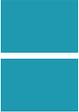


## ARTICLE



# Initiatives of Oil Producing Communities and the Dynamics of Conflict and Peace Building in the Niger Delta

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## Abstract

Local initiatives in the dynamics of conflict and peace building are germane to understanding the actions and inactions of a people reacting towards their plights. This study adopts a qualitative methodology to investigate initiatives in local communities, in the unending conflicts and peace building processes in Nigeria, using Gokanaya, Onelga, and Eche communities in Rivers State as case studies. The major findings showed that the roles and networks of key indigenous institutions such as the elders' council, ruling houses and 'mothers of the land', as well as traditional healers and witch doctors are vital in directing the affairs of the communities: their socio-political, economic, spiritual and religious activities. However, government and multinational corporations often sidelined them. With only technocrats and the educated elites involved in negotiating peace, key stakeholders were missing and conflicts in the region intensified. The study recommends that peace building initiatives should take a bottom-top approach and be devoid of politics.



## Keywords

indigenes, multinational corporations, technocrats, peace building, conflicts

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Oil producing communities in Nigeria are faced with a myriad of problems. Characteristically they are underdeveloped, and relatively far from government presence and modern ways of life (Ikporukpo, 2004). Irrespective of this, these communities are the proverbial hens that lay the golden eggs which support the Nigerian economy. Events since 1999 depict oil producing communities as places where tensions and conflicts have continually heightened, with all the attendant negative consequences on the socio-economic and political development of the

country (Imobighe, 2002; Jega, 2007; Albert, 2010). There has been violence in different parts of the country, especially in oil producing communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Democratic governance commenced in Nigeria in 1999, and the estimated number of deaths from violent conflict since then is over 10,000 and over 300,000 internally displaced persons (Ikelegbe, 2005). Most of the conflicts in Nigeria are a result of several factors: poverty, terrorism, human rights abuses, religious fundamentalism, disease, unemployment, ethno-nationalism, resources agitation and marginalization of one ethnic group by another (Jacques, 2005, Albert, 2010).

The history of conflict in oil-producing communities in Nigeria is a long 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 in their communities. Following the unhealthy negative practices by multinational oil companies, the social and environmental cost of crude oil production in the region have been catastrophic. They include the destruction of wildlife and biodiversity, loss of fertile soil, pollution of air and drinking water, degradation of farmlands and damage to aquatic ecosystems. So, during the five decades since the discovery of the black gold, 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, and even more profound is the low level of development amongst the inhabitants (Akinwumi, 2004). Mostly farmers and fishermen, their means of livelihood are continuously being threatened by the activities of the oil companies.

The 1970s, 80s and, 90s saw the Nigerian governments make empty promises to the indigenous peoples and other inhabitants of the oil producing communities. In the long run the relationship and trust of the people towards government became strained due to the deep sense of frustration and perception of neglect and marginalisation, and the failure to win concessions through peaceful means. In the 1990s, the oil producing communities rose in protest against oil companies and the federal government. In the last decade, the challenges have meant a deadly struggle between the ethnic and community leadership, the elites, business men and politicians, youths, women and various other groups in the region (Ikporukpo, 2005; Enweremadu, 2009). In addition, individuals and groups struggle to control and dominate access to, and actual opportunities and benefits from, the oil proceeds. The result was the emergence of greed, corruption and conflict surrounding distribution of the benefits, which underpin numerous incidents of community conflicts in the region (Akinwumi, 2004; Odinaku, 2010). A number of scholars have noted the complexities, the diversity of communities, agitators and human interests, but not how conflict developed through local institutions and spiritual medium in the Niger Delta.

Specifically, this study seeks to examine the role of indigenous institutions and their networks in the dynamics of conflict in oil producing communities. There is a need to understand the cultural and spiritual dynamics of conflicts adopted by local institutions when seeking redress and resolving the myriad of problems facing oil producing communities through conflicts.

## 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 traditional heads of clans (custodians of culture), mainly chiefs, and their subjects, women and

youth leaders in the three communities of Gokanaya, Onelga and Eche. The study employed in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with a cross section of 25 heads of household, 12 chief priests and 13 youth group leaders, a total sample size of 50. For a robust qualitative study, the opinions of a sample of one hundred residents across the communities were also included. The data was subjected to content analysis, limited to interviews and discussions with the indigenes of the various settlements: elders, (males and females). Interpretation of data was situated within the framework of the Niger Delta socio-political and economic environment.

## SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY POPULATION

In the sample population, 58 % (29) were males and 42 % (21) females, 36 % were Christians, 48 % Animists and 16% Muslims. For the age group categories, 30 % were within the 18-37 age bracket and categorized as youths, 44 % in the 38-57 age bracket, and 26 % between 58-77 years old. The majority, about 70 % had both primary and secondary education. The figures for occupational activities clearly show that a high percentage is involved in agriculture (42%, fishing and farming) with a further 18% working as civil servants, 26% in trade and 14% speculating in land.

## 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 (only men); ruling houses and the king makers (blue blood); mothers of the land (mainly women traders and craft workers); traditional healers (native doctors); witch doctors, and the age grade unions (youth associations). These institutions have come to be regarded by the community and the respondents as vital in any event that may occur. There was no doubt of their importance in directing the affairs of the communities: social, political, economical, spiritual and religious activities. In Gokanaya, Onelga and Eche, the traditional rulers emphasised that the relevance of traditional institutions should not be



underestimated as it goes beyond what western education and educated elites can explain. Specifically, the traditional head in Eche, stated that:

“Traditional institutions are powerful in the control of the people’s lives developmentally, economically, politically and religiously. There are a lot of things that go beyond what the eye can see. Many a time, politicians and government officials have come to pay homage and later turn their back on 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 Eche)

In the opinion of one of the heads in Gokanaya, the role of indigenous institutions and their networks in the dynamics of conflict in Rivers state has 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; to unite the people for peaceful coexistence. In recent times, out of insecurity, selfish interest and bad governance, political manoeuvring and meandering have continuously separated the people from their livelihood and resources. Hitherto united ethnic groups are increasingly becoming disenchanted with each other and, in the same way, the traditional institution is affected. It is in these regards that the spiritual means have been developed, resuscitated and directed against government officials, programmes, decisions and ‘sycophants’ benefiting from their largesse; amidst these widening divisions, poverty becomes paramount in these communities.

Similarly the focus group discussions with the women revealed the existence of spiritual powers in manipulating the people, especially the youths. A female head noted that it is unfortunate to resort 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 lose their loved ones, many are no more, deaths everywhere; secret societies and cult groups, here and there uncontrollable.”

The issue of secret cults and societies, according to Maquet (1971), is evident and commonly used in Africa in times of conflict resolution and peace building. They are defined as 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 a few people with special knowledge or interest can understand them. Offiong (1989) 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. Re-

spondents generally agreed with the existence of special sources of powers utilised by the elders, usually secretive and kept private. Although there was reluctance 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 indicated three categories of cult/secret societies: 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 other vices; while the traditional secret societies comprised mostly of the elderly whose responsibilities are intertwined with culture of the people. Traditionally they participate actively in ensuring peace and monitoring 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 noted as recent and associated with the degradation of arable land and governmental neglect of oil producing communities in the late 1980s. This period marked the third decade of oil exploration in Nigeria. About 25 % of the respondents highlighted the impact of colonialism and the empowerment of traditional elites where they had not previously existed (especially among the Igbo speaking elites in River State known for their cephalous arrangement). Endemic corruption and poor leadership since independence and the discovery of oil in 1958 had created a culture of conflict and therefore driven the imperativeness and invocation of a silent aspect of the peoples’ culture into action, often using the spirit medium in the generation of conflict as a sign of protest among local inhabitants in the region. This is one of many ways: the communities (through their custodians) react and seek redress for the anomalies in their environment and against those regarded as oppressors or collaborators of local and sometimes state government. An interviewee noted that “in recent times, we (referring to the members of the elders’ council) have been forced, like the youths, to make 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 also have their mechanisms to frustrate and repay corrupt officials in their own coin. The creation of unrest, disagreement and conflict were some of the mentioned demonstrations of the spiritual means invoked to stalk the villages at night, often not visible or scientifically proven but evident during the day. The women leader in Eche, commented on the collaboration of members of the Omu’echelonu secret



society (limited to a few elders) with the council of elders in the spiritual activities guiding the communities as well as in the analysis of conflict.

“Secret societies and cults can be categorised into three groups. 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 institution whose interests are not genuine, as in the case of exploitative and corrupt government. These institutions have been part of our culture; we barely resort to violence, the anti-social cult, traditionally, is always the last resort.”

The above statement corroborates previous studies on how cult groups are embedded in African culture. Ogunade (2002) noted that secret societies exist in the Nigerian setting and that the influence of these societies varies depending on the local situation, and specific time of year among the various ethnic clusters. In this regard, to say that secret societies, as other traditional institutions, have and do metamorphose 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, the Arewa Youth Movement (AYM) among the Hausa, and the Bakassi and Egbesu boys in the riverine areas in the 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	%	Roles and levels of involvement in conflict
Masquerade troupes	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	

Source: Field Survey, 2011/2012

The survey highlighted that the role of masquerade troupes, priests, occult, and cult groups was high in the dynamics of conflict in the oil producing communities. The highest ranked were the occult and cult groups (38.7 %), followed by the Masquerade troupes (28.0 %) and traditional priest groups (24.7 %). These groups, mainly dominated by men (although market women and heads of trade

associations were also highlighted), are key players in conflict generation but their involvement in the crisis in the region was found to be a moderate 8.6%.

Stakeholder debates and analyses of the interviews and discussions among various traditional heads, youths and workers in the oil companies showed that these groups are not completely distinct or isolated from each other. A former Nigerian National Petroleum company (NNPC) employee noted that these indigenous groups are made up of people from within the community; they belong to different but interrelated institutions. For instance, during festivals, a young man in the masquerade group will perform his duty as a member, while also belonging to another group such as the cult group. This shows that membership of traditional institutions is in a state of flux, making it 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 against state authorities. As noted in Eche, the upheaval during election and festival periods are often difficult to trace, because many of the perpetrators belong to different associations, traditional unions or communities. This often causes confusion among the security operatives when making arrests. For others, women groups are not excluded from crisis generation, as they have been found instigating their children, youths and husbands to, violently and otherwise, fight for their rights. Traditionally, among the Gokanaya people, a conflict could arise in the morning if a woman goes out naked at night to rain curses on the people or particular group of families, or government officials and politicians who have done wrong towards the community or an individual. This view is also widely held among the Binis, where some of the Gokanaya kinsmen trace their origin.

## INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR NETWORKS IN PEACE BUILDING

Particularly of note and mentioned by those interviewed, was the masquerade institution popular referred to as *Egungun*. Traditionally, the *Egungun* are believed to be spirits which enter a man and make him perform acrobatically, dancing and gesticulating, and chanting words which can only be understood by the people surrounding the *Egungun*. It is also believed that they bring blessings and revelations from the spirit world. The *Egungun* institution is of importance to the people, and it is believed that the spirit appears three times a year. The first appearance is at the beginning of the planting season (early March-April), then at the time of harvesting of yam and maize, often symbolised as the god of fertility, and then between August



and December as a symbol of peace and thanksgiving (welcoming indigenes who have been abroad). This institution has greatly been affected by education, religion, politics, deforestation and the oil economy.

The people have profound belief in the network and impact of the Egungun as a traditional institution and festival. This is evident in the way young and old, indigenes and non indigenes anxiously prepare and idolise the coming of the Egungun. An elder and member of the Aonda Masquerade, however noted that there were specific Egungun, only known to members of the masquerade houses whose duties were strictly to pour libation and praise, for peace and peaceful coexistence of the people.

A traditionalist in Eche stated that the last fifteen years symbolised a dark period in Rivers State and among its people, and that there was a new Egungun that appears at night. It does not symbolise peace, and is only accompanied by birds making strange sounds. A youth leader in Onalga noted that, recently, ceremonial masquerades were common, during burial rites, rites of passage and age grade ceremonies, especially the *Babouwa* (Comic masquerade).

A female head of Eche opined that, as more and more people receive formal education, they abandon their culture to adopt western religions, especially Christianity. In doing so, the people gradually leave behind the rituals, tradition and customs associated with the institutions. Regarding the Egungun festival, she highlighted the fact that, today, very few people can perform the rites to bring out the Egungun and interpret their messages. The few custodians of this institution are very old and their children are no longer interested in continuing the tradition of masquerading.

## INDIGENOUS COMMUNAL PROPOSALS AND GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES' RESPONSES TO THE PEACE BUILDING PROCESSES IN THE NIGER DELTA

The aftermath of the 2008 amnesty programme by late President Umaru Yar'Adua, brought new hope and temporary relief to the people of Rivers State. The regular call for proposals on how to ensure peace building since then is said to have gained prominence and is becoming more and more relevant in the current political situation. Similarly, the state and local media are gradually coming to terms with the idea that traditional institutions and elders are vital to peace building initiatives and practice in any community with regards to their 'spiritual powers'. Community

based organisations and non-governmental organisations have also recognised the need to incorporate the chiefs and elders and their traditional structures to restore order to the system. It was described as, "widely welcomed", however, a lot of politicking was noted in practice, evident in the demands and proposals that arose from the communities and the governmental responses, as listed in the table below:

Table 2. Community proposals and government responses to their demands

Community proposals/demands	Frequency	% ages	Comments on Government responses to community 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
Road network linking rural community to urban centres	34	22.8	High
Low-cost housing	14	9.3	Low
Total	150	100	

Source: Field Survey, 2011/2012

Table 2 shows that 23.3 % of the communities' demands between 2008 and 2012 were related to the need for fertilizers and fishing materials; 22.8 % for roads construction; 17.3 % for cottage industries; 16.0 % for market construction and expansion; and health facilities accounted for 11.3 %. In all the proposals, the construction of road networks linking the rural areas to major cities was given more importance while the provision of fertilizers and fishing materials was rated as high in terms of governmental response. The proposal aimed to alleviate poverty in the local settings by laying emphasis on basic human needs such as food, health and shelter. However, it was discovered that, although government received various proposals from the communal heads, the implementation of the proposals was described by many as politicised issue which highlighted the selfish agenda of the government. For instance, while the communities demanded new and modern markets, government agencies were more interested in renovating the existing markets. In Eche, the case was different, as government built a new market but not on the land specified in the proposal. The decision had a negative effect



and was heavily criticized. Upon completion, the market was only used as a shelter for the destitute, hoodlums and miscreants at night. One of the women leaders in the study noted that market locations and operations have spiritual connotations, which only the elders can explain:

“[...] the new market in Eche has been abandoned because it was not sited in the place where the elders and the community wanted. The government and agencies involved failed to realise that the market site has a spiritual implication for it to function properly by attracting people, and be used without suffering misfortune. This is a major factor why the market is still unused to date.”

In Gokanaya and Onelga, cottage industries built by the government were among the demands of the communities in the proposal submitted shortly after the amnesty programme. Over 78 % of those in the study commented that the speed with which government embarked on the project was overwhelming:

“[...] it would have not been imagined that the cottage industry in Onelga was completed within six months. It was in record time, the acquisition of production materials and equipments followed subsequently.” (Women leader/youth)

In Eche, 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 councillors are not on good terms with the community heads, just because a vote of no confidence was once passed on them prior to the 2011 election. For this reason, they rejected key demands in the community's proposal such as the demand for a cottage industry to serve the community, especially the youths, in skill acquisition and empowerment.” (Religious leader, Eche).

Based on the riverine nature of the communities, the demands for fishing boats, fishing nets, hooks and other materials and equipment were common in the three communities' proposals in the peace building initiatives. The provisions of these materials and equipment have also been described as being politicised and distributed based on community support for the government in power. Loyalist camps were identified as key to governmental responses. Health facilities were also a major part of the proposals, but the request for hospitals was specifically 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 remove these demands from the proposal. The worst response was

to the request for low-cost housing: a community head quoted the state housing authority chairperson as saying “housing proposals are for those in bigger cities and not for rural dwellers”.

Of all the proposals listed in Table 2, road construction, reconstruction and maintenance was given the nod. The network of roads was described as having improved since the amnesty programme had begun. This was attributed to the Presidential proclamation that the interior of the Niger Delta should be opened to avoid militants groups hiding in the creeks. This gesture has meant more villages and rural areas in the Niger Delta are connected to major towns and cities, aiding development and communication in general. However two-thirds of the interviewees noted that construction of roads gives government agents the opportunity to embezzle public funds, hence the concentration and 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 knowing what triggers conflict and the various societal signs and symbols that are often displayed prior to the manifestation of conflicts. Without exception, the conflict in the Niger Delta was considered a result of grievances, ill feelings, resentments and government insensitivity to the plight of the people and their environment. Of note is the degradation of the environment as a result of the exploitation and exploration of oil, as well as the long-term effect on the health and livelihood of the people. Agricultural activities on lands, rivers and the sea have been affected to the extent that life has become not only expensive but in some cases hostile, for communities and the people who hitherto lived in peace. Given these narratives of life in the Niger Delta, the initiative towards creating conflict was studied. This study revealed seven different strategies and initiatives adopted by the people of Gokanaya, Onelga and Eche in reaction to their plight:

- 1) Red banners on poles along market roads
- 2) Barricades along farmlands
- 3) Sacrifices on disputed lands, structures and private houses of notable individuals in the community and their government allies
- 4) Night-time gatherings
- 5) Early morning gatherings of youths (mostly males) in public places
- 6) Early closure and late opening of markets
- 7) Resonating sound of gongs and town criers late at night instead of around midday or early morning.



These signs were described as ways for the people to ingeniously communicate conflict, to act out their feelings, to show that there was an issue yet to be addressed or had not been properly addressed and the likelihood of an impending conflict, which if not decoded by state authority, and given a speedy response, might spell doom for the nation. While these signs and symbols are often obvious to outsiders, the precise meanings can only be properly interpreted by locals or sometimes only a specific group of people. In this case the interpretive understanding of signs and symbols becomes necessary in conflict analysis. Insiders usually know when violence and conflicts will be unleashed. It was also noted that government and local authorities often do not take these initiatives seriously, except after major strikes by militant or aggrieved parties through the vandalization of public property, gruesome killings and other avoidable disasters.

## THE CONFLICT IN PEACE BUILDING INITIATIVES

While conflicts are caused by grievances, so are the initiatives towards resolving conflicts and peace building, a process which brings back equilibrium to the society. However the problem encountered by the communities in conflict resolution and peace building is that there is often a top-bottom approach. Government and public office holders also take advantage of making money out of every peace building process in the Niger Delta, thereby reducing it to a purely ceremonial activity. In Onelga and Eche it was noted that the key representatives of the various wards in the communities were sidelined in the peace building 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. According to the participants in Gokanaya, consultants were hired from universities and government ministries to deliberate and dictate the pace and shape of the peace building process. Often, the peace building process is prolonged because the acclaimed negotiators or experts are not grounded or well informed about the plight of the people, hence the difficulty in negotiating peace in the wider Niger Delta region. The result is more grievances, distrust and acrimony in the community wards. Quite a number of respondents (about 46 %) considered that the peace building initiatives were usually from outside rather than from the communities, as summed up by a youth leader in Eche:

“[...] community clashes, as well as the peace building 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 those of larger communities. Similarly, opinions of individuals from the communities are usually not taken into consideration, compared to that of the representatives of government.”

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

“In the past, Shell-BP’s involvement in community services and development programmes as one of the initiatives to peace was very 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 would benefit everyone irrespective of whose interests were harmed.. Presently, the situation has changed. Government interference and corruption in the traditional institutions among others are issues creating conflict of interest and discord in various communities where oil is being explored.”

Narrating a particular scenario in Eche where a primary school was said to have been renovated with the sum of N50million:

“[...] for instance one of the community development programmes in Eche which has created a lot of noise and disputes against the multinational companies, was the renovation of Eche primary school with the sum of fifty million naira. First of all, the primary school was not among the priorities of the people of Eche, the school was built by the community with the sum of N7million. 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 six kilometres from the inland population.” (Financial secretary, Otuoma Women Association (OWA) in Eche).

In Kerboumo Union (KU)-Onelga, and the Isopkemrou Youth Organisation (IYO)-Gokanaya a major conflict of interest was with the farming population. This was basically on three issues: (1) removal of subsidy earlier enjoyed from Shell and BP community development programmes, (2) the emergence of the SPDC (Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria) and NNPC (Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation) joint venture and (3) the introduction of agencies in the fertilizer and pesticide distribution channels.



“[...] in the past, fertilizer was being re-subsidised after the normal subsidy by the federal government. This was a good gesture by Shell-BP, however, since the introduction of multinational corporation joint venture initiatives, fertilizer procurement and distribution is now being handled by different agents set up by the government in the various communities. This has not only widened the bureaucratic bottleneck and the cost of fertilizers, but also the cost of getting it from the agencies (point of distribution) to the point of usage (the farm).

Another interviewee (a farmer) noted that the support enjoyed from multinational companies in the communities was gradually fading with the introduction of various ventures which do not put the community's interests at heart. Shell and Agip used to help farmers buy fertilizers and pesticides and distribute them to farm settlements where the youth arms of farm cooperatives collect on behalf of their parents and kinsmen. This has all changed. “What a pity”, exclaimed the female farmer, a member of the Kerboumo Union, who highlighted the distribution channels of fertilizers and pesticides among farmers.

In Onelga, the women's group noted that “the case of peace building in the Niger Delta is often determined at the federal capital territory Abuja rather than through the initiatives of those affected. It was deduced from the qualitative data that there was more politics in peace building initiatives than in conflict initiatives, because they are frequent and involve government expenditure, so peace building processes in the Niger Delta were described as political and full of deceit:

“[...] Imagine someone who has lived all his life in Lagos city 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 number of cult groups causing trouble in this community? Does he know those sponsoring violence in this area? These are questions we should ask ourselves.” (Pa. Obiyan, a retired teacher and headmaster in Onelga)

From his comments, it is clear that the people are angry because of the continuous sidelining of the people at the community level in proffering solutions to the unending crisis in the region. They are missing links in the chain,

and if this situation does not change, it will create myriads of problems in the future.

The effect of the above is manifested in the consistent vandalization of multinational companies' installations and facilities located around Rivers State and neighbouring communities. There is regular protest by youths and adults within these communities firstly against this development and secondly because of the price hikes of agricultural produce. It is on record that the Niger Delta is one of the regions in Nigeria with the highest expenditure on agriculture, yet with the lowest yield and contribution to agriculture due to the exploration of oil. Agriculture accounts for over 60 % of the nation's employment opportunities, but in the Niger Delta the meagre income from agriculture means it employs unskilled youth, the largest section of the labour force. The result is the restive and violent nature of most youth, already unemployed.

## CONCLUSION

This study sees the discrepancies facing the manner in which community proposals are being handled as one of the causes of conflict, poverty and violence in the Niger Delta region, evident in Onelga, Gokanaya and Eche communities. Specifically, government and multinational corporations exploring and exploiting the resources (oil) in the communities are becoming increasingly insensitive to the plights of the inhabitants in conflict situations and their initiatives as pivotal steps in the peace building processes and the restoration of harmonious coexistence in their communities. If not checked and given the necessary attention within and alongside the amnesty programmes, the politicisation of community needs and corrupt practices among government officials, party affiliates cum loyalists, will continue to put the oil producing communities in a perpetual state of conflict. Lastly, the study recommends that the initiatives of local communities in generating conflicts amidst the insensitivity of government and its agencies should not be taken for granted in the broader discourse of peace building, which should take a bottom-top approach and be devoid of politics. ■



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