

TOWARD A REFORM AGENDA FOR THE NIGER DELTA

A Report of the Africa Program
Center for Strategic and International Studies

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The principal author of this report is Alex Iannaccone, with input from colleagues Michael Baca, Jennifer Cooke, and J. Stephen Morrison. The report encapsulates the general conclusions of a March 14 CSIS conference; the ideas expressed, unless specifically noted, are not the views of any one speaker, but a compilation of broader themes.

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Toward a Reform Agenda for the Niger Delta

Alex Iannaccone

Introduction

On March 14, 2007, the Africa Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) hosted a conference on the Niger Delta, one in a series of events organized by a consortium of U.S.-based institutions to elevate the focus on Nigeria in the lead-up to and immediately beyond Nigeria's April elections. The sponsoring institutions are CSIS, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Council on Foreign Relations, the U.S. Institute of Peace, the African Studies Program at Johns Hopkins SAIS, and the African Studies Program at Northwestern University. The conference began from the premise that the injustices and dangers of the Niger Delta, long neglected, are of rising prominence in Nigeria's national political debates and will inexorably confront the next governing administration in Nigeria as a priority challenge. Specifically, the conference aimed to:

- assess trend lines in the Delta in the lead-up to the April 2007 elections;
- build consensus around dynamic reform prospects that a new Nigerian administration might promote to strategically confront political and criminal violence, corruption, and poverty in the Delta; and
- examine how best the United States should engage a new Nigerian administration to address the Delta's immediate and underlying challenges.

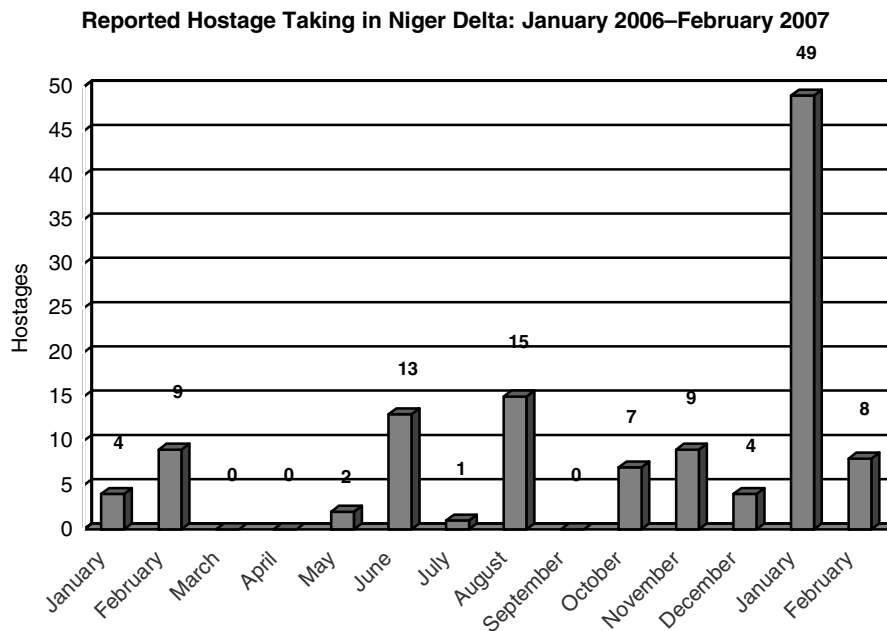
The conference opened with an introductory snapshot of current trend lines in the Niger Delta: on-the-ground perceptions of democracy; dynamics among armed militant groups; and human development indicators. Two panels followed, the first offering a firsthand analysis of the situation in the Delta and prospective reform approaches, and the second focusing on the status of current external support programs and how the relationship between the United States and Nigeria might evolve in the future to boost the efficacy of joint initiatives.

Current Trend Lines

Rising Criminal and Political Violence

Armed militant groups operating in the Niger Delta have graduated to a new level of lethality and technical and tactical sophistication. A recent confidential survey reports that the availability of AK-47s in the Delta has increased five-fold in the last 30 months and that militant groups likely possess remote-detonation and night-vision equipment, as well as anti-aircraft missiles. The same survey estimates that the five best-armed and trained groups have a combined fighting force of 10,000 men and access to 25,000 weapons. Between January 2006 and March 2007, militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) abducted over 100 oil-sector employees (see figure 1). An active ransom market has emerged that has brought considerable financial resources to these groups. A rising level of hostage taking has also made oil and gas service companies increasingly reluctant to dispatch personnel to repair sabotaged or ruptured pipelines, contributing to the enduring shut-in of over 600,000 barrels per day of oil production.

Figure 1: Hostage Taking



The fragmentation and proliferation of militant groups in the Delta make it difficult to say with certainty what role militancy will play in the upcoming elections: whether these groups will act as independent, violent spoilers; be co-opted as local enforcers advancing the causes of officials and political parties; or enter a relatively quiet phase. After serving political patrons in the 2003 elections,

many youth militias “took to the swamps” and began to rely on stolen oil and, more recently, extortion and hostage taking for revenue. Although groups such as MEND rhetorically play on long-standing political grievances, it remains unclear to what degree their actions reflect political versus material or criminal considerations.

Continued Corruption and Poor Governance

Corruption marked by the lack of fiscal transparency and accountability at a national, state, and local level, continues to be the single gravest obstacle to socioeconomic development in the Niger Delta. The Nigerian federal government and Niger Delta state officials have in recent years had ample oil revenues to begin to redress the Delta’s neglect but, to date, have squandered multiple opportunities to do so.

At a local and state level especially, government revenues have reached record highs, but there has been little tangible progress in the provision of infrastructure, local power, education, and elementary healthcare. Local government revenues in Nigeria are four times higher than they were in 1999. The government of Rivers State, for instance, had a 2006 budget of \$1.3 billion—higher than the budgets of many West African countries and about five times the budget of most Nigerian states—yet the communities of Rivers State have seen little improvement in their standards of living. Typically, less than 10 percent of the state and local budget is set aside for healthcare and education. And even then, much of the money set aside for these purposes is lost to corruption and phantom projects.

The consequence of this neglect, as pointed out in the 2006 *Niger Delta Human Development Report*,¹ is a deplorable state of human development in terms of life expectancy, child survival rates, income, and education. In the Delta, the already dire circumstances that most Nigerians face are compounded by environmental degradation from the oil industry and a lack of appropriate waste management. With nearly three-quarters of its population under the age of 30 and a fertility rate of 5.9 children per woman, the lack of opportunities in Nigeria weighs heavily on a bulging youth population, which may increase the likelihood of civil strife.²

Approaching Elections

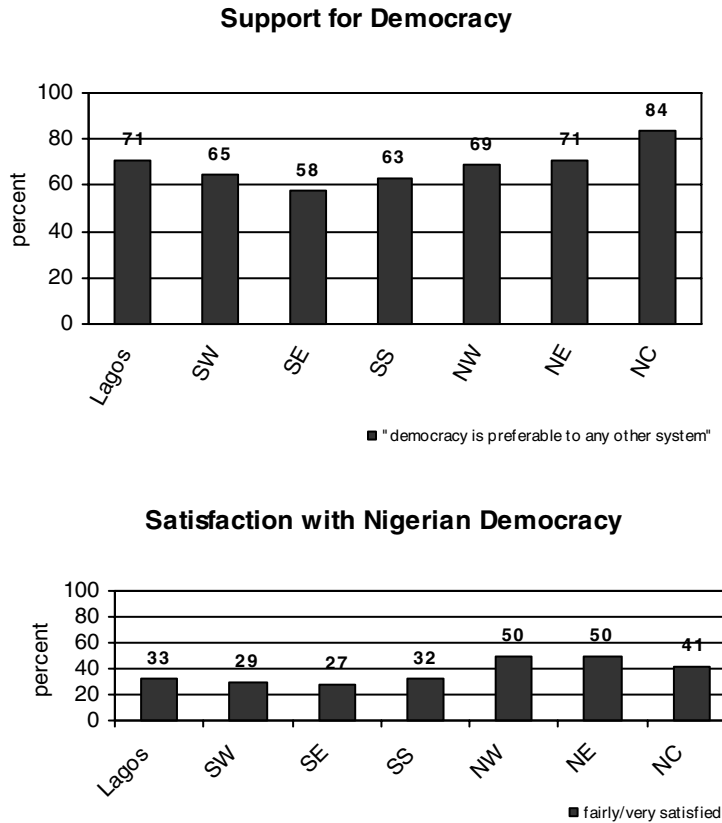
Afrobarometer’s February 2007 survey, the first pre-election opinion survey conducted in Nigeria, found that a majority of the Nigerian people, while moderately supportive of the notion of democracy, are deeply dissatisfied with Nigeria’s democratic trajectory since the end of military rule in 1998–1999 (see figure 2). There is little trust in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) or in President Olusegun Obasanjo. Additionally, the survey found considerable skepticism over the 2003 elections and the prospect of free and fair

¹ United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Niger Delta Human Development Report* (Abuja: UNDP, 2006), pp. 63–67.

² Elizabeth Leahy et al., *The Shape of Things to Come: Why Age Structure Matters to a Safer, More Equitable World* (Washington, D.C.: Population Action International, 2007), p. 26.

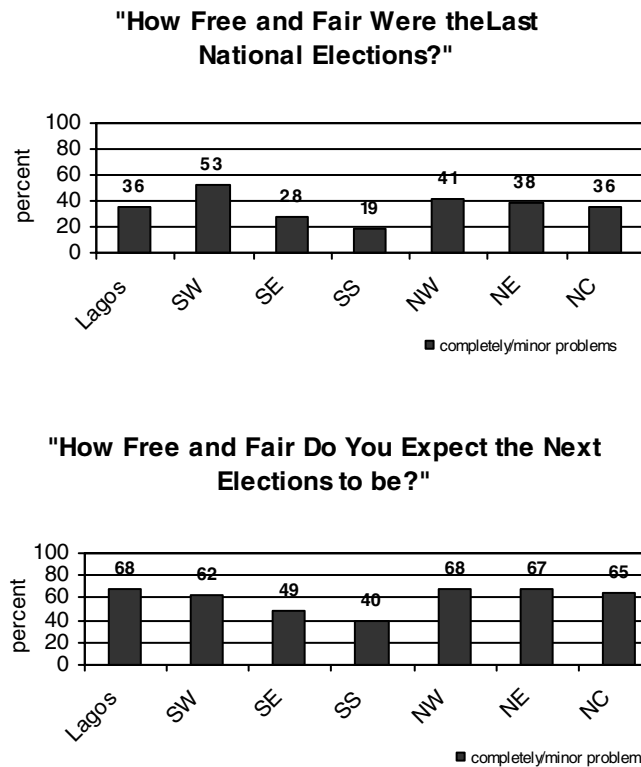
elections in April 2007 (see figure 3). It is worth noting that on all of these issues, citizens of the Delta had consistently lower expectations than citizens of other regions.

Figure 2. Afrobarometer Survey, January 2007



The Afrobarometer survey found a plurality—but not a majority—of support for the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) at the end of January 2007. Although the situation will be highly fluid in the months preceding the elections, some panelists interpreted these results as being a reflection of the measures that the PDP leadership and President Obasanjo have taken to ensure that their partisans are the leading names on the ballot. In this view, the revalidation of PDP membership in mid-2006 was a mechanism for excluding voices of dissent at all levels. Similarly, there is a widespread perception that the INEC and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) have been used by the PDP to remove opposition names from the ballot. “It was clear that the president as an individual had the final say of who the party candidates would be at every level,” said Nigerian activist Dimieari Von Kemedi. “The results are clear. The winners are known.”

Figure 3. Afrobarometer Survey, January 2007



A January survey conducted by two Nigerian organizations, the Alliance for Credible Elections and the CLEEN Foundation (formerly the Center for Law Enforcement Education), revealed that the percentage of eligible voters registered in Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers States lagged behind the Nigerian average. The same study also reported that the percentage of voters fearful of violence at the polls was higher in these three states than in Nigeria as a whole. The figure proved particularly striking in Rivers, where over 60 percent of eligible voters expressed fear that they were at risk of becoming a target of violence.

Despite these disturbing trends, most speakers agreed that while the April elections are likely to be highly flawed, there is reason to remain cautiously optimistic that they will result in a nonviolent transition of power and an improved approach to the Delta.

New Reform Agendas

Panelists emphasized that a new administration will face considerable domestic pressure to take a renewed approach to solving the manifold problems of the Delta. The Delta increasingly, and visibly, touches on Nigeria's national interests: stability, equity, governance, and, no less important, the country's ability to

achieve the target oil-production goal of 4 million barrels per day in 2010. Nigeria's frontrunner presidential aspirants have all expressed a desire to address these issues principally through political, as opposed to security, means. First, they are aware that the Nigerian military is no match for the militias, who are better armed and more knowledgeable about the local terrain. Second and more importantly, they acknowledge that the problem at root is a political and developmental challenge. While panelists agreed on the pressing need for reform, there was divergence as to which model for change could best channel assistance and at the same time ensure local ownership and access.

A Marshall Plan-type of approach, strongly favored by one speaker, would seek to overcome widespread disappointment over the repeated failures of past Delta reform plans by putting in place a credible, fresh framework, led from Abuja, that mobilizes massive resources over a multiyear period and sets clear and verifiable targets. Such a Delta-wide approach could potentially leverage the major resources required to redress regional deficits in transportation and energy infrastructure. Other speakers cautioned that, by itself, this type of approach will be inadequate unless there are strong, matching local institutions to ensure that resources are allocated in ways that reliably address local grievances and needs. A bottom-up, community-based approach, however, will only be effective if it features representative and accountable community institutions.

Panelists criticized the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) as being heavily top down, ineffectual, unaccountable, and chiefly a vehicle for high-level political patronage. In sum, it has failed to yield tangible results at the local community level. Nigeria and the Delta region, panelists agreed, have the financial resources to underwrite such a major, comprehensive approach, but ensuring transparency and popular legitimacy will remain the most difficult challenges. Established institutions like the NDDC, owing to their lack of legitimacy, are not promising candidates to carry any new future agenda forward.

There has been some headway in improving governance at the national level with initiatives like the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), but more needs to be done to increase transparency and accountability at a national, state, and local level. This could involve public access to revenues and expenditures data, auditing of budgets, and independent monitoring of the effectiveness of government socioeconomic initiatives.

The U.S. Role

The United States has limited financial leverage as a donor in a country as large and wealthy as Nigeria. Current U.S. development assistance to Nigeria is less than 1 percent of the country's GDP, and much of the U.S. assistance is channeled through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). "The solution to Nigeria's challenges and of those in the Delta do not, cannot, and, frankly, should not reside in places like Washington or Paris, London or Beijing, but rather within the local communities, cities, and towns in Nigeria," said Phil Carter, director of the Office of West African Affairs at the State Department. The

U.S. government sees itself as playing an important supporting role in this process by helping with capacity development. Current programs, for instance, include the training of security units for peacekeeping operations and establishing better monitoring and response capabilities for security forces in the Delta.

However, U.S. officials expressed frustration over the many opportunities and initiatives that have been proposed in discussions with the Nigerian government but which have resulted in little action. The result has been missed opportunities to strengthen technical capabilities that could have enhanced security in the Delta. These proposed initiatives include a regional maritime-awareness program, backed by a \$16-million contribution from the United States, and training in the identification and tracking of illegal small-arms and light-weapons flows.

Speakers emphasized widespread skepticism among Nigerians of U.S. intentions vis-à-vis Nigeria: U.S. counterterrorism programs and the recently announced decision to establish a U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) are often viewed by Nigerians as strictly self-interested U.S. instruments to secure oil resources and advance the global war on terror. Theresa Whelan, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Africa, countered that AFRICOM is not a new force per se, but simply a way of reorganizing existing U.S. military programs to more efficiently and consistently focus U.S. efforts on the continent. If any U.S. troops are on the ground in Nigeria, it is only a tiny number on short-term training assignments, said Whelan.

Policy Recommendations for the United States

The United States and Nigeria have multiple shared interests and enjoy considerable mutual goodwill. Following the April elections, speakers argued, the United States would be well advised to pursue an activist, multipronged strategy to assist the new Nigerian government in addressing challenges in the Niger Delta. Six key steps were identified.

1. ENGAGE IMMEDIATELY AFTER ELECTIONS.

Act swiftly and effectively following the April 2007 elections to engage the new Nigerian government at a senior-level and clearly express U.S. concerns and aspirations for Nigeria, recognizing that there are other powers such as China who will be competing for influence. Establishing a strong bilateral relationship at various levels of government will show U.S. concern and support for reform in Nigeria.

2. ACKNOWLEDGE PROGRESS IN TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVES.

Privately and publicly acknowledge the progress that has been made to date in increasing transparency and encourage Nigeria to continue to live up to the standards it has set for itself. Work toward the implementation of programs such as the EITI that audit the allocations of state and local governments.

3. EXPAND TARGETED ASSISTANCE.

Find ways to innovatively assist Nigeria by increasing public awareness about transparency initiatives such as EITI and making their implementation more

effective through training in fields such as auditing, account management, and forensic investigation.

4. RESTORE A HIGH-LEVEL BILATERAL MECHANISM.

Replace episodic high-level engagement with a more sustained partnership that gives ongoing attention to security, health, energy, commerce, and education. The U.S.-Nigeria Bilateral Commission, established during the transition back to democratic rule in 1998–1999, was a very effective mechanism that could be a model for renewed efforts.

5. USE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY TO EXPLAIN AFRICOM.

Be clear about the purpose of establishing an African command and the objectives of AFRICOM in terms of its role in Africa and its future relationship to Nigeria.

6. ACCELERATE A U.S.-NIGERIAN DIALOGUE ON THE DELTA.

Establish a renewed dialogue with the Nigerian government that encourages a wide-ranging consultative process that engages a diverse set of societal interests and marries top-down and bottom-up approaches. The Delta may warrant a Marshall Plan effort. If so, it will need to be financially and politically driven by Nigerians and could benefit from logistical and managerial assistance from the United States and other donors.

Conclusion

A new Nigerian administration will face sharp domestic demands to take a stronger, comprehensive and long-term approach to the injustices and critical challenges of the Niger Delta. It will also likely have an opportunity to act, swiftly and strategically, to pursue a new course. The United States is well positioned to be helpful, in close partnership with the new Nigerian government. For both the Nigerian and U.S. governments, political will and focus will be decisive factors.