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COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT OF OIL PRODUCING RURAL COMMUNITIES OF THE NIGER-DELTA, NIGERIA

Ejirefe Influence

Salem University Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This paper qualitatively looks at the relationship between Community relations and rural development with special reference to oil producing communities in the Niger-Delta. It points out the adverse effects of oil exploitation and exploration by the multinational oil companies on the oil producing rural communities of the Niger-Delta. The oil producing rural communities are faced with mass unemployment due to the problem of environmental degradation, ecological problems are not adequately addressed, roads, electricity, water, education and health facilities are in terrible condition, youth restiveness and all sorts of crimes due to little or no community relations; thereby making the condition of living not conducive for the local people. This negligence has left the operations of the multinational oil companies in chaos due to the activities of the restive youths. As checks to these developmental challenges the oil companies consciously carried out some developmental works in the oil producing rural communities yet the problems of pipeline bombing, vandalism, etc continues. The paper believes the multinational developmental efforts were not appreciated because the power structures of the oil producing rural communities were not consulted. The paper therefore stressed the need for consultation to determine the felt-needs of the local people to foster good neighbourliness between the oil companies and the oil producing communities.

KEYWORDS

Community relations, Oil Producing Communities, Rural Development, Felt-needs and Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

A vital phenomenon in this decade is the aspiration for development in developing societies. The need for development in the physical, social structures and institutions of rural and urban communities in Nigeria is very important. Development transforms the individual and society at-large. It enhances individual wellbeing and provides the platform for solving societal problems.

However, rural communities, especially oil producing communities in the Niger-Delta lag behind urban communities in Nigeria. Consequently, Nigerian elites, foreigners, urban poor, villagers, job seekers, youths, especially graduates and young secondary school leavers prefer living in urban towns in spite of the high crime rate, high accident rate, corrupt practices, ugliness of refuse heaps and the dangers it pose to human health. These persons, especially rural dwellers believe urban towns in Nigeria offer opportunities for business, personal improvement, better employment, availability of infrastructures and good things of life, Amirize, (2010) asserts that as centres of economic activities, urban towns offer employment and business opportunities. From hawking to contracts, hustling youths of both sexes stay in towns, some of them combining business with part-time programmes.

It is a quirk of fate that apart from importation of some essential commodities, the raw materials and agricultural products used in the urban areas are got from the rural areas and the oil specifically from the rural communities where it is deposited in the Niger-Delta. The Nigerian elites and their foreign counterparts in the oil industry who resides in townships, profit and enjoy most of these products continues to live large while rural dwellers, especially oil producing communities in the Niger-Delta continues to live at subsistence level and in penury with minimal or no development taking place in their communities. The disparity in the standard of development between rural communities, especially oil producing communities in the Niger-Delta and urban communities is just too much.

This paper looks at the relationship between community relations and development of oil producing rural communities in the Niger-Delta. Multinational oil companies and corporate organisations operating in the Niger-Delta have come to realise that unless there is a cordial relationship between them and the stakeholders in their communities of operations they cannot function effectively. Community relations ensure that this type of environment triumph.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this paper is qualitative and it relies on secondary data for analysis.

2.1. DEFINITION OF TERMS

Community relations: Osuji, (1999) posits that community relations are concerned solely on how to create enabling environment in the host communities so that the company can carry out its activities without any hindrance rather with the assistance and support of the host inhabitants. It has the tendency to promote and sustain good relationship among all stakeholders - the oil companies and the host communities.

Oil producing communities: Agim, (1997) defined oil producing communities as those communities in whose territory oil is discovered and from where it is exploited. Oil producing communities in the Niger-Delta are rural communities.

Rural development: According to Economic Commission for Africa, (1972) as cited in Amirize, (1998) is the outcome of a series of quantitative and qualitative changes occurring among rural population. These include improvement in the level of awareness and standard of living.

Felt-Need: This is the priority need of the people, the very area they want development now.

3. PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH OIL PRODUCING COMMUNITIES IN THE NIGER-DELTA

The Niger-Delta is known for crude oil and major source of income for Nigeria. A greater percentage of this income is used to fund developmental projects of the 36 states and their urban capitals, including Abuja the Federal capital territory and the 774 local government areas in Nigeria, yet the oil rich communities are devoid of meaningful development. This ugly situation brought about serious protestations and arms struggle in the past which led to the granting of amnesty to the Niger-Delta militants by the Yar'Adua-Goodluck government in 2009. One would have thought that by now the whole of Niger-Delta, especially the rural community from where the oil is exploited is developed but that is not to be.

In fact, oil exploration and exploitation led to a great deal of poverty, suffering, frustration and problems for the oil producing communities of the Niger-Delta. The foreign investors came with I don't care attitude, they establish their companies without the consent of the host communities and without adequate plan for their welfare. Onyenwenwa, (2000) argues that

the multinational oil companies did not involve the oil bearing communities, ab initio. Since there is no negotiated Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the companies have no insurable interest. Therefore, they have no bargain to keep. This amount to RAPE of the people and not merely a case of communication gap. (pp, 125-126)

The Niger-Delta communities are completely devastated with little or no development to show. The people's sources of livelihood (farming and fishing) are destroyed by the activities of the multinationals. Onyenwenwa, (2000) further argues that

“in the Niger-Delta, oil pipe lines under people's houses, beneath their farm land and under the waters. Sometimes the oil spills into the Rivers/farms. The hitherto serene, beautiful natural environment is destroyed. Animals are driven away, the others which couldn't escape, perish. The people's traditional occupations of farming and fishing are automatically disrupted”. (p.126)

This ugly situation led to mass unemployment and youth restiveness against government and the multinational companies and all sorts of economic crimes, pipe line bombing, vandalism, kidnapping, etc in the Niger-Delta.

Ecological problems are not adequately addressed; the roads, electricity, water and health facilities are in terrible condition and in many areas lacking. Okujagu, (2000) cited in Amirize, (2010) states that social amenities such as light, water, health services, transportation system, educational facilities and other infrastructures are generally lacking, making the condition of living not conducive. This is the central problematique which remain a public discourse or social desiderata for some time now.

4. CONTRIBUTIONS OF MULTINATIONAL OIL COMPANIES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF OIL PRODUCING COMMUNITIES IN THE NIGER-DELTA

There is need for Multinational oil companies to develop the oil producing rural communities of the Niger-Delta to avoid further violence, pipeline bombing, vandalism, incessant protestations and

negative perception of the multinational companies by the host communities. Haastrup, (1997), cited in Ajala, 2000) argues that the perception of the oil companies by their rural host communities is not pleasant. The rural people believe the oil companies are rich yet very uncaring, and are supposed to be alternative to government and providing all infrastructure and facilities, Haastrup, (1997) cited in Ogedengbe, 2007) avows that where communities see oil companies as substitute to government, there is a danger for both the long and short-term relationship. This is part of the problems in oil industry/community relations. A major strategy adopted by the multinational oil companies to conquer these negative perception and problems and to bring about peace and good relationship was to contribute to the development of these rural communities. The following are some of the contributions of Shell Petroleum Development Company, Mobile Petroleum Nigeria, Elf Nigeria Ltd, Chevron Nigeria Ltd, TEXACO and Pan Ocean oil Corporation in collaboration with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) to the development of oil producing communities in Nigeria.

Kiikpoye, (2008) cited in Ejirefe, 2015) states that Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) spent \$59 million on Community Development Projects in the Niger-Delta and paid \$114 million to Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) - the state development intervention agency for the region in 2006.

Mobil Community Assistance Projects, (1994) cited in Osuji, 1999) posits that the main library building of Eket Division Public Library was in a state of disrepair and Mobil Petroleum Nigeria repaired the building with about ₦4 million. In addition, the main block of Secondary Grammar School, Upenekang Ibeno in Akwa-Ibom State was rehabilitated, and six abandoned staff quarters completed for use. Osuji, (1999) avers that NNPC/Chevron Venture has executed projects/programmes in the advancement of community relations policy and in 1992 Chevron build and commission 18 bed hospital for the people of Ugborodo community. This hospital offers a wide range of services including child delivery and community health enlightenment with emphasis on the type of diseases and illness prevalent in the rural Niger-Delta.

Osuji (1999) additionally states that the contributions of Elf Petroleum Nigeria Limited are tangible, durable and economically beneficial to the majority of the rural people, that Elf Nigeria Ltd in 1995 spent ₦2 million to provide 3 units of pipe borne water located at Akabuka, Obagi and Erema to serve six oil producing communities in its OML58 operational area. These communities are Obobura, Idu, Obagi, Ogbogu, Akabuka and Erema in the Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State. The company also completed a bore-hole/hand pump project for Elele community in Ikwerre Local Government Area of Rivers State. In 1992, Elf Nigeria Ltd also constructed 1.4km community road for Obite, 3km community road at Obiyebe, concrete drainage at Ogbogu and 4.56km road resurfacing for Akabuka/Oboburu communities. NNPC/TEXACO joint venture also provided assistance by way of scholarships to communities around operations such as Sengara, Fish-town, Kuilama and Ezetu. Pan Ocean Oil Corporation another joint venture of the NNPC provided pipe borne water to the Ovade community in Ethiope North Local Government of Delta State. In 1986/87, this company built and fully furnish a 6-class room block and principal's office for Ogini Grammar School in Oghara. The company built and furnished a four-room classroom block for Eyere Kpokpo Primary School, Otefe and in 1987 refurbished another four-room classroom block for the same school; etc.

These are evidences of community development but it's apparent the oil companies' developmental efforts has not produce the needed development and peace in the oil producing rural Niger-delta, that is why violence, kidnapping, oil theft and pipeline bombing, and vandalism still persist. Even though, the Niger-Delta militants have been granted amnesty, trained and given monthly stipends, the problem continues. This is the state of affairs and it reveals gaps in understanding and in the application of community relations in the oil producing communities. This paper hopes to correct these gaps with the mechanism of consultation.

5. BRIDGING THE GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING AND APPLICATION OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS WITH THE MECHANISM OF CONSULTATION IN OIL PRODUCING COMMUNITIES IN THE NIGER-DELTA

Multinational Oil Companies in the Niger-Delta need Community Relations that can solve problems, promote and sustain good relationship between their companies and the rural communities. This is the *raison d'être* the oil companies decided to establish Community Relations Unit (CRU). Some of the NNPC-Joint ventures call their CRU, Community Relations Committee (CRC). The CRC comprises of people from various departments in the company and headed by a leader who may also act as the spokesperson for the group. The CRC serve as a go between the oil Company and the Community, project the company' reputation, show that the company is a responsible company and willing to work with them to improve their welfare and development of the community to enhance good neighbourliness.

It is important that members of the CRC meet quarterly or monthly with the community power structures to identify and discuss the felt-need of the community and report back to the leadership of their company for approval. According to CUTLIP, et-al, (1985), cited in Ejirefe, 2015), the power structures are Opinion leaders, Prime movers, Independent, Dissidents and Networks. The Power structures according to Agim, (1997) are known as five critical interest groups, they are the Traditional ruler-ship, Women group, Community government or CDC, Youth organisation and Actual power group. Irrespective of the nomenclatures it assumes, the important thing here is that the community power structures or community representatives are consulted before community programmes and projects are embarked upon. It is improper to design a project in isolation without the input of the local people. Osuji, (1999) argued that it is wrong to attempt to present local management with a pre-packaged programme designed in isolation, instead let the local people define the needs of their communities and work with them in developing a programme for their situation. Consulting the community power structures help to foster development and understanding between the company and the community.

6. CONCLUSION

Community relations are essential for peace, tranquillity, progress and development of the oil companies and the communities of operations. It becomes even more meaningful to the oil producing communities in Nigeria only when the community power structures or community representatives are adequately consulted and allowed to determine their felt-needs or priority need.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above, the following are recommended:

- The oil companies should meet the felt-needs of their communities of operations. When they do that, harmonious environment is created for their companies and the local people.
- The oil companies should assist in providing relevant infrastructures for their host communities. Assist in training some of the able and willing community members in entrepreneurship to acquire the needed skills to establish their own business as well as train some of them in areas that are useful to the oil industry so that the oil companies can find them attractive and useful for employment and in fact employ some of them. By so doing the community members will see the oil companies as partners in progress and as catalyst to realising community development aspirations.
- In addition to the above, members of the CRC should be trained on the value of community relations. They should be proactive and fair to all stakeholders as well as provide and sustain both short-term and long-term developmental projects in their host communities.

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