

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Rural-urban migration of young persons from selected conflict ridden communities in Rivers State: A sociological approach**

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**Migration could be voluntary or involuntary. The paper examines the involuntary movement of young persons or child labour (youth) from conflict communities of Ogbogoro, Ogbakiri, Rumuekpe and Rumuolumeni, in Rivers State. The techniques deployed are the interview method and focus group discussion (FGD) methods in collecting data. The theoretical framework is hinged on the Marxist political economy theory. Its focus is on the sustenance of young persons and children (child) livelihood in the urban centre or cities. Our argument is that the influx of young persons (youth) from these communities to the urban centre as livelihood or survival mechanism constitutes the myriads of nefarious activities in the urban centre, in the absence of state or government control. Conversely, it is posited that the increase in communal conflict in these rural communities generates a tremendous population upsurge to the urban city. This will give rise to all kinds of survival or livelihood strategies.**

**Key words:** Rural-urban, migration, conflict, young persons.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **The problem**

Wosu (2007) asserted that given the character and content of communal conflict, the social matrix of material conditions of existence and the entire cultural cosmos within communities in the Niger Delta have been destroyed. We witness the emigration of young persons, women and children to the urban city for refuge and survival and the inherent destruction of the social fabric of the communities from which they migrate.

The contest for access to oil wealth has created factions and unrest in communities that result to conflicts of urban elites against local elites, chiefs against the youths, elites against the youths, youths against community, youths against youths and claims agents against community (Wosu, 2007). The dominant forms of factional conflicts have led to several intra- and inter-community conflicts, inter- and intra- group struggle among youth bodies, agitation and struggle for

chieftaincy stool, struggle for control of oil royalties and conflict between youths and community leaders. Women equally block Oil Companies' access roads in demand for certain things or agitation against marginalization or alienation from their farm land. These and many more are the agitations that plunged Ogbogoro, Ogbakiri, Rumuekpe and Rumuolumeni communities into crises. The consequences are destruction of lives and property, alienation from farm land and individual and group movement of persons to urban city for refuge and livelihood.

Government's failure to control the situation, provide assistance or support to the persons became thought provoking and challenging. Then the question is, what will be the fate of migrant youths or able-body men into the urban city? How and what do they do to survive? How will they cope with the risks associated with urban life? These questions will form our hypothetical premise in examining the livelihood mechanisms of migrant young persons to the urban city in the absence of government support. We argue that migrant young persons (youths) would be cut

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in the euphoria of urban life to survive.

Evidence shows that rural-urban migration whether for circulation, temporary sojourns in towns or permanent urban residence, is the most significant form of migration and has attracted much study (Anele, 2003). Many planners, policy makers and governments perceive rural-urban migration as the overriding internal migration pattern in the region (Anele, 2003). The concentration of the urban populations of many young persons, children alike, and women from rural communities engenders urban nuisance and growth of large urban agglomerates.

The excessive migration from rural to urban areas is seen as the major cause of this growth (Odigie and Orobosa, 2008). Again, another concern is the impact of out-migration of children and young people from the communities, the effect of population loss and dependency. In other words, many children, out of migration, are victims of rituals and child labour in the city. This undermines community social viability and promotes underdevelopment. Rural-urban migration is selective of the young, the educated, the innovative and the energetic or able bodied men leaving behind the apathetic, the retired and tired, the illiterate and the insane (Anele, 2003). This is contrary to a conflict-ridden situation in which emigration is not selective as people of different background and social standing run for their dear life.

This push of rural-urban migration has tended to neglect the fact that urban areas are currently not the primary destination of migrants out of rural areas. In fact, rural-rural migration is by far the most important type of internal migration in most part of sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, as Anele (2003) posited, 'it is more of a feature of developing countries than developed ones, and particularly relevant to agricultural regions'. In the context of Nigeria, existing researches on internal migration processes are generally fragmentary, covering only a few villages or medium-sized towns. The paper examines their socio-economic livelihoods and associated risk of rural-urban youth's migration. It explores the independent and collective influences of individual, household and community on young people migration status and destination, and addresses issues concerning population concentration and survival.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nigeria has an annual population growth rate of 2.5% and an estimated population of over 140 million (Nigerian Population Census, 2006 has a figure of 140 million). She is the most populous country in Africa (UN, 2005). The 1963 and 1991 census defined an urban centre as a place of settlement with not less than 20,000 people. The net migration rate of Nigerian population is estimated at 0.25 per 1000 population in 2008 (Rivers State Government Diary, 2009).

The country comprises 6 geo-political zones: North Central, North East, North West, South West, South East and South-South. These zones represent different ecological features, but also different economic potentials, population densities, level of development and urbanization (NISER, Rivers State Diary, 2009). Ekpenyong (2003) and Ajakaiye and Adeyeye (2001) linked the different patterns of industrial development over the decades to the generation of divergent regional economies with implications for regional dimensions of poverty. Political and economic developments have created centres of counter-attraction all over the country with obvious implications for migration, not only for civil servants, but professionals and private self-employed people across the country. Using the economic survival perspective of migration, this analysis seeks to obtain some measure of propensity of young people for survival as migrants. It is obvious that ethnic differences portend differences in social identity, social organization, attitudes and behaviour, systematic and comparative analysis of their implications, particularly in relation to migration. Serious and systematic study of these variables in relation to communal conflict and migration has not been undertaken in Nigeria, especially in the Ikwere Ethnic Nationality. This may not be unrelated to the sensitivity volatility of ethnic issues in the country. Thus, conflicts resulting from the ethnic-based competition for political and economic power since independence have polarised the ethno-linguistic nationalities in this part of the world. Against this background, there emerged the underdevelopment and conflicts in the Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta region consists of ten states, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Ekiti, Imo, Ondo and Rivers and 185 local governments (UNDP, 2006). In 2006 census, the total population of all the ten states of the Niger Delta was 33.6 million. This was made up of 17.305 million males and 15.897 million females. The states with the highest population sizes are Rivers, Delta, Akwa Ibom and Imo (NPC, culled from Otoghagua, 2007).

Wosu (2007) identified two tributaries in migration studies. They are the micro-economic or individualist model, and the macro or structuralist model. He identified the third variant that seeks to integrate the basic elements of the micro and macro models. According to him, proponents of the micro or individualist perspective generally believe that migration is a result of rationally calculated decision to maximise alternatives by the individual migrant such that the decision to move is purely personal. The macro or structuralist model argues, on the contrary, that migration is a response or outcome of the economic, social and political environment in which migrants find themselves.

It is axiomatic that most young migrants are seen from individualist perspective, rather than a group one. This distorts the fact that individuals often act principally as agents of social ensembles, and that the relationship

between a social group and its individual members is a complexly structured one. In this regard, 'voluntary migrants' are distinguished from involuntary migrants on the ground that the former have time to assess the situation rationally, unlike the latter whose movement is coerced and kinetic like atoms in motion. As it is obvious, migrants usually face challenges that border on survival and adjustment in their displaced condition and destination. The thrust of the paper therefore is to examine the livelihood mechanisms of involuntary migrants from the conflict ridden communities.

The problems encountered by migrants are attributable to certain variables. Researchers suggested that the difficulties in coping are partly because rural-rural migrants predominantly have no education and are unskilled in the middle age groups and are married, while rural-urban migrants are predominantly single, educated, young and often students seeking better educational opportunities. Human capital theories have not only identified the life-cycle advantage for young people to move, but also emphasized the role of education, where individuals with more schooling are expected to have greater returns in moving and hence have higher migration rates.

Other studies in Nigeria indicate that an increasing number of rural-urban migrants depend on the urban economy as unemployed persons, while rural-urban migrants are fully employed and contribute to the growth and diversification of rural economies by exploiting rural resources such as cocoa, kola, palm products, working in rubber plantation, etc. For instance, in the communal fight in Rumuekpe, people migrated from the agrarian community to neighbouring villages like Ndele, Elele, Ibaa, etc., that are predominantly farming or agrarian. Thus, the familiar environment they had or moved to, sustain their livelihood mechanism.

## METHODOLOGY

This study focused on some selected communities, namely, Ogbogoro, Ogbakiri, Rumuekpe and Rumuolumeni in Rivers State, which were purposively (deliberately) selected. We were judicious and conscious in selecting these communities because they are typical or representative of the crises ridden communities in the Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality, which are the focus of the present research. Our sample communities were stratified in line with the existing traditional divisions (compounds and/or wards). Having done this, we randomly selected five compounds from each community and this corresponded with the focus group discussion (FGD) from which information was elicited.

We adopted the sample survey method. The data collection techniques employed were interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). We had 20 FGDs in all; there were 5 FGDs in each of the four communities. Each FGD had 6 participants, with an interviewer and a recorder who recorded the discussion. On the whole, there were 120 participants/interviewees/respondents. Of the total number of respondents for this research, each of the following three age groupings had 40 respondents: 13 - 18; 18 - 24 and 25 - 30. It is important to state categorically here that the issue of the age range of the social category called young person or youth is

contentious as it is devoid of an acceptable universal definition. We were guided here by the definition proffered by the National Youth Policy for Nigeria (1989), which says that a young person or youth is "any person within the age range of above 12 to 30 years". There were 70 males and 50 females in our sample. The male gender preponderated for the simple reason that, they were gladiators cum activists who shaped the course of events during the crisis.

Interestingly, the respondents cut across different statuses and professions as shown below: Students were 66 (comprising 40 males and 26 females in secondary school); 27 artisans (17 males and 10 females); traders were 12 (8 males and 4 females); the unemployed/not schooling numbered 15 (5 males and 10 females). The informal chat we had with the leaders (who were also leaders of the migrants at the point of origin) from which certain detailed information were garnered, coupled with the process of selecting the actual cases (respondents) which enabled us to include in the sample different elements of the population, is enough guarantee that the sample is representative.

Some of the issues raised for discussion or questions posed during the FGD included: Why did you migrate to the present destination point? What informed the choice of your migration to the present area of residence? How do you survive in this strange land? Why did you engage in the kind of economic activities you are involved in? If you had higher education would you have opted for the same economic activities? How lucrative are the jobs you do? Under normal circumstances, would you have abandoned the skills you acquired long ago for the present job you are doing? Do you get assistance from the local government authority or the state government since your arrival here?

Worthy of note is that, the study focused on communities in transit as the indigenes were scattered in different neighbouring communities. This influenced the choice of accidental sampling technique adopted for the selection of the actual cases (respondents). Through this technique, we were able to identify the respondents in their destination settlements. The interview elicited responses from migrant youths (male and female), children within school age and some able bodied men. The use of Ikwerre language was a veritable tool for discussion as the communities are Ikwerre speaking people in Rivers State.

The communities covered in this study were engulfed in communal crises at different periods. For instance, the communities of Ogbogoro, namely, Rumukpalikwuada, Rumuodor, Rumubisio, Rumuadi, Rumuehienwor, Anaka, Rumuwokeada, Egbelu Akami, and Egbelu Ozodo, with a combined population of 12,040, became factionalized in which some people fled whereas others remained behind between 1999 and 2004. In the case of Ogbakiri with the following villages or sub-communities: Okporowo, Oduoha, Rumuoro, Ahai, Rumuokani and Rumuada, having a population of 19,688, witnessed a crisis between 2001 and 2005 which happened in phases. Infact, each succeeding phase was deadlier as more and more lives were lost and property destroyed. The sub-communities of Rumuekpe with a combined population of 16,900 are Ovelle, Ekwuche, Imogu, Omegwa, Oduoha, Mbuguhiie, Mbugudo and Omoviri. Like the case of Ogbakiri, Rumuekpe had a phased crisis. Between 2006 and 2007, the gruesome killing of one prominent member of Rumuolumeni, one Mr. Isi, set the tone for crisis that engulfed all the sub-communities, namely, Nkpor, Mgbuodohia, Mbuguosimini and Minikpiti. Their combined population is 11,000. It is interesting to note that, with the exception of Ogbogoro, Ogbakiri and Rumuekpe, there was a more generalized and inclusive crises that affected every segment of the communities.

In analyzing the data for this research, we adopted qualitative (descriptive) rather than quantitative method. The reason is simply because qualitative method does not pose the problem of obscurantism and therefore makes clearer the critical elements contained in the study. In other words, it obviates unwarranted manipulation of figures which sometimes defeats the aim of social

researches. Again, most recent studies on migration are increasingly deviating from quantitative analysis which often juggles with figures unnecessarily and unreasonably.

## FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The rural involuntary emigration of youths, men, women, girls and children to the urban city in the communities studied is occasioned by conflicts over chieftaincy stools. Chieftaincy is a traditional stool associated with community leadership structure. Historical researches show that one among the major causes of communal conflicts in many African societies, especially Nigeria and in particular Rivers State, is chieftaincy tussle. Most of the communal conflicts that grew and escalated into other conflicts resulted from the struggle over traditional leadership stool. The long-standing disagreements over chieftaincy, land and other resources (royalties from the oil companies) among communities are always part of the remote causes of these conflicts, even if other trigger causes exist. The result is involuntary movement to urban city. This finding is in accord with Wosu (2007) and Eke (1997, cited in Wosu, *ibid*). We found out that young migrants from these conflict ridden communities engaged themselves in informal activities for livelihood. These activities are legitimate and/or illegitimate, depending on the condition and perceptions of people and the imperative of survival which made them to engage in more than one economic activity simultaneously. Specifically, they engaged in the following:

### Local government revenue collection

Majority of the male respondents (66%) engaged themselves in this activity. Their *modus operandi* is mounting of roadblocks at strategic places to impound vehicles, trucks, cars, etc., that do not have local government or radio stickers. The degree is very high as the migrant youths see it as a do or die affair. It is mostly carried out by able-bodied men, that is, those who are physically strong and apparently do not suffer from disabilities in any form. This is so because the job involves the exertion of energy hence only those who are physically fit could do it. Their educational qualification does not exceed school certificate. Of course the job does not require any special skill, except the ability to seize keys of moving trucks and vehicles. They found this job interesting and make a lot of money out of it (Wosu, 2007). This avenue provided a source of livelihood for the rural migrants in urban centres.

### Daily hired labour

Other able-bodied men and youth constituting 43% of respondents engaged in daily hired labour like excavating

building foundation, septic tank, road drainage, etc.

### Engagement of artisans in job scouting

27% of skilled and semi-skilled males, carpenters, masons, tailors, etc., continued their trade by scouting for daily job for survival. Infact, this category of respondents said they do not have much difficulty in adjusting to the new reality (migrant status).

### Okada riding (commercial motor cycle riding)

Those who could quickly mobilise some fund never procrastinated in purchasing second-hand or used motor cycles for commercial purposes. Indeed, 13% of the male respondents (mainly the unemployed and traders), are those involved in this activity. An interview with some okada riders revealed that they make good money from the business, though they were hesitant in divulging information on the exact daily income. The reason for the non-disclosure of this vital datum might not be unconnected with the secretive attitude of Nigerians in making public, information that border on sex, income and age. They were hunted by the fear of taxation in the event of disclosure of their income. However, they lamented that the risk involved in the business is very high. Some have lost their lives in the process. The reason for regular bike accidents as hinted during the interview is because, almost all the riders had no previous knowledge of bike riding before getting involved in the business. Nevertheless, one way of securing their new found job is to organize themselves into a group or union for purposes of achieving group solidarity and provision of welfare for members.

### General sales

We found that migrant girls engaged in sales, working in cyber café, computer operator (these persons are mostly found at the tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt). Others engaged themselves in restaurants, hotels, beer parlour, bakery of bread, wedding cake, meat-pie, moi-moi, etc. Some of these activities imbued some of the young female migrants with skills which hitherto they never possessed: skills capable of empowering them in future. Our focus group discussion showed that, migrants' child labour assumed the form of street selling (hawkers of minerals, pure water, groundnuts and garden eggs, banana, etc), rags or scrap pickers (scavengers), street entertainer, child prostitution or pornography (they are mostly hired by notorious gangs in the urban city such as the Niger Delta militants for serving and servicing them), begging, and other odd jobs. Begging in the streets and along highways by the children who supposedly should be catered for by parents and adults, is tantamount to

devaluation of the culture of the people. These children are mainly street children and rural migrants. Some of them are orphans, abandoned by parents, riot or war casualties. In the communities in the Niger Delta, the situation is greatly alarming on a daily basis. They turn to be a helping hand to the parents. In our interview, for some children, their primary objectives are survival. Some engaged in touting, stealing and all kinds of illegitimate activities.

### **Oil bunkering**

Is another key livelihood mechanism for migrant youths. In a press statement by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on 29 May, 2008 (that was Democracy Day), he opined that the crises in the Niger Delta region would continue because oil bunkering in the oceans and kidnappings are sources of livelihood that attract huge amount of money. The purport of this is that, the able-bodied youth migrants settle in the creeks and unleash attack on companies or corporate organizations and individuals in the urban city. Moreso, youths from these communities are being engaged by wealthy men and politicians in the city as me-guard, houseboys and maids. They engage in car wash and security job (gate man) in the urban centres. Our focus group discussion with migrants between the ages of 13 - 18 years revealed that youths of school age engage in hawking of pure water, mineral, groundnuts, and garden eggs. Some took to begging, pickpocket along the road and bus conductors in the urban city. These youths join the Fulani migrants as beggars along the roads in the city of Port Harcourt. However, they try to disguise or hide their identity. Some of them who are audacious open up and tell their story. What is more, wealthy persons in the urban city engage the youths from these communities as houseboy, gardener, and housemaids. They equally engage them in washing of cars, while some able bodied youths took up security job (gateman) in the urban centres.

On the contrary, some migrant youths engaged themselves in all kinds of illegitimate activities for survival. Out of desperation for livelihood ("man must waki"), they got involved in activities like smoking and sale of opium otherwise called Indian hemp (Wosu, 2007). Other activities are commercial sex, (sexual exploitation), robbery, cultism, political thuggery during elections which culminates in militancy in the Niger Delta. The election thuggery by involuntary migrant youths was manifested in the just concluded Local Government Chairmanship election in Rivers State.

### **Kidnapping**

This is the most recent source of livelihood for the able bodied migrant youths. The increase in kidnapping

became more prevalent consequent upon the increase in communal conflicts, with its attendant consequence for involuntary movement. Our research findings showed that, when communal conflict in the Niger Delta had not taken a centre stage, the case of kidnapping (whether white or black men, old or young) was strange. The emergence of communal conflicts and displacement of persons ushered in a new mode of living or survival strategy by the involuntary youths from the communities. Against this background, hostage taking, oil bunkering, all sorts of criminal activities commenced on a larger scale in the city of Port Harcourt. Life in the urban city became precarious, nasty, brutish and short. The state does not control or check the involuntary movement from rural to urban centre. Secondly, the state does not have the magic wand to stop communal conflicts. The influx of involuntary migrants to the urban city is seen as part of social dynamics. They become a group of species that must survive and contribute to the development of the state either positively or negatively, depending on the social forces prevalent at the time. Thus, they operate in the urban centres and their environs and escape to their hideouts in the creeks, slums (waterfronts), where they are hardly easily located or any form of their identity disclosed.

It has been argued elsewhere that the absence or neglect of government in being proactive in communal conflicts will continue to usher in increase in involuntary migrants to the urban City (Wosu, 2007). Its logical implication is that the migrants must adopt a mechanism for livelihood.

### **conclusion**

The increase in communal conflict has witnessed a tremendous increase in involuntary movement of youths, men, women, girls, children, able bodied persons to the urban centres. It is a movement that has unleashed tension and fears on all sorts of inhabitants in the city. The lack of proactive and post active action of the government in the communal conflicts still remains a serious challenge. This should be an area of policy enunciation and implementation. According to the economic survival perspective of migration, the alternative strategy for involuntary migrants is seen as development process. Our findings showed that alternative livelihood mechanism due to involuntary action, whether legitimate or illegitimate, must emerge.

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