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After the Armed Militants:

Strengthening Civic Action In Nigeria's Niger Delta

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Introduction

This policy paper examines the long trajectory of the Niger Delta peoples' struggle for social and environmental justice since crude oil was discovered in the region in 1956, and argues that nonviolent civic action is the most effective way for them to achieve their goals.

The paper analyses the long-running efforts by certain actors in the region to secure a just political settlement in the wider Nigerian federation by violent means, beginning with Isaac Adaka Boro's short-lived armed rebellion in 1966, the attempted military coup against the General Ibrahim Babangida-led junta in 1990 by Niger Delta civilian and military elements, and the violent push by armed youth militants beginning in 2006 to resolve the matter and argues that these violent efforts worsened the plight of ordinary Niger Deltans instead of improving their condition.

The second section of the paper traces the genesis of non-violent protest in the region – writing protest letters to the government of the day, peaceful demonstration at oil production sites and participating in 'minority' politics at the state and federal levels. The Federal Government's revenue allocation efforts also provided an opportunity for Niger Delta politicians and civic leaders to ventilate their grievances against a central government that had appropriated the bulk of oil revenues.

Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and Ken Saro-Wiwa provided a model of non-violent civic action that Niger Delta leaders drew on as they engaged successive military governments in their effort to obtain economic and environmental redress. Saro-Wiwa made this explicit as he battled Royal Dutch Shell and its Nigerian subsidiary in the early 1990s. This is the subject of section three.

The fourth section focuses on the men of violence in the region – Isaac Adaka Boro, Great Ogboru and the 1990 coup leaders, and the young men of Odi who attempted to obtain justice through the barrel of the gun. The policy paper argues that the efforts of these armed actors did not bear worthwhile fruit and in fact worsened the situation of the ordinary people of the Niger Delta.

The emergence of the Movement for the Emancipation Of the Niger Delta (MEND) in 2006 was the culmination of efforts by these men of violence to forcefully alter the region's grim condition. The consequence of this doomed effort has been further militarisation of the region by the Nigerian government's Joint Task Force (JTF), escalating corruption as a fallout of the government's sponsored Amnesty Programme, oil bunkering on an industrial scale, unregulated artisanal refining of crude oil and further strengthening of the multinational oil companies who now openly rely on the Nigerian military to 'protect' their installations. This is the focus of section five.

The paper concludes by arguing that the three main environmental nongovernmental organisations in the Niger Delta – Health Of Mother Earth Foundation, Environmental Rights Action, and Social Action - should ramp up their research, documentation and advocacy work using the tools of civic democracy and pooling together community-based organisations and smaller NGOs in a broad-based network of civic action. The paper highlights the work and life of the late Claude Ake, a Niger Delta indigene who through books and civic engagement as a public intellectual, provided a worthy example of civic-democratic action geared towards peaceful resolution of the Niger Delta crisis.

2. **Genesis:** The Path Of Nonviolent Protest In the Niger Delta

Properly understood, oil production, particularly in onshore sites, constitutes an egregious act of violence on the living environment. When oil production in commercial quantities commenced in Nigeria's Niger Delta in 1956, local communities at first thought that this was a good thing and that it would lead to substantial economic benefits for themselves. As Royal Dutch Shell set down its oil rigs and opened its first oil wells in Oloibiri in present day Bayelsa State, it quickly dawned on local people that their farmlands, rivers and fishing streams were being violently assaulted and that the oil company did not provide any safeguards.

The initial response of these community leaders was to despatch delegations to the oil company's offices in Port Harcourt to protest this wanton destruction of the environment which they had relied on for millennia for economic sustenance. But Shell officials ignored these delegations. Community leaders then turned to the regional government then headquartered in Enugu and pressed its officials to intercede with Shell on their behalf. When nothing came of these efforts they turned to the central government in Lagos, writing letters of protest outlining their plight at the hands of Shell and calling on government officials to regulate the activities of the oil company. To further press home their grievances, youths in these communities took to staging peaceful protests at oil production sites, and taking photographs of these polluted sites and sending them to newspapers for publication.

The empanelling of the Willink Commission by the colonial government in 1958 also provided a vent for Niger Delta leaders. The task of the commission was to look into the fears of minority ethnic groups as Great Britain began to prepare to hand over the reins of government to indigenous political leaders. Niger Delta political leaders used the opportunity afforded by the Willink Commission to raise their fears of economic and political domination by the majority Igbo ethnic group. They argued that since oil had been discovered in their communities their areas were now economically viable and called for the creation of new states out of the Eastern Region where the region's ethnic minorities would have control over their own affairs. Sadly, the Willink Commission declined their request.

The outbreak of civil war in the country in 1967 also provided Niger Delta political leaders an opportunity to peacefully push for outcomes benefitting their people. In a bid to secure their support against Chukwuemeka Ojukwu who had moved to remove the Eastern Region from the federation under the name of Republic Of Biafra, Yakubu Gowon, who had emerged Nigerian military Head Of State following the assassination of General Johnson Aguiyi Ironsi, created twelve new states in the country, three in the Eastern Region. Two of these were in the ethnic minority areas, fulfilling the long-running agitation by Niger Delta leaders for states of their own.

However, the creation of new states turned out to be a hollow victory for the people of the Niger Delta. As the Gowon administration began to prepare to conclude the civil war, it enacted a Petroleum Decree in 1969, abrogating the provisions of the 1963 constitution that had placed oil mineral in the control of regional governments. Henceforth, the 1969 decree imperiously stated, all minerals including oil would be under the control of the Federal Military Government in Lagos.

Niger Delta leaders did not like this development and peacefully protested against it by writing letters to the Federal Government pressing for a return to the previous regional arrangement. This was war time, however, and there was little they could do when the Gowon regime ignored their letters. General Gowon followed up the 1969 decree at the end of the war with a panel headed by I.O. Dina to work out a new revenue allocation formula for the country. It must be borne in mind that the Federal Government had emerged from the civil war in 1970 as very powerful indeed, and was moving towards centralising all administrative instruments in the country. It was in this atmosphere that Chief Dina recommended a new revenue allocation formula wherein the bulk of the oil revenue was handed over to the Federal Government, with all states of the federation sharing the remainder equally. The Niger Delta states that bore the pains of oil production were not given any consideration in this new arrangement, and its leaders justly protested to General Gowon.

It is to Gowon's credit that the Dina Commission report was not implemented even though its general spirit continued to guide the actions of his administration until it was overthrown in a military coup in July 1975. Niger Delta leaders were to resume battle when the civilian administration of Shehu Shagari asked Dr Pius Okigbo to give the nation a new revenue allocation formula in 1982. Borrowing a leaf from Dina, Okigbo proceeded to share the oil revenue between the centre and the states and ignored the push by Niger Delta leaders to set aside a fair portion of this revenue for the region from which this oil was obtained.

The establishment of OMPADEC in 1991 by the Babangida administration can be seen as the culmination of the peaceful push of the people of the Niger Delta for environmental and economic justice, starting in the early 1960s. It has been stated in some quarters that OMPADEC was General Babangida's knee-jerk response to the April 1990 coup against his regime led by Niger Delta civilian and military elements. This, however, is a superficial reading of the matter. Protests against environmental pollution by the oil companies had been building up since the early 1980s, sometimes taking the form of forced shutdowns of the operations of the oil companies. Successive governments in Lagos had been taking note of this even though they did not act to ameliorate the situation.

The April 1990 coup was merely a continuation of a long-running chain of nonviolent civic action led by Niger Delta leaders, and the appointment of Alfred Horsefall, a Niger Delta indigene, to lead OMPADEC was a clear indication that General Babangida was aware of these nonviolent agitations and wanted to placate the people of the region. OMPADEC was designed to tackle ecological challenges as a fallout of oil production. It was also charged with providing the Niger Delta communities with social services to aid their development.

On paper OMPADEC looked perfect, but the process of implementation soon turned out to be a nightmare. OMPADEC officials were highly corrupt; worse, they did not know how to

go about proper project design, and projects were sited without regard to the actual needs of local communities. Community leaders were not consulted on how best to carry the local people along, and it was only a matter of time before General Babangida's successors took another look at the agency and consigned it to the junkyard. Even so, OMPADEC was an important watershed to the extent that it concretely underlined the grievances of the people of the region and what needed to be done to urgently address them.

3. **Nonviolence:** Gandhi, Luther King and Saro-Wiwa's Secret Weapon.

Physical violence has always attended oil production in Nigeria's Niger Delta. As peaceful protests against environmental and economic injustice heightened in the region in the 1980s, Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), the Nigerian subsidiary of Royal Dutch shell, established a security branch called Shell Police and charged it with the task of 'policing' the company's installations. Shell Police were armed with weapons, and they regularly harassed and brutalised local people deemed to be hostile to the company's activities. The other multinational oil companies operating in the region soon followed Shell's example and established security outfits of their own.

Even so, this development did not impel Niger Delta political and civic leaders to answer violence with counter-violence. They continued to maintain their nonviolent stance in engaging the oil companies. They may have been inspired by the example of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Ken Saro-Wiwa, political leaders who used the tactics of nonviolent protest to confront far more powerful opponents and emerged triumphant.

Mahatma Gandhi: 'Wear them down with nonviolence'

Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian lawyer educated in Great Britain, developed the tactics of nonviolent political protests working with Indian immigrants in South Africa in the early decades of the 20th century. South Africa was a racially segregated society at the time, and the ruling Europeans treated Indians and black Africans with contempt and consigned them to the bottom of the economic and social order. In such cities as Durban and Natal Indians were forbidden to live in the same residential districts as Europeans. Menial jobs were reserved for them, and even so their pay was paltry. Indians could not vote, and they were required to carry passes wherever they went.

South African Indians invited the then young Gandhi to come to South Africa to represent them in legal cases. On arriving in the country, Gandhi was shocked at the maltreatment of his fellow Indians and began to mobilise them to do something about this. He would make them to gather in crowds and go to government offices, administered by Europeans, to protest against laws and policies of the government deemed to be discriminatory against Indians. The government regularly unleashed the police against Gandhi and the other Indian protesters, but Gandhi maintained a peaceful stance and asked his followers not to retaliate with violence.

Gandhi combined this nonviolent stance with regular meditation. He took care to maintain friendly relations with European officials on a personal level, and sought to win them over

through force of argument. Gandhi's long stay in South Africa was eventful. It was there that he honed his tactics of nonviolent struggle, tactics that he further developed when he returned to his native India to lead the battle for independence from Great Britain.

On arriving in India, Gandhi sought out like-minded civic leaders and together they began to mobilise the ordinary people to begin to agitate for self-rule. The British colonial government was firmly entrenched in power at this time and so did not take Gandhi and his small team of followers seriously. Gandhi embarked on a nationwide tour, preaching nonviolence and independence and soon more Indians began to listen to him. He established a small commune where he practiced vegetarianism and simple living, weaving the cloth that he wore and insisting that the future of India lay in agriculture and self-reliance.

By the mid 1930s the Congress Party that Gandhi led had become a major political force challenging the British colonial government. It was in this period that the British resorted to violence and intimidation in an attempt to prolong colonial rule in India. When Gandhi brought out thousands of Indians into the streets of the towns and cities to march and demand for independence, the British replied with guns and batons. Gandhi himself was arrested several times and put in prison. But throughout this turbulent period he maintained his stance that Indians should reply the powerful British with only peaceful marches. They should not be armed with guns or sticks or any other weapon. Even when they were hit with the butt of British guns they should just smile and continue their peaceful protest.

As the Second World War ended in 1945, an exhausted British faced a Gandhi and his Congress Party that was now very powerful and in control of the minds of millions of ordinary Indians. Gandhi had achieved this feat without firing a single shot. Great Britain had no choice but to capitulate and India was granted Independence in 1947. Mahatma Gandhi did not live to enjoy the fruits of the independence he had worked so hard to bring about, however. He was assassinated by a young man who felt that Gandhi was too accommodating to Indian Muslims. Even so, the tactics of nonviolence that he inaugurated spread throughout the whole world and inspired other political leaders to emulate him.

Martin Luther King: 'I have a dream'

The Reverend Dr Martin Luther King, the African American civil rights leader, was only a teenager when Mahatma Gandhi was battling the British colonial government in India with the weapon of nonviolence. President Abraham Lincoln had issued a proclamation ending slavery in the United States in 1865. For a brief period following the end of the American Civil War during which some southern states attempted to secede and continue with the practice of slavery, African Americans enjoyed freedom and were able to vote in elections, amongst other civic rewards. But this was short-lived. Southern states soon introduced new laws which segregated blacks from the rest of society. Black people could not vote; they could not attend good schools; hotels and restaurants were barred to them; in buses and other public transport they were consigned to the back. In short, black people were forced back to the days of slavery.

This was the grim situation of black people in the United States when Martin Luther King, a young Baptist pastor, set out to end it beginning in the mid-1950s. The trigger was a young

black seamstress, Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat in a bus for a white man in Montgomery, a city in Alabama in southern United States. Parks was put in detention by the government and black people replied by boycotting the city transport service. Martin Luther King was the pastor of a small church in the American south at this time, and the Montgomery bus boycott soon attracted his attention.

Luther King was a gifted orator and original thinker, and his sermons in church usually moved the congregation to tears. He was widely read, and was familiar with the work and life of Mahatma Gandhi. He decided to emulate Gandhi and use the tactics of nonviolence to confront the white leaders of the southern United States who had held down his fellow black people for a hundred years following the end of formal slavery. Luther King established a civic organisation and began to tour black churches where he preached nonviolence and the need to stand up to southern whites.

At first he did not make any headway. Held down by Jim Crow (segregationist) laws for decades, black Americans were afraid that if they protested against these laws, white people would unleash the Police against them. But Martin Luther King persevered, pointing out that the tactics of nonviolent struggle had worked in India and that the struggle of black Americans for their civil rights was protected by the American Constitution. He urged his fellow black Americans to come out into the streets and march peacefully in protest against racist laws. He also urged them to go to restaurants and hotels and schools reserved for white people and insist that they be served.

Martin Luther King soon began to galvanise black crowds wherever he went. They began to march in the streets in their thousands, demanding an end to racial segregation and the enactment of laws empowering them to participate in American life as full citizens. The Federal Government, with John Kennedy as President, was at first reluctant to steer these laws through Congress, but faced with massive black protests in the southern states, began to invite Martin Luther King and other black leaders for dialogue. Meanwhile, in the southern states white leaders dug in and sent police dogs and water canon to disperse protesting blacks. But with Luther King in the lead, the former continued to maintain their nonviolent stance even as police officers clubbed them down. In several instances black leaders were abducted from their homes and killed. Luther King's own home was fire-bombed and he too was regularly detained in prison. These tribulations did not sway him f rom his nonviolent stance, however.

The result of these peaceful protests was the enactment by the Federal Government of the Civil Rights Act, quickly followed by the Voters Right Act. Black people could now vote; they could also go to any hotel or restaurant they wished and be served without the usual molestation by whites. Schools were desegregated, and black children sat alongside their white counterparts to receive instruction. The apogee of Martin Luther King's efforts was the March On Washington in 1963, to call attention to unemployment among black people and the fact that that their civil rights were still not accorded to them in full. Thousands of people, black and white, gathered in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC to hear black leaders speak about their peoples' plight and what still needed to be done. It was on this occasion that Martin Luther King delivered his now immortal 'I have a dream' speech where he called on black and white people to sit together at the table of brotherhood.

Luther King continued his civil rights work, further expanding it to address rising poverty and inequality in the United States. He gave speeches, led peaceful marches, and called on American political leaders to bring about a nation founded on justice and equity. But his new

stance against widespread poverty was beginning to ruffle feathers in certain powerful places, and in 1968 Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone to lead a peaceful march of sanitation workers. He was only 39.

Martin Luther King believed deeply in the power of nonviolence to galvanise seemingly weak people and make them fearlessly confront their oppressors. He put this in practice in the southern part of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, and so doing, won civil rights for his people.

Ken Saro-Wiwa: 'Sing, Ogoni Sing'

Ken Saro-Wiwa, like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King before him, believed in nonviolence as a weapon to confront more powerful opponents. As a young man in the university in the early 1950s, he saw first hand in his native Ogoni the deleterious effects of oil production and wrote protest letters to the government. Shell was the sole operator in Ogoni, and Ken Saro-Wiwa felt that the company could be persuaded through civic and peaceful means to conduct its affairs in Ogoni in an environmentally responsible manner.

Ken Saro-Wiwa was a government official in Rivers State in the 1960s and 1970s before resigning and setting up as a businessman. By the 1980s protests against Shell and the other oil companies had reached a crescendo in the Niger Delta. The region's civic leaders, including Ken Saro-Wiwa, also felt that the region was not getting its fair share of the oil revenues and that something had to be done about this injustice.

This was the general mood that informed Ken Saro-Wiwa's writing of the Ogoni Bill Of Rights in early 1990. The bill spelled out the injustice the Ogoni had suffered in the hands of the Nigerian government and Shell since oil production began in Ogoni in the late 1950s, and argued for a new arrangement wherein the Ogoni would receive a fair share of the oil revenue obtained from their land, the environment protected, and Ogoni people represented in Nigerian political institutions in an equitable manner.

Saro-Wiwa followed up with the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), a grassroots organisation designed to actualise the demands of the Ogoni Bill of Rights. Youths, women, professionals and chiefs had their individual organisations but affiliated to MOSOP. Saro-Wiwa wrote an anthem and designed a flag for the organisation. It is significant that MOSOP was formed just a few months after Shell invited Nigerian soldiers and anti-riot police to neighbouring Umuechem where the company had oil wells and flow stations. The people of Umuechem had mobilised to peacefully protest against the company's unethical practices in their community, stressing that they did not get any financial benefits from their oil and that Shell was destroying their farmlands and fishing streams to boot.

The oil company's response to Umuechem's legitimate protest was to unleash the full wrath of the Nigerian state against the community. Soldiers and police invaded the town, burning down houses and killing several notables. Saro-Wiwa was aware of this bloody incident, but still went ahead to prepare MOSOP for a confrontation with Shell and the Nigerian government. He made it clear to all MOSOP members that they were to go about their activities protesting against economic and environmental injustice in a nonviolent manner even if Shell replied with violence.

By 1992 MOSOP and Ken Saro-Wiwa had become a household word in the entire Ogoni. Peaceful marches were organised in community after community where the demands of the Ogoni Bill of Rights were read out and community members made to pledge loyalty to MOSOP and its goals. In 1993 Saro-Wiwa led thousands of Ogoni people to Shell's installations in their land and peacefully shut them down. Shell workers were also expelled from the land. This was after Shell and the Nigerian government ignored MOSOP's ultimatum that back royalties be paid to the Ogoni people for over 30 years of oil production. It is significant that not a single Shell worker was harassed or killed during this operation.

Saro-Wiwa also took the Ogoni case to the international community – the United Nations, European and American environmental NGOs and such television networks as CNN and BBC. Everywhere Ken Saro-Wiwa went he preached the philosophy of nonviolence – at home in Nigeria and abroad. It was at this time that Shell and the Nigerian government began to collaborate to put down the Ogoni revolt with violence. Lt. Col. Paul Okuntimo, an officer of the Nigerian Army, was charged with the task of suppressing MOSOP with violence and he did this with uncommon brutality. Women were raped; men were killed or brutalised and whole villages were burnt down by armed troops commanded by Col. Okuntimo.

Ken Saro-Wiwa refused to move away from his nonviolent stance in the face of this provocation. He regularly called on MOSOP members not to retaliate against Shell and Okuntimo but instead to come out into the streets singing peace songs and insisting on the demands of the Ogoni Bill Of Rights. Ordinary Ogoni obeyed Saro-Wiwa and maintained a peaceful stance even as Okuntimo continued to kill their people and destroy their homes. Not knowing what else to do to contain MOSOP, the Nigerian government put Saro-Wiwa in detention, but following widespread protests, was forced to release him after a couple of months.

Shell and the government then resorted to the tactic of divide-and-rule in Ogoni. Certain notables were lured away from MOSOP and encouraged to oppose Saro-Wiwa. It was during a meeting of some of these notables in Giokoo, an Ogoni village that some youth, angry that MOSOP was being undermined, stormed the venue of the meeting and killed four of these notables. The Nigerian government saw an opening here and declared that Saro-Wiwa had masterminded the killing of the four notables although he was nowhere near the scene of this bloody tragedy. Following a judicially-flawed trial, a trial in which the Nigerian government and Shell made clear that it was their desire that Ken Saro-Wiwa be convicted for murder, the apostle of nonviolence and eight other MOSOP officials were hanged in Port Harcourt prison on 10 November, 1995.

But in death, Ken Saro-Wiwa achieved notable victories for the people of the Niger Delta. Four years after his hanging the 1999 constitution that inaugurated the democratically-elected government of President Olusegun Obasanjo ceded 13 percent of oil revenue to the various Niger Delta states from where this oil was obtained. Further, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), charged with the task of facilitating social and economic development of the region, was established by the Federal Government to replace the comatose OMPADEC. Umaru Yar'Adua, Obasanjo's successor as President, followed up these efforts by establishing the Federal Ministry of the Niger Delta to further consolidate the work of NDDC. Clearly, Ken Saro-Wiwa's deployment of the weapon of nonviolence has yielded fruits, even at cost of countless lives.

It is significant that Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Ken Saro-Wiwa met with violent death even as they continued to purse nonviolent civic action. Even so, their efforts yielded

concrete benefits for their people, benefits that could not have been gained had these three apostles of nonviolent civic action resorted to violence. The next section of this policy paper examines the attempts by men of violence to bring about progressive change in the Niger Delta to the extent that these efforts unleashed unsavoury consequences.

4. Cometh The Men Of Violence

In the first section of this policy paper we noted that the strategy of choice of Niger Delta civic and political leaders following the emergence of unregulated oil production in their communities was nonviolent civic action. But the path of peace was not always followed in the region. There were elements who insisted that the Nigerian government was intransigent and that positive change in the Niger Delta could only come through the barrel of the gun. In this section we highlight the action of Major Isaac Adaka Boro, Great Ogboru and his fellow coup makers, and the young men of Odi as they moved to change the status quo by force.

Isaac Boro's Shortlived 'Revolution.'

Isaac Adaka Boro, an Ijaw who was educated at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, was bitter with the government of the then Eastern Region and the Federal Government because he felt that the development needs of the people of the Niger Delta was being neglected in the early 1960s. Oil production in the region was still in its infancy, and the enormous revenues derivable from this resource was still unknown. Even so, Boro felt that the Niger Delta was endowed with enough natural resources to finance the rapid development of the region and that both the regional government in Enugu and the Federal Government in Lagos just did not care to bring this about.

Isaac Boro decided that the only way to end the plight of his people was for them to break away from Nigeria and establish a new Republic of the Niger Delta. He gathered a handful of followers and armed them with rifles and they took to the delta swamps, preaching the gospel of the new republic. Boro had not done any mobilisation of the ordinary people of the region before he declared the new republic, and so no one rallied to his flag. Boro and his men overran a few government establishments but soldiers and policemen were despatched from Enugu and the 'revolutionaries' were arrested after a few days and imprisoned. This brought to an inglorious end Isaac Boro's 12-day 'revolution.'

Isaac Boro was later to join the Nigerian Army when civil war broke out. He was commissioned a major but was killed in action near Port Harcourt. Boro's efforts to bring about a just political settlement of the Niger Delta crisis failed because he did not undertake civic mobilisation of the people before embarking on his project. Following his death in 1968, Boro was virtually forgotten in the Niger Delta until his memory was resurrected in the late 1990s by the Ijaw Youth Council whose members were casting about for heroes of the 'struggle.'

Great Ogboru And The Coup Makers

Great Ogboru, a young Niger Delta businessman resident in Lagos, was like Isaac Boro similarly angry that oil derived from his region was used to develop other parts of Nigeria while the latter wallowed in poverty and environmental degradation. This was in 1990, and General Ibrahim Babangida, a northerner was in power as Head Of State. Ogboru began to plot with several young Niger Delta officers in the army to mount a military coup against General Babangida and put in place a new government where Niger Delta civilian and military actors would call the shots. The inner circle of the coup plotters was later expanded and several Middle Belt officers, including Major Gideon Orkar, were brought into the plot.

What made this coup plot different from others preceding it is that it was largely financed and planned by civilian elements from the Niger Delta who later brought in young military officers to execute it. The coup, mounted in the early morning of 20 April, 1990, was bloody. Several army officers were killed even as the coup plotters took over the main radio station where Major Orkar broadcast to the nation, spelling out the grievances of the people of the Niger Delta and the Middle Belt against the Babangida junta. Significantly, Orkar also announced, even as the coup was still in progress, that several northern states had been excised from the Federation as they were seen to be oppressing the ethnic minorities of the Middle Belt and the Niger Delta and enjoying a disproportionate share of the Niger Delta's natural resources while contributing nothing in return.

It was a bewildered Nigerian people that listened to Major Orkar's broadcast that April morning. Nobody knew what to make of it. However, as morning dawned it turned out that the coup attempt had been crushed by soldiers loyal to General Babangida and Major Orkar and several other coup plotters taken into detention. Great Ogboru and few other military officers who had worked with Major Orkar evaded arrest and secretly left the country. General Babangida ordered the mass detention of officers and men of the Nigerian Army who had mounted the coup. They were subsequently tried by a military tribunal and executed. Among them was Major Gideon Orkar.

The foiled coup brought to the nation's attention the long-running grievances of the people of the Niger Delta. The resort to violence failed to bring about tangible benefits, however. Some have argued that General Babangida's decision to establish OMPADEC shortly after the coup attempt was a direct fallout of Great Ogboru's move to forcefully resolve the Niger Delta crisis. This is not so. Niger Delta leaders had been pressuring the Federal Government and the oil companies for decades, and the establishment of OMPADEC was a response to this troubling fact. Further, it needs to be pointed out that Ken Saro-Wiwa established MOSOP in the same period as Great Ogboru's failed coup, indicating that civic action in the Niger Delta to protest the Federal Government and the oil companies' acts of injustice was building up.

The Irate Young Men of Odi

Odi is a small town in Bayelsa State. Following the Niger Delta-wide mobilisation of youth drawn largely from the Ijaw ethnic group to protest against economic exploitation and environmental degradation led by Oronto Douglas, the environmentalist, and the Ijaw Youth Council in 1998, the Federal Government deployed soldiers massively in the region to forestall any threat to the oil companies' installations. Douglas and his followers had put out a document titled The Kaiama Declaration in which they detailed the sufferings of the Ijaw at the hands of the oil companies and the Nigerian government, pointing out that the oil obtained from their land had laid waste to farm lands and fishing waters thus impoverishing ordinary Ijaw. Like Ken Saro-Wiwa's Ogoni Bill Of Rights, the Kaiama Declaration also enumerated the monetary value of the oil taken from Ijaw land since production began in 1956 and asked the Federal Government for a new fiscal arrangement in which Ijaw communities would henceforth get a fair share of the oil revenue.

The Federal Government, then under General Abdulsalaam Abubakar, not only ignored the demands of the Kaiama Declaration but deployed warships and several army brigades to major Ijaw towns. As Oronto Douglas brought out Ijaw youth in a peaceful march to put out gas flares in the oil companies' flow stations, they were met with gunfire. Several Ijaw youth were killed and countless others thrown into detention. Soldiers spread out into Ijaw villages maiming and brutalising people.

It was in this atmosphere of official highhandedness and brutality that some young men obtained guns in Odi town and cordoned it off, declaring it out of bounds to Nigerian police and army. These armed young men were responding to the violence of the Nigerian government, and they said that the nonviolent stance favoured by Oronto Douglas and the other officials of the Ijaw Youth Council did not apply to them.

When a contingent of policemen was despatched to Odi to arrest the young men, the former was ambushed and killed. When news of this incident reached the ears of Olusegun Obasanjo who had emerged President following the end of military rule in May 1999, he gave the governor of Bayelsa State a seven-day ultimatum to arrest the young men in Odi or else he would take military action against the town. When the seven days elapsed and the governor was unable to apprehend the young men, President Obasanjo despatched an entire army brigade to Odi who proceeded to raze the entire town to the ground. Several people were also killed.

The irate young men of Odi were part of the general Niger Delta milieu of glaring injustice and the violence the Federal Government had deployed to continue to prop up this arrangement. They felt that civic protest by Ijaw leaders including the new Ijaw Youth Council had not yielded any worthwhile results, and that 1999 was a good year to resort to violent tactics. They did not achieve their objective of obtaining justice, instead triggering the destruction of their town by a Nigerian army that obeyed orders issued by a ruling class long inured to the cries of the people of the Niger Delta.

The futile violent stance of Isaac Boro, Great Ogboru and his fellow coup plotters and the irate young men of Odi was to be given greater scope as the Movement for The Emancipation Of The Niger Delta (MEND) emerged in the region in January 2006.

5. MEND And The Assault On Civic Action

The Movement For the Emancipation Of the Niger Delta (MEND) did not emerge suddenly out of the blue. The elections that brought about Nigeria's Fourth Republic in May 1999 had been characterised by vote rigging, voter rigging and violence. In the Niger Delta politicians recruited youth and gave them arms to be deployed against their rivals. When these politicians took office later in the year, they discarded these youth who then in anger began to deploy the guns the politicians had given them to kidnap oil industry workers for ransom. Some youths later branched off and obtained more sophisticated weapons and bombs with which they began to destroy the installations of some of the oil companies, arguing that these companies were in consort with the Nigerian government to oppress their people.

This was the situation in which an Ijaw youth, Asari Dokubo, established the Niger Delta Volunteer Force and modelled it on Isaac Boro's 'revolution' of 1966. Dokubo made it clear that his outfit was a radical departure from the peaceful stance of Ken Saro-Wiwa and Oronto Douglas and that he intended to confront the Federal Government and the oil companies with arms because, in his own words, 'these people understand only the language of violence.' Henry Orkar, a young Ijaw man and arms dealer emerged on the scene during this period and began to supply Asari Dokubo and other men of violence in the kidnapping racket with weapons in return for cash.

Meanwhile, on the political scene in Bayelsa State, a core Ijaw state, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, the governor was brazenly looting the state's treasury and putting the proceeds in his bank accounts in Europe and the United States. Following an investigation by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Alamieyeseigha, who was holidaying in London at the time was declared wanted for corruption by the Olusegun Obasanjo-led Federal Government. He was detained by the London police awaiting trial but escaped from custody and returned to Nigeria. President Obasanjo intimidated the Bayelsa State House of Assembly to impeach Governor Alamieyeseigha. Following his loss of immunity, the Obasanjo government threw him into prison and his deputy, Goodluck Jonathan, became governor in his place. All this was in 2005.

It was the collision of all these forces that threw up MEND in early 2006. MEND was formed by a disparate group of young men, mainly Ijaw, who were protesting against the Federal Government and the oil companies while at the same time indulging in kidnapping oil company workers and other crimes to make money. MEND's first public statement was to demand the immediate release of Governor Alamieyeseigha and Asari Dokubo. The latter had been arrested and detained following the overrunning of his military camp in the Niger Delta creeks by Nigerian soldiers.

When the Nigerian government refused to set free these two men, MEND replied by setting off explosions destroying several oil installations. It also took to the internet, threatening to shut down the oil industry in its entirety and thus crippling the Nigerian

economy which relied on oil exports for 95 percent of its foreign exchange earnings. Following subsequent bombings of oil installations by MEND, oil prices surged in the international market even as oil production in Nigeria decreased precipitously. MEND insurgents had adopted hit and run tactics, and the army troops deployed by the Federal Government to find and destroy them were simply powerless.

MEND's tactics was soon copied by other violent groups in the Niger Delta, and by 2009, the Niger Delta was not only awash with weapons but kidnapping of oil workers, murder and general mayhem were the order of the day. The Nigerian economy also began to feel the impact as oil production halved. This was the situation when Umaru Yar'Adua took office as president with Goodluck Jonathan, an Ijaw, as his vice. Yar'Adua quickly moved to resolve the Niger Delta crisis, using Vice President as his go-between. But the armed militants ignored Jonathan, insisting that a peaceful resolution was longer on the table.

President Yar'Adua then gave the armed militants two weeks to lay down their weapons or face military action. When the militants still refused to put down their weapons, helicopter gunships moved into Gbaramatu in Delta State, home base of Government Ekpemupolo, a leading MEND commander and bombarded his camp. The camps of other armed militants were similarly targeted, leading to considerable loss of lives. This was when the militants caved in and accepted the amnesty deal offered by the Yar'Adua government. They were to hand in their weapons and disband their followers in return for monthly stipends. Armed youths were also to be given training in skills acquisition to enable them get jobs in the oil companies and other industries. Some of these commanders were lured with lucrative multi-million Naira contracts to protect the installations of the oil companies.

Following the death of President Yar'Adua in 2010, Goodluck Jonathan took office. He oversaw the Amnesty Programme, and ensured that the monthly stipends of the militants were regularly paid. So far the amnesty deal has held and an uneasy peace has returned to the hitherto turbulent Niger Delta. However, it must be pointed out that the fundamental demands of the people of the Niger Delta – a fair share of the oil revenue and regulated oil production in which their ecology is protected – have not been met. Instead, MEND and its latter-day copycats further constricted the democratic space in the region, mounted an assault on peaceful civic action and generally reversed the movement of Niger Delta civic and political leaders in the direction of a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

Democracy affords actors the opportunity to dialogue and seek trade-offs as they work towards peaceful reconciliation of conflict. Following the return of civilian democratic rule in the country in 1999, there emerged an opening for Niger Delta political leaders to lead the region's non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations in nonviolent negotiation with the Nigerian government and the oil companies. MEND's move towards guns and violence shut down this opening for civic action, and further strengthened the men of violence on the side of the Federal Government and the local communities to take the law into their hands.

The Federal Government, even as it continues with the Amnesty Programme, has further empowered its Joint Task Force (JTF), a combined Army, Navy and Air Force outfit to continue its militarisation of the Niger Delta. The JTF still arrests and intimidates local people and work closely with the oil companies to exploit oil in an environmentally irresponsible manner. Oil bunkering on an industrial scale is widespread in the region, leading to loss

of revenue in the millions of dollars annually. Local youth not captured by the Amnesty Programme have resorted to artisanal refining of stolen crude oil, causing widespread ecological damage.

Some militant commanders have parlayed their former position to emerge as billionaire-contractors working to 'protect' oil industry installations. This practice began during the government of President Goodluck Jonathan who was anxious to see the Amnesty Programme emerge as a success story. These militant commanders were invited to Abuja and put in expensive hotel accommodation and their every demand met. When Muhammadu Buhari took over as President in 2015 he initially moved to have some of the militant commanders arrested, accusing them of perpetrating sundry crimes. But told by his advisers that these former commanders still maintained a hold on their youth followers in the Niger Delta and could plunge the region into renewed violence and anarchy if rubbed the wrong way, President Buhari back-pedalled and embraced the Goodluck Jonathan practice of giving them lucrative oil industry contracts.

The peace currently prevailing in the Niger Delta is an uneasy one, to the extent that the Amnesty Programme and the buy-over of militant commanders have merely papered over the open sore that is the Niger Delta crisis. MEND's resort to violence did not resolve this crisis. Instead, it mounted an assault on peaceful civic action, the only weapon known worldwide as capable of delivering deep and lasting peace and justice. It is to this that we now turn.

6. Conclusion

Towards Civic-democratic Action: The Example Of Claude Ake

The Movement For The Emancipation Of The Niger Delta (MEND) has been disbanded, but the organisation still casts a long shadow on the Niger Delta. The several civic and democratic organisations that were birthed in the region in the early 1990s and which powered nonviolent protests against the oil companies and the Federal Government are now a pale shadow of their former robust selves, and the foundations that supported them are no longer as forthcoming as was the case in the past. On their part, the Federal Government and the oil companies pay more attention to the demands of the former militant commanders who in turn have positioned themselves as the prime interlocutors in the Niger Delta crisis.

This development is dangerous. Long lasting peace cannot be flow from the barrel of a gun but through persistent dialogue and nonviolent civic engagement as exemplified by the work of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Ken Saro-Wiwa. The end of military rule and the inauguration of civil democratic governance in Nigeria in 1999 has provided an opening for solutions to the Niger Delta to be peacefully deliberated by all contending parties. True, elections in the country have not always been fair and transparent, but the democratic space, flawed as it is, nevertheless offers civic actors in the Niger Delta a handle with which to push for continued dialogue.

There are some leading non-governmental organisations operating in the Niger Delta presently. These include Environmental Rights Action/Friends Of The Earth Nigeria, Health Of Mother Earth Foundation, and Social Action. These groups are positioned strategically in the region and have been working these past several decades to peacefully articulate the grievances of the ordinary people of the region and bring them to the attention of the Nigerian government and the oil companies. They have not always received sufficient foundation grants to enable them hire adequate staff and ramp up their work in the Niger Delta, but they have managed to do outstanding work with the modest resources available to them.

The return of democratic rule in the country in 1999 and the negative activities of Niger Delta politicians not only siphoned off workers from these NGOs, it also muddied the civic water they operate in. During the heyday of MEND and its copycat militant groups, Environmental Rights Action and the other NGOs had to struggle strenuously to make their voices heard. Worse, this coincided with the decision of several international foundations to reduce funding to Niger Delta NGOs and community-based organisations, making it difficult for them to continue to operate at maximum capacity.

With the demise of MEND and the growing realisation that the Amnesty Programme has not provided credible solutions to the Niger Delta crisis, attention has returned to the work of Environmental Rights Action, Health Of Mother Earth Foundation, Social Action and others. This is an auspicious moment for these NGOs to reinvigorate their work in the region and leverage the democratic space, constricted as it is, to further strengthen civic action among local actors.

Top on the list of these efforts must be to be put in place a network of Niger Delta NGOs and community-based organisations, pooling their various strengths to more effectively engage the oil companies and the Nigerian government. There are several of these organisations in the region. Most of them are poorly resourced, administered badly, and are unable to mount effective advocacy campaigns. Environmental Rights Action, Health Of Mother Earth Foundation and Social Action should introduce regular training to further strengthen these groups and turn them into credible partners in the work of returning the Niger Delta to economic and ecological health.

Further, the leading Niger Delta NGOs must strengthen their in-house research and documentation divisions. Environmental Rights Action carried out considerable research and documentation in the 1990s but this has since tailed off. It must be revived across the leading NGOs. Advocacy work is difficult and very expensive. Even so, the NGOs must beef up this aspect of their work. An effective way of doing this is to work through community-based organisations in the region, empowering them with resources to act as their voice in the local communities. This is collaborative work.

Health Of Mother Earth Foundation has positioned itself as a policy think tank, going beyond everyday advocacy to calmly thinking though the Niger Delta crisis and producing policy papers advocating lasting solutions. This effort is not only important; it should be encouraged by international foundations through generous grants that will enable the organisation to hire talented staff to do this work.

It is a scandal that there are not many think tanks in Nigeria presently. This is because wealthy Nigerians and international foundations shy away from this sector. This is a sad development, and something should be done to reverse it. Europe, North America and Asia are well-served by policy think tanks that serve as an alternative to the government of the day, researching public policy alternatives and pressing these on both the government and the citizenry. Nigeria and the wider African continent should not be wanting in this regard. Health Of Mother Earth Foundation should therefore be seen as a worthy test case and all efforts made, locally and internationally, to see that it emerge as a Nigerian think tank robustly intervening in the debate on how best to resolve the crisis in the Niger Delta.

Democracy, properly understood, is the government of the people. The ordinary people of the Niger Delta have been struggling since oil was discovered in their region in 1956, to peacefully bring about an arrangement whereby this oil can be exploited while given due regard to the local environment and the impacted communities given their fair share of the oil proceeds. Successive military administrations were hostile to these demands even as they looted the nation's treasury and corruptly enriched themselves and their families and friends. The murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight compatriots in November 1995 was the culmination of this regime of injustice in the region.

The expectation was widespread in the Niger Delta that the coming of democratic rule in 1999 would spell a speedy resolution of the long-running crisis in their region. But this has not happened. Niger Delta politicians have proved to be narrow-minded and self-serving both at the regional and national levels, neither advocating the demands of the ordinary people nor working to see that the intervention agencies established in the region truly work to deliver development. Budget cycle after budget cycle, these politicians use the public treasury to enrich themselves to the detriment of the poor and powerless. Projects are embarked upon that have no impact on the daily needs of the ordinary people, who in turn shake their heads in frustration.

But this is not the time to despair. Power ultimately belongs to the people, and power can be made to deliver the much-desired dividends of democracy through persistent civic action. It is in the voting booths that who wields power is decided, and the ordinary people of the Niger Delta should make voting for politicians willing and able to tackle their development challenges a priority. They must ask the three leading NGOs we mentioned to inaugurate voter education programmes in the entire region, helping them to properly articulate their long-term interests and which politicians are best positioned to bring them to fruition.

The Example Of Claude Ake

The life and work of Claude Ake, a Niger Delta academic and public intellectual who died in a plane crash in 1996, best exemplifies the civic-democratic action in the region we have been advocating in this policy paper. A political scientist by training, Professor Ake had taught in universities in North America and Tanzania before returning to Nigeria in the mid-1970s. He was engaged by the department of Political Science at the University of Port Harcourt and there he trained successive cohorts of students in the art and science of political analysis. In between teaching, Professor Ake also conducted academic research and continually published books and journal articles that sought to make meaning of Nigeria and Africa's enduring political crisis. Ake was a revolutionary Marxist at this time, and his books and articles paid tribute to the efforts of the exploited masses to overthrow Africa's then nascent capitalist class and enthrone socialism.

Professor Ake was also a keen observer of the atrocities perpetrated on the people of the Niger Delta by the oil companies and successive Nigerian governments and wrote about them. As protests by the region's civic and political leaders mounted in the early 1990s, Professor Ake, a Niger Delta native, was on hand to give intellectual guidance. He worked closely with Ken Saro-Wiwa when the latter established MOSOP and ensured that Saro-Wiwa's nonviolent advocacy was grounded in solid research and argument.

Things changed when Saro-Wiwa was arrested by the Federal Government in 1994 and was brutalised in detention. Professor Ake became more publicly engaged, wearing the toga of a left-of-the centre academic calling for the release of Saro-Wiwa and justice for the people of the Niger Delta in general. He visited such leading anti-government weekly magazines as Tell and TheNews and gave them articles he had written in defence of Ken Saro-Wiwa's work in the Niger Delta. Meanwhile he retired from University Of Port Harcourt and with the help of some international foundations, set up a public policy think tank in the same city named Centre for Advanced Social Science (CASS).

CASS attracted the leading lights of academia in the Niger Delta and countrywide to its doors immediately. Of primary concern for Professor Ake was the deepening economic and ecological crisis in the Niger Delta, and he gave this his undivided attention. Following Ken Saro-Wiwa's murder by the General Abacha junta in November 1995, Professor Ake made it clear that Shell Petroleum Development Company played a key role in this tragedy, that he had confidential documents to prove this, and that he would make them public. Professor Ake was travelling to Lagos to further publicise his position on Saro-Wiwa's murder when the plane he was travelling in crashed and he died.

It is significant that before he died, Professor Claude Ake moved away from his former revolutionary Marxist stance to social democracy, highlighting the centrality of regular elections and democratic government in Nigeria and Africa. The Soviet Union had collapsed in 1991, and for Ake the position of Marxists that capitalist regimes in Africa had be overthrown, by violence, if necessary, was no longer tenable. The ordinary people, peacefully assembled in polling stations and choosing their political leaders – leaders actuated by the desire to better the lot of the poor majority, was the new powerful weapon in place of bloody overthrow of capitalism.

Of course Claude Ake had a problem with formal liberal democracy advocated by the Western countries and pressed on African leaders. He saw this version of democracy as no different from hardcore capitalism and instead called for a social democracy that will not only empower the majority poor to vote out the exploitative capitalists but give primacy to their desire for free and qualitative education, universal healthcare, subsidised public housing and strong trade unions able to defend the interests of the workers.

Professor Ake advocated this position in the last two books he wrote before he died – Democracy And Development In Africa and The Feasibility Of Democracy In Africa. These books, now classics of political economy, argued that development had not really commenced in Africa, that Africa's political leaders were obsessed with power without thinking through how this power could be leveraged to deliver development on the continent, and that social democracy best represented the aspirations of ordinary Africans to exercise power democratically and peacefully to meet their social and economic needs.

By engaging the Niger Delta crisis with the weapons of nonviolent civic action and intellectual argument Claude Ake pointed the way towards a meaningful and long-lasting resolution. The resort to violence by MEND and the other men of violence is not only a retrogressive step but serves as an obstruction to efforts geared towards this peaceful resolution. The problems afflicting the people of the Niger Delta is a problem embedded in an authoritarian resolve to continue to exploit oil in the region in ways that run counter to the desire of the overwhelming majority of local people. It is thus a crisis of democracy. The only resolution of a democratic problem can only be found in the arena of democracy, through nonviolence and civic action. This is the lesson the men of violence in the Niger Delta failed to learn.

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- Ike Okonta

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About HOMEF

Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF) is an ecological think tank advocating for socio-ecological justice and food sovereignty in Nigeria and Africa at large. HOMEF recognises that the global crises have systemic roots and the current paradigm of development and growth based on competition will lead to the critical destruction of biodiversity and continued destructive extraction of natural resources as well as dependency on risky technologies.

HOMEF works on Fossil Politics and Hunger Politics using grassroots tools to build and share knowledge through our Ikike platforms. Our Ikike platform has educational spaces such as Community Dialogues, School of Ecology, Sustain-Ability Academy, Conversations and Learning from the Wise.

We also have a programme on Community and Culture through which we carry out cultural production and wellness activities.

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