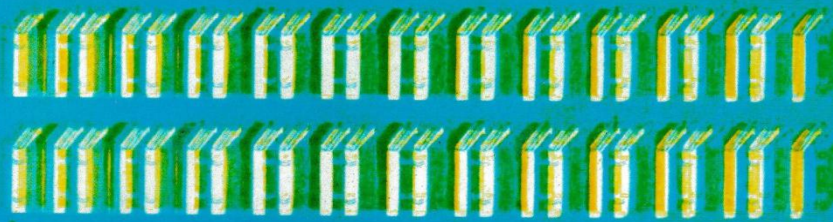
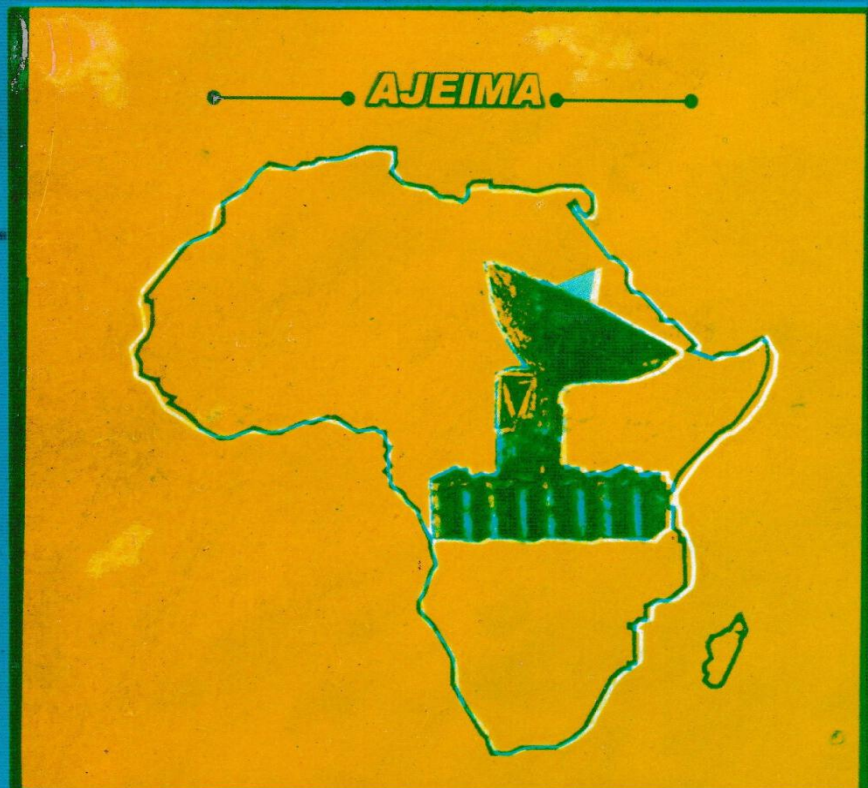


**AFRICAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATION  
&  
INFORMATION MANAGEMENT**



**VOLUME 12 NUMBER 1 & 2 SEPTEMBER 2011**

## **From Freedom fighting to Militancy: the Imperativeness of Peace in the Sustainable Development Process of the Niger Delta**

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### **Abstract**

**T**he Niger Delta region bears the main stay of Nigeria's economy; but compared to other areas in Nigeria, it is an impoverished area due to development neglect. Regarding the feeling of deprivation on the part of the indigenes, several steps have been taken to secure redress. With the central government not obliging, the struggle had over the decades taken various dimensions. As a result, peace had eluded the area while violence ensued. This paper sets out to discuss the trend of violence and the need for peace in the area. Pivoted by the social structural functional theory of Robert K. Merton, the study was driven by the library and opinion survey as sources of data, emerging data showed that: the struggle for freedom from oppression and deprivation predates colonial Nigeria; the region is in need of peace; the preferred approaches to peace vary along stakeholders' interests which in itself is a source against the desired peace; and while the amnesty deal has secured fragile peace, the government needs to express sincerity and total commitment to the challenges of developing the region, principal of which should be investment on Information Communication Technology.

## Introduction

Undoubtedly, Nigeria craves for sustainable development but the approach to realizing this is mainly dependent on oil. Boro (1982) argues that oil is the main factor on which the famous Nigerian political dispute is based. It could be further claimed that oil has not only revolutionalized the global state of industry but has also made others covet its possessors with the attendant conflicts and aggressions. It is the main stay of Nigeria's economy and the Niger Delta region is the bearer of this envious resource.

Having regards to the contribution of the region to the nation economy, the people of the region basically feel neglected oppressed and marginalized. The result of this feeling has been the struggle for self determination, freedom and autonomy by the Niger Deltans. Hence the likes of Isaac Boro and Samuel Owonaru led a group of Niger Delta youth on a revolutionary expedition for freedom in February – March, 1966(Boro 1982). In declaring the revolution, Isaac Boro submitted:

*Today is a great day ... in the history of the Niger Delta...*

*Because we are going to demonstrate to the world what and how we feel about oppression. Before ... we were branded robbers, bandits, terrorists, or gangsters, but after today, we shall be heroes of our land (Boro 1982:116).*

Boro's assertion concerning the name-calling, however, continued beyond. Though the said revolution was an attempt at bettering the lot of the region whose state of development was appalling, the crime – incline names continued till such perpetrators were branded militants. In spite of the struggle, the region has remained impoverished and undeveloped. If anything, the situation has been made worse by the absence of peace made possible by glaring case of youth restiveness. This paper seeks to appraise the trend of the struggles for self determination by the Niger Deltans over the years and underscore the necessity of peace for the attainment of sustainable

development in the region. The rest of it is structured after ethnographic sketch the region, issues in development and sustainable development, the trends of the struggle, attempts by various governments to intervene, theory, method and data, as well as discussion and conclusion.

## The Niger Delta Region

Odita (2008) opines that the Niger Delta or what has become known in the Nigerian political parlance as the south-south geo-political zone is relatively new. From the former Eastern, Western, and Mid-Western regions, the South-South zone now comprises six states, namely: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers. It should be noted that by virtue of the Niger Delta Development Commission Act of 2000, the region has extended to include: Abia, Imo, and Ondo States. Regardless of the debate on its political geography, what has remained constant over the centuries is their oppression and marginalization. Their struggle for self determination and autonomy has engaged national and global attention.

Odinkalu (2008) presents that the region is a floodplain in Nigeria's southernmost tip and consists of sedimentary deposits formed south of the Niger-Benue confluence and north of the Atlantic estuary. With an area of about 25,640 square kilometers, the floodplain comprises mostly swampland and mangroves with a diversity of ethnic nationalities including: Ijaw, Ogoni, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Isoko, Efik, Etche, Ibibio, Ilaje, Andoni, Ikwerre, Kwele, Igbo, all located in the nine states earlier configured. Obi (2001) adds that as a political usage, Niger Delta acquired currency in the mid 1980's with the resurgence of identity politics in the wake of economic liberalization policies of a succession of military regimes.

The region has continued to sustain population growth and, as a result of oil development, absorbed large-scale

migration, particularly into urban areas. Population densities per habitable area are very high, given the limited area of dry land (NDES, 1997). The critical social issues there-from include: inadequate potable water supply and sanitation with their attendant poor standards of health. Housing, roads and other infrastructures are deficient in most areas. Urban infrastructure is unable to cope with existing demands and is bound to be further strained by projected population increases (Spiff and Horsfall Jnr. 2008). Dearth in transportation facilities and electricity combine to impair health and impede development in most communities. The above, coupled with environmental degradation as well as policy failures and wrong political motives all constitute an amalgam of problems that bedevil the region in her quest for sustainable development (NDRDMP 2007). Collaborating, the World Bank (1995) in its report described the region as being: *blesed with an abundance of physical and human resources, including the majority of Nigeria's oil and gas deposits, good agriculture land, extensive forest, excellent fisheries, as well as a well developed industrial base, a strong banking system, a large labour force, and a vibrant private sector. However, the region's tremendous potentials for economic conditions that are not being addressed by present policies and actions.*

In other words, the region is the oxygen bag of Nigeria's economy, an exceeding rich region, but with largely impoverished people. This poverty-stricken picture is arguably sequel to decades of serious neglect suffered by the region. The region is therefore currently plagued with the challenges of facilitating her rapid, even, and sustainable development and transformation into economic prosperity, social stability, ecological regeneration, and political peace (NDRDMP 2007). There is, therefore, great need for peace in order to attain the desired feat.

## Development and Sustainable Development

Development is the process of improving the quality of all human lives in a society (Todaro 1981). In such a process, the likes of poverty, unemployment, and inequality gaps are usually on the decrease (Seers 1969). Thus, Ake (1996) posits of development as the process by which people create and recreate themselves and their life circumstances to realize higher levels of civilizations in accordance with their own choices and values. In line with this position, development should be self-generated and flexible enough to accommodate facilities, aid and help from others. People are the end point of development. Thus, Caincross (1996) posits that:

*the key to development lies in men's minds, in the institution with which their thinking finds expression and in the play of opportunity on ideas and institutions.*

Put differently, it is needful for development drives to be internally generated. It furthers that development should take an organic integration of land, economy, and society, and the establishment of the enabling conditions for effective local participation at all levels of development programme – including decision-making and the implementation processes. Granting rural status to it, Mabogunje (1981) asserts that development is a broad-based reorganization and mobilization of the rural masses so as to enhance their capacity to cope with the daily demands of their lives with changes resulting from such reorganization and mobilization. The challenges of development, therefore, go beyond throwing money at problems to the importance of the masses' participation. The end products will undoubtedly include: increased productivity in agriculture, enhanced food security, reduction of poverty and inequality, provision of infrastructure, and stemming the tide of youth restiveness – hence – development.

In the light of the above, the Bruntland Commission to the acceptance of

most scholars view sustainable development as a development process that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Abasiokong and Modo 1994). Furthering this, Aina and Salau (1992) see it as a notion with global concern which seeks to ensure that:

*... the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potentials to meet human needs and aspirations.*

In sum, whether it is freedom fighting or militancy, the approach should be such that current and future potentials should have the capacity to consistently meet human needs and aspirations. It is arguably best done in an atmosphere of peace.

### **A Long History of Descent in the Region**

The Niger Delta region has for centuries been richly disposed to natural resources – especially oil. Their position on the wrong side of the social structure is not also new. Indeed, prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the area has been rich in oil (palm) and squabbles with the authorities have been attendant. Thus, the history of descent and violence predates the colonial period.

For instance, King Jaja of Opobo was reported to have challenged the disposition of the European authorities whose interest in the oil palm and human resources of the region was inordinate. The result was his banishment from his community. Also sad to recall is the fate that befell the Nembe city-state sequel to their 1887's destruction of the Royal Niger Company's (RNC's) facilities in their protest against the company's monopoly-induced ruinous policies. Sir George Goldie, the head of the company mobilized a naval bombardment by the British forces which destroy the Nembe city-state, killing very many and ensuing a small pox epidemic (Alagoa 1964).

Crowther (1962) reports that upon the revocation of the Charter of the RNC in 1899, the British Government effectively took over the direct administration of the region, and acquired total control of all minerals and mineral-bearing lands. For law and order enforcement, the West African Frontier Force was raised. In addition, series of legislations were made to legalize the expropriation of the region's resources. Elias (1953) lists such to include: Minerals Ordinance, The Public Lands Acquisition Ordinance, and The Crown Lands (Amendment) Ordinance. Arguably, therefore, these legislations gave a sound background to the long history of violence in the process of the region's challenge for development.

Odinkalu (2008) posits that as the oil of the region transmuted from the oil palm and palm wine to the much globally regarded petroleum, post colonial governments enhanced and reinforced the pathology of ruthlessness and violent pacification of the region. He references Okonta (2008) thus:

*“It is a measure of the deep disenchantment of the (Niger Delta) communities... that shortly after young military officers...staged...(a coup)... a group of (Niger Delta) militants led by Isaac Adaka Boro... formed the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS)... proclaimed a Niger Delta Republic, and attempted to secede from the Nigerian Federation.”*

This heralded a new era in the struggle. To Boro (1982), it was an attempt by the NDVS to demonstrate to the world what and how they felt about oppression. Theirs was, thus, a case of revolutionary freedom fighting. Then came the era of challenge against environmental degradation, championed by the Late Ken Saro-Wiwa under the aegis of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). The outcome was disastrous as Saro-Wiwa and twelve others were killed to crowd psychology (four of them), and state-driven execution (nine of them, including Saro-Wiwa).

Rather than exterminate the urge for the struggle, the execution of Saro-Wiwa and others raised a new era in the struggle. The likes of Asari Dokubo, Henry Okah, Tom Ateke, Government Ekpompolo, Saboma George, Victor Ben Ebikabowei, Farah Dagogo, Egberi Papa, etc. under the aegis of various group including: the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), Niger Delta Strike Force (NDSF), in the main (Abu 2008:11). As a result, parallel governments of some sorts were created, peace eluded the region and fear became the order of the day.

According to the Ogomudia Report, the contemporary situation began with the peaceful agitation for political and economic empowerment which was evident in the forms of: the "Niger Delta Republic", the "Ogoni Bill of Rights", the "Kaiama Declaration", the "Urhobo and Isoko Forum Declaration", etc. (Ogomudia Report). The state's response to this was largely violent. Yet the agitation increasingly continued.

The perpetration of violence in the region is attributed to various factors. Oditah(2008) for instance, advances that the greater level of activism and restiveness in the region is traceable to: (a) the ill-fated 1997 million-man-match in Abuja organized by Mr. Daniel Kanu to support General Abacha's attempt at self-succession took many Niger Delta youths to Abuja where they saw how their oil money was used for the city's development with many bridges over dry land where as they never had any over their waters; (b) greater unwillingness by the Niger Deltans to remain docile in the face of exploitation and oppression; (c) greater awareness of the oil politics; (d) increased environmental damage; (e) recent attempts at democracy and the misuse of youths in the political process; and (f) widespread corruption and poor political leadership among the Niger Delta chieftains. These, added with the lack of political will, on the part of the Federal Government, to develop the region have combined to make

the Niger Delta struggle lingering. Today, the struggle has been hijacked by self-seeking, opportunistic and criminal groups masquerading as freedom fighters.

### **Attempts By Government(s) to Stem the Tide**

Obviously the exploration and exploitation of oil resources in the Niger Delta has harbingered serious land, water, and gas pollution. As a result, farming, fishing, and other traditional sources of livelihood have been frustrated – hence – unemployment and poverty. It is also outrageous that there is dearth in infrastructural development. In sum, the region remains poor, neglected and underdeveloped (Oditah, 2008).

In a bid to soothe the resultant discontent, various governments have established institutions and programmes to tackle the development problems in the region. The initiatives of government include: the Willinks Commission; the Niger Delta Development Board established in 1961; Niger Delta River Basin Authority, 1976; Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC), 1992; the 1.5% Initiative; the 1999 Constitutional provision of 13% minimum derivation allocation from the Federation Account to oil producing states; the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), 2000; the Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan (NDRDMP), 2007; and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, 2008. Added to the above are some committees, including: the Special Security Committee on Oil Producing Areas, led by General Alexander Ogomudia, then Chief of Army Staff; and the Niger Delta Technical Committee, led by Ledum Mitee. In spite of the above attempts, only paltry and ephemeral successes have been recorded. As a result, militant activities increased alongside the spate of insecurity in the region. Relevant government institutions have on various occasions entered the scene to enforce peace in the area.

Of course, in March, 1966, the federal forces exterminated the Isaac Boro-led revolution (Boro 1982); on November 10, 1995, the Saro-Wiwa-led MOSOP resistance was quelled upon summary execution of Saro-Wiwa and eight others. This was followed by Lt. Col. Paul Okuntimu-led Internal Security Task Force (ISTF) whose mandate was to dismantle civic agitations in the region through the most extreme and unaccountable forms of counter-insurgency methods (Odinkalu 2008). In 2001, the Odi Community in Bayelsa State was leveled as government forces' counter to the murder of policemen in the said community. And recently there has been a military Joint Task Force in the entire region which has engaged the militants in no small measures.

In the face of this, government has become criminalized and illegality has become the order. As a result, only the armed groups and their leaders appeared to receive any hearing from anyone. Clearly, the only way to get noticed was to organize an armed band. This arguably signaled the beginning of the militancy era. In this era, violence became politicized as automatic and semi-automatic rifles, shot guns, machine guns, and shoulder-fired rockets are readily available for purchase at international and regional levels (Ibeanu 2007).

In sum, the problems of the region are exploitation, oppression, impoverishment, environmental degradation, violent crime and corruption. All these make peace elusive in the area. The state of state force does not answer the question. All have combined to cost us the opportunities for a lasting solution. What is needed in the situation, according to Oditah (2008) is "Niger Delta Justice". This paper contends that it could only be achieved on the altar of peace.

### **Theory, Methods and Data**

Arguably the Niger Delta situation is the creation of the Nigerian social structure which emphasizes questions bordering on:

who occupies what position, plays what role, and via which institution? The realities of this structure have created a situation of conflict. Hence, the conflict theory can explain the causal values of the Niger Delta case. However, the functional consequences of the conflict make for the appropriateness of the Structural-Functional theory as promoted by Robert K. Merton. Inspired by Talcott Parsons' taxonomic device of functional prerequisites (Parsons, 1957), Merton (1968) agrees that each system is faced with the challenges of meeting the requirements which are identified to include: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern maintenance.

Merton furthers that the creations for the meeting of identified needs do not always remain functional. In which case, they may be functional, non-functional, and dysfunctional (Ritzer 2002). Merton maintains that even in the wake of performing the desired role and recording the manifest (intended) functions, it may also record some latent (unintended) functions. These unintended functions breed unintended consequences that run the risk of becoming dysfunctional to the system and thus threaten its survival strategies.

By implication, the region, the oil industry, the stakeholders, and development neglect, are all creations of the society. The interplay of these has created some latency. The result has been the conflict that plagued the region and the entire nation which, in turn, has threatened the very existence of the nation. As a result, the same structure has evolved approaches to solving the problem. One of such approaches is the amnesty deal which arguably has returned peace to the region with the government promising greater level commitment to the development of the region. It follows that failure to make good the promise would create new problems which ultimately will threaten the survival of the entire system. Hence, this appreciates the problem from the functional-conflict perspective.

In terms of method, this work is mainly library-based. This was

complemented by the opinion survey method in which opinion molders were randomly selected and interviewed on the necessity of peace in the region's quest for sustainable development. Focus group discussions were also carried out in three states namely: Rivers (Choba); Bayelsa (Kaiama); and Delta (Okerenkoko). In all the settings, tape recorders were used. On the average, 16 participants were in each of the three groups. The study which lasted for three months between July and September 2008 raised data on the importance of peace, the approaches to peace and the amnesty initiative of government.

It should be noted that elder statesmen, leaders in the Niger Delta region, youth leaders and some militant leaders constituted the interview respondents. Youths in the study sites were the main constituents of the focus group discussions. Research assistants were raised in the neighbourhood of the study sites to enhance easy identification of purpose and assimilation.

### **Findings: The Imperativeness of Peace**

Force has never really harbingered positive events with enduring legacies. Thus, Dwight D. Eisenhower postulated that:

*"Though force can protect in emergency, only fairness, consideration, and cooperation can finally lead men to the dawn of eternal peace."*

The above quotation enumerates four basic requirements for the security of peace. Therefore, whether miscreants, freedom fighters, criminals, militants, or state police or military, all must cooperate within the law, consider the common good, be fair to all concerned, and play roles on a just note. Regarding the three items on the check list adopted for the opinion survey, emerging data are presented below.

### **The Importance of Peace**

A top government functionary submitted:

*The crisis...commands our urgent attention...to address...in a spirit of fairness, justice, and cooperation...we will involve all stakeholders...all aggrieved ... individuals (should) immediately suspend all violent activities and respect the law...together...we will find a way to achieve peace and justice.*

Another stated:

*Meaningful development cannot and has never thrived in an atmosphere of rancor, resentment, in-fighting and civil disobedience. Let us...lay down our arms and give peace a chance.*

Typical of the focus group discussions was: *Truly, there is nothing as good as peace. With peace everyone can walk around the whole place at anytime without molestation and development agents would feel safe in their bid to work. People would also leave the creeks, contribute meaningfully to the development process and enjoy good life.*

### **How to Achieve Peace**

The Chairman of the Niger Delta Technical Committee, Ledum Mitee opined that upon cessation of hostilities, opportunities should be created for: *Decommissioning, Disarmament, and Rehabilitation.... Consequently ...an initial 25% derivation that can be further improved upon as oil price improves...the NDDC should be restructured...in order not to conflict with the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs.*

A front line environmentalist argues that Environmental Justice is the way out: *The central government must refocus on integrated development of the region... the communities should be made to meaningfully participate in any decision-making processes that affect their health and environment.... And finally, the central government should repeal all existing oil and gas, and environment-related laws and enact new laws based on environmental justice concepts and objectives.*



A Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN) based in Port Harcourt routes for:

*The enhancement of legal mechanism for protecting and asserting individual and community rights; creating an unfettered access to for the minutest wrong or injury; and strengthening institutional framework to meet the needs of the conflicts in the region.*

Another legal practitioner recommends: *Remodeling of ownership and control, review of the allocation formula, the sanctity of the rule of law, transparency and accountability, the passage of the Freedom of Information Bill, as well as capacity building and job creation, as the panacea for peace in the region.*

A Civil Rights activist unequivocally submits:

*For enduring peace in the region, the only way out is the implementation of the recommendations of the Special Security Committee on Oil Producing Areas Chaired by General Alexander Ogomudia, the then Chief of Army Staff.*

Typical of the focus group discussions, the disposition is thus:

*Whatever they intend to do, let them not cheat us anymore. We need the flyovers, dual-carriage roads, bridges, potable water, electricity power, good quality schools, hospitals, etc. Our people must also be in high positions in the oil-oriented establishments. Those in the oil industry should not create a different community from ours... There should not be discrimination here... Money allocated to the various parts of the country should be made public and those who spend money for our development should show details...cases of corruption should be probed to their logical conclusions.*

#### **The Amnesty Initiative**

On face value, the amnesty initiative has restored hope for peace in the Niger Delta (Ajaero 2009). This, however, needs to be fully achieved and sustained.

To Tom Ateke:

*I have embraced the amnesty deal in order to give President Yar'Adua the opportunity*

*to address the Niger Delta problem under a peaceful atmosphere.*

To Godwin Abbe, the Minister of Defence, amnesty is:

*...the beginning of the development of the Niger Delta...oil will no longer be a source of sorrow, but...of wealth.*

But to a former militant:

*Since...our leader...has embraced amnesty, we cannot but follow him....We only want government to look at our demands and fulfill its own of the bargain....We need functional education and strongly recommend education in the area of computer literacy for our youth.*

A legal practitioner argues that beyond the amnesty:

*...if unemployment in the region continues, then a new set of militants will definitely emerge.*

And from the focus group discussions:

*The amnesty deal is an attempt to divert attention from the real issues. Thank God our people have embraced the deal and peace should return. Government, thereafter, should not have any reasons not to positively change the developmental status of the region. Otherwise, the evil day has merely been postponed. The struggle will someday continue on a militant note.*

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that there is a general consensus as to the necessity of peace for the sustainable development of the region. There is, however, no consensus as to the approaches to securing peace. It is a case of a blame game amongst the stakeholders. Professional and Civil Rights Activists generally call for legislations, sincerity, involvement of the masses in the decision-making process and total commitment on the part of government; while the government functionaries press on for the laying down of arms by the militants.

Regarding the amnesty initiative, this was a viable option on the part of government. The militants have largely obliged. Peace has returned to the region; but the real problem is in the management

of the post-amnesty realities. It is generally agreed that the commitment and sincerity of government should be total and comprehensive.

### Conclusions

This paper set out to underscore the imperativeness of peace in the challenge of sustainable development in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It has traced descents in the region to a long history and has shown that the struggle over the years has impeded the development of the place. It submits that peace is a necessity for the region to achieve sustainable development. This can, however, be achieved when legislations have been reviewed, functional education (with emphasis on computer literacy), and the masses involved in the decision-making processes. These, together with cooperation, consideration, justice and fairness on the part of all stakeholders will ensure the sustainable development of the region.

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