

Democracy and Underdevelopment in Coastal Communities in Akwa Ibom State Since 1999



Maclean Donald Mbikan¹, Ubongabasi Ebenezer Israel²

^{1,2}University Of Uyo, Uyo-Nigeria

ABSTRACT: Democracy in Nigeria and of course in Akwa Ibom State has created lopsided development and thereby widened the gap of inequality in the State. Democracy is a political and constitutional arrangement in which the values of economic development and social welfare of the citizens can grow and be sustained. In spite of the great potentials in agricultural, mineral and human resources in the state, development has remained uneven. The coastal communities like other rural areas in the mainland, are grossly underdeveloped, despite harbouring the wealth of the state, particularly, petroleum oil and gas. The coastal areas of the state are replete with poor or absence of basic infrastructure, poverty, unemployment high-crime rate, and youth restiveness. The article concludes that democracy in the state rather than foster a sustained development, has created uneven and uncoordinated development especially in the coastal areas. That only adequate provision of social infrastructures with sustainable development programme can secure the future of the people both in the hinterland as well as in the coastal communities.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Coastal, Communities, Development, Underdevelopment and Akwa Inom State.

INTRODUCTION

Akwa Ibom State is one of the states in the South-South geo-political zone in Nigeria, created on September 23, 1987. The state is made up of thirty one (31) local government areas; and is further divided into two geographical zones, namely, the hinterland and the coastal areas. The hinterland or mainland areas of the state constitute twenty eight (28) local government areas, while the remaining three (3) local government areas; that is Eastern Obolo, Ibeno and Mbo make up the coastal communities. These three local government areas stretch from the Cross River on the east and border on the Atlantic Ocean. The same three local governments cover about one hundred and twenty nine (129) kilometres coastline, making Akwa Ibom State the longest coastline in Nigeria. The area equally plays host to some multinational oil companies – Shell Petroleum, Exxon Mobile Unlimited, Agip, and of recent Stallion Global.

In addition, the vegetation of the coastal area is dominated by mangrove, foliage of trees and later nypa palm (*nypa fruticans wurmb*). Also, there are wild palm and coconut trees which grow extensively all over the area. The coastal strips have deposits of fine sand which form the coastal bank on which some settlements/villages exist. These settlements are called in Obolo language “okwaan mbong or Elekpon” “Ukana” in Ibeno and “Ine” in Mbo. Some of these settlements are fishing settlements which are not for permanent residence. Within the banks of the rivers/creeks are some prominent fishing settlements, among them are: Elekpon, Okoroete, Okwaan Obolo, Agansat, Etekum, Elekpon Obianga, Ogbogbouti, and Agansa (all in Eastern Obolo); Akata, Ikpaira, Ibot Okpon, Itabasi, Ntitoekaiba (in Ibeno) and Okposo, Utanayanta, Erebu, Ukpata (Mbo).

Traditionally, the communities engaged in fishing, trading and farming. Fishing is carried out in the creeks, rivers and the Atlantic Ocean. The three local governments have common history of origin and migrations. Uya (1984:29-31, Ejituwa (1991:6) says that the Oron, Obolo and Ibeno migrated from the Ramby region of the South West Camerouns. History has not recorded any war or conflict among them. Three different languages are spoken in the area: Obolo (in Eastern Obolo), Oro (in Mbo) and Ibeno (Ibeno). Urua (2004:134-135) classifies their languages under the Niger-Congo phyla. There are similarities in their culture and this probably confirmed their historical background.

Following the creation of states and local governments in 1996, these coastal communities in Akwa Ibom State, were constituted into three local governments namely – Eastern Obolo, Ibeno and Mbo. The creation of these local government areas have been a dream come true because of the yearnings of the people. The people have continued to cherish the euphoria which

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greeted that proclamation – creation of local government in 1996. The people had hoped that local government creation would usher in better job opportunities, rapid development and radical transformation of their economy. But their expectations were soon dashed with the democratic rule from 1999. It later dawned on the people that the state government and the councils could not by any magic wand, meet the people's expectations by radically transforming the infrastructures and economy into an Eldorado. Hence, this article examines the impact of democracy and underdevelopment in Akwa Ibom State vis-à-vis the coastal local government areas since 1999.

CONCEPTS OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy in Nigeria predated the independence of the country in 1960. The idea of democracy emerged with the formation of the first political party in Nigeria – Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) in 1923. The goal of democracy has been vehemently pursued from the colonial period through the decolonization of Nigeria, and her attainment of independence in 1960 (Orukpe and Isibor, 2018:212-213). Since 1960, the struggle for democracy has been like wall clock pendulum with the First Republic-1960-1966; second and Third Republics 1979 and 1983; while 29, 1999 marked the Fourth Republic. In point of fact, the transition to democracy on May 29, 1999 did not mark the birth of democracy as highlighted.

It is pertinent to note that democracy is connected with development. In fact, democracy galvanizes development. Democracy is generally seen as the suitable form of government, because it ensures human freedom, socio-political and economic development. No doubt that Sam Oyorbaire says that it is the very stuff of politics (Sam Oyorbaire, 1992:32).

Therefore, according to Igboke (2019:17) democracy means a system of government whereby the people exercise their governmental power either directly or indirectly through representatives elected by them periodically. Also, the popular definition of democracy is that of Abraham Lincoln, which stated thus:

“Democracy is the government of the people by the people and for the people” (cited by Igboke, 2019:17).

Generally, democracy is people-centred system of government, which implies that the people are sovereign and power belongs to the people. In other words, democracy revolves round the people and is germane to development. Chris (2015:18-19) mentioned the merits of democracy among others to include free choice of leaders, equal opportunity, equality of individual, participation in governmental affairs and decision-making.

DEVELOPMENT

The term development lacks universal accepted definitions. Umana (2003:105) says that development is used and interpreted in different ways by different analysts; and it is also used and analysed in political and economic literature and discourses. Iniodu (2004:309-310) expresses similar opinion and states that development means different things to different people in different places at different times. That development means improvement or upward mobility in the economic, social or political status of the community. Okorosaye-Orubite (2008:1002-1013) cited Fletcher in Rex, defined development as the actualization of an implicit potentiality, the simplest example being the patterned growth and maturation of a seed or an initial germ cell to the full adult form of the individual plant or animal or human person. Frank (2016:13-20) listed four popular conceptions of development to include – economic growth, modernization, distributive justice and socio-economic transformation.

Furthermore, development is more often define in terms of economy. Development should not be limited to economic aspect alone but also to political and social issues. For instance, Nigeria's transition from military to civilian administration could be described as political development.

UNDERDEVELOPMENT

Underdevelopment like development has no universal definition. In fact, there is no agreement on what constitutes underdevelopment. Umana (2003:100) defines underdevelopment as a state in which an economy does not record any progress in terms of taking care of the basic needs of the citizens. It implies a state of unsatisfactory societal well-being compared to the existent conditions elsewhere (Adeyemo 2003:14, Asuk 2019:27). Nearly all scholars attribute underdevelopment in Africa (Nigeria inclusive) to colonialism. Underdevelopment means stagnation, poverty, unemployment, backwardness and so on. Like development, the concept of underdevelopment is more or less linked with economy. Less emphasis is placed on contemporary or modern underdevelopment as the case may be in Nigeria in general and Akwa Ibom in particular. As Umana (2003:111) puts it; modern underdevelopment expresses a relationship of exploitation.

In the case of Akwa Ibom State, the political elites vis-à-vis the government use democracy to enrich themselves at the detriment of the people and also lack the political will to create a culture of development with regard to the coastal communities despite the fact that these communities harbour over 90% of the wealth of the state-petroleum oil and gas.

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Coastal Communities in Akwa Ibom State Since 1999: Democracy and Underdevelopment Debate

As earlier mentioned, Akwa Ibom State has thirty one (31) local government areas out of which three (3) border on the Atlantic Ocean namely: Eastern Obolo, Ibeno and Mbo. These local governments sandwich between Imo and Cross Rivers. The return of the country (Nigeria) from military rule to civilian administration on May 29, 1999 was seen as a welcome development. There was jubilation as democracy is seen as one of the best forms of government and it is people-oriented. Democracy is congruent with development and could reduce underdevelopment significantly. The people expected that democracy would transform their economy, for instance, provision of infrastructure, creation of employment opportunities and reduction of poverty/youth restiveness.

In Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, between 1999 and 2004, the state government identified the problems/challenges facing the state to include, poverty, unemployment inadequate energy (electricity supply) and lack of good drinking water. Others are poor enrolment in schools/declining educational infrastructure as well as poor health facilities/services. (Akwa Ibom State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, AK-SEEDs, 2004:5-13). Okoko and Ibaba (1998:56-67) confirmed the absence of infrastructure in the Niger Delta region (Akwa Ibom State inclusive). This is acute in the coastal/riverine communities despite the fact that both the state and federal governments have been making billions of dollars from crude oil/gas sales, extracted from the areas, while the coastal communities have nothing to show for their wealth.

Again, since 2004, there has been a downward trend in infrastructural development in the coastal communities in the State. In point of fact, most rural communities in the state (including coastal communities) have no electricity supply, though there are poles and cables but no power supply. In Eastern Obolo, Oil Mineral Producing Development Communities (OMPADEC) now Niger Delta Development Commission (NNDC) provided electricity in the 1980s. The electricity supply covered Okoroete, Okorombokho, Okoroiti and Iko Town, while that of Ibeno was provided by the Exxon Mobile and Mbo by the Akwa Ibom State Government. However, some of these facilities have become moribund because of lack of maintenance.

In the area of health, the coastal communities have two cottage hospitals established in Okoroete, and Ibeno respectively; and none in Mbo. The areas had well over thirty (3) primary health centres; but both the cottages hospitals/primary health centres lack manpower and equipment. The absence of regular electricity supply has also crippled the operations of these health facilities. The cottage hospital in Okoroete, Eastern Obolo Local Government headquarters has no resident doctors. The same situation applies to the cottage hospital at Ibeno.

Another issue threatening the wellbeing of the coastal communities is poor enrolment of the coastal communities pupils/students in schools as well as declining educational facilities. The three local government areas aforementioned had nine (9) secondary schools – four (4) in Eastern Obolo, four (4) in Mbo and one (1) in Ibeno and about eighteen (18) primary schools. The primary /secondary schools like the health centres are poorly equipped with inadequate seats for staff and students; inadequate number of staff, poor libraries/laboratories as well as lack of science equipments. Some of the equipments (sciences' equipments/computers) were donated by multinational companies operating in the areas as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This equipment could not be put to use because of lack of electricity to power them. Some secondary schools in the area have only four permanent teachers and the same applies to the primary schools (most of the schools rely heavily on the services of Youth Corp members whose services have a 12-monthly cycle). It is imperative to note that some of these secondary schools were established through community efforts and were later taken over by the state government. A case in point is the secondary school at Iko Town established by Shell Petroleum (SPDC) while Okoromita Secondary School was established through community effort (all in Eastern Obolo Local Government Area).

Moreso, the entire coastal communities have no landing jetty, good drinking water but are constantly threatened by severe coastal erosion/flooding caused by climate change and environmental pollution especially from oil spill. The oil spill, for example has caused a lot of damages to aquatic life and the ecosystem. Coastal erosion/flooding has affected the three coastal local government communities. Ita Abasi community in Ibeno was washed away by Atlantic Ocean in 2017; and most fishing settlements in Mbo and Eastern Obolo were also affected.

In addition, coastal communities are affected by unemployment and poverty. Unemployment is visible in the State while the coastal communities appeared to be worst affected – in spite of their contributions as oil bearing communities. AK-SEEDS (2004:5-6) puts unemployment rate in the state at 60%. While the National Bureau of Statistics NBS (2010) placed the state third in unemployment rate in the country and in 2020, the state's unemployment rate was 45% that is second in the country (NBS:2020). Though the various reports did not mention the coastal communities, they are probably the most affected. The high rate of crime in the area have been attributed to unemployment, which has also given rise to unrest and youth restiveness. Unemployment in the state has been attributed to poor leadership and lack of political ideology by the ruling political party that is People's Democratic Party (PDP) that has been in power since 1999. (Akwa Ibom State: Planet FM 101.1 News, Friday 3, June 2022, 7.00am).

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Closely linked with unemployment is poverty and malnutrition. Israel and Mbikan (2021:56) stated that poverty is one of the most widespread socio-economic problems in the state especially in the coastal or littoral communities. Poverty and malnutrition is so visible that a former legislator and commissioner in Eastern Obolo Local Government Rt. Honourable Adasi Ubulom was quoted as saying that poverty walk bear footed in the area. As part of the Niger Delta region, the coastal communities in Akwa Ibom State may be regarded as the least develop part of the state.

Democracy in Nigeria in general and in Akwa Ibom State in particular has encouraged corruption, nepotism and lopsided development. (Akwa Ibom State: FM 94:5 Wednesday June 1, 2022, 8.00pm Podium Programme). The programme also faulted the process of selecting representatives from the local governments, states and federal by the various political parties; and that people with poor leadership qualities have been presented by the various political parties to the electorates. In the case of Akwa Ibom State, since 2007 successive governments have concentrated development in the state capital (Uyo) and their respective villages/local government areas. A case in point is the government of Chief Godswill Obot Akpabio (2007-2015) which concentrated development in Ukana and Ikot Ekpene Local Government Areas with good roads, hospitals, borehole water, and renovation of all the government secondary schools. His government, brought Police Secondary School, Federal Polytechnics and Police Mobile Unit to Ukana his own village.

Also, the government of Udom Emmanuel is toeing the same line with Godswill Akpabio his predecessor by providing the basic infrastructure to his village Awa and part of Onna Local Government Area. The administration, brought Akwa Ibom State University Teaching Hospital, and some industries-which about 80% of them are sited in Awa, the home town of the current governor.

The two administrations already mentioned made little or no effort to develop the coastal communities. With this philosophy of "Charity Begins at Home" demonstrated by the immediate past and the current administrations in the state, it will appear that the solution to the situation of uneven development as it affects the coastal communities in Akwa Ibom State will only be properly addressed if an indigen of one of these coastal communities is elected as a governor of the state-a task that appears to be a near impossibility, judging from how politics is played in the state.

CONCLUSION

It is generally agreed from the discussion above that the leadership structure in the state since 1999 has left much to be desired in terms of development, especially as it affects coastal communities. If there are lofty ideals in democracy, the Akwa Ibomites have lost touch with them. Development should be all-inclusive. The approach of "winners take it or Charity Begins at Home", should be discouraged. Therefore, to stem the tide of crime and reduce rural-urban migration, the state's emphasis should be on evenly-spread development that cuts across both coastal as well non-coastal areas.

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