Summary

The mismanagement of government resources allocated to the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) for ex-agitators has created complex and stubborn financial dependencies. This complicates efforts to transition the PAP to an end. These dependences stretch beyond legitimate participants, to those vying for an illegitimate share of the allocated resources. This includes those administering the PAP and political elites. This briefing summarises a research report, which is based on interviews with those in the system. It explores the importance of untangling and detaching these critical financial and political dependencies as part of exit strategy proposals.

Key messages

- The PAP is not a sustainable solution for stabilisation and development in the Niger Delta, nor do the financial benefits extend to large parts of the population. Instead, it has created complex and stubborn financial and political dependencies, which complicate efforts to end it.
- Since 2009, the PAP has helped sustain thousands of ex-agitators with monthly stipends, but generally failed to ensure reintegration into employment or society. In parallel, some leaders among agitators and political elites have developed ways to steer the PAP in their favour, and embezzled significant funds allocated to activities.
- These actors have grown heavily dependent on the PAP and, to some extent, on each other to extend it. This helps explain why the five-year programme has lasted more than ten years, shows no signs of ending, and is fiercely defended.
- The emergent elite-run ‘constellations of patronage’ impact wider power dynamics, by making close associates more powerful, but more dependent, on the PAP and the Presidency.
- Any successful exit strategy from the PAP will need a well-informed political approach which understands the interest of all actors, on top of a well-designed plan for winding down activities.
Introduction

Initiated in June 2009, the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) has become an enduring institution. Initially it was conceived as a short-term mechanism for de-escalating and defusing the militant insurgency that destabilised the oil-rich Niger Delta over the preceding decade, and was also designed to achieve broader socioeconomic and stabilisation objectives. Its approach is to reintegrate agitators via trainings, further education, job placements, and business start-up support, and pay a monthly social support stipend until they graduate the PAP. However, mismanagement enables elites to divert annual budget allocations into private pockets, compromising the quality of delivery so much that participants fail to graduate, and it must continue running. Lucrative and durable, the PAP has created complex and stubborn financial dependencies—both for elites and its lowliest beneficiaries. This brief explores the inner workings and patronage functions of the PAP in the context of its beneficiaries, to highlight an important consideration in the design of a realistic and effective exit strategy.

Methodology

The research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states between July and August 2019. Researchers met with PAP beneficiaries that have undertaken training or received stipends. Researchers struggled to find out basic information about the programme from officials in the PAP’s Abuja headquarters and the liaison office in Port Harcourt. As a result, official information relating to the administration of the PAP—and its scope, scale, contracts, and activities—remains scarce.

Findings

The PAP is spectacularly opaque compared to other government entities. For the past five years (2017-2021), the annual budget was NGN65 billion (GBP£146 million), but no breakdown of how those funds are spent is published, nor any evaluation of completion or effectiveness. Independent observers repeatedly find that the PAP has failed to achieve its core mandate of skills development and employment, largely due to mismanagement of resources. Three main areas where actors vie to control resources allocated to the PAP are outlined below. These flow via ‘constellations of patronage’ embedded in the political economy of the Niger Delta.

Stipends

Ex-agitators—the intended beneficiaries—receive a monthly stipend worth more than double the national minimum wage. But without effective training, post-training support, or employment opportunities, they have not been reintegrated into society or weaned off payments—and many are now dependent on the PAP. Senior ex-agitators are generally allocated the same stipend, but in many cases continue to receive a cut of the stipends paid to their subordinates, despite efforts to stop this. Furthermore, it is commonly alleged that thousands of non-agitators or non-existent ‘ghost agitators’ were fraudulently inserted so senior ex-agitators or political elites can receive their pay. Without robust record-keeping this is easy to institute, and is difficult to prove, but interviews confirmed a common perception that these practices are widespread.

Contracts

Our research suggests contract award processes are primarily driven by political considerations, rather than technical competence or value.

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for money. Individuals seeking contracts must forge relationships with ruling party figures and demonstrate their loyalty ahead of, during, and after elections. This appears to be the main route to gain privileged access to high-value contracts directly from the PAP, or indirectly through the influence of the PAP over other government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), and private sector actors such as international oil and gas companies. Other routes reported include extortion through acts or threats of violence. Contracts typically include:

- Fulfilment of trainings, conferences, events, and other activities for the PAP.
- Procurement of materials meant to support livelihood start-up following PAP training.
- Construction of buildings, facilities, roads, and other infrastructure for government MDAs.
- Security, surveillance, and other services in the formal oil and gas industry.

**Prospects for a return to conflict**

The prospects for a return to conflict remain significant. The failure of the skills development, training, and employment dimension of the PAP means that, if it is discontinued today, it will have done little to improve the livelihood, business, and educational skills of Niger Delta youth. The PAP has reduced instability, but via an approach that relies on key conflict actors to suppress tensions in return for a share of budgeted resources. The relative stability is also unsustainable and fragile as this approach does not solve the underlying causes of instability, is at the discretion of political elites, vulnerable to manipulation, and hotly contested among ex-agitators.

A decade after the start of the PAP, local grievances surrounding resource control and development—key demands of the agitators—have not been meaningfully addressed. The failure of successive governments (both federal and state) has further hardened attitudes among ex-agitators and the region’s long-suffering residents. This has left its beneficiaries disillusioned with government-led peace or development processes, and more susceptible to re-engaging in violent or criminal acts. **Public perception surveys** carried out by SDN across violence-prone communities in the region reinforce this point; citizens identify the failure of the PAP, and the need for reform and exit—but are broadly opposed to ending PAP benefits without a sustainable alternative.

Considering the reach of patronage networks, the ability and willingness of technocrats within the political system to design alternatives needs to be improved. The political class use ex-agitators as muscle in illicit errands to further their power, and they often use the benefits of the PAP, or threats to investigate past benefits, as leverage to entice support. Utilised in this way by the political class, the system provides incentives for participants to push against its end, often through mass protests, or firmly worded threats to return to conflict or to attack the oil and gas industry.
Conclusion

Designed to be a stop-gap solution to transition the region out of a resource-driven conflict, the PAP has instead become a dependency-inducing palliative—a substitute for the delivery of public goods and widespread socioeconomic gains. Vast corruption syphons away resources that may otherwise enable the programme to achieve its objectives and come to a managed end. Due to mismanagement, the PAP has not achieved in 11 years, what it set out to do in five. Thus, elites and beneficiaries can justify demands for extensions and further budget allocations.

The PAP itself depends on key conflict actors to suppress agitations on an ad-hoc basis. Yet this requires deception, false promises, and contributes to an accumulation of disillusionment with government, as well as with the key conflict actors they co-opt. This system is not sustainable, it regularly fails, erupts into violence, and risks a future regional collapse into conflict.

Viewed politically and pragmatically, the PAP has become an entrenched part of Nigeria’s political economy, and the fragile political settlement in the Niger Delta region. Because successive federal governments have viewed the PAP as a conduit for patronage and a mechanism for co-opting individuals and groups with deep-seated grievances, the PAP remains primarily a political—rather than developmental—programme. Ending the PAP will therefore require a well-informed political strategy based on an understanding of the interests and incentives that maintain the PAP. That strategy would need to be supported by an unprecedented level of coordination, cooperation, and commitment, among federal and state officials, to developing the Niger Delta.

See our full report for more detail and recommendations.
SDN supports those affected by the extractives industry and weak governance. We work with communities and engage with governments, companies and other stakeholders to ensure the promotion and protection of human rights, including the right to a healthy environment. Our work currently focuses on the Niger Delta.