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The *Journal of Communication and Media Research* is a research-based and peer-reviewed journal published twice-yearly in the months of April and October by Delmas Communications Limited for the Department of Mass Communication, Delta State University, Abraka. (The two issues are produced concurrently and released simultaneously, though independent of each other, in the month of October.) The journal is addressed to the Nigerian and international academic community and it accepts articles from all scholars, irrespective of country or institution of affiliation.

The focus of the *Journal of Communication and Media Research* is research, with a bias for quantitative and qualitative studies that use any or a combination of the acceptable methods of research. These include Surveys, Content Analysis, and Experiments for quantitative studies; and Observation, Interviews/Focus Groups, and Documentary Analysis for qualitative studies. The journal seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge in the field of communication and media studies and welcomes articles in all areas of communication and the media including, but not limited to, mass communication, mass media channels, traditional communication, organizational communication, interpersonal communication, development communication, public relations, advertising, information communication technologies, the Internet and computer-mediated communication.

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Intervening factors in conflicts between oil companies and host communities in Nigeria's Niger Delta Region

LANRE OLAOLU AMODU* and IDOWU SOBOWALE, Ph.D.**

Abstract

The degree of violence in the Niger Delta has become endemic, characterized by 33 cases of kidnapping recorded between January 2006 and February 2007, with more than 200 victims, mostly expatriate oil workers. There were also about 12,770 cases of vandalism, particularly of pipelines and installations, recorded between 2000 and 2007, with most of them occurring in the Niger Delta. The implications of the Niger Delta crises are too far-reaching to be ignored. For the inhabitants of the area, there are constant environmental hazards and security threats, while for the Nigerian government, over ₦150.5bn in revenue was lost in eight years; there was also a drop of more than 20% in oil exports between April 2006 and October 2007. The concern of the study was to investigate the intervening factors in the conflicts between oil companies and host communities in the Niger Delta. The population for this study comprised indigenes of Omoku and Obrikom communities in Rivers State and Eruemukohwarien, Tisun and Kolokolo communities in Delta State. Both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus group discussion) methods of data collection were employed. The findings revealed that not all the communities studied were involved in company-community conflicts. The study also shows several factors that determined whether or not there were conflicts in the communities, such as the oil companies being perceived as representing the government, political undertone and the communities' bid to attract attention among others.

Key Words: Niger Delta, Oil Companies, Conflict, Intervening Factors

Introduction

The "Niger Delta" has attracted a great deal of attention over the years. Among the major reasons for this is the rich natural endowment of the region. The Niger Delta is reputed to be one of the world's largest wetlands, having ecosystems comparable to the Sundarbans in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and India (Osagie, Ibaba, and Watts, 2009). More importantly, it is also rich in crude oil, which has become the main stay of Nigeria's economy. Another major reason for the popularity of the Niger Delta, unfortunately, is the frequent conflicts associated with oil production in the region. Osagie, Ibaba, and Watts (2009) observe that though it is a rarity for Nigeria to be emblazoned on the front page of the

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Wall Street Journal, the September 19th, 2009 issue featured a story titled "Delta Farce: Nigeria's oil mess."

Consequent on the frequent conflicts between oil companies and host communities in the Niger Delta and the media coverage of the same, people tend to believe that the causes of the conflicts are easily identifiable; those causes are either politically or economically instigated and all the communities in the Niger Delta are involved in conflicts. In response to those beliefs, it must first be noted that several complex factors, which are intricately interwoven, contribute to the play out of conflicts in the region. Those factors, in most cases, are not limited to the economic or political sphere; rather, they may also be sentimental and communal, which by no means, reduces their saliency. Also, not all the communities in the Niger Delta are conflicting, though majority of them demonstrate the tendency. To find a lasting solution to the conflicts, it is necessary to understand the factors involved. This paper, therefore, explores the intervening factors in the conflicts between oil companies and host communities in the Niger Delta.

Statement of the Problem

The degree of violence in the Niger Delta has become endemic, characterized by 33 cases of kidnapping recorded between January 2006 and February 2007, with over 200 victims, mostly expatriate oil workers (Africa Masterweb, 2007). There were also about 12, 770 cases of vandalism, particularly of pipelines and installations, recorded between 2000 and 2007 with most of them occurring in the Niger Delta (Nwankwo and Ezeobi, 2008).

The implications of the Niger Delta crises are too far-reaching to be ignored: for the inhabitants of this area, there are constant environmental hazards and security threat, while for the Nigeria government, over ₦150.5bn in revenue was lost in eight years (Nwankwo and Ezeobi, 2008); there was also a drop of more than 20% in oil exports between April 2006 and October 2007 (BBC News, 2007). The global community is not excluded from the effect of the crises; the crude oil price on the world market was raised to \$100 per barrel in January 2008 (Arowolo, 2008 as cited in Alabi, 2008) and later to about \$120 a barrel in April 2008.

Drawing an analogy from the medical practice, a proper diagnosis must precede treatment. Several prescriptions have been offered for resolving the conflicts between oil companies and host communities, but majority of them fail to take into cognisance major factors that can determine whether or not the relationship between a company and its host community degenerates into conflict. Consequent on this oversight or lack of thorough investigation, several efforts to mediate between the warring parties have come short of achieving their objectives, thereby creating the impression that a lasting solution is farfetched.

Hence, this study seeks to investigate the intervening variables in the conflicts between oil companies and host communities in the Niger Delta. The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Determine if all Niger Delta communities are involved in conflicts
2. Identify the factors that determine whether or not the communities engage in conflicts.

The research questions drawn directly from the objectives above are the following:

1. To what extent are Niger Communities involved in conflicts with oil companies operating in their areas?
2. What are the factors that determine whether or not the communities engage in conflicts?

Literature Review

There have been several attempts to define the characteristics of the Niger Delta over the years. Asakitikpi and Oyelaran (1999) observe that it is a densely populated area in Nigeria. Its boundaries, as defined by the Nigerian government, extend more than 70,000 km. The area makes up 7.5% of Nigeria's land mass. It stretches in an East-West direction and extends from South West Cameroon to the Okitipupa ridge, forming an apex at the South East of the Rivers Niger and Benue confluence.

According to the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the Niger Delta includes all the nine oil producing states of Nigeria: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers States (NDDC, 2000). The UNDP (2006) agrees with this definition of the area. The reasons for this grouping were largely political and they include administrative convenience, political expedience, and development objectives (UNDP, 2006). Ibaba (2005), however, observes that the inclusion of Abia, Imo and Ondo States in the definition is wrong because the scope of the region should not be defined by politics, but by geography. He goes on to say that the definition given by the defunct Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) and the Willink Commission Report, which states that there are only six Niger Delta States, better captures the makeup of the area. He, nevertheless, notes that with states creation, it is probable that some Niger Delta communities may have now been placed in states other than the six widely accepted Niger Delta States. Our current study adopts Ibaba's description of the Niger Delta because the focus is on communities with resident oil activities and shared geographical characteristics.

The communities in the Niger Delta have settled in the area for several centuries (Alagoa, 2005). It is inhabited by more than 7 million Nigerians from 20 ethnic groups in about 800 communities (Ibaba, 2005). According to Atakiti (2004) (as cited in Saiyou, 2006), the Niger Delta consisted mostly of agrarian communities before the 15th century. Those communities produced commodities such as oil palm, rubber, sugarcane, and fruit trees like mango, banana, plantain, and pawpaw. They also engaged in fishing, handicraft, and trading.

Oil exploration started in Nigeria between 1908 and 1914. The process was initiated when the German Nigerian Bitumen Corporation and the British Colonial Petroleum Company began drilling from the heavy oil seeps in the cretaceous Abeokuta formation (Nwaobi, 1980; Saiyou 2006). Consequent on the discovery of only dry holes, and particularly the break out of World War I, the venture was abandoned. However, interest in oil exploration was resuscitated from 1937 to 1940 when preliminary investigation was undertaken by Shell-D' Arcy Petroleum Development Company. This effort also was aborted due to the Second World War.

In 1946, the Royal Dutch Shell Group and British Company replaced Shell D' Arcy, and jointly financed the Shell-BP Development Company of Nigeria. Exploration continued in the northern part of the Niger Delta. In 1953, the first evidence of oil was encountered at Shell-D's Atata-1 well; however, oil was not discovered in commercial quantity until late 1956 when Shell-BP made a find in the Tertiary Agbada formation at Oloibiri. More discoveries were made at Ughelli (Nwaobi, 1980). The first oil cargo from Nigeria was exported from Oloibiri oil field in 1958 at the initial rate of 5,100 barrels a day.

Saiyou (2006) notes that the initial disposition of the host communities to the advent of oil companies in the Niger Delta was positive. The discovery of oil in the region and the influx of transnational oil corporations raised the hopes of the indigenes in respect of the long awaited development that suddenly seemed apparent. Saiyou further points out that the discovery of oil was a welcomed development. This was consequent on the general impression of most Nigerians that the Niger Delta, particularly the Ijaw territory,

was one of the world's vast wasted wetlands. Hence, the host communities readily accepted the oil companies, seeing them as an opportunity to address long overdue developmental issues.

The oil exploration and exploitation processes have, however, brought with them the degradation of the environment, thereby impoverishing the host communities and endangering lives. Asakitikpi and Oyelaran (1999) observe that tapping into the oil reserves requires the construction of rigs, industrial facilities, and power plants, and it also involves prospecting, exploring, and drilling of crude mineral oil. They state that all these result in the degradation and destruction of life-supporting ecological systems and natural resources. Apart from the destruction of vegetation during the exploration and production phases, the flaring of associated gas in the process of extracting the crude oil poses a threat to human life. Unburned carbon is often transported into the homes and working areas of the Niger Delta inhabitants. Also, whenever it rains, thick soot is washed off roofs and other surfaces, causing water pollution, which is believed to contain harmful chemicals that affect the fertility of the soil. According to Alao (2005), some gas flaring sites in the Niger Delta have been in existence for more than 30 years running 24 hours a day. Hence, about 35 million tons of carbon dioxide and 12 million tons of methane are released in a year.

About 52 years after oil was first discovered at Oloibiri, the Niger Delta communities have declared war on the oil companies they once so readily accepted. This development is due to the extent of damage suffered by those communities as a result of the oil exploration processes, and what they consider to be inadequate compensation by the oil companies, and/or gross neglect of the region by successive Nigerian governments. In 2005, the Niger Delta communities sued NNPC, Shell, Exxon, Chevron, Total, and Agip joint venture companies for failure to stop gas flaring. According to Environmental Rights Action (ERA), though gas flaring had been prohibited under environmental regulations since 1984, Nigeria still has more gas flared than anywhere else in the world (F.O.E., 2005). According to Rizvi (2005), environmentalists estimated the amount of gas associated with crude oil that is wasted daily at about two million cubic feet. They stress that the wasted gas contains a mix of toxins that pose severe health risks to human populations. Rizvi further notes that child respiratory diseases, asthma, cancer, and premature deaths are increasingly becoming the lot of a vast majority of Niger Delta residents, due to the massive gas flaring.

On the case of the Oil Spill Intelligence Report commissioned by Greenpeace, an international organization for environmental conservation and the preservation of endangered species states that Shell's major spills in Nigeria total 7.4 million liters (Hinman, 2008). It was also revealed in the 10-year spill record that of the major spills from Shell's operations in over 100 countries worldwide, 40% occurred in Nigeria. Hinman also explains that since the Niger Delta is a catchment area for over 20 river systems, six million people depend on its fertile fishing grounds and agricultural land. Consequently, the spills constantly flow into near-by streams costing communities their farmland and water supply.

In 1999, the Shell Company was accused of allegedly injecting a million litres of waste into an abandoned oil well in Erovies. It was later reported that several people who consumed crops or drank water obtained from swamps in the area displayed symptoms such as stomach ache, cough, vomiting, and dizziness. Ninety-three people died from the illnesses within two months. The results of independent researches conducted by three laboratories and two Nigerian universities a year after the health problem was detected showed a poisonous concentration of lead, zinc, and mercury in the dumped substance (Ofefe, 2008).

Consequent on the complex nature of the problems in the Niger Delta, members of the community have embraced violence as a means of curbing the excesses of oil

companies, getting at the government, and attracting international attention amongst others. According to Ogbogbo (2004), the various joint venture agreements entered into by the federal government and transnational oil companies indicate the broadening of the parties involved in the crises. The government is perceived to have abandoned its responsibility to its citizens while the oil companies are believed to have failed to demonstrate corporate commitment to the welfare of their host communities. Hence, the oil companies have been categorized as foes, thereby broadening the parties to the conflicts. This view was corroborated by Ron Van den Berg, the chairman and MD of Anglo Dutch Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria when he remarked that since the communities could not seize the government, they attacked the oil companies instead (The Guardian, Monday, p 28, 1999). In 2002, an international observation team declared the Niger Delta as one of the most volatile regions in the world (Alao, 2005). Since a higher percentage of the violence in the area is against the oil companies, it becomes imperative for the companies to re-evaluate their relationships with their host communities, that is, re-engineer their community relations strategies.

Theoretical Perspective

The situational theory was proposed by Grunig and Hunt in 1984 (Baskin, Aronoff and Lattimore, 1997). It states that a public can be defined or characterized according to the degree of its awareness of the problem confronting it and the extent to which it seeks a solution to it. The theory aims at helping to understand the different component parts of a community and how organizations relate with them at different times.

The situational theory was propounded to explain how and when different types of public can be identified. An active public, as defined by Grunig and Hunt (1984) (cited in Baskin et al, op cit, p. 56), is one that seeks and processes information concerning an organization or an issue of interest to an organization. They further identify three variables that determine whether or not people are active and when they will seek and process information about an issue:

1. Problem recognition: when people are faced with issues, they must first become aware of them and recognise the fact that those issues have the potential to affect them.
2. Constraint recognition: this describes how individuals perceive the obstacles in the way of a solution. If they believe that they stand a chance of overcoming the obstacles, they will seek and process information on that issue; in the alternative, they remain passive.
3. Level of involvement: this refers to the extent to which individuals care about particular issues. The degree to which they care will determine their involvement in seeking and processing information about it.

In assessing Niger Delta communities using the steps above, it is clear that they are active publics. Firstly, they recognise that there is a problem, and the problem is that they are both physically and economically disadvantaged (Ibaba, 2005; Alabi, 2008). They also recognise the possible consequences of the problem for them, indeed, they are actually heavily affected (BBC News, 2007). Secondly, Niger Delta communities identify both the government and the oil companies as their obstacles in accessing their due share of the oil resources, and they probably believe they can overcome the obstacle through the use of violence. Thirdly, the extent of protest and violence clearly indicates how much they care about the issue. This theory, therefore, serves as a yardstick with which we can measure the extent that the communities are willing to go to secure what they consider to be their entitlements.

Method

This study adopted the use of focus group discussion (FGD) and survey. Hence, both the qualitative and the quantitative research methods were used for a clearer understanding of the research problem (Wimmer and Dominic, 2005, p. 108). The rationale for using the qualitative method was based on three important characteristics as highlighted by Wimmer and Dominic (ibid). According to these authors, a qualitative research is an interpretative study which allows each observer to create reality as part of the research process, which believes in the fundamental difference in human beings, and strives for the depth of the study rather than the breadth of it. This study investigated the factors that must obtain before conflicts can arise in the communities. Hence, this method is appropriate for investigating the questions raised in the study. The quantitative research method, on the other hand, was used in this study due to its attribute of sampling the opinion of a large number of people on specific subjects and the capacity of its findings to be generalized.

The population for this study comprised the indigenes of Omoku and Obrikom communities in Rivers State and Eruemukohwarien, Tisun and Kolokolo communities in Delta State. The communities were randomly selected from the operation areas of Shell, Agip and Chevron. For the quantitative aspect of this study, a survey was carried out in the five selected communities in Delta and Rivers states in the Niger Delta. The sample size was 595 consisting 182 respondents from Eruemukohwarien, 22 from Tisun, 36 from Kolokolo, 283 from Omoku and 72 from Obrikom communities.

Nine focus groups were constituted for this study. Four groups were constituted in Eruemukohwarien: elders group (6 participants), women's group (7 participants), youths' group (8 participants, ages 20-35 years) and young girls' group (6 participants, ages 16-25 years). In Tisun community, only one group was constituted because of the low population, and it was the men's group (7 participants). The women were, however, not available for the FGD. In Kolokolo, two groups were constituted: Youths/men's group (7 participants), and women's group (8 participants). Only one group each was constituted in Omoku and Obrikom because of their internal political issues. The youths were restrained from participating and the women were also not available. Hence, the elders' group was constituted in both communities (8 participants in Obrikom and 11 participants in Omoku). Therefore, a total of 68 discussants participated in this study. As can be seen, the numbers of discussants that constituted the groups vary. The standard number adopted for this study was eight, but in cases where the target could not be achieved, six was made the minimum. The exception in the case of Omoku (11 participants) was because the interview was granted after an elders' meeting. Hence, all those present participated in the FGD.

Findings

After conducting the fieldwork for this study, both quantitative and qualitative data were generated. The data are presented below.

Table 1: Respondents' Acknowledgement Of Conflicts Occurrences In Their Communities

Any conflict in your community?	Name of Community				
	Eruemukohwarien	Tisun	Kolokolo	Omoku	Obrikom
Yes	95.6%	4.5%	66.7%	78.0%	90.3%
No	4.4	95.5	33.3	21.6	9.7
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
n	182	22	36	283	72

Conflicts may occur when there is incompatibility between the goals, objectives or values of the oil companies and host communities in the Niger Delta. The result in the table above shows that the highest percentage of conflict acknowledgement came from Eruemukohwarien, while the lowest was from Tisun. It is not surprising that Eruemukohwarien returned such a high percentage because a conflict occurred in the community about a year before this study was conducted. Members of the community demanded that their road network should be repaired by Shell but there was no response from the company. Hence, a demonstration was staged during which the operations of Shell in the community were shut down. A year after the incident, the cause of the conflict was yet to be addressed; hence, the issue remained current in the community. Tisun, on the other hand, claimed to be a peaceful community, and this reflected in the respondents' acknowledgement of conflicts.

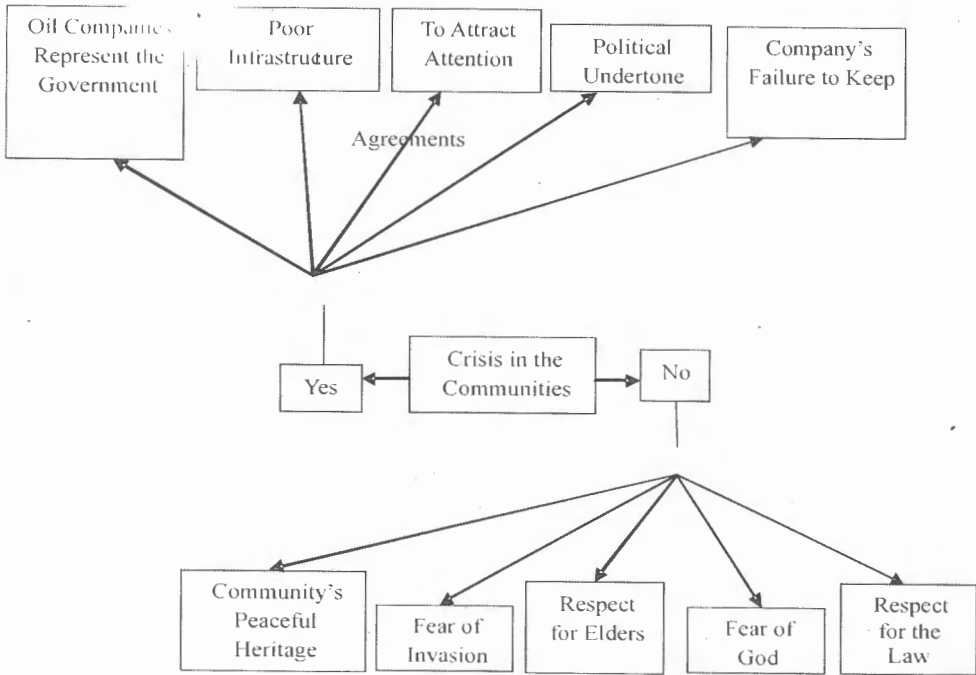


Fig. 1: An Illustration of the Factors influencing the Presence or Absence of Crises in the Communities

The Figure above illustrates the responses of the participants to the question on the factors responsible for whether or not there were conflicts between oil companies and host communities. As expected, all the responses to the question fell into two categories; those who admitted to conflicts in their communities and those who denied same. The respondents who said that there were conflicts in the communities identified the following factors as being responsible: oil companies represent the government, poor infrastructure, desire to attract attention, political undertone and oil companies' failure to

keep agreements. On the other hand, the respondents who denied conflict occurrences also identified the following factors as reasons: communities' peaceful heritage, fear of invasion, respect for elders; fear of God and respect for the law.

Discussion

The society is perceived by conflict theorists as an arena where groups contend for power or benefits (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). Members of the society may or may not be fully aware of this contention, depending on their level of involvement. The findings of this study show that people of Eruemukohwarien, Obrikom, Omoku and Kolokolo communities were more aware of conflict situations than those in Tisun community.

One of the reasons given by the participants who acknowledged the occurrence of conflicts in their communities was that the oil companies represented the government. They insisted that the government and the companies conspired to rob them of their dues. They also observed that the oil companies ran to the government when there were conflicts in the communities, which further proved the governmental support they enjoyed. By aligning with the government, the oil companies earned themselves an enemy in the communities. The implication of this for them was that for as long as the government continued to fail in its responsibilities in those communities, the oil companies would continue to be victims of transferred aggressions. It would be risky, therefore, for the companies to push the blames of underdevelopment to the government and hide behind it, because whichever way, they would serve as the shield for the government.

In any society, the government has the responsibility to create an enabling environment for development. Political campaigns are focused on proposed development agenda and the electorate vote based on their perception of the candidate with the best development plan. Though there have been arguments back and forth on the role of businesses in the development process, the concept of social responsibility has come to be generally accepted. In fact, companies that fail to be socially responsible are liable to conflicts. The participants in this study complained about the state of the infrastructure in their communities. While they were aware that the government had the main responsibility of improving their infrastructure, they also said that it was the oil companies, and not the government, that undertook oil exploration in their communities. Hence, the companies were expected to stand up to the ecological challenges. The situation became more complex when they observed that the facilities in the oil companies residing in their communities were modern and well maintained while their own communities were left without such amenities. Some scholars also noted the ironic affluence exhibited by many oil workers as well as political office holders in sharp contrast to the social deprivation of most residents of the Niger Delta (Ibaba, 2005; Obi, 2004; Esparza and Wilson, 1999). Akinola (2009) observes that among the major infrastructural challenges in the communities are poor roads. For instance, the only transportation in island communities in the Niger Delta is by water ways through the aid of in-board and out-board engine boats, flying boats, and canoes.

Also, it was noted in this study that some of the communities engaged in conflicts so as to attract the attention of both the oil companies and the government. They claimed that the duo paid more attention to communities that posed threats to them while they abandoned the ones that were relatively peaceful. Though the participants insisted that their communities did not condone militancy, they expressed the possibility of adopting violence if it would guarantee them the same attention that the restive communities enjoyed. This means that the relatively peaceful communities may be considered inconsequential by the oil companies until they become actively involved in the conflict, thereby winning the full attention of the companies.

Another important cause of conflicts that was identified by the participants was politics. It was revealed that during electioneering periods in the past, some politicians

engaged some youths as political thugs. Those youths were given arms, which were not retrieved after the elections. Since the politicians did not have any use for the thugs afterwards, they resorted to violence. A different dimension of the politics that was identified was the one used by influential members of the communities. It was discovered from the focus group discussion sessions that some leaders used the youths in the communities to demonstrate against the oil companies to achieve their ends. That was a betrayal of trust because the demonstrators were led to believe that they were demonstrating for public good; whereas, they were only being used to win contracts. The case would be more pathetic if some of them lost their lives in the process of fighting another man's war. One of the complexities of the situation was that the oil companies always gave contracts to their leaders, but the people continued to demonstrate. The companies never comprehended what else the people wanted. The people were often frustrated with the companies' "lack of response." Hence, both the oil companies and the masses were always victims of plots by the elite in the communities. This further underscores the complex nature of the Niger Delta conflicts.

The last cause of conflicts that was identified by the participants was the oil companies' failure to keep agreements. The companies were accused of either selectively implementing, or not implementing at all, the agreements reached with the communities. In a bid to force them to keep the agreements, the communities resorted to conflicts. The implication of this for the oil companies is bifurcated; firstly, the companies would lose their credibility among the people and secondly, the violence against them might continue. Folarin (1998), while identifying sources of conflict, says that communication breakdown can result in conflict and it can be engendered by failed promises.

According to Wallace and Wolf (2006), for conflict to be controlled, one group must be able to, at least temporarily, suppress its rivals. If this assertion is true, we can also argue that one group may deliberately submit to its rivals to control or avoid conflict. Fig 1 reveals that some of the participants denied the occurrence of conflicts in their communities. Though they were exposed to similar conditions as communities where conflicts existed, they presented some interesting reasons for deliberately avoiding conflicts. Among the reasons was the peaceful heritage of their communities. The participants claimed that their forefathers had instructed them to maintain peace in the communities. Hence, from one generation to another, they had made efforts to keep to that instruction. They also claimed that it was the insensitive attitude of both the oil companies and the government that forced them into uncharacteristic demonstrations and protests.

Another major reason given for the lack of conflicts in the communities was the fear of military invasion. It was established in the course of this study that this was one of the strongest reasons for peace in some of the communities. Some participants admitted that they would have engaged in violence to force the oil companies and the government to respond to their requests but for the safety of their families. They stated that jeopardizing the security of the communities was too much a price to pay for any benefit.

While some of the participants condemned militancy, some others identified with the militants saying that they were fighting for the entire Niger Delta. A major concern that comes to the fore at this point is that, though the selected communities for this study claimed they did not condone militancy, they might still find other violent means of expressing themselves in the future. This is because they have the motive and the intense emotion to become violent; all they lack is the will, and this may change if, according to them, the communities remain neglected. Hence, there is the tendency for them to shift from being passive communities to active ones. This may also result in a shift in the balance of power as it has been witnessed in the communities where militants used terror to subdue the oil companies and the government.

Some of the participants also identified the youths' respect for the elders in the communities as one of the reasons for the lack of conflicts in their communities. This displays the role played by the cultural setups of the communities. While the youths were more vibrant, the elders were considered wiser. Hence, the youths claimed that whenever they felt like reacting with violence against the oil companies, the elders called for restraint and they listened. This may be a major sphere to explore while seeking a lasting solution to restiveness in the Niger Delta. The oil companies and the government can explore the cultural setup to foster a better relationship with the communities.

It was also interesting to note that fear of God was mentioned as one of the reasons for the lack of conflicts in some communities. Some respondents claimed that they could have attacked the installations of the oil companies "If not for God." While a comment such as this could have been ignored as just a matter of speaking, it was observed that the respondents made a lot of references to God during the FGDs. There were also side comments about the communities depending on divine intervention for solutions to their problems and the people praying to God for peace. Also, during the interview session with the women leader in Obrikom, she mentioned that a special prayer session was organized to pray for the community. Considering all the above, therefore, it becomes clear that religion plays an important role in the lives of the people in the selected communities. Hence, this channel can be explored for the sake of peace in the Niger Delta.

Lastly, the participants mentioned that their respect for the law also helped to prevent conflicts in their communities. They insisted that they would follow the legal process to express their displeasure with the oil companies. As far as they were concerned, the law, though slow, was better than violence.

All the responses provided here show that the selected communities for this study were active publics (Baskin, Aronoff and Lattimore, 1997). The situational theory identifies active publics as those who recognise the problem, recognise the constraints and are actively involved in the situation. As can be seen, the respondents recognised their major problem to be lack of development in the communities, they considered the oil companies and the government as their constraint, and they believed that the problem was a threat to their well being. Not all of them were, however, violent in their approach to resolving the situation.

Conclusion

The Niger Delta is a volatile area because of frequent conflicts. The violence in the communities ranges from oil installation vandalism to abduction. Nevertheless, it will be misleading to offer a blanket description of the entire region because our study has shown that not all the communities are involved in conflicts. The oil companies should pay attention to the factors identified by the communities as being responsible for the occurrence of conflicts. For instance, the companies should be mindful that the performance of the government in the state or country in which they operate would have immense implications on the goodwill they enjoy from their host communities. Hence, they should use their strategic economic position to encourage or pressurise the government to become more responsive. Also, the oil companies should make efforts to spread their contributions to all the communities in the Niger Delta, rather than paying too much attention to the restive areas alone. This is because some of the conflicts that occurred were due to the need for attention by some of the communities. The oil companies should note that some of the communities, in which there were no conflict occurrences, did not attribute their seemingly peaceful disposition to the oil companies' community relations strategies. Hence, the companies should intensify their efforts to build and maintain a more beneficial relationship with the communities.

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