

Public participatory approach as an alternative conflict resolution strategy for environmental/resource-oriented conflicts in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria

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Accepted 28 September 2014

In recent times, conflicts have assumed alarming rates, worldwide. In Nigeria, environmental and/or Resource control-centered conflicts are not excluded. Efforts targeting ensuring peace have failed to yield the required results owing to adoption of conventional strategies that are biased, one-sided, coercive and adversarial. Thus, this study tried to evaluate the importance of Public Participatory Approach (PPA) as an alternative effective and sustainable strategy for resolving conflicts within the Niger Delta region owing to the conventional strategies being found to be grossly ineffective and non-sustainable whereas the PPA has not only proven to be effective, but also efficient and sustainable in approach. This is because of its ability to give a great majority of the voiceless people in the community the opportunity to be heard and their views considered. Majority of the respondents in this present study agreed that the Public Participatory Approach is a far better approach to conflict resolution than conventional strategies within the study area. This could be attributed to its being relatively non-biased, not lop-sided in nature, highly collaborative, problem-solving oriented, trust-building and above all, sustainably profitable to majority. By adopting strategy, a greater majority of the affected people within communities stand the chance of having their views and opinions known to stakeholders and policy makers. And, because their views are considered and adopted, they also stand to support same, thus the preference of the PPA as the most people-friendly type of strategy for resolving environmental-oriented conflicts within the study area.

Key words: Conflicts, Niger Delta area, resolution strategies, public participatory approach.

INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region has witnessed several conflict types with most of which having environmental and/or resource control-notations. Efforts tailored towards amicably resolving them have failed to yield desired results. According to Coser (1956), conflict is a struggle over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources, in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals.

Zartman (1991) believed conflict is an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions and an expression of the basic fact of human interdependence while Adler and Rodman (1990) opined conflict as an expressed struggle between two interdependent parties who perceive incompatibility goals, scarce resources and interference from other party in achieving their goals. Conflicts refers to contradictions arising from differences in the interests, ideas, ideologies, orientations and

precipitous tendencies of the people concerned (Okoh, 2005).

According to Folarin (1998), the following are sources of conflicts; competition over goals and interests that can be shared, usurpation or attempt to usurp the goals of one component by another, inconsistencies in goals, increasing desire for autonomy or authority by the different individuals or groups in the community, scarcity or inadequacy of resources to meet the needs of the various components and various kinds of communication breakdown.

Divergent, symmetrical, complementary as well as parallel conflicts are prominent conflict typologies that manifests in several dimensions within the region. Omoweh (2010) stated that the crisis in the Niger Delta is a political one and that its origin can be traced to 'the path the Nigerian state took to development, inclusive of

its type of capitalist development in the mining sector' and Amodu (2012) declared that the unrestricted manner through which the Nigerian state acquires land and exploits its contents betray its failure to recognize that the land and its resources constitute common resources.

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Part 44, and Subsection 3 bestows the right to ownership of crude oil, mineral oil or natural gases in, under or upon the Nigerian soil on the Federal Government of Nigeria, yet people are empowered to use their lands. To help resolve problems created by these Sections and earlier Laws, the same 1999 Constitution, The Land Use Act of 1978, Section 29 (2); The Oil Pipeline Act (Cap) 145 of 1956 as well as the Petroleum Drilling and Production Regulations of 1969 all provided for the payment of compensation to a party whose land, or property is destroyed in the course of mining, drilling or production operations. In addition, Nwike (2013) reported that the Petroleum Drilling and Production Act, Paragraph 20 provided that an operator who unreasonably interferes with fishing rights shall pay adequate compensation to the owner of such rights (Petroleum Act No. 30 of 1975). The questions are: when is an operator considered to have unreasonably interfered with fishing rights? What is considered an adequate compensation? These are sources of conflicts.

While in a search for factors that pose as sources of environmental stress, Nwike (2013) observed that out of the 11 factors considered as greatest stress motivators that lead to conflicts in communities in the Niger Delta, economic hardship remained the number one cause of conflict in the region. Also, some communities, if not all in the Niger Delta have certain portions of lands that are considered 'sacred'.

These portions are reserved exclusively as sacred sites for rituals and worship of deities. During exploration and exploitation of oil, such lands could be encroached upon and this could be labeled a taboo by indigenous people, especially foreigners to the community enter such restricted portions of land. Most of the conflicts in the Niger Delta have arisen from complex environmental problems; and a long history of neglect and social development of people who seemed helpless watching their land and water resources continually devastated by the intense exploitation for petroleum and gases without deriving any appreciable benefits by the way of investments in their own development (Oloruntimilehin and Ayoade, 2002).

Anonymous (2013) quoted Senator Itah Enang, Senate Committee Chairman on Rules and Business, that various oil blocs that were awarded to Nigerians in the past should be revoked, and that a new oil bloc allocation that would ensure federal character principle be carried out on grounds of insinuation that over 83% of the total oil blocks were allocated to certain persons from Northern Nigeria without justification. All these constitute sources of conflicts within the region.

According to Bolten and Connaughton (2013), environmental conflict resolution is defined as the third-party assisted resolution and collaborative problem-solving in the context of environmental, public lands, or natural resources issues or conflicts including matters related to energy, transportation and land use.

Environmental conflict resolution becomes necessary since environmental and resource issues have and would continue to be central to prospects for global conflicts and co-operation. Environmental conflicts within the region manifests themselves as political, social, economic, religious, territorial conflicts or conflicts over resources or national interests (Akpobibio, 2001). Several modes of interventions like facilitation, mediation, counseling and therapy, conciliation, quasi-political procedures, informal tribunals, arbitration of different types of criminal and civil justice systems (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998) have been employed at one point or the other within the region.

Public participatory approach to conflict resolution in the Niger Delta

When people participate in making a decision, they support it (Academic Association Peaceworks (2004). The conventional methods of conflict resolution failed to broker peace in the region because the people were not given adequate chances of participation in making decisions on the issues that affected their communities and their environment.

In line with the recommendations of Kapner and Likubo (1996), the participatory approach to conflict resolution is being proposed for resolution of environmental-oriented conflicts in the study area because it is a collaborative approach to 'problem-solving' and 'decision-making' and these strategies include but not limited to building trust, communicating face-to-face, gathering information, dialoguing, negotiating, valuing diversity, team building, having focus group discussions, searching for alternatives, and seeking win-win situations.

The importance of adopting this approach lies in its ability to help in gathering as much information as possible from affected voiceless grass-root people and in the most sincere manner so that the hydra-headed issue could be exposed to the surface and issue resolved sustainably in time.

Theoretical framework

Three different theories would be adopted in this work.

a. Conflict Theory: The conflict theory evolved as a major alternative to the functionalist approach to analyzing a society's general structure (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). But, contrary to functionalist's view of the existence of interdependence and unity in the society,

conflict theorists view the society as an arena where groups contend for power (Amodu, 2012). Naagbantou (2005) posited that in pre-colonial Niger Delta, the same resource-propelled conflict we are experiencing today also manifested then.

b. Situational Theory: It's of the view that a public can be defined or characterized according to the degree of its awareness of the problems confronting it and the extent to which it seeks a solution to it (Baskin et al., 1997). However, Amodu (2012) further stated that the theory aims at helping to understand the different component parts of a community and how organizations relate with them at different times. The adoption of the situational theory for this study is because it would be helpful in assessing active publics.

c. Stakeholder's theory: The stakeholder theory states that a corporation has stakeholders who are generally the groups and individuals that benefit from or are harmed by the corporation's actions (Amodu, 2012). Thus, individuals and groups who are dependent, directly or indirectly with the corporation are identified by the theory. Dougherty (1992) and Ray (1999) identified and classified four groups of publics that make up a stakeholder; enabling publics, functional publics, normative publics and the diffused publics. Amodu (2012) opined that the stakeholder theory also provides a robust approach to corporate responsibility, unlike the shareholder theory, that parochially considers only the shareholders as worthy of attention. This theory would help in providing insight to the mindset of stakeholders who decide the operational strategies of most multinational companies.

STUDY DESIGN

Data sources were through three different data parametric sources; Key Informant Interview, Focus group Discussion and Use of Questionnaire. This was due to the nature of the data sets generated. While qualitative research methods were needed to generate and assess the quality of information that was got from key informant interviewers and focus group discussion, the quantitative research method was used to generate and assess those of the survey methods using questionnaire as an instrument.

Study population

This study focused on the activities of the multinational Oil companies in Ndokwa East, Ndokwa West and Ukwuani Local Government Areas of Delta State, Nigeria

from host communities like Okpai, Kwale, Obodo Ugwa and Ebedei. Thus, the Corporate Affairs Unit of the Oil companies residing within the host communities, Community members, workers at the Ministry of Environment in Delta State, Law Enforcement Agents as well as Researchers concerned with Conflict Resolution were all sampled in this study.

Sample size

A total of 384 respondents were sampled in this work. Respondents were drawn from the Oil Companies, Communities, Ministry of Environment, Law Enforcement Agents, member of the communities. The opinions of 24 respondents were also sought to form basis for the qualitative part of the work while 360 respondent's opinions were through questionnaire.

Sampling techniques and analysis

1. Simple Random Sampling was used to select the communities that were sampled.
2. Systemic Random Sampling was used to select the individual respondents' sample.
3. Purposive Sampling Technique was used to study and gather information from participants like key informant interview and focus group discussants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Assessment of various strategies currently being used for resolving environmental-oriented conflicts within the study area

Table 4 showed that respondents believed that Kwale witnesses more of a combination of all the avenues, Royal fathers and Youths; Okpai and Obodo Ugwa witnessed a combination of all of the avenues exploited while Ebedei exploited more of all the options available, followed by Elders and Royal Fathers in their relationship with the Oil companies. The term conventional strategy refers to the deliberate isolation of a section or greater majority of people as subjects of exploitation in resolving environmental-oriented and/or resource-centered conflicts. Thus, conventional strategies do not involve a large majority of the people in sourcing information while the Public Participatory Approach on the other hand involves a greater majority of the people in sourcing for information and in resolving conflicts.

An elder in Okpai said:

'We could organize ourselves and go and tell them our minds. We can hold meetings and resolve issues by ourselves and whatever we resolve in such a meeting is

Table 1. Shows the distribution of respondents by gender disparity.

Gender	Kwale	Okpai	Ebedei	ObodoUgwa
Male	61.33	63.81	53.33	72.00
Female	38.67	36.19	46.67	28.00
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Table 2. Shows age distribution of respondents.

Age Bracket	Kwale	Okpai	Ebedei	ObodoUgwa
20 – 35	26.67	30.48	42.22	33.33
36 – 50	50.67	41.90	22.22	48.00
51 – 60	8.00	20.00	24.45	12.00
61 - Above	14.66	7.62	11.11	6.67
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Table 3. Shows educational qualifications of respondents.

Qualification	Kwale	Okpai	Ebedei	ObodoUgwa
SSCE	45.33	50.48	51.12	57.33
HND/B.Sc	34.67	24.76	33.33	34.67
M.Sc/M.A	14.67	22.88	13.33	5.33
Ph.D & Above	5.55	1.88	2.22	2.67
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Table 4. Shows respondent's assessment of strategies for resolving environmental conflicts.

Means employed	Kwale	Okpai	Ebedei	ObodoUgwa
Royal fathers only	21.33	3.82	22.22	6.67
Elders only	2.67	4.76	35.56	8.00
Family heads only	1.33	0.95	2.22	1.33
Youths only	20.00	0.90	2.22	1.33
All of the above	54.67	89.57	37.78	81.33
None of the above	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.34
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

final. We can also write petitions to Oil companies and to government. We use to block and disrupt their (Oil companies) activities if they don't want to listen. We at times send delegates to Oil companies and government because we can't all go there. These are some of our strategies. But, the plain truth is, we always make much progress when we work together''

In depth interviews conducted in Kwale, Ebedei as well as Obodo Ugwa showed that they shared the same strategies as Okpai. But they insisted that government always mobilized security operatives against their wish. On the part of the Oil companies, it was found that all of them tend to reach out to their host communities either through youth representatives, elders representatives, Royal fathers or even women groups. In

this direction, a staff of one of the Oil companies had this to say:

''We acknowledge that we have social corporate responsibilities to our host communities to perform. We try to our best in that direction by providing the communities with certain basic social amenities but the problem is that most of the host community members confuse us for government. We are not government. We can't take the place of government. If they want everything provided for them, they should hold their governments responsible and not us. Wetinsef? (What is it?) ''

Thus, it could be seen that the Oil companies also feel some level of frustration in that host communities have

become over-expectacious of them. On the part of government, we can summarize their strategies from the words of two government officials; one from the Ministry of Environment and the other is a Law Enforcement Agent. The Ministry of Environment official opined that;

“the stand of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is very clear on the issues of rights of people in Nigeria, be they expatriates or Nigerian nationals. We are all entitled to freedom of movement, we have rights to pursue legitimate business and own personal properties. So, if anyone wants to prevent another from enjoying those rights and responsibilities expected of him/her, government would set every machinery in motion to prevent that and restore law and order. Or, if such happens, should government go and beg? Should government hold its hands and allow a community to hold its citizens and properties to ransom? I don't think so. This is why we deploy troops to the community, at times”.

And, a Law Enforcement Agent said:

“Our job is to maintain Law and Orderliness. We have instruction to do just that and nothing else.”

Thus, it is clear that the local, state and federal government view some of the acts that lead to conflicts within the Niger Delta as acts of criminality and insubordination to the state rather than any fight for resource control. And, this brings us to the conclusion that the conventional strategies currently been used by Oil companies and government in resolving conflicts with the host communities are grossly ineffective and there is the need for the adoption of effective and sustainable strategies that should be able to resolve the conflicts and sustain the peace.

Onosode (2003) agreed that the current top-down approach to the endemic problem has failed to deliver results that are simultaneously socially and economically sustainable. This is because of its blame-trading nature where one party claims to be right and points accusing fingers at others. Okoh (2005) pointed out that the federal government has most probably perceived the conflict in the Niger Delta as acts of insubordination to the nation and as such the approach has involved the use of control measures, force, coercion, impatience with dialogue and information gathering. The host communities feel the government that is supposed to support them becomes, oppressive and this further worsens the problem.

Furthermore, Ibid (2005) was of the opinion that oil companies have perceived the basic needs of the host communities is that of alleviation of poverty through provision of basic social needs and economic infrastructure and the oil companies as part of their corporate social responsibilities ‘hand-out’ what in their point of view are the missing links needed to effect mutual co-existence between them and the militant

communities. The host community might not be satisfied with what the Oil companies offer. They think that what is offered is not at all commensurate with what the profit they are making from their soil. However, they fail to realize that oil companies cannot take the place of government in terms of social service provision to them. At the end, host communities come to the harsh realization that their destinies are in their own hands and they employ various strategies that range from ‘reactive pacifism’ to ‘reactive militancy’ (Onosode, 2003) in fighting for relevance.

Ibid (2003) opined that this could take the form of unorganized and organized verbal agitation, community meetings, sit-ins, vigils, written petitions to the oil companies and the government, media interviews and newspaper publications, delegation to oil companies and government agencies, verbal threats, communiqué, mass rallies and demonstrations. Others are temporary occupation of installations and oil company premises, adoption of oil company staffs, blocking and disruption of oil company operations, law suits, sabotage, violent combats between warring communities and political action.

Assessment of the effectiveness of conventional resolution strategies for environmental-oriented conflicts within the study area

In Kwale, majority of the respondents believed that the conventional methods of conflict resolution are ineffective. Thus, a youth leader in Kwale had this to say:

“At a time in this community, Oil companies interacted only with selected elders but when the youths stamped their feet on the ground and took their rightful place in the community, they (Oil companies) realized that elders alone cannot help them. ”

Also in Okpai, Ebedei and Obodo Ugwa communities, majority of the respondents still opined in the affirmative that the conventional means of conflict resolution in their communities that focused only on the elites proved to be ineffective. Hence, an elder in Okpai said:

“Government and Oil companies are beginning to realize that a single tree cannot make a forest. They cannot achieve peace by dealing with a few persons alone. It has not and will not take anybody, anywhere. They should face the hard facts. They should adapt newer and better strategies that should carry everybody along. ”

In Ebedei, an elder said:

“That type of strategy (conventional) cannot work well for a long time. It won't even work but if it does, then it might only be to the benefit of the Oil companies and

government. And, that is why it cannot really work. They know the right things to do. Let them do so.''

A youth in Obodo Ugwa said that:

'' the society had evolved and that if those strategies worked before, that they can no longer work now. ''

A representative of one of the Oil companies said:

''We are beginning to realize that current strategies are not the best for the region because of the uniqueness of the people there. I must be very sincere; those old methods have really lost their relevance, recently. ''

Efforts to make the representative to give more details proved abortive as he seemed to be very conservative and later just said that he can't say more because he didn't want to be quoted out of context. In real sense, the message has been passed that the conventional methods have lost their validity and relevance under the present setting. However, security personnel who spoke in anonymity insisted that the current method is the best for the people in the area because they are very stubborn. Majority of the respondents from all the communities were of the opinion that the conventional conflict resolution strategies have over-lived their relevance (see Table 5). Surprisingly, a government official whose opinion on the issue at hand was sought had this to say:

''I believe that the current strategies are still functional, efficient and effective. This is because as long as we live, we must always have differences and there is nothing that can be done, if you like give the whole earth to them, I can assure you that the problems would still be there. There is no 100% full-proof strategies that can eradicate the problem from the region. ''

In summary, it could be deduced that those who support the continuation of the present conventional methods were those who must have been benefiting from the conflicting situation since both the heavily affected groups at the community and the Oil companies didn't support it. Thus, it could be said that the old conventional methods have lost their usefulness and should be replaced with newer and an all-embracing strategy that is entirely people-friendly.

PPA as an alternative effective and sustainable resolution strategy for environmental-oriented conflicts within the study area

Majority of the respondents in all sampled communities agreed that the Public Participatory Approach is a much better conflict resolution strategy than the conventional

strategies. In Kwale, Okpai, Ebedei and Obodo Ugwa, 85.33%, 97.14%, 84.45% and 84.00% respectively agreed the PPA is an effective conflict resolution strategy within the region (Table 6). The fact some equally disagreed and a few others undecided as to their knowledge of the superiority of the strategies confirms the insinuation of Okoh (2005) that the PPA is not completely a flawless as it requires careful planning, determination on the part of all stakeholders as well as highly placed skilled facilitators.

In addition, majority of all the respondents within the study area were of the opinion that their reason for the preference of the PPA over conventional methods of conflict resolution is because majority of the people support it (Table 7). The basis of their support is because it is open to majority, truth-seeking and not fault-finding. As a result, the views and opinions of the down-trodden, the oppressed and most affected persons in the community have a chance of being evaluated and if proven to be promising, policy makers could incorporate it into policy platforms for adoption and implementation.

An elder in Ebedei said:

''that the best way to resolve issues is to seek the opinions of majority of the people. He further opined that, if one should listen attentively to a mad man that lessons could be learnt from such not to talk of sane persons of the society. Each time we've sought the opinions of majority of our community members, we've always achieved our aims ''

An elder in Okpai also said;

''The problem with these people (Oil companies) is that they would not want to take time out to come and seek the opinions of majority of the affected people in the community before embarking on community projects. At the end they would start shouting that they have spent so much on the company, yet nothing tangible and appreciable can be seen. Anytime they have sought the opinions of majority of the people before embarking on community projects, it has always received applause from the people. ''

And, an Environmentalist and a Professor from Ogume area had this to say;

''A major progress in the right direction is definitely the adoption and implementation of the PPA as an operational strategy for conflicts of this nature within this region. This would make room for proper articulation of divergent views that should point positively. If they consult well with majority and not just a section of the community, more facts would emerge and things could then be done in a timely fashion. I think the Oil companies do not want to consult with majority so as to reduce their burden. But, if they could, it would benefit

Table 5. Showing effectiveness of strategies used for resolving conflicts.

Strategies	Kwale	Okpai	Ebedei	Obodo Ugwa
Very effective	18.67	12.38	2.22	4.00
Effective	24.00	17.14	31.11	21.33
Not effective	49.33	63.81	62.22	69.34
I don't know	8.00	6.67	4.45	5.33
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Table 6. Shows results for effectiveness of PPA.

Effectiveness	Kwale	Okpai	Ebedei	Obodo Ugwa
Yes	85.33	97.14	84.45	84.00
No	2.67	0.95	4.44	5.33
I don't know	12.00	1.91	11.11	10.67
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Table 7. Shows reasons for preference of PPA.

Level of Support	Kwale	Okpai	Ebedei	Obodo Ugwa
Majority support it	74.67	75.24	86.67	60.00
Some people support it	18.67	21.91	6.67	32.00
Nobody support it	1.33	0.95	2.22	4.00
I don't know	5.33	1.90	4.44	4.00
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

everybody''

Summary

It could be said that:

1. The conventional strategies were found to be highly biased, one-sided in nature, adversarial in entirety, aggressively-centred, fault-finding and with a holier-than-thou approach. Thus, its inability to have helped in successfully resolving conflicts of this nature within the Niger Delta area. Majority of the respondents in all the study areas (Kwale, Okpai, Ebedei and Obodo Ugwa) all agreed that the conventional strategies have not proven to be sustainably effective strategies for conflict resolution within the study area.
2. The Public Participatory approach (PPA) to conflict resolution is being recommended for adoption within the study area as an alternative to conventional strategies within the study area. Majority of the respondents in all the study areas (Kwale, Okpai, Ebedei and Obodo Ugwa) all agreed that the Public Participatory Approach is a far better approach to conflict resolution than conventional strategies within the study area. This is because, unlike conventional strategies, it is relatively non-biased, not lop-sided in nature, highly collaborative,

problem-solving oriented, trust-building and above all, sustainably profitable to majority.

Conclusion

Evidence from this study have shown that conventional methods and strategies for resolving environmental-oriented and/or resource-centered conflicts have no doubt proven to be ineffective in ensuring peace and stability within the Niger delta region. Instead, it has further increased the communication gap amongst rivalries, increased animosity, led to distrust and predisposed more people within the study area to danger of acts of intimidation, trepidation and criminality.

This necessitated the need for search and recommendation of the Public Participatory Approach (PPA) as a strategy for ensuring efficient, effective and sustainable conflict resolution of environmental-oriented and/or resource-centered conflicts within the Niger Delta region.

By adopting this method and strategy, a greater majority of the people affected in one way or the other stand the chance of having their views and opinions known to stakeholders and policy makers. And, because their views are considered and adopted, they also stand to support same, thus the preference of the PPA as the

most people-friendly type of strategy for resolving environmental-oriented conflicts within the study area.

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