

Niger Delta development and failed promises

By Daniel Iworiso-Markson

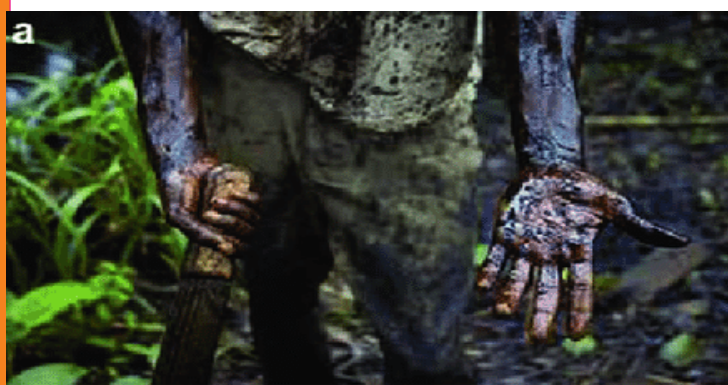
Nothing puts in more stark relief the squandering of Nigeria's fortunes than the state of development of other oil-endowed climes like the Gulf States vis-a-vis the utter despoliation of our oil-rich Niger Delta. Why couldn't the Niger Delta be developed like Dubai, which in the space of two decades, and before our very eyes, grew from an unremarkable fishing town to the Middle East's business, tourism and culture epicenter?

In one of his many published articles, Brandon Bekker, while on a sabbatical in Dubai wrote a piece he titled 'A Dream in the Desert: The Man Who Built Dubai', where he said, "If ever there was an example of a high growth, high performance city, Dubai would certainly be it. "What's even more impressive about the meteoric growth of Dubai is the role that one man played in developing the ideas, strategies and teams that fuelled it. I greatly admire Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, prime minister and constitutional monarch of Dubai, and reading his book *My Vision: Challenges in the Race for Excellence* reminded me exactly what I love about his style of leadership." The challenge of today's Niger Delta, not to talk of the larger Nigerian polity is that we have been bereft of leaders like Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid

Al Maktoum. Truth is the development or advancement of any state or nation is a function of her leadership. According to John Maxwell, author of over 70 leadership books, everything rises and falls on leadership.

The success story of Dubai today revolved around the vision and uncommon leadership of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. The same can be said of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew. It was clear that both the Sheikh and Lee Kuan Yew were not just men of enormous vision, but they possessed the unique ability to be single-minded in the execution of their vision. To build the Niger Delta of our dream will require a similar single-minded deliberation and effort. The first place to start is to identify and be deliberate about the choice of leaders we put in positions of leadership for if the truth be told bad and corrupt leadership is at the heart of our region's underdevelopment. If the Niger Delta must develop, then it is imperative that we elect the right set of leaders and buck the national predilection to enthrone mediocrity. For too long it appeared as if only the worst amongst us found their way to power by hook or by crook.

The right leaders would of necessity prioritize basic development, focusing poverty alleviation, primary



healthcare and education. If you move around the Niger Delta today you will be shocked to find out that our people still lack the very basic amenities. There are many communities still without portable drinking water or a primary health clinic. Whilst it is good to build roads and bridges to link communities and promote social and economic intercourse, it is equally important to attend to the very basic needs of clean water supply and basic health facilities. Leaders in the Niger Delta should be intentional about assisting the common people with resources to meet their basic needs.

Your good roads and bridges mean nothing if the people are wallowing in abject poverty, unable to appreciably pursue a means of livelihood that will enable them live in dignity. It means nothing if the children are roaming the streets instead of having them in the school classrooms and learning. It means absolutely nothing if the bulk of your youth population are not gainfully employed or empowered and armed with the requisite skills to fend for themselves. Sadly, the derelict situation of the denizens of the Niger Delta reflects the national condition such that Nigeria today teeters on a dangerous precipice fuelled by widespread discontent and instability. For us in the Niger Delta, our future and prosperity now lies in our ability to look beyond oil, a depleting asset that has inflicted more pain than gain. The magnitude of the damage to our environment and the attendant effects on the lives and health of our people by oil exploitation is still to be fully appreciated.

Rather than wasting time in lamenting this baleful legacy, we must focus our energy on harnessing available resources to actualize our goals of create a strong regional economy through economic cooperation and integration. This was the aim that undergirded BRACE (acronym for the states that make up the Niger Delta) Commission. It is sad to say that the governors of the six South-South states today have not moved the needle as far as BRACE is concerned. What is clear from where I stand is that some of our governors are busy politicking and are more concerned about their hold on power than be bothered by any vision to transform the Niger Delta and positively affect the material conditions of the people.

With the future of oil and even natural gas fast receding into the past as a result of climate change driving the development of alternative energy sources, we cannot afford to waste any more time. I strongly believe the Niger Delta can still be made to emulate Dubai's development model if our leaders would embrace the vision of looking beyond the self and take the necessary steps. Many years ago, Qatar sought to emulate the development template of Dubai and today that effort has paid off. Qatar today is fast overtaking Dubai as the number one business and tourism destination in the Middle East. I believe If it worked for Qatar, it can also work for us in the Niger Delta. All that is required are men of vision to arise, give the people a new hope and provide selfless leadership and example.

Reflection on the squandered opportunity to develop the region and the imperative to do something about it rather than indulge in lamentation and hand-wringing informed our decision to mark the fourth anniversary of our online newspaper, **FIRST NEWS**, by organizing a public lecture with the theme "Building the Niger Delta of Our Dream: With or Without Oil". It is scheduled to hold in Port Harcourt on the 4th of October 2024 at the Atlantic Hall of Hotel Presidential. Billed to speak at the event are some of the engaged figures on the challenge of development in the region and beyond. They will engage our audience in meaningful conversation and dialogue that will stimulate new ideas and solutions on the way forward to fast track the region's development. It bears restating: there can be no better time than now for us to rethink the future of the region, casting our minds back to the time when we were a thriving economy, long before the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956. That was when the white man came with his oily business. Then, our people were bemused by his preoccupation with the oil and allowed him to exploit our land rather mercilessly. Now he has sucked out the black gold and has left our land badly degraded and despoiled, leaving whatever is left to their local interlopers.

Now they have put a knife (guns) in the hands of warlords in the name of pipeline surveillance contract, in another phase of exploitation and despoliation of our land and its resources. Indeed it is worth recalling that before the discovery of the oil at Oloibiri the Niger Delta occupied a most fertile land suitable for the cultivation of crops such as yam, cassava, palm kernels and rubber while the availability of water bodies made for aquaculture particularly fish farming. Agriculture was the mainstay of our region's economy back then and we grew our crops both for local consumption and exports. The region was a major exporter of rubber, timber, and palm oil and palm kernels via the Niger delta ports of Burutu, Forcados, Koko, Sapele, and Warri. Today, all that has gone with the wind. Warri and other ports in the Niger Delta are now looking like grave yards. The only gainful (some would say ungainful) employment in the Niger Delta today is either to be a card carrying politician or a brief case toting oil and gas contractor. Agriculture has been relegated to the background. With the people economically marginalized little wonder one report indicates that 73% of the populations are multidimensional poor in the Niger Delta. Some states in the region had the largest percentage of people in the country living below the poverty line as of that 2023 report. The situation demands clarity of vision and spirited engagement by a new generation of leaders to turn the tide. The challenge is urgent. The time to act is NOW!

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