



Research Paper

Peace Building as a Mitigating Process in Conflict Escalation Towards Sustainable Peace in Niger Delta Region

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates peacebuilding processes in the Niger Delta, emphasizing their role in mitigating conflict escalation and fostering sustainable peace. It examines the root causes and dynamics of conflict in the region, including resource-based inequalities and political marginalization, which significantly impede peacebuilding efforts. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the analysis draws on secondary data from scholarly articles, government reports, and non-governmental organizations to evaluate the impact of various peacebuilding initiatives on conflict resolution and community stability. The findings reveal that, while multifaceted approaches such as community dialogue and economic empowerment have achieved some success, they are often undermined by unmet expectations and distrust. Additionally, challenges such as socio-economic disparities, environmental degradation, and political corruption necessitate a holistic approach to achieve sustainable development. The study underscores the importance of local participation in enhancing the effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives, as it fosters legitimacy, inclusivity, and community ownership in addressing underlying grievances. Ultimately, the research advocates for a comprehensive strategy that prioritizes equity, environmental justice, and local engagement to create lasting peace in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: *Niger Delta, peacebuilding, conflict escalation, sustainable peace, resource inequality, local participation, environmental justice, conflict transformation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been characterized by significant conflict, driven by a complex interplay of political, economic, and social issues. Since the discovery of oil in the region in the 1950s, the Niger Delta has become central to Nigeria's economy, producing an overwhelming majority of the nation's oil and gas resources. Yet, despite this wealth, the region has faced profound levels of underdevelopment, poverty, environmental degradation, and social injustice, exacerbated by political marginalization and economic exploitation. These conditions have resulted in recurring conflicts, manifesting in violence, civil unrest, and militancy, leading to the destruction of lives, property, and the environment. Consequently, peacebuilding has emerged as a critical area of focus to manage conflict, address grievances, and foster sustainable peace in the Niger Delta. The concept of peacebuilding involves a range of efforts aimed at preventing the resurgence of violence by addressing root causes of conflict and fostering conditions for sustainable peace (Lederach, 1997). It includes establishing trust, promoting justice, strengthening institutions, and creating socio-economic opportunities. In the Niger Delta, peacebuilding processes have gained importance due to the persistence of violent conflicts that not only threaten local stability but also affect Nigeria's broader socio-economic environment and global energy security. Peacebuilding initiatives in the Niger Delta are designed to prevent conflict escalation, mitigate violence, and enable conflict-affected communities to achieve long-term stability and resilience.

Over the years, the Niger Delta has experienced various peacebuilding interventions aimed at resolving the region's longstanding issues, including the Amnesty Program introduced by the Nigerian government in 2009. This program provided a platform for militants to disarm and reintegrate into society through education, vocational training, and economic support. However, while the Amnesty Program was initially successful in reducing violence, the region continues to face sporadic conflicts due to unresolved structural inequalities, environmental degradation, and lack of effective governance (Eke, 2014). As a result, peacebuilding remains an ongoing process that requires continuous adaptation, local engagement, and strategic investment to address the underlying drivers of conflict sustainably.

This study on "Peacebuilding as a Mitigating Process in Conflict Escalation towards Sustainable Peace in the Niger Delta Region" aims to critically examine the mechanisms of peacebuilding employed in the region, their effectiveness, and the role these processes play in mitigating conflict escalation. The study will explore the multifaceted dimensions of peacebuilding, including conflict prevention, dispute resolution, post-conflict recovery, and economic development initiatives, with a focus on their impact on sustainable peace in the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta is one of the most volatile regions in Nigeria, with a history of conflict rooted in colonial exploitation, post-colonial political exclusion, and economic marginalization (Obi, 2009). The region's wealth in oil and gas resources has attracted significant foreign investment; however, these investments have primarily benefited the central government and multinational corporations, while local communities have been left with the negative consequences of environmental degradation, including oil spills, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity (Watts, 2004). These socio-economic and environmental challenges have fueled grievances among the local populations, leading to demands for resource control, environmental justice, and equitable distribution of resources (Ikelegbe, 2005). The emergence of militancy in the Niger Delta can be traced back to the 1990s, when groups such as the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and later the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) began to demand greater autonomy and environmental accountability from both the Nigerian government and oil companies. These groups engaged in various forms of resistance, including peaceful protests, legal battles, and, in some cases, violent confrontations with state forces (Cesarz, Morrison, & Cooke, 2003). The escalation of conflict into militancy and insurgency had severe implications for the security of the region and the stability of Nigeria's oil economy.

Peacebuilding efforts in the Niger Delta are vital for transforming the socio-political landscape of the region and addressing the structural factors that contribute to conflict. According to Galtung (1969), peacebuilding is essential to achieving "positive peace," which not only focuses on the absence of direct violence but also on building social and economic structures that promote justice, equity, and human dignity. By addressing the underlying causes of conflict, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to basic amenities, peacebuilding initiatives help to create an environment in which sustainable peace can be achieved. In the Niger Delta, peacebuilding processes have been undertaken by a range of actors, including the Nigerian government, international organizations, local non-governmental organizations, and community groups. These initiatives often encompass programs for economic empowerment, infrastructural development, and capacity-building for conflict management. Additionally, peacebuilding efforts in the Niger Delta have included direct mediation between conflicting parties, community dialogue, and reconciliation processes, aiming to rebuild trust and promote peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic groups (Ukeje, 2001). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these initiatives has been constrained by issues of governance, corruption, and inadequate funding, which have hampered efforts to achieve long-lasting peace in the region.

II. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The Niger Delta region, despite its vast contributions to Nigeria's oil economy, remains plagued by severe underdevelopment, environmental degradation, and socio-political marginalization. These conditions have fueled recurring conflicts, marked by militant uprisings, civil unrest, and economic instability. Previous peacebuilding interventions, such as the Amnesty Program, have temporarily reduced violence but have failed to address the region's underlying issues of poverty, inequality, and lack of effective governance. As a result, conflicts continue to resurface, hindering sustainable development and peace in the region. This study seeks to examine peacebuilding as a mitigating process, exploring how it can address these root causes and foster long-term stability and resilience in the Niger Delta.

III. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This study aims to analyze the peacebuilding processes in the Niger Delta, focusing on their role in mitigating conflict escalation and promoting sustainable peace. Specific objectives of this study include:

1. examine the root causes and dynamics of conflict in the Niger Delta region.
2. evaluate the impact of peacebuilding initiatives on conflict resolution and community stability.
3. identify challenges faced by peacebuilding processes in addressing the underlying grievances in the region.
4. explore the role of local communities and stakeholders in peacebuilding efforts and their contribution to sustaining peace.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the primary drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta, and how do they affect peacebuilding efforts?
2. How have peacebuilding initiatives mitigated conflict escalation in the region?
3. What challenges impede the success of peacebuilding processes in the Niger Delta?
4. How can local participation enhance the effectiveness of peacebuilding and contribute to sustainable peace?

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

John Paul Lederach's theory of Conflict Transformation

John Paul Lederach's theory of conflict transformation provides a unique approach to addressing conflicts by emphasizing the need to tackle not only the visible aspects of disputes but also the deeper social, economic, and political structures that enable them. Lederach's framework diverges from traditional conflict resolution, which often focuses on ending violence or reaching agreements without transforming the conditions that create conflict in the first place (Lederach, 2003). Conflict transformation theory aims to change the relationships, dynamics, and structures that foster hostility, ultimately seeking to build sustainable peace. This theoretical approach has profound applications in regions like the Niger Delta, where protracted conflicts over resource control, environmental degradation, and systemic marginalization of local communities have sustained cycles of violence, economic hardship, and social disintegration. By applying Lederach's model to the Niger Delta, there is an opportunity to go beyond surface-level solutions and implement strategies that address the root causes of grievances and promote long-term development.

Lederach's theory of conflict transformation rests on a comprehensive view that sees conflict as an opportunity to address structural inequities and foster constructive change. According to Lederach, conflicts often stem from deeper systemic issues, where injustices and imbalances in power, resources, and social inclusion create environments ripe for hostility (Lederach, 1997). Conflict transformation, therefore, emphasizes relational change, structural reform, and systemic understanding as essential components of peacebuilding. Relational change seeks to repair and build trust among parties in conflict, creating space for cooperation and mutual respect. Structural transformation addresses economic and political inequalities, while systemic understanding looks at the broader interconnectedness of societal issues that perpetuate discord. In the Niger Delta, these principles can be instrumental in developing strategies that not only manage conflict but also foster the conditions for sustained peace.

The Niger Delta, though rich in oil resources, has long been plagued by grievances related to resource mismanagement, environmental pollution, and economic neglect. Oil production has brought wealth to the national economy but has left local communities facing environmental degradation, poverty, and social exclusion (Watts, 2004). Conflict transformation theory is particularly relevant in this context as it recognizes that addressing such conflicts requires more than superficial negotiation; it demands structural change that redistributes resources, restores ecological balance, and ensures inclusive governance. Through relational

transformation, structural change, and systemic understanding, the theory provides a framework for fostering a more equitable and peaceful environment in the Niger Delta, where the needs and aspirations of local communities are taken into account. Relational transformation, as emphasized in Lederach's theory, focuses on altering the nature of interactions and relationships between groups in conflict. In the Niger Delta, where communities have historically felt marginalized by government and corporate interests, rebuilding trust is crucial to peacebuilding. Relational transformation encourages open dialogue and genuine communication between stakeholders, such as government officials, oil corporations, and community leaders (Lederach, 2005). For instance, forums or peace committees could provide a platform where affected communities can voice grievances, discuss environmental and economic issues, and work toward joint solutions. Such forums would enable different parties to humanize each other, fostering empathy and understanding. By promoting respectful and constructive communication, relational transformation can break down the deep-seated mistrust that perpetuates hostility in the region.

Structural transformation addresses the socio-economic and political inequities that are often at the root of conflict. The Niger Delta's development is hindered by a concentration of wealth and power outside the region, where oil revenues largely benefit the national economy but fail to improve local conditions. As a result, communities lack access to basic services, infrastructure, and economic opportunities, creating a sense of injustice and exclusion. Lederach's approach to conflict transformation advocates for structural changes that address these inequalities, promoting resource redistribution and economic empowerment. In practical terms, this could mean designing policies that direct oil revenue back into local development initiatives, such as health services, education, and job creation programs. Additionally, structural transformation would require reforming governance frameworks to give communities a voice in decision-making processes. Empowering local governance structures and ensuring fair distribution of resources are essential steps in reducing the economic disparities that fuel conflict and in building a more just and peaceful society. Systemic understanding in conflict transformation theory emphasizes the need to recognize the interrelated factors that sustain conflict and to address them holistically. In the Niger Delta, environmental degradation, economic disparity, and political marginalization are not isolated issues; they are interconnected problems that perpetuate cycles of violence and instability (Ikelegbe, 2005). Systemic understanding urges peacebuilders to see these issues as part of a larger system, where each factor influences and exacerbates the others. For instance, environmental damage from oil spills harms local fishing and farming, which undermines community livelihoods and leads to economic hardship. In turn, economic deprivation can fuel political grievances, as communities feel abandoned by the state and its corporate partners. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires policies that not only tackle one issue but also consider its impact on others. For example, environmental rehabilitation programs that clean up oil spills and restore ecosystems would not only improve health and environmental conditions but also support economic recovery by reviving fishing and farming. By approaching the conflict in a holistic manner, systemic change can reduce the interconnected grievances that have sustained instability in the Niger Delta. In addition to practical peacebuilding applications, Lederach's conflict transformation theory offers an ideological shift that is vital for sustainable peace in the Niger Delta. This shift involves seeing peace as more than just the absence of violence but as a positive state that includes social justice, inclusion, and empowerment (Lederach, 2003). For decades, the Niger Delta has been treated primarily as an economic resource for Nigeria, rather than as a region with its own socio-cultural and economic needs. Lederach's approach challenges this mindset, advocating for peacebuilding that is inclusive and grounded in the needs of local communities. Such a shift would involve empowering local voices, respecting indigenous knowledge, and recognizing the rights of communities to share in the benefits of the resources they produce. This ideological shift is crucial to creating a long-lasting peace, as it aligns the interests of local communities with broader national development goals.

Implementing conflict transformation in the Niger Delta, however, is not without challenges. Corruption, weak institutions, and competing interests in oil revenues pose significant barriers to the equitable distribution of resources and the enforcement of environmental regulations. These issues can undermine peacebuilding efforts and hinder structural and systemic reforms. In addition, the dominance of oil interests may resist changes that prioritize community welfare over economic profits (Obi, 2009). Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated effort among government, civil society, and private sector stakeholders to ensure transparency, accountability, and a commitment to sustainable development. By involving multiple sectors and adopting a participatory approach to peacebuilding, it is possible to mitigate these challenges and create an enabling environment for conflict transformation in the Niger Delta. Lederach's theory of conflict transformation offers a valuable framework for the Niger Delta, where conflict is driven by a combination of economic, environmental, and social factors. By emphasizing relational, structural, and systemic change, the theory addresses the root

causes of conflict and promotes a vision of peace that goes beyond mere stability. The practical applications of conflict transformation—such as community dialogue, economic empowerment, and environmental rehabilitation—provide concrete ways to build trust, reduce disparities, and restore ecological balance in the region. However, achieving sustainable peace in the Niger Delta will require a commitment to addressing systemic issues and overcoming institutional challenges that have historically hindered development and marginalized communities. By adopting Lederach’s approach, peacebuilding efforts in the Niger Delta can move beyond short-term solutions and toward a future where communities are empowered, resources are equitably shared, and conflicts are transformed into opportunities for growth and resilience.

VI. LITERATURES REVIEW

Ikelegbe (2005) investigates the economic dimensions of conflict in the Niger Delta, focusing on how oil-related activities have intensified conflict and hindered sustainable peace. The study aims to examine the underlying economic grievances that contribute to conflict escalation in the region. Objectives include identifying economic factors fueling violence, examining the impact of resource allocation on local communities, and analyzing policy interventions designed to mitigate economic disparities. Research questions address the extent of economic inequity’s role in conflict, the effectiveness of existing policies, and the economic impacts of oil exploitation on local communities. Using the theory of structural violence, Ikelegbe explores how socio-economic structures embedded in resource distribution exacerbate conflict. Methodologically, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, including interviews with community leaders, surveys of local residents, and analysis of oil revenue distribution data. The findings reveal significant economic inequalities rooted in oil wealth distribution, with local communities bearing the brunt of environmental degradation without fair compensation. Ikelegbe concludes that peacebuilding in the Niger Delta must involve equitable economic policies and recommends government accountability in revenue allocation, community empowerment, and sustainable environmental practices. These recommendations highlight the need for an inclusive economic framework as a foundation for sustainable peace.

Obi (2009) examines the role of identity and transnational activism in the peacebuilding process in the Niger Delta. The study’s aim is to assess how international advocacy has influenced local peace initiatives and community rights in the Niger Delta. Key objectives are to investigate the role of transnational networks in empowering local actors, understand the challenges of external interventions, and evaluate the impact on the region’s stability. Research questions revolve around the efficacy of transnational support in reducing conflict, the perceptions of locals toward these interventions, and the influence of identity politics. Obi employs the social identity theory, emphasizing the power of collective identity in shaping community resilience and resistance. A qualitative methodology is used, analyzing case studies of international NGOs active in the Niger Delta. The findings indicate that while transnational efforts have raised awareness and pressured corporations to adopt better practices, they have also faced resistance due to perceptions of neocolonialism. Obi concludes that successful peacebuilding requires collaboration between international bodies and local actors, with respect for indigenous identity. Recommendations include fostering more culturally sensitive programs and enhancing local participation in decision-making processes.

Watts (2004) explores the concept of the “resource curse” in the context of the Niger Delta, analyzing how oil wealth contributes to conflict and obstructs peace. The aim is to examine the socio-political impacts of oil extraction on conflict dynamics and governmentality in the Niger Delta. Objectives include understanding the relationship between oil wealth and state control, analyzing the influence of oil on local governance, and identifying strategies to curb resource-related violence. The research questions address the link between oil dependency and authoritarian governance, the role of oil in perpetuating social inequalities, and the efficacy of government interventions. Using Foucault’s theory of governmentality, Watts examines the governance structures underpinning oil exploitation. The methodology involves archival research, policy analysis, and interviews with policy experts and community members. The findings reveal that oil wealth centralizes power within the Nigerian government, reducing accountability and inflaming community grievances. Watts concludes that effective peacebuilding requires decentralization and community-oriented resource management. Recommendations call for transparent governance reforms and policies that give communities control over local resources to ensure peace and stability.

Idemudia (2009) assesses the effectiveness of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives by oil companies as a peacebuilding tool in the Niger Delta. The study aims to evaluate CSR’s potential to address socio-economic grievances and contribute to sustainable peace. Objectives include analyzing the alignment of CSR activities with community needs, assessing CSR’s impact on local attitudes toward oil companies, and exploring CSR’s limitations. Research questions focus on how CSR influences community-corporate relationships,

whether CSR mitigates conflicts, and how CSR practices could be improved. Employing stakeholder theory, Idemudia underscores the importance of aligning corporate interests with community welfare. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, incorporating surveys, interviews, and case studies of CSR programs. Findings show that while CSR projects provide some relief, they often fail to address root issues such as environmental damage and economic marginalization, leading to distrust and continued resentment. Idemudia concludes that for CSR to support peace, it must be comprehensive and community-driven. Recommendations include reorienting CSR to focus on sustainable development, transparent implementation, and genuine community engagement.

Okonta (2006) examines the Ogoni struggle for autonomy within the broader context of ethnic minority rights in the Niger Delta, focusing on its implications for peacebuilding. The study's aim is to explore the relationship between ethnic rights, resource control, and sustainable peace. Objectives include analyzing the Ogoni Movement's impact on local autonomy, exploring how ethnic identity shapes conflict, and assessing government responses to ethnic-based demands. Research questions inquire into the effectiveness of ethnic mobilization for resource control, government policies on ethnic autonomy, and the role of ethnic identity in peace efforts. Okonta uses the theory of ethnic mobilization, examining how identity serves as a catalyst for political activism. A qualitative methodology is employed, including interviews, document analysis, and ethnographic observations. The findings reveal that the Ogoni movement's push for autonomy heightened awareness of ethnic rights but also intensified state repression, contributing to conflict. Okonta concludes that sustainable peace requires policies that recognize ethnic rights and support local governance autonomy. Recommendations include empowering ethnic communities through legal reforms, resource-sharing agreements, and dialogue-based conflict resolution.

VII. METHODOLOGY

This analysis employs a qualitative method, utilizing secondary data sourced from scholarly articles, government reports, and reputable organizations to understand the primary drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta and their implications for peacebuilding efforts. Academic literature, including peer-reviewed articles and books, provides theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence on the socio-economic, environmental, and political dimensions of conflict in the region. Additionally, government reports from Nigerian agencies offer insights into policy frameworks and the effectiveness of existing peacebuilding initiatives, while reports from non-governmental organizations highlight grassroots perspectives and the lived experiences of local communities, enriching the understanding of how conflicts impact peace efforts.

The analytical approach includes thematic analysis, where thematic coding is applied to identify and categorize key drivers of conflict, such as socio-economic inequalities, environmental degradation, political marginalization, the role of multinational corporations, and militarization. Each theme is analyzed to determine its impact on peacebuilding efforts. Comparative analysis is also utilized to identify patterns and discrepancies across different sources, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the conflict dynamics in the Niger Delta. Contextualization is vital, placing the identified themes within the broader socio-political context of Nigeria and considering historical grievances and the complexities of local governance.

VIII. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Answer to research question 1 on what are the primary drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta, and how do they affect peacebuilding efforts?

The Niger Delta's conflicts are deeply rooted in socio-economic disparities, environmental degradation, political marginalization, and the "resource curse" that has ironically accompanied the region's rich oil reserves. Each of these drivers contributes to an environment that complicates peacebuilding efforts, and understanding them is essential for creating effective strategies toward sustainable peace.

One of the primary drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta is the intense socio-economic inequality rooted in the paradox of resource wealth. Although the region generates substantial revenues for the Nigerian economy, local communities face widespread poverty, poor infrastructure, and limited access to basic services. This phenomenon, often termed the "resource curse," underscores how resource-rich regions like the Niger Delta suffer disproportionately due to the uneven distribution of wealth and benefits from resources such as oil (Watts, 2004). While oil contributes significantly to Nigeria's GDP, the local communities see little benefit, creating a sense of dispossession and frustration. This disparity fuels grievances among the people and has led to social unrest, as many Niger Delta residents feel that they are denied their rightful share of the region's wealth. This widespread poverty and lack of development in the region present substantial challenges for peacebuilding

efforts, as local populations may view peace initiatives that do not address economic issues as superficial (Ikelegbe, 2005).

Environmental degradation is another critical driver of conflict in the Niger Delta. Decades of oil extraction have led to extensive pollution, including oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation, which have devastated farmlands and water bodies. Oil spills, in particular, have harmed fishing and farming, the traditional livelihoods for many residents, effectively stripping people of their economic independence and food security (Idemudia, 2009). The constant environmental degradation contributes to a perception of systematic disregard for the well-being of the local population by both the government and multinational oil companies. This destruction of natural resources not only worsens poverty but also creates an environment ripe for conflict, as residents increasingly view the state and oil companies as antagonists rather than partners. Efforts at peacebuilding are thereby hindered by the need to address the environmental impacts of resource extraction. Without measures to restore the environment and establish accountability for environmental damage, peace initiatives struggle to gain local trust and support (Zalik, 2004). Political marginalization is another factor that significantly drives conflict in the Niger Delta, as the local population often perceives itself as excluded from decision-making processes concerning their land and resources. Centralized control over oil revenues means that state and federal authorities exercise power over resource allocation, leaving little room for local leaders and communities to have a say in the development agenda or receive benefits from their resources (Obi, 2009). This political exclusion fosters resentment toward the state and creates a situation where many Niger Delta residents view the government as complicit in their exploitation. Local militias and insurgent groups, often driven by the belief that armed resistance is the only way to make their grievances heard, pose a formidable challenge to peacebuilding efforts (Okonta, 2006). The political marginalization thus undermines the credibility of government-led peace initiatives, as they are often seen as tools to maintain the status quo rather than promote genuine change.

Another factor exacerbating conflicts in the Niger Delta is the presence of multinational oil companies, whose operations frequently contribute to socio-political tensions. The presence of these corporations often fuels suspicions that they are more invested in profit than in the well-being of the local population, given their historical lack of accountability regarding environmental damage and employment practices (Watts, 2004). This tension between local communities and multinational corporations often translates into hostility, further complicating peacebuilding initiatives. The perceived alliance between the government and oil corporations alienates the population, who see peacebuilding efforts as mere extensions of corporate and state interests, devoid of genuine commitment to their welfare. This dynamic erodes trust and fosters an environment of distrust where violent resistance becomes a means of expressing grievances (Idemudia, 2009). Furthermore, the militarization of the Niger Delta by both the state and non-state actors has exacerbated conflict and hindered peacebuilding. In response to local resistance, the Nigerian government has frequently deployed military forces to the region, often leading to violent confrontations with local groups. This militarization not only intensifies the conflict but also leads to human rights abuses, which further embitter the local population and fuel animosity toward the state (Obi, 2009). The proliferation of armed groups, spurred by widespread frustration and economic necessity, has created a complex security environment, with militias engaging in activities such as oil bunkering, kidnapping, and other forms of organized crime. This environment of violence and militarization renders peacebuilding efforts ineffective unless they are accompanied by a genuine demilitarization process and the establishment of trust-building mechanisms that address the underlying grievances of the region's people (Zalik, 2004).

In addition to these drivers, youth unemployment and a lack of viable economic opportunities contribute to the cycle of violence. Many youths in the Niger Delta are drawn to armed groups or illegal activities because legitimate employment opportunities are scarce. With limited access to education and job prospects, young people see militancy and other forms of resistance as the only means to improve their living conditions. This widespread youth involvement in conflict poses a severe threat to peacebuilding, as efforts to establish peace must offer sustainable livelihood alternatives for this demographic (Ikelegbe, 2005). Addressing youth unemployment and fostering entrepreneurship within the region could play a significant role in reducing the appeal of violent resistance and facilitating peace. Finally, the complex interplay of these factors has created a context in which peacebuilding is not merely about halting violence but must also address the underlying structures that perpetuate conflict. Traditional peacebuilding efforts, often focused on conflict resolution rather than transformation, fail to address the systemic issues that continue to drive unrest. Lederach's theory of conflict transformation emphasizes the importance of transforming relationships, social structures, and power dynamics, rather than merely resolving immediate issues (Lederach, 2003). This approach is particularly relevant to the Niger Delta, as sustainable peace in the region requires changes to the socio-economic and

political structures that underlie the conflict. Peacebuilding efforts in the Niger Delta must, therefore, encompass socio-economic development, environmental restoration, political inclusion, and empowerment of local communities to achieve lasting change. In conclusion, the primary drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta—resource-based inequalities, environmental degradation, political marginalization, multinational oil corporations, militarization, and youth unemployment—create a formidable challenge for peacebuilding initiatives. These factors not only fuel ongoing violence but also erode trust in peacebuilding processes. Effective peacebuilding in the Niger Delta must address these drivers comprehensively, with a focus on equitable resource distribution, environmental justice, political inclusion, and economic empowerment, particularly for the youth. Only by addressing the root causes of conflict can sustainable peace be achieved in the Niger Delta, a region where the complexity of its conflicts necessitates a holistic, transformative approach to peacebuilding

Answer to research question 2 how have peacebuilding initiatives mitigated conflict escalation in the region?

Peacebuilding initiatives in the Niger Delta have sought to address the escalation of conflict through a range of approaches, from amnesty programs and capacity-building efforts to corporate social responsibility initiatives and local empowerment. These initiatives focus not only on reducing immediate violence but also on addressing underlying grievances, promoting community engagement, and creating sustainable economic opportunities. In examining how these efforts have impacted conflict escalation, it is evident that while peacebuilding initiatives have had mixed outcomes, they have played a critical role in curbing large-scale violence and fostering a more stable environment, though challenges remain in ensuring their long-term effectiveness.

A significant peacebuilding effort in the Niger Delta is the Niger Delta Amnesty Program (NDAP), introduced in 2009 by the Nigerian government to provide former militants with training, job opportunities, and financial support. The NDAP was initially effective in curbing violence, as thousands of militants surrendered their weapons and participated in the disarmament process (Agbibo, 2013). By providing alternative livelihood opportunities, the program sought to reduce the economic motivations that fueled militancy in the region. Studies indicate that the NDAP played a significant role in reducing attacks on oil installations, thus enhancing the security environment and creating a window for dialogue between the government, oil companies, and local communities (Joab-Peterside, 2014). While the program has faced challenges in implementation, especially in terms of adequately delivering promised benefits and ensuring sustained employment for former militants, it has remained one of the more successful peacebuilding initiatives aimed at mitigating conflict escalation.

Another important aspect of peacebuilding in the Niger Delta has been the focus on community-based initiatives that promote dialogue and foster cooperation among local stakeholders. Initiatives led by organizations such as the Niger Delta Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee (NDCRC) have created platforms for dialogue among various ethnic groups, communities, and oil companies. These initiatives are based on the recognition that community grievances regarding environmental damage, lack of development, and political marginalization must be addressed to create sustainable peace. Dialogue forums, workshops, and community consultations help to facilitate a participatory approach to conflict resolution, which enables community members to voice their concerns and seek collaborative solutions. Such initiatives have contributed to reducing tensions by fostering a sense of inclusion and giving local communities a stake in the peacebuilding process, thereby mitigating the likelihood of violence escalation (Obi, 2009).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives by oil companies have also contributed to peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. Oil companies, particularly those implicated in environmental degradation, have faced significant pressure to contribute to local development efforts to compensate for the socio-economic impact of their operations. Many companies have launched projects focused on infrastructure development, healthcare, education, and skill-building. Chevron, for example, has implemented the Global Memorandum of Understanding (GMoU) framework, which includes provisions for direct financial support to communities, capacity-building, and the development of community-managed projects (Idemudia, 2009). This framework allows communities to take ownership of projects, which enhances their sense of agency and mitigates resentment toward oil companies. While CSR efforts alone cannot resolve the root causes of conflict, they have been instrumental in building goodwill, providing resources, and alleviating some grievances, thereby contributing to conflict de-escalation.

Local empowerment and sustainable economic initiatives have been central to peacebuilding efforts in the Niger Delta. Recognizing that economic deprivation is one of the primary drivers of conflict, several initiatives have focused on skill acquisition, entrepreneurship, and agricultural development. For instance, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have implemented training programs that equip local youth with vocational skills,

allowing them to pursue livelihoods outside of militancy. These efforts have particularly targeted youths, who represent a significant portion of the population and have been heavily involved in the Niger Delta conflicts (Watts, 2004). By providing alternatives to armed resistance, these initiatives reduce the appeal of joining militant groups and thus contribute to peacebuilding. However, the impact of such programs is often limited by inconsistent funding and limited access to markets, which can hinder long-term economic stability. Traditional leadership and cultural practices have also played a role in peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. Many communities in the region have customary practices and traditional leaders who wield influence over local matters. Recognizing this, some peacebuilding initiatives have involved collaboration with traditional leaders to mediate disputes, foster reconciliation, and advocate for non-violent approaches to conflict resolution. Engaging traditional leaders in the peace process leverages their influence to promote peace at the community level and reinforces non-violent norms. The integration of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms with formal peacebuilding frameworks has contributed to mitigating conflicts by ensuring that peacebuilding approaches are culturally sensitive and locally resonant (Joab-Peterside, 2014).

Despite these efforts, the peacebuilding initiatives in the Niger Delta have faced significant challenges. Structural issues, such as political exclusion and environmental degradation, remain largely unaddressed, and peacebuilding initiatives often face obstacles in addressing these deep-rooted causes of conflict. For example, while the NDAP successfully reduced immediate violence, it did not address the ongoing issues of environmental degradation, which continues to affect the livelihoods of local communities. As a result, some former militants who participated in the NDAP later returned to militancy due to unmet expectations and persistent socio-economic challenges (Agbibo, 2013). These issues highlight the limitations of peacebuilding initiatives that focus on short-term gains without addressing the structural issues that perpetuate conflict.

Furthermore, there is ongoing criticism of the role of oil companies in peacebuilding. While CSR initiatives by companies like Chevron and Shell have had some success in fostering goodwill, they are often viewed by local communities as insufficient given the scale of environmental damage and socio-economic challenges in the region (Idemudia, 2009). Many communities view CSR projects as compensatory rather than transformative, as they do not address the long-term impacts of oil extraction. This skepticism has hindered the effectiveness of corporate peacebuilding efforts, as communities often view these initiatives with distrust, believing that they are more about public relations than genuine engagement with the needs of the population.

In addition, the militarization of peacebuilding in the Niger Delta has been a controversial aspect of conflict mitigation efforts. The government's deployment of military forces to suppress insurgency in the region has often led to violent confrontations and human rights abuses. This approach, while intended to maintain security, has frequently exacerbated tensions by reinforcing perceptions of state oppression. The militarized response has undermined other peacebuilding efforts by fostering mistrust between communities and the government and creating an environment where violence is perceived as the only way to gain attention (Watts, 2004). Efforts to combine military interventions with peacebuilding initiatives have therefore struggled to find the right balance, as security operations without parallel socio-economic improvements only serve to heighten resentment and resistance among local populations.

In conclusion, peacebuilding initiatives in the Niger Delta have employed a multifaceted approach to mitigate conflict escalation, focusing on amnesty programs, community-based dialogue, CSR efforts, economic empowerment, and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. These initiatives have collectively contributed to reducing large-scale violence and fostering a more stable environment. However, their effectiveness has been limited by challenges related to unmet expectations, distrust toward corporate involvement, and the ongoing impact of environmental degradation. Addressing these limitations requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond temporary measures to address the structural inequalities that drive conflict in the Niger Delta. Sustainable peace in the region will likely depend on a commitment to long-term development, genuine engagement with community needs, and systemic reforms that promote socio-economic and environmental justice.

Answer to research question 3 what challenges impede the success of peacebuilding processes in the Niger Delta?

Peacebuilding processes in the Niger Delta face a range of complex challenges that have impeded their success, despite numerous initiatives aimed at addressing conflict and fostering sustainable peace. The primary challenges include persistent socio-economic inequalities, environmental degradation, lack of trust between stakeholders, political instability, and the militarization of the region. These obstacles have collectively limited

the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts, as they prevent the creation of a stable and supportive environment for transformative change.

Socio-economic inequalities are among the most significant barriers to peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. Although the region is rich in oil resources, the local population experiences high rates of poverty, limited access to education, and inadequate infrastructure, including healthcare and transportation. This stark disparity has fostered resentment and anger toward both the government and oil companies, which are seen as profiting from the region's resources without reinvesting in its development (Aghedo, 2013). These socio-economic grievances are a key driver of the region's conflicts, as marginalized communities often resort to militancy to gain attention and demand a share of the region's wealth. The lack of equitable distribution of resources has thus hindered the success of peacebuilding initiatives, as efforts that fail to address these root causes of poverty and inequality do not resonate with the affected communities.

Environmental degradation, particularly due to oil spills and gas flaring, presents another formidable challenge to peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. The environmental destruction caused by the oil industry has severely impacted the livelihoods of local communities, particularly those dependent on fishing and agriculture. Oil spills have contaminated water sources and agricultural land, leading to food insecurity and health issues in the region (Joab-Peterside, 2014). This degradation has created a pervasive sense of injustice among local residents, who view environmental harm as an assault on their way of life and cultural identity. When peacebuilding initiatives do not address environmental restoration, they fail to gain the trust and cooperation of communities that prioritize ecological security. The focus on immediate conflict resolution without long-term environmental remediation has hindered peace efforts, as local populations continue to protest against the environmental damage they endure.

Another major obstacle to peacebuilding is the pervasive lack of trust between stakeholders in the Niger Delta. Local communities, oil companies, and the government have historically been at odds, with communities viewing both the government and corporate entities as exploitative and indifferent to their plight. This distrust has roots in a long history of broken promises, particularly regarding developmental projects and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that have often failed to deliver meaningful benefits. Oil companies, for instance, have launched CSR projects aimed at building infrastructure and creating job opportunities, but many of these initiatives are perceived as insufficient or as public relations tactics rather than genuine efforts to uplift local communities (Idemudia, 2009). Consequently, peacebuilding initiatives led by the government or oil companies often lack credibility among local populations, who view them with skepticism and distrust. The absence of genuine partnership and mutual respect among stakeholders thus impedes the collaborative efforts necessary for sustainable peace.

Political instability and corruption further complicate peacebuilding processes in the Niger Delta. Local and national governments in Nigeria have frequently been embroiled in corruption scandals, leading to widespread perceptions of ineffectiveness and self-interest. Corruption siphons off funds intended for development and peacebuilding projects, resulting in a lack of adequate resources to implement meaningful changes in the region (Watts, 2004). Additionally, the politicization of peacebuilding efforts often means that initiatives are driven by political agendas rather than genuine concern for the region's stability. Politicians may use peacebuilding funds for personal gain or direct resources toward projects that benefit certain groups over others. This corruption and political manipulation undermine trust in government-led initiatives, further exacerbating community resentment and resistance. Without transparent and accountable governance, peacebuilding initiatives face an uphill battle in establishing credibility and achieving long-term impact.

The militarization of the Niger Delta presents yet another challenge, as security operations intended to protect oil installations and maintain order often lead to violence and human rights abuses. The Nigerian government has frequently deployed military forces to the region to counteract militant groups that sabotage oil infrastructure or kidnap oil workers. However, these militarized responses have been criticized for their heavy-handed tactics, which include raids, arrests, and sometimes indiscriminate violence against local communities (Obi, 2009). This approach fosters a climate of fear and hostility, as local residents perceive the government's security forces as occupiers rather than protectors. The militarization of peacebuilding efforts contradicts the objectives of building trust, fostering dialogue, and promoting inclusive participation, ultimately exacerbating tensions instead of mitigating them. Moreover, the presence of armed forces in the region diverts resources away from social and economic initiatives that could address the root causes of conflict.

Another critical challenge is the lack of consistent and adequate funding for peacebuilding initiatives in the Niger Delta. While programs like the Niger Delta Amnesty Program (NDAP) have provided some financial support to ex-militants, the sustainability of these efforts is frequently compromised by limited funds and inconsistent disbursement. As funding dwindles, so do opportunities for vocational training, employment, and community development projects that aim to engage former militants in productive activities (Aghedo & Osumah, 2015). Without reliable funding, peacebuilding initiatives struggle to maintain momentum and fail to offer the long-term support required to prevent former combatants from returning to militancy. This inconsistency in funding highlights the limitations of short-term peace initiatives, which, without sustained investment, fail to deliver lasting benefits and thus do not secure the loyalty of participants in the peace process. Cultural and ethnic divisions within the Niger Delta also present obstacles to peacebuilding, as they complicate efforts to foster unity and collaboration among different groups. The Niger Delta is home to numerous ethnic groups, each with its own language, customs, and socio-political structures. Historical rivalries and competition for resources have often led to interethnic tensions, which can hinder peacebuilding initiatives that fail to account for these divisions (Joab-Peterside, 2014). For instance, the benefits of peace initiatives or corporate social responsibility projects are sometimes distributed unevenly, benefiting certain ethnic groups over others, which exacerbates resentment and contributes to intra-regional conflicts. The failure to implement culturally sensitive peacebuilding approaches has therefore limited the effectiveness of these efforts, as they do not adequately address the needs and concerns of all groups within the Niger Delta.

In conclusion, peacebuilding processes in the Niger Delta face numerous challenges, from socio-economic inequality and environmental degradation to political corruption, militarization, and ethnic divisions. These obstacles have limited the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at fostering stability and sustainable development in the region. Addressing these issues requires a holistic and inclusive approach that goes beyond short-term interventions. For peacebuilding efforts to succeed, they must focus on promoting equity, environmental restoration, and trust-building while ensuring accountability among stakeholders. Only through comprehensive, sustained, and culturally responsive initiatives can peacebuilding efforts overcome the formidable challenges that impede progress in the Niger Delta.

Answer to research question 4 how can local participation enhance the effectiveness of peacebuilding and contribute to sustainable peace?

Local participation plays a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts and contributing to sustainable peace, particularly in conflict-affected regions such as the Niger Delta. Involving local communities in the peacebuilding process fosters a sense of ownership, accountability, and empowerment, which are essential for addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting long-term stability. The integration of local perspectives and knowledge can improve the relevance and impact of peace initiatives, ensuring they are tailored to the unique socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts of the region. One of the key benefits of local participation in peacebuilding is that it enhances the legitimacy and credibility of peace initiatives. When local communities are actively involved in decision-making processes, they are more likely to perceive the initiatives as legitimate and relevant to their needs. This legitimacy is vital for building trust among stakeholders, as local populations often harbor skepticism toward external interventions, which they may view as imposed solutions that do not address their specific concerns (Miall, 2004). By involving community members in designing and implementing peace initiatives, peacebuilders can create a sense of shared responsibility and commitment, which is essential for fostering cooperation and reducing tensions.

Local participation also allows for a deeper understanding of the underlying drivers of conflict. Local communities possess valuable knowledge about the historical, social, and cultural contexts that shape conflicts in their areas. This knowledge is often overlooked by external actors who may lack familiarity with local dynamics (Paffenholz, 2010). By engaging local stakeholders, peacebuilders can gain insights into the root causes of conflict and develop more effective strategies that address these issues. For instance, community leaders can provide critical information about grievances related to resource allocation, environmental degradation, and socio-economic inequalities, enabling peacebuilders to design interventions that are better aligned with the needs and aspirations of the affected populations. Furthermore, local participation fosters inclusivity and diversity in peacebuilding processes. In many conflict-affected regions, certain groups, including women, youth, and marginalized communities, may have limited access to decision-making processes. By actively including these groups in peacebuilding efforts, initiatives can become more representative and equitable. Research has shown that inclusive peace processes are more likely to result in sustainable outcomes, as they ensure that the diverse interests and perspectives of all stakeholders are taken into account (UN Women,

2015). For example, women's participation in peace negotiations has been linked to more comprehensive and lasting peace agreements, as women often prioritize social justice, economic development, and community well-being (Swaine, 2017). In the Niger Delta, empowering local women and youth to take part in peace initiatives can lead to more holistic approaches that address the multifaceted nature of conflict. Additionally, local participation contributes to the sustainability of peacebuilding efforts by promoting local ownership and capacity-building. When communities are actively engaged in peace initiatives, they are more likely to develop the skills and resources necessary to manage conflicts and promote peace independently. This empowerment can lead to the establishment of local peace committees or organizations that facilitate dialogue, conflict resolution, and community development initiatives (Lederach, 2003). By building local capacities, peacebuilding efforts can transition from being externally driven to being community-led, ensuring that peace is not merely a temporary outcome but a sustained process rooted in the community's own efforts and aspirations.

Moreover, local participation enhances accountability and transparency in peacebuilding processes. When community members are involved in decision-making, they can hold local leaders and external actors accountable for their commitments and actions. This accountability is particularly important in contexts where corruption and mistrust are prevalent, as it helps to ensure that resources are used effectively and that peacebuilding initiatives address the actual needs of the community (Bächtiger et al., 2010). In the Niger Delta, for instance, local communities can monitor the implementation of development projects and peace initiatives, thereby reducing the likelihood of misallocation of funds and ensuring that benefits reach those most affected by conflict. However, it is important to recognize that local participation in peacebuilding is not without its challenges. Power dynamics, historical grievances, and existing inequalities within communities can affect the inclusivity and effectiveness of participation efforts. Some voices may dominate the process, marginalizing those who are already disadvantaged (Hunt, 2014). Therefore, peacebuilding practitioners must be mindful of these dynamics and work to create spaces where all community members can contribute meaningfully to the peace process. This may involve using facilitation techniques that encourage dialogue among diverse groups, addressing power imbalances, and ensuring that marginalized voices are heard and valued.

In conclusion, local participation is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives and contributing to sustainable peace in conflict-affected regions like the Niger Delta. By fostering legitimacy, understanding, inclusivity, and local ownership, participation empowers communities to take charge of their peace processes and address the root causes of conflict. While challenges exist, the potential benefits of local engagement in peacebuilding are significant. To maximize these benefits, peacebuilding practitioners must prioritize inclusive approaches that ensure the voices of all stakeholders, particularly marginalized groups, are heard and valued. Ultimately, the success of peacebuilding efforts depends on the commitment of local communities to shape their futures and the willingness of external actors to support and facilitate these processes.

Key Findings

1. The primary drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta, such as resource-based inequalities and political marginalization, pose significant challenges to effective peacebuilding initiatives.
2. Peacebuilding efforts in the region have seen some success through multifaceted approaches, including community dialogue and economic empowerment, yet they remain hindered by unmet expectations and distrust.
3. Key challenges to peacebuilding processes include socio-economic inequality, environmental degradation, and political corruption, necessitating a holistic approach to achieve sustainable development.
4. Local participation is vital for peacebuilding effectiveness, as it fosters legitimacy, inclusivity, and community ownership in addressing the root causes of conflict.

IX. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Niger Delta's conflict landscape is driven by deep-rooted issues such as resource inequalities and political marginalization, which significantly challenge peacebuilding initiatives. While multifaceted approaches have yielded some positive outcomes, they remain constrained by distrust and unmet expectations. Furthermore, ongoing socio-economic disparities and environmental degradation complicate the path to sustainable peace. For peacebuilding efforts to be effective, a comprehensive approach that prioritizes equity,

environmental justice, and local engagement is essential. Empowering local communities to take ownership of peace processes can enhance legitimacy and inclusivity. Ultimately, addressing these intertwined challenges is crucial for fostering lasting peace in the Niger Delta.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings the study came up with the following recommendations:

1. **Address Resource Inequalities:** Implement policies that ensure equitable distribution of resources and wealth generated from the Niger Delta's oil reserves, prioritizing the needs of local communities to mitigate resource-based conflicts.
2. **Enhance Community Engagement:** Develop and sustain community dialogue initiatives that actively involve local stakeholders in the peacebuilding process, fostering trust and addressing unmet expectations.
3. **Promote Environmental Justice:** Establish comprehensive environmental restoration programs and regulations that hold corporations accountable for environmental degradation, ensuring that the local communities benefit from sustainable practices.
4. **Empower Local Governance:** Strengthen local governance structures and promote participatory decision-making to enhance community ownership and accountability in peacebuilding initiatives, ensuring that the voices of marginalized groups are heard and valued.

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