A Study of Community Acceptance and the Role of Philanthropic Organizations in the Reintegration of Former Non-state Armed Youth in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

Okechuku Onuchuku[1], Chibuzor Chile Nwobueze[2], Kelechi Belinda Udeogu[3]
[1,2,3]Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria

Check for updates OPEN ACCESS

DOI : https://doi.org/10.61796/ijss.v3i1.105

Sections Info	ABSTRACT
	*Objective: The transition of former violent non-state actors from the creeks of the Niger Delta back into society remains one of the most volatile challenges in Nigeria's post-amnesty landscape. This paper examines at how important community acceptance is, and the significant role charities play in getting people back into society. Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes can be state run with a focus typically on training for work, but not on the social debt and trauma that engendered community opposition. **Method:** This research using qualitative analysis of host community perceptions demonstrates that reintegration is not a top-down bureaucratic event but a contentious bargain of trust, and the automatic nature of structural stigma is detrimental to social peace. **Results:** This paper delineates what it sees as a considerable "legitimacy gap" surrounding state interventions that philanthropic organizations are excellently placed to fill. Non-state actors facilitate restorative justice mechanisms that go beyond mere economic settlement. Findings reveal that philanthropic involvement is most effective when it shifts the focus from individual rehabilitation to communal healing, addressing the grievances of victims alongside the needs of former combatants. **Novelty:** The paper maintains that, before uncertainty is transformed to sustainable peace, security forces must stop regarding armed youth as militants and embrace social acceptability with accountability and trust combined.*

INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has witnessed scenarios that portray the area as an enclave of paradox with manifestation of deprivation and poverty amid abundant wealth. For decades, the struggle over resource control, environmental degradation and political marginalization produced a generation of violent non-state armed groups, youth who took up arms against both the state and multinational oil corporations. While the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) succeeded in silencing the heavy artillery of militancy, it inadvertently created a complex sociological dilemma: the "liminal" status of thousands of former combatants who are no longer at war but are not yet fully "at home". Getting these people back into their communities is not just about finding them jobs. Instead, it is a really sensitive thing that involves getting communities to accept them and fighting the bad feelings people have about them.

At the heart of the reintegration crisis is the friction between technical disarmament and social reconciliation. Official Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) frameworks often operate on the assumption that peace can be purchased through stipends and vocational training. However, as noted by Ukiwo, the structural drivers of the Niger Delta conflict–unemployment, environmental injustice and perceived state neglect–remain largely unaddressed [1]. When former militants return to their ancestral

homes, they do not enter a vacuum. They go back to places that were often hurt by what they did before. So, people still see them as militants, and that sticks with them, making it hard for them to get help from the community or find real work. They think of this bad feeling as a kind of being killed socially and not regarded as existing the right way. People are there, but they are shut out because they are seen as not good [2]. In the Niger Delta, people often feel this way because they think the amnesty programme gave prizes to those who caused violence while forgetting the people who were hurt [3]. This feeling of unfairness makes communities not want to welcome back youth involved in this, because they might be trouble or because they got benefits, they did not deserve.

The inability of the state to manage these micro-level social dynamics has led to a high rate of recidivism, as the ostracized youth often find more acceptance within criminal gangs or resurgent militant factions than in society.

Because government programmes have not really helped communities heal, charities have become highly important. Unlike the state, which is often viewed with suspicion by Niger Delta residents, philanthropic entities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often possess the "local legitimacy" required to mediate between returnees and their hosts. These groups have filled the gap by not only giving money but also setting up programmes for justice. Assisting people talk to one another and making it possible for victims to meet with offenders, charities in the Niger Delta have started to focus on helping everyone recover, not just individuals.

However, the efficacy of philanthropic intervention remains under-researched in the specific context of the Niger Delta's post-conflict ecology. While some scholars argue that private-sector and non-profit involvement can depoliticize reintegration, others suggest that without a broader political settlement, these efforts are mere palliatives [4]. This paper investigates how charities deal with the problems of social stigma and getting communities to accept people back. It argues that reintegration is a two-way street, indicating that the transformation of the youth is only as effective as the willingness of the community to transform its perception of the "other".

Statement of the Problem

Despite the formal cessation of hostilities under the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme, the reintegration of former violent non-state youth in the Niger Delta remains dangerously incomplete. While the state has invested heavily in vocational training and monthly stipends, these technical interventions have largely ignored the sociological "wall" of communal rejection. A critical disconnection exists between the acquisition of skills and the social capacity to utilize them: former violent youth return to ancestral homes only to face entrenched social stigma and a "spoiled identity" that precludes them from meaningful civic participation.

This feeling of suspicion causes people to feel alone and keeps them from getting jobs because local businesses and social groups do not want to include those seen as unreformable. Because people are not accepted, they do not feel like they belong, and that makes them more likely to commit crimes again. Charities have tried to fix this, but they often do not work together well enough to get rid of the stigma. The central problem,

therefore, is the persistent failure to reconcile returnees with their host communities, a failure that threatens to transform a hard-won "negative peace" back into active insurgency.

Objectives

The main objective of the study is to explore the link between social perception and structural reintegration among former youth combatants. Specifically, the research seeks to:

1. Investigate the socio-psychological causes of communal stigma towards former violent non-state youth in the Niger Delta to get more insight into how memory and grievance, and fear shapes the present degree of rejection.

2. Assess the relationship between community acceptance and recidivism (i.e. how much the phenomenon of social exclusion pushes returnees back to the tent of militancy).

3. Evaluate the effectiveness of existing philanthropic efforts not limited to vocational training and stipends in delivering psychosocial support and social mediation;

4. Identify cultural and structural barriers that prevent the transformation from amnesty beneficiaries to productive members of host societies for ex-violent youth; and

5. Establish a coordination mechanism that aligns the philanthropic community with community leaders and state actors in creating an accommodating climate for restorative justice and lasting peace.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach to understand the complexities of social stigma and how well charity help works. It was based on a two-part method, combining analysis of existing data with field observations.

1. Data Sources

Existing Data: Journals, long-term reports from the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP), internal reviews from NGOs and charities like the PIND (Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta) Foundation, and histories of local conflicts in the area were consulted.

Nature/Approach of Field Observations Structured, non-participant observations were conducted across identified urban and peri-urban hubs in the Niger Delta. Amnesty beneficiaries seen in public are scrutinised; larger philanthropic projects are visible in local streets, and the tendency for informal social hierarchies to exist about who belongs and who does not is the focus of observation.

2. Analytical Framework: Thematic Analysis

A recursive thematic analysis was applied to the collected data. This required a multi-wave coding exercise to distil raw observation and the literature into relevant implications.

Theoretical Framework

The return of erstwhile violent non-state youth to society in the Niger Delta, is much more than a logistics transition from the bush and back to the city, but a deep socio-psychological negotiation. In order to make sense of this complexity the current paper

grounds its investigation in two cross overheard paradigms: Social Identity Theory (SIT) andLabelling Theory. Each of them has its own focus and specific qualities, but together they shine light on how lines of community are drawn, and how the "stigma of the insurgent" is upheld or broken.

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Developed by Tajfel and Turner, SIT posits that individuals define their self-concept based on their perceived membership in social groups [5]. In the context of the Niger Delta, communities often define themselves in opposition to those who have "disrupted" the communal peace. Reintegration creates a crisis of categorization. The former violent youth, once part of an "out-group" (the militants), seeks re-entry into the "in-group" (the civilian community).

However, SIT suggests that "in-group" favouritism and "out-group" derogation serve as mechanisms for maintaining communal self-esteem [6]. If a community perceives the former militant youth as a threat to its moral or physical security, the barriers to acceptance become rigid. Philanthropic organizations, therefore, act as "identity brokers". Their role is to facilitate "re-categorization", shifting the community's perception of the youth from "aggressor" to "neighbour". The success of reintegration depends on whether these organizations can foster a "common in-group identity", where both the community and the former combatants see themselves as stakeholders in a shared, peaceful future [7].

Labelling Theory

While SIT explains group dynamics, Labelling Theory, originating from the symbolic interactionist tradition, explains the persistence of social stigma. Becker argues that deviance is not inherent in an act, but is a consequence of the application of rules and sanctions to an "offender" [8]. For the youth of the Niger Delta, the label of "militant" often becomes a "master status", a primary identifying trait that overrides all other personal attributes [9]. When a community calls a young person irredeemable, it becomes a reality. Being labelled this way causes them to feel isolated, which then makes it harder for them to find jobs or opportunities. This can push them back into violent groups, because the community will not let go of that label, making normal life impossible [10]. Philanthropic intervention is analyzed here as a "de-labelling" mechanism. By providing vocational training and public testimonials of reform, these organizations attempt to overwrite the derogatory label with one of "skilled professional" or "peace-builder".

The Integrated Model

In this study, these theories integrate to create a "Triad of Reintegration." The Social Identity Theory discusses structural barriers of group belongingness; The Labelling Theory discusses relational burdens of stigma; and The Philanthropic Organisations Role — The Interventional Force. The framework is based on two types of maps: identity maps and labelling patterns and assumes that reintegration is a two way process: the youth cannot be the only one that has changed; the community has also to change its identity maps and its labelling patterns to generate a cognitive space in which the youth can be permanently absorbed into society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reintegration of ex-combatants into non-violence/non-militancy in Niger Delta is often framed within technical/economic parameters, However, new academic work has suggested that the very idea of success as such a transition is made to be inextricably tied to the social networks of a community where such groups are received. This review explores the work on the triple-axis of community acceptance, the lingering shadow of social stigma, and the rising trend for during-the-fact philanthropic support filling the space between the efforts of the State to disarm and the local level to absorb.

The Paradox of Community Acceptance in the Niger Delta

Community acceptance is not merely a milestone to reach but a negotiation to be continuously navigated. According to Onuoha, in the Niger Delta, acceptance of former militants is frequently undermined by a "justice gap", the idea that former agitators receive a stipend and receive training while their victims go poor and uncompensated [11]. It conjures up a landscape where the returning individual is seen not as a rehabilitated member of the community but rather as a pampered beneficiary of historical abuse.

Also, as Ikelegbe notes, the "community" is not a unitary structure. However, acceptance is different dependent on generation and sex [12]. Returnees are often seen as a challenge to traditional authority by elders, and even their peers as walking reminders of failed resistance. Thus, a local response to reintegration is necessary, a one size fits all manner fails to account for the often-specific historic grievances of individual oil-producing communities [1].

The Architecture of Social Stigma

If acceptance is the goal, social stigma is the primary barrier. Scholarly discourse on the Niger Delta frequently references the "militant" label as a permanent marker of deviance. Building on the foundational work of Link and Phelan, recent studies in the region indicate that stigma functions as a mechanism of social control [10]. As noted by Ebiede, even after vocational training, many former violent young people discover that the "invisible ink" of their past actions prevents them from securing local employment [13].

This stigma is often exacerbated by the media's portrayal of the region. By framing the Niger Delta primarily through the lens of criminality and pipeline vandalism, external narratives reinforce internal communal fears. Omotola points out that this can cause communities to reject young people because they fear they might re-offend, even if they have not done anything wrong [14]. The research indicates that, until people stop thinking of youth as equal to violence, getting young people back into the economy won't really solve anything.

Philanthropic Organizations as Intermediaries

The limitations of state-led initiatives, such as the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP), have carved out a critical space for philanthropic and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While state programmes often focus on the "D" and "R"

(Disarmament and Demobilization), philanthropic entities are increasingly focused on the "Reintegration" aspect, the most fragile phase of the process.

Groups like the Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) have come up with plans that put social support ahead of just giving money. Idemudia claims that charities are in a great spot to be go-betweens since they usually do not have the same political problems as the government [15]. By putting money into things that help the whole community, like water or schools, instead of just giving money to individuals, these groups can help bridge the justice gap. When everyone in the village benefits from a project, the young people returning are linked to the good things happening, not just getting something for themselves.

However, the literature also sounds a note of caution. Obi warns against the "NGO-ization" of peace, where reintegration becomes a series of short-term projects driven by donor cycles rather than long-term social shifts [16]. The sustainability of philanthropic intervention depends on its ability to transition from service provider to social facilitator, empowering local traditional institutions to take over the de-stigmatization process.

The distinction between the barriers of stigma and the potential of philanthropy currently has two decades of research behind it. However, even here there remains a lack of discourse on how the two interact. While a lot of the literature focuses on philanthropic intervention as a tool, they often overlook the psychological effect that the labels have on communities. That gap is addressed here by way of a study that explicitly examines how direct socio-psychological narratives — in this case, community-based storytelling and inclusive vocational hubs — modify former violent non-state youth perceptions and are focused on the end of violence.

Socio-psychological Drivers of Communal Stigma

The collective repudiation of erstwhile violent non-state youth in the Niger Delta is not typically an instantaneous phenomenon; it is a deeply psychological social process subjected to the persistence of a history of collective grievance and victimization. In order to understand how this stigma works, we first need to unpack the idea that it is just the manifestation of personal fears. Actually, stigma here works as a coping mechanism, a mental protection used by communities to negotiate around the justice lacuna generated by state-sponsored reintegration strategies.

The Justice Gap and Moral Outrage

A primary driver of communal stigma is the perceived inversion of the moral order. In the Niger Delta, state interventions such as the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) have historically focused on providing stipends, education and vocational training exclusively to those who took up arms. To the law-abiding community member who has endured the same environmental degradation and poverty without resorting to violence, this creates a profound sense of relative deprivation. This justice gap fuels a specific type of social stigma: moral outrage. The returnee is not just seen as a former combatant, but as a "subsidized aggressor" who has been rewarded for criminality while the victims remain in squalor. Consequently, social exclusion becomes the community's only

available tool for rebalancing the scales of justice; if the state will not punish the offender, the community will do so through the withdrawal of social capital.

Historical Grievances and the Militant Archetype

The fear-based psychology is inseparable from the region's bloody record of factionalism. Years of militancy have bequeathed a heritage of intra-communal treachery, as primarily youths have turned on their kin or local elders in order to assert primacy or gain access to oil-related loot. This historical background has congealed into an ironclad militant archetype in the public imagination.

So, when a young person comes home, people will look at them through the prism of the event, no matter how much they may have grown. So a rumour becomes more than something to think about, it's a "what if" fear that creeps into history; the community remembers trouble of the past and they suspect it will rise once more. For this reason, when the person does even the smallest thing, it is blown out of proportion as a signal that he or she is reverting back to his or her old ways, and this deepens the stigma and provides a means by which we can regulate their behavior.

The Burden of Collective Trauma and Social Contagion

Stigma also serves as a coping mechanism for collective trauma. The Niger Delta has functioned as a low-intensity conflict zone for years, and the psychological scars of rape, kidnapping and artisanal refining-related disasters are pervasive. In many communities, the presence of a former non-state youth acts as a "triggering stimulus", a constant visual and social reminder of a period of terror that the community is desperate to forget. Rejecting the individual is, in a sense, an attempt to reject the memory of the conflict itself.

Furthermore, this stigma is maintained through social contagion. In tight-knit communal structures, the cost of associating with a stigmatized individual is high; one risks "stigma by association". This creates a feedback loop where even those who might personally believe in the youth's reformation feel compelled to participate in their exclusion to maintain their own social standing and security within the kinship network.

The Erosion of Social Trust

And lastly, the socio-psychological incentive of rejection is the decay of traditional societal trust. This is because historically, grievances with the state and oil corporations have at times spilled over into horizontal relations, leading to a zero-sum mentality. In case of the low trust, a high-caution mode is set by the community. The returnee is seen as a sort of Trojan horse; their presence could invite an unwanted foreign military presence, or internal conflict. In this climate, stigma is more than an emotional response; it is a coldly considered, albeit painful, act of self-preservation. Only by grasping these drivers can one appreciate the fact that individual rehabilitation cannot bring about reintegration by itself; it requires a systemic healing of the communal psyche that will tackle these ingrained perceptions of injustice and fear.

The Nexus of Rejection: Community Acceptance and Recidivism Rates

At the end of the day, preventing recidivism is the ultimate measure of success of any DDR programme. This proves particularly not accident when considering the Niger

Delta in which the link between acceptance of the community and return to militancy is not a mere correlation but a direct consequence of it. But for a young ex-violent non-state actor, returning to a community that treats them with lasting hostility or distrust, psychological and economic barriers to their successful reintegration become fatal, and social exclusion becomes a strong motivator for the return to other illicit networks.

The Push-Pull Dynamic of Social Exclusion

Viewed through the lens of push-pull dynamics, recidivism amongst Niger Delta people is most appropriately explicable. The principal pull factor is the rejection from the community. As a returnee is barred from local social networks, denied land to farm from or barred from entering community markets, he is in effect divested a civilian identity. Such a lack of identity and withhold of living creates a hollow space of alienation. At the same time, the same militant networks that spawned them continue to be a draw. These communities provide what the community denies: an immediate sense of belonging, a clear hierarchy and financial stability Recidivism, in these circumstances, becomes a survival mechanism, a cold rational calculation in a society that, through stigma, has made it clear that the rehabilitated need not apply.

The Collapse of Social Capital as a Catalyst for Crime

The trust and mutual backing of the people in a community, known as social capital, becomes a sort of informal policing force. This is critical to the recurrent war question; high levels of community acceptance serve as protective social glue for a former combatant, reducing the risk of returning to violence. On the flip side, if social capital is denied, then the person is unanchored from community norms. Moreover, studies show that the absence of young people from familiar rites of passage, family gatherings, or religious communities lowers the crime-committaing cost. The returnee returns to find less at stake in resuming artisanal refining (of course known locally as oil bunkering) or in kidnapping-for-hire, with no longer a reputation to defend, and no community to be held accountable by. Even within the Niger Delta itself, the loss of community control and oversight that is a key factor in recidivism here — where organised militancy has morphed into localized crime, often with no distinction drawn between the two — continues.

The Self-fulfilling Prophecy of Stigma

A critical psychological driver of recidivism is the labelling effect. When a community persistently labels a young person as a militant or criminal, the individual eventually internalizes this identity, a phenomenon known as secondary deviance. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: if the young person is treated as a threat regardless of their behaviour, the incentive to maintain reform vanishes. If a returnee finds that their attempts at legitimate work are sabotaged by rumours or that they are the "usual suspect" whenever a local crime occurs, they often conclude that they might as well reap the benefits of the life they are already being punished for. This psychological shift from reforming youth back to active combatant is almost always preceded by a period of intense communal shunning.

The Role of Economic Interdependence

The correlation is further cemented by the economic realities of the region. Community acceptance is the gateway to the informal economy. In the Niger Delta, job opportunities are frequently mediated through kinship ties and local recommendations. Social exclusion, therefore, translates directly into economic starvation. When a young person is unable to participate in the local economy due to stigma, the lucrative (albeit dangerous) nature of the oil-black-market becomes their only viable path to sustenance. Regional studies show that when communities actively involve former soldiers in social projects with other residents, recidivism drops because it breaks down the us vs. them mentality. Data indicate that community acceptance is the best way to ensure these young people have stable, long-term futures. While state-led stipends can provide temporary relief, they cannot replace the security found in social belonging. Without a deliberate strategy to foster communal reconciliation and dismantle the structures of stigma, the Niger Delta will remain trapped in a cycle where today's "reintegrated" young person becomes tomorrow's recidivist. Reintegration is not an individual process; it is a communal one, and its failure is almost always a failure of the social fabric rather than a lack of individual resolve.

Beyond the Starter Pack: Evaluating Philanthropic Efficacy in Psychosocial Reintegration

For decades, reintegration efforts in the Niger Delta have been characterized by a "transactional" model, largely driven by the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP), which prioritizes monthly stipends and brief vocational training. However, as recidivism and persistent communal friction suggest, technical skills are essentially useless if the returnee is psychologically broken or socially barred from practising them. In this landscape, philanthropic organizations and NGOs have attempted to fill the gap, moving toward a transformative model that emphasizes psychosocial support and social mediation [17].

The Shift from Vocational to Psychosocial Support

Traditional interventions often operate on the flawed assumption that poverty is the sole driver of militancy. While economic desperation is a factor, the trauma of combat and the "moral injury" of communal betrayal are equally significant. Recent interventions by organizations like the Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) have begun to pivot, acknowledging that a young person who has spent years in the creeks requires cognitive-behavioural shifts before they can effectively utilize a welding machine or a poultry farm [18].

It is crucial to note how well these charity projects work in Safe Space programmes. Unlike programmes run by the government, which can be slow and feel distant, these charities often use people who have been there to help others. This gives them the trust that the government cannot get. As noted in recent assessments, this human-centric approach addresses the "crisis of masculinity" and post-traumatic stress that often manifests as aggression, the primary barrier to community acceptance [19].

Social Mediation as a Tool for Community Buy-in

Perhaps the most critical role of philanthropy in the region is acting as a neutral arbiter between the returnee and the aggrieved community. The state often reintroduces returnees into villages without prior dialogue, fuelling resentment among victims who see "perpetrators" being rewarded with stipends [20].

Philanthropic groups can use community stakeholder forums. These forums get traditional leaders, women's groups and youth leaders involved before the person comes back home. This helps with reintegration. Non-governmental organisations facilitate "truth and reconciliation" style dialogues at the grassroots level, and help demystify returnees and humanize their struggle [21]. When a philanthropic organization mediates a public apology or a symbolic communal cleaning project led by returnees, it effectively washes off the social stigma that state-issued certificates cannot touch [22].

Assessing the Limitations: Scale and Sustainability

Despite these successes, the efficacy of philanthropic interventions remains hampered by "projectization", the tendency of NGOs to operate on short-term grant cycles. While a 12-month psychosocial programme may show immediate results, the deep-seated social stigma in the Niger Delta requires generational engagement. Furthermore, there is often a "silo" effect; an NGO may succeed in psychosocial healing, but if the state fails to provide the macro-economic stability for the youth to work, the psychological gains are quickly eroded by renewed economic hardship. Recent reports highlight that, while these "soft" interventions are gaining traction, they are often underfunded compared to the massive budgets allocated to military security or direct cash transfers.

Charities can be good, but they do not help enough people. There are a few success stories but a lot of problems still persist. Instead of just doing the bare minimum, groups should rebuild trust in communities by helping people talk to one another and deal with trauma. That is really the only way to get real, lasting peace. However, for these interventions to move from the periphery to the centre of regional policy, there must be a deliberate integration of these human-centric models into the broader state-led frameworks.

Cultural and Structural Barriers to Reintegration in the Niger Delta

The transition of youth in the Niger Delta from "amnesty beneficiaries" to integrated, productive community members is frequently arrested by a complex interplay of deep-seated cultural anxieties and rigid structural failures. While the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) has succeeded in maintaining a fragile cessation of hostilities, it has largely failed to transform the social identity of the participants. The following analysis identifies the barriers that turn reintegration into a revolving door of stigma and economic exclusion.

Cultural Barriers: The Psychology of Stigma and "Blood Guilt"

At the heart of the cultural impasse is the "moral injury" sustained by the host communities. In many Niger Delta cultures, the community is an organic whole; violence against a neighbour is not just a legal infraction but a spiritual rupture. Former militants

are often viewed through the lens of *ritual pollution*. Even when legal amnesty is granted, communities often feel that the "blood guilt" remains unatoned [21]. This leads to a persistent social shunning where returnees are excluded from communal leadership roles, marriage prospects and traditional ceremonies.

Furthermore, there is a profound victim-perpetrator paradox. Communities that suffered under the volatility of militant activity often resent the reward system of the amnesty programme. When a former youth combatant returns with a monthly stipend and a vocational certificate—while his victims remain in poverty—a cultural friction that manifests as active hostility is created [20]. This resentment hardens into a social stigma that labels the returnee a "mercenary" rather than a "prodigal son", effectively barring them from the emotional security required for a successful transition.

Structural Barriers: The "Amnesty Trap" and Institutional Silos

Structurally, the reintegration process is hindered by what can be termed the "Amnesty Trap". The PAP was meant to be about security, not about helping people grow. Therefore, the monthly payments it gives out can make people too reliant on them. It is like the system encourages young people to stay ex-militants just to keep getting paid, instead of trying to become business owners [17]. Also, the job training offered does not really match what is happening in the Niger Delta economy. Many young people are trained in things like welding, diving and seafaring, but it is still extremely hard for them to get into the oil and gas industry. Without "aftercare" services, such as job placement or access to credit, these certificates become decorative [18]. The lack of an institutional bridge between training and employment means that the youth, despite their technical skills, remain structurally excluded from the productive economy.

The role of philanthropic organizations is often the only corrective measure to these silos. However, even these interventions face the structural barrier of "short-termism". Most NGO-led reintegration projects are funded for 12 to 18 months, whereas the psychological and social re-engineering of a war-torn community requires a decade of engagement [19]. This mismatch between the depth of the trauma and the brevity of the intervention leaves many of the young people in a state of "liminality", stuck between a violent past they cannot return to and a productive future they cannot reach.

The Path Forward: Role of Social Mediation

To collapse these barriers, philanthropy must pivot from "starter pack" distribution to deep social mediation. Structural integration is impossible without cultural "cleansing" or reconciliation. Also, these organizations, that focus on assisting the society, can facilitate community stakeholder forums in order to provide opportunity to individuals to present their concerns publicly. This creates a cultural substitute for the traditional mechanisms of atonement [22]. The transition from amnesty beneficiary to productive citizen becomes a shared community goal rather than an imposed state project.

The Integrated Restorative Reintegration Framework (IRRF)

To really change the Niger Delta from a place of conflict to a place of lasting peace, there is the need to stop the way reintegration is currently being handled, because it is all

over the place. Before this, the government handled moving the project forward, but community leaders and charities worked completely separately. The Integrated Restorative Reintegration Framework (IRRF) wants to bring these together as a team that includes all three. In this team justice will be the number one reason to keep the community connected.

1. Core Synchronization Matrix

The success of this framework depends on identifying the unique leverage each actor brings to the table and ensuring their efforts are mutually reinforcing rather than duplicative.

Table 1. Core synchronization matrix for coordinated reintegration framework.

S/N	Pilar	Actor	Primary Responsibility	Reintegration function
1	Authority	State actors (PAP, NDDC)	Legislative backing and physical security	Providing the "Legal Exit" (Amnesty) and macro-economic infrastructure
2	Legitimacy	Community Leaders	Moral and traditional arbitration	Providing the "Social Entrance" (ritual and social acceptance)
3	Sustainabilit y	Philanthropic organizations	Technical expertise and funding	Providing the "Bridge" (psychosocial support, skills and mediation)

Source: Author's compilation, 2026

2. The Restorative Justice Nexus

At the heart of this synchronization is a shift from retributive or distributive justice to **restorative justice**. State actors often assume that "buying peace" through stipends is sufficient. However, long-term peace requires the healing of the social fabric.

In this framework, **philanthropic organizations** act as the neutral secretariat. They fund and facilitate "truth and reconciliation circles" where former violent youth (beneficiaries) and victims meet under the supervision of **community leaders**. These leaders provide the traditional framework for atonement, often involving local rites that "wash away" the stigma of violence, while the **State** provides a legal guarantee that such participation will not lead to fresh prosecution for past acts.

3. Operationalizing the Framework: The Three-phase Alignment

To make this synchronization functional, the actors must align across three specific phases:

Phase I: Pre-eEntry Mediation (led by philanthropy & traditional rulers): Before a young person returns to the community, philanthropic mediators work with traditional rulers to gauge community temperature. They identify "trigger points" of resentment

and conduct workshops to prepare the community for the returnee's arrival, ensuring the "social entrance" is not a hostile one.

Phase II: Cooperative Economic Ventures (led by state & philanthropy): Instead of individual stipends, the state should redirect funds toward cooperative business models (e.g. sustainable aquaculture or modular refineries) managed by NGOs. These ventures must intentionally pair former militants with non-militant youth from the same community. This breaks the "benefit-for-violence" narrative and fosters collaborative productivity.

Phase III: Monitoring and Social "Aftercare" (led by community & state): Community leaders act as local monitors, providing "social reporting" on the progress of returnees. The state uses this data to refine policy, while philanthropic organizations provide the necessary psychosocial interventions (trauma counselling) if signs of relapse or social withdrawal appear.

Sustainability in the Niger Delta is not a product of surveillance, but of belonging. By synchronizing state resources with community-led legitimacy and philanthropic agility, a "safety net of accountability" can be created. This framework ensures that the former youth combatant is no longer a guest in their own land, but a stakeholder in its collective prosperity. The goal is a transition from a state of unarmed conflict to a state of active peace.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : The findings of this study underscore a fundamental truth about post-conflict stability in the Niger Delta: the successful reintegration of former violent non-state youth is less a technical challenge of vocational training and more a complex social negotiation of trust and equity. The state's Amnesty Programme started things off for stopping the fighting, but it has not really dealt with the bad social stuff that returnees face back home. This study shows that giving people money does not really work if the community still sees them as a threat, even if they are being helped out. This social problem is not just about old memories; it is about people feeling like things are not fair. When communities feel the government has left them behind, there are problems when ex-fighters come back with government money. **Implication :** Charities have intervened to do a lot more than just give money. They are actually shaping communities. Switching from helping individuals to helping the whole community grow, these groups are closing the fairness gap. An example is when a charity project ties a young person to a shared community benefit, like a solar-powered health centre or a co-operative farm. The story goes from past wrongs to future usefulness. This research argues that to make things really different, things need to go beyond the fighter label. Instead, young people should be helped to see themselves as people who help the community, not just people with a troubled past. **Limitation :** However, charities are not a cure-all. The projects only last if they work with local leaders and the ways in which people have always made peace. **Future Research :** Basically, the Niger Delta can only truly find peace by bridging the gap between disarming people and making them feel like they belong. Leaders need

to realize that one cannot buy community acceptance. It has to be earned through honest projects that include everyone.

REFERENCES

[1]   U. Ukiwo, "Horizontal inequalities and ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 547–593, 2007.

[2]   E. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, USA: Prentice-Hall, 1963.

[3]   C. Obi and S. A. Rustad, *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-Violence*. London, U.K.: Zed Books, 2011.

[4]   M. J. Watts, "A Tale of Two Gulfs: Life, Death, and Dispossession in the Niger Delta," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 99, no. 1, 2012.

[5]   H. Tajfel and J. C. Turner, "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, W. G. Austin and S. Worchel, Eds. Monterey, CA, USA: Brooks/Cole, 1979, pp. 33–47.

[6]   M. A. Hogg and G. M. Vaughan, *Social Psychology*, 8th ed. Harlow, U.K.: Pearson, 2018.

[7]   S. L. Gaertner and J. F. Dovidio, *Reducing Intergroup Bias: The Common Ingroup Identity Model*. Philadelphia, PA, USA: Psychology Press, 2000.

[8]   H. S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York, NY, USA: Free Press, 1963.

[9]   E. M. Lemert, *Social Pathology: A Systematic Approach to the Theory of Sociopathic Behavior*. New York, NY, USA: McGraw-Hill, 1951.

[10]   B. G. Link and J. C. Phelan, "Conceptualizing stigma," *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 363–385, 2001.

[11]   F. C. Onuoha, "The Niger Delta Amnesty: Challenges and opportunities," *Conflict Trends*, no. 1, pp. 44–51, 2011.

[12]   A. Ikelegbe, *Oil, Resource Conflicts and the Post-Amnesty Programme in the Niger Delta: Guiding the Peace Process*. Benin City, Nigeria: UniBen Press, 2010.

[13]   T. M. Ebiede, "Community level reintegration of ex-combatants in the Niger Delta," *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 17, no. 5, pp. 415–435, 2017.

[14]   J. S. Omotola, "'Liberation movements' and rising violence in the Niger Delta: The new contentious politics of oil," *African Affairs*, vol. 106, no. 422, pp. 33–54, 2009.

[15]   U. Idemudia, "Oil extraction and poverty reduction in the Niger Delta: A critical examination of partnership initiatives," *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 90, no. 1, pp. 91–116, 2009.

[16]   C. Obi, "Oil and conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta: Cleaning up the mess?" *African Security*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 147–163, 2014.

[17]   S. I. Ibaba, "The Amnesty Programme and the reintegration of ex-militants in the Niger Delta: A review of the psychosocial component," *Port Harcourt Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 112–128, 2021.

[18]   Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND), *Niger Delta Annual Peace and Security Report: Navigating Local Conflict Dynamics*. PIND Publications, 2024.

[19]   United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Nigeria, *Assessment of Psychosocial Support Mechanisms in the North-East and Niger Delta DDR Processes*. UNDP, 2022.

[20] T. S. Akinyetun, "Stigma and the challenge of reintegrating ex-militants in the Niger Delta," *Journal of African Peace and Security*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 45–62, 2023.

[21] A. S. Zibiri, "Philanthropy and peacebuilding: A study of NGO interventions in oil-producing communities," *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 88–105, 2022.

[22] B. Uduang, "Community leaders demand more social mediation in amnesty deals," *Vanguard News*, Nov. 12, 2023.

Okechuku Onuchuku
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria

*Chibuzor Chile Nwobueze (Corresponding Author)
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria
Email: chibuzornwobueze@yahoo.com

Kelechi Belinda Udeogu
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria