

**ASSESSMENT OF GOVERNMENT ACTION ON DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS AND PUBLIC  
RELATION TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF NIGER DELTA CONFLICT**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The study was carried out to assess government action on development efforts and public relation tools for effective management of Niger Delta conflict. The Niger Delta people had been using peaceful means to ask government to look into the challenges of the region before it escalated to violent conflict. Some of the peaceful efforts they made include going to Lancaster Conference in 1957; representatives were also sent in 1958 to the Willinks Commission, where it was recommended that attention should be given to developing region. Others include written petitions, community delegates sent to make formal complaints to state governments, federal government, and oil companies involved. It was also discovered that public relations and effective communication play a vital role in managing the conflict and developmental needs of the region by creating room for dialogue and interaction with the various stakeholders. Based on the findings, the researcher concludes that public relations and effective communication are key factors in resolving the challenges government is facing in the management of developmental needs of the Niger Delta region. Based on the findings of the study, one of the recommendations made was that the Niger Delta people be advised to pursue justice through non-violence.*

**KEYWORDS:** Conflicts, Management strategies, NDDC and Niger Delta

**Introduction**

The Federal Government of Nigeria has established so many commissions to look into and deal with the affairs of the Niger Delta region. The present commission, the Niger Delta Development Commission, which was established by Obasanjo's administration, was established to look into the affairs of the Niger Delta region, which has over the years been lamenting over perceived neglect by the government and oil companies operating in the region. Being a region rich in oil wells and which accounts for over 90% of the nation's economy, they feel their interests are not well represented by the government considering the enormous resources that have been generated from the region. This perceived neglect led to agitations by various groups, causing unrest and making life uncomfortable for the oil producing companies, the government, and the nation at large.

This agitation and unrest, which is also caused by environmental pollution and degradation, gas flaring, poverty, and unemployment experienced by the people of the region, made them destroy or vandalize oil pipelines, stop work or production, kidnapping of expatriates, introduction of militancy, etc. Several government administrations have tried to establish different commissions to handle the situation, but they were not successful, hence the continuous agitation by the people of the region. The Obasanjo administration in 1999 set up the NDDC Commission as an interventionist agency to look into the rapid and sustainable development of the region and ensure the region is socially stable, politically peaceful, economically prosperous and ecologically regenerative (Omojunikanbi, 2019). This interview

with Mr. Psaro Yormamue of Corporate Affairs Department is to find out how the Commission has been able to achieve peace in the region as well as possible challenges that may pose a threat to the Commission in realizing its vision and mission in the region.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify the Public Relation tools used by Federal Government of Nigeria in managing the Niger Delta conflict.
2. Find out if the people are satisfied with government action on development efforts in the Niger Delta region.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the public relations tools used by Federal Government of Nigeria in managing the Niger Delta conflict?
2. Are the people of the region satisfied with government actions in development efforts in the region?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work is based on the Mixed Motive model of Public Relations. Based on study excellence, Murphy (1991) suggested a mixed motives model of conflict management. This model consists of the two-way asymmetric tactics and two-way symmetric tactics described by Grunig et al. (1991) and Murphy (1991) as the model that showcases the practice of PR in conflict resolution in a practical world.

Murphy (1991) posits that employing mixed motives offers every side in the conflict an opportunity to retain its position while jointly exploring common ground in a bid to resolve the conflict. Mixed motive recognizes the superiority of the organization's motive and embosses the scale between two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical communication in PR. In both fields, this scale is described with such terms and tactics as bargaining, negotiation, mediation, accommodation, withholding, avoidance, contention, compromise, composition, competition, collaboration, co-operation. The parties in a conflict have different interests to protect and do not trust whatever is communicated by the opponent. However, the parties in a conflict need to cooperate with each other sometimes for an agreement to be reached (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 2001). This model was adapted from Thomas's (1976) work on dual concern model in the field of "concern for self and concern for others" (Plowman, 2001, 1998, p.245). This theory is relevant to this study because the mixed motive approach to government challenges in managing the Niger Delta crisis has the capacity to build and increase the citizen's trust and belief in government agencies, most especially during crisis resolution or management, because "this model makes government more transparent, more accountable, and more trustworthy, since the citizen, government officials, and other stakeholders participate in policy making, content creation, knowledge sharing and structuring, and collaborative decision making" (Chun et al. 2010).

## Conceptual Review

### Concept of the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta area is a geographical description of the states in Nigeria on the tributaries of the River Niger. But for administrative convenience, the Niger Delta today is synonymous with oil and mineral-producing states. This is why states that do not belong to the core Niger Delta geographical zone are included as part of the Niger Delta. Thus, the Niger Delta includes states from the South-East geographical zone—Abia and Imo—as well as Ondo states from the South-West geographical zone. The core Niger Delta states are: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers State. The present composition of the Niger Delta is the product of Obasanjo administration's desire to secure the administration of the development of oil-producing states in the country. This arrangement led to the establishment of Niger Delta Development Commission following an Act of Parliament in 2000. The Commission was inaugurated on December 21, 2000 (Udoudo, 2006).

The Niger Delta derives its name from River Niger, flowing primarily from west to east, through Guinea, Mali, Niger, Benin, and Nigeria, to the Gulf of Guinea. After River Nile and Congo, River Niger is the third longest in Africa with a length of 4,180km. It is also 190km long. It is believed that Niger Delta is the third largest freshwater swamp and mangrove in the world, yet as a result of its difficult terrain, it is largely inaccessible. The Niger Delta is one of the least developed regions in Nigeria despite the fact that the region accounts for about 90 percent of the nation's total annual earnings through its resources of oil and gas that are deposited in its belly and in the deep of its waters (Akpan, 2008). Nigeria is one of the leading oil producers, with about two million barrels of production capacity per day. The Niger Delta, being a multi-state region, is also multi-ethnic. Multinational companies such as Shell, Mobil, Chevron, Elf (TotalFinaElf), Agip, and Texaco operate oil and gas in the region in collaboration with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). The first successful drilling of petroleum was at Oloibiri in 1956. The region is estimated to have nearly 200 oil fields, with well over 400 oil production storage facilities scattered throughout its swamps and creeks (Akpan, 2008).

Perceived lack of sensitivity to the rights of the region led to the introduction of various agitation groups such as the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Mujahid Asari Dokubo, the Niger Delta Solidarity Front (NDSF) led by Abiye Abaku and the Icelanders led by Soboma George. Others include the Niger Delta Vigilante Movement (NDVM), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Coalition for Militant Action in the Niger Delta (COMA), the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), led by Ken Saro Wiwa, and the Niger Delta Vigilante Services (NDV), led by Ateke Tom, etc. Every act by these groups projects struggle for better conditions of the region. As a result of this, even acts of criminality are presented as part of the struggle for a better condition of the region. The Niger Delta problem was heightened in the early stages of Abacha administration when the administration executed an environmental activist, Ken Saro Wiwa, and eight of his Ogoni kinsmen after a trial. This extra-judicial killing earned Nigeria a suspension from the Common Wealth of Nations as well as isolation from the international community, especially the advanced economies of the West (Ganiyu, 2009).

### Concept of Crisis Management

A crisis is conceptualized as the occurrence of any event that results in or is susceptible to resulting in a dangerously unstable situation with devastating effects on individuals, groups of people, a community, a country, or the world at large. A major characteristic of crises is

that their occurrence is often sudden, though sometimes preceded by seemingly unnoticed events that account for the great devastation to the environment, security, socio-economic, or political affairs of the affected environment. Crisis management is a statement that shows that there has been a breakdown in law and order. The agencies of law and order are hence used to control the situation, and the agencies include law enforcement agencies like police, navy, army, etc. The parties involved at this point lose control of the situation, as the situation can be resolved through non-violent means until normalcy is restored (Best, 2006). Best went further to say that when law enforcement agencies are introduced into the management of a crisis situation, there may be the use of force to restore law and order and this may lead to violations of human rights. It is seen from the above that part of crisis management is left to the government. The parties involved may be unable to resume their normal activities until the disrupted communication is restored. In a crisis situation, its management or separation might not be palatable, and may be violent or consume the parties involved.

Crisis management, according to Omowale (2008), is "all attempts and skills, including methods, used to respond to both the reality and perception of crisis. It involves the process of assessing, understanding, and coping with any serious situation from the time it starts to the point the crisis is resolved" (p.620). Some keys of mediatory skills that can be used in successful crisis management. They include:

- Identifying root cause and deciding on corrective actions.
- Examination of each party's position.
- Fairness and impartiality.
- Sensitive approach to gain confidence and trustworthiness.
- Acceptable conflict resolution and conflict minimization.
- Enforceable and fair outcomes.

According to Omojunikanbi, N. (2019), there are three mediators, they include:

- Independent mediator – this are groups, organizations or individuals that are neutral in the crisis. They have no interest on the issues in the crisis. They are also experts in crisis/conflict resolution and are expected to use their expertise and experience on the mediator process. The mediator is everyone's friend and no one's sympathizer.
- Social Network mediators – these are groups or individuals who share common values with the parties involved in the conflict. They draw their strength and basis of their role as mediators from the fact that they are part of the social network, as a result, they are known and trusted by the disputants. This could be friends, members of families, opinion leaders etc.
- Authoritative mediators - these are those who held position of power and importance with the disputants within the same organization. They control the resources which the disputants value so much. Their decisions are not imposed on the parties rather they use their position of authority to persuade an amiable resolution of the issues for which the mediators have interest.

The NDDC, which represents the Federal Government of Nigeria, has organized programmes and projects as an intervention step in managing the crisis in the Niger Delta with the aim of ending the crisis that occurred as a result of what the people of the region felt was a neglectful attitude towards the Niger Delta region's development, which made their lives worse, which has also been the primary cause of the crisis in the region. This made the NDDC an authoritative mediator.

## Government Conflict Management Strategies in Resolving Niger Delta Conflicts

Conscious of the consequences of the crisis in the Niger Delta Region, various approaches have been adopted by successive governments over the years to curb Niger Delta crises, knowing that these crises pose a threat to the security, unity and integrity of the Nigerian state, the lives and property of residents of the region and disrupt the oil business, which accounts for over 90% of the national economy. Yet the crisis remains unabated. This is because these approaches have failed to address the fundamental issues at stake in the region's crisis, such as environmental degradation, minority rights, resource control, and allocation. Some of the identified strategies used by the government to resolve the Niger Delta crisis include but are not limited to:

**Avoidance:** Avoidance was the first style used by the Federal Government of Nigeria in responding to the complaints of the oil communities about exploitation, marginalization, environmental degradation, etc. The government turned deaf ears instead of listening to the predicament of these people, knowing that they have the statutory responsibility to listen to these grievances and complaints. The government pretended all was well when all was not indeed well. It was this avoidance style that escalated the problem and introduced a violent revolution on February 23, 1966, by Isaac Adaka Boro, who formed his Niger Delta Volunteer Force, an armed group consisting mainly of people of Ijaw ethnic origin, with which he declared the Niger Delta treasury felony (Duru, 2010). The initial violence in the Niger Delta region occurred as a result of a long period of neglect and avoidance by either the oil companies or by governments that refused to take action as necessary to resolve the conflict.

**Confrontation / use of force:** According to Frynas (2003), "once a community becomes violent in Nigeria, the first thing the government does is to use confrontation and deploy armed policemen to keep peace in the area". (p.203). Confrontation is frequently used by the government in response to a crisis situation. Frynas said that a frequent response of the government to anti-oil protests or crises in the Niger Delta was the use of repressive security measures (p.99). International human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch have detailed information and evidence of extra-judicial killings, rapes, floggings, and arrests of anti-oil protesters. According to Human Rights Watch, "Activists from human rights and environmental organizations advocating for the rights of the oil-producing communities also face regular harassment from the authorities." These include arbitrary arrests, beatings, and intimidations (Human Rights Watch, 1999, pp. 131-133).

In dealing with anti-oil protests, the Nigerian authorities used regular units of the police, navy, and army. Sometimes, special squads consisting of the military and police are created to deal with protesters, such as the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force in 1994 (Human Rights Watch, 1995, p.14). The Odi massacre is one of the examples of this style of resorting to intimidation, oppression, and brutal force in response to the Niger Delta crisis. The Obasanjo administration, under the excuse of dealing with hoodlums who stay in Odi, killed seven (7) policemen on duty in Odi and carried out a military operation to wipe out the entire community. Environmental Right Action, in their publication, "A Blanket of Silence," believes that the killing of the policemen was never the reason for the onslaught on Odi. To them:

It was just an excuse by the government of Obasanjo in collaboration with Shell another oil company to summarily resolve the Niger Delta question. The idea was to contain the agitation of

the people of the Niger Delta for resource and environmental control, political autonomy and a democratic Federal Nigeria. Obasanjo and the social forces he represents perceive this agitation as a major threat to the status quo. They therefore want to conquer the Niger Delta by force of arms, easier way to sustain the rape on the people and their resources (A blanket of Silence, p.7).

In supporting the views of ERA, the civil society mission observed that:

General Obasanjo's handling of the Niger Delta crisis, as exemplified by his unconstitutional and reckless deployment of troops to Odi, has been consistent with the oppressive philosophy of governance of erstwhile military dictators, who conceive force as the basic strategy for resolving social and political problems. We would have expected that the coming into power of a civilian government would have ushered in a different approach to the crisis, one that would emphasize dialogue and popular participation in the quest for a just and lasting solution. Odi has cast a big question mark on the ability of the Obasanjo government to resolve the nation's social problems in a democratic manner (Blanket of Silence).

According to Otitte and Albert (1999), for Nigeria to experience sustainable peace in the Niger Delta region, it has to change its attitude to conflicts. (p.38). This popular way of responding to conflicts in the Niger Delta shows that not much attention is given to problem-solving approach or strategy by the Nigerian government. Taylor (2013) stated that the current democratic regime is not quite different from the military regime in terms of its approach and response to the crisis in the Niger Delta region. He said this is especially true in the use of force and repression to contain the pressures in the region. But contrary to the regime's expectation that such intimidation will calm the people and give the government and its partners a field day, the crisis has intensified and the region's militant youths, who have come to see their resistance as a war of survival, are now ready to even defy security agents. This has, however, in recent times, given a rethink to the government on how best to tackle the Niger Delta crisis. This is more so due to the fact that the nation's economy is threatened as the cost of operation activities in the region increases every now and then. Obasanjo's government has therefore put the following in place to prevent the situation from getting out of hand.

1. The establishment of the Niger Delta Development commission to, amongst others, develop and implement a master-plan for development and transformation of the Niger Delta and coordinate other development agencies and initiatives for the region.
2. The creation of the National oil spill contingency plan to respond to any environmental emergency in the oil industry.
3. Also for new oil and gas projects, Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) studies and the implementation of the provision of the studies with a view to enhancing the integrity of the environment are now compulsory (at least on paper).
4. The reduction of gas flaring through the policy of re-injection and the encouragement of development of gas-based projects.

## Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative method to gather data. One Deputy Corporate Affairs Manager was purposefully selected from the Niger Delta Development Commission in Port

Harcourt Office. In this inquiry, an in-depth interview was used to generate data from the NDDC Deputy Director of Corporate Affairs, a Commission set up by the Federal Government to cater for the needs of the people in the Niger Delta region of the nation. The decision for this interview was because this study sought to explore the topic area.

### **Transcription of Interview**

Mr. Psaro Yornamue is the Deputy Director of Corporate Affairs Department of NDDC, in this interview, Mr. Psaro Yornamue spoke on the causes of crises in the Niger Delta, steps/actions NDDC uses to tackle conflicts in the region, outcomes of NDDC's developmental programmes in the region, factors responsible for the success or otherwise of the programmes in the region, channels of communication the commission uses to disseminate information in the region,, challenges NDDC is confronted with in the discharge of their duties and on the satisfaction of the people with the Commissions activities in the region. The transcription is presented in the order the interview questions were organized.

#### **Ngozi Comfort Omojunikanbi: Welcome, Mr. Yornamue. Can you tell us what are the major causes of conflict in Niger Delta?**

In response to the major causes of crises in the Niger Delta region, Mr. Psaro Yornamue stated that the major cause of crises in the region is absence of genuine government attention to the challenges of people of the region. He explained that government's neglect to issues such as environmental pollution and degradation, the wanton activities of oil and allied industries operating in the area, the absence of social amenities and basic infrastructure were the leading causes of crises and agitations in the Niger Delta region. According to Mr. Yornamue, previous intervention efforts by successive administrations accomplished little or nothing in addressing the environmental and development challenges in the area. In his words:

“It was the presence of these issues-poverty, unemployment, lack of basic amenities, environmental pollutions, oil spillage, etc. that orchestrated agitations by various militia groups and conflicts between government agencies, especially security forces that were deployed to quell rising agitations in the Niger Delta that contributed to heightened conflicts in the region. It was to respond to the conflicts and challenges of the people of Niger Delta region that NDDC was created”. The Deputy Director of Corporate Affairs hinted that since its creation in 2000, NDDC has had to tackle these challenges, especially the resolution of conflicts and crises since the Commission is aware that development cannot thrive in the midst of conflicts and crises.

#### **What communication method does NDDC adopt to inform the people about development efforts in the Niger Delta region?**

In his response to the question that sought to know the communication channels used by NDDC in relating with its stakeholders, Mr. Yornamue stated NDDC uses local radio and television, newspapers, town criers, social media, town hall meetings and traditional rulers to inform various stakeholders of its programmes and activities. “The combination of both traditional, mass media and social media channels ensure that stakeholders are sufficiently informed about what NDDC is doing”.

**In your opinion sir, do you think the Niger Delta people are satisfied with NDDC intervening actions? If yes or no, why do you think so?**

On the satisfaction of the Niger Delta people with the interventions of NDDC, Mr. Yornamue categorised residents of the Niger Delta region into three groups-the informed group, the misinformed group and the uninformed group. According to him, the informed group is satisfied because they are aware of the efforts of NDDC in addressing environmental and development challenges in the region. "The misinformed group due to political differences may not be satisfied with NDDC. The uninformed group has not heard anything due to disconnect with mainstream media of communication". Mr. Yornamue claimed that despite the prevailing challenges, NDDC has done well in responding to crises and development challenges in the Niger Delta region.

**Thank you, Mr. Psaro Yornamue, for taking the time to speak and for honoring this interview.**

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

**RQ1: what are the public relations tools used by Federal Government of Nigeria in managing the Niger Delta conflict?**

Government Deputy Director, Corporate affairs identified some communication tools employed by government in communicating with the people to include use of local radio and television, newspapers, town criers, social media, town hall meetings as well as traditional rulers to inform various stakeholders of its programmes and activities. The combination of both traditional, mass media and social media channels are to ensure that stakeholders are sufficiently informed about what the government is doing.

**RQ2: Are the people of the region satisfied with government actions in development efforts in the region?**

The Government representative who participated in the interview identified three categories of residents in the region, the three groups comprises of (a) the informed group. (b) the misinformed group. (c) the uninformed group. The participant said, the informed group are satisfied because they are aware of the efforts of Federal Government in addressing environmental and development challenges in the region. The misinformed group due to differences politically may not be satisfied while the uninformed group has not heard anything due to disconnect from mainstream media of communication. However, in his opinion, despite the prevailing challenges, the government has done well in responding to crises and development challenges in Niger Delta region.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The study discovered that the government understood the role of Public Relations in managing the Niger Delta conflict and applied it in managing the conflict and developmental needs of the region. The government officer interviewed recognized also the importance of using communication in managing such conflict, the benefits which includes public enlightenment on the causes of the problem, dialoging with every stakeholder for peace and building a lasting relationship with them as well as correcting misinformation. Communication has been identified as one of the conflict management strategy by scholars, hence, adhering to constant communication with the people of the region will result to



closing the gaps relating to participating, understanding and settling of conflict (Heinze, 2013).

Furthermore, the study revealed some tools of public relations used which includes stakeholders' meetings, workshops, official letters, newspapers, radio, television, interactive sessions, town hall meetings, social media, and traditional rulers. All these are for maintain constant communication with all stakeholders. Despite this, it was discovered that there are some set of people who are either misinformed due to political reasons or uninformed of what government is doing. According to Liu & Horsley (2007), factors such as, politics, legal constraints, media scrutiny, devaluation of communication, poor public perception, lagging professional development and federalism are capable of hindering the effective and efficient use of government communication in communicating with the people.

### **Conclusion**

The study examined government development challenges in Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. The findings showed that some of the government development challenges in the region include kidnapping of contractors and government staff, cultism, extortion of money from contractors by the youths of the region and attacks on government staff for not contributing to youth movement. All these activities slow the rate of project execution in the region. Contractors at some point had to abandon sites due to threats from cultism, which is spreading like wildfire. However, it was discovered that the government uses meetings and peace outreaches to different locations to address these issues by appealing to the misguided to embrace peace so that the region can move forward. It was also discovered that public relations and effective communication play a vital role in managing the conflict and developmental needs of the region by creating room for dialogue and interaction with the various stakeholders. Based on the findings, the researcher concludes that public relations and effective communication are key factors in resolving the challenges the government is facing in the management of developmental needs in the Niger Delta region.

### **Recommendations**

It is therefore recommended that, among others:

1. The Niger Delta people are advised to pursue justice with non-violence.
2. The oil companies are recommended to protect the environment by complying with environmental regulations which includes cleaning up all polluted sites in the Niger Delta as well as stopping the gas flaring which is one of the major causes of the crises in region.

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