

Title: “Winning ‘the Niger Delta Battle’ Through Sustainable Community-Based Learning and Outreach: The Challenge of Community Development in Nigeria’s Oil-Rich Region”

By: Dr. Njoku Ndubueze

ndulife@yahoo.com

This paper rests on the argument that the much touted sustainable development in the Niger Delta cannot take its proper root until there is mass tertiary education aimed at equipping the indigenous people of the area with appropriate knowledge and skills, which will complement the haphazardly implemented mass adult and literacy programmes that terminate at the basic literacy level (Secondary Education level). The paper posits that, given the peculiar volatile nature of the Niger Delta, occasioned by a combination of illiteracy, extreme poverty amidst plenty, ignorance on the side of both the government, the oil companies and host Niger Delta communities, poor situation analysis and employment of ill-suited panacea (such as handouts, paltry palliatives and violence) for resolving the seemingly intractable national embarrassment called the Niger Delta crisis, constructive introduction and support of community-driven mass oriented distance higher education, such as can be offered by the Open University System, could be the right first step to the gateway of stemming the crisis.

In the light of the above, the paper has been subdivided into the following thematic areas:

- 1.The Context of the Niger Delta Chaos
- 2.The Inadequate/ Ill-suited Strategies Employed in Addressing the Niger Delta Conflicts.
- 3.The State of Adult and Non-formal Education in Nigeria .
4. The Need for Community-Based Learning and Outreach as a Panacea for Sustainable Development in the Niger Delta.
5. Summary and Conclusion

The Niger Delta is a site of one of the world's richest oil deposits. The region, as defined by the Nigerian Government, covers a mere 7.5 percent of the Nigerian landmass. So oil-rich is the region that it has produced billions of barrels of crude oil for Nigeria since production began with 4000 barrels in 1958. The Niger Delta originally consisted of the states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Edo, Cross River, Delta and Rivers. It was the Obasanjo administration which expanded it to include Abia, Imo and Ondo states (Omojola, 2007).

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2000), there is no consensus on the definition of the Niger Delta, even among the recognized spoke-persons of the region. For some, they are critical of a political definition of the Niger Delta based on states; instead, they see the Delta, geographically, as a triangle with its apex between Andoni and Aboh, descending eastwards to Qua Iboe River at Eket and westwards to the Benin River, with its base along the Atlantic coast, between the Bights of Benin and Biafra.

Others define the Niger Delta politically as the six states of the so-called South-South zone of the country, namely Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers. Still others make a distinction between the "core" and "peripheral" Niger Delta. The core Niger Delta includes Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa and some portion of Akwa Ibom, while the periphery comprises the states of Ondo, Anambra, Edo, Cross River and Imo. On the other hand, there is the elastic school of thought that contends that all the groupings in both the core and peripheral Niger Delta belong to the Niger Delta area.

Some people view the Niger Delta as a "rainbow-region" in which numerous ethnic nationalities "have found a home. Others argue that there are three aboriginal groups, namely, the Ijaw, a number of "Ednoids group and the Ibibio. The rest of the people were said to be essentially "Protestants" and "refugees' fleeing the harsh Bini rule. All these reflect in the complexities of the Niger Delta. The bulk of onshore oil production in the Niger Delta is found in these states, with lesser (though still substantial) quantities found in the southern extremities of Abia, Edo and Imo States, which form the northern boundaries of the territory. Although this economic reality is responsible for the importance of the territory in modern times, the Niger Delta has always been a vital historical entity in the West African sub-region as a whole (Barrett,

2008: 14). The interactions between the people of the Delta and the outside world have been existing for a long time, especially since the 15 century when Portuguese explorers reached the kingdoms of Grand Benny Rivers State , Warri in Delta State and Benin in Edo State . Evidence of this

interaction is still extant not only in some aspects of the language and the customs of some of these people, but also in the costumes and artefacts that are found in the area. For a long period following the first contacts with Europeans, the Niger Delta was one of the major gateways of the slave trade. “This tragic connection has influenced the nature of the territory’s political economy over time” (Barrett, 2008:14).

Some of the most important historic events associated with the territory have been connected to its links with the slave trade, and later with the enormous trade in palm oil that became an important lubricant to the industrial revolution in England in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Niger Delta proper is actually made up of what came to be known in Europe as the Oil Rivers city States of West Africa in the late 18th and throughout the 19th centuries. The coastal kingdoms became the controllers of the trade in these commodities and as such they grew rich, but sadly they were also constantly in turmoil as they sought to maintain control over the resources in neighbouring territories. In modern times, these historic concerns continue to be relevant. The fact that the Niger Delta has become the most vital economic territory within the Nigerian Federation because it sits on the nation’s oil reserves, has led to increased calls for a re- examination of the relationship between the Federal Government, the oil companies and the people of the region. The neglect of basic services in the territory has become a “corporate and political scandal”, and the growing militancy of the youth of the territory in response to this has become an integral factor in national political discourse. The Niger Delta has contributed enormously to the Nigerian national economy , resulting in a situation in which the enormous and explosive increase in oil prices world- wide have fuelled unprecedented public expenditure and development strides in Nigeria, but largely outside of the Niger Delta. Unfortunately, the area has borne the brunt of the environmental degradation caused by oil and gas exploitation. Little wonder why the Niger Delta leaders have become more vocal in their protests, and as the low level of

alleviation attained scandalous proportions, the younger people in the area have also become increasingly restive.

Their anger was based on the perception that national development appeared to be formulated on the logic "that revenue earned from their territory would be used to develop other parts of Nigeria, while the Niger Delta suffers neglect and environmental degradation, poverty. This has been so given that means of the people's livelihood such as farm lands, fishing and forest reserves are being destroyed. Also disaster such as flooding, pollution of rivers, gas flaring, acid rain are regular features, culminating in various health hazards (Ero, 2008; 58-60).

In the light of the above, the nature of the relationship between the oil and gas industry and the host communities grew more volatile as the young people of the area became more enlightened about the circumstances existing in other parts of the world where oil and gas exploitation is carried out under more conscientious conditions. The continued neglect and insensitivity of the oil companies and the Federal government led to the formation of insurgent groups to confront the government and the oil companies, thus ushering the era of kidnapping – and attacks on oil installations (Barret, 2008).

The Inadequate/ Ill suited Strategies Employed in Addressing the Niger Delta conflicts.

Rather than embark on projects that would develop the human capital capacity among the locals, the oil companies in the various Nigerian governments have continued to take the part of "tokenist and ephemeral measures", which have not resolved the poverty situation in the area..

On the part of the government following the Willinks commission of 1958, which recommended that the Niger delta deserved special developmental attention, the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) was established. But, for the seven years it existed, it made no significant mark. Again, in 1979, following agitations for a special focus on the development of the region, the " Shehu Shagari administration allocated 1.5 per cent of the Federation Account to address the peculiarities of the region, only to be abandoned a few years into the Babangida regim. Thus, its impact was unnoticeable in the welfare of the people (Yishau, 2008: 78-79).

In 1992, the Babangida regime set up the Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC), with the mandate of turning around the faces and phases of the region. However, as observed by O.C.J. Okocha, former President of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), the commission had no direct bearing on poverty reduction until it wound up in 1999. Under the past civilian administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was set up with the mandate of facilitating “the rapid, even and sustainable development of the Niger Delta into a region that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative and politically peaceful”

The NDDC developed a master plan in collaboration with stakeholders such as the oil companies, development agencies and the civil society.

However, in spite of the siting of some projects within the region, the NDDC remains poorly funded. For instance, the last administration released less than N100 billion to the commission from 2001 to 2006, which is about eight percent less than what it should have got during the period (Okocha, cited in Yishau, 2008:79).

The oil companies, on their own part, engage in tokenist granting of scholarships to few individuals, agricultural projects such as the Nigeria- Agip Oil Companies Green (NAOC) “Cross River project” cited only in Obio-Obio, Rivers State, establishment of few health facilities and health programmes, few skill acquisition centres which, it is believe, are over valued or bloated by the oil companies in terms of delivering corporate social responsibility.

According to Omojola (2007:39), “oil companies insensitivity to the plight of Niger Delta people continue to over-shadow the little good done by them through employment opportunities, provision of healthcare facilities and other corporate social responsibility programmes”.

The above report went further to state that Shell, for instance, is committed to contributing to regional development. It spends an average of N115 million annually on sustainable development programmes, with over \$70 million going to the NDDC. Exxon Mobil set aside \$12 million for social and health programmes for 2007, in addition to having built 95 percent of the roads in

Eket, Akwa Ibom, where some of its operations are based, probably, to create access roads for its smooth operations.

According to Basil Omiyi, Shell Nigeria Managing Director, Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (SPDC), spent \$32 Million on 129 community projects and carried out various awareness campaigns in 460 Communities in 2005 (Macaulay, 2006:36).

Both the government and the oil companies, rather than embark on massive human capital development, connive to perpetuate double standards and arm twisting amidst tokenist measures, as mentioned earlier. Thus, the oil companies are hide under the laws of the Nigerian Federation.

According to Professor Kimse Okoko, the President of Ijaw National Congress (INC), government and oil companies do not replicate what obtains overseas. Overseas, there are one industry towns where an industry transforms a whole town because right from the beginning the company knows its responsibility. Okoko has challenged oil companies in the Niger Delta to go to Houston in the United States where the agreement makes it very clear that even after paying taxes, oil companies have roles to play in the development of the town. But on the contrary, in the Niger Delta, it is easy to see how callous these oil firms are. In the places they have their location, it is 24 – hour electricity, 24-hour water, but just a few metres from that location, one encounters indigenous communities in perpetual darkness, as the oil firms do not consider it necessary to connect electricity just a few metres to their homes.

The tendency for the oil firms is to hide under the cloak of oppressive laws governing the oil industry (Okoko, cited in Agbo and Ofuokwu/ 2008:82).

The State of Adult and Non-Formal Education in Nigeria .

Adult literacy education in Nigeria has received very low growth rate in terms of enrolment. This assertion is supported by the observation of the Federal Government of Nigeria /UNICEF Report (1993:99) which states that with the relatively low national growth rate in enrolment for adult literacy education, the probability of eradicating illiteracy remained remote until quite recently when a number of measures, including increased advocacy, mobilization and

awareness campaigns aimed particularly at previously underserved groups, were instituted.

However, in spite of the above measures, access, enrolment, ownership facilities, curriculum and instruction, welfare and discipline and staffing were in short supply, although more awareness was created, leading to a marginal increase in enrolment.

The Need for Community-based Learning and Outreach as a Panacea for Sustainable Development in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is spread over a landmass of about 70,000 square kilometers, and inhabited by an estimated population of 20 million Nigerians in 2000 communities. The region is mostly characterized by wetlands and water bodies, with creeks and rivers criss-crossing the entire region. The higher lying plains experience five to seven months of flooding in the year, resulting from the overflowing waters of the lower Niger River in which whole communities and farmlands are invariably submerged. Flooding and river-bank or coastal erosion are the bane of the people. "The Niger Delta is, no doubt, a difficult if not an out rightly inclement terrain" (Alamieyeseigha, 2004:17). From the above scenario, the cost of erecting formal tertiary institutions in the largely dispersed difficult terrain within the region would gulp colossal budgetary allocation. Thus, in such an environment, access to education is readily very poor, as those seeking formal education access it at a very high cost, having to travel a very terribly long distance. This makes formal education very costly to acquire . Considering that the primary occupations of the people (fishing, farming, forest product gathering, craft, etc. usually at subsistence levels), have been grossly diminished by environmental degradation, resulting from oil spillage, urban industrial pollution, oil pollution, deforestation, population pressure, gas flaring and acid rain, etc, making it a delicate ecosystem, the people having lost their traditional means of livelihood, now reel in abject poverty and penury, lacking virtually all forms of social amenities and infrastructure, including electricity, potable water, medical facilities, roads, shelter, etc. Besides, the area suffers from a regrettable legacy of hunger, high and rising rates of unemployment, and having viewed the government and the oil firms with suspicion as dubious, the youth engage in restiveness and all forms of social insecurity, including communal conflicts.

As a result of mass poverty, majority of the people remain in ignorance (for they cannot afford qualitative and cost intensive education), with little or no understanding of the operations of government, as well as the art and act of constructive bargaining and dialogue with the oil companies. Also, because, the oil firms appear to be insensitive to the peculiar problems of their host communities, they collude with the government to use strong arm tactics and high handedness to counter their agitation for justice and corporate responsibility. This situation continue to orchestrate dwindling corporate image, leading to a spate of violence, as exemplified by hostage takings and kidnappings, threat

and actual blow-up of pipelines and float stations, and a vicious cycle of violence, mayhem, poverty and ignorance (Ford; 2007; Jason, 2004; Ajaero and Azubike, 2006; Ezeoke, 2009).

Currently, the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta, such as the Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (SPDC) has affirmed that since 2003, they have began to lay the groundwork for a major shift in their strategy towards sustainable community development. As Omiyi, the first indigenous managing director of Shell in Nigeria, put it,

“We have adopted a thematic approach concentrating our efforts on economic empowerment, human capital development, healthy living, and basic services. We are also focusing more on partnership, not only with the communities themselves, but also with government, and local and international NGOs – for example our 5-year and 20 in partnership with USAID to develop capacity in agriculture, health and enterprise, and our 3-year 4.5 million partnership with Africa focused on reducing deaths from malaria. The new approach also aims to abolish corrupt practices that impede sustainable development within communities” (Omiyi, cited in Soyinka, 2005:31).

The point of emphasis is that, sustainable community development plans as mentioned above cannot really be sustained if the people in the communities remain in ignorance and illiteracy. It takes people with education and skill, with analytical prowess to understand and appreciate appropriately the import of corporate social responsibility. This paper, therefore, canvasses that community-based outreach education programme be incorporated into the oil

companies' sustainable development programmes in order to ingrain and engrave community development on a sustainable basis.

Other forms of skill acquisition so far adopted are selective and adhoc. But community based mass-oriented outreach education programme will not only make for permanent literacy, but also for permanent skill and analytical skill. The oil companies could rehabilitate and rebuild their corporate image in their host communities by embarking on open distance learning outreach in the remote oil producing communities which is a "cost effective means to deliver education to all our people". This kind of education is best suited for the Niger Delta communities. The major objectives of this kind of education, as enunciated by Jegede (2003: II), include:

- (a) The provision through an alternative route, of flexible time-independent and open education as practicable as possible for all who require it.
- (b) The delivery of instruction through several media and channels to people everywhere within Nigeria including the remotest parts of the country (such as the Niger Delta Swamps).
- (c) The development in an individual of certain knowledge, process, skills and attitudes, within a specific content or proficiency area congruent with the learner's needs, interest, learning styles, environmental and other constraints.
- (d) The provision of flexible learning opportunities purposefully sequenced with minimal disruptions to an individuals socio-economic and cultural characteristics.

Summary and Conclusion

From the foregoing, the net outcome of this analysis is that, if open and distance education is used to educate the indigenous stakeholders of the Niger Delta, in a system which regards education as the pivot on which other aspects of community development stand, the Niger Delta community and individuals will benefit in more ways than one. For instance, those educated will remain in their local communities. It will reduce the unemployment rate and the tendency to flock to the urban areas. It will contribute to the alleviation of poverty in the rural Niger Delta, catalyze the level of literacy, stimulate economic activities in these areas, and hopefully preoccupy them with

sustainable learning and research activity, which would divert their attention and energy away from

violence. On the whole, they would begin to appreciate the principle of constructive engagements and dialogue.

Finally, much as it would not be claimed that the viewpoint of this writer has been defended up to the point of irrefutability, one would hope that the views will go a long way in provoking critical reactions from which we shall come away to be more enlightened.

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