 1997).

Development must be people-centred. It must have forward linkages to the various sectors of their economy as well as existential realities (Ake, 1981). In other words, the development of an environment, must be anchored on the utilization of the comparative advantage of the people, to address other challenges that might occur in their quest to advance their existence. For those in the deltaic environment, water transportation, is also expected to carry other sectors along in the quest for sophistication to ensure efficiency of occupations. For one to survive, movement is required to work or shop for sustenance. Movement thus, become the determinant factor in our daily existence.

Since the people of the area are maritime bound, the introduction of a higher level of effort-propeller for mobility in the riverine areas, was expected to affect the general life of the people by migrating them from manual efforts of movement to machine-oriented engagements, which could be

easily assimilated (Eweke, 2023). In areas of commercial fishing, boat-building, maritime security, eco-tourism, oceanography as well as movements related oil exploration amongst others, the advancement of the water transportation business with the introduction of motorized outboard engines, was expected to integrate the Ijaw people into the Nigerian as well as international economy properly where they would be key players in the maritime sector. The reverse had been the case since the twentieth century. In other words, the introduction of engine-boards, does not constitute development except the people had been able to assimilate the idea and practice of not only producing environmentally friendly machines but also, economically viable ones. Thus, there had been the problem of technology transfer since the Ijaw people did not go out of their way to get relevant knowledge pertaining to such machines like the Japanese did. The hitherto thriving Ijaw boat-building industry, which had places such as *Arugbo*<sup>iii</sup>, as specialized towns, have withered due to obvious desertion.

Griffin (1969:48) noted that, 'Underdevelopment as it is encountered ... is a product of history'. Put differently, development and underdevelopment are part of same process. To be explicit, it seems that, the idea of 'equality' is utopian. In other words, when people relate, the outcome of their interactions would make a part or parts more developed on one hand and others underdeveloped. This had been the pattern most progress analysis had largely taken in developmental historiography. Africa where the Niger Delta is domiciled, had been classified as an underdeveloped continent. In fact, the Nigerian State has steadily seen the decline of the standard of living of her citizens from the 1980s (Onwuka, 2019), which cumulated to her acquiring the touted title of 'Poverty Capital of the World' in the second decade of the twenty-first century. While it is true that, the various peoples of the country had suffered from internal factors which had made Nigeria not to utilize resources inherent in the territorial space to advance her course, there is also the obvious statistical as well as conceptual difficulties of using only numerical conventional standards in economics in analyzing underdevelopment.

Economists rely more on per capita income in their analysis of what constitutes developed and underdeveloped. The observation on the problems of conceptualizing the idea of underdevelopment, are hereby analyzed below. Although, the analysis is confined to areas termed underdeveloped and developing especially countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, there are rich oil countries that have per capita incomes well above the rest but are otherwise underdeveloped in their general economic characteristics. Second, there are a number of technical difficulties that make the per capita incomes of many underdeveloped countries (expressed in terms of an international currency, such as the U.S. dollar), a very crude measure of their per capita real income. These difficulties include the defectiveness of the basic national income and population statistics, the inappropriateness of the official exchange rates at which the national incomes in terms of the respective domestic currencies are converted into the common denominator of the U.S. dollar, and the problems of

estimating the value of the noncash components of real incomes in the underdeveloped countries. Finally there are conceptual problems in interpreting the meaning of international differences in per capita income levels (Goetz, 1991). Not exhausted yet, is the nomenclature 'developing' added as a midpoint between developed and underdeveloped. What developing mean, becomes very problematic should we take other related concepts as extremes without a mid-point.

Infusing the idea of social, political, and religious into the economic component of development to have, 'socio-economic development', 'political economy', 'religious development', dilutes the above interpretation. The concept of socio-economic development, moves beyond numerical analysis, to include the unquantifiable values of people, considered vital to their continuous existence. Issues of conflict resolution and management for economic induced engagements, perception of occupational importance and relevance to a particular people, accessibility and affordability of education as well as healthcare services are fundamental in interrogating this idea. The people of the Western Niger Delta had never had it good in terms of the provision as well as availability of the above in their environment. The concept of development is essentially engaged to ensure that, the existential realities are considered in any attempt to improve the lives of the people. The various developmental attempts have not considered engaging the environmental comparative advantage for the benefit of the people nor had their perception on what development was, comprehended. For example, the Ijaw people had by their standard, an advanced *aro*<sup>iv</sup> industry which could have been synchronized with maritime ideas from Europe to set this specialty on a sophisticated path than it was met (Oral Conversation with Capt. Soroghaye, 06/10/2021).

The twentieth century no doubt, saw the oppression of peoples of various parts of the world as the fangs of European and America capitalism, pierced through the cultural fabric of various societies. It did the same for the study area by regulating and relegating the main occupation of the people of the water-logged Niger Delta with the colonial government's as well as successive indigenous Nigerian administrations exploitation, having an 'I don't care' attitude towards the advancement of the maritime culture of the peoples of the area. The development of inland water transportation which introduced European idea as well as equipment and institutions to manage the business of movement and communications on the waterways, significantly contributed to consolidate the underdevelopment of the people of the Western Niger Delta in the twentieth century.

An important point needs to be clarified here about past efforts on developing a framework for the advancement of the area under discussion. The first of such exercise probably, relates to the touted Willink Commission Report of 1957. This report had been extensively quoted by various scholars for its acknowledgement of the environmental peculiarities and challenge of development of the Niger Delta. A cursory look at the report shows its weak appreciation of the history and intergroup dynamics of the area including the ecological potentials which should have provided the springboard for the

actualization of their yearnings. This was due to its leaning on European anthropological standards in understanding the peoples of the country. The Report was mostly concerned about entrenching British idea of voting power as a prerequisite for influencing government projects to the area, strengthening of Western democratic institutions especially the formation of non-ethnic party system and constitutionalism as the best protection against government neglect as well as discrimination (Willink Commission Report, 1958:30&95). Worst still, the Report haven acknowledged the genuineness of the petition of the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta, decided to give the developmental destiny to others who they asserted, 'did not understand the problems and environment of the people'. To this end, the Report did no justice to the plight of the people of the area. Alternatively, it supported the 'Commissionization' and 'Committeeization' of any developmental effort by the Nigerian state which was supposed to emanate from the people. The idea of intervention as development effort, offends the sensibility of Africans generally and the Ijaw people in particular, as it presupposes that, the people in focus, had to be assisted by external forces. However, taking the etymology of intervention from its Latin root, *intervenire*, which signifies 'to come between', interrupt', the Ijaw people in particular, have been deprived of attaining their fullest potentials by expressing themselves (Mojoyinola, 2019).

In summary, the views about development above, have not captured the peculiarities of the environment of the Niger Delta which is considered maritime oriented. The Ijaw ethnic nationality who are majority in the area, had been out of the Nigerian state architecture of decision-making, which is essential for one's advancement. This paper adopts the Todaro (1981:71) position of development, which fundamentally addressed three key issues related to human existence. They include; i. Life sustenance ii. Self-esteem and iii. freedom from servitude which the Ijaw people have little or no control over in the Nigerian state. Any development attempt that does not equip the people with the needed skills, knowledge and tools to engage their challenges in the above areas of need, is not sustainable development.

### **Understanding State-Centric Approach To Niger Delta Development In The Twentieth Century**

The discourse on the idea of development in Nigeria, had essentially been made in two fold. The first has to do with the concept of development as it relates to interactions between as well as within peoples and a description of the practice of development in Nigeria. From a cursory breakdown of the concept of development, there are two levels of analysis. The first has to do with what emanates from International (international-state) relations while the other is the national (nation-state) level engagements respectively. Thus, the people-oriented or bottom-up approach had been lacking in such conversations.

The essence of nation-states relations is to further one's domestic development. This is grounded on the principle of economic nationalism (Rourke, 2001:389). Thus, foreign policy which is usually dominated by economic issues

(Orugbani, 2006:47), projects the interests of nation-states to advance various sectors of their society at the expense of other actors. Although Ikime (1978) averred that, there was a 'Nigeria' before British imperialism, the British facilitated the creation of the Nigerian state in the twentieth century, to simplify its exploitation. As had been seen in the actions of the colonial enterprise, the British authorities took certain steps to transform inland waterways transportation in the area through the arrogation of powers to control economic activities around waterbodies and spaces as well as provision of infrastructure. However, it was in line with the British imperial ambition of developing her home-country with the human and natural resources of the colonies. This also included the extraction of monetary obligations such as taxes, fines, and levies as well as other dues from the indigenous peoples for the former's benefit. The Dual Mandate by Frederick Lugard (1912), aptly captures the interests of the British government to various peoples of the world whom they projected their development concerns over.

On the national level, it involves a country, taking concerted steps to promote the economic wellbeing of the state. The British colonial administration yielded 'self-government' to the various regions of Nigeria in 1952. The planning and execution of programmes as well as projects from this point, supposedly fell on government constituted by various individuals who had indigenous status. However, issues of how Nigeria should relate with other nation-states, was confided to British dictation until 1961 when the Anglo-Nigerian Pact that was supposed to keep the former in the control of the latter, was resisted. In reality, Nigeria has not gotten the leverage to 'exploit' others for her advancement as done by the European colonial adventure. Thus, Nigeria is a true reflection of how humanitarian, nation-states should be to one another.

In a bid to drive development in Nigeria, there had been articulated positions of government known as Development Plans. These plans were aimed at repositioning the country on the part of indigenously induced progress. These strategies were conceived to achieve economic independence from external influences especially from Europe as much as possible, as the independent nation-states were still tied to the apron-string of external control after 1960. During a conference on industrialization in developing countries, it was observed that, many 'Third World Delegates' saw development as not only a means of improving living standards but also a tool for building national strength and prestige, as well as an asset in international politics (Usoro, 1977:64).

A proper nomenclature has to be given to the Nigerian approach to development. From a critical look or interrogation of government approach to advancing the various regions via the economy of the country, the authorities have a FLAT RATE MODEL in concept and practice. Some features of the Flat Rate Model of Development needs to be outlined here. Firstly, 'development' is centrally planned. The central authorities, do things from the confines of their comfort zone without any or very little input of the various peoples of the country especially those who might not have any form of



presence in the decision making process. Secondly, the planning of the advancement of the country, had been based on projections for one segment of the transport industry which had been the landed mode (road and rail). In other words, there had been the absence of the consciousness of such government establishment, about the needs of the riverine area especially the Ijaws of the Niger Delta.

For the economy, crude oil has been the main consideration for the planning of the development of the Nigerian state. In all, any meaningful and people-oriented development, must be rooted in their worldview as well as environmental reality. Development cannot be said to be significant without the input and consideration of how it would benefit those it was originally meant for. Thirdly, it is bureaucratically laden with 'red-tapism' and unnecessary bottlenecks by government agencies and parastatals, concerned with the conception as well as execution of such policies. In this process, there had arisen the problem of inter-agency collision. This had been seen in the conflict or struggle for control by one agency against another, on issues in a particular sector. Thus, the multiplicity of governmental bodies, had contributed to the problem of proper implementation of policies. For example, the Nigerian Maritime Safety and Security Agency (NIMASA), had been in 'unhealthy rivalry' with the Nigerian Ports Authorities (NPA) as well as National Inland Waterways Authority (NIWA), over the control of security issues in the waterways, inland to the country ([www.nigeriamaritime360.com](http://www.nigeriamaritime360.com)). There also is the Nigerian Navy as well as Marine Division of the Nigeria Police Force, bickering on whom should superintend over security issues in the waterways, inland to the Nigerian State. These and many other issues, inhibit the focus on the environmental peculiarities as well as comparative advantages of the Niger Delta, which is a *sine qua non* for its development.

There is also the problem of economizing the value system of various peoples on monetary terms. Thus, numerous component of the maritime culture of the Ijaw people, are downplayed as not having any importance or business worth. Areas such as religious worships, fishing festivals, sea food diving as well as barter for services of canoe paddlers, cannot be measured with the state-centric tools of economics.

## The State Of The Maritime Potentials In The Niger Delta

The Niger Delta have enormous human and material resources. The human component houses the environmentally conditioned specialization in areas of boat-building, fishing, diving, canoe paddling, oceanography and weather forecast, maritime security and salt-making, to mention but a few (Angaye, 1999:273-281). On the natural resource side, there are sand and gravel quarry, shales and clay, sandy beach ridges available for tourism development as well as the wind and wave abilities for energy generation especially for coastal area dwellers (Okonny, et al, 1999:15-16).

The interaction between the Ijaw people and their environment over the centuries, had enable the evolution of specialized professions which respected nature by maintaining

stability in their relations. It is important to note that, while such skills enabled people to earn a living, it also taught life survival skills of patience, selflessness and commitment to the wellbeing of others<sup>v</sup>. For example, young children are introduced to the idea of swimming and paddling to enable them have the needed confidence to engage their environment and by extension, life situations meaningfully<sup>vi</sup>. Ethnographic evidences abound on how children, between the ages of 3-5 years, are prepared with survival abilities which could make them fit into their parents' maritime oriented professions of fishing, canoe-making, trading, as well as water transport services.

The building of human capacities is fundamentally required for an enduring establishment of service industries related to the area. Infrastructure are wasted investment when provided without considering the place of the people in the scheme of things. Angaye (1999:273) noted that, the pursuance of wrong development strategies, could even slow down the overall potential advancement of the economy of a given people. This is essentially the case as the chase for modernization, follows the craving for roads and the presence of oil exploitation multinational companies, had hit an all high in the area. In this case, there are consistent calls for the relocation of operational headquarters of such companies to the Niger Delta (the Nation Newspaper, 2017). This push does not consider the comparative advantage of the peoples of the area, as regards their functionality in the petroleum industry. While it is true that, indigenous peoples should participate in the oil business, the abandonment of their traditional occupations has further complicated their economic advancement. Problem of economic sustainability of the Nigerian economy with crude oil production, had been raised. Ikorukpo (2017) had pointed out that, the challenges of insecurity in the area, would be further heightened with the bleak future of 'black gold' lucrativeness.

A relation to the issues of development, is that of constant and perennial flooding of the area. Critical observation shows that, the abandonment of the environmental peculiarities of the area, had resulted to the blockage of natural drainages and rivers due to the urge to construct roads as well as other infrastructure for urbanization. The unique nature of the environment had not being taken note of as these projects are embarked upon for 'showmanship' without recourse to environmental sustainability. The constant silting of the area, had not also been adequately addressed via waterways clearing programmes (NAI/WARPROF. 127/3). This was done in the colonial era before the advent of indigenous leadership in the Nigerian state especially from 1960. The negligence of waterways maintenance since independence, has severe ecological challenge for the area as water bodies are gradually drying up due to the constant depositing of debris from other areas and the challenge of climate change. This has to be meaningfully addressed to save the area from losing its exceptionality, which is an asset to the Nigeria state should it be properly utilized.

The undeveloped human capacity related to the maritime potentials, had been blamed on governance as well as leadership failure in the Nigerian state (Ibaba, 2017). Public

fund meant for issues of the area, had been treated as 'Bush Meat' as government positions are perceived as rotational for personal aggrandizement. This had enabled the development of psychopathic and sociopathic characters, who do not care about others, their community or country. Thus, the State had groomed individuals who are not 'humans' as they have no empathy for anyone. As had been observed, individuals with sociopathic personality are usually filled with pent up anger, given their feeling of alienation, deprivation and rejection by the society. They lack social responsibility and have the attitude to take from society, in a cruel way, what they perceive to have been denied them (APA, 1994). They exhibit self-centredness which manifest as corruption in governance, public service and other sectors of the economy; illegal oil bunkering, kidnapping and hostage taking for ransom; piracy; cultism and the sabotage of oil installations for pecuniary gains (Ibaba and Ikelegbe, 2010).

The non-focus on the maritime potentials of the average Ijaw youth, had made some evolve negative tendencies related to crime, influenced by their environment (Benabai Kings Oral interview, 06/10/2021). In other words, gangs and violent oriented groups in the area, mostly have a maritime orientation in nomenclature and modus operandi. As at 2009 (the Presidential Amnesty Proclamation year), of the prominent fifteen (15) militant groups in the Niger Delta, thirteen (13) are of the Ijaw ethnic nationality while two (2) are related to the Itsekiri ethnic group. The point is that, both groups are more prominent in the swampy area of the Niger Delta. With the lack of government presence in the creeks, these non-state actors emerge to take charge of these ungoverned spaces, imposing their terms and conditions of existence on people in the area. Names of such groups in Ijaw area include; Niger Delta People Volunteer Force, Adaka Marines, Martyrs Brigade, Niger Delta Volunteers, Niger Delta Militant Force Squad, Niger Delta Coastal Guerrillas, Meinbutu Boys, Arugbo Freedom Fighters, Iduwini Volunteer Force, Egbesu Boys of Africa, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, The Coalition of Militant Action in the Niger Delta, and the Niger Delta Peoples Salvation Front. That of the Itsekiri area are Agbukumasa and Jenekpo. One must acknowledge that, security concerns for landed areas, are different from that of water-logged<sup>vii</sup>. Also, the non-adaptability of the Nigerian security architecture, to cater for the area in focus ensured that, the creeks had become safe haven for every manner of criminal activities which the common people, bear the brunt. Although there have been various Joint Task Force Operations in the Niger Delta, these might not be needed should be people be involved in securing their environment by empowering them with relevant skills as well as support for the advancement of allied industries.

There are overlapping engagements between militant and violent-oriented groups in the Niger Delta. Members of a particular group either form coalition with others to birth that militant group or members of a particular violent-oriented group form the militant group. Gangs such as Icelanders and Greenlanders, which were neck-rivals in the Rivers-Bayelsa axis, are aligned to the maritime perception of their

environment. Thus, we have young people who have a sense of belonging, affiliated to groups whose worldview are influence by the ecological peculiarities but cannot meaningfully engage the varied opportunities the area has to offer due to the abandonment of the comparative advantage inherent therein for the chase of 'utopia' progress for the setting. For example, young people in various gangs and nocturnal groups, pride themselves as 'sailors' or 'mariners' but have no basic skills in the industry neither can most of them even swim when thrown into a river with life jacket. That is the irony of having lots of opportunities embedded in an environment but could not be harnessed for human capital development due to leadership failure on the part of government and elites of the region as well as the application of 'quick fix' strategies to challenges of the area.

## CONCLUSION

The paper has attempted a look at the issue of development of the Niger Delta as basically the challenge of mobilizing human resources indigent to the area, to maximize the environmental potentials in this maritime space. While it is acknowledged that, enormous effort had been put into the area to 'turn it around' for the better, the strategies had been unsuitable as the fundamental factors, the human as well as nature dynamics, were not considered in such arrangements.

Development should promote the comparative potentials of people and enable them make informed decisions that would ensure their continuous existence. The peoples of the Niger Delta especially the Ijaw group, have been held down by state forces, to live the way they see themselves. With crude oil exploitation activities ensuring their environment being polluted, maritime potentials untapped, and ability to chart their future endeavours bleak, the resource control agitation should migrate to non-oil dimensions especially the emergency of bringing back the consciousness of engaging the maritime potentials for sustainable development of the area. This is in line with an earlier advocacy that called for the placement of the people's participation as prerequisite for the actualization of their aspiration (Odoemene and Eweke, 2017).

The above would 'free' the Ijaw and other ethnic minorities, from the shackles of being dictated to on the shape their developmental future would take; a trap with strong roots in British orchestrated plans to keep the area underdeveloped in collaboration with 'internal forces'. The Ijaw people could thus, commence the crusade of redirecting their energies to attention on the maritime nature of their environment and strengthen areas of comparative advantage for coping in a world without oil or one where it is not solely depended on for energy provision around the world.

<sup>i</sup> *Abiku* refers to the Yoruba concept of a child that had been given to the parents to make them suffer having a one.

<sup>ii</sup> *CAABA* is an acronym for Communal Agro-allied-based agricultural model. It was propounded by Ambily Etekpe, a Professor of Political Science, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Nigeria.

<sup>iii</sup> *Arugbo* means a land of boats, from the Ijaw concepts of *aru* (*aro*) – boat, and *ogbo* – land. The above depicts the reality of a thriving maritime industry to the mind of the people before intercourse with European way of life that had changed the course of their existence in many directions.

<sup>iv</sup> *aro* which ordinarily refers to as boat, constitute the existential issues related to mobility for the Ijaw people. Due to the riverine nature of their environment, they were able to invent and evolve various kinds of sea going vehicles. In other words, anything that could make one move from one point to another is called *aro*. Thus, there is *ogbo-aro* (land boat), *agono-aro* (air – boat) and *beni-aro* (water-boat). While the water transport system seemed to have comparative advantage as a result of their everyday engagements, they still had within their worldview, the progressive idea of a ‘boat’, moving both on land as well as the air before intercourse with people from outside the continent.

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