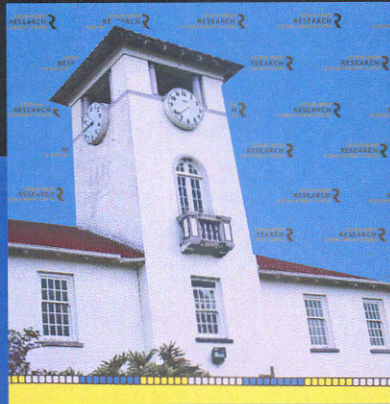




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# Multinational oil companies' channels of communication and conflict resolution in the Niger Delta

Lanre Amodu<sup>1</sup> and Idowu Sobowale<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This empirical study explores the communication channels adopted by Shell, Chevron and Agip for conflict resolution in five communities in the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta is one of the volatile areas in Nigeria due to conflicts between various oil companies and host communities, resulting in several cases of kidnapping, vandalism of pipelines and installations, and insecurity of lives and properties. The oil companies' direct operations in the communities have directly exposed them to physical risks. Also, considering that host communities hold oil companies responsible for violating their natural environment and destroying their livelihood through the exploration process, oil companies automatically become a major target. The concern of the study, therefore, is to investigate the communication channels that the host communities identify as being used by the oil companies for conflict resolution in the Niger Delta. The population for this study comprises indigenes of Omoku and Obrikom in Rivers State and Eruemukohwarien, Tisun and Kolokolo communities in Delta State. A quantitative method of data collection (survey) was employed. The findings revealed that the respondents perceived Chevron as the oil company that was least involved in conflicts in their communities, and this was related to the balanced communication channels used by the company.

**Key words:** Communication, channels, conflict, oil companies, host communities

## Introduction

Several studies have been conducted on Nigeria's Niger Delta and the nature of conflicts devastating the region (Ibaba, 2005; Akinola, 2008; Amodu and Sobowale, 2011). Several parties to the conflicts have also been identified (Osagie *et al.*, 2009), but our chief concern in this paper is the communities in which oil companies base their operations, which are generally referred to as host communities, and the multinational oil companies in the Niger Delta region.

The activities of multinational oil companies have been examined with special consideration given to the underdevelopment of Niger Delta communities (Omoweh, 2010;

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Watts, 2009). These studies highlighted the challenges faced by host communities and the oil companies' inability to manage such challenges effectively. However, adequate attention has not been given to a balanced evaluation of the nature of communication that exists between the oil companies and their host communities.

Considering that communication is essential in building profitable relationships (Krauss and Morsella, 2000: 131), it is understandable that conflict may evolve in the event of a breakdown in communication or the use of inappropriate communication channels (Folarin, 1998: 49). A communication channel, as it appears in this study, refers to the path through which the oil companies interact with their host communities. Consequently, any channel that links both parties, be it an organisation, group or process, falls in this category. Systems theory and ecological systems theory aided in the conceptualisation of this study, as we explore the communication channels used by three major oil companies in Nigeria's Niger Delta – Shell, Chevron and Agip – and their host communities.

## Literature review

### *Conceptualisation of Conflict*

Conflict is a result of a dynamic relationship between two or more parties, struggling to gain control of valuable resources (Folarin, 1998: 49). According to Otite (2001), conflict arises when individuals or groups in a defined environment pursue divergent goals, interests and ambitions. The author explains that when there is a change in the social environment, for instance, the discovery of new resources from exploration of the physical environment, a fertile ground for conflict is created. The ensuing conflict usually involves individuals and groups who are interested in using the new resources to achieve their goals.

The term 'conflict' has been severally defined over the years. Swanstrom and Weissmann (2005: 7) define it as "the result of opposing interests involving scarce resources, goal divergence and frustration". Among institutional definitions available is one proposed by the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution, which views conflicts as "disagreements that lead to tension within and between people" (Vestergaard *et al.*, 2011: 4). The Centre emphasises that conflict goes beyond mere disagreement, which involves divergent positions, to include relationships that are not cordial. In the case of conflict, not only are the positions incompatible, the relationship is also jettisoned.

Zartman (1991:370) states that conflict is "an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions and an expression of the basic fact of human interdependence." Several other scholars agree that conflict is unavoidable, stating that it is "part of everyday life" (Vestergaard *et al.*, 2011: 3) and that people are permanently in battle with others as well as themselves (Eftimie and Moldovan, 2011: 73). Folarin (1998) argues that conflict is not necessarily a bad thing; rather, it can be both functional and dysfunctional. According to him, there is general agreement among scholars that development is hardly

conceivable in the absence of some form and measure of conflict. He submits that what matters is the way and manner the conflict is handled.

Though conflict is similar to competition and contests in that it is a normal process of interaction, it is still distinct from them, more so in complex societies in which essential resources are scarce. While competition and contests lead to the emergence of a winner among contestants through the assessment of some observers, conflicts are not so easy to resolve. Donohue and Kolt (1992) explain that when interdependent people express their differences in the process of achieving their needs and goals, conflict may arise. The co-existence of the differences becomes impossible without some adjustment, yet neither of the parties may want to shift ground.

Sandole (1993) identifies the stages of conflict as initiation, escalation, controlled maintenance, abatement and termination/resolution. He explains that the stages together form a process, and in that process, peace is the ultimate target of conflict, or perhaps violence. However, the individuals or groups may not necessarily achieve the initial objective; the conflict may subdue that objective through negotiated settlement. It is noteworthy, here, that Sandole's view of conflict seems to be influenced by functionalism. Functionalists believe that all the parties in a society are interdependent, therefore, in the case of conflict, the society evolves a means to resolve it (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). This is, however, not always true as can be seen in the case of the Niger Delta. The conflict seems to be taking the communities further from peace.

### **The Niger Delta conflict**

The struggle for relevance in the Niger Delta dates back to the pre-colonial era. According to Ikalama (2006), the Niger Delta struggle did not start with the discovery of oil in 1957, rather, it was due to the difficulties posed by the physical terrain. Ibaba (2005) observes that almost three-quarters of the Delta area is submerged under water – lagoons, creeks, rivers and lakes. What is left is largely swampy land, which is flooded for about four months of the year as a result of the overflow towards the lower Niger. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Niger Delta people insisted that there should be fair trade terms to benefit their communities. The last quarter of that century was characterised by an aggressive European imperialist economic philosophy of free trade (Alao, 2005). Several conflicts ensued between the Niger Delta people and the Europeans on the coasts of the Niger Delta region because of the communities' determination to maintain their middlemen status. Prominent among those crises were the clash of the Jaja of Opoho with the British, leading to his eventual exile in 1886, King Koko of Nembe's famous Akassa raid on the depot of the Royal Niger Company in 1895, and the crisis between Nana Olomu, the then Itsekiri Governor of Benin River, and the British in 1895.

According to Alao (2005), during the colonial era, virtually all the resources of the colonised people were controlled by the colonial state. The agitation of the Niger Delta people was principally focused on drawing attention to their environmental peculiarities and their requirement for basic infrastructural amenities. Colonialism, however, cur-



tailed the initial dominance of the Niger Delta on the Nigerian economic scene by abolishing the middleman advantage hitherto enjoyed by the region. Moreover, cash crops emerged in other parts of the country, such as the groundnut pyramids in the Northern Region, and cocoa in the Western Region, further reducing the Niger Delta's economic relevance. According to Sir Willink (as cited in Alao, 2005), due to its ecological makeup, the Eastern Region (including the Niger Delta) is the poorest of the three regions.

In February 2007, Nigeria celebrated 50 years of oil exploration. According to Agagu and Adu (2008), observers have opined that in spite of Nigeria's oil wealth, the performance of the sector has not been impressive. Aiyetan (2008) cited Rilwan Lukman, the former Minister of Petroleum in Nigeria and the former president of OPEC, to have said that oil is both a blessing and a curse in Nigeria. In the same vein, Ezeobi (2008) describes Nigeria's years of oil exploration as 50 depressing years of oil. Agagu and Adu (2008) note that only a few individuals and companies have benefited from oil so far, while many other communities and millions of people have been underdeveloped and impoverished. They further argue that there has been unprecedented development in several communities due to the activities of the oil industry. The oil industry has in no small measure helped to propel other industries since the time oil assumed great ascendancy in industrialisation. The countries that have benefited from the oil industry include Dubai, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Britain and Singapore, among others. Although Nigeria has also benefited from the industry through the oil boom in the global market, the Niger Delta, which forms the bedrock of the country's oil exploration, has no semblance of development which can be linked with the oil industry.

The effect of oil exploration on the Niger Delta environment was not realised until years after the process began. According to Soremekun and Obadare (1998), although the commercial shipment of oil from the Nigerian coast started in 1958, the havoc being wreaked on the environment by the oil companies was not realised until about 30 years later. They further explain that massive environmental pollution has been engendered by the oil companies in their petroleum operations. For instance, there have been several pipeline leakages, well blow-outs, and spillages, having severe effects on land, water and other ecological elements. Observers have noted that the extent to which oil is explored and taken away from the Niger Delta is commensurate with the devastation left in its wake.

Due to the negative effects of the operations of oil companies in the Niger Delta, the erstwhile crises in the region took up a new dimension. According to Oloruntimehin and Ayoade (2002: 16): Most of the conflicts have arisen from complex environmental problems, and a long history of neglect and social development of peoples who have seemed helpless watching their land and water resources continually devastated by the intense exploitation for petroleum and gases without deriving any appreciable benefits by way of investment in their own development.



The Niger Delta communities purposely began to attack oil companies and their installations in order to attract attention to their plight. In response to the attacks, oil companies have made several attempts to manage the conflict with limited success. Among the efforts they made was to engage in some level of social responsibility and communication with the communities.

### **Statement of the problem**

Niger Delta is one of the volatile areas in Nigeria because of several conflicts that have been witnessed. Between January 2006 and February 2007, over 33 cases of kidnapping were recorded, with over 200 victims, mostly expatriate oil workers (Africa Masterweb, 2007). Nwankwo and Ezeobi (2008) observe that about 12 770 cases of vandalism of pipelines and installations were recorded between 2000 and 2007 in Nigeria and most of them occurred in the Niger Delta. In October 2013, the Federal Government of Nigeria, through the Group Managing Director of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), Andrew Yakubu, acknowledged that about 150 000 barrels of crude oil were lost per day whenever there was a shut down due to vandalism (Premium Times, 2013). Yakubu claimed that persistent attacks by vandals on major pipeline arteries were responsible for the fluctuation in Nigeria's daily crude oil production levels.

Consequent on the volatility, the inhabitants of this area are constantly exposed to environmental hazards and security threats, the government loses revenue and oil companies lose business. Because the oil companies operate directly in the communities, they are more exposed to physical risks than the government. And because host communities blame the companies for the violation of their natural environment, thereby destroying their livelihood, oil companies automatically become a major target.

Oil companies have employed several means to attempt to manage the conflicts with little success. Among the options explored was social responsibility. According to Aaron (2008), Shell spent \$59 million and paid \$114 million to the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2006, yet there was no visible evidence of the expense. This informs his conclusion that corporate social responsibility, as practiced by the oil companies, is not effective in managing the conflicts. Bousso (2014) reported that Royal Dutch Shell's offer to pay £30 million to compensate the Bobo Community in the Niger Delta for two oil spills in 2008 was rejected by the community which filed an appeal to a London court in 2011 for more than £300 million.

The problem here may lie in the kind of communication engaged by the companies. The channel of communication will influence the recipients' perception of the source and the message. It does not matter how much the companies have spent or are willing to spend, and it does not matter what they contribute to the communities, if they do not engage appropriate channels of communication, they will not be accepted by the people and their efforts will not be appreciated. Hence, it becomes essential to consider the oil companies' communication channels from the perspective of the host communities, since they determine the success or failure of any Corporate Social Responsibility

(CSR) effort. This study, therefore, explores the perceived channels of communication engaged by oil companies in the Niger Delta for conflict resolution. The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Determine the communities' views of Shell, Chevron and Agip's involvement in conflict with their host communities.
2. Identify the perceived channels of communication used by each company for conflict resolution.

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

1. To what extent do host communities believe Shell, Chevron and Agip are involved in conflict with them?
2. What are the perceived channels of communication used by each company for conflict resolution?

### **Theoretical perspective**

The systems theory was adopted for this study. The theory was developed by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy and it analyses the concept of a group of things with similar attributes, and how that group interacts with other groups (Tamas, 2000: 1). Laszlo and Krippner (1998: 5) observe that the first statement made by Bertalanffy on the subject was from 1925-1926 in which he "gave the fullest formulation of a general theory of systems". Bertalanffy describes a system as any kind of group, comprising animate or inanimate elements, having any kind of relationship.

According to Anderson *et al.* (1999: 4), a system can be defined as "an organized whole made up of components that interact in a way distinct from their interaction with other entities and which endures over some period of time". Sub-systems may also exist within other larger systems, as in the case of a household within a village, or a village in a region (Tamas, 2000: 1). With respect to this study, the Niger Delta, as a region, is a larger system within which exist sub-systems such as the host communities of the oil companies as well as the companies themselves.

A salient attribute that defines a system, beyond the homogeneity of its elements, is the existence of an imaginary line that determines what is within or without the system. The imaginary line is referred to as a boundary. According to Tamas (2000: 2):

System boundaries can be 'drawn' wherever any observer wishes, and for any purpose. In a village, for example, it may be convenient to see the community as a cluster of different households or family groups ... at other times, it may be convenient to show the different age groups in a community.



Bertalanffy further explains that a system can either be “open” or “closed”, depending on the kind of boundary it has. A system is closed when its boundary forbids external interferences, while the opposite is the case in an open system. All human communities are, however, open systems, though the extent of their openness depends on the amount of external influences from other sub-systems or larger systems. Bertalanffy refers to the external influence as “energy”. Similar to human beings’ need for nourishment for survival, every system requires energy, which may be in the form of information, physical or psychological development (Tamas, 2000: 3).

Another vital concept in system theory is the term “entropy”, which describes a force or tendency that exists in every system to “malfunction” after consuming all available energy (Laszlo and Krippner, 1998: 8; Tamas, 2000: 4). An insufficient amount of social or economic energy between one sub-system and another or between a sub-system and a larger system may weaken their relationship, which may deteriorate into a conflicting situation. According to Saiyou (2006), Niger Delta communities were initially positively disposed towards the multinational oil companies because of the development anticipated from their coming. However, the degradation of the environment and incommensurate economic benefit for the communities sucked out the “energy” in the relationship, resulting in the attending conflicts.

From an organisational perspective, Baskin, Aronoff and Lattimore (1997: 54) state that the system theory “captures the notion of parts and wholes, allows us to look at structure and provides insight into how the parts are related.” The theory provides a way to think about relationships between an entity and its surrounding components. Systems theory posits that an organisation does not exist as a nucleus; rather, it depends on, and must communicate with other parties surrounding it. Those other parties can be seen as the stakeholders that affect or are affected by the activities of that organisation (Baskin *et al.*, 1997: 54).

It is pertinent for every organisation to understand the relationship among parts and the formation of the whole. Every organisation, no matter how big, remains only a part of a larger entity, the remaining part is made up of the various publics of the organisation which are located in its task environment. Various constraints are imposed by the environment on the organisation and they can be in form of customers boycotting products, legal action, banks choosing not to lend money to the organisation, and so on. In view of this, it is important that organisations become more adaptive to their environment rather than becoming more rigid. It is indeed easier to adapt the organisation to the environment than the other way round. In the case of the oil companies in the Niger Delta, their immediate environments are the physical communities in which they operate. The loss of goodwill by the companies resulted in the conflicts currently being witnessed. The systems theory is important to our study because it helps us to understand the relationship between the variables that are involved: the communication channels of oil companies, specifically Shell, Chevron and Agip, and their involvement in conflicts in their communities.

Another perspective of the systems theory that is useful for this study is the ecological



systems theory, which encompasses “an evolving body of theory and research concerned with the processes and conditions that govern the lifelong course of human development in the actual environments in which human beings live” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993: 37). This theory posits that an individual is surrounded by an ecological environment that is concentric in nature, moving from the innermost level to the outside. Directly next to the individual is the level known as the microsystem, which comprises immediate contacts such as the family, school, peers and religion. The mesosystem comes next, representing the relations between different microsystems. The next level is the exosystem, serving as the link between an individual’s immediate environment and the social environment in which he/she does not have an active role. The fourth level of the ecological environment is the macrosystem, describing the cultural values, customs and laws that shape the relations in the previous levels (Paquette and Ryan, 2001). The final environment, chronosystem, describes the changes or consistencies over time in the characteristics of the individual as well as the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993: 37).

Every community comprises individuals and the Niger Delta communities are no exception, consequently, the five levels of the ecological systems theory apply. Worthy of note, however, are the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem. According to Amodu (2012: 103-105), Niger Delta communities are usually sub-divided into groups according to family, peer groups and other administrative classifications, and these fall within the microsystem. The interactions between these various groups for effective running of the communities occur at the mesosystem level, while the contact with the industry, i.e. the multinational oil companies, takes place at the exosystem level.

## Methods



A survey was adopted for this study due to its attribute of sampling the opinion of a large number of people on specific subjects. The study was conducted in 2012. Although several oil companies operate in the Niger Delta, Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell, Agip, also known as the Nigerian Agip Oil Company Limited (NAOC), and Chevron, a north American company that operates in Nigeria under the joint venture name Chevron Nigeria Limited (CNL), were selected for this study. The three oil companies were purposively selected because of their relatively larger scale of operations in the Niger Delta.

Simple random sampling was used to select the communities studied. All the elements of each population were written on pieces of paper, rolled up and put in a container. The samples required were randomly selected from the container, thereby using the simple random sampling without replacement. Shell’s operations in the Niger Delta are classified into the eastern area of operation (Akwa Ibom, Cross River and Rivers States), central area of operation (Bayelsa) and western area of operation (Delta and Edo States). The western area was randomly selected for this study and Delta State was selected.

Of the local government areas hosting Shell operations, Ughelli North was randomly selected. Eruemukohwarien and Afiesere were also randomly selected, but Afiesere had to be dropped because of the volatile condition in the community.

Chevron established an Itsekiri Rural Development Council made up of 23 Itsekiri communities within five oil fields of its area of operations. The five fields are Abiteye, Dibi, Escravos, Ughoegungun and Olero. Dibi oil field was randomly selected and of the six communities in that category, Tisun and Kolokolo communities in Delta State were selected. Agip also had its operations in Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states. After randomly selecting Rivers State, Obiafu/Obrikom oil location was selected in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area. Finally Omoku and Obrikom communities were selected.

Systematic random sampling was used to select the individual respondents. In each of the communities, a starting point was randomly selected and the respondents were chosen according to a selected sampling interval. Wimmer and Dominick (2003:91) explain that systematic random sampling is similar in some ways to simple random sampling but it saves more time, resources and efforts. They observe that systematic samples are frequently used in mass media research and that "since the procedure so closely resembles a simple random sample, many researchers consider systematic sampling to be as effective as the random procedure" (Wimmer and Dominick, 2003: 91).

The population figures obtained before this study showed that the population of Tisun was 3 415, Kolokolo was 5 966, Eruemukohwarien was 5 265, Obrikom was 5 316 and Omoku was 33 962. Based on these figures, 200 respondents were proposed for Tisun, Kolokolo, Eruemukohwarien and Obrikom, while 300 were proposed for Omoku. However, it was discovered in the field that the population resident in Tisun and Kolokolo were 38 and 45 individuals respectively. A crisis occurred in the communities in 2004, which led to the death of several indigenes and the displacement of others. The entire villages were razed and deserted, and up to the time of conducting this study, only a few of the natives had returned home. Hence, the copies of the questionnaire distributed were reduced. This problem was managed by using about 80% of the available population to arrive at a considerable sample and to ensure a formidable representation of their perception. In Eruemukohwarien, Obrikom and Omoku, the samples selected were affected by the willingness of respondents to participate in the study because of its sensitive nature. Nevertheless, the fidelity of this study was ensured by the systematic random selection of the respondents. Consequently, the sample size for the study was 595, consisting of 182 respondents from Eruemukohwarien, 22 from Tisun, 36 from Kolokolo, 283 from Omoku and 72 from Obrikom.

## Findings

The data generated from the fieldwork are analysed and presented below.

**Table 1: Respondents' acknowledgement of conflicts in their communities and the oil companies involved**

Conflict in the communities	Resident oil company		
	Agip	Chevron	Shell
Yes	93.8%	81.8%	44.6%
No	6.2%	18.2%	55.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>n</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>65</b>

Table 1 presents the respondents' views on the occurrence of conflicts in their communities and the oil companies involved. The finding reveals that more respondents identified Shell as being involved in conflicts in their communities than the other two companies. Considering that Shell has the largest operations in the Niger Delta, the company is likely to be more involved in conflict situations than the others. On the other hand, Chevron's operations are mostly restricted to the Itsekiri communities, which is possibly responsible for the fewer acknowledgements of conflict involvements. The Niger Delta communities surveyed in this study were open systems and their boundaries were penetrated by the oil companies. From Table 1, it can be observed that the relations between the communities and the companies were, however, becoming "entropic", causing a decline in their cordiality.

*Continued overleaf/*



**Table 2: Oil companies' channels for relating with communities in the absence of conflict**

Channels for relating with the community	Resident oil company		
	Agip	Chevron	Shell
Royal fathers only	3.1%	25%	7.7%
Elders only	32.0%	2.1%	6.2%
Family heads only	4.1%	3.0%	3.1%
Youths only	43.2%	8.6%	12.2%
All levels above	8.8%	58.6%	70.8%
No level at all	8.8%	2.7%	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>n</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>65</b>

As presented here, channel refers to the path the multinational oil companies take to establish contact and relate with their host communities. In this context, the host communities are the larger systems while the royal fathers, elders, family heads and youths are the sub-systems. Hence, the sub-systems, which are microsystems, interact within the mesosystem of the communities. Since, the larger systems comprises the sub-systems, the interferences from oil companies tend to flow through whichever sub-system that is considered to exert the desired influence on the larger system. Table 2 shows the channels the oil companies used to relate with the communities when there was no conflict. The table shows that of the three oil companies, Agip related more with the communities through the royal fathers, Shell related more through the elders and youths, and Chevron generally favoured a combination of the four channels. It can be observed that on a general level, none of the three companies was particularly disposed towards the use of family heads as the sole channel for relating with the communities.

*Continued overleaf/*

**Table 3: Oil companies' channels of conflict resolution**

Channels of conflict resolution	Resident oil company		
	Agip	Chevron	Shell
Elders	5.7%	54.7%	13.2%
Youths	5.7%	30.1%	13.2%
Government	51.5%	7.5%	60.5%
Consultants (NGO)	37.1%	7.8%	13.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>n</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>28</b>

Amodu (2012: 93, 150, 154) states that during conflicts, oil companies tend to withdraw from direct contacts with the communities and then engage external communication channels or paths in relating with them. Among other external channels, oil companies engage the government because of its direct influence over its citizens and non-governmental organisations (NGO) because of their perceived neutral stance. Table 3 reveals that the preferred channel of conflict resolution by Agip was through community elders and youths, while Chevron and Shell preferred external channels i.e. the government and consultants. By identifying with its host community, Agip tended to avoid a tripartite approach in resolving conflict with its host communities. The approach may explain why the degree of conflict between Agip and its host communities was less than Shell's, but more than Chevron's (Table 1) that favoured a more balanced approach (Table 2).

### **Discussion**

Conflict is a complex phenomenon arising from human interactions. Sociologists, social psychologists and scholars in other related fields have noted in their studies of human interactions that conflict is inevitable in human societies (Otite, 2001; Zartman, 1991; Folarin, 1998). Some scholars have even contended that conflict is a normal process of development in the society (Park and Bures, 1921). Hence, that there is conflict in the Niger Delta is not abnormal. The complexity, however, arises because of the persistent nature of the conflict and the minimal success recorded in spite of the efforts made to resolve it (Amodu, 2012). Also, the conflicts in the Niger Delta have further underdeveloped the region, thereby contesting the assertion that it is a normal process of development.

The results of this study reveal that Shell had the largest percentage of the respondents who claimed that their communities had experienced conflict with the company, more than Agip and Chevron. A look at the channels of communication engaged by Shell for conflict resolution provides an answer for the perception expressed by its host communities. As can be seen in Table 2, 43.2% of the respondents said that Shell communicated with the youths and 32% said it communicated with the elders. However, other channels of communication were given less attention. Interestingly, it appears that Shell communicated more through the youths and elders in the absence of conflict (see Table 2), since it shifted its attention to the government (51.5%) and consultants including NGOs (37.1%) for conflict resolution (see Table 3 on previous page).

Agip was next to Shell in the respondents' rating of its involvement in conflict in their communities, as can be seen in Table 1. More than half of its respondents (58.6%) said that it made use of all the channels listed in Table 2. Also, 25% said that Agip communicated through the royal fathers. During conflicts, the company communicated more through the elders, followed by the youth (Table 3). This may explain Agip's lesser involvement in conflict than Shell.

As far as the respondents were concerned, Chevron had a relatively low involvement in the conflicts in their communities. Table 2 reveals that almost three-quarters of its respondents were of the opinion that the company communicated through all the channels listed in the table. Though Chevron communicated more through the government during conflicts, the respondents felt it made use of the other channels equally. Consequent on the foregoing, it can be said that Chevron's involvement in conflicts was limited due to its ability to balance the use of several communication approaches in managing its conflicts with its host communities.

The instrument for this study (questionnaire) was completed by individual respondents who collectively made up the sample. It cannot be overemphasised that as individuals, they were exposed at different levels to the five ecological environments. Considering that the microsystem, which comprises family and peers, was the closest to them, it is understandable that they may show preference for the company that acknowledges the internal channels in the communities.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1993: 37), "it is within the immediate environment of the microsystem that proximal processes operate to produce and sustain development". He describes proximal process as human development that results from a "progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993: 38). Consequently, it is expected that a child who grew up within the microsystem of a Niger Delta community would have developed some level of connectivity to or respect for such a system.



## Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that Shell, Chevron and Agip used a variety of channels to communicate with Omoku and Obrikom communities in Rivers State and Eruemukohwarien, Tisun and Kolokolo communities in Delta State. In the absence of conflict, the oil companies communicated with the communities through the royal fathers, elders, family heads and youths generally, though Shell was perceived by the respondents to have preferred the elders and youths, Agip preferred the royal fathers, while Chevron preferred a combination of the channels.

It was further discovered that during conflicts, the oil companies communicated through the elders and youths within the communities, with the addition of two external channels: government and consultants. The involvement of the two external channels was necessitated by the companies' reluctance to relate directly with the communities during conflicts. Chevron was found to have used more of the governmental channel, but with a balanced use of the other three channels.

Communication is, without any doubt, an important means of conflict resolution. The channels of communication used by the oil companies have been found to be relative, just as the opinion of the respondents about the involvement of the oil companies in conflicts in their communities. Considering that conflict is dynamic, dynamic communication becomes imperative. Oil companies should not just focus on the use of some channels of communication at the expense of others; rather, a careful blend of the channels will be more effective. It is also important for quality attention to be given to internal channels in the communities.

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