



# Conflict Management in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: A Participatory Approach

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## **Abstract**

This paper introduces an alternative approach to conflict management in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Niger Delta region, the crude oil bearing region of Nigeria, has witnessed an unprecedented spate of violent conflicts in the recent past, and all efforts to quell the conflict seem to have failed to yield the desired results. The proposed approach is based on collaborative problem-solving methodology to conflict management. Not only does this approach obviate the inherent problems of the control and adversarial method that has hitherto been adopted by government and other stakeholders in the Niger Delta; it gives participants an equal chance to express their views, generate options and influence the final decision. The paper however recognises that the participatory approach is not completely flawless. It requires very careful planning, determination on the part of all stakeholders as well as highly skilled facilitators.

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## Introduction

There is consensus among scholars on the inevitability of conflict in relations among human beings (Weeks 1992:ix, Fraiser & Hipel 1984:3, Burton 1987a:8 and 1987b:137-138, Moore 1987:ix, Okoh & Ewhariemen 2001:3-4). Some even extol conflict as 'an essential creative element in human relations... the means to change... and the means by which some social values of welfare, security, justice and opportunities for personal development can be achieved' (Burton 1987b:138). Nevertheless, the destructive dimensions of violent conflict cannot be left out of account, and it is generally agreed that whether or not conflict plays a positive or negative role is essentially a matter of how it is managed (Imobighe 1997:276-277). The effectiveness or otherwise of the management of conflict is itself largely dependent on how well the causes of the conflict have been understood.

Conflict refers to contradictions arising from differences in the interests, ideas, ideologies, orientations and precipitous tendencies of the people concerned. These contradictions are inherent at all levels of social and economic interactions of the human race. It may therefore exist at the individual, group, institutional, regional, national and international levels. Conflict is thus a pervasive phenomenon in human relationships and has been seen as the 'basic unit for understanding social existence' (Nnoli 1998:3-5).

Conflicts may have negative or positive effects. The resolution of conflicts helps to push society towards enhanced humanity. Conflicts are inevitable in human affairs but if carefully handled, they can lead to social and economic progress. When unresolved contradictions are allowed to linger and explode into violence, however, conflict becomes undesirable and may develop into a menace. Violent conflict is therefore the consequence of the inability or failure to accommodate and resolve contradictions in society through arrangements and procedures that eliminate their negative effects and maximize their positive effect. According to Nnoli (1998:16), such failures result from the inability of conflicting units to accept the arrangements and procedures that have been adopted to resolve the conflict. This is the case with the management of conflicts in the Niger Delta.

Three major reasons give credence to the proposal of participatory approach at this time.

First, the level of poverty in the area is deepening, as the inhabitants of the area are unable to carry on with their economic activities such as farming, fishing, and very little else. Agricultural activities usually grind to a halt in communities where violent conflicts take place. Houses, farm lands and fishing ponds are often burned down or destroyed and usually abandoned as villagers escape into safer areas where they do not have access to farm lands or fishing ponds. Violent conflicts also lead to deaths of many male household heads, leaving a large number of widows, orphans and incapacitated people. The increase in morbidity leads to a fall in agricultural productivity, lower income and intensified poverty.

Secondly, the obvious failure of the old perspectives and management strategies of the host communities, Federal Government and the oil companies makes it imperative to search for a better strategy to facilitate negotiations between different stakeholders in projects and policy dialogue.

Thirdly, the zone is the economic nerve centre of the nation, which cannot afford the perennial disruptions to oil production occasioned by violent conflicts.

Under the current democratic political dispensation in Nigeria, a participatory approach to governance is inevitable for the attainment of good governance, transparency and accountability. This approach is of particular importance in the management of the perennial conflict in the Niger Delta region. Previous attempts at the application of the approach failed to achieve the desired results, perhaps because of a weak formalisation and generalisation of the practice. Hence an important objective pursued in this paper is to increase the sensitisation of all stakeholders regarding the existence and efficiency of the participatory approach for the resolution of the issue of frequent violent conflicts in the Niger Delta region.

### **The Niger Delta and the Nigerian Economy: The Contradictions**

Nigeria is generously endowed with natural sources of energy resource. These include coal, crude oil, natural gas (associated and non-associated natural gas),

lignite and a number of renewable energy resources such as fuel wood, biomass, hydropower and solar energy. Crude oil occurs in seven prospective basins, that is, Niger Delta, Anambra basin, Chad basin, Dahomey basin, Sokoto basin and the Benue Trough, while condensates are found in the South Eastern shelf. Presently crude oil exploration and commercial activities are concentrated on the Niger Delta basin acreage and the continental shelf (Central Bank of Nigeria 2000:81). There is enough evidence that 99% of Nigeria's proven crude oil and gas reserves are situated in the Niger Delta (Okoh 2001:390).

The Nigerian economy now revolves around the exploitation and exportation of crude oil. Nigeria's crude oil is the sweet and light type, being low in sulphur content. It is highly sought after in the international crude oil market. Currently, Nigeria's oil production accounts for 8% of the OPEC total daily production and 3% of the world's volume (Nigerian National Petroleum Company 2000:5). Nigeria's gas reserve is even greater than the proven crude oil reserves though it has largely remained unexploited. Nigeria's gas reserve is estimated at about 124 trillion cubic feet. In energy terms this is said to be twice as much as the nation's crude oil reserves (Okoh 2001:390). Gas is obtainable in the form of associated and non-associated or dry gas, condensate gas and natural gas liquids. It is said that 60% of the available gas is located east of the Niger and 40% west of it. The estimated on-shore component is 71% of the total, while 29% is offshore. Unfortunately about 75% of associated gas produced annually is flared. Of all the natural resources, crude oil has become the pivot of the Nigerian economic revolution. The petroleum sector accounts for approximately 35% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 96% of foreign exchange and about 80% of total government revenue (Nigerian National Petroleum Company 2000:6).

The Niger Delta is made up of seven out of the 36 states of Nigeria. The oil-producing states include Delta, Bayelsa, Cross River, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Edo, Ondo and Imo states. But Delta, Bayelsa, Cross River, Rivers and Akwa Ibom states constitute the Niger Delta, which occupies a landmass of 70 000 square kilometres, an area of high ecological value. These states are made up of about 500 densely populated rural ethnic minority communities (Okoh & Egbon 1999:410), some of which have a long history, dating back to colonial times, of what has generally been understood as interethnic conflict. The people of the Niger Delta are polygamous and warlike. The annual festivals of many

Niger Delta communities involve cutlass-toting displays, which often lead to provocations that result in violent conflicts. The people are mainly fishermen, but small numbers are farmers. The Niger Delta region in Nigeria is believed to be the world's third largest mangrove and fresh water swamp, a third of which is wetland.

In the last four decades the Niger Delta has witnessed a high level of petroleum sector activities. Subsequent to the first successful drilling at Oloibiri-1 in 1956, the Nigerian government's legislations and concessions to various oil prospecting companies set the stage for large scale explosion in exploration and production activities from 1970 to date. The Niger Delta has nearly 200 oil fields with well over 400 oil production and storage facilities scattered within its swamps and creeks. These are operated by multinational firms such as Shell, Mobil, Chevron, Elf, Agip and Texaco, in joint ventures with the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (Okoh & Egbon 1999:410). As the Niger Delta became the prime basis of exploration and production of crude petroleum oil, the search for oil and gas was intensified in both deep and shallow waters as well as inland. In time the Nigerian economy became a victim of the 'Dutch disease'. This refers to a situation in which a booming export sector, that is, Nigeria's oil sector, increases the relative price of non-tradable goods and services, thus hurting the rest of the tradable sector. Approximately 90% of her foreign earnings and 70% of total revenue accrue from the petroleum sector. Government effort (particularly during the military regime) was geared towards expanding its revenue flow from the sector, to the utter neglect of the inhabitants of the area.

The oil and gas production and refining facilities such as terminals of pipelines, flow and pump stations, manifolds and refineries are scattered across the landscape of the Niger Delta. Many years of oil and gas production with frequent occurrence of crude oil and petroleum product spillage have left the people of the Niger Delta dispossessed of their land, land fertility, delta forest (mangrove), water resources and their livelihood. These losses have led to high levels of poverty and unemployment (particularly among youths), infrastructure decay, moral decadence and crime in the area. The region has become ridden by violent conflict, which caused the wanton destruction of its people and valuable properties, and left millions of dollars unrealised due to deferred production as

a result of violent conflicts and work stoppages. The crises of Ogoni (1994/95), Ijaw/Ilaje (1998-2000), Odih (1998/99), Warri (Urhobo/Itsekiri, 1952, 1981, 1987, 1997-2002), Ogbijaw/Itsekiri (between 1995 and 2004) are just a few of the violent crises which led to the death of many people, staffers of oil companies and members of the Nigerian police force, the destruction of properties, and the loss of production time and revenue, both to oil companies and to the Nigerian economy at large.

The high activity level in the Niger Delta has exposed the area to the dangers of pollution of water, land and air as well as oil spills which have endangered aquatic life as well as the entire ecosystem, topography and surface vegetation. The problem of deforestation has led to loss of bio-diversity in the mangrove swamps, and to the destruction of nurseries and feeding grounds for many commercially important species of fish and crustaceans. The contamination of water bodies by oil has also led to the contamination of fisheries, freshwater and brackish water swamps, and to the killing of fishes, crabs, oysters and periwinkles. This has therefore destroyed artisan fishing which is of great importance to Niger Delta economy. The 45 years of oil production in the area has brought about defoliation of mangroves and the acceleration of erosion and flooding in the coastal areas. There is also the case of contamination of rivers and inland waters, which are important sources of drinking water and food, thereby rendering such water and food unfit for human consumption. Ground water pollution is another serious impact of oil production. As it was expected, the activities of the oil industry did not spare the health of the human components of the Niger Delta environment. For instance, Ndifon (1998:804-813) identified oil acne (a special skin eruption due to exposure to oil) among respondents. He also reports the incidence of cancer, decreased fertility, fever, cough, abdominal pain and diarrhoea, while as much as 85 percent of respondents suffered a combination of these symptoms.

The difficult terrain makes road construction and maintenance an uphill task. The Niger Delta inhabitants thus suffer from poor road conditions, leading to high cost of transportation. The area has been denied the much-needed development of social and economic infrastructure such as electricity, roads and pipe borne water. The Niger Delta states suffer from relatively high rates of both rural and urban unemployment. The neglect of the region for so long against

the backdrop of so many unresolved issues seem to have resulted in the breeding of an army of miscreants.

The externalities associated with the exploration, production and transportation of crude oil are of the negative type. They may be classified into quantifiable and non-quantifiable externalities. The quantifiable negative externalities include such effects as numbers of fish killed as a result of oil spillage in fishing waters, numbers of hectares of crops destroyed or replaced with giant pipelines and rigs. These are easy to identify and value in monetary terms. The payment of adequate compensation to displaced communities or individuals may suffice. The non-quantifiable negative externalities on the other hand include the loss of potential output which would have been derived from unpolluted land and water, the increased health hazards resulting from increase in hydrocarbons in the water and air, the increase in the mortality and morbidity rates associated with environmental pollution, as well as the loss of income by farmers as result of polluted farmlands. Also, the loss of vital sources of drinking water, the effect of moral decadence and the loss of societal values are all examples of non-quantifiable externalities which are of grave consequence to the people. These are not easy to identify, value or state in monetary terms. Most of the externalities associated with crude oil exploitation in the Niger Delta are of this sort. These externalities precipitate the contradictions in the Niger Delta.

All of these have culminated in socio-economic problems such as high levels of poverty and unemployment, community and oil company conflicts, intercommunity conflict over land and compensation, decay in societal values, poor roads and transportation network, high cost of fuel, paucity of housing and infrastructure facilities, moral decadence and high crime rates. These problems have been said to be located within the revenue-sharing principles, formulae and practices of the federal government which have starved the Niger Delta of much needed funds (Okoh & Egbon 1999:407, Egbon & Okoh 2000:11-12, Okoh 2001:391, Okoh 2002:81-83). Since 2000 the federal government has increased the proportion of revenue shared to the Niger Delta states, and infrastructure development has improved through the activities of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), but the levels of poverty, unemployment and violent conflicts are still quite high.

## **The Nature of Conflict in the Niger Delta Region: The Issues at Stake**

The nature of conflict in the Niger Delta may be classified into four variants.

**Inter-community conflict**, which may be as a result of long standing disputes between two or more communities, unsettled boundary problems, disputes over oil-bearing land, or incursions into community land.

**Intra-community conflict**, which may be due to long standing disputes between individuals within a community, political marginalisation by a ruling ethnic group or class, an unacceptable traditional ruler, or embezzlement (real or imagined) of compensation by community leaders.

**Community versus oil companies conflict**, which may be caused by several factors. There are factors related to the presence of oil installations in a community. For instance, an incursion into community land, a threat or perceived threat to the continual existence of a community, ineffective communication between communities and oil companies, unrealistic formalities of claim tenders, non-payment of compensation for occupied land. Some factors are specifically related to environmental pollution: non-payment or inadequate payment or unduly delayed payment of compensation for polluted land and water resources, abject poverty due to displacement and loss of livelihood arising from pollution of farm land or fishing waters. The devastating effects of the oil industry do not only affect the economy and the ecosystem, but also the cultural and social systems of the Niger Delta. Disputes between communities and oil companies are therefore often of long standing nature and difficult to resolve.

### **Community versus (federal, state or local) government conflict**

For this variant many of the problems are linked to the federal government. The causes of the community versus government conflict may be some or a combination of the following:

- The parlous state of existence and material conditions prevailing in the Niger Delta;
- Low level and quality of development in the region and the near absence of a common development framework and focus;



- Perceived low level of government presence in the Niger Delta;
- Paradox of grim poverty amidst tremendous oil wealth and flagrant display of wealth by the beneficiaries of the oil wealth both within and outside the Niger Delta;
- Nonchalant attitude of government towards the plight of the people of the Niger Delta;
- Marginalisation by government;
- Creation of local government by the federal or state government;
- Boundary adjustments by federal government;
- Acquisition of land by government for public or military force; and
- Use of force in conflict management by the police and military force.

Conflicts in the region are becoming increasingly frequent and intensely violent, leading to incessant loss of lives and property. Violent conflicts and economic progress are mutually exclusive. This is precarious, particularly for Nigeria whose major source of foreign exchange earnings – Nigeria's engine of growth – is the bone of contention in the Niger Delta. Moreover, recent management strategies, such as the creation of such institutions as the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the creation of local government areas/councils, the provision of social amenities and payment of compensation for land failed to arrest conflicts in the Niger Delta. If anything, the violent conflicts have taken a turn for the worse. This points to the need to revisit the management strategies of relations within and between communities and oil companies, and communities and government, with a view to instituting conflict management procedures that would lead to peace and sustainable development in the Niger Delta region and the Nigerian economy. It is clear that violent conflicts in the Niger Delta have socio-cultural, political and economic dimensions which are interconnected with oil-related issues, such as deprivation, marginalisation, environmental degradation, military interventions in the conflicts and old rivalries between the communities.

## **Current Strategies for Managing Conflicts in the Niger Delta**

The management strategies adopted so far have been based on how each of the three stakeholders in the Niger Delta saga, that is the communities, the oil companies and the federal or state government, perceives the problems of the Niger Delta and the methods for dealing with them.

Firstly, the host communities have come to the conclusion that their destinies are in their own hands and as such they have constantly employed strategies and tactics ranging from 'reactive pacifism' to 'reactive militancy' (Onosode 2003:111-115). This has taken the form of demand by groups for political empowerment, increased fiscal allocation to compensate for resource exploitation, and environmental degradation, resource control and overall development (Osaghae 1998). The basic strategies include:

- Unorganised and organised verbal agitation;
- Community meetings;
- Sit-ins, vigils;
- Written petitions to oil companies and the government;
- Media interviews and newspaper publication;
- Delegations to oil companies and government;
- Vocal threats, communiqués, mass rallies and demonstrations;
- Temporary occupation of installations and oil premises;
- Adoption of oil companies staffers;
- Blockades and disruption of company operations;
- Legal suits;
- Sabotage;
- Violent combats between the warring communities, and
- Political action (Onosode 2003:111-124).

These strategies have heightened tension, insecurity and conflicts in the region.

Secondly, the oil companies have perceived that the basic need of the communities is the alleviation of poverty through provision of basic social and economic infrastructure. The oil companies, as part of their corporate social responsibilities to the host communities, 'hand out' what in their point of view

are the missing links needed to effect mutual co-existence between them and the militant communities. These come in the form of community development projects such as construction of roads, jetties, health centres, electrification, science equipment, and employment and scholarship schemes for members of host communities. Unfortunately, the communities view these efforts as paltry vis-à-vis the perceived value of resource exploitation by the oil companies and the federal government. Violent conflicts have therefore continued unabatedly.

Thirdly, the federal government has most probably perceived the conflicts in the Niger Delta as acts of insubordination to the nation. Hence its management style has been that of controlling the conflict. This approach has involved the use of control measures, force, coercion, impatience with dialogue and information gathering.

There have thus been two strands of management strategies for Niger Delta conflicts. The first involved a number of ad hoc measures. One of these measures was the use of force to quell violent uprising in a bid to force the aggrieved people into quiescence. For instance, soldiers have been sent into communities to raid, kill, maim and set villagers' houses on fire. This was the popular management style, particularly during the military rule. The present democratic government has had to take recourse to such brutal control measures to coerce conflicting communities to avoid or accommodate conflict. Other measures in this category included litigations, ad hoc tribunals and judicial commissions of inquiry into such conflicts, special ad hoc committees, militant declarations and ultimatums, hurriedly organised symposia, workshops and conferences, 'peace talks', elders' forums, environment friendly publications and workshops organised by the government, oil companies, NGOs, communities, traditional rulers, print media, pseudo-environmentalists and an array of nascent groups and movements (Onosode 2003:121-125).

The second strand is based on the 'paradigm shift' to the new understanding that the essential link between peace in the Niger Delta, the oil companies and the Nigerian economy is community development projects. Such projects have included the provision of social and economic infrastructure, compensation for polluted land, a youth's skill acquisition programme and scholarships for students of Niger Delta origin. More recently, after much agitation from Niger Delta indigenes, the revenue shared to Niger Delta states has been increased

by releasing 13% of the derived income to the states of the region. Upon popular demand, specialised institutions have been established to cater for the needs of the Niger Delta. These included the now defunct OMPADEC and the current NDDC. The basic mandate of NDDC is to further pursue the aims and objectives of the community development paradigm, that is, the provision of social and economic infrastructure.

These management strategies notwithstanding, the violence has continued unabatedly with grave consequences for the Niger Delta communities, the oil companies and the Nigerian economy at large. According to Onosode (2003:124), the current top-down approach to the endemic problem has failed to deliver results that are simultaneously socially and economically sustainable. This can be ascribed to the lack of a common development framework and focus. This therefore calls for a new approach that would meet this need. The participatory approach is hereby being proposed.

### **The Participatory Approach to Conflict Management in the Niger Delta**

The participatory approach to conflict management is a collaborative approach to 'problem solving' and decision making. It places an equal priority on the relationship with the other parties and on a mutually satisfying outcome. The strategies of the 'problem-solving' conflict management style include building trust, communicating face-to-face, gathering information, dialoguing, negotiating, valuing diversity, team building, having focus group discussions, searching for alternatives and seeking 'win-win' solutions (Kepner & Likubo 1996:11-28).

Previous methods of conflict management in Nigeria have been adversarial, such that communication between the various stakeholders, that is federal government, oil companies and communities, has been tactical and withholding, argumentative, fault-finding and blame-trading. The attitudes have mainly been suspicious, one-sided, past-oriented, aggressive and defensive. The procedures have involved bargaining from established positions, attacking the other party, using whatever standards are adjudged to be effective in achieving individual goals, and considering options which advance specific parties' positions.

The participatory approach to conflict management can be said to be a *collaborative* and *problem-solving* methodology. It is a democratic process, which recognises the people's right and responsibility to manage their own affairs. The collaborative problem-solving process allows parties or stakeholders with different views to participate. All participants are given equal chance to express their views, generate options and influence the final decision. According to Academic Association Peaceworks (2004:32), 'when people participate in making a decision, they support it'.

Under the collaborative problem-solving methodology, communication is honest and open. It shares information and avoids fault finding and blame trading by the parties. The reciprocally assertive attitudes are future-oriented and trust-building. The procedures involve negotiation, a focus on the problem and not on parties or persons, a search for common ground, a search for a fair and objective basis on which to take decisions, and a search for options that may lead to mutual gains (Academic Association Peaceworks 2004:32-35).

The participatory approach, which was first known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), is now generally referred to as Participatory Learning and Action (PLA).

Chambers (1994a:954) described the PRA as:

a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local rural or urban people to express, enhance, share and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions to plan and to act.<sup>1</sup>

The PLA approach combines:

- A set of diagramming and visual techniques originally developed for livelihood analysis and now widely used in Natural Resources Departments and in development agencies, and
- Underlying principles of grassroots participation from human rights

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1 For an in-depth analysis and development of PRA procedures see Robert Chambers 1994a, 1994b and 1994c.

activism, which involve rethinking power relations and partnerships between development agencies, experts and poor people. These are now being developed further to facilitate negotiation between different stakeholders in projects and policy dialogue (Altinkaya 2002:1-2, Mayoux 2003:3-4).

Participatory approaches enable a wide cross-section of people to share information and opinions about their lives and their environment. It is a bottom-up approach to solving problems and making decisions. Participatory methods use a diverse and flexible set of techniques for visual representation and stakeholder involvement characterised by a set of underlying ethical principles. The participatory approach to development has developed a set of visual tools which can be flexibly applied to assist the synthesis and analysis of information that can be used in group settings and as part of individual interviews. Also the participatory methods use a set of guidelines for facilitating participation and negotiation in focus group discussions and workshops where different stakeholders are brought together. This may not employ much of the visual techniques. According to Mayoux, the emphasis is on innovation and creativity in adapting previous practice to new contexts and needs. In our present circumstance, the essence of the participatory approach would be to bring together all the stakeholders in the Niger Delta saga, in order to contribute towards the creation of favourable conditions that may increasingly facilitate sustainable development in the Niger Delta region and the Nigerian economy as a whole.

The underlying principles on which the participatory approach is based are the following:

- **Embracing complexity**

The participatory approach acknowledges complexities and seeks to understand them rather than over-simplifying reality in accordance with predetermined categories and theories. This is of particular interest to the Niger Delta situation, which is saddled with enormous complexities such as multiplicity of rival tribal and ethnic groups with complex historical relationships.

- **Recognition of multiple realities**

These realities should be taken into account in analysis or action. In the case

of the Niger Delta there are many such realities, which policy makers would rather wish away than attempt to solve them. Prominent among them are the high poverty levels of the bulk of the Niger Delta inhabitants, the demand for resource control and the unhealthy competition among the communities in crude oil-bearing areas.

- **Prioritising the realities of the poor and most disadvantaged**

Here the participatory approach takes all stakeholders as equal partners in knowledge creation and problem analysis. In the case of the Niger Delta the main stakeholders are the host communities (youth, men and women), the oil companies and the federal government, state government and local governments. Others may include NGOs, civil society, community based organisations (CBOs), and institutions such as NDDC.

- **Grassroots empowerment**

The participatory approach does not only aim at gathering information about impact, but also aims at making the assessment process a contribution to empowerment through linking grassroots learning and networking into policy making.

The participatory approach has the capability to bring information from a diversity of sources more rapidly and cost-effectively than quantitative or qualitative methods alone (Mayoux 2003:7). The participatory approach is potentially capable of contributing towards increasing the relevance of impact goals and indicators, and of the representations of the stakeholders, the reliability or understanding of development processes; and the credibility of practical inferences.

The techniques of participatory methodologies include the following:

### **Visual techniques**

These techniques may include diagrams, ranking techniques, time trends analysis, mapping techniques, calendars and ethno-classifications. It is said that the eye receives 83% of information while the other four senses receive the remaining 17%. Hence the key to improve communication is to visualise

ideas. The visual techniques could be applied in the communication process of participatory conflict resolution in the Niger Delta by holding discussions with groups or teams, surveying the opinions of participants, evaluating alternative proposals, identifying problems to be tackled, analysing situations and writing the opinions, ideas, proposals on cards, blackboards, flipcharts, maps, calendars, etc. These visual techniques can be used to list different headings, characterise dependent relationships, interrelated lists and complex interrelationships.

There are a number of advantages for applying visual techniques in conflict management. First, contributions are not lost and forgotten. Writing down a contribution shows the participants that their ideas or messages have been received and duplicated. Secondly, heterogeneous information and contributions become easier to understand with the help of visual aids, which reduce the dangers of misrepresentations and misinterpretations. Thirdly, discussion is limited to arguments relating to the subject matter and is thereby made more objective-oriented. By so doing, emotionally biased contributions can be dealt with separately and more appropriately. Fourthly, the particular stage of discussion is apparent at all times and the direction it is taking is obvious. This is also helpful for those who join the group at a later stage. Participation in discussion is enhanced as emphasis can be placed on hearing the views of every single participant. The implication is that participants' identification with contents and decisions made can be improved. The usefulness of visual techniques is limited, however, in cases where participants do not want their views publicised or where formal traditions do not allow such a publication.

### **Group and team dynamics techniques**

These may include focus group discussions, role-play and participatory workshops. The basic tool used for the analysis of participatory group and team dynamics is the semi-structured discussions or interviews (SSDs or SSIs). The SSD is a form of guided interviewing where only some of the questions are predetermined. It does not involve the use of questionnaires but at most a checklist of questions as a flexible guide. In contrast to formal survey questionnaires, many questions are formulated during the interview or discussions are generated by the responses of participants. SSDs may be held with:



- Individuals from different categories of the community who have an interest in the same topic;
- Key informants who are interviewed for specific information only they may have (as traditional rulers who may have special knowledge about the history of conflicts with neighbouring communities, oil companies or the government);
- Groups of stakeholders who can provide general community level information; and
- Focus groups with whom certain issues may be discussed in detail, e.g. financiers of violent conflicts, the gun barons, the local warlords, government representatives, oil companies and policy makers.

The face-to-face interaction enabled by this tool can be valuable for gaining understanding of the issue at stake and establishing rapport between communities and policy makers.

For maximum benefit from an SSD, the facilitator must learn to listen, be ready to learn from the discussion, facilitate and not dominate, lecture or interrupt the discussants, respect other people's opinions, set an agenda and prepare discussion by summarising findings.

### **Specialised participatory techniques**

These techniques may include the open house, road shows, open space technologies, participatory appraisal, future search, appreciative inquiry and open agenda conferences. The specialised participatory techniques are very useful for incorporating the views and ideas of the elite class who may not be available for community/public meetings. Reaching this group is of grave importance, however, as the information they provide may tend to stir the warring communities to rise up in arms against the government or the oil companies.

The most prominent of these techniques is 'the open house', which was developed as a constructive alternative to public meetings. It provides a forum where interested people can obtain information and register their views. The venue is usually a well-known place in the community such as the town hall or the palace of the traditional ruler. Display panels are used to present key

information about the proposals or issues at stake. These should give visitors a clear understanding of the issues and/or proposals. A short video presentation can be used to enhance written information. A table with hand-out materials is usually provided. Refreshments may also be provided.

To maximise the gains from the open house technique, a systematic feedback is critical. The facilitators may ask the visitors to complete a short survey as they leave the open house. This will help to generate quantitative data and background information for cross tabulation, for example, the geographic location, sex, age and occupation of respondents.

Road shows are variations on the open house. In this case facilitators transport the open house from place to place, setting up and running the open house format in a range of locations suitable to the target audience (Altinkaya 2003:1-2).

The other methods mentioned above are variants of the open house techniques.

### **Benefits of Community Participation in Conflict Management**

Effective community participation has been said to impact positively on social and economic progress. The following are some of the specific benefits of effective community participation in situation analysis and policy making.

In the first place it improves the quality of policies and services. When diverse stakeholders are included in decision making, the policy makers benefit from their first-hand understanding of issues. They provide reality checks, which facilitate the testing of a priori assumptions.

Secondly, community participation helps solve complex problems. Social, economic and environmental problems are nearly always complex, and the Niger Delta is a case where working together can increase the possibility of finding sustainable solutions.

Thirdly, community participation builds trust and understanding. This is particularly useful in the Niger Delta where these two elements of development are conspicuously missing. People develop confidence in a government/agency

that openly invites them to participate in decisions that affect them. A foundation of trust is a priceless element when tough decisions (as is the case in the Niger Delta) need to be made.

Fourthly, community participation helps create an inclusive society. When government acts in co-operation with communities, people feel more powerful, more fairly treated and more valued. This is expected to create a peaceful environment in which the community members can help solve their own problems. This in turn would encourage self-reliance and innovation leading to sustainable development in the Niger Delta region and the Nigerian economy as a whole.

Fifth, community participation helps in measuring progress. Active relationships with the community are valuable for monitoring policy outcomes. The contacts with communities can help policy makers to:

- Identify people to be involved in monitoring and evaluation;
- Develop appropriate indicators to measure progress, and,
- Design appropriate ways of gathering data.

Finally, community participation in policy and decision making will help to ensure that human rights are upheld (Mayoux 2003:2-3) and that the Niger Delta people can get a fair share of the 'national cake'.

### **Challenges of the Participatory Conflict Management Approach**

It is important to state here that participatory methods face a number of inherent challenges. Some are due to the visual tools and others to the participatory process. The extent to which a participatory methodology attains its potential contribution depends essentially on the level of care with which it is used. The participatory tool kits should only be handled by facilitators who have vast experience in handling them, and in the knowledge of the community's traditions, customs and, most importantly, language. The Participatory Conflict Management Approach also faces other challenges, which are listed below:

### **Time pressure**

This is pervasive but must be overcome. Time invested early in inclusive collaboration will save time later.

### **Fear of conflict**

This must be resisted since it can lead to denial or suppression of the open dialogue that is needed to resolve potential conflict.

### **Temptation to revert to old ways of doing things**

Typical examples are: not wanting to listen, being 'right', isolating and excluding, attacking and defending, competing, trading blames, practising authoritative leadership and decision making. There is a need to persist and persevere through the awkward phase of learning new skills as this would lead to greater benefits in the future.

### **Narrow or partial measures of success and achievement**

There is always the tendency to want to settle with partial measures of success and achievement. Patience is required to allow collaborative processes to work themselves out. For the collaborative problem-solving approach to conflict management to be effective, these challenges must be recognised and adequate adjustments made to overcome them.

Participatory methods have been employed in poverty-alleviation programmes refugee-resettlement projects and micro credit programmes in New Zealand, India and many developing countries with varying degrees of success. In Nigeria the application of the participatory approach has been on ad hoc bases mainly for data gathering. The Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES) used it to gather and analyse information (Onosode 2003:123). The oil companies have now included PRA/PLA procedures as part of environmental impact assessment. Again, however, the consultants involved in such studies use the tool on ad hoc bases to gather information and fulfil their contract obligations. The European Union through its Micro Projects Programme (MPP3) is currently using the participatory approaches in community development in three Niger Delta States, Delta, Bayelsa and River States. The Federal Ministry of Agriculture

is also beginning to adopt it for its fadama programme and the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP). These programmes are yet at their foundation stages.

This paper calls for an integrated conflict management model which sees conflict management as a process embracing three levels of activities, that is, (1) conflict prevention, peace promotion and consolidation; (2) conflict control and abatement; and (3) conflict resolution (Imobighe 1997:275-280).

1. Conflict prevention, peace promotion and consolidation should involve a behavioural code, confidence building measures and integrative activities, and democratic practices.
2. Conflict control and abatement should involve passing resolutions, making appeals, and using neutral forces to separate hostile parties.
3. Conflict resolution should involve intensive negotiation, the use of mediatory organs, and conciliation activities (Academic Association Peaceworks 2004:22-28).

It is being advocated here that a well thought out community participatory process be built into the policy and decision-making procedure for the Niger Delta region at all times. This would involve the establishment of governance structures, such as the setting up of a community monitoring team by the community members, which has good representation and gender balance at the community level. It will also involve the employment of trained facilitators by the oil companies and government as well as the involvement of pro-active organisations such as the Civil Society Organisations – NGOs, CBOs, and civil rights groups. These would collectively be able to define and advocate a common policy agenda for the Niger Delta region, and to actively contribute to and provide feedback on new policies and their implications (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2001:1-6). It would also require parastatals, such as the National Centre for Economic Management and Administration (NCEMA), which have been involved in training and other capacity-building activities, to train a team of facilitators for government agencies, NGOs and CBOs who would effectively institute the participatory process and nurture it to maturity.

## Conclusion

The conventional methods of dealing with contradictions in the Niger Delta have no doubt failed to broker peace in the region. Rather, these strategies have heightened tension, insecurity and conflicts in the region. The participatory approach to conflict management is no doubt an invaluable tool which would enable a wide cross-section of people to share information and opinions about their lives and environment. People, who under normal circumstances are voiceless and powerless in the community, are empowered to gain confidence and to speak out. The face-to-face interaction which it provides, creates the opportunity for policy makers to gain an understanding of the issues at stake and to develop community trust and confidence for the government and its intentions. The application of a participatory approach in the Niger Delta is not new but policy makers have over the years paid lip service to the issue, and its principles have not been wholly applied. Hence the desired result of peace in the Niger Delta region has remained an illusion.

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