

OIL PRODUCING COMMUNITIES' INITIATIVES AND THE DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT AND THE PEACEBUILDING IN NIGER-DELTA

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ABSTRACT

Local initiatives in the dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding are germane in understanding the actions and inactions of a people towards their plights and sustainable development. This study therefore adopts a qualitative methodology in investigating local communities' initiative in the unending conflicts and peacebuilding processes in Nigeria, using Gokana, Onelga, and Etche communities in Rivers State as case study. Major findings revealed that the roles and networks of key indigenous institutions such as elder's council, ruling houses, mothers of the land, traditional healers and witch-doctors were vital in directing the affairs of the communities. However, they were often sidelined by government and the multinational corporations. This reality has continuously hindered the development of the region. Similarly, the use of technocrats, educated elites and the relative neglect of local leaders in negotiating peace were discovered as a missing link in the quest for peace and sustainable development in the region. Lastly, the study recommends that peacebuilding and development initiatives should take a bottom-top approach and be devoid of politics for a realistic sustainable development.

Keywords: Indigenous institutions, local-initiatives, multinational corporations, technocrats, conflict, peacebuilding, Niger-delta.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Oil producing communities in Nigeria are faced with myriads of problems. Characteristically they are underdeveloped, relatively far from governmental presence and modern ways of living (Ikporukpo, 2004). Irrespective of the facts, that these communities are the proverbial hen that lay the golden eggs which oils the Nigerian economy. Events from 1999 till date can be used to describe oil producing communities as places where tensions and conflicts have continually heightened, with all the attendant negative consequences on the socio-economic, political and sustainable development of the Niger-delta (Imobighe, 2002; Jega, 2007; Albert, 2010). To say that there has been violence in different parts of the country, especially in oil producing communities in Nigeria is an understatement, which is also stating the obvious. Since 1999, when democratic governance commenced in Nigeria, violent conflicts had caused an estimated death of over 10,000; and 300,000 internally displaced persons (Ikelegbe, 2005). Most of the conflicts in Nigeria are as a result of several factors such as: poverty, terrorism, human rights abuses, religious fundamentalism, diseases, unemployment, ethno-nationalism, resources agitation, environmental pollution, deforestation and marginalization of one ethnic group by another (Jacques, 2005, Albert, 2010). Nature though tough and resilient in the face of disturbances, nevertheless damage in most cases is generally irreversible, this calls for a strong concern for sustainable development amidst incessant conflict in the Niger delta. Bearing in mind the

concept of sustainable development as put forward by Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause (1995), which emphasizes agitation for a vision expression, value change, moral development, social reorganization or transformational process toward a desired future or better world, understanding the dynamics and seemingly unending conflict and peacebuilding in the Niger-delta becomes germane.

The history of conflict in oil producing communities in Nigeria is a long battle for struggle of the people over the failure of the central government and the oil companies, to make meaningful improvement in their lives, despite the abundant resources generated from their communities. Following the unhealthy practice by multinational oil companies, the social and environmental cost of crude oil production in the region has been catastrophic. They include the destruction of wild life and biodiversity, loss of fertile soil, pollution of air and drinking water, degradation of farmlands and damage to aquatic ecosystems. Thus, for five decades since the discovery of the black gold (crude oil), ecological devastation of farmland and neglect arising from crude oil production have left much of the populace in the Niger delta region desolate and poor, even more profound is the poor state of human development amongst the inhabitants (Akinwumi, 2004). The inhabitants are mostly farmers and fishermen, their means of livelihood are continuously being threatened by the activities of the oil companies. The 1970s 80s, 90s saw the Nigerian government making empty promises to the indigenes and inhabitants of the oil producing communities; which in the long run has strained the relationship and trust of the people towards government in recent times due to the deep sense of frustration, perception of neglect, marginalisation, and having failed to win concession through peaceful means. Inhabitants of oil producing communities rose in protest, first in the 1990s against oil companies and the federal government. Consequently, the last decade, the challenges faced have fuelled a deadly struggle amongst the ethnic and community leadership, the elites, business men, politicians, youths, women and various other groups in the region (Ikporukpo, 2005). In addition, individuals and groups struggle to control, dominate access to available opportunities and benefits from the oil proceeds, The resultant effect was the emergence of greed, corruption and distributive conflicts underpin numerous incidents of community conflicts in the region (Akinwumi, 2004; Odinaku, 2010).

BRIEF HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF CONFLICT IN THE NIGER-DELTA

The earliest attempts to protest the perceived injustice in Rivers State was led by Ken Saro Wiwa, along with his fellow ethnic minority activist who formed the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1990. MOSOP demanded for more than US\$40 billion as compensation from Shell for four decades of environmental degradation and pollution in the land of the Ogoni ethnic minority. In January 1993, Saro – Wiwa and the Ogonies mobilized, and held rallies, where some 300,000 Ogoni protested against Shell for the pollution and environmental degradation of their land. Government responded by banning public gathering and declaring that disturbances of oil production were acts of treason and terrorism. Then by May, 1994, Ken Saro Wiwa and eight fellow MOSOP members were tried and condemned for murder; and were eventually hanged in 1995 on the instruction of late dictator General Sani Abacha (Albert, 2005).

From the mid 1990s, oil producing communities (especially in Rivers State) witnessed incessant violent conflicts, as prominent local leaders competed to assume top chieftaincy positions in the area, recruited youth leaders and provided them with money and weapons to assist in their often violent struggles to control resources locally. It was at this point the call for resource control, true federalism and national sovereign conference became prominent in Nigeria once again after the

Nigerian civil war of 1967 (Ehwarieme, 2005). Several violent clashes occurred round Port Harcourt, the River state capital city; and since the mid 1990's, these youth groups in various oil producing communities have grown more powerful and resentful, hence the militarization of the Niger-delta (Enweremadu, 2009). It is in this regard that this study seeks to examine oil producing communities' initiatives towards conflict with emphasis on local traditions and the spiritual dynamics of conflict in Nigeria. This is an area quite a number of studies have neglected focusing more on the involvement of local communities in peacebuilding and the overt aspect of conflict in Nigeria. Conflicts in River State reflect the widespread collapse of public order in the country.

Over the years, conflict has caused extensive damage to various oil producing communities in Rivers State; and attempts to reconcile the communities, government representatives and the multinational companies exploiting and exploring oil often times yielded negative results and where positive agreements reached are not sustained (Albert, 2005). A number of scholars have noted the complexities, the diversities of communities, agitators and human interests but not in the development of conflicts through local institutions and spiritual medium in the Niger-delta. Studies have overlooked the dynamics of conflicts in the region (Akinwumi, 2004; Albert, 2005; Ikporukpo, 2005). Like most violent conflicts in contemporary Nigeria, conflicts in oil-rich states, reveal the inherent weakness of the State and its institutions to effectively resolve social conflicts because of the inadequate knowledge therein in understanding traditions and how they operate. Instead, the State has often times demonstrated strong preference for military coercion to suppress community leaders, youth groups and civil society activists within the communities. It is estimated that approximately a quarter of all peace agreements reached often times failed for reasons that cannot be explained or comprehended, hence the continuity of conflict (Akinwumi, 2004; Albert, 2010). At this point the need to probe into traditions and the activities of the underground players (custodians of culture) becomes imperative as another aspect in understanding conflict.

This study therefore examined community based initiative in peacebuilding and conflict transformation as a bottom-up approach; to entrench an enduring peace for sustainable development and a stable society. Having realised that peace and development cannot take place in violent situations as well as the concern for peacebuilding. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the role of indigenous institutions and their networks in the dynamics of conflict in oil producing communities. The need therefore to understand the cultural and spiritual dynamics of conflict adopted by local institutions in seeking redress and attention to the myriads of problems facing oil producing communities through conflicts becomes necessary to be addressed.

METHODOLOGY

The scope of this study is Rivers State, a focal point in Nigeria's oil producing Niger-delta region. The study population consisted of custodians of cultures (Traditional heads of clans), mainly chiefs, and their subjects, women and youth leaders in three communities of Gokana (South-East), Onelga (Ogba/Ndoni/Egbema LGA) – North-West and Etche (South -East). The study employed principally in-depth interviews and focus group discussions among a cross section of 25 households' heads, 12 chief priest 13 youth's groups heads. In all, 50 respondents constituted the sample size. As a qualitative study, data collected were subjected to content analysis. This study was limited to interviews and discussions with the indigenes of the

various quarters: elders, (male and females). Interpretation of data was situated within Nigeria’s (Niger-delta) socio-political and economic environment.

Map 1. Study Areas in Rivers State, Nigeria



SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

The research comprised of 50 respondents: 29 males (58 per cent) and 21 females (42 per cent). More males were involved in the study; of which 36 percent of the total respondents were Christians, 48.0 percent Animists and 16.0 percent Muslims. The age group categories of respondents showed that 30.0 percent were within the age bracket of 18-37 years, 44.0 percent 38-57 years, and 26.0 percent between 58-77 years. The study categorized youths as those within the age brackets of 18 to 37 years. Educational attainment of respondents showed that majority of the respondents; about 70 percents had both primary and secondary education. The occupational activities of respondents showed clearly that quite a number of participants were into agriculture (42.0 per cent fishing and farming). Others were civil servants (18.0 percent), Traders (26.0 per cent) and land speculators (14 per cent).

INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR NETWORKS IN THE DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT IN OIL PRODUCING COMMUNITIES

The study revealed that the indigenous and traditional institutions in Rivers State were associations made up of men, women and youths who over the years have distinguished themselves by birth, age and occupational achievement. Notable among these institutions were the *elder’s council* (comprises of only men), *ruling houses* and *kingmakers* (blue blooded elites),

Mothers of the land (made up of female/mothers who are mainly traders and artisans); *traditional healers* (native doctors); *witchdoctors*; and the *age grade unions* (youth associations). These associations have come to be regarded by the communities; as noted by the respondents, they are very vital in any event to be or not to be. They were no doubt important in directing the affairs of the communities, the social, political, economical, spiritual and religious activities. In Gokana, Onelga and Etche, the traditional rulers emphasised that the relevance of traditional institutions cannot be undermined as it goes beyond what western education and educated elites can explain or abandoned. Specifically, the traditional head in Etche, noted that:

Traditional institutions are powerful, in the control of peoples' life developmentally, economically, politically and religiously. There are a lot of things that goes beyond what the eyes can see. Many a time politicians and government officials have come to pay homage and later turn their backs against us, play on our intelligence by sidelining the traditions of the people with lots of promises and white elephant projects but the results are evident in the unrest everywhere in Rivers and other parts of the Niger-delta (Traditional Head Etche).

In the opinion of one of the heads in Gokana, the role of indigenous institutions and their networks in the dynamics of conflict in Rivers state is a common sense explanation, 'spiritually the mind of the people can be controlled through them'. This is an important function of traditional institutions and their leaders; in uniting the people for a peaceful coexistence. In recent times out of insecurity, selfish interest and bad government, political manoeuvring and meandering have continuously separated the people from their livelihood and resources. Hitherto united ethnic groups are increasingly becoming disenchanted and in the same vein the traditional institution is affected. It is in these regards that the spiritual means have been developed resuscitated and diverted against government officials, their programmes, decisions and 'sycophants' benefiting from their largesse; amidst these widening divisions, poverty becomes paramount in these communities.

Similarly the focus group discussions with women revealed the existence of spiritual powers in manipulating the people especially the youths. A female leader noted that it is so unfortunate to resolve to such means:

The implication of using cultural and spiritual means in creating disputes among one another and in settling scores have caused a lot of people to loose their love ones, many are no more, deaths everywhere; secret societies and cult groups here and there uncontrollable (sic).

The issue of secret cults and societies according to Maquet (1971) are evident and commonly used in Africa in times of dispute settlements and peace formulation. As defined, they are close associations, guilds, and cult groups with closed membership. These societies are 'fraternities' established by a conjunction of purposeful intentions with a view to achieving specific ends. They are branded 'secret' partly because only few people with a special knowledge or interest can understand them. Offiong (1939) revealed some of the modus-operandi of secret cults as involving the use of particular rituals, signs, symbols and forms of knowledge which are withheld from non-initiates. Respondents generally concurred to the existence of special sources of powers utilised by the elders and are usually kept private and secretive. Though respondents were reluctant

to mention names of secret cults and rituals in the communities, it was however noted that there are many secret cults in the communities which are highly respected.

In Onelga, the traditional head categorised cults and secret societies into three: traditional secret societies, religious secret societies and anti-social secret societies, he further noted their activities as vital in explaining conflicts in Rivers state and environs. Among the three listed cults, the antisocial secret societies are usually made up of youths who physically express their anger via violent means such as rioting, burning of houses, kidnapping and through other vices; while the traditional secret societies comprised mostly of the elderly whose responsibilities are enmeshed within the peoples' culture. Traditionally they participate actively in ensuring peace and checkmating the roles and powers of the village heads. However it was spelt out clearly in the focus group discussions with the elders that 'he who has the power to make peace also has the power to create conflict' this is often used as a slogan in the meetings of the elders or as a general adage. Responses on the involvement of the elderly and traditional cults in conflict generation was overwhelmingly noted as recent and associated with the degradation of arable land and governmental neglect of oil producing communities at the later part of the 1980s. This period marked the third decade of oil exploration in Nigeria. About 25 per cent of the respondents highlighted the impact of colonialism and the empowerment of traditional elites where they did hitherto not exist (especially among the Igbo speaking elites in River state known for their acephalous arrangement). Similar the long time corrupt leadership encountered by the people since independence and the discovery of oil in 1958 created a culture of conflict and therefore the imperativeness and invocation of a silent aspect of the peoples' culture, often not used is the spirit medium in generation of conflict as a sign of protest among local inhabitants in the region. This is one among many other ways; the communities (through their custodians) react and seek redress to the anomalies happening in their environment and to those regarded as oppressors or collaborators of government locally and sometimes at the state level. An interviewee noted that 'in recent times we (referring to the members of elders' council) have been forced like the youths to make the society uninteresting for the new sets of leaders'. This prompted the adage that '*he who said his mother will not sleep, will also find no sleep*' meaning the elders have their mechanism also to frustrate and pay back corrupt officials in their own coin. The creation of unrest, disagreement and conflict were some of the mentioned manifestations of the spiritual means invoked at night, often not seen or scientifically proven but evident at day time. Of note by the women leader in Etche, was the collaboration of members of the Omu'Etchelonu secret society (limited to a few elders) with the council of elders; making use of the spiritual medium in guiding the communities as well as in the analysis of conflict.

Secret societies and cult groups can be categorised into three: In terms of conflict creation, combat and opposition to evil. Physically, the anti-social arms of the secret institutions are mandated to face any person or institutions whose interests are not genuine as the case of exploitative and corrupt government. These institutions have been part of our culture; we hardly resolve to violence, the anti social cult traditionally is always the last resort.

The above statement corroborates what past studies have noted that cult groups are imbedded in Africa culture. In Ogunade (2002) and Okunola and Ikuomola (2012) studies, they noted that secret societies thus exist in Nigerian setting and the influence of these societies varies depending on situations on ground, seasons and among various ethnic clusters. In this regards to say that secret societies like other traditional institutions have metamorphose and entrenched into key roles in the

niger-delta is stating the obvious. They have been in existence since the pre-colonial period in Nigeria. Some of them have now been reformed and transformed politically into militia groups, such as the Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC) among the Yoruba, Arewa Youth Movement (AYM) among the Hausas, the Bakassi and Egbesu boys in the riverine areas among the south-east and south-south political zone.

Table1: Respondents Views on Indigenous Institutions and their Networks in the Dynamics Of Conflict In Oil Producing Communities

Categorisation of Networks	Frequency	Percentage	Roles and levels of involvement in conflict
Masquerade carrying houses	42	28.0	High
Traditional Priests and Festivals of curses	37	24.7	High
Market women/traders association	13	8.6	Moderate
Occult and Cult groups	58	38.7	High
Total	150	100	

Field Survey, 2011/2012

The survey highlighted respondents' views on the role of *masquerades'* carrying houses, priestly, occult and cult groups. These were described as high in the dynamics of conflict in oil producing communities. Highest in terms of ranking were the occult and the cult groups (38.7 per cent), followed by the *masquerade* carrying houses (28.0 per cent), and traditional priestly groups (24.7 percent). These groups are mainly dominated by men (notwithstanding market women and heads of trade associations were also highlighted) as key players in conflict generation but described as moderate with 8.6 percent involvement in the region's crisis.

Stakeholder debates alongside the analysis from interviewees and discussants (traditional heads, youths leaders and workers in the oil companies) showed that these groups were not completely isolated from each other or distinct in any way. A retiree in the Nigerian National Petroleum company (NNPC) noted that these indigenous groups are made of people from within the community; they belong to different and interrelated institutions. For instance a young man in the masquerade group, during festivals will perform his right as a member, while also belonging to another group such as the cult group. This shows that membership of traditional institution is in a state of flux. For this reason it becomes difficult to hold any person or group responsible for a particular crisis especially when they are not seen perpetuating violence or physically indulging in the mobilisation of youths to go against state authorities. As noted in Etche the upheaval during elections and festive periods are often difficult to trace, because many of the perpetrators belong to different associations traditional unions and communities. These often put the security operatives into confusion in making arrest. For others, women group are not left out in crisis generation, as they have been found instigating their children, youths and husbands to fight for their rights violently and other wise. Traditionally, among the Gokana people, conflict could result in the morning if a woman goes about naked at night to rain curses on the people or particular group of families, or government cum politicians who have done the community or an individual wrong. This view is widely held also among the Binis, where some of the Gokana kinsmen traced their origin (Okunola and Ikuomola, 2012).

INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR NETWORKS IN PEACEBUILDING

Particularly of note and as mentioned in the explanation above by discussants and interviewees in the communities of study, was the masquerade institution popularly referred to as *Egungun*. Traditionally the *Egungun* are believed to be spirit. Tradition has it that the spirit comes into a male and makes him to perform, display acrobatically by dancing, gesticulating and chanting of words only to be interpreted by the people surrounding the *Egungun*. Their duties range from going into the forest, accompanying the masquerade (*Egungun*) to the people, and assist in interpreting the messages of the gods as declared by masquerade. It is also believed that it brings blessings and revelations from the spirit world to the people. The *Egungun* institution is of importance to the people. The belief and the legend is that it appears thrice a year, first at the beginning of every planting season (between early March-April), secondly at the harvesting period of yam and maize (often symbolised the god of fertility) and as a symbol of peace and thanksgiving at the end of every year between August and December (welcoming of indigenes who have sojourned abroad for greener pastures). This institution has greatly been affected by education, religion, politics, deforestation and the oil economy.

The network and impact of the *Egungunas* as a traditional institution and festival cuts across the belief of the people, this is evident in the way children, women and men, strangers, indigenes and non indigenes anxiously prepare and idolise the coming of the *Egungun*. An elder and member of the Aonda masquerade house, however noted that there were specific *Egungun*, that are only known to members of the masquerade houses, and that their duties is strictly to pour libation and encomium, for freedom, development and peaceful coexistence of the people:

....this particular *egungun* has not been out for over thirty –three years, for two reasons, deforestation and political interference by government on the houses and persons responsible for escorting them out into the society.

For another respondent, a traditionalist; in Etche, he noted that the last fifteen years have symbolised a dark period in Rivers state and among its people. Similarly he noted that there is a new *Egungun* that appears at night....it does not symbolise peace, it is also not accompanied by anyone rather than birds with strange sounds. A youth leader in Onalga noted that in recent times ceremonial masquerades are common, exposed during burial rites, rites of passage and age grade ceremonies especially the *babouwa* (a comic masquerade).

A female head of Etche opined that quite a number of people are becoming more and more educated, so also they give away their culture only to imbibe western religion especially Christianity. In so doing the people gradually leave behind the rituals, tradition and customs associated with the institutions. Regarding the *Egungun* festival, she highlighted the fact that at present there are very few people who can perform the rites, in bringing out the *Egungun* and interpreting their messages. The few custodians of this institution are very old and their children are no longer interested in the continuation of the lineage of masquerading.

INDIGENOUS COMMUNAL PROPOSALS AND GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES' RESPONSES IN THE PEACEBUILDING PROCESSES IN THE NIGER-DELTA

The aftermath of the amnesty programme by late President Umaru Yaádua in 2008, brought a new hope and temporal relieve to the people of Rivers state in the Niger-delta region. The regular call for proposals on how to ensure peacebuilding in the past four years was said to have gained prominence and is becoming more and more relevant in the current political dispensation. Similarly, the state and local media are gradually coming to terms with the idea that traditional institutions and elders are vital to peacebuilding initiatives and practices in any community with regards to their 'spiritual powers'. Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and Non Governmental Organisation (NGOs) are not left out; they have also in line recognised the need to incorporate the chiefs, the elders and their traditional structures in restoring order to the system. It was described as widely welcomed, however in practice and implementation a lot of politicking was noted. The politicking was emphasised as evident in the demands and proposals which emanated from the communities and governmental responses as listed in the table below:

Table 2: Community Proposals and Government Responses to their Demands

Community Proposals/Demands	Frequency	Percentages	Comments on Government Responses to community proposal Proposals
Building and expansion of markets (Open and lockup shops).	24	16.0	Average
Cottage industries.	26	17.3	Average
Fertilizers, Fishing boats and other related materials	35	23.3	High
Health facilities	17	11.3	Low
Roads network linking rural community to the urban centres	34	22.8	High
Low cost housing	14	9.3	Low
Total	150	100	

Field Survey, 2011/2012

Table 2 showed that the need for fertilizers, fishing materials accounted for 23.3 per cent of the communities' demand in the last four years. 22.8 per cent roads construction; 17. 3 per cent for cottage industries; 16.0 per cent for market construction and expansion; and health facilities accounted for 11.3 per cent. In all the proposals, the construction of road networks linking the rural areas to major cities was given more attention; the provision of fertilizers and fishing materials were rated as high in terms of governmental response. Categorically the proposal figures out some of the ways of alleviating poverty in the local settings, by laying emphasis on basic human needs, such as food, health and shelter. However it was discovered that though government received various proposals from the communal heads, nevertheless the implementation of the proposals was described by many as politicised with different selfish agenda by the government. For instance while the communities demanded for new and modern markets, government agencies were rather interested in renovating the existing markets. In

Etche, the case was different as government built a new market but not on the land specified in the proposal. The effect of such governmental decision was negative as completion of the market was frowned at, deserted and never put to use, only to serve as shelters for destitute, hoodlums and miscreants at night. One of the women leaders in the study noted that markets locations and operations have spiritual connotations which only the elders can explain:

The local and state government often do not take our demands seriously, whenever they do, it is either they do it haphazardly without taking the stakeholders along, or neglecting the culture and tradition of the people towards developmental projects. The implication of such is the abandonment of projects by the people. For instance the new market in Etche, has been abandoned because it was not sited in the place where the elders and the community wanted. Government and the agencies involved failed to realise that market siting has spiritual implication for it to function properly, by attracting people; and without calamity for it to be used. This is a major factor why the market is still unused till date rather it is occupied by the homeless and lunatics.

In Gokana and Onelga, the cottage industries built by the government were among the demands of the communities in the proposal submitted shortly after the amnesty programme. Over 78 per cent of the discussant and interviewees commented positively on the speed with which government embarked on the project. It was described as overwhelming:

..it would have been imagined that the cottage industry in Onelga was completed within six months. It was in a record time, the acquisition of production materials and equipments followed subsequently (Women Leader/youth).

For another:

...we were amazed with the rate of completion, but the operation as at the first quarter of this year has not been impressive. The industry has been starved with funds and qualified personnel, it is becoming a shadow of itself (Village head Onelga).

In Etche, the cottage industry was not granted because of political reasons. Of note was that the community did not support the local government chairman's second term bid:

The local government chairman and the counsellors are not in good terms with the community heads, just because a vote of no confidence was once passed on them in one of the community assessment forum. Based on this they have rejected key demands in the community's proposal. One of such is the demand for a cottage industry that will serve the community especially the youths in skill acquisitions and empowerment.

Politics have often been the issue setting this community backward, if proposals are given quick attention. It simply means the government enjoy absolute loyalty from the community representatives, but in this case the cottage industry has eluded us. Government response to the community's demands, are usually not pleasing 'this community has been classified as anti government and always in opposition'. I wonder if being in opposition calls for neglect!(Religious leader, Etche).

Based on the riverine nature of the communities, the demands for fishing boats, fishing nets, hooks and other materials and equipments were common in the three communities' proposals in the peace building initiatives. The provision of these materials and equipments have also been described as being politicised and distributed based on community support for the government in power. Loyalists' camps were identified as key to governmental responses. Health facilities were also a major part of the proposals, specifically the request for hospitals were reduced to health centres and clinics. The need for the local authority to finance and improve traditional medicine was completely neglected. In Onelga, the traditional head was asked to expunge such demands out of their proposal. Worst of all demands is the request for low cost housing, this a community head reported quoting the state housing authority chairperson as saying 'housing proposals are for those in bigger cities and not for rural dwellers'.

Among all the listed items in the proposals highlighted in table 2, road construction, reconstruction and maintenance was given kudos. The network of roads was described as encouraging since the amnesty programme began. This was attributed to the Presidential proclamation that the interior of the Niger-delta should be opened to avoid militant groups hiding in the creeks. This gesture has made more villages, and rural areas in the Niger-delta to be connected to major towns and cities, aiding development and communication generally. However two-third of the interviewees noted that construction of roads gives room for government agents to embezzle public fund, hence the concentration and the speedy approval of construction proposals.

CONFLICT INITIATIVES

Conflict though eminent in all society, is a product involving human actions and inactions (Weber, 1978). Human initiatives towards the generation of conflicts can only be understood by what triggers its and the various societal signs and symbols that are often displayed prior to the manifestation of conflicts. Unanimously it was gathered that conflict in the Niger-delta is as a result of grievances, ill feelings, resentments and government insensitivity to the plight of the people and their environment. Mostly of note is the degradation of the environment as a result of the exploitation and exploration of oil as well as the long time effect on the peoples' health and livelihoods. Agricultural activities on lands, rivers and seas have been affected to the extent that live has become not only expensive but hostile in some cases towards communities and people who hitherto lived in peace. Given these narratives of lives in the Niger-delta, the initiatives towards conflicts were interrogated. The study revealed seven different strategies/initiatives adopted by the people of Gokana, Onelga and Etche which are can be described as reactions to their plights:

1. Red banners on poles along market roads
2. Barricades along farmlands
3. Unholy sacrifices on disputed lands, structures and junctions of notable individuals in the community and government allies
4. Nocturnal gathering
5. Early morning gathering of youths (mostly males) in public places
6. Early closure and late opening of markets
7. Resonating sounds of gongs from town criers late at night instead of the day or mid day.

These signs were described as ways and ingenuities of the people to communicate conflict, to express their feelings, to show that there is an issue yet to be addressed or improperly addressed and the likelihood of an impending conflict, which if not decoded by state authority and speedily responded to might spell doom for the nation. These signs and symbols are often obvious to outsiders but the meanings can only be well interpreted by locals and sometimes by specific group of people. It is in this case the interpretive understanding of signs and symbols become necessary in conflict analysis. Hence the time of unleashing violence and conflicts is usually known to the insider and the inner caucus. Also it was noted that government and local authorities often do not take these initiatives seriously except after occurrence of major strikes by militants or aggrieved parties through the vandalization of public properties, unwholesome deaths and other avoidable calamities.

THE CONFLICT IN PEACEBUILDING INITIATIVES

Despite the fact that conflicts are necessitated by grievances so also were initiatives towards resolving conflicts and peacebuilding. The process of peacebuilding is an indication that society can still gain be restored, however the problems encountered by the communities in conflict resolution and peacebuilding is that it often takes the top-bottom approach; and that government and public office holders do profit and make more money out of every peacebuilding process in the Niger-delta, thereby making it a ceremonial splendour. In Onelga and Etche it was noted that the key representatives of the various wards in the communities were sidelined in the peacebuilding process and in the amnesty programmes; except for those who have close ties with governmental agencies, and are card carrying members of the ruling political parties. For the participants in Gokana, consultants were hired from the universities and government ministries to deliberate and dictate the pace and shape the peacebuilding process will take. Often than not the peacebuilding process is usually prolonged because the acclaimed negotiators or experts are not grounded or well informed about the plights of the people, hence the difficulties in negotiating peace in the wider Niger-delta region. The domino effect therefore is more grievances, distrust and acrimony among wards in the different communities. Quite a number of respondents (About 46 percent) alluded that the peacebuilding initiatives usually come from outside rather than within. A youth leader in Etche summed the peacebuilding initiatives as not coming from the communities directly:

...community clashes as well as the peacebuilding processes in the Niger-delta region as a whole have often been politicised in favour of communities in support of the ruling political parties with notable individuals/personalities in society and government. Small communities are not considered because it is believed that their votes do not count compared to that of large communities. In same vein opinions of the common man and woman from the communities are not taken into considerations most times; rather, that of the representatives of government are viewed as superior. These are people who do know anything about the community and the problems therein..

A member of the Isopkemrou Youth Association has this to say:

In the past Shell BP's involvement in community services and development programmes as one of the initiatives to peace was so impressive and hailed by members of the communities. This was so because they were consulting with the community heads, market women, elders, youths and various religious and

traditional bodies before embarking on programmes and projects that will benefit everyone irrespective of whose Ox is gored.. Presently the situation has changed government interference under the Shell and NNPC joint ventures for sustainable community development is alarming. Bribery and corruption everywhere, the involvement of politicians, elites without track records in the society as consultants, politics of association, corruption of the traditional institutions, acrimony among others are issues creating conflict of interest and discords in various communities where oil is being explored.

Narrating a particular scenario in Etche where a primary school was said to have been renovated with the sum of ₦50million:

for instance one of the community development programmes in Etche which has created a lot of noise and disputes against the multinational companies, was the renovation of Etche primary school with the sum of fifty million naira, first of all, the primary school was not key among the priorities of the people of Etche, the school was built by community's effort with the sum of ₦7 million, instead of renovating the primary school for such a huge amount, the community would have preferred the joint venture to build a secondary school for the community, as the closest government owned secondary school is about 6 kilometres from the interior (Finacial secretary/Otuoma Women Association (OWA) in Etche).

In Kerboumo Union (KU)-Onelga and Isopkemrou youth organisation (IYO) in Gokana a major conflicting interest was with the farming population. This was basically on three issues of (i.) removal of subsidy earlier enjoyed from Shell BP's community development programmes, (ii.) the emergence of Shell BP and NNPC joint ventures and (iii.) the introduction of consultants, and agencies in the distribution channels of fertilizers and pesticides;

...in the time past fertilizers were being re-subsidised after the normal subsidy by the federal government. This was adjudge a good gesture by Shell BP, but the introduction of multinational corporation joint venture initiatives, fertilizer procurement and distribution have been handled by different agents'; setup by government in the various communities. This has not only widened the bureaucratic bottleneck, the cost of fertilizers, but also the cost of getting it from the agencies at the point of distribution to point of usage in the farms.

Similarly another interviewee (a female farmer) noted that the support enjoyed from multinational companies that are present in the communities, are gradually fading away with the introduction of various ventures which do not put the communities interest at heart especially during planting season, Shell and Agip assist farmers in the purchasing of fertilizers and pesticides freely and they also distribute it to farm settlements where farm cooperatives (youth arm of farm cooperatives) collect that of their parents and kinsmen. These have all changed. What a pity! She exclaimed.

In Onelga, the women discussants noted that 'the case of peacebuilding in Niger-delta is often determined in the federal capital territory–Abuja, rather than through the initiatives of those affected', Generally it was deduced from the qualitative data generated that there were more politics in peacebuilding initiatives than in conflict initiatives, because it is often

celebrated and involved government expenditure. Hence peacebuilding processes in the Niger-delta was described as political and full of deceptions:

...Imagining someone who have lived all his life in Lagos was made the chairman of the amnesty programme in Onelga....just because he is a member of the ruling party!...What does he know about the origin of conflicts in this community? Does he know the numbers of cult groups fomenting troubles in this community? Does he know those sponsoring violence in this area? These are questions we should ask ourselves (Pa. Obiyan, a retired teacher/head master in Onelga).

In the above, it became clearer that the bitterness of sidelining the people at the community level, in proffering solutions to the unending crisis in the region; is a missing link which if not curbed will create further, myriads of problems in the future.

The effect of the above manifested in the consistent vandalisation of the multinational companies installations and facilities located around Rivers State and adjoining communities. First, is the regular protest by youths and adults within these communities; against this unhealthy development; secondly was the skyrocketed price of agricultural produce. It is on record that the Niger-delta region is one of the zones in Nigeria with the highest expenditure on agriculture, yet with the lowest yield and contribution to agriculture due to the exploration of oil. Similarly as agriculture accounts for over 60 percent of the nation's employment opportunities, in Niger-delta the meagre income from agriculture puts most unskilled youth who are in the majority out of the labour market; and the result is the restive and violent nature of most youth who are automatically disengaged and idled. By implication, the possibility for sustainable development programmes is hindered.

CONCLUSION

This study sees the discrepancies existing in the way and manner communities' proposals are being handled as one of the causes of conflict, poverty and violence in the Niger-delta region as evident in Onelga, Gokana and Etche communities. Specifically, government and the multinational corporations' exploitation of the communities' resources have been perceived as inimical to the peoples' wellbeing, these insensitive to the plights and initiatives of the inhabitants' calls for concern. The insensitivity to local communities' initiatives has created a missing link in the quest for sustainable development, amidst the increasing militancy in the region. In an area where conflict has become so entrenched, damages and insecurity to lives, properties, natural and human components in the region; will continue to soar higher than expected. The resultant effect no doubt will be unrest and uncertainties, facing the communities, especially the indigenes and residents in the Niger-delta. The disparity and dichotomy as evident in the failure of the state, to properly integrate local social networks, such as the *elder's council, ruling houses, mothers of the land, traditional healers* and *witch-doctors* will continuously hindered sustainable development. Similarly the politicisation of communities' needs and corrupt practices among 'party affiliates cum loyalists' of government if not checked and given the rightful attention within and alongside the ongoing amnesty programmes, continually oil producing communities will be in perpetual conflict, which has never in history foster development. The study recommends a bottom-top approach which should incorporate the initiatives of local communities in generating peace amidst the insensitivity of government and her agencies. Lastly, the concept of peacebuilding as an essential ingredient for sustainable development should serve as a guiding force and a catalyst in the incorporation of local initiatives in

governmental programmes and policies; and in proffering solutions to the seemingly unending crisis in Nigeria's Niger-delta region.

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