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## CONCEPTUAL ISSUES OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCARCITY IN WARRI CONFLICT

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### **Abstract**

Environment and settlement are potent reality in human existence as well as precursor to violent behaviour when there is somewhat deprivation. For over 60 years, the Warri area of the Western Niger Delta has experienced increase in exploration activities due to the huge availability of carbon. In spite of sundry challenges of environment and settlements where oil and gas are produced in sub Saharan Africa, there are recurrent issues of conflicts over ownership of land as a result of royalties from mineral resources and mutual claims of marginalization arising from other demographic factors. This paper is an attempt not only to demonstrate the escalation dynamics of mineral resources as drivers of conflict but also environmental peacebuilding through improved natural resource governance to create peaceful relationships among ethnic communities in the Warri area. The paper concludes that institutions and agencies of government and multinational oil corporations responsible for natural resource governance should evolve strategies for effective community and citizens' engagement.

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**Keywords:** Environment, Settlement, Conflict drivers, Peacebuilding, Warri crisis

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### **Introduction**

Environment is the totality of the surrounding conditions and circumstances within which an organism lives. It comprises the physical, chemical and biotic as well as socio-cultural factors that affect and determine the form and survival of the organism or ecological community. In its natural form, the environment contains resources such as soil, air, water and other elements which are constantly changing and reshaping under a variety of geological, climatic, biological and human forces. Due to natural and man-made causes, the environment is in perpetual change. Consequently, there is environmental degradation, that is, depletion and deterioration of resources such as air, water and soil, destruction of the ecosystem and the extinction of wildlife. Globally, the major area of environmental concerns are the deterioration and loss of rain forest, desertification, air pollution and smog, ozone depletion and the destruction of the marine environment as evident in the invasion of our waterways by water hyacinth. Increasingly, pollution has remained a global scourge, poisoning the planet's fauna and flora.

The history of the environment underscores man's struggle for survival. To satisfy his needs, man uses the natural resources which abound in his environment in a variety of ways, including agriculture, irrigation, mining and transportation which have severe impact not only on the environment resulting in its continuous degradation but also as conflict drivers. The challenges of the environment is further aggravated by rapid population growth, industrialization, urbanization and uncontrolled exploitation of its natural resources. Among animal species, human beings are unique in making conscious efforts to rebuild their environment; other animals do no more than accept and utilize the environment as it is.

For ages, mankind has continued to plunder the environment through indiscriminate exploitation of its natural resources, most of which are non-renewable. Many species of living creatures, both plants and animals have become endangered or extinct due to excessive hunting, fishing, clearing and burning of bush. The natural forests are constantly under threat of disappearance as they are continuously utilized by human beings for domestic and economic purposes (Homer-Dixon, 1996).

## The Study Area

For the purpose of this paper, the geo-physical definition of the Warri crisis area comprises the three local government areas of Warri South, Warri South-West and Warri North, with headquarters in Warri Township, Ogbe-Ijoh and Koko respectively. The main objective of this paper is to interrogate environment scarcity as precursor to violent conflicts in the Warri crisis area. Although, major ethnic clashes in the area date back to 1952 (Imobighe, 2002), the ethnic crisis in the Warri area is between the Ijaw and Itsekiri, on the one hand and the Itsekiri and Urhobo of Warri, on the other. The conflict trajectories in its latest form, however appears unsurpassed in its scale, ferocity and acrimony. It was precipitated by the announcement of the headquarters of the newly created Warri South-West Local Government Council in 1996, persisted following growing and relentless agitations; The fact is that greed and avarice lead to predatory usage of the wealth of nature in a way that compromises the livelihoods of the very people the land and its resources is supposed to support.

## Environmental Scarcity and Conflict

Environmental scarcity is one of the most ignored causal factors of social conflicts and stress. As powerful groups seize control of resources in the absence of State weakness, grievances escalate and trigger or deepen divisions within and between social groups, thereby giving rise to opportunities for violence. A survey of the literature on relationship between resource scarcity and conflict show opinions that focus on scarcity as the primary driver of conflict in line with the findings of peace research which produced the axiom that resource scarcity is a primary cause of conflict. Critics of the scarcity hypothesis note paradoxically that most violent conflicts occur in regions that have resource deposits rather than in those that lack them (Karl, 1997).

Resource conflict is one of several destabilizers commonly seen as a characteristic of many of the extractive economies of developing countries. The complicated state of affairs faced by resource-rich countries include intractable conflicts, new wars, resource wars, complex political emergencies, conflict trap, resource securitization, petro-violence, blood diamonds (Collier 2005; Pelluuso and Watts, 2001; Kaldor 1999; Kaplan 1994; Nafzinger and Auvinen 1996). According to Renner (2005), resource-driven conflicts killed more than 5 million people, forced 5 to 6 million people to flee to neighbouring countries and displaced about 15 million people inside the borders of their home countries during the 1990s alone. One particular research focused on our local situation in Nigeria (Watts, 1999). Violence in the Niger Delta alone was estimated to have killed about 1000 persons a year between 1999 and 2004 (Hamilton *et al*, 2004). In addition, constant tension exists between the various ethno-regional groups and also between local actors over access to oil wealth through control of political power.

For a long time, social researchers had focused on internal problems associated with resource abundance and their implication for violent conflict. For instance, in his popular book: *The Coming Anarchy*, Robert Kaplan (1994) warned of “demographic, environmental, and societal stress, in which criminal anarchy emerges as the real strategic danger”. Others also noted that natural resources which should have promoted economic growth and development and lift standards of living for people appear to produce economic deterioration, corruption, economic mismanagement and even conflict over their control instead.

For instance, some scholars suggest that the 1994 genocide in Rwanda was caused largely by the scarcity of arable land, falling agricultural produce prices, and poor governance (Bachler, 1999). Theisen (2008) argued for instance, that poverty and dysfunctional institutions are causes of civil violence; while

Sukhre (1997) and Klare (2001) note that environmental scarcity threatens livelihoods and increases the potential for violent conflict because it constitutes a direct-threat to powerful political interests.

Armed conflicts continue to affect many communities and countries throughout the world. For the year 2010, more than thirty active armed conflicts were recorded by the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP), and four of these caused more than 1000-battle related deaths. Today, the majority of on-going conflicts are internal with high civilian casualties (UCDP, 2011). In addition to these, the World Development Report for 2011 claims that more than an estimated 1.5 billion people live in countries stricken by armed conflict. Looking at all these, scholars who draw attention to the close linkage between scarcity and conflict argue that we are entering an era of warfare driven by resource scarcity particularly in places where competition for valuable resources exist side by side with deep-rooted ethnic, religious, or tribal cleavages (Klare, 2001). Others acknowledge that resource or environmental scarcity is more likely to be a trigger of violent conflict when you also have changes in resource access or distribution.

Environmental scarcity often encourages powerful groups to capture valuable environmental resources and prompts marginal groups to migrate to ecologically sensitive areas. These two processes called “resource capture” and “ecological marginalization”, in turn reinforce environmental scarcity and raise the potential for social instability which deepens their poverty” (Homer-Dixon, 1996). In the absence of adaptation, environmental scarcity sharpens existing distinctions among social groups and weakens governmental institutions and states. The intermediate social effects of environmental scarcity therefore include constrained economic productivity, social segmentation, and weakening of institutions and states; can in turn cause ethnic conflicts, insurgencies, and political instability.

The assertion of Stavenhagen (1990) is quite instructive here. According to him, land is not only an economic factor of production, it is the basis of [their] cultural and social identity; the home of ancestors, the site of religious and mythical links to the past and to the supernatural. The key findings of Homer-Dixon (1994) suggest that environmental scarcity over access to land use and rent will worsen in many developing countries and may become an increasingly important cause of violent rebellions, insurgencies and ethnic conflicts. He adduces a wide array of empirical work linking environmental degradation with violent outcomes, and articulates a preliminary theoretical framework to explain these linkages.

The central thesis of Homer-Dixon (1994) is that scarcity of renewable resources can, in combination with other social factors, contribute to macro-level violent outcomes such as ethnic clashes and insurgencies. As he points out, violent outcomes are often the product of interactions between scarcity and a number of other factors, such as inequality, migration, and the functioning of social institutions. It is often the case in such situations that elites within a society are able to garner much of the resources for themselves, to engage in resource capture.

Homer-Dixon also made it clear that scarcity-induced violence could occur in closely-knit rural areas as well as widely variegated urban settlements because serious urban problems can be precipitated by a chain of social and environmental causes. One of such trigger events could be a situation in which rural population growth, environmental degradation and unequal distribution of resources lead to further environmental degradation and an accompanying marginalization of peoples who already were relatively powerless. When this is accompanied by rural-urban migration, particularly of relatively young people, the demand on resources goes up sharply. And if unemployment is extensive, there is considerable risk of widespread violence. Homer-Dixon asked a pertinent question: “Can the sources and the nature of the conflict, I ask, be adequately understood without environmental scarcity as part of its causal story?” His second argument is that the literature is weak in analysing the catalytic factors or proximate causes of

internal conflict because they are triggered by domestic problems; bad neighbourhood; bad neighbours and bad leaders

### Resource Scarcity and the Warri Crisis

Most scholarly publications on the Niger Delta crisis in Nigeria attest to the fact that the proximate and structural factors are related to natural resources (oil), environmental degradation and political governance. However, the *Post Express* of 12 July 1999 reported the crisis that engulfed the oil city of Warri in a way that suggested that while factors such as ethnicity and absence of political will to institute reforms were at play, another underlying and more profound factor was driving the cross violence. According to the newspaper,

*"the Warri carnage is not only symptomatic of the numerous problems facing the peoples of the Niger Delta region, but also an exposé of an unwillingness by the government over the years to address problems which possess potent capability to affect the stability of the nation. ...the crisis had a more enduring motive than the relocation of the headquarters from Ogbe-Ijoh (Ijaw land) to Ogidigben (Itsekiri land) ", and "centers on resource-sharing".*

While some are quick to say that competition for oil wealth has fuelled violence between these ethnic groups and led to the ethnic militarisation of nearly the entire region, others see the conflict as a product of contrasting desires in arguing that in its simplest form, the problem in Warri is that of Itsekiri's desires for hegemony, which are in direct contrast to Ijaw/Urhobo's desires for autonomy. Others still (see for example, Isumonah and Gaskiya, 2001) consider it a tussle over ownership even where they accept that ownership, in this respect, confers certain pecuniary privileges:

*[Warri] is an age-long conflict. Legally, Warri has been judged to be Itsekiri owned....That the legal system has not been able to effect a permanent settlement of conflict claims of ownership is seen from the bloody clashes....in the past few years. The conflict has claimed over 3000 lives, displaced thousands, and destroyed property worth several billions of naira (Isumonah and Gaskiya, 2001).*

Although there are those who have argued that disputations between the three major ethnic communities in Warri reflected the desire of each of them for some form of political affirmation based on ethnic identification. The identification, invariably calls for group entitlement which encourages one group or some groups to claim that a region or specific territory ought to belong to them and that the political system should be made to reflect this by for example locating the political headquarters within such a domain. Other groups may want nothing more than the right to participate in the affairs of the state or region on equal terms. Such ethnic claims to priority are based on group legitimacy within a territory as a link to ownership.

One of the most common claims to legitimacy in Warri and elsewhere in the world is predicated in indigeneity, with the implication that a group that is indigenous to an area "owns the area" even if that group is a small minority among the groups in the area. The claim to primacy by dint of indigeneity is widespread and can be a powerful political tool to secure privileges. The term *bumiputera* or "sons of the soil" is commonly used in many parts of Africa and Asia by some people to demand special rights or recognition against more recent settlers, even if these settlers are the majority.

Thus, inter-group relations in Warri attracted significant attention for many reasons. Warri is located in Delta State, one of the wealthiest oil states in Nigeria accounting for about 40% of Nigeria's oil

output (Leton, 2006). Delta State receives 13 percent of the revenue from production and has a particularly controversial division of political and government positions and structures, over which representatives of different ethnic groups are struggling. Warri is a strategic city in the oil-rich Niger Delta region the second most important oil town in Nigeria after Port Harcourt (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Though with a small population of less than a million, Warri is at the epicentre of Nigeria's vast oil industry; it is home to a major refinery, a huge oil infrastructure and the focal point for the export terminus at Escravos.

The three main ethnic groups in Warri have all crossed swords with each other with growing intensity and violence spanning some two decades. For example, the Ijaws and Urhobos quarreled over land in Aladja and at Gbarigolo and Esama in 1996; the Ijaws of Ogbe-Ijoh fought their Itsekiri neighbours in 1997 over the relocation of the Warri South Local Government Headquarters from the Ijaw community of Ogbe-Ijoh to Ogidigben, an Itsekiri village, on the far shore of the Escravos River; and the Itsekiri engaged in intense disputes, often violent, with the Urhobos in 2001 and 2003 (ICG, 2006). These conflicts constitute what Leton (2006) has referred to as "the Warri Crisis" or as "the Many Worrying Warri Wars" (MWWW), which displaced in excess of 200,000 people over the seven years it raged.

Imobighe *et al.* (2002) identify several reasons for the ethnic conflicts in Warri among the Urhobos, Ijaws and Itsekiris:

- i. Dispute over ownership of Warri land among the Urhobos, Itsekiris and Ijaws.
- ii. Suzerainty of the Olu of Warri, the traditional leader of the Itsekiris.
- iii. Dispute over the legitimacy of claim by non-Itsekiri ethnic groups to separate local government councils in Warri metropolis.
- iv. The conflict over royalties from mineral resources and mutual claims of marginalization arising from either demographic factors or hegemonic control and utilization of political apparatuses to advance parochial goals to the detriment of other communities and groups.

According to Imobighe *et al.* (2002), Warri town as opposed to the wider Warri region, is not an oil-bearing community as such, but it is a centre of refining and processing and oil service industries. However, access to oil and oil rent and more generally, control over land/territory; and more specifically the establishment of Local Government has been a major cause of ethnic conflict between the major ethnic groups in Warri - the Urhobo, Ijaw and Itsekiri. The perception is that whoever controls the territory, controls access to the abounding oil wealth which also includes contracts and other bursaries from both Federal, State and Local Government allocations and also from dealings with oil companies especially Chevron which is the dominant oil multinational in the area.

Consequently, Warri became the locus of some of the most vituperative ethnic conflicts since the late 1990s. Several lives and properties were lost in the process of what is now referred to as the Warri Crisis. The extent of loss of life and human displacement is difficult to quantify, but according to Human Rights Watch (2003) report, the number of lives lost run into thousands. During the same period, disruption of oil exploration activities by militancy activities and very violent intra and inter community protests were some of the other major security challenges that the government and security agents had to deal with.

At the heart of the Warri crisis is the complex question of who "owns" Warri (Edevbie, 2000; Jarikre, 2021). All three ethnic communities claim to "own" Warri and these claims have often been supported by sometimes very ambiguous non-text based historical sources regarding early history, residence, traditional authority and demography (Leton, 2006). Closely linked to the question of "ownership" is that of representation in the formal structures of government, both at local government and state level.

Both Ijaw and Urhobo saw the then political dispensation in the state in which Itsekiri dominates government structures in the three Warri local government areas (LGAs), Warri North, Warri South, and Warri South West, as unfair (Jarikre, 2014). They complained that this dominance meant that the Itsekiri and their traditional leader (the Olu of Warri which itself is a contested title, having been changed in 1952 from the Olu of Itsekiri) benefit disproportionately from government resources, both at the level of government contracts and appointments. For example, when it comes to obtaining “certificates of origin” in order to obtain government bursaries for higher education.

Control of government structures clearly constitute a harbinger of other juicy benefits, especially the access to a greater amount of valuable contacts from the oil companies, which may disproportionately enrich the beneficiaries at the expense of other groups who are left out (Human Rights Watch, 2003). For that reason, one of the key demands of the Ijaw and Urhobo are the creation of new wards and local government areas which they believed would ensure that their ethnic groups are more effectively represented.

A summary of the various issues that effectively curtailed peaceful coexistence among the three groups is presented below:

**Oil Presence:** oil wells and oil refining and distribution facilities across the Warri region laid the foundation for a precipitous decline.

**Conflicting claims over territory:** Who “owns” Warri?

**Ethnic Dominance:** Itsekiri dominate government structures in the three Warri local government areas (LGAs), Warri North, Warri South, and Warri South West and benefit disproportionately from government resources, both at the level of government contracts and appointments

**Traditional Rulership:** the Ijaw and Urhobo ethnic groups dispute the title of the Olu of Warri as the paramount ruler of Warri

**Fear of Political Dominance:** Breaking of Warri Division of the old Western region into two local government areas reignited fears among the Ijaw and Urhobo ethnic groups over access to political control and the accruing benefits and rents from oil especially in the territories that they control.

**Access to Oil Rent:** lop-sidedness in control over land/territory reduced the level of contact with the oil companies that may lead to the award of valuable contracts and other forms of economic benefits.

**Political Patronage:** whoever controls the territory, controls access to contracts and other bursaries from Federal, State and Local Government allocations

**Political Representation:** representation in the formal structures of government, both at local government and state level.

Homer Dixon (1994) structural scarcity typology was clearly evident in Warri. As he noted, these factors are particularly prone to triggering local conflicts than the other forms of scarcity. The Ijaw and Urhobo who experienced resource scarcity saw themselves as politically and economically marginalized groups who had no other options for improving their situation than to fight against the Itsekiri group to gain more resources. For instance, the British colonial administration, in efforts to make sense of a new environment and to create order, had by 1900, began to seek and acquire land for administrative purposes. The various land deals were handled through Dore Numa, an Itsekiri, who signed the leases that released the land to the colonial administration.

While the Urhobo and Ijaw communities contend that Numa had illegally leased their land without proper authorization, the Itsekiri's had argued successfully in a series of court cases, up till 1936, that the leases were contracted by Numa on behalf of the Itsekiri people. Both the Urhobo and the Ijaw have refused to accept Itsekiri's legal victories as just and have resisted any political or administrative measures that seem to legitimize Itsekiri's claims of ownership. On the other hand, the Itsekiri who had more influence over politics got assistance from government when they were faced with resource scarcity than the two other marginalized groups and did not initially consider violence as an option (Salawu, 2010). Thus, the Ijaws and Urhobos fought because they saw themselves as lacking other options to cope with scarcity. This particular outcome is well documented in Gurr (1970) on group mobilization approach in the face of relative deprivation in his classic book, 'Why Men Rebel'. Gurr's thesis presented in three key arguments has proved useful in explaining conflicts between neighbours. First, he opined that discrimination against an ethnic or religious minority causes the minority to form grievances. Second, these grievances contribute to the mobilization of the group for political action. Third, the more mobilized the group, the more likely it is to engage in political action including protest and rebellion.

To a large extent therefore, Homer-Dixon (1996) argument that environmental scarcities influence the outbreak of violent civil conflict through a series of intermediate social effects, such as inhibition of economic productivity, the creation and aggravation of group tensions and divisions, and the weakening of institutions and the state's capacity to respond to public needs and effectively deliver public goods played out rather forcefully in the city of Warri.

Scarcities created and aggravated by the creation of local government councils only in Itsekiri-controlled areas enabled that ethnic group to perpetuate resource capture and thereby marginalize the other two groups. The powerful Itsekiri group shifted resource access as well as its distribution in their own favour to the exclusion of the Ijaw and Urhobo. They triggered grievances by tightening their grip on the increasingly scarce political and economic resources that the control of local government councils provided and used this control to boost their wealth, influence, and power. Resource scarcity intensified scarcity for the other groups in Warri. Salawu (2010) made the point that this is a national malaise that has intensified rivalries among ethnic as well as religious actors. For him, these stem from:

*Accusations and allegations of neglect, oppression, domination, exploitation, victimization, discrimination, marginalization, nepotism and bigotry. In every nation, there is no complete agreement on how wealth, power and status are to be shared among individuals and groups... This is because, different groups and individuals have diverse interests in which case, some groups will have their aims met, while others will not. What this means is that conflict usually occur when deprived groups and individuals attempt to increase their share of power and wealth or to modify the dominant values, norms, beliefs or ideology. Thus, in Nigeria ... there seems to be a divisive interplay of politics, ethnicism and religions, which has consequently led to the rising nationalism and militancy of various ethnic and religious movements. ... are meant to correct any perceived form of marginalization, oppression or domination (Salawu, 2010).*

According to Ikime (1969), the question of the "ownership" of Warri has been in dispute even before independence and remains the subject of heated debate in the Nigerian courts and the media. It is a key ingredient of resource capture and control and therefore constitutes the main issue of contention in the position statements of the various ethnic groups in relation to the underlying causes of the violence that rocked Warri for almost ten straight years. Closely linked to the question of "ownership" is that of

representation in the formal structures of government, both at local government and state levels. While most of the conflict between these groups are triggered by economic access to oil, and therefore could be resolved politically, other challenges such as primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism make the conflict difficult to address directly.

Finding a solution to the violence in Delta State proved rather difficult. It required a dedicated effort by government to resolve the political issues under dispute, including the equitable and effective spending of government resources, and the restoration of law and order through effective, impartial, and law-abiding law enforcement action. A negotiated solution to the demands of the different ethnic groups had to be found; and fresh elections needed to be held in Delta State, as in other states where national and international monitors found the level of fraud and violence surrounding the 2023 polls to be so high that the minimum international standards for democratic elections were not met.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite the resolve by Government to avert future recurrence of inter-ethnic cross-violence in Warri, it is yet to take concrete steps to negotiate solutions to the political disputes that underlie the crisis. The Nigerian government has to address the Ijaw/Itsekiri/Urhobo conflict as separate from the greater collective identities that make Nigeria and that has been referred to as ‘the national question.’ Oil companies and the government have to increase transparency by instituting confidence-building measures that will douse tensions associated with perceptions of favouritism of one ethnic group over another. Conflict settlements and truces are not usually followed up systematically and seldom well-coordinated. This leaves a lot of gaps for re-escalation of conflicts and redefinition of group interest.

Environmental scarcity is found to be associated with conflict and the occurrence and protracted violence. This results from the acute struggle for the control of resources, which increases vulnerability to conflict, violence and war. The struggle by rulers, elites and community groups for access to such resources in furtherance of political consolidation agenda has meant increasing appropriation and privatization through monopoly of contracts and other pecuniary benefits breeds conflicts and violence. This point is underscored by the fact that hitherto excluded claims to the resources can trigger contests over power and wealth. This is why inter-ethnic conflicts in resource rich states are characterized by violent scramble to control natural resources. This is what is often described in the literature as “resource wars” and to a large extent, the Warri crisis was a ‘resource war’ between a group that monopolized resource benefits and others who were striving to assert themselves by breaking the shackles of domination and monopoly of resource gains from oil presence.

To a large extent therefore, the upsurge of the Warri crisis can also be linked to the rise of ethnic nationalism in the Niger Delta as various groups struggled to stake their claims on the Nigerian state. During that period, the Niger Delta region was embroiled in resistance against the Nigerian state and the multinational oil companies. Decades of oil exploitation, environmental degradation and state neglect created an impoverished, marginalized and exploited citizenry which after more than two decades produced a resistance of which the youth were a vanguard. State repression and corporate violence further generated popular violence, lawlessness, illegal appropriations and insecurity. The Niger Delta became a region of intense hostilities, violent confrontations and criminal violence. It was enveloped by proliferation of arms and institutions and agencies of violence. The economy of conflict that emerged was characterized by an intense, violent and bloody struggle by the three major groups involved in the Warri crisis for the appropriation of oil resources and benefits from the oil economy.

In view of the findings above, the following recommendations are made in support of Homer-Dixons' (1996) hypothesis on resource conflicts that are triggered by horizontal forms of scarcity. There is the need to institute policies and laws that redresses existing imbalance in access by ethnic groups by forging a national citizenship and citizenship education. Multinationals in the Niger Delta should increase corporate transparency and effectively enforce good policies.

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