

# The POPULATION FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIGER DELTA REGION: POLICY ISSUES

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## Preface

CPED's Policy Brief is a short publication designed to inform policy makers and other stakeholders at the federal, state and local government levels in Nigeria on the key policy issues emanating from the action research and intervention programmes carried out by CPED and its collaborators. The Policy brief series for 2011 will focus largely on the challenges facing development in the Niger Delta region under CPED's research theme on growth and equity in development in Nigeria. This first number in the series is on population factor in development in the Niger Delta region.

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## **The Population Age Factor in the Development of the Niger Delta region: Policy Issues**

### **Introduction**

Much has been known about the physical resources of the Niger Delta region and the implications of their exploitation for the people of the region. Just as the natural resources are important for the development of the Niger Delta region, so also are the human resources. The main focus of development programmes in all parts of the world is upon the people living in different communities within the development area. The population of any region is both a beneficiary and an agent of development.

The situation in the Niger Delta region cannot be an exception to this important rule. In the search for the understanding of the impact of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region and of the appropriate policy framework for the development of the region, efforts must be made to examine the nature of the relationship between population dynamics and the patterns of change in the region.

We need to know the demographic features and dynamics of the people of the Niger Delta region, as well as their current socio-economic activities and the patterns of poverty among the people. At the same time, the people are key components and contributors to the process of development in the region.

Consequently, the demographic and socio-economic characteristics, patterns and perceptions of the people are crucial to the planning of the development of the region. If this is to be attained in the Niger Delta region for sustainable planning, efforts must be made to understand and possibly intervene in demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the people in the different communities in the region against the background of the nature and level of sustainable resources. This will facilitate sustainable poverty alleviation and development programmes in this crucial region of Nigeria.

### **Population Characteristics and Implications for Development**

The most basic determinant of the character and needs of any area is its population. In addition to sheer numbers, the ages, incomes, jobs and educational levels of the people, the size of their families and the types of households they live in, all these have an important part to play in the utilisation and the planning for livelihood as well as the provision of social services in a community. The allocation of social and infrastructure facilities in any country or region depends largely on resources that are available to the country/region in relation to the demand for the services.

Where the resources are adequate, it is relatively easy to spread these services equitably to the population, both the young and old, occupational groups, migrants and non-migrants as well as various other units of the population in all localities. In a region such as Niger Delta, where

development indicators are grossly limited, the situation with regard to the provision of these services becomes more complex. In such a situation, demographic considerations in the planning of such services become paramount. Consequently, the structure, distribution and growth of a population determine the social and infrastructure facilities required currently and in the future. It is in this context that this section discusses the characteristics of the population of the nine Niger Delta States.

### **Age Structure of the Niger Delta region**

As expected, the population of Niger Delta region is significantly youthful in character. Youths aged below 30 years constitute over 62 per cent of the population. Adults of working age (30-69) are only 36 per cent, suggesting a heavy dependency burden. Persons aged 70 and above constitute a mere 2.0 per cent of the population, a testimony to the high incidence of mortality and consequent short life span for the average dweller in the region. In various states in the Niger Delta, there are lower proportions of children who are less than 15 years in the age categories 0-4 and 5-9, compared with the 10-14 cohort. The explanation for this trend appears to be related to declining fertility associated with the hard economic situation in most communities in the region.

Overall, the age composition of the Niger Delta region has a number of implications for the development of the region. In the first place, the relatively high proportion of young persons below working age tends to reduce labour input

per capita and, all other things being equal, tends, therefore, to reduce income per capita. There is urgent need to increase employment opportunities among the working age group so as to sustain the prevailing standard of living.

Secondly, the larger proportion of young persons in the population requires that a greater part of limited resources be allocated to 'social investment' rather than to 'economic investment'. That is, the more youthful the population, the greater is the proportion of total savings that must be devoted to the rearing of the young, and the smaller the proportion of total savings that is available for investment in agricultural or industrial projects designed to increase per capital production. There is need to motivate both the state and non-state actors for increased investment in the social sector.

Thirdly, the massive growth in the number of young people in the region has enormous implications for governments, development agencies, economies and society as a whole. Among the most pressing problems related to children and youth in the communities of the state are: employment and migration trends, educational attainment rates, teenage births and violence and vandalism among youth. All of the problems are inter-related and represent a major challenge for both the present and the future. For example, if in the future more children are not in school and fewer young adults are able to secure jobs, there is an even greater likelihood that these young people will face hardship, migrate to other areas in search of opportunity or bear children before they have the economic and social support

needed to raise healthy children. The decisions of the young population about when and how many children to have will determine the future size and the quality of life of region's population in the coming decades. But the Niger Delta region stands to reap a demographic bonus characterized by a wave of young people entering the work force without a wave of children following, when the present "bulge" of young people comes into the workforce. If adequately trained, and if jobs can be found for these prospective entrants into the labour force, the "workforce bulge" can be the basis.

Another component of the demographic trend in the Niger Delta region relates to the challenge of providing for the elderly, although the proportion of the population in this category is still quite small at the moment. However, the proportion of the elderly is growing and is bound to increase quite rapidly in the coming decades. Increase in the number of the elderly is occurring at a time when the traditional support system for the elderly, the extended family, is being eroded. The severe economic difficulties faced by many countries in the 1980s and the early 1990s have increased household poverty. Consequently, more women are working outside their homes to supplement family income, and are no longer available to care for aged parents. Moreover, massive rural-urban migrations and industrialization are reasons why working children are more likely, than ever before, to live away from older parents who are left behind in villages.

Yet, the elderly who are custodians of traditional values, and who, more than ever before, are being called upon (in some countries at least) to care for HIV/AIDS orphans, constitute a resource for development. Ageing population can be expected to strain medical systems. Hence, there is need for planning to ensure dignified and productive life for the elderly without jeopardizing the equally demanding needs of the young and adult population for education and health services, and employment.

### **Population pressure on land and development problems**

Problems associated with rapid population growth in the rural communities of Niger Delta States are also reflected on the issue of accessibility to land for productive activities. The survey results indicate that very few people interviewed in the communities, especially the rural areas are satisfied with the existing level of their economic production. This suggests that they may be prepared to improve their economic position if the opportunity arises. It was noted that land availability is not a major problem of the people in many communities as land was generally available for farming activities. Actually the communities and respondents that complained about land shortages are largely fishermen who have been deprived of some of their fishing grounds as a result of oil exploration. The only major outstanding problem, which they do not identify, is proliferation of small-holdings as well as the fragmentation of the existing holdings. It appears that these two problems are dependent on other problems existing in the communities. For example, small farm holdings may be

influenced by the shortage of labour while fragmentation of farmland holdings may be due to the poor transportation system and the absence of adequate marketing facilities.

One of the problems relating to productive activities in the rural communities is the likelihood that many people engaged in agricultural activities at present, particularly farming, could abandon them to pursue other perceived productive ventures in the major urban. Consequently it is important to find solutions to the problems confronting agricultural production in the rural communities.

Although land is not all that scarce in many communities at least in the context of the prevailing farming methods, there is bound to be more pressure on land as the population increases, especially in the upland areas where a significant proportion of the land have been taken over for construction activities and urban development. Increasing land shortages will lead to land speculation and hence commercialisation of land which is at present not too commercialised.

In addition to the people engaged in agricultural activities, those who are at present engaged in craft production need to be encouraged. Loans should be given to individuals engaged in various craft industries and small-scale traders. But financial assistance must not be provided in isolation. It must be combined with other forms of encouragement particularly informal training in business management. This is a major problem of all small-scale industries and businesses in the rural communities. The problem of a labour supply shortage particularly for agricultural production will be more serious because a large proportion

of those who are at present engaged in farming but who could not get paid employment will engage in craft occupations in the central locations and growth centres when they emerge. This is because apart from those who are at present engaged in these occupations many more people will be required to practice these craft occupations since there will be a rise in the demand for their services.

### **Policy Options and Challenges**

A number of policy options and challenges should be the focus of attention by policy makers in the Niger Delta region

#### *Reducing mortality and fertility*

The first of these relates to the challenge of reducing mortality and fertility in the region. It is well known that both mortality and fertility declines are favourable for development. Since development in one way or another brings about such declines, these relationships can be viewed as positive feedbacks in the process, forming a vicious circle by which success breeds success: sustained socio-economic development on the one hand and attainment of a modern demographic regime on the other. The components of population change are ingredients in the overall pattern of development, but for the most part they have the nature of dependent variables. Demographic transition is welcomed for the immediate welfare gains that low mortality and low fertility bring, but the proper policy focus to achieve those gains is on the broad development

effort. Many researchers and development planners, however, would adopt a much less passive stance on health and population policy. If there are proven means of intervention that can speed the mortality and fertility declines, then the gains both for immediate welfare and for the development effort can be reaped much earlier than would otherwise happen.

For mortality, the appropriate means of intervention are known. Research findings in many developing countries show that mortality patterns are often influenced by differences in income distribution, levels of (and gender disparities in) education, public health expenditures, and the design and reach of the health system. All of these are factors that can potentially be influenced by policy, and in combination can yield a reduction in mortality levels. The degree to which fertility can be affected by policy has been a controversial issue in population and development studies, despite the casual assumption of many that the standard intervention - the family planning programme - is of proven efficacy. But interventions of some sort are needed: the "demographic bonus" or any other economic advantages accruing from fertility decline are of interest because of the presumption that there are policy measures that can lower fertility other than through development itself. By most accounts the main factor behind fertility transition is the falling "demand" for children, traceable to a host of actual and anticipated changes: in survivor-ship rates, in the family economy, in educational and labour market opportunities, and in related normative images of family and society. Also contributing to fertility decline are greater

knowledge and availability of modern contraceptive methods and, in some situations, strong government efforts to promote smaller families.

The direct costs of children, in particular for education and health services, are substantial, but in Nigeria these are considerably supported through centralized public financing. Parents of large families may thus be little disadvantaged. There are obvious sound public policy grounds for that financial design, but it removes a potentially powerful instrument to reduce demand for children. A by-product of the structural adjustment programme in Nigeria has been the cutting back of these social expenditures, a move widely decried on welfare grounds, but with possible effect on population growth as many families now realise the rising cost of bringing up their children.

The objections that are widely made to government dictates in matters of fertility behaviour and outcomes can be avoided by promoting the use of social pressures from kin or community. Such pressures are probably felt less on the direct question of family size than on related matters such as age at marriage, approval or disapproval of particular practices of birth control, and restrictions on sex roles. However, it is not apparent that population policy can be designed to benefit significantly from this phenomenon. Cases where community outreach has seemingly altered some fertility-related behaviour are often better interpreted in terms of changes in the perceptions of incentives and

opportunities of the actors themselves: the individual parents.

The major policy challenge for the Niger Delta region, which emanates from the experiences outlined above, is to ensure the provision of basic health care services in all communities and promote the utilisation of the services. This would contribute to the reduction of the demand for more children that characterises most rural communities in the region. Furthermore, considering the fact that the use of social pressures have been quite successful in many parts of the less developed world in terms of controlling family size, a community-based approach should be adopted in which communities in the Niger Delta region are mobilised to take part in the education of their members with respect to fertility control, especially within the framework of programmes designed to control the spread of the deadly HIV/AIDS. There is no doubt response from community-based approach to fertility control would be effective in the communities of the Niger Delta region.

### *Management of Vulnerable population groups*

The Niger Delta region is faced with problem of vulnerable population groups such as displaced people due to conflicts, women and other minorities, but the dominant vulnerable group at the moment are the adolescent youths who are growing under difficult circumstances. Here we focus on sexuality and sex education. Socialisation of the child has been and continues to be a communal responsibility in the rural communities of the Niger Delta

region with members of the immediate and extended families playing a dominant role. However, in recent times, secondary agencies, such as church, school and the media have contributed. Also, greater mobility, which modern society demands, has meant that adolescents are now being forced to look after themselves more than ever before. This is due to either parental absence because of occupational obligations, or to the adolescent's educational needs which take him/her to institutions located away from the village. This situation exposes the adolescent to opportunities for early sexual encounter.

While the youth is more vulnerable to early sexual activity in contemporary society, the adolescent in the Niger Delta region is also ill prepared for it. Discussion between parent and child is minimal as far as the sex is concerned. This situation is a continuation of traditional views on sex, which considers sexual activity as purely for procreation and not for pleasure. Therefore, in traditional society, the only approved form of contraceptive method is abstinence. Contraceptive methods, especially condoms, are available everywhere. Condoms can be purchased at most village patent medicine stores, and more sophisticated methods are in clinics and pharmacies in nearby larger settlements/towns. Abortion is not an option in traditional society because it is regarded as murder. This traditional attitude continues in contemporary society, which regards abortion as a crime. Commercial sex was never part of traditional life in the communities of the Niger Delta region. The situation is still the same in rural areas at present though the same cannot be said for the urban areas. This

has contributed to the problem of indiscipline among the children and youths in the area. Family life or sex education in schools is a scarce commodity for the adolescents in the communities. Few adolescents have had family life or sex education classes in school, mostly at the secondary level of education.

In this context, attention of state and non-state actors need to be paid to supporting the youth in the following ways: programmes to encourage parents to continue to maintain and enhance existing bonds with their children and spouses, including family support; programmes to encourage parent-child communication on personal and sensitive matters such as sexual behaviour, menstruation, contraceptive methods and STDs; programmes giving basic information on human biology, contraceptive methods and STDs, including AIDS; introduction of family life or sex education curriculum into the formal school syllabus or revision and updating of any existing ones. Emphasis should be placed on family planning methods, use, misuse and side effects; STDs including AIDS, how they are contracted, transmitted, available treatment, if any; and training programmes for teachers and counsellors to be able to deliver the new or improved curriculum.

#### *Summary of key recommendations on vulnerable population groups*

- Programmes to encourage parents to continue to maintain and enhance existing bonds with their children and spouses, including family support.

- Programmes to encourage parent-child communication on personal and sensitive matters such as sexual behaviour, menstruation, contraceptive methods and STDs.
- Programmes 'giving basic information on human biology, contraceptive methods and STDs, including AIDS.
- Introduction of family life or sex education curriculum into the formal school syllabus or revision and updating of any existing one. Emphasis should be placed on family planning methods, use, misuse and side effects; STDs including AIDS, how they are contracted, transmitted, available treatment, if any.
- Training programmes for teachers and counsellors to be able to deliver the new or improved curriculum.
- Provision of out-of-school classes for family life or sex education to provide information for youths that are no longer in school. Possible institutions through which the classes could be delivered include youth and church clubs, age-grade associations and other voluntary groups.
- Provision of facilities where adolescents and youths can feel free and confident to go and get information and services.

## **Policy Options and Issues on land and development**

- The first relates to the need to encourage some form of mechanization in view of the possible shortage in farm labour supply. This will encourage those who are at present engaged in agricultural activities to continue in such activities. Further, it will help to attract more people to agriculture in order to increase food production in the area. The success of mechanization, however, depends on the solution to two major problems. The first of these concerns the existing land tenure system in the area.
- The present fragmented system imposes a major constraint on the ownership of a large piece of land by an individual. Consequently the land owned by individual farmers will not be large enough to allow the efficient use of machines. With improved transportation facilities it is expected however, that the problem of fragmentation could be reduced, as it is possible for many farmers to acquire enough land for farming in one spot. The desirability to acquire lands near their homes will diminish as roads are improved.
- The second constraint on mechanization in the area relates to the lack of capital for the purchase of expensive materials by farmers. The solution to these problems will depend largely on the initiative of the state and non-state actors as well as Niger Delta region that will be actively involved in the economic development of Niger Delta region during the next few decades.

- The success of the regional economic development programmes of Niger Delta region depends on the availability of marketing facilities within it. If producers cannot get facilities for the marketing of their products then they will not be encouraged to produce more. One hopes that with the expected population increase in the communities of Niger Delta region coupled with the expected improvement in the transportation network of the area, markets will naturally emerge in various localities. But the authorities must support such markets by providing various amenities particularly stalls.

For further information on the projects that generated this policy brief contact:

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