

# Socio-Economic and Political Activities of Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State

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**Abstract:** *Southern Ijaw Local Government Area is the largest local government area in Bayelsa State, and it is in the Niger Delta region of the country. This Study highlighted the social, economic and political activities in the local government area as to have a clear understanding about the wellbeing and politics of the people of Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State Nigeria.*

## 1. Introduction

Local Government is widely recognized, as a veritable instrument for the transformation and the delivery of social services to the people. It is also recognized as being strategic in facilitating the extension of democracy to the local level by increasing the opportunities for political participation by the grassroots population. It is as well widely regarded as being well situated to perform the above functions due to the various advantages which it has over the other tiers of government and their field agencies.

*“The physical and psychological distance between officials of the other tiers of government and the people tends to frustrate efforts in making the people to fully identify with government programmes. Generally, people at the grassroots level tend to understand local government better and to be closer to it because they are able to feel its presence and impact on their day-day activities”<sup>1</sup>.*

*“The nearness of local government to the people and the fact that it is normally constituted of their locally elected representatives has placed it in a position where it can easily articulate and aggregate the people’s demands, and is more likely to be attuned to their local needs and aspirations”<sup>2</sup>.*

However, these could only be achieved if the stakeholders in the system, which includes both political office holders as well as administrative staff, live up to their responsibilities.

## 2. The Concept of Local Government

Generally, local government is the type of government that helps either the central or state government or both to carry out effective administration of the country at the grassroots level.

Though, at varied times, different scholars and authors, have attempted to give definitions of local government. However, no one definition is all encompassing and universal. The expression local government means different things to different people in different parts of the world.

Ibodje cited in Ibaba (2004:171), observed:  
*“Local government can hardly be given a one for all type of definition. It is also not very easy to define it in exact*

*term.....local government can only be characterized in such a way that it can be recognized as such different times and places”<sup>3</sup>*

Let us at this point cite a few definitions of local government by some scholars and authors. “Local government has been defined as the lowest unit of administration to whose laws and regulation, the communities who live in a defined geographical area and with common social and political ties are subject”<sup>4</sup>

From the Nigeria guideline for local government reforms of 1976 as cited in Ugwu (2000:2), define local government as; “government at the local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas.....”<sup>5</sup>

On her part, Okoli (2005:1), defined local government as “the third tier or level of government created for the purpose of efficient and effective administration of the localities”<sup>6</sup>

Odenigwe (1984:15), perceived local government as “that part of a nation or state which deals mainly with matters of concern to the people of a particular place”<sup>7</sup>

From the global perspective, local government, according to the United Nations, Office for Public Administration, thus, “a political division of a nation or (in federal system), state, which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the power to impose taxes or exact labour for prescribed purposes”<sup>8</sup>

The meaning of the concept local government appears nebulous, giving the varied explanation and definitions given to the term. However, it is important to note from the above definitions that, it is a sub-unit of government at the local level. Ofoeze (1999:103) explains local government to be:

*“.....a system of local administration intended primarily to co-ordinate the activities of the state government.....in such way as to insure proper decentralization of functions and actual participation of local people in the general development and management of their affairs.....”<sup>9</sup>*

One very important thing to note from the above definition is the underlying term decentralization.

The term decentralization used here refers to an organizational arrangement whereby the management of public function is transferred to sub-unit bodies or agencies with jurisdiction limited to only certain parts of the total territory of a country.

Following the above, local government can be seen as a sub-unit of government at the local level, characterized by a political status and thus policy-making power, a defined geographical boundary, local autonomy and increased scope for popular participation in government activities, structural differentiation and multi-functional powers.

### **3. Geography and the People of Southern Ijaw Local Government**

Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State is located at the Southern part of the state, with its headquarters at Oporoma, which was the District Headquarters of the then Oporoma District. It is interesting to note that, the local government is unique in the state, as it is the only local government areas that has boundary with all other seven local government areas of the state.

It is bounded by Ekeremor Local Government in the West, Sabama in the North-West, Yenagoa and Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Areas in the North, then in the North-East, it is bounded by Ogbia Local Government Area, Brass and Nembe Local Government Areas in the East and finally in the Southern axis by the Atlantic Ocean.

The local government area is made up of several clans namely; Apoi, Bassan, Bomo, Koluama and Ogboin. Others are Olodiana, Oporoma and Tarakiri. The main language of the people of the area is Izon language, with slight dialectical differences from one clan to another, and from one community to the other.

By the 1991 population census, the local government has an estimated population of two hundred and sixty-seven thousand three hundred seventy-one people, and occupies a land mass of 32.2% of the present Bayelsa State.

Nearly three quarters of the area is covered with water, made up of Lagoons, Creeks, Rivers and Lakes. The remaining part is largely made up of swampy land which is usually flooded for about five months, precisely from July through November, due to the over flow of the lower Niger. The area is characterized by the rainy season which last from April to October, and the dry and harmattan seasons which intervene the other period.

Notwithstanding the swampy nature of the area, farming is part of the people's occupation, though largely subsistence. Others are: fishing, canoe carving, local gin production and palm oil production and so on.

There is no central authority from whom the people take instructions. All the people of the various clans have their own rulers, usually known as Ibenanawei (Clan Head) and Amananawei (Village Head), some of whom are recognized

and classified as first, second and third class chiefs by government.

### **4. Historical Background**

Southern Ijaw Local Government Area was created out of the old Yenagoa Local Government in the old Rivers State in 1991; it was created by the then Military President, General Ibrahim Babangida alongside Ekeremor and Ogbia Local Government Areas in the present Bayelsa State. Thus, it was part of the twenty-four local government areas that made up the old Rivers State.

With the creation of Bayelsa State in 1996, Southern Ijaw Local Government Area became one of the eight local government areas that made up the state. The local government area basically consists of the then Oporoma Division, with its headquarters at Oporoma.

The Bayelsa State House of Assembly in 1999 made a law, thus, "Local Government Areas Creation and Transitional Provisions Law 1999", and created additional twenty-four local government areas in the state, out of which six were created out of the Southern Ijaw Local Government Areas, making them seven. Though, the new local government areas are not recognized at the federal level, perhaps due to the controversy over whose constitutional duty it is to create new local government areas.

### **5. Socio-Economic and Political Activities and Development**

Southern Ijaw Local Government Area is the largest Local Government Area in Bayelsa State; it can be described as one of the least developed local government areas in all ramifications in the country. The local government virtually lacks all indicators of development.

Due to the high level of unemployment and poverty in the area, there is a high rate of dependency between the people of the area as regards their education, food, health, shelter and so on. Lack of road network and the near absence of educational institutions in the area, particularly tertiary, have not helped matters, as the people does not have the required skills for employment, and in a situation where most people are unemployed, the issue of poverty cannot be eradicated or reduced. The establishment of the Niger Delta University Amassoma in 2001, and recently the Federal Polytechnic of Oil and Gas Ekowe in the local government area give the people high hopes about positive change in this regard, even though they have not created the much needed positive impact due to their recent establishment. However, it had created some positive impact to an extent as a result of some youth getting admission into these institutions and some getting jobs.

Politically, the local government has the highest number of political wards and State constituencies in the State; seventeen out of the one hundred and five wards, four out of the twenty-four State Constituencies, and one out of the five Federal Constituencies (Southern Ijaw Federal Constituency), and one of the three local government areas

that made up the Bayelsa Central Senatorial District. Perhaps, due to its size, population and voting strength, the local government produced the first Executive Governor of the State (His Excellency Chief DSP Alamiyeseigha), and the first Senator to represent the Senatorial District (Senator David Brigidi) in 1999, in the current democratic dispensation.

The local government area is culturally rich. This is evident in the various cultural festivals and activities. Some of such cultural festivals and activities are; the "Kpaikpai" annual festival of Ekowe, the "Okpukpa" annual festival of Onyoma, the "Igbegbele" dance of Amassoma, the annual "Seigben" fishing and feasting festival also of Amassoma, the "Ogidi-Owu" festival of Peremabiri, and so on. Some of these festivals are celebrated annually while others are performed at special or important occasions.

The local government presently hosts three multinational oil companies, these are; the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria, which has two flow stations and several oil wells, the Nigeria Agip Oil Company also with two flow stations and several oil wells and Texaco-Chevron, which has its off-shore operations in the area.

Despite the presence of these multinational oil companies in the area, the lives of the people remain the same. This is due to the fact that, nearly all lucrative positions in these oil companies are occupied by non-indigenes on the pretext that, the people of the area are not qualified.

It is a known fact that these multinational oil companies have impacted on several rural communities in the areanegatively. Essentially, the major and pervasive impact is the oilpollution and the drastic decrease in the nutrients value of the soil, decrease in available land mass for cultivation, the destruction of food and cash crops and marine life, which ultimately leads to a decline in agricultural output and by extension its underdevelopment. Commenting on this, Ibaba (2001:25) states;

*"In all oil spillages and gas flare stands out as the major variable which impact on the communities"*<sup>10</sup>

It stands to reason from the above that oil spillage impoverish the economy of the people, as well as creating health problems. The people grossly lack medical facilities, and thus, exacerbate rural poverty in the area. All these poor conditions have led to conflicts and/or youth restiveness. The restiveness of youths is attributed to the fact that, they bear much of the frustrations which had resulted from the deprivation and marginalization of the host communities and its people by the multinational oil companies and the government.

In conclusion, the failure of government to provide basic infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, and communicationand the multinational oil companies to carry out their corporate social responsibilities by providing social amenities, had led to the poor socio-economic developmentof the area. This is because there is no way an industry can be sited in an area where all the facilities

needed for the effective functioning of an industry are not available.

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