21st Century 'Resource Control' Insurgencies: The Case of the Niger Delta

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Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free…The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident…In this sense oil is a fairy tale and, like every fairy tale, a bit of a lie. **Ryszard Kapuscinski** [1]

The problem is the Good Lord didn't see fit to put oil and gas reserves where there are democratic governments. **Dick Cheney** [2]

After the carnage of the Second World War, the great powers' retreat from their colonial dominions left an array of embryonic states. It was hoped that mineral rich lands of the post-colonial world would catalyse a development boom, thus securing a productive future for these states in a new world order. However, as Le Billon has observed, a paradox has emerged from the possession of such resource wealth.[3] Resource-rich countries have often descended into a trap of poor governance, poverty and civil unrest.

This essay will examine why this 'resource curse' has fuelled an insurgent movement in the Niger Delta. There is already a wealth of comprehensive studies of these insurgencies.[4] This essay will avoid another retelling of this narrative. Rather, through an analysis of insurgent grievance in this oil-rich region, it will conceptualise insurgency in its relation to a resource-dependent world, where governments and multi-national corporations are willing to test both legal and moral norms to secure lucrative access to natural resources. The essay will address these internal conflicts – what Ron calls the 'resource and war paradigm' – from two angles.[5] Firstly, it will question how insurgent conflict can be linked with the political ecology of developing nations, framed by the international thirst for increasingly dwindling natural resources.[6] It will give an overview of the 'resource curse', where conflict is emerges from the clash between world capitalism and localism.[7] It will argue how oil creates claims over nature – 'our oil' – and gives insurgent movements an 'oil-owning identity.'[8] This new idiom, where oil serves 'as the ground on which claims can be made', frames the insurgent 'resource control' narrative.[9] It will be suggested that petro-capitalism creates a form of internal colonialism amongst elites, which in turn galvanises insurgent grievance.[10] The second part of this discussion will demonstrate how the insurgents' 'resource war' falls into Kaldor's definition of 'new wars', where there is a 'blurring of the distinctions between war, organised crime and major violations of human rights.'[11] Refocusing on the Niger Delta, it will be suggested that resource control introduces complex insurgent motivations. It will be argued that colossal environmental degradation, economic exclusion and the rise of ethno-nationalism are vital contributors to how we conceptualise future insurgencies that battle for control of natural resources.

The question of the relationship between insurgency and natural resources should first ask how this discord is framed in contemporary international relations. For Klare, resource wars are armed conflicts revolving 'to a significant degree, over the pursuit or possession of critical materials.'[12] Although the term came into fashion during the 1980s when the Soviet Union threatened to disrupt western supplies of Middle Eastern Oil and African minerals, our understanding of the term can be placed in a more deep-rooted historical context.[13] As Le Billon and Klare have shown, the link between violence and resources has become a 'distinctive feature' of the modern security environment.'[14] The legacy of mercantilism has meant a continued scramble for riches, 'where trade and war became intimately lined to protect or interdict the accumulation of "world riches"'.[15] Furthermore, the global

scramble for oil has meant that securing resources leads to territorial and political conflict. Thus resource control is politicised and entangles insurgencies 'in wider processes of identity construction' that legitimise violence.[16]

For Klare, the link between militancy and valuable resources is clear:

When the imbalance in the allocation of oil rents coincides with ethnic … or political divisions … you have a natural recipe for internal conflict. The Western press may describe the resulting violence as tribal or sectarian warfare, but all to often it derives from, or is exacerbated by, the distorting effects of oil production.[17]

Thus resource conflicts go to very heart of the dysfunction of developing states. Resources create an environment 'in which vulnerability is enhanced, and shape the opportunities to would be belligerents.'[18] No one has been clearer on this point than Collier and Hoeffler in their seminal article written for the World Bank in 2000.[19] Their thesis introduced the *greed vs. grievance* issue in civil war conflicts. While debate continues over whether economic greed does indeed foster internal conflict, Collier and Hoeffler's linking of natural resources to insurgencies is key. Furthermore, as will be discussed later, resource conflict has a multiplicity of motivations. As Giordano has argued, the post-colonial world created a new paradigm, where 'countries endowed with natural resources are at greater risk of internal conflict for a variety of reasons, including exposure to price shocks, corruption, availability of finances for rebel groups, and incentives for succession.'[20] The clash of localism and global capitalism, the 'corporate-community conflict', also lies at the heart of insurgent action.[21] Moreover, weak institutional environments further foster insurgencies. Institutional crises are particularly pronounced where 'general political sovereignty' is contested and minority groups in fervently disputed territorial conflicts claim resource wealth.[22]

Nowhere on Earth has the 'resource curse' been demonstrated with such profound consequences than in the Niger Delta. For the Delta's impoverished minorities, the curse has been dramatically played out through decades of economic mismanagement, endemic corruption and 'environmental terrorism.'[23] After 50 years $300 billion has gone to the exchequer from oil exports while $50 billion has disappeared overseas. Yet Nigerian per capita income is $290. Where local politicians in the Delta region spend millions on private helicopters and extravagant lifestyles, its people have the highest mortality rates and worst public services in the entire country while coping with almost non-existent infrastructure.[24]

The issue of elite corruption and domination is a central linkage between resource control and insurgency. For the communities like the Ogoni, the absence of any substantial reinvestment of multi-billion dollar oil revenues into local infrastructure provides a key rallying-cry for the insurgent cause.[25] The lack of political accountability, financial profligacy and brutal counter-insurgent campaigns provide a template for how institutionally fragile governments quell resistance against the perceived mismanagement of resource riches. In the Delta this discourse runs back to the earliest of insurgent campaigns. Isaac Boro's Niger Delta Volunteer Service in 1966 declared a "Republic of the Ijaws" in 1966, even installing a provisional senate and constitution and eventually executing a series of militant attacks. Boro saw his community as 'providing the bulk of oil wealth in Nigeria, [yet] his tribe the Ozons were amongst the most down-trodden, oppressed and neglected.'[26] Thus the unequal redistribution of oil revenues runs to the very heart of Niger Delta insurgent grievance. Post-independence Nigeria embraced the multi-billion dollar benefits of oil exploration while leaving the inhabitants of oil-rich lands destitute, ignored and oppressed. For Boro and the scores of movements that followed him, the battle for resource control fitted well with Kaldor's thesis of a 'new war', where there was a 'growing divide between those who are part of global processes and those who are excluded.'[27]

This economic neglect, lack of political representation and plundering of resource revenues lies central to the friction between post-colonial elites and marginalised indigenous groups. For Maier, Nigeria has not been developing but in fact 'underdeveloping', with a lower GDP than before the discovery of oil.[28] The 'equitable system of derivation' has been 'constantly and systematically obliterated by successive Nigerian governments.'[29] The US Department of Energy estimates that the Nigeria's state-owned oil company (NNPC) made losses of $4 billion to corruption or criminal activities in 2000 alone.[30] Nowhere is this recklessness better demonstrated than during the years of the Abacha dictatorship in the 1990s, where Abacha himself embezzled billions and bequeathed the country with ethnic division and fiscal ruin. Thus insurgents observe a pattern of institutional weakness, where the spoils of resource

wealth not only create long-term grievance, but foster anger amongst communities that see themselves as on the periphery of national political participation.

This exclusion, where there is a 'direct relationship between revenue allocation and the exercise of political power', further hardens insurgent resolve.[31] Uyi Ojo and Akinbonde have written in detail about the motivations for increased militancy in the Delta, and see the failure of federalism to address the concerns of minorities as crucial:

In such a situation where resources taken from the Niger Delta are not only out of control of the host communities, but are seen as frittered away irresponsibly, cannot in any way be expected to engender peace in the Niger Delta, especially when their communities watch their environment and … livelihood being degraded, and see themselves sinking further into unrelieved poverty.[32]

This process of mismanagement of resource wealth, what Omeje calls an 'oilification' of the state, has an international dimension.[33] While Nigerian petro-capitalism may be 'miserable, undisciplined [and] decrepit', it is the *environmental* impact of modern resource extraction that ferments militarism amongst disenfranchised groups. The litany of environmental crimes attributed to the actions of multi-national oil companies (MNOCs), often in collusion with the state, has been well documented.[34] However, the role of environmental damage in driving insurgencies is a key aspect to how we frame contemporary resource wars and takes debate beyond mere complaints of 'authoritarian highhandedness' and 'unequal fiscal federalism.'[35]

The quest for environmental justice amongst Niger Delta insurgents has existed from Boro's early movement to the recent 'terrorism' of insurgencies such as MEND.[36] The problem of environmental damage existed since the first extractions in 1958, but it was the 1978 Land Use Act passed by the Obasanjo regime, where territory could be appropriated for oil operations, that had a powerful influence on insurgent violence.[37] Insurgencies thus arise from the destruction of local ecosystems that in turn destroy homes and livelihoods or create long-term health issues. The Delta's Ogoni tribe have labeled the behaviour of Shell as 'ecological war' that is 'omnicidal' in effect.[38] One Ogoni song reflects their desperation over gas flaring:

The flames of Shell are the flames of hell,
We bask below their light,
Naught for us to serve the blight,
Of cursed neglect and cursed Shell.[39]

Decades of oil spills and gas flaring in the Delta has led to nutrient deprived soil, undrinkable water, inedible fish, respiratory diseases and even loss of hearing. Crucially, it is institutionally weak governance that again precipitates such catastrophic environmental degradation:

We witnessed the slow poisoning of the waters of this country, and the destruction of vegetation, and agricultural land by oil spills….But since the inception of the oil industry in Nigeria…there has been no concerned … effort on the part of the government, let alone the oil operators, to control the environmental problems associated with the industry.[40]

As Le Billon has argued, the political ramifications of environmental degradation is significant – what he calls 'environmental security' – and further complicates the already delicate process of resource extraction.[41] Moreover, such wanton irresponsibility by MNOCs provides a core element to insurgent objections – that of a lack of opportunity in the face of colossal resource wealth. This 'environment-economic nexus' is sharpened with the intrinsic politicisation of environmental damage, where oil spills and gas flaring is seen as a human rights issue as well as an environmental one.[42]

The relationship between MNOCs, the host state and the insurgent is complex and dynamic. Yet the actions of global companies have a significant effect on embryonic insurgent movements. In Nigeria, the actions of multinationals are seen as an extension of the dysfunctional post-colonial state. As Ifeka has argued, contentious corporate behaviour reaffirms the destabilising effect of inserting 'the private sovereignty of corporate capitalism inside the political, pubic sovereignty of the nation-state.'[43] Corruption helps maintain contractual stability and project profitability, the two

pillars to successful resource extraction.[44] As one Western oil company manager commented, 'for a commercial company trying to make investments, you need a stable environment. Dictatorships can give you that.'[45] Furthermore, MNOC's operate in an unregulated, legally nebulous environment, where disputes between communities and intransigent multinationals are dragged through the courts for years, even decades.[46] In the Niger Delta, Shell was implicated in the bribing of witnesses during the high-profile trial of insurgent leader Ken Saro-Wiwa.[47] This type of action carves an irreparable line in the sand between the 'traditional' and 'modern' sections of society.[48] Moreover, the presence of MNOC's has highlighted new territory in which to frame insurgency. As Watts has argued:

oil companies … have no analytical presence in the models of rebellion or civil war. At most they appear as the unfortunate corporate entities … Corporate practice … [is] conspicuously absent in any account of politics which is astonishing because the companies themselves have acknowledged that they are a central part of the political dynamics of community conflict.[49]

Yet an analysis of the nature of insurgent action itself is essential in any attempt to conceptualise insurgency in its relation to resource control. Certainly for recent insurgent groups in the Delta like MEND, high-profile attacks – and a media-savvy understanding of propaganda of the deed – have propelled their cause into international news.[50] Insurgent missions have acquired a more extreme tint, a marked departure from the stunted protests of the 1970s and 80s. This 'petro-violence' is deeply rooted in the struggle for oil, and as Obi and Rustad argue, has ramifications for international resource security.[51] There has been an increasing sophistication of insurgent operations – 'spectacular attacks' on oil terminals, kidnappings, mass siphoning of oil, high powered weaponry, remotely detonated car bombs, speedboats, mastery of advanced insurgent tactics, as well as the creation of international partnerships.[52] These methods have been extremely effective – three hundred foreign workers have been detained and currently the conflict costs the Nigerian government $4.4 billion in lost revenue every year.[53] Moreover, the language in MENDs call to arms has shown a more refined political philosophy that acknowledges the global reach of their actions.[54]

However, while we can label some of the Delta's militant groups as 'popular insurgencies', to attribute resource based insurgencies to this form would be wholly misleading.[55] In fact, the very nature of oil extraction, or diamonds for that matter, fosters small, feral militias with localised grievances. For the Delta, this 'restive youth problem' is precipitating an increasingly unstable situation, where 'area boys', vigilantes and gangs, fiercely armed, use the rallying-call of 'our oil' to fight a primitive campaign of intimidation.[56] These community claims are essential to our framing of the resource control insurgent. While MEND may undertake high profile, internationally recognised terrorist actions, the destabilising presence of oil magnifies local politics, multiplies vested interests exponentially and undermines the very structure of the nation state. As Watts has commented, 'this process is endless. The logic is ineluctable and of course terrifying.'[57]

Furthermore, this disjointed set of militias produces a multi-ethnic, fractious insurgent bloc that arises from multiple resource claims. With resources increasingly found in areas of political tribalism, ethno-nationalism further diversifies the insurgent movement. As Maier has noted, the Delta insurgents are just as likely to fight one another than the failed federalism they so vociferously deplore.[58] Thus ethno-nationalist claims over resources erode national unity and tear apart any notion of an 'imagined community'.[59] Watts is correct in highlighting the importance of multiple claims to resources, where oil is a

national resource on which citizen claims can be constructed. As much as the state uses oil to build a nation and develop, so communities use oil wealth to activate community claims on what is seen popularly as unimaginable wealth – black gold.[60]

Thus resources, while engendering passionate and effective forms of insurgency, also foster division amongst movements vying for resource control. This 'multi-layered, complex cultural matrix' is essential to our understanding of the non-uniform resistance contained in resource wars.[61] While MEND's highly politicised insurgency has proved effective, there are multiple examples, as Rhuks has shown, of gangs 'riding on the coat-tails of the agitation for resource control.'[62] It is easy to see how this particular characteristic does not lend itself to a 'collective, culturally

driven ethno-nationalism [that is] needed to inspire a sustained and vibrant revolution.'[63]

This complex relationship between insurgency and natural resources will only continue. Resources are strategically invaluable economic and political tools. Yet for insurgencies, things are not as black and white. While MEND has shown that local militias can evolve into sophisticated insurgent movements with international influence, the prevalence of incoherent feral insurgencies can haul an already volatile post-colonial state further into the abyss. Additionally, resource claims help create new identities as well as reinvigorating historic ethnic tensions. It is of no surprise that Watts has called the current situation in the Niger Delta an 'extraordinary train wreck.'[64] Yet it would be imprudent not to query how much the international drive for resource ownership is the true cause of internal conflict. As Klare has eloquently argued, we must now look beyond Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis.[65] Rather, it is the unquestionable human thirst for black gold – or water, or minerals for that matter – where global capitalism, post-colonial kleptocracy and the disenfranchised insurgent will meet in an unpredictable and volatile new paradigm.

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[52] Idemudia (2006), pp. 401-3; Kalu (2008), p 182; Watts (2007), p 639; Gedicks (2001), p 51.

[53] Watts (2007), p 639.

[54] Ifeka (2006), p 727.

[55] MacKinlay (2009), p 73.

[56] Watts (2007), p 640; Watts (2005), p 71.

[57] Watts (2005), p 74.

[58] Maier (2000), xx-xxi.

[59] Watts (2005), p 74.

[60] Watts (2005), p 73.

[61] Kalu (2008), p 182

[62] Rhuks (2011), pp. 45-6.

[63] Kalu (2008), p 181.

[64] Watts (2007), p 640.

[65] Klare (2005).

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