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CSOs demand an alternative benefit-sharing scheme that places communities at the center of NDDC operations

Appalled by the mindboggling revelations of corruption involving highly-placed persons in the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), a coalition of civil society organizations working in the Niger Delta region strongly condemn the alleged mismanagement of public funds earmarked for regional development, leaving the oil-rich communities in the region poorer, with zero or run-down infrastructure, high unemployment, youth restiveness and endemic conflict. The findings of the ad-hoc probe panels set up by the Senate and the House of Representatives—including information from the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN)—show that the NDDC's interim management committee (IMC) could not properly account for N81.5 Billion spent between January and May 2020. The panels also found that NDDC contracts worth over N67Billion were never executed.

Comprised of Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Delta, Ondo, Imo and Abia states, the inhabitants of the region continue to live in crushing poverty and degraded environments amid the billions of oil wealth squandered on frivolities. Substantiated media reports are replete with details of how NDDC officials splashed obscene amounts of money on ridiculous expenses like *Lassa fever*, *condolences*, imprest, foreign travel, maintenance etc. None of these expenditures align with the agency's overarching functions which include regional policy formulation and implementation, environmental remediation, execution of development projects such as the construction of roads, jetties health centers, schools, industries, agriculture and fisheries, housing, water supply, electricity and so forth.

'We view NDDC's alleged financial recklessness as a declaration of war against the vast poor and vulnerable populations, especially women living in hard-to-reach localities and riverine settlements, already living in necessitous conditions', Emem Okon, director of **KEBETKACHE WOMEN** said.

NDDC has received over \$40bn (N15 trillion) of NDDC since 2000 when it was established by President Olusegun Obasanjo with the sole mandate of developing the Niger Delta region following decades of massive oil pollution and environmental devastation. The economic and infrastructural backwardness across the region attests to the agency's continuing failure to deliver on its mandate. Indigenes of the region studying abroad have been stranded for several months owing to the NDDC's failure to pay for their scholarship tuition. Poorly-regulated petroleum exploration and production activities by oil multinational corporations continue to unleash the mayhem of pollution, environmental degradation, total or partial destruction of vegetation in many locations, destroying the peoples' ability to live and make a livelihood.

'It is clear that the multiple grievances that triggered the violent conflict of the late 90s, necessitating the establishment of the NDDC, have remained largely unmet. The latest revelations, if unpunished and stolen monies unrecovered, could pave way for the resumption of militancy activities in the region, with disastrous consequences for the country's oil output and revenue earnings', says Fyनेface Dumnamene, director of **Youths & Environmental Advocacy Center**.

Accountability for the criminal diversion of public funds lags behind as the very institutions and regulators responsible for ensuring probity in the region's affairs, have all been linked to various acts of malfeasance in the NDDC. At the probe panels looking into the IMC's financial transactions, lawmakers of both the Senate and House were publicly accused [of 'hijacking'](#) the commission's budgets over the years, and appropriating most of the agency's over-bloated contracts to themselves. Till date, this allegation has neither been denied nor countered with evidence. The

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Niger Delta minister charged with the supervisory responsibility for NDDC's affairs was also named in a chain of fraudulent activities.

'The NDDC's corruption scandal deals a serious blow to the government's anti-corruption drive which could potentially reverse the gains of several years of the lull in violence and considerable peace in the region. A coherent, holistic and people-focused intervention is now necessary to prevent surging local discontent from rising to a level that would be too difficult to repair', says Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri of SPACES FOR CHANGE.

The civil society organizations working in the Niger Delta region are calling on President Muhammadu Buhari to:

1. Immediately disband the 5-member Interim Management Committee (IMC), and reconstitute the board of the Commission as stipulated by law. In addition, we urge Mr. president to immediately relieve the current minister of Niger Delta Affairs, Mr. Godswill Akpabio, of his duties, pending the outcome of the investigations of alleged misfeasance in public office, particularly involving fraudulent handling of NDDC contract deals.
2. Direct the EFCC to launch an independent probe into NDDC contracts, especially abandoned projects and projects awarded and paid for, but not executed from 2015 till date. Indicted contractors should be prosecuted with the aim of recovering and remitting all misappropriated funds into the Commission's coffers.
3. Investigate allegations of hijack of NDDC budgets and preferential contract awards to serving public officers and federal lawmakers, with a view to identifying, naming, prosecuting and bringing all indicted persons to book.
4. To favourably consider civil society's proposal for an alternative benefit-sharing regime that places communities at the center of NDDC's operations in the region and in particular, recognizes the rights of communities to approve or veto NDDC projects. Civil society organizations are willing to engage further with the government regarding how to design and implement benefit-sharing schemes that ensure local communities reap better benefits from oil wealth.

SIGNED:

- **SPACES FOR CHANGE | S4C** (Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri)
- **KEBETKACHE WOMEN** (Emem Okon)
- **WOMEN IN EXTRACTIVES** (Faith Nwadishi)
- **WE THE PEOPLE** (Ken Henshaw)
- **THE PEOPLES CENTER** (Celestine Akpobari)
- **YOUTHS & ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY CENTER** (Fyneface Dumnamene)
- **FOUNDATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS ADVOCACY** (Nnanna Okafor)
- **CORPORATE ACCOUTABILITY & PUBLIC PARTICIPATION** (Phillip Jakpor)
- **KONYELUM IMMALAH FOUNDATION**
- **CENTER FOR TRANSPARENCY ADVOCACY**
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