



## Public policy lacuna: The travails of implementation in the Niger delta region of Nigeria

Umoh, Udofia Sunday<sup>1</sup>, Poroma Celestine Lekia<sup>2</sup>, Deedam Dorka Godbless<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political and Administrative Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Nigeria

<sup>2,3</sup> Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni Port Harcourt, Nigeria

### Abstract

This paper addresses public policy lacuna with a special focus on the travails of implementation in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. The paper argues that there exist, significant disparity between project approval initiation and actual completion. It further argues that the common trend in the Niger Delta Region is that government pursues preponderantly, income consuming rather than income generating projects. It explains that while most projects are approved and cited for political reasons and gains most of them do not reflect the aspirations and needs of the people, hence their abysmal failure abandonment. The paper recommends a structural framework that will enhance a transparent policy devoid of corruption and political interest. This will drive a regime of transparency and initiation of sustainable projects and programmes that will stimulate the local economy of the people and improve their living condition.

**Keywords:** public policy, political leadership, corruption, social disturbance

### 1. Introduction

A careful observation or exploration of the Niger Delta Region by any sincere person or groups will surely reveal stark disparity between public policy pronouncements by governments at all levels of governance, and policy implementation in the Region. In other words, there exists significant lacuna between projects approval, initiation and actual completion. While some projects do not see the light of the day after approval, most projects are never completed after their initiation.

Execution of viable projects is central to rapid industrialization and development of any economy. Viable project fully executed creates condition for employment creation and sparks off investment opportunities which in turn, generate income and enhances the wellbeing of the citizens.

The Niger Delta Region is plagued with prevalence of abandoned projects. Several housing, water, agricultural, health and road projects have been abandoned by the government and its agencies in the Region. Some of these projects have also been assessed to be either technologically obsolete, dilapidated or time irrelevant as a result of long period of abandonment.

For a better appreciation of this study, the paper is divided into four sub-sections. The first deals with conceptual clarifications, the second is concerned with theoretical framework, the third focuses on the causes of project failures in the Niger Delta Region and the last subsection deals with the conclusion.

### Conceptual/Theoretical Matrix

Public policy is faced with the problem of consensus in terms of definition. Beside that, is the dilemma of defining the boundary of what constitutes public policy. To some scholars, public policy is what government chooses to do or not to do (Dye, 1976). To others, it is what government intends to do and how it intends to do them.

What is central to all definitions of public policy is that, it is

an activity or actions taken by public authorities and not a private concern. It is the output or product or even consequence of a governmental process or course of action, which involves and affects a wide variety of areas and issues that requires compliance. Public policy is supposed to be a policy reaction to prevailing or perceived future public demands or needs. This is in recognition of the fact that policies are outputs of the prevailing political process.

A project on the other hand, can be viewed in several ways. Among the several definitions given by scholars, the following can serve our purpose here a project is the use of one or more scarce resources during a specified time for the purpose of producing some economic return or output at a later time; a capital investment to develop facilities to produce goods or services etc. From these definitions, a common feature of all projects is that they involve the commitment of economic resources with the hope of some benefits. (Walter, 1961) [7]. Project execution therefore is the steps and processes taken by policy-makers in ensuring the implementation or completion of such project. Project abandonment on the other hand is a situation whereby, a project is discarded or left uncompleted before its life-span is over. A project that is left uncompleted for a reasonable number of years after much funds have been committed to it, can be said to have been abandoned (Okafor, 1983) [4].

Various types of projects exist and these could range from expansionary to new projects, from projects aimed at total overhaul or replacement to modernization, and capacity consideration to lease-based projects. Timely and proper execution of projects is beneficial to the society. However, abandonment constitutes a colossal and abysmal loss to such a society. (Ezirim, 1999).

The theoretical anchorage of this study is the elite preference model of public policy-making. This model is characterized by limited participation of affected groups in the policy making process; control of power, skills, wealth and resources, status and information by a few; and a certain degree of continuity and commonality of interests

(Egonmwan, 1987). Parry Geraint (1972) posits that the values and preferences of public policies reflect that of the elites, rather than the demands of the masses whom such policies are suppose to impact on.

In their bid to maintaining the status quo, elites are bound to be conservative, non-innovative and marginal, rather than indulging in dynamic and high change potential policies. The elite have limited consultation with the affected groups in policy decision-making. The model infers that the elite is dominant in the policy making process and assumes that policy flows from the top, few ruling minority to the majority that are ruled.

The implication of this theory to the study is that project initiation and execution or abandonment does not reflect the genuine demands of the people. It means that there is a level of consensus on the preservation of the interest of the elite. Policies in this sense can only be reformed to meet continuing interests of the elite group instead of radical change. In other words, projects are abandoned if such action is to the best interests of the elites and not the masses.

### **Project administration in Niger delta region**

Several factors have been identified as being responsible for poor policy implementation and thereby leading to project failures and outright abandonment in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. These include absence of visionary leadership, improper conception and evaluation of projects, poor quality of materials used, incompetence of contractors, absence of due process in the award of contract, lack of effective monitoring mechanism etc. These are briefly examined below.

**Poor Quality of Political Leadership:** In the Niger Delta Region, poor quality of political leadership is a major obstacle to project execution. The region is currently bereft of sound, visionary and committed political leadership capable of embarking on aggressive project execution. When there is absence of sound and visionary leadership, the political will to execute certain projects may be lacking. The Region is said to be suffering from several pathologies of which leadership crisis is the most prominent. According to Egonmwan and Ibodje (2001) <sup>[2]</sup>, “crisis of leadership is perhaps the greatest crisis of development in the 20th century Nigeria”. To Pius Okigbo:

*It is a crisis arising from the absence of a coherent system of choice in politics and economies such as to allow leaders to emerge who will take the region as a whole as their constituency and who do not regard themselves merely as the canonical representatives of a section or group within the country In summary, the words of Sir Walter Bagehot captures the qualities of a good leader; “a common man of uncommon principles. (cited in Pius Okigbo, 1991:3) <sup>[4]</sup>.*

The Niger Delta leaders often times, embark on white elephant projects and mostly, projects that do not have direct bearing on the lives of the masses. The net result of this is project failure or abandonment. We presented the issue of leadership first because it is within it that other issues discussed revolve.

**Improper Conception of Projects:** The successful completion or abandonment of any project is largely a function of its conceptions. Some projects are conceived to serve wrong purposes and most times unrealistic given the limited available resources and time meant for their completion. Most projects that have been abandoned by

successive governments both at the national, state and local government levels, in the Niger Delta are white elephant projects conceived to enrich a particular set of people. The fact remains that the motives behind the conception of any project determines the success or failure of such a project.

**Poor Project Evaluation:** A good project evaluation programme helps to determine or ascertain whether or not, a project is worth committing funds to. The decision to embark upon a project hinges on the cost-benefit analysis of the said project, among other considerations. One of the most important aspects of project evaluation is an assessment of the factors necessary for the successful implementation of the project.

Unfortunately, in the Niger Delta Region, projects are not usually properly evaluated before execution, hence their abandonment or incompleteness. According to Ezirim (1999), projects evaluation process requires, at least four forms of interrelated investigation, namely; technical feasibility, economic and social desirability, commercial viability, and financial profitability. Technical feasibility entails a careful examination of all technical details involved in the conception and implementation of the project. Economic desirability shows the extent of economic gains and development a project can offer in the area it is cited. Commercial viability is concerned with the acceptability of such project by the market, while the financial profitability takes care of the cost implications and benefits derivable from such project. Unfortunately, the above steps are hardly taken in project implementation in Nigeria and the Niger Region in particular.

**Poor Quality of Materials Used:** A major problem of project implementation in the Niger Delta is the use of poor quality materials by the contractors. A careful observation of most projects abandoned or those that were poorly implemented in the Region shows a high level of discrepancy between projected materials in project proposals and actual materials used in the execution of such projects. In most cases, inferior materials are used, and this accounts for short life span of completed projects, and an unpredicted loss of lives and property occasioned by collapsed buildings, bridges, and rampant deep potholes in our major roads.

**Corruption and Absence of due Process in the Award of Contracts:** Absence of transparency in issues involved in the conception, award and implementation of projects is perhaps, the most important factor responsible for project failures in Nigeria. In Nigeria, lack of due process in public policy is a consequence of corruption. Project execution in Niger Delta is characterized with large absence of due process in terms of project approval, release of fund, and actual execution.

Due process requires that all the laid down rules and procedures for the award of contracts for projects including publication of such contracts, unbiased screening of application or tenders, appropriate release of funds through the right quarters to the right persons etc, must be strictly followed or adhered to. Factors such as misappropriation, misallocation, embezzlement, fiscal indiscipline etc, often times, constrained implementation of an otherwise viable project or the completion of same. Evidences abound in the Niger Delta where erstwhile good project suffered

abandonment and or incompleteness simply because the manager misappropriated the funds earmarked for them. Good examples at the national level include the over forty years old Ajaokuta steel project, the controversial 16 billion power and energy project, the Petroleum Development Trust Fund (P.T.D.F), the National Identity Card etc. Some examples in the Niger Delta include the abandoned Delta Rubber Company, Risonpalrn Nucleus Estate Ubima, in Rivers State, Several Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) initiated projects and inherited by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), spread across the Niger Delta Region which are still not completed till date.

These cases clearly show the lack of patriotism, dedication and commitment on the part of our leaders. These in turn, are traced to the fact that government policies and actions are mostly founded on the platforms of self-aggrandizement, ethnic, tribal and geo-political considerations. It is important to note that most capital projects of governments in Nigeria over the years were predicated on grounds of political and ethnic biases. The result is the preponderance of abandoned projects.

Also, arising from corruption and absence of due process is the award of contracts to incompetent contractors or hands. It is a common phenomenon that contracts are awarded to individuals who have access to the corridor of power but without technical competence. Most times, it is the officials of government that bid for the contracts with the intention to sublet them to other contractors, or in their inexperience execute such projects. The implication of this is that when a project contract is awarded on the basis of political patronage, such projects are not usually given the attention and supervision they deserve.

**Lack of Effective Monitoring Mechanisms:** One thing is to conceive and approve a project, and another is to ensure that such project is fully implemented. Effective monitoring of projects is part of the evaluation process as it ascertains the level of work done and instills checks on both the quality of materials used, regularity of the contractors on site and the quality of expected output of the project. Unfortunately, absence of effective monitoring system in Nigeria, accounts for the collection of mobilization fees by contractors without going to site or outright abandonment of projects they have received full payment, and why poor quality materials are used and poor job done. It equally accounts for delays in projects execution or their extension beyond their completion time.

**Social Disturbances:** Social disturbances are lapses arising from social policies of government. Communal clashes, riots, cult activities, religious crisis, and the recent upsurge of violence and militancy in the Niger Delta are consequences of the large lacuna in government development policies in the Region.

They are social factors that are now serving as the biggest obstacle to project execution in the Region thereby giving rise to increased cases of project abandonment in the area. Social disturbances especially of the violent type, is usually characterized with destruction of lives and property. The recent cases of hostage taking and kidnapping have adversely affected the development of the Region. Most projects awarded by the federal government in the Region such as the dualization of the East-West road linking Rivers

State to Bayelsa, Delta, and Edo etc and series of state governments sponsored projects have been abandoned by the contractors and the governments as a result of the above factors.

### Conclusion

We have identified several factors that account for the syndrome of project abandonment's in the Niger Delta. It is a common trend in Nigeria that we pursue preponderantly, income consuming rather than income generating projects. It is instructive to note that the Niger Delta Region cannot develop industrially and project wise in a regime of flagrant financial impropriety, fiscal indiscipline, absence of due process, lack of effective monitoring of projects, social disturbances etc.

It is our belief that the success or failure of any project is dependent on the quality of political leadership, regime type and pattern of political changes. The (constant change from one form of government to another has foisted on our leaders the syndrome of change or abandonment of projects they are supposed to inherit, to their preferred ones. This leaves behind a scenario where government projects are greeted with inconsistencies and incongruence, and therefore, devoid of continuity.

It is therefore, our opinion that if these ugly trends are not checked, the Niger Delta Region may forever be bereft of sound sustainable projects that will enhance the development of the area.

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