

Review

# Oil multinationals and conflicts construction in oil-host communities in the Niger Delta

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**Oil-host communities in the Niger Delta have for over two decades been enmeshed in violent conflicts. These conflicts have resulted in numerous deaths, destruction of properties and entire communities. The proliferation of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta is a departure from the history of social, political and economic relations in the region before and during colonial rule. The paper interrogates the trajectories of conflict in the Niger Delta and states that the vitriolic relation within and between oil-host communities is a product of the antics of the oil multinationals. It argues that the business ethics of the oil multinationals are premised only on profit maximisation. Thus, they have actively aided and abetted state repression in the Niger Delta, and anchored their relations in oil-host communities, on partnership with those with power to violently disrupt their activities. The ethics and practice of the oil multinationals in oil-host communities besides conducting conflicts, eroded and fragmented traditional authority; giving rise to intense struggles by contending groups with their attendant violent outcomes. Three case studies are used to show the conflict conducting policies and practices of the oil multinationals in oil-host communities.**

**Key words:** Oil multinationals, conflicts construction, Niger Delta.

## INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta has for over two decades, been engulfed by oil-related conflicts that have taken various forms; community-state (security forces), community-oil company, intra-community, inter-community and inter-ethnic. Examples include: Umuechem and the state 1990; Obagi and the state 1993, 1994; Odi and the state 1999; Soku and Nembe that spread to Sangama, Kula and Opukiri 1992, Eleme, Ogu and Okrika 1999, Ijaw and Itsekiri 1997–2003; Ogoni and Andoni 1993, 1994; Ke and Bille 2001 Itsekiri and Okere Urhobo 1999; Bassambiri and Ogbolomabiri 2005; Afiesere and the

state 2006; Okerenkoko, and the state 2006, Gbaramatu Kingdom and the state 2009, Ayakoromo and the state 2010. Most of these conflicts were internecine wars that caused acute destructions and severe constriction of human security that the Niger Delta could aptly be called a “zone of violence” (Keane, 1996). Although there are no clear statistics on the number of deaths arising from these conflicts, it is commonly acknowledged that these conflicts have resulted in large number of deaths and destruction of properties and in some cases entire communities in the region.

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Admittedly, the Niger Delta, due to its riverine and swampy topography, has historically been extremely politically fragmented and subjected to frequent disputes over land, fishing rights, and sometimes over traditional leaders' sphere of influence (Emuedo et al., 2007). However, in spite of this, the history of social, political and economic relations in the region before and during colonial rule indicates that the area largely symbolised peace and was developing along a path, akin to many areas in today's Nigeria (Iyayi, 2008). Indeed, the natural resources; forests with animals and water bodies with fishes were shared freely by the people before the advent of oil.

An examination of the trajectories of conflicts and the cyclic nature of these conflicts would seem to suggest that the conflicts have been goaded by varied interests that may not be unconnected with the presence of oil in the region. Indeed, community-states conflicts are mostly the state's repressive response to the people's "combative reactionism" (Emuedo, 2010) to the "ecological war" (Eteng, 1997) foisted on the region, by unbridled oil activities. The acute repression in the region in the face of deleterious impacts of oil activities on the environment and the resultant poverty necessitated Okonta (2006) to remark that, the presence of the state is felt only in the form of machine guns and jackboots in the Niger Delta. Also, inter and intra-community conflicts in the region, appears driven by dimensions of inter-communal relations amongst communities in the region that is anchored on intense struggle for land, forests, creeks and swamps containing oil, contrary to erstwhile practices before the advent of oil. These conflicts that have acutely constricted human security in the Niger Delta have been linked to the business ethics and practices of the oil multinationals in oil-host communities (Omeje, 2004, 2006b). The paper interrogates the trajectories of conflict in the Niger Delta. It argues that though most conflicts are off-shoots of state's actions; the oil multinationals through their policies and practices actively aided and abetted conflicts in the region. Three case studies are presented to show how policies and practices the oil multinationals conduces conflicts in oil-host communities in the Niger Delta.

### **CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN OIL-HOST COMMUNITIES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Many scholars regard conflict as an inevitability in human relations (Fraiser and Hipel, 1984:3; Burton, 1987a:8, 1987b:137-138; Okoh and Ewhariemen, 2001:3-4). To Burton (1987b:138) "Conflict is an essential element in human relations ... the means to change ... and the means by which social values; welfare, security, justice and personal development may be achieved". In apparent support of this notion, Nnoli (1998:3-5) opined that conflict is not only a pervasive phenomenon in

human relationships but often, it is the 'basic unit for understanding social existence'. Conflicts may be internal or external. External are conflicts that are not caused by interactions within the group or community but impact its functionality. On the other hand, internal conflicts may occur among or between actors within a group or community. Conflicts may be violent or non-violent. However, in any society, conflict, especially of the violent type is usually a harbinger of insecurity. But why do violent conflicts occur? Psychologists have noted that conflicts turn violent when the anger and or worries that give rise to frustration (the source of conflict) are not resolved. Also, avoidance or denial of conflict makes conflict violent, as the ignored group seeks to redress the issue at contention (Albert, 1999; Francis, 2006). Conflicts in most Third World societies have been blamed on factors, such as greed (Collier and Hoefler, 1998, 2002, 2007; Collier et al., 2009); economic deprivation and social disorganisation (Keen, 1998, Draman 2003, Ikporukpo, 2003); grievance (Ikelegbe, 2006; Ukiwo, 2007); frustration and aggression (Goor et al., 1996; Emuedo et al., 2007); relative poverty (Dollard et al., 1939); conflicting interpretations of rights and responsibilities due to values difference (Olokesusi, 1996); exploitation and domination (Anele, 1999); and the failure of social contract (Murshed and Jadoedin, 2008). Gurr (1970) opined that conflicts are caused by poverty and other factors having devastating impact on the progress of any society.

The conflicts in oil-host communities in the Niger Delta appear to capture some aspects of the above perspectives. For instance, the Nigerian state has earned estimated \$600 billion revenue from oil since 1956 (Watts, 2008) but the oil revenues have not touched the lives of the people. This is because the oil multinationals consider the oil-host communities irrelevant in their operations; as such, they have absolute disregard for their well-fare. This is exemplified by the fact that Shell, the pioneer oil multinational spent only a paltry 0.000007% of the over \$30 billion of oil it extracted from the region on community assistance in 25 years (Rowell, 1994). Till date, the oil multinationals attitude to the region remains unchanged. As, such, the Niger Delta remained as described by Willink et al. (1958:34) "poor, backward, neglected". Thus, the Niger Delta is a place of amazing paradoxes. The region, suffers obtuse administrative deficit, decayed socio-economic infrastructure, and endemic poverty. Besides, these, the typical community in the Niger Delta is usually comprised of different and often conflicting groups; farmers, fishermen, traditional rulers, firewood cutters, hunters, unemployed youths, traders, etc. Thus, the communities are not homogenous but comprised of individual units having special needs based on several factors; who they are, where they live, their resources, livelihoods, the nature of their terrains, the problems created by state neglect; unemployment poverty and environmental despoliation

from oil activities. It is clear therefore, that people inhabiting a community can be a source of social unrest. After the oil spill at Rumuekpe, Rivers State, in 1989, for instance, fishermen dug pits along the banks of the less polluted section of their lake to entrap fish. However, this was at variance with the farmers' intention to grow dry season crops on the available safe area. Often, in parts of the region firewood cutters damage farmers' crops, transporters damage river banks and fish traps, and cause turbulence in river channels. Also community leaders are sometimes in conflict with villagers arising from the seeming failure of the former to address the needs of the latter. Thus, myriads sources of discords exist in the communities.

### Trajectories of conflicts in oil-host communities

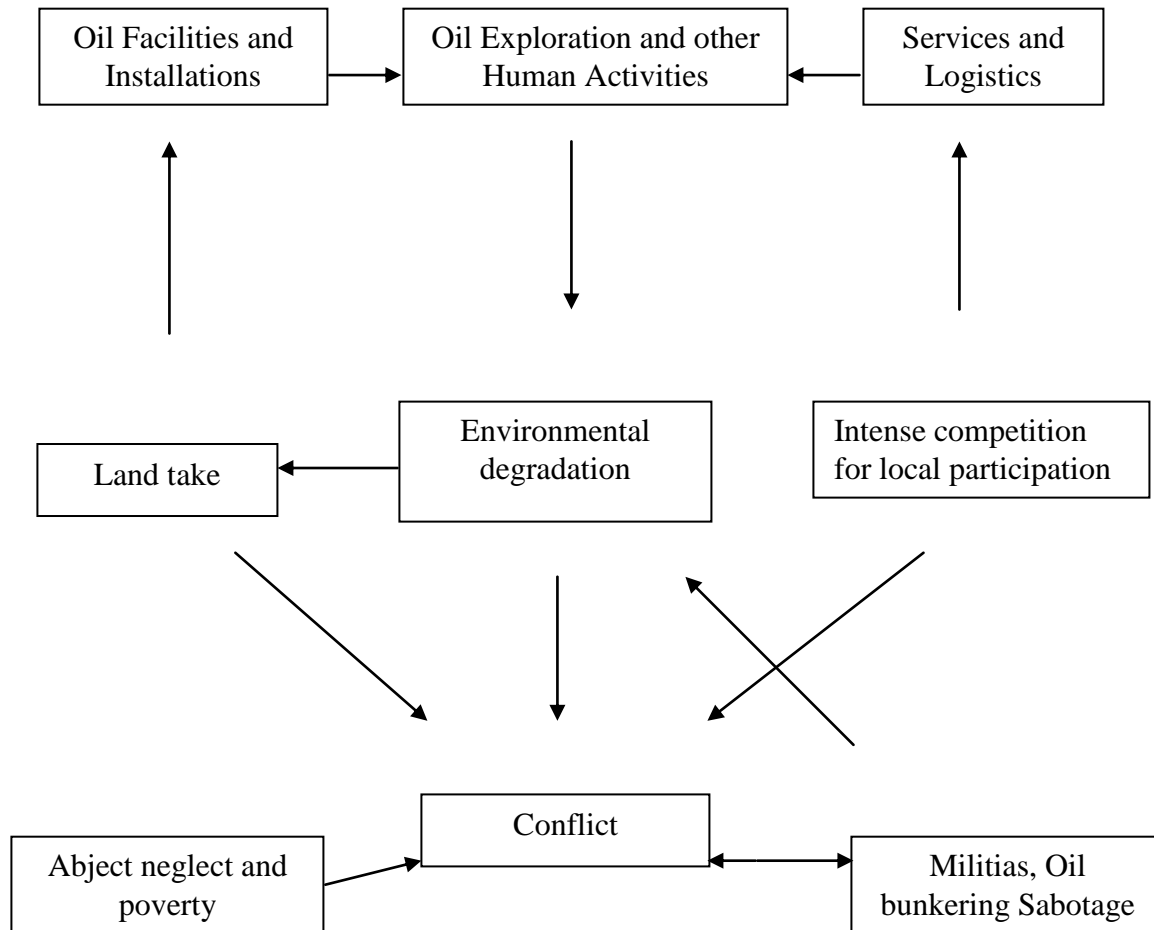
As earlier mentioned, though some inter-communal competition and conflicts had occurred, the Niger Delta was largely characterised by peace. It was also suggested that the conflicts may be connected with the presence of oil in the Niger Delta. Indeed, Pa Saro-Wiwa, (2002:viii cited in Iyayi, 2008) alluded to this, when he asserted that "...were living in peace before Shell came. We were sharing our forest with animals and monkeys but when Shell came, they started setting one community against the other. They started with Andoni and Ogoni and before you knew it, they had started killing our people". As Iyayi (2008) asserted, the history of "setting one community against the other, and how, "before you knew it, they had started killing our people" is the history of oil activities; role of the "oil multinationals" in the region's progress; the oil multinationals methods of operations, and ramifications of their activities". The State has failed to mediate operations of the oil companies in the region, due its dependence, on oil rents and revenues. Since the mid 1960s oil emerged as the core source of state revenues, thus, a key issue in Nigerian politics. Indeed, control over oil was a key catalyst of the Nigerian civil war; 1967–70 that killed a million persons and displaced 6 million others (Ibeanu and Luckham, 2007). Since then, Nigeria has remained in a state of suppressed, 'silent' or 'structural' or 'repressive' violence (Galtung, 1976; Watts, 1983). In other words, oil became synonymous with conflict.

Therefore, conflicts in the oil-host communities have been goaded by varied oily interests. A 2010 study "Oil, The Nigerian State and Human Security in the Niger Delta" reported that initially; inter-community conflict was the most common in the Niger Delta (Emuedo, 2010). The report stated further that since 2000, the common forms of conflicts have been; community and state and community and oil companies. Community-states conflicts are mostly repressive actions of the state at ensuring steady oil flow in the region. This form of conflicts has exerted the greatest damage on the region.

Inter and intra-community conflicts, appears driven by dimensions of relations amongst oil-host communities that is anchored on intense struggle for what Watts (2004) has labelled governable spaces. These conflicts are often, over receipt of oil's tokenistic benefits. Inter-community conflicts are caused mainly, by inter-community struggle over benefits from oil companies; Intra-community conflicts are usually triggered by disagreement between community factions. The issues in contention may include land ownership petty contracts and compensation for damages. This may arise from rivalry between local comprador elites to position themselves as a bridge between the oil multinationals and the community or as a result of activities of vocal local elite "benefit captors" to capture community resources for themselves. This is because the oil multinationals often align with individuals or communities that could disrupt oil activities or suppress agitations against their operations. Thus, as Omeje (2004, 2006b) asserted, the conflicts are closely linked to the antics of the oil multinationals in oil-host communities. Six identifiable intra-community factions and their role in intra-community conflict are shown in the Figure 1. Oil company-community conflicts are usually offshoots of a number of factors; oil spills and the associated ecological devastation; delays in the clean-up of areas impacted by oil spills; payment of inadequate compensation for damaged crops; oil multinationals' breach of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and patronage of community factions. Community and state conflicts have been triggered initially by neglect and deprivation of the region by the state. Whereas these triggered the conflict, the violent response of the state, to the policies of the oil multinationals in oil-host communities to ensure steady oil flow have sustained the conflicts. Some of these conflicts are discussed later in the work (Figure 1).

### Oil multinationals and insecurity in the Niger Delta

Oil operations it appears takes place mostly under dictatorships and or in conflict zones. The view that oil operation is intertwined with violent conflicts has been expressed by many writers (Nore and Turner, 1981; Yergin, 1991; Saro Wiwa, 1992; Watts, 2004). Indeed, evidences abound of the link between oil operations and conflicts in most oil producing regions of the world; Cambodia, Venezuela, Sudan, Chad, Iraq, Iran and of course Nigeria. Watts (2004) associated these oil-related conflicts to the quest for profit maximisation by the oil multinationals; hence, the disregard for best practice in their operations. Yergin (1991) epochal work "The Prize" espoused the close link between oil and conflicts in Third World countries since they discovered oil. Watts (2004) seem to share the same view by chronicling oil-related conflicts in oil producing areas of Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and Nigeria; arising from the oil



**Figure 1.** Dimensions of conflict in oil-host communities. Source: Okoko, 1978.

multinational's impunity of operations. Thus, Ikporukpo (1996:159), noted that "Since the great gold rush, ..., no natural resource has attracted so much attention and generated so much boom and yet so much conflict as petroleum". One thing common to Third World oil producing countries is that the oil is found in ethnic minorities' areas. Ethnic majorities inherited and personifies the post colonial state; their attitude towards the ethnic minorities' oil producing areas as in the colonial state was predatory. Thus, areas were subjugated to internal colonialism for the purpose of revenue accumulation.

The basic structure of the colonial state was directed on establishing authority and control required for facilitating its primary objective of economic exploitation, as such, its laws empowered its agents (Multinational companies) to dominate and extract resources (Young, 1986:29). Thus, colonial policies were very congenial to the multinational companies (its agents) rather than the local people, as, it sponsored only the economic policies of the interest it represented; the acquisition of the resources to be used to advance British interests (Young, 1986: 31). As, such the multinational companies (its

agents) often leveraged state policies in their favour. Post colonial Nigeria inherited the basic traits of the colonial state. Thus, as, in the colonial state, the oil multinationals, (its agents) have also had ample leverage over state policies. As a pioneer and largest oil producer, Shell has been specially privileged in leveraging state policies; its interests most often, coincide with that of the state. Consequently, state officials have been more concerned with interests of the oil multinationals, instead of the local people in the oil producing areas. The interest of the oil multinationals in the Niger Delta is the derivation of maximum revenues from oil; achievable only, by continuous oil flow. Also, the Nigerian state as Obi, (2004:173) opined, "depends almost wholly on revenues from oil. Thus, the dynamics and contradictions internally (economy, politics etc.,) of the state dictates that it coercively defends oil facilities". As, such, despite the acute deleterious impacts of oil activities in the Niger Delta, the state has ensured continuous oil flow by coercion and brutal repression of the people. This coincidence of interests in continuous oil flows between the oil multinationals and the state accounts for the former's utter disregard for repression in the Niger Delta.

Indeed, complicity of the oil multinationals in the vicious repressions in the Niger Delta is exemplified by their several actions; overt and covert to "oil" insecurity in the region. First, it was revealed at the sittings of the Oputa Panel (Human Rights Violations Investigations and Reconciliation Commission) that late dictator General Sani Abacha's life Presidency campaign got \$40 million funding from the oil multinationals (Obi, 2001:173). In 2000, the oil multinationals gave over ₦7 billion to the Nigerian Navy for arms procurement to enable it combat attacks against their operations in the Niger Delta (*The Comet*, April 26, 2000:16). What is worthy of note is that the oil multinationals choose to arm the Navy rather than deploy this huge funds for the provision of social facilities to uplift the squalid state of the region. However, though the Navy was unable use the weapons procured to prevent insurgents' attacks on Nigeria's largest off-shore oil production and storage platform, Bonga in 2006 (Watts, 2007), it deftly used the weapons to destroy several communities; Odioma, 2005<sup>1</sup>, Gbaramatu Kingdom 2009 and Ayakoromo 2010 (Amaize, 2009; 2010). In all instances, several hundreds of persons were killed, thousands displaced and almost the entire communities destroyed.

Second, individually, the oil multinationals, routinely offered logistics support to the security forces on repression mission in the Niger Delta. For instance, Shell paid field allowances of the men of the dreaded Rivers State Internal Security Task Force. The task force was set-up by late General Abacha's regime at the start of the Ogoni people's peaceful protests against Shell, over the deleterious effects of oil activities on their environment. The task force was headed by one Major Okuntimo, a man who boasted of knowing over one hundred ways of killing a human being. The task force turned Ogoniland into a garrison enclave; and subjected the people, to the worst acts of terror and dehumanisation. Acute repression of the Ogonis climaxed with the kangaroo trial and judicial murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his compatriots in 1995. Shell was implicated in Saro-Wiwa's murder as it allegedly induced two key witnesses with money and job offers to give false testimonies against Saro-Wiwa (Manby, 1999a; Pegg, 1999:476; Greenpeace, 2001).

Indeed, Shell by several of its actions showed active support for state repression and its preference for an environment of insecurity rather than peace in the Niger Delta. For instance, barely three months after Saro-Wiwa's judicial murder, Shell provided logistics support and paid the field allowances of an army escort for its pipeline contractor Wilbros that killed one woman and injured 20 others in Ogoniland. Also, Shell procured 107 handguns and assorted weapons worth over \$500,000 to the Nigeria police in the Niger Delta (Manby, 1999:175). Shell's supply of weapons to the police is not surprising, as, the Police has often, viciously attacked, killed and destroyed communities to deter protests against Shell's

ruinous oil activities in the region. For instance, the police on Shell's invitation attacked unarmed protesters at Umuechem community in November 1990. The police killed 80 persons including the king and burnt 495 houses during the attack. Again in October 1999, on the invitation of Shell, the police attacked Choba community, where they raped 30 women, razed several houses and destroyed properties worth several millions. Other police attacks on communities on Shell's behalf include; Uwheru; 20 persons Killed and 11 houses burnt in January 2004, and Afiesere; 20 persons killed and over 80 houses burnt in 2006. Thus, the police deftly deployed the weapons supplied to it by Shell for the purpose for which they were supplied; killing, maiming of the Niger Delta people and destruction of their communities.

Shell has not been the only oil multinational involved in overt and or covert suppression of the Niger Delta people to ensure continuous oil flow. Chevron, an American oil multinational also routinely provided logistics for troops on repressive missions in the Niger Delta. For instance, on January 4, 1999, soldiers conveyed in a Chevron helicopter and three boats brutally attacked and sacked two villages (Opia and Ikenyan) in Delta State killing 7 persons, while 100 others were declared missing. Chevron offered to pay a paltry sum of \$5,000 compensation to both communities when its complicity in the attacks (provision of logistics support to the soldiers) was reported. On another occasion, soldiers also, conveyed in Chevron helicopters opened fire on peaceful protesters killing 10 persons and injuring scores of others (Manby, 1999:175). These acts clearly evidence the collaborative role of the oil multinationals in the perpetuation of conflicts in the Niger Delta. These oil multinationals' collaborative actions with the state to suppress the people are besides their profit maximisation driven business ethics and antics in oil-host communities.

## **OIL MULTINATIONALS POLICIES CONDUCTING CONFLICT IN OIL-HOST COMMUNITIES**

Korten (1996:131,70-71), while commenting on the business ethics of oil multinationals in their host communities, noted that "their operations are premised on an ideology of relationship that: corporations should act solely on the basis of profitability without regard to impacts; absence of loyalty to place or community, and that relentless pursuit of profit leads to optimal results". According to Ashton-Jones (1998:130), the activities of oil multinationals are rooted in a culture that is founded on the assumptions that "profit maximisation is the basis for operating a business, and in the contest of the Niger Delta, what this means is that any expense beyond what is needed to get oil out of the ground is undesirable". This business ethics of the oil multinationals impacted on oil-host communities in two major ways with profound effects. Firstly, it led to impunity of oil activities with

absolute lack of care for the environment. Thus, since the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta, oil activities have involved huge gas flaring, incessant oil spillages, indiscriminate waste dumping and absence of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA). Secondly, the oil multinationals, to ensure continuous oil flow through their policies willingly destroyed the traditional bond and cohesion that hitherto existed in the oil-host communities, leading to incessant conflicts.

The business ethics of the oil multinationals eroded social capital in the Niger Delta. They achieved this by preying on the pervasive poverty to pit the people against themselves. This impacted the sociological structure of oil-host communities, with adverse effects on social relations. Sociologically, social capital refers to the basic resources inherent in social relations that ease collective action; trust, norms and institutions that represent groups that meet regularly for common objectives. A feature of social capital is reciprocity; this promotes bargaining, conciliation and teamwork. These are vital elements for the maintenance and sustainability of community growth. Social capital therefore, engenders teamwork among groups, communities and institutions. Other related benefits include social elements like; information sharing, collective action, decision-making that deter clannish or opportunistic behaviour. In the Niger Delta the oil multinationals as a policy wittingly eroded social capital. They deployed divide and rule tactics, through loop sided sharing of tokenistic totems of recognition; annual diaries and calendars among or within oil-host communities. Land ownership was usually, the basis for recognition, as, a host community. As a result communities began laying claim to oil bearing lands or lands proposed for oil-related projects. This led to intense struggle over land by many contiguous communities in the Niger Delta, as each wanted recognition as an oil host community. The struggle over land was such that communities that gave out land to their filial relations centuries ago suddenly began laying claim again to such lands. The counter claim by erstwhile recipients to such lands due to centuries of occupation led to struggle over oil bearing lands. Often, communities or sections of communities pitted against each other. Thus, hitherto peaceful communities with long filial relationships become embroiled in vitriolic conflicts. This led to the conflicts between the Kalabaris (Soku) and the Oluasiris (Nembe), in 1992; triggered by the decision to name a Shell gas project, "Soku Gas Plant". The conflict spread later to the neighbouring communities; Sangama, Kula and Opukiri. This also led to the Eleme, Ogu and Okrika Communal conflict and the gruesome murders in October 1999. The wars between Ogoni and most of its neighbours between 1993 and 1994: Andoni in July 1993, Okirika in December 1993, and Ndoki and Asa in April 1994 also derived from contention over land (Ibeanu, 2000:27). So also, was the Eleme, Ogu and Okrika Communal conflict in October, 1999. This was over the benefits accruing from being

the base of the Port Harcourt Refining Company (a subsidiary of NNPC) at Alesa Eleme. Other neighbouring communities that were also caught up in conflicts include; Bille, Kalabari, Umuechem, Obagi, Brass, Nembe, Rumuobiokani, Ogu, Okere-Warri, Aladja and Bolo (Okeke, 2000:40).

As if these were not enough, the oil multinationals through their community liaison officers also, stoked and "oiled" disharmony in oil-host communities. They routinely created greasy corporatist relationships with influential or vocal elites (local or urban) to sabotage communal interests. They induce such persons with contracts that are not expected to be executed; they are actually cash gifts, bribes or ex-gratia payments to such persons (Zalik, 2004; Omeje, 2006). This led to proliferation of oil industry sponsored cottage industry projects in oil-host communities, in the guise of community development. These projects were never commissioned for use. Hancock (1989) aptly, described assistance offered by the oil multinationals in the Niger Delta as follows; "roads that end at rivers and then continue blithely onward on the other side, electrification without power supplies, highly sophisticated equipment that no one can use, aquaculture projects producing dish at \$4,000 per kilo for consumption by peasants who do not earn \$400 per year". In other words, the oil multinationals spent money in the name of the people, rather than for the people. Also, the oil multinationals settled visible youth groups with payment of "stay at home" or "standby" money; and later, organised (arm) youth groups to protect their facilities as a Shell financed study revealed (WACS, 2003). These corporate practices inserted millions of dollars of "easy money" into individual hands, with youths the major beneficiaries as they became greatly empowered financially. The oil multinationals intended these actions to stem protests against their operations and attack on or sabotage of their facilities. These antics contributed to an environment in which militancy was encouraged and facilitated. Besides, they also corrupted the entire fabric of community leaderships, as families and sections of communities pitted against one another. As a result, the powers of traditional authorities became utterly eroded leading to leadership fragmentations in oil-host communities.

This condition greatly favoured the youths who acquired arms with their new found wealth, enhanced their capacity and began exerting themselves more forcefully. Soon they emerged as the fulcrum of power and the only group that could gain attention of the oil companies. As it were, only violence and disruption of oil activities attracted benefits from the oil multinationals. This compelled the traditional leaderships to hand over the responsibility for liaison and negotiation with the oil companies to the youths. In truth, as Alagoa (2000) asserted, youth leaders simply intimidated or violently pushed aside, their elders and traditional authorities and became the voice of the people. Kemedi (2003: 13-21) opined this was because

the “oil multinationals related to the leadership fragmentation in the oil-host communities in terms of which faction was more powerful and disruptive as opposed to which faction was properly constituted and traditionally legitimate”.

However, awareness of the fact that violence and disruptive actions against oil activities, often, earned “benefits” from the oil multinationals ignited waves of intra-communal conflicts and youth violence across oil-host communities. These conflicts resulted from competition by various youth groups to gain supremacy in their communities, and by implication, right of access to the oil multinationals and easy money. These conflicts in turn, impacted negatively on oil production, as they acutely disrupted oil activities. Frustrated, the oil multinationals began engaging private paramilitary security firms to secure their personnel, housing estates and facilities. Thus, over 10 mercenary companies have been operating in the Delta since 2005. These include; Triple Canopy, Control Risk, Erinys International (a British company with vast experience in Iraq), Armor Group, Aegis Defence System, and Northbridge Service Group; successor to the defunct Executive Outcomes; the South African paramilitary force employed by Angola during its war with Jonas Savimbi’s UNITA rebels forces. Its personnel directly engaged in combat during the Sierra Leonean civil war. The mentality and psychology of these security personnel was that of soldiers on combat mission. As a result, their attitude was that of hostility; the Niger Delta people were considered enemies (Isima, 2007). As far as they were concerned, their assignment in the region is protection of the oil multinationals “rights” to carry out their business with impunity; get oil at very cheap rate to yield maximum profit. The brutalities that resulted from actions of these security personnel further complicated relations between the people especially the youths and the oil multinationals, leading to more conflicts. Exasperated, the oil multinationals prodded the state into acute militarisation of the entire oil-host communities with the Joint Military Task Force (JTF). The activities of the JTF as we all know led to the escalation of the conflict into a near full blown insurgency in late 2005. Three cases are hereunder used to empirically illustrate the nexus between oil multinationals actions and conflicts in oil-host communities. The first two illustrates conflicts arising from actions of comprador elite “benefit captors” aligned to the oil multinationals, while the third illustrates conflicts arising from oil multinationals’ support for community factions.

### **Case 1: Egbemo Angalabiri community**

A well-head failure in 1999 at Egbemo Angalabiri community led to oil spillage that destroyed communal fish ponds and the sources of water supply. As always,

the traditional council promised to step into the matter. But arising from the “seemingly failure” of the traditional council to achieve meaningful results in the past, the youths that time decided to participate actively on that occasion. After several meetings between Shell and the community and owing to the combativeness of the youths, Shell admitted liability. The community demanded hundreds millions of dollars for damages caused by the spill as compensation. The stage was thus, set for negotiation between the community and Shell on the extent of compensation. The spill was very extensive and destructive and Shell had admitted culpability, thus, it had very little room to manoeuvre. Boxed in, as it were, Shell resorted to its old tricks, so, as, the negotiations were going on, Shell as usual made under-the-table payments to the paramount chief and members of his Council, to influence the community to accept a lower sum, than the amount proposed by the community as compensation and sent to Shell. However, the information about the payment was leaked to the youths. As a result, the youth leadership confronted some members of the traditional council who confirmed the information. The youths led a revolt against their paramount Chief and dethroned him together with his council of chiefs. Thereafter, the youths mounted a campaign to disrupt Shell’s operations in and around their community. Shell promptly contacted the youth leadership and after a brief meeting, paid the amount demanded by the community as compensation. The youths thereafter sidelined the traditional council and took up the role of liaison and negation with the oil companies.

### **Case 2: Ewureni**

Nigeria’s pioneer and major oil producer Shell has several operating oil wells in Ewureni community in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. The Ewureni community entered into MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) with Shell for the provision of basic social amenities, offer of employments and most importantly payment of compensation for damages to properties (communal and individual) from Shell’s activities in the area. Despite decades of numerous incidences of oil spills that have extensively damaged individual farmlands, communal fish ponds and shrine; Shell it seems failed to pay compensation to the community. This is despite assurances by the king whenever such incidents occurred that Shell would pay compensation. However, unknown to the people, Shell has been secretly paying to the king and a clique of chiefs all monies due to the community as compensations from its operations. In return, the king and these chiefs had ensured that no protest is mounted against Shell in the community. The king rewarded these chiefs with appointment as liaison between the community and the oil companies, after they successfully foisted the king on community. This is

because it was the king's mother that hailed from the community. In a patriarchal society as the Niger Delta, this precludes him from the throne but these group of chiefs ensured that he was foisted on the community. This situation subsisted till 1999.

Around mid July 2000, a Shell contractor in connivance with some officials of Shell stole a well-head (Christmas tree) from an operating oil well near the community. The uncapped well spewed out crude oil about 30 metres into the air and rained down on the surrounding areas for over three weeks. The ecosystems of all contiguous communities to the oil well were seriously affected by the huge oil spill, inclusive of Ewvreni. The youths on that occasion decided to confront Shell directly. However, as the youths planned their mode of action, Shell contacted and made an under-the-table payment of a pitiable sum of ₦4 million to the King to use the security forces to coerce the youths' leadership. But this time as in Egbemo, a source leaked the information about the payment and the king's plan to use the security forces to coerce them. As a result, the youths quietly slipped into the forest on the day that the security forces were to arrive the town. Thus, when the security forces on invitation of the king flooded the community; all the youths were gone. About a week later, the youths leadership sent a deputation to the king, ostensibly to "sue for peace" and "to declare their allegiance" to his authority. The king thinking that he has won again asked the security forces to depart the town. But in what was akin to a coup, that same night after the security forces departed, the youths besiege the King's palace. After about an hour of gun battle, the king was captured. The youths killed the King in front of his family members, tied his dead body to a vehicle and dragged it round the whole community. Thereafter his dead body was put in cheap coffin and laid on the side of the Ughelli-Port Harcourt high way for over three months, before it was finally buried. After the death of the king, Shell promptly negotiated with the youths and then paid the compensation they demanded. As is to be expected, the youths thereafter, effectively took control of the community.

### Case 3: Nembe

The intra-community crisis in Nembe offers a clear insight into the oil multinationals' nefarious antics and support for those with more disruptive power, at the expense of community cohesion in oil-host communities in the Niger Delta. Thus, giving insight to the fact that the oil multinationals preference to operate not only in an environment of conflict but that would keep the oil flowing no matter the cost to the people. This would explain why oil and blood has flowed side-by-side in the Niger Delta. It is therefore discussed in some more details.

There are four oil fields in Nembe that produces about

150,000 barrels daily (Kemedi, 2003). Between 1985 and 2000, 50 oil spills incidents occurred in the community that spilled an estimated 500,000 barrels into the environment (Kemedi, 2003). These spills had a debilitating impact on the flora and fauna. As a result, in the late 1980s, the Nembe Council of Chiefs requested authority from their King to negotiate benefits and other tokens for the community with the oil companies. The King granted this request. This turned out to be the beginning of conflicts in the community. The initial conflict was spurred by the rivalry between the chiefs over the control of the benefits from the oil companies. This rivalry disrupted the community's traditional structure of power as the bond between the chiefs was broken, setting the stage for more challenges to traditional authorities.

The first challenge to the community's traditional authority came from a youth group; the Isongo-foru. The group usurped the power of the king by stripping the Council of Chiefs of the power to negotiate on behalf of the community with the oil companies. Hitherto, the king in council constituted the sole authority in the community. This began when one Lionel Jonathan returned home to "improve" his community after resigning his job as a law lecturer at the Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt. On arrival, he built around himself, a power structure of youths that call themselves; the "House of Lords" but the group later changed its name to Isongo-foru. The group had a membership of a little over one hundred but it was well armed, giving it advantage over other groups. Based on reports by its community liaison officers, on the group's strength and visibility, Shell leveraged the group to protect its operations in the community from shutdowns. Shell also began to empower the Isongo-foru, to deter agitations from any other sources. Besides, the ample wealth, it amassed, Isongo-foru, also received arms supply from Shell, thus, it became largely unassailable in the community. The Isongo-foru's reign was absolute and not even the King in Council could challenge it. Several bloody clashes ensued between Isongo-foru and other rival youth groups in the community. In all these clashes, Shell actively supported the Isongo-foru against the other youth groups. The then government of Rivers state and later Bayelsa state deployed the police into the community in an attempt to control the conflict but this only led to more bloodshed. The insecurity in Nembe community deteriorated further in 1995 when, Mrs. Itari Kumbo-Garuba, a retired principal and wife of then Colonel Chris Garuba (now a retired army General), decided to challenge Isongo-foru's power over the community. She must have felt that she had the wherewithal to face the group; she was not only the spouse of a senior serving army officer but she was also then, a member of late General Abacha's constitutional conference. She assembled and financed a youth group called Agbara-foru that battled Isongo-foru for supremacy and by implication, access to the oil companies. The



rivalry between the two contending groups led to three vitriolic clashes in the community on November 12 and 25 and December 14, 1995.

Arising from the viciousness of the conflict, Chief Hans Suku-Ogbari, the then Chairman of Nembe Council of Chiefs attempted to broker peace between the two groups but his efforts ended in failure. In his quest to stop the bloodletting, he requested the then Rivers State government to deploy men of the Mobile Police to arrest all the warring parties, including his own nephew. Thereafter, the Nembe Council of Chiefs placed a ban on the youth groups involved in the clashes. Surprisingly, however, some of the Chiefs were later arrested based on spurious allegations by some of the arrested youths that some of the Chiefs procured arms for the Agbara-foru. Thus, in a complex power game, the sponsors of Isongo-foru implicated their enemies on gun running and murder charges. These charges were never substantiated, and the report of the panel set up by then Rivers State government to investigate the conflict; believed to have indicted some highly placed persons was never released. The Agbara-foru faded out after this crisis but the Isongo-foru continued to grow in strength and audacity. Challenges to its hegemony were met with brute maniacal force until May 6, 2000, when the bubble bust.

The end came in an incongruous manner. The management of Shell on February 28, 2000 scheduled a meeting with the Nembe Council of Chiefs at its Eastern Headquarters Office in Port Harcourt. The meeting was to discuss the sum of ₦800 million that Shell claimed to have spent in Nembe community on developmental projects, whilst none existed. The intent of the meeting therefore, was to enable Shell enlighten the community on the "disappeared" funds. However, unknown to the Chiefs, the meeting was a mere ruse, as Shell's management never intended the meeting to hold as it would publicly expose corruption within the company. On the other hand, the Isongo-foru; an obvious recipient of some of the fund, regarded the meeting as a brazen affront to its unbridled powers and a threat to its liaison with Shell. The management of Shell and the Isongo-foru then connived to abort the meeting.

As a result, Shell's management delayed the meeting and kept the Chiefs waiting for over five hours in the company's waiting room. But although the Chiefs were deeply frustrated, they waited patiently. Shell's management sensing that the Chiefs could wait indefinitely motivated the Isongo-foru to chase the Chiefs off their premises. The Nembe Council of Chiefs complained to Shell's management about the lack of courtesy and protection for them even its own (Shell) premises. But Mr. Burham, Shell's Head of Community Relations retorted that the Chiefs unlike the youths have no power to close flow stations and therefore, not deserving serious attention from Shell. The Chiefs' reply to this taunt was to close the flow station in Nembe Creek

without recourse to other parties. Shell called in the Isongo-foru, their allies, to re-open the flow stations in direct affront to the Chiefs. The entire Nembe community, even the other youth groups, felt aggrieved by the Isongo-foru's show of bravado and as a result, decided to move against the Isongo-foru, at any cost.

On the evening of May 5, 2000 Isongo-foru's top echelon prepared for a journey to Okpoama, a neighbouring community for the burial ceremony of one Christopher Peters, their secretary-general. Isongo-foru leadership sensing that conspiracy was afoot against them by the community youths decided to cow them again by getting them arrested. Most of those arrested were members of the Teme group (a predominantly spiritual youth movement). Though the Teme group had kept aloof from all the conflicts on spiritual grounds, they have nursed the intention of ousting the Isongo-foru, due to their excesses in the community. Thus, once the Isongo-foru leaders left for Okpoama, other Teme group members seized the Isongo-foru's armoury and rounded up all their members remaining in the community; thus, the Teme group completely neutralised the Isongo-foru in the community. A new other was proclaimed by the Isenasawo in the early hours of May 6, 2000 at the community square.

## Conclusion

The rising tide of community conflicts, fragmentation and reconfiguration, identity mutation and reconstruction in the Niger Delta are all related to the dynamics of petro-politics. This is due to the creation of benefit captors in oil-host communities arising from the policies of the oil companies. The policies of the oil companies and the emergence of youth groups have heightened crime and violence in the politics of the Niger Delta oil communities and the region as a whole. The violent youth phenomenon and the general state of militancy and protests have made available enormous quantity of sophisticated arms and ammunitions. This has caused numerous feuds within and between communities that have led to very bloody and disruptive conflicts; that have; claimed many lives, massively destroyed villages and properties, disrupted oil facilities and production and general insecurity in the Niger Delta. Thus, the oil multinationals may need to reshape their policies to encourage community harmony if they are to operate in environment devoid of violence and relentless vitriolic conflicts. Those unfamiliar with events in the Niger Delta would want to dismiss the above narratives as mere gimmicks aimed at disparaging the image of the oil multinationals, especially Shell in the Niger Delta. It is a well known fact that for over three decades, there were no conflicts between the people and the oil multinationals, and the oil-host communities were not riddled with violent conflicts. Even when protests started,

it was through peaceful means; picketing, deputations and legal actions. Indeed, in Nembe that later became epicentre of violent conflicts, the traditional council merely led the people to the town's waterside, where a letter was read and then handed over to the Council Chairman for onward transmission to the state Governor. For such critics, they need to explain the total sidelining of traditional authorities in oil-host communities and the vitriolic conflicts that followed since the 1990s. The answer lies in the above narratives.

## Note

See 'Nigerian Navy Destroy Odioma Community, 50 local people killed.

[http://www.eraaction.org/modules.php?name=ERA\\_News&file=article&sid=15](http://www.eraaction.org/modules.php?name=ERA_News&file=article&sid=15)

## Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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