

Consequences of the Forgotten (or Missing) R

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Introduction

Ateke Tom, a major militant leader in Nigeria's Niger Delta, was pictured on Al Jazeera television October 1, 2009 shaking hands with President Umaru Yar'Adua. He was not the first militant leader to accept the amnesty offered by Yar'Adua. Indeed General Boyloaf had been pictured shaking hands with the president more than a month before. What was remarkable about Ateke was that he had had a similar photo op five years before, when he and his former enemy, militant leader Asari Dokubo, had been photographed shaking hands with another Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo. It was like *déjà vu*, seeing Ateke posing with two Nigerian presidents at the Nigerian independence October 1st celebrations, five years apart. One must ask "how many times can the same person be disarmed?" And what went wrong the first time, to require a repeat performance?

This paper looks at the DDR processes in the Niger Delta from the viewpoint of a practitioner intimately involved in the first round and a close observer of the second round. It presents a sad case study of the consequences of the Forgotten R of DDR, i.e. Reintegration. It also modifies the title of the seminar panel from "Forgotten" to "Missing R", as my experience over the past six years suggests that the Reintegration element was not so much inadvertently forgotten, as purposefully left out.

Militancy in the Niger Delta

To understand why DDR processes in the Niger Delta have not worked, it is necessary to look at the history and nature of militancy in the region. I have attempted to provide a fuller understanding of the armed groups of the Niger Delta in a September 2009 paper for the Council on Foreign Relationsⁱ To briefly summarize here, in the late 1980's university confraternities began spilling out of the campuses in the form of street gangs, many of which became involved in the retail side of the drug trade and later in bunkering (the theft of crude oil). With the return of civilian democracy in 1999, large numbers of youth were hired and armed as political thugs to rig elections and intimidate members of the opposition parties. The political violence of the 1999-2003 term centered on Rivers State, the eastern capital of the oil industry. By the 2003 and later 2007 elections, political thuggery had spread to all parts of Nigeria, but was particularly common in the three core states of the Niger Delta, where the high stakes from oil revenues make it literally a "do or die" business. The core states of Delta,

Bayelsa and Rivers account for most of the oil production in Nigeria, which is overwhelmingly the largest source of income for the country. Out of the federal oil revenue, the Niger Delta states receive 13% directly to the state governments.ⁱⁱ Hence controlling this huge amount of money, over which there is very little accountability, gives politicians the incentive to win elective offices by whatever means necessary.

Add to this mix of youth armed for the drug trade, oil theft and political violence, the high level of armed intercommunal or interethnic conflict, often fought over control or “ownership” of oil and gas facilities. The result is a region of highly armed civilians and a large military presence, where socioeconomic development is low, and there is little participation in the oil and gas industry, which greatly impacts the environment and its people. The addition of poor governance, both in non-delivery of basic services and lack of fiscal transparency make the region a powder keg waiting to explode.

And explode it has done. There have been a number of fierce interethnic wars, political riots, attacks on oil facilities, kidnappings and occasional killings of foreign oil workers, which later evolved to kidnapping of Nigerian elites. The large ransoms paid to kidnappers have only exacerbated the problem, as the stakes get higher and higher. While some groups began attacks and kidnappings for ideological reasons, the ransom payments brought in many pure criminals, who also specialized in piracy and bank robberies.

The economic violence that started with cults in Rivers State who were used to rig the 1999 and 2003 elections came to a temporary halt in October 2004 with a peace agreement facilitated by President Obasanjo between the warring factions of Ateke Tom’s Niger Delta Vigilante and Asari Dokubo’s Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force. A DDR process was initiated, but had unfortunately broken down by mid-2005.

Tensions heightened in September 2005 with the arrest of Asari by federal security agents. The arrests of Asari and the former Bayelsa governor, Alamiyeseigha, were key factors in the creation of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) which took armed struggle to a whole new level. In January 2006 MEND kidnapped its first set of expatriate hostages, and this was followed by massive attacks on Shell facilities in Delta State and more kidnappings. This led to a downward spiral of increasing attacks and kidnappings with ever higher ransom payments. Oil production was down to approximately half of its pre-2006 level, which resulted in declines in federal revenues. Finally in 2009, President Yar’Adua announced an amnesty for all members of militant groups. The amnesty program was conducted in August-October 2009, and militants were theoretically disarmed and sent to demobilization camps. To date, no reintegration has been done.

We shall look at each of the 2004 and 2009 DDR processes in turn and consider the consequences of the lack of reintegration in each of them.

The 2004 Rivers State Peace Agreement and DDR process

The 2004 peace agreement involved the two major groups which had been used to rig the 2003 election in Rivers State i.e. the Niger Delta Vigilante headed by Ateke Tom and the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteers Force headed by Alhaji Asari Dokubo. The conflict between these two groups started in late 2003 and included fighting on the streets of the state capital, Port Harcourt, (including one group coming within half a mile of Government House); military attacks on several major towns; threats by hundreds of Ijaw commanders to attack oil and gas installations. This turmoil caught the attention of all Nigerians and indeed the world as oil prices skyrocketed in September 2004. Realizing the danger of such continuing violence, President Olusegun Obasanjo invited both leaders and their key followers to Abuja. After hours of discussion, the leaders signed a peace agreement, which was aired on CNN. Governor Peter Odili was also invited to the meeting to explain his role in this conflict. Two subsequent meetings were held between the militants and the Presidency, at which two committees were set up: a Disarmament Committee headed by Governor Odili and a Community Governance committee headed by Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, then Deputy Governor of Bayelsa State (now Acting President of Nigeria).

Three of us from two civil society organizations (Academic Associates PeaceWorks, the NGO of which I am the Executive Director and Our Niger Delta, an NGO started by several young men from Bayelsa and Rivers States) approached Governor Odili about working with the Rivers State Government on the peace process and he willingly accepted. During the month of October 2004 the Disarmament Committee collected weapons from all parties, which were kept at the military cantonment and publicly destroyed on November 15. Two disarmament observers from SaferAfrica in Pretoria (sponsored by DFID) and a mobile policeman assigned to protect me documented and recorded serial numbers of all weapons received officially. Asari eventually handed in 3,000 weapons. Unfortunately no clear record was kept of weapons handed in by Ateke's group before the official start of the disarmament. Also unfortunately the committee chose to pay for weapons turned in, averaging N250,000 (c. \$2,000) for a serviceable AK-47. This was well above the market price and doubtlessly led to more purchases simply for the purpose of the disarmament exercise. It is also unclear what percentage of weapons were really turned in.

At the time of the peace agreement on October 1, no one had a clear idea of exactly who had been involved in the intergroup fighting. Therefore the three civil society facilitators recruited about 8 young men from the state to go to each camp and effectively write up a case study on each group. In this way we were able to identify the real leaders, assess group membership, and look for those who might cooperate with the DDR. I then met with the leaders of all of the various groups and listened to their stories. Perhaps through the face-to-face interaction with hundreds of militants which began during this time, the militants came to trust me. I became known as “Mum” to the armed youth and “Mama Militant” to outsiders. This listening and mentoring was an important part of our rehabilitation process. On November 19, 2004 we organized a meeting between Governor Odili and 50 key group representatives. After hours of listening to the fellows telling their stories, the governor hosted all of us to dinner in his official residence and a peace agreement was signed at the end of the evening.

Thereafter began a series of activities which can be considered partly demobilization and partly reintegration. The talking sessions between the boys and President Obasanjo, and later me, exposed some horrific acts, such as tying live people in sacks and throwing them into the sea or dropping them off high buildings. One request that came from the boys themselves (the militants call themselves boys although they may be in their 30’s) was a church service of confession and forgiveness. The process of the various groups jointly planning this service was the beginning of trust building. It was extremely moving to see 2,000 young men, dressed in matching t-shirts and wrappers praying, then dancing together. A number of people were in tears, including Governor Odili. Services were held for both the Christians and Muslims just before Christmas 2004. Later other militants requested a second service, which never happened due to lack of funding. They wanted to be seen on television, to show their families and communities that they had changed and could be accepted back home. One of the shortcomings of this DDR process was that there was virtually no attempt to build reconciliation and reintegrate the boys back home. Thus they stayed in Port Harcourt, where they were a captive audience for the next round of violence.

My two young Niger Delta male colleagues and I were co-opted onto the Rivers State Rehabilitation Committee, which was to plan the demobilization and reintegration of the ex-combatants. We organized a day-long meeting of potential contributors to the peace process, including Social Services Department, the governor’s wife’s training program, the drug enforcement agency, secret service, Shell, EU, etc. By December 1, 2004 the Rehabilitation Committee had a 34 point Action Plan for DDR- little of which was actually implemented.

One exciting innovation was an Outward Bound type camp organized by Our Niger Delta, paid for by the state government, in which we took 700 ex-militants to a government leadership

camp in faraway Jos in the northern part of Nigeria. This was the first time that the combatants from both sides were in close proximity, and it was a challenge to a) get them to engage in constructive vigorous activity and b) keep the peace. However the camp went very well and was a turning point in the positive reorientation for many of the guys.

Immediately after the camp, a Central Coordinating Committee (CCC) was set up with representatives from the various groups. The committee worked well for about a month, planning out training and enlightenment activities for the Youth Office, which the Rivers State governor had promised to establish. However as this office was never set up and no other funds were available, the CCC meetings tapered off and disillusionment began to set in. This is unfortunate as the CCC did tap the leadership skills of the various members, and it provided an opportunity for people from both sides of the 2004 conflict to meet regularly in a safe environment.

Two training programs established by the state government did take off in early 2005. The first batch of trainees was 100% ex-militants, and we had to have the former armed group leaders at the training center to maintain peace among the former enemies. By the second batch, the politicians were beginning to give the training slots for their friends and relatives and over time, the percentage of ex-combatants steadily declined until these programs became mainly a source of political patronage. Again this led to disillusionment, as did the tapering off of the promised scholarships to return to school. Also the promise to deploy some of the ex-militants in the army or police was never kept.

Problems arose from the behavior of group leaders, as well as, the politicians. Money was paid for some hundreds of militants to participate in monthly sanitation exercises. However the money was paid through the militant group leaders and often didn't reach the guys themselves. In retrospect, this was probably purposeful to break up the group structure. However in less than a year after the peace agreement, in-fighting had broken out within both Ateke's and Asari's group, which the leaders could not control. Once again vicious fighting broke out on the streets of Port Harcourt, this time among former allies.

A number of unkept promises helped to unravel the peace process. For example, President Obasanjo had given instructions for Governor Odili to establish Community Committees in both of the most affected kingdoms: Okrika and Kalabari, with the goal of rebuilding the communities physically and socially. Although the committees were nominally established, they never were effective, largely due to lack of state government support. The Niger Delta Development Commission was also instructed to establish technical training centers in Okrika, Kalabari, as well as Ogbakiri. When NDDC finally did set up such centers, they were located in towns chosen by NDDC management for their own personal reasons. Our attempts to recruit

funding from the foreign donor agencies met blank walls, as most agencies have multi-year programs that do not allow for quick responses to pressing situations. This was very frustrating as the donors missed a real opportunity to help prevent escalation of the Niger Delta crisis. These lapses reflect a lack of **political will** on the parts of government, development agencies, donor agencies and ex-combatants, which allowed the DDR process to unravel within the first year.

Lessons learned from the Rivers State DDR process

When we jumped into a sudden DDR process in early October 2004, most of us had not done anything like this before. We responded to immediate needs and planned things as we went along. It was only in June 2005, in preparing to write up our experiences, that I read the DDR literature and could analyze what we did well and poorly. These are documented in the paper on Demobilization in the Niger Delta Peace and Security Secretariat Background Papersⁱⁱⁱ, which details our attempt to address the twelve fundamental issues of the Niger Delta.

Some lessons learned from this experience include:

- Advance strategic planning is critical and needs adequate investment
- An information base of number of combatants, kinds and locations of people and weapons is necessary. Therefore combatants must be registered early and research done on the weapons issue
- Combatants are diverse and need different kinds of reintegration assistance. In the case of the Niger Delta, many combatants have committed or been victims of atrocities for which they need psychosocial counseling, as well as work done with the community which is expected to receive them back
- Reintegration should be community based, especially in those communities most affected by the conflict
- Security of ex-combatants must be guaranteed.
- A neutral mediator with power to implement actions can sustain the initiative
- There should be a central institution to cover demobilization and reintegration activities
- Viable alternatives should be provided for ex-combatants. These may be jobs paying reasonable salaries, loans for self-employment or business, support for returning to school, or entry into the police or military
- DDR should be part of an integrated recovery strategy, that includes economic development, security sector reform, justice and reconciliation.
- Restorative justice may be part of the psychological adjustment process
- Ex-combatants should be involved in building a new society, which addresses some of the basic social justice issues and particularly governance issues

- Ex-combatants should also be involved in designing and implementing their own reintegration programs, especially in building bridges with others. The Central Coordinating Committee was one such short-lived attempt
- Comprehensive and periodic assessment of the various components of the DDR process and appropriate revisions should be conducted.
- Regional strategies are important, as neighboring states may benefit from conflict, be involved or victimized by it

What we did well in the Rivers State DDR

- The virtual immediate cessation of violence
- Reduction of tension and restoration of confidence in government
- The intervention of top-level politicians who demonstrated the political will to make this happen
- The willingness of political leaders to listen to all parties
- The willingness of political leaders to initially invest financially in DDR
- The involvement of a number of groups in planning and implementing DDR
- The effort to change the mindset of members of the armed groups
- Initial involvement of ex-combatants in the reintegration process
- Provision of training for hundreds of ex-combatants

What were the shortcomings of the Rivers State DDR

- Little advance strategic planning. Things happened so fast that no one actually sat down to think out the process
- No central institution to coordinate all DDR processes
- Attempts by vested interests to abort/hijack the process for their own goals
- Consequent decline of interest and commitment by the state government
- Lack of continuity in involving ex-combatants in implementation
- Delays in establishing the Youth Agency, led to unfulfilled promises about schooling, military, job creation and placement
- Resulting disillusionment of many ex-combatants led to return to old ways- violence, bunkering, drugs
- No psychosocial counseling given
- 4,600 jobs created were not sustainable, adequately paid or related to work done. Virtually no real job creation was done
- NDDC training centers were not established as instructed
- Inadequate public enlightenment about the end of amnesty and return of Rule of Law led some ex-combatants to believe that they could still get away with anything
- Security agencies felt disempowered, both in authority to enforce Rule of Law and the technical ability to do so

- Community Committees were not properly established and the focus remained on individuals rather than communities, thereby reinforcing the status and power of warlords

Breakdown of the 2004 Rivers State DDR Process

Within a few months of the peace agreement in October 2004, the political will to actually carry out a proper DDR process had dwindled. Unkept promises led to disillusionment. The arrest of Alhaji Asari Dokuo in September 2005- less than a year after the peace agreement- led to threats of renewed violence. Although we were able to keep the boys out of fighting for some months, they were enticed into even greater violence in early 2006. It would appear that disgruntled politicians invested money in a semi-ideological struggle over the marginalization of the Niger Delta region. After the initial 2006 attacks on oil facilities and kidnapping of foreign oil workers, various government officials- political and security agents- jacked up the ransom payments, to increase their own cut of the ransoms. Eventually some officials even sponsored such acts, especially kidnappings of political opponents.

In addition, as the 2007 elections approached, politicians re-recruited and armed youth to rig the elections in their favor. Indeed the level of rigging of the 2007 election was the highest ever. Some previously unarmed groups were armed for the election. All political parties participated in this rigging exercise. Unfortunately the arms can never be collected back at the end of the election, so this led to an even higher level of arms in the Niger Delta region.

The Current DDR Process 2009-2010

President Yar'Adua promised the Niger Delta militants amnesty if they disarmed between August and October 2009. Although the process started slowly, by the beginning of October virtually all of the armed groups had theoretically disarmed. The payments of approximately \$3 million to each major group leader, plus the threat of military attack if they did not participate, provided both the carrot and the stick to the boys. No one is sure what percentage of the weapons in the Niger Delta were handed in: I would guess about 30-40% of those held by the militants. Some weapons were old and unserviceable, while others appeared brand new and shiny. The latter may be explained by the political competition that was taking place between two prominent politicians in Bayelsa State, in which both wanted to be seen as producing more militants and more guns. No one is quite sure how many militants theoretically disarmed.

Estimates have ranged from 5,000 to 20,000. Even official government figures are confusing. It has been stated that allowances are being paid to 18,193 “ex-militants”, not including the boys from the camp of a major warlord Tom Polo in Delta State, who refused to register. A recent proposal to retrain 2,000 of Tom Polo’s boys was rejected, as he now claims to have 10,000 fighters in his group. However the Federal Government reintegration plan released in January 2010 only includes training for 4,800 so one wonders what happens to the other 13-15,000. There has since been an announcement on March 3 that 20,192 ex-militants will be given training; this number is more in line with the higher earlier estimate of the participants in the amnesty program. Also no one is sure that the people who disarmed were really militants, as there was no accurate census before the exercise began.

In spite of offers of external technical assistance and the presence in Nigeria of at least two experts in DDR- one with DFID and the other with UNDP- the Nigerian government refused all offers of assistance, saying that the amnesty would be done “the Nigerian way”. That usually means that a fair amount of money changes hands and it appears that this also occurred in the 2009 amnesty. As far as I am aware, there was no neutral outsider observer of the disarmament process, especially as it seemed to take place in a number of places simultaneously with various people collecting weapons. As mentioned earlier, General Boyloaf was taken by the Bayelsa State Governor to meet with President Yar’Adua and theoretically disarm. Ateke Tom was later taken by Timi Alaibe, a competitor of the governor, for the same purpose. In some cases, members of the Federal Government Amnesty Committee went to the militants’ camps to collect weapons, while a large show of disarmament was conducted at the town square in Yenagoa, the Bayelsa State capital.

It was only at the end of the amnesty that a Reintegration Committee was set up and its proposed program was made public in January 2010- three months after the end of the amnesty. However members of civil society were largely disgruntled with this plan. A committee headed by Patterson Ogon, a human rights activist now working with Bayelsa State Government, studied the plan and pointed out a number of problems- including the fact that 80% of the budget was to go for consultants and services and only 20% benefiting the real beneficiaries. This plan has still not been implemented- a full four months after the end of the amnesty period.

In the meantime the militants have been largely unengaged. They were told to report to demobilization camps, but there were seldom the staff or facilities to handle the ex-combatants if they did come to camp. For example, in Egbokodo near Warri, Delta State, bunks were moved into a would-be day training center but there were no showers and only a few toilets for the

proposed 400 residents. The militants were promised a monthly stipend of about N65,000. However when the residents at the demobilization camp at Aluu, near the University of Port Harcourt in Rivers State were not paid their stipends, they went on a rampage to the nearby university campus, attacking and raping. The students then marched to Government House to protest to the governor.

The government reintegration plan included training in some of the more common skills, such as carpentry and dressmaking. In 2006 the NGO which I head was hired by UNDP to develop a skills training program. I changed the program from the normal one to one focusing on members of the armed groups and incorporating counseling on careers, psychosocial, drugs; life skills, business training, sports, English, math and social studies. Our reorientation officers were themselves ex-militants who had dropped out of violence in 2004. We also studied all existing training centers in the three core Niger Delta states, current skills taught and opportunity mapping to determine what training we would give. Representatives of armed groups were involved in all stages of the planning. We were told very clearly that the militants did not want the usual routine training but instead wanted to work in the oil and gas industry. In view of the few jobs available directly in the industry, this meant training in things like sophisticated welding, heavy equipment operation and training to become contractors to the companies.

The current government reintegration plan is not based on opportunity mapping and is likely to result in the usual basic skills training that will not lead to real jobs or self-employment opportunities. In addition many second-rate training centers, without proper equipment or competent staff, have been identified for the reintegration program. Several government agencies, such as the National Directorate of Employment, have been identified to conduct technical training. However such agencies do not consider the unique social and psychological background of these “trainees” and are poorly prepared to meet the challenges that will arise if and when the training actually starts. One of the most important aspects has not been addressed- that of real job creation. Even if ex-combatants do go through technical training, unless there are real jobs with desirable salaries or real opportunities for self-employment, then the youth will return to violence. All of these bode badly for the success of the program.

A rethinking- out-of-the-box thinking will be necessary to come up with a creative plan for demobilizing and reintegrating the members of the armed groups and keeping them out of violence long-term.

In addition to handing in their arms and being given new sources of livelihood, some of the members of armed groups insisted on the Nigerian government addressing some of the fundamental issues in the Niger Delta region. President Yar'Adua began a series of meetings with various militant groups soon after the amnesty came to an end. The President even met with the Aaron Team, a team of representatives chosen by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta to speak on their half, in spite of early refusal of the government to recognize this team. Although nothing specific came out of these meetings, they at least were the start of a dialogue, as well as, a safety valve for the frustrations of the youth. Unfortunately President Yar'Adua was taken to Saudi Arabia on November 23, 2009 for medical treatment, and these discussions stopped. In effect the whole federal government ground to a halt in the vacuum created by the President's departure without proper handing over to the Vice President. On February 9, 2010 the National Assembly asked the Vice President, Goodluck Jonathan, to step in as Acting President. However President Yar'Adua returned to Nigeria secretly and unexpectedly in the dead of night on February 24. Since then there have been power struggles between the camps of the two would-be presidential figures. The Niger Delta reintegration program has been forgotten in the battle.

In the meantime, MEND and some other armed groups called off their ceasefire in late January when they saw that the reintegration had stalled due to the absence of President Yar'Adua. Generally the youth of the Niger Delta were happy when Goodluck Jonathan stepped in as Acting President in early February, as he is from the region, being a former governor of Bayelsa State. The return of President Yar'Adua has raised tension once more in the region, with fears that their native son may be sidelined. Threats of attacks have resumed and indeed there have been two attacks on oil facilities in the past week. There are also strong rumors that some of the armed youth are regrouping to protect Jonathan's interests. The Niger Delta governors met on the last weekend of February, calling on the Federal Government to implement the reintegration program, warning that failure to do so can result in renewed violence in the region. The 2009 amnesty may well go the direction of the 2004 peace agreement, due to the lack of political will to complete the process, leaving the youth partially disarmed, scarcely demobilized and certainly not reintegrated.

The Conflict Economy

After researching a paper on Blood Oil in the Niger Delta^{iv}, I now realize that the crisis in the Niger Delta is perpetuated by some selfish individuals who benefit from it, even while the majority of people in the region suffer. For example, top politicians and military officials benefit from the oil bunkering business more than the boys in the creeks who blow up pipelines. If

these boys were trained and given other jobs, the managers of the bunkering trade would have to recruit new operatives. In the same way, many politicians need to keep the armed youth at their disposal for the next election while some talented and brutal ones are on standby to deal with political enemies. Even interethnic conflict is often a cover-up for lucrative businesses such as bunkering and arms trade. Demonstrating a fair amount of initiative, some of the leaders of armed groups have used the money paid to them to participate in the amnesty process to buy new bunkering barges, thus perpetuating the criminal activity. As long as these criminal activities continue, there is little incentive to accept a small stipend to go for technical training.

Given the money at stake in these businesses, I believe that international intervention will be required to dry up the criminal activities- bunkering, drugs, arms importation, money laundering- that fuel the conflict economy in the region and that prevent any serious demobilization and reintegration from taking place. This explains the Missing R in the DDR equation.

ⁱ Asuni, Judith Burdin, "Understanding the Armed Groups of the Niger Delta," *Working Paper*, Council on Foreign Relations: (New York, September 2009).

ⁱⁱ "Nigeria: Transparency Snapshot," Revenue Watch Institute (2008), URL= <http://caspiarevenuewatch.org/our-work/countries/nigeria-transparency.php> (accessed March 1, 2010). Revenue Watch Institute shows that the Nigerian government had made 24.5 billion USD between 2008-2009 from oil revenues, According to the current Nigerian Constitution this would mean that 2.85 billion USD would be distributed to the Nigerian oil producing states. No confirmation that the full amount has been received by the states has been found.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peace and Security Secretariat, "Niger Delta Peace and Security Strategy Background Papers" (unpublished paper, Port Harcourt, 2006), 43.

^{iv} Asuni, Judith Burdin, "Blood Oil in the Niger Delta", *Special Report*, United States Institute of Peace: (Washington, DC, August 2009).