

## Unmasking The Power Of Community Relations In Promoting The Socio-Economic Deficiency In The Niger Delta

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### **Abstract**

*The perennial community relations induced conflict between corporate organizations and their host communities especially the multinational oil and gas exploring and production companies in the Niger Delta calls for investigation because of its socio-economic hardship and effects on the organization and the host communities. This unwanted scenario inspired this paper. The paper is anchored on systems theory as applied in public relations or community relations practice. The paper also relied on descriptive and desk research for its data gathering. Consequently, the study observed the following as some of the causes of the socio-economic problems bedeviling corporate organizations especially the multinational oil companies in the Niger Delta: lack of proactive Corporate Social Responsibility projects and programmes, adoption of gunboat-diplomacy and militarization community relations, poor community relations policy, application of divide-rule-community relations policy, pollution of the environment, lack of payment of royalty to host communities, poor employment policy for host communities, etc. To addressing these plethora of problems, the paper advocates for a paradigm shift from the handlers of community relations policies of the corporate organizations in the planning and implementation of community relations policies to avoid suspicion and hostility in their communities of operations. The paper equally advocates for adoption of proactive community relations and corporate social responsibility by corporate organizations particularly the multinational oil and gas companies rather than the present gunboat diplomacy, militarization and fire brigade community relations.*

**Keywords:** *Unmasking the power, community relations, social-economic deficiency*

## **Introduction**

Every organization has its neighbor or community that has given its land for the operation of the organization hence the community plays host to such organization and in the event of industrial hazard or pollution, the host community becomes a major sufferer of the quagmire (Alikor, 2014). Therefore, any organization that worth its value and respects its corporate image must court the friendship of the host community to avoid conflict and have a hostility free operation in its area of operation. The absence of this kind of friendship and relationship has created unwanted conflict or crisis between many organizations and their host communities hence disrupting the socio-economic activities in the society. In recent times, we have witnessed series of conflicts snowballing into destruction of lives and property occasioned by poor community relations policy of multinational oil companies in Rivers State. Some of these cases are between Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) vs. Ogoni ethnic nationality, SPDC vs. Umuechem in Etche Local Government, Rumuekpe vs. SPDC in Emohua Local Government Area, Rumugurushi vs. SPDC in Obio-Akpor Local Government Area, Mgbu-Osimini, Rumueme vs. Agip in Port Harcourt Local Government Area, Idu-Ekpeye in Ahoada West Local Government Area vs. Agip, Egi in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area vs. Total Oil Company, Bonny/Fenima youths in Bonny Local Government Area vs. NLNG. All in Rivers State (Nigeria Liquid Gold Programme & Nigeria Info FM, 2021).

To avoid this kind of quagmire, corporate organizations must create a deliberate policy to court the friendship of their host communities to have a hostility-free operation. This is because hostility is counter-productive to the operation of corporate organizations. It hinders the socio-economic activities of organizations and retards their actualization of set out objectives. It is against this background, every organization that values its image and reputation must strive to have a symbiotic relationship with its host communities. This genre of relationship enhances corporate organizations to achieve their predetermined goals. For oil and gas producing companies, community relations helps them in exploring and production of the “black gold” called oil and gas (Alikor & Ukauegbu, 2019). This explains the fact that most of the socio-economic problems bedeviling Nigeria nation are caused by the actions and inactions of corporate organizations and their host communities. These problems on many occasions have resulted to violent conflicts hence impeding the socio-economic development in Nigerian nation. Therefore, this negative narrative must be re-scripted in the relationship between host communities and the organizations they play host to in order to stimulate socio-economic development of Nigerian state. Corporate organizations must see their host communities as critical stakeholders in their operations to avoid anti-development elements and attitude from the host community. That is why effective community relations becomes imperative and sacrosanct, to the overall survival of corporate organizations in Nigeria. According to Center and Jackson (2007), a

neighbourhood, town, city or state is obviously a human community. Like organizations, they require positive interrelations among all members in order to function smoothly and efficiently because organizations would have difficulty operating effectively in communities that are disrupted by crisis.

It is necessary for them to accept the responsibility of corporate citizenship hence mutual respect and relationship must be engendered by positive public relations actions (Center & Jackson, 2007).

### **Demystifying the concept of community relations**

Community Relations is like a biological cord that ties an organization and its host community together for mutual benefit. It is a meeting point between organizations and their immediate neighbours. Its importance in the socio-economic development of the nation can only be imagined. It is a catalyst for building a sustainable and symbiotic relationship between organizations and the communities where they are located. Alikor (2014) opines that community relations is a branch of public relations that aims at creating sustainable and symbiotic relationship between an organization and its host community. Alikor further posits that community relations is a deliberate and sustained efforts of an organization aimed at creating goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its host community in order to have a crisis-free operation. Hendrix and Hayes (2007) observe that one of the most important publics an organization has is its community, the home of its office and operations. Maintaining good relations with the community usually entails management and employees becoming involved in and contributing to local organizations and activities. Seitel (2011) discussing the concept of community relations notes that in 21<sup>st</sup> century, most organizations, companies, hospitals, sports team, schools, etc understand they have an obligation to their host communities including supporting nonprofit organizations. This goodwill in public relations is called community relations. For an organization to coexist peacefully in its community of operation, three skills in particular are required according to Seitel (2007). They are:

- ❖ Determining what the community knows and thinks about the organization.
- ❖ Informing the community of the organization's point of view.
- ❖ Negotiating or mediating between the organization and the community and its constituents should here be a significant discrepancy.

### **Theoretical framework**

This paper is anchored on systems theory as applied in public relations practice. The theory was propounded by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy in 1940's and the theory expanded by Ross Ashby in 1964. The theory holds that public relations professionals must constantly monitor their environment, intended goals, actions and feedback from the stakeholders and other publics in order to make the necessary changes in organization's policy and proffer solutions to stimulate the socio-economic growth of the organization in particular and the society in general. According to the protagonists of this theory, the constant monitoring and evaluation of the work environment and critical stakeholders will enable the corporate organization to bring in the necessary innovation and management strategies that will fit the work environment and reach a state of equilibrium. In community relations, systems theory focuses on the arrangement relationships between organizations and their

neighbours (host communities) with the intention to bring in the best from the relationships for the enhancement of the socio-economic development of the organizations and their host communities.

The systems theory tries to study organizations dynamics, constraints and elucidate principles and models that can be used to addressing them in the organization in order to maximize the socio-economic goals of the organization.

### **Abridged historical perspective of community relations policy in Niger Delta**

Historically, multinational oil and gas companies operating in the Niger Delta popularized community relations in Nigeria in the late 1980s and early 90s to eliminate host community induced crisis in their communities of operations (Nkwocha, 2016). Nkwocha further observes that before now host communities were relegated while their environment, homes, water, farmlands, airspace and means of livelihood (Fishery and farming) were destroyed through oil and gas exploration, production and distribution activities by the upstream and downstream oil sector. Oil spillage, for instance, destroyed both waters and farmlands, and made life miserable for the 'ruralites' in the oil and gas producing communities. Gas flaring and acid rains had their own health hazards including black and white sooth (Obeta, 2008; George-Ukpong, 2012; Nkwocha, 2016). Sadly enough, the host communities never benefited enough from these oil and gas exploration production companies. Poverty and poor standard of living still ravaged the host communities till today. Most of the indigenes of the host communities are still leaving in mould houses without zinc on the houses, no good water to drink, no good health facility, no good road, no electricity, etc. This situation has given rise to diverse agitations by the host communities of multinational oil and gas exploration and exploitation companies. The resultant effect of this condition of the host communities is the present cat and dog relationships between the former and the latter, it is against this background that the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, Kimso Okoko and other environmentalists began to agitate for an improved life for the host communities in the Niger Delta.

These agitations triggered the multinational oil and gas production companies to establish Community Relations Units or Desks to handle host communities yearnings and aspirations between 1980s and 90s. But how far has the establishment of the community relations units of these companies addressed the socio-economic goals of the oil and gas producing communities and why the incessant picketing of oil and gas companies, hostage taking against the companies staff, molesting of companies staff, blocking of companies premises, kidnapping of companies staff, vandalization of oil pipelines, withdrawing of community policing and other illicit actions against the companies if the community relations policies of these companies have been effective?

### **Target goals of community relations in promotion of socio-economic development of Niger Delta:**

1. To foster a symbiotic relationship between a corporate organization and its host community.
2. To achieve a peaceful working environment for a corporate organization.

3. To inform the host community about the *modus operandi* of a corporate organization's community relations policy, their products, services and management.
4. To build a mutual trust between a corporate organization and its host community.
5. To prevent man-made-crisis in corporate organization's community of operation.
6. To facilitate a hitch-free operation for a corporate organization.
7. To create an atmosphere that will trigger profit-making for companies and public acceptability for non-profit making organizations.
8. To find out the impression of host community about the operation of a corporate organization.
9. To modify a negative idiosyncrasy emanating from host community to prevent conflict.
10. To reinforce an acceptable attitude from the host community for mutual benefit between a corporate organization and host community.
11. To motivate a desired behaviour or attitude that will aid a corporate organization to achieve its predetermined goals effectively and efficiently.
12. To attract customers and consumers for higher patronage of a corporate organization's merchandise.
13. To develop paradigms for crisis prevention and management in corporate organization among others.

#### **Target goals of host community**

1. Improved standard of living of host community inspired by corporate organizations
2. Improved proactive community relations policy and corporate social responsibility projects and social investment programmes
3. Protection of the environment: land, river, sea, stream and air-space by the oil and gas exploration and exploitation companies
4. Remediation of polluted environment especially farm land by the oil companies
5. Provision of employment opportunities for indigenous of host community
6. Respect for the culture and tradition of the host community
7. Development of host community via human capacity building and infrastructural development
8. Sustainability of relative peace in host communities
9. Expectation of mutual relationship between host community and corporate organization
10. Encouragement of community policing rather than the militarization of the operational base of the company

#### **Methodology**

This paper relied on descriptive and desk research methods because of their relevance to this kind of work. The descriptive method helped us in describing the nature of community relations practice in Rivers State and by extension the Niger Delta by corporate organizations especially multinationals as observed while the desk research method helped us in assessing what has been researched and written on community relations practice in the Niger Delta.

**Triggers of socio-economic problems in corporate organizations in Niger Delta:**

1. Lack of political-will by the government to confront socio-economic problems like gas flaring
2. Perennial insecurity in the nation
3. Lack of employment opportunity for the teeming youths of Nigeria especially the host community
4. Lack of proactive community relations policy by corporate organizations especially the oil and gas production companies
5. Lack of implementation of labour law in terms of employment of junior staff
6. Introduction of neo-colonialism by multinational oil companies in of host communities
7. Adoption of divide-and-rule community relations model by corporate organizations especially the multinational oil exploration and production companies
8. Lack of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes and projects in companies' communities of operations
9. Incessant pollution of the environment by oil exploration and production companies
10. Deforestation of host communities' bio-diversity reserve or forest in favour of oil exploration and exploitation by the upstream oil sector
11. Lack local content contract policy by corporate organizations
12. Lack of economic support for micro businesses in host communities

**Conclusion**

Beyond doubts, no well meaning corporate organization can easily achieve its socio-economic goals without carrying along its host community irrespective of the socio-economic exigencies especially in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This is because the people are more aware and informed of their rights and privileges especially in the area of community relations projects and programmes. This simply means that for corporate organizations to achieve their predetermined goals, they must coexist with their host communities meaningfully through the adoption of proactive community relations and corporate social responsibility to enhance their socio-economic goals otherwise hostilities become the rendezvous of their operations.

**The Way Forward**

Having observed and studied some crises and their causes in the Niger Delta, we make the following recommendations as the way forward to come out of the present socio-economic quagmire bedeviling Nigerian state. Among which are:

1. The paper advocates for sustainability of viable socio-economic policy of corporate organizations and government such as Operation Feed the Nation, Greenland Initiative, Education for All, Zero Community Relations Induced Crisis, etc.
2. Corporate organizations especially multinational oil and gas exploration and Production Company should adopt proactive community relations and corporate social responsibility to eliminate crises in their communities of operations since no meaningful socio-economic development can take place in the time of rancour and acrimony.

3. Corporate organizations especially the oil exploration and exploitation companies should minimize the level of environmental pollution and possibly turn gas flaring into wealth creation to promote Nigerian socio-economic growth.
4. Oil companies should embark on aggressive remediation of polluted land to make it fertile and fruitful for future agriculture activity.
5. Oil and gas companies should embark on aggressive cleaning of farmland, rivers and stream polluted by oil exploration, production and distribution to turn the defiled land to a wealth creating environment.
6. Local content contract policy and employment should be encouraged to promote the socio-economic goals of the host communities.
7. Corporate organizations should consider the infrastructural development of their host communities as a key component of their management policies to make the socio-economic lives of the indigenes of the host communities more meaningful.
8. Corporate organizations should support the socio-economic life of their host communities via micro credit facility to raise their business life.
9. Host communities should stimulate community policing to protect the lives of the personnel of the organizations and their property.
10. Host communities should refrain from embarking on illicit actions against corporate organizations to enhance their socio-economic well-being.
11. Government should diminish the insecurity in the nation to stimulate the socio-economic activities in the nation.
12. Government regulatory agencies should be more alive to their responsibilities to reduce the excesses of corporate organizations especially in area of tax invasion and gas flaring to stimulate socio-economic growth of the nation.

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