

**ASSESSMENT OF THE CHALLENGES FACED BY GOVERNMENT IN
DISCHARGING ITS FUNCTIONS AND THE OUTCOMES OF THE
INTERVENTIONS EMPLOYED BY THE GOVERNMENT**

OMOJUNIKANBI, Ngozi Comfort, Ph.D
Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies
University of Port Harcourt
Rivers State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This study was done to assess the challenges faced by government in discharging its functions and the outcomes of the interventions employed by the government. An in-depth interview was used as the method, while an interview guide schedule was used as the instrument of data collection. Findings revealed that some of the challenges confronting the government include kidnapping of contractors, extortion of money from contractors by youth groups, cultism, and attacks on some government staff, among others. Findings also showed that government uses meetings and peace outreaches to different locations to address these issues. The study also revealed that government public relations play an important role in the management of the Niger Delta conflict. It is therefore recommended, among others, that the government should effectively engage and involve the Niger Delta people in the execution of their projects. This is believed to give the people a sense of belonging, thereby making them more corporate with the contractors and the government in the execution of their duties. On the part of the Niger Delta people, it is recommended that they pursue justice with non-violence, 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 gas flaring, which is one of the major causes of the crisis in the region.

KEYWORDS: Conflict Management, Challenges, 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 vandalise 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 treat to the Commission in realising its vision and mission in the region.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Find out the challenges encountered by the government in discharging its functions in the region.
2. Ascertain the outcome of the steps employed.

Research Questions

1. What are the challenges encountered by the government in discharging its function in the region?
2. What is the outcome of steps / interventions employed?

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 practise 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 recognises 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 the dual concern model in the field of "concern for self and concern for others" (Plowman, 2001, 1998). 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 Development Commission (NDDC)

The NDDC was established as an interventionist agency by the government of Nigeria to help solve the problem in the region where people have been crying and agitating against the perceived marginalisation of the region. It was set up by the Obasanjo administration and officially inaugurated on December 1, 2000. (Niger Delta Development Commission Act, 2000). Its mission is to ensure the rapid and sustainable development of the region into an economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically responsible, and politically peaceful region. Asadu, (2008). The vision of NDDC is to offer a lasting solution to the socio-economic difficulties of the Niger Delta region.

The Act that established the NDDC specifically enumerated the following areas of intervention:

- surveying the Niger Delta in order to ascertain measures necessary to promote its physical and socio-economic development.
- Preparing master plans and schemes designed to promote the physical development of the Niger Delta region in the estimation of member states of the Commission.
- Implementation of all the measures approved for the development of the Niger Delta region by the Federal Government and the States of the Commission.
- Identify factors inhibiting the development of the Niger Delta region and assisting the member states in the formulation and implementation of policies to ensure sound and efficient management of the resources of the Niger Delta region.
- Assessing and reporting on any project been funded or carried out in the region by oil and gas companies and any other company, including non-governmental organizations, as well as ensuring that funds released for such projects are properly utilized.
- Tackling ecological and environmental problems that arise from the exploration of oil mineral in the Niger delta region and advising the Federal Government and the member states on the prevention and control of spillages, gas flaring and environmental pollution.
- Ljiasing with the various oil mineral and gas prospecting and producing companies on all matters of pollution, prevention and control.
- Executing such other works and performing such other functions, which in the opinion of the Commission are required for the sustainable development of the Niger Delta region and its people (NDDC Act, 2000).

Methodology

The researcher used 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, in-depth interview was used to generate data from the NDDC Deputy Director 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 its duties, and the satisfaction of the people with the commission's activities in the region. The transcription is presented in the order in which 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 the 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, and 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 are the steps/actions employed by NDDC to resolve the conflict?

On the steps or actions NDDC uses to tackle conflicts in the Niger Delta region, Mr. Yornamue hinted that NDDC uses projects, empowerments and consultations to respond to issues in the region. He explained that the projects that are carried out by the Commission, such as construction of roads, jetties, rural electrification, town halls, classroom blocks, bridges, shore protection, health facilities, provision of medical facilities and medical care, etc. are direct response of NDDC to infrastructural deficit and different health challenges

among some people of the region. He also explained that the empowerment package involves training of youths in computer skills, agriculture-farming, fishing and poultry. “At the end of the training, NDDC provides laptop and desktop computer sets and printers for computer trainees, fishing nets and boats for trainee fishers and materials for those trained in poultry and snail farming. The Commission also provides funds for the trainees so that they can hire shops and materials to start up the skills they have acquired”.

The NDDC’s Deputy Director, Corporate Affairs also explained that the Commission holds monthly meetings with ex-militants. He further hinted that some contracts are approved for the ex-agitators in order to entrench peace in the region. “The Commission partners with the Federal Ministry of Niger Delta to implement the presidential amnesty programme. NDDC also runs the traffic volunteer services for youths in the Niger Delta region. The Commission organizes annual stakeholders’ forum at which issues about the region are discussed by stakeholders. These meeting are for interactions with stakeholders and they have been strategic in resolving conflicts and agitations in the region”. Mr. Yornamue stated that the creation of state offices by the Commission also helps to douse tension and agitations in the Niger Delta region. This, he explained, is because most youth bodies and other groups prefer going to their state offices than coming to the Commission’s Headquarters in Port Harcourt to lodge complaints or for protests.

What are the outcome of steps / interventions employed?

On the outcomes of NDDC’s interventions in the Niger Delta region, the Deputy Director, Corporate Affairs of NDDC claimed that the intervention programmes and projects carried out by NDDC in the Niger Delta region have helped in reducing conflicts and hostilities in the region. “I can tell you without any fear of contradictions that agitations and conflicts have reduced. What we have now is cultism-fueled by politics. It has nothing to do with NDDC or the Niger Delta struggle”.

What are the factors responsible for its success or otherwise?

On factors responsible for the success of the interventions of NDDC in the Niger Delta region, Mr. Yornamue enumerated the factors that have helped the Commission to cultivate the cooperation of different groups in the Niger Delta region to include transparency, accountability, respect for human life and commitment. According to Mr. Yornamue, the activities and programmes of NDDC are open that everyone can access what the Commission is doing. He stated that projects are carried out with concerned stakeholders from planning to implementation and that this has cultivated the admiration of the people. The Deputy Director, Corporate Affairs of NDDC stated that NDDC has respect and values the welfare of the people of the region. “This accounts for the construction of health centres in several communities across the states of the Niger Delta region. The Commission organizes medical outreaches at which several health cases, such as kidney transplant, eye and dental surgeries as well as other cases are been diagnosed and treated. The Commission also partners with several medical centres (public and private) across the region to attend to the health needs of the people of the region. This is in addition to overseas medical cares carried by NDDC for cases that cannot be managed locally”.

According to Mr. Yornamue, NDDC understands the importance of good public relations management and the Corporate Affairs Department have remained committed to ensuring the goodwill of different stakeholders across the region. “At Corporate Affairs, we listen to

voices and complaints of different groups. We advise management on the best measures to resolve issues and address complaints. We respond to comments and criticisms and this has helped in building a good image for the Commission”. The Corporate Affairs Deputy Director further explained that NDDC has its eyes on handling strategic publics, such as the youths and women. The commitment to addressing issues about women and the youths informed the creation of the Directorates on youth and women affairs. “We also have another Directorate called Education, Health and Social Services (EHSS) Directorate which takes care of education, health and social services, such as markets and small scale business. NDDC also runs Service Compact to all Nigeria (servicom) unit that ensures that visitors at our offices are well treated. If one is badly treated, the individual can lodge a complaint with the servicom unit for appropriate actions by management”.

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”.

Are there challenges encountered by NDDC in discharging its functions in the region?

When asked whether there are challenges the NDDC is confronted with as it discharges its functions in the region, the Deputy Director Corporate Affairs stated that the Commission is challenged by issues such as kidnapping of contractors, extortion of money from contractors by some youth groups and attack on some NDDC staff for not contributing to youth movements. “Cultism is also spreading like a wild fire and this also slows the pace of project execution in the region. In some cases, contractors have had to abandon sites due to threats posed by cultism”. He also informed that NDDC 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.

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 challenges encountered by the government in discharging its function in the region?

The government official who participated in the interview recognized or identified some challenges that deter the rate in which the government would have otherwise successfully and effectively discharge their duties in the region. The challenges identified by the interviewer include issues such as kidnapping of contractors, extortion of money from contractors by some youth groups, cultism and attack on some government staff for not contributing to youth movements. This challenges slows the pace of project execution in the region. however, it was discovered that government officials use 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

RQ2: what are the outcomes of the steps employed in managing the challenges in the region?

The participant in the interview agreed that the outcome of interventions by government have helped in reducing conflicts and hostilities in the region. Agitations has also reduced. Findings revealed that most conflicts in the region is caused by cultism-fueled by politics. It has nothing to do with Niger Delta struggle. The participant in the interview also acknowledged and attributed the success of the outcomes achieved so far to the great role public relations plays. According to Mr. Yornamue “the government understands the importance of good public relations management and the Corporate Affairs Department have remained committed to ensuring the goodwill of different stakeholders across the region. In his words, “At Corporate Affairs, we listen to voices and complaints of different groups. We advise management on the best measures to resolve issues and address complaints. We respond to comments and criticisms and this has helped in building a good image for the Commission”.

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, 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 were forced to abandon sites at one point due to 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 government are facing in the management of developmental needs of the Niger Delta region.

Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that, among others:

1. The Government should effectively engage and involve the Niger Delta people in the execution of their projects, this is believed will give the people a sense of belonging thereby making them to cooperate with the contractors and the government officials in the execution of their duties.
2. The Government should ensure that the citizens are informed properly as this can help eliminate misinformation as well as enlighten the uniformed.

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