Intra- and Inter-group Relations in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

By

Chibuzor Chile Nwobueze, PhD, MSPSP
Reader, Peace Studies
Department of History and Diplomatic Studies,
Faculty of Humanities,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt,
Rivers State, Nigeria
08037253790
chibuzornwobueze@yahoo.com

Introduction

We can be as separate as the fingers, but as united as the hand (African Proverb)
Every human society requires that groups from all walks of life collaborate for social cohesion. This makes it possible for them to identify their needs, beliefs, differences and commonalities and appreciate multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual diversity. Both intra- and inter-group relations make society develop and can greatly determine the stability of a state. Handled constructively, without socio-economic and environmental injustice, relations amongst groups can be healthy and there would be social cohesion and, under most circumstances, such relations may not result in violence or crises. This necessitates designing reflexive processes by which negative interactions among groups are controlled and constructive management reinstated.

The Niger Delta is populated by groups from different ethnic nationalities that interrelate in various areas of endeavour. Some of the groups in the region are the Ikwerre, Andoni, Kalabari, Ogba, Ogoni, Egbema, Ekpeye, Ijaw, Efik, Ibibio, Enuani, Urhobo, and Itsekiri. The dynamics of group consciousness is a common phenomenon. Also, most of these groups have their deities which regulate the activities of community members for social cohesion. The region has had several contacts with various groups,

including Europeans. Notable was the Akassa Raid of 1895, with the resistance of the people to British merchants' economic domination which paved the way for colonialism after the end of the Royal Niger Company (RNC). The peace, security and social infrastructure provided by the British created prosperous opportunities for inter-group relations.

There are significant threats to inter-group relations, namely greed, the politics of exclusion, marginalisation, inequality, lopsided appointments, oppressive policies, revenue sharing disputes, minority-majority conflicts, hate speech and actions/crimes, character assassination, democracy with discrimination, hostility and discriminatory tendencies, and many others. Currently, many groups are relating with mutual suspicion as a result of feelings of discontent and hostility perception, particularly in the Niger Delta, where inequality is a common feature. Vexed groups accept the temptation to demonise whole groups by judging them by their most extreme fringes as well as intentionally accommodate agents of intolerance and hatred and give them the ability to influence impressionable hearts and minds.

Ogbogbo *et al.* assert that, since independence, inter-group relations (characterised by social consciousness, indifference towards others, protection of socio-cultural values in a competitive society, and so on) have remained within the matrix of suspicion and hostility.[1] This continues to manifest because the people fail to constructively manage the disputes among them. Social inequality is one of the triggers of mutual suspicion in inter-group relations. These relations can be harmonious or hostile but it is better for groups to relate peacefully without any threat to their existence.

The Niger Delta is a region that experiences increasing violence that constrained the USA to predict Nigeria's likely disintegration in 2015 as a

[1] C. B. N. Ogbogbo, R. O. Olaniyi, and O. G. Muojama Eds. *The Dynamics of Inter-group Relations in Nigeria Since 1960. Essays in Honour of Obaro Ikime @ 70* (Ibadan: BWright Integrated Publishers, 2012).
Ltd.

result of clashes between militants and security forces; and this was disregarded by policymakers.[2] The Niger Delta is symbolic in the history of inter-group relations in Nigeria, both as a region and as a people. The discovery of petroleum deposits in commercial quantity at Oloibiri and Afam in 1956 made the then Shell-B.P. Petroleum Company to move its operational base from Owerri, a town in Igboland, in present-day Imo State, to Port Harcourt, owing to its nearness to oil fields, roads and habour facilities. As from 1957 when Shell began to relocate to Port Harcourt, the building of offices, training centres and facilities for oil workers became the core activities of the company.[3] The Shell Oil terminal report and other sources also revealed that, apart from its contribution towards the increased quantity of imports through the Port-Harcourt seaport, the dredging of the mouth of the Bonny River by Shell B.P. was what made the Nigerian Ports Authority to also dredge the seaport in Port-Harcourt down to Bonny, with appreciable impact on inter-group relations.[4] However, the presence of oil companies has made inter-group relations to go beyond the major towns like Bonny, Ughelli, Warri, Sapele, Eket, Uyo, Owerri, Port Harcourt, Yenagoa, and Patani. Most rural areas now welcome and host groups from all walks of life, including foreigners, creating opportunities for closer communication, greater population movements and so more intimate and greater interactions in economic and social spheres.

The government has established tertiary institutions in the region. Although the aim of the Federal Government in establishing the Petroleum Training Institute at Warri (now Federal University of Petroleum Resources, Efurrun) was to produce middle-level manpower for the petroleum industry, in recognition of Warri as an oil town[5], the initiative

[2] BBC Online November 15, 2004. http://www.nigeriamasterweb.com/HeatInNigeria6.html

[3] See U. Udeke. Petroleum Exploration and Socio Economic Changes in the Producing Communities of
Nigeria, 1908-1985. PhD Thesis, Department of History , University of Calabar, - Nigeria, 1995.

[4] Udeke, 1995.

[5] NAOC, 1992; *Tell*, 1991, Udeke (1995).

has inter-group relations values. In a deliberate effort to promote inclusive and sustainable development, both the federal and state governments established and financed university education as a priority for institutional development. The state did the following in the Niger Delta: established University of Port Harcourt, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State University, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Federal University Otuoke, Federal Polytechnic, Ekowe, Bayelsa State, with specialisation in Gas, Petroleum and Environmental Studies, as well as Delta State University, Abraka. The most recent one is the Maritime University, Okerenkoko, which will definitely promote inter-group relations within the creeks of Delta State and the entire Niger Delta.

University education has significantly built a human capital base renowned for creativity, innovation, productivity and scholarship, which has largely contributed to conflict transformation in the Niger Delta. However, the benefits have been reported to be higher among the elite than the low class.

Issues and Challenges of Inter-group Relations

The history of inter-group relations shows that groups can be influenced by the actions or activities of neighbouring groups, whether they are sub-groups or a major group whose cultures or traditional leadership styles are related.[6] Groups that have related historical experiences tend to understand one another better than those who only share a common boundary. As far as Niger Delta groups are concerned, crude oil is a dominant issue in the region, considering how groups are pitted against one another over the revenues accruable from oil. In this regard, not only groups have been engulfed in disputes over oil, but also the federal and state governments, with litigation and confrontational strategies dominating the conflict-handling styles.

According to Samuel Aghalino, the occupation of land by the oil companies which construct flow lines, flow stations and other oil installations is the

[6] B. Nwanne. Ed. *Ika: the Land and Its People*. (Lagos: Up and Doing Publishers, 2004).

driver of acrimony between them and host the communities.[7] The attitude has rather complicated if not worsened the inequality in land accessibility, particularly when the customary rights system largely determines land accessibility in sub-Saharan Africa and the land tenure weakens women's claim to land, while their male counterparts still have enormous control in issuing land.[8] Most groups in the region seem to have had high consciousness with unusual value for land that has excluded the less privileged.

Isaac Albert argues that the mobilisation of groups can promote intra-group relations; inter-group conflicts arise from the struggle over values or claims.[9] It is not disputable that, when there is conflict between groups, social welfare, facilities, and freedom must be at stake, with the core aim of the groups being to protect their group identities and interests.[10] The fact that oil is synonymous with youth violence cannot be disputed because it is used to achieve the political agenda of the protagonists in different communities.[11] According to Oseloka, when the 'Ogoni mobilized to challenge the unfavourable partnership between oil companies and government, they expelled Shell oil company from their land and created a dual power situation in which people's power, for a movement took

[7] S. O. Aghalino. Oil and Cultural Crisis: The Case of the Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Africana: The Niger Delta* 5, 1 (2011). 1-21.

[8] S. Razavi. Liberalisation and the debates on women's access to land, *Third World Quarterly*, 28, 8 (2007): 1479-1500.

[9] I. O. Albert. *Inter-ethnic Relations in a Nigerian City: A Historical Perspective of the Hausa-Igbo Conflicts in Kano 1953-1991* (IFRA-Nigeria occasional publication no.2, 1993).

[10] J. Osagiea, F. Akinpelu, F. Adegoke, and S. Ezeani. 'Causes of Conflicts in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria as Expressed by the Youth in Delta State.' *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 5 (2010): 82–89. http://ac.els-cdn.com/S1877042810014291/1-s2.0-S1877042810014291-main.pdf?_tid=93aca240-bb22-11e4-8c2f-00000aacb362&acdnat=1424671970_77c11020faba4b5ba3eaddeff8d72a22

[11] J. Giroux. Turmoil in the Delta: Trends and Implications. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2, 8 (2008): 11-22.

primacy over the state.'[12] This was as a result of the oil-related statutes that affect oil-producing communities.[13] Sawyer (2016) claims that the advent of oil in commercial quantity in Ijoland heightened the impact of conflict, which spiralled to crisis amongst supposed brothers; and it eroded their values, with sanctity of life, which is the core of Ijaw brotherhood, relegated to the background.[14] The cultural crisis associated with petro-business affected indigenous norms and cultures, with the usual incidences of displacement, criminality and prostitution.[15]

Daniel Hamilton discusses the relationship between the stakeholders in oil-producing communities thus:

> Records reveal that between 1956 and 1996, the relationship between oil companies and their host communities was relatively cordial, individualized and isolated. Leaders of the oil producing communities were still optimistic this new found source of wealth will transform their communities into a heaven of prosperity. What they did not foresee was that much of the euphoria for a coming prosperity from the expanding oil and gas industry would not continue into the 1980s. During the 1970s contradictions in the industry/community relationship within Niger Delta manifested….The material conditions of existence were indeed becoming worse because the financial compensation being paid to oil producing communities was not only

[12] Oseloka (2010:243).

[13] See The Technical Committee Report (2008).

[14] O. A. Sawyer. Oil and Intra Ethnic Conflicts in Ijoland: 1956-2007. (Ph.D Thesis Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies, University of Ibadan, 2016).

[15] S. O. Aghalino. Oil and Cultural Crisis: The Case of the Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Africana* 5, 1 (2011):

> grossly inadequate, but was also creating a new and dangerous phenomenon in these communities, the phenomenon of inter- and intra-community conflicts/crises unknown to these communities.[16]

If the groups that have adopted hostility perception begin to appreciate the need for mutual trust, understanding and respect, the region would benefit from the human and regional development associated with cordial inter-group relations. Different groups have utilised solidarity in advocating community rights and economic justice for the people in the Niger Delta. The oil companies sometimes ignore the complaints of the host communities, pretending that problems neither exist nor are there disputes not resolved.[17] Out of all the ethnic groups, the Ijaw are referred to as the largest ethnic group in the Niger Delta, and this has influenced inter-group relations since independence.[18] In terms of war-making, the Ijaw ethnic group is regarded as the most violent and warlike group owing to its confrontational style of engaging major ethnic groups and oil companies in the Niger Delta.[19]

It is worthy of mentioning that having the same dialect does not stop disputes over scarce resources, as some of the groups seem to have incompatible goals. In Rivers and Bayelsa States, for example, there are the

[16] D. I. Hamilton. Oil and Gas Companies and Community Crises in the Niger Delta. *American Review of Political Economy* 9, 1 (2011): 3-17.p.3 http://arpejournal.com/ARPEvolume9number1/Hamilton.pdf

[17] F. Iyayi. Oil Companies and the Politics of Community Relations in Nigeria. In Raji, W., Ale, A. and Akinsola, E. Eds. *Boiling Point*. (Lagos: Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, 2000). Pp.151-178.

[18] I. **Okonta**. 'Behind the Mask: Explaining the Emergence of the MEND Militia in Nigeria's Oil bearing Niger Delta.' *Niger Delta*, *Economies of Violence Working Paper* (2006): http://geog.berkeley.edu/ProjectsResources/ND%20Website/NigerDelta/WP/11-Okonta.pdf

[19] V. Ojakorotu and Uzodike. Oil, Arms Proliferation and Conflict in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. *African Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2007): 85-106.

Nembe, Ogbia, Brass, Kolokuma, Gbarain, Egui, Ekpitiama, Oghulagha, Ogubolo, Ijo and Ikwerre. The problem is that resource governance can cause hostility perceptions that motivate inter-group conflicts.

Many sub-groups have engaged in inter-group relations in order to either meet their needs or protect themselves from the rising threat of violence, poverty or exploitation by the oil companies or perceived marginalisation by policymakers. Various groups in Ijawland have been actively engaged in exploring this option in intra-group relations.

This approach has helped them in initiating memorandum of understanding between the communities and the oil companies. The global memorandum of understanding (GMOU) has greatly contributed to bringing them together, although there are times when disputes arise over the benefits from the agreements that facilitate corporate social responsibility (CSR). Various multinational oil companies, including Chevron Nigeria Limited and Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), have signed a memorandum of understanding with their host communities in rural development and healthcare projects across the Niger Delta, including Ogbia Local Government, Oloibiri and neighbouring communities. Their efforts in equipping general hospitals and other primary healthcare centres is a product of inter-group relations.[20]

Improvement of work efficiency, equity and comprehensive sector-wide delivery of essential primary healthcare services in the Niger Delta, are imperative for optimal harnessing of the youth potential as well as consolidating the modest gains made in health management. The target of this opinion is to promote and sustain the development, knowledge and application of health economics in the Niger Delta. Health will ultimately serve as bridge to peace. Health and healing serve as an antidote to inter-group conflicts and destruction. In a situation of conflict and contestation over resources, improved health for all stands apart as a neutral aim. It

[20] D. O. Ore. Shell, GE Sign on Healthcare Projects for Oloibiri. *Guardian News*, Saturday, 14 February. http://www.ngrguardiannews.com/news/national-news/198139-shell-ge-sign-on-healthcare-projects-for-oloibiri

institutionalises feelings of care and compassion, collaboration and strength rather than violence.

So far, the GMOU has empowered Regional Development Councils (RDCs) to execute community development projects. But this requires training by non-governmental organisations, as well as working together with companies in building trust through confidence-building measures in lower stakes.[21]

The drive for CSR delivery has shaped inter-group relations in the region. For instance, various oil companies have constructed bridges, roads, and jetties in various communities in the riverine areas. Some of the communities that benefited from these jetties are Omadino, Madangho, Ughorodo and Ode-Itsekiri in Delta State. Also, construction of an access road to Agip's office complex was financed by the company from the Mile 4 area of Ikwerre Road to its office, which now benefits the entire society.[22] Nevertheless, multinational oil companies need to look at more youth-focused programmes and initiatives to empower the youth of the Niger Delta.

Different disputes have characterised intra-group relations in the region. Some of these are the ones involving Polaku, Koroama and Shell on ecological damage, and confrontations at the creeks and swamps, with legal action; Ogboloma, Obunagha, Oloibiri, Nedug, Agbia and Shell, on the issue of ecological destruction; Okotiama and Shell; Amarata, Yenizue-Epie, Agud Epie, Igbogene, Etegwe, Okutu, and Shell; Akenfa and Shell, over disputes on inadequate compensation; Biogbolo, Ede-Epie, Okutukutu, Etgwe, Yenzue-gene, over the pipeline linking Kolo Creek Station, which polluted farmlands, forests and the only source of drinking

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21 See 10 Elements of Good Practice in Corporate-Community Engagement– Lessons Learned from Chevron Nigeria Limited's GMOU, 2013. http://inec.usip.org/blog/2013/feb/18/10-elements-good-practice-corporate-community-engagement-lessons-learned-chevron-ni

[22] See. Udeke, 1995. And J. Okolie-Osemene and U. Udeke. Multinational Oil Companies and Urbanization in Nigeria's Delta Region. In Ukase, P. I., Akubor, E. O. and Onoja, A. I. Eds. *Urbanization, Security, and Development Issues in Nigeria 1914-2014, Festschrift in Honour of Professor Enoch Oyedele*. (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press Limited, 2016).

water the people depend on; and the Obunagha community 1992 dispute concerning the lack of social responsibility by Shell.[23] Ecological damage has not affected only the source of water, but has also made food security to decline across the region to the extent that the soil is no longer fertile for farming. This is why many youths now divert their interest to the collection of royalties and CSR from the oil companies, to the detriment of sustainable community development. The situation has been aggravated by poor compensation of those impacted by the oil spillage as well as the ongoing social and economic deprivation in the Niger Delta. The state must be responsive to its responsibilities towards the prevention, management and transformation of pollution, flood and erosion-induced conflicts in the Niger Delta in accordance with international conventions.

Geographical Factor in Intra- and Inter-group Relations

Peace and conflict impact assessment reveals that geographical factors, such as location, climate, and distribution of resources, forests, valleys and hills, have played significant roles in the areas of war and peace, shaping the relations between groups. The river systems have been major communication avenues for the various Niger Delta peoples, promoting transportation, economic activities, commercial exchanges as well as the spread of traditional and Christian religions, education and civilization.

For instance, existence of rivers has not prevented groups from interrelating and transacting trade in goods or farm produce. Various communities within the region visit markets beyond their localities, including those in the hinterland and creeks. The desire for urban life has also meant that residents of riverine communities often travel by boat to developed towns in the region. Various religious movements usually surmount the challenge of crossing rivers to carry out evangelism in creeks. They travel to Nembe,

[23] Dadiowei, Tari. 2009. Environmental Impact Assessment and Sustainable Development in the Niger Delta: The Gbarain Oil Field Experience. Niger Delta Economies of Violence, *Working Paper* 24. Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, USA and Tari Dadiowei, 1994, 2006.

Brass, Bonny Island, Egbdei in Kolokuma/Opokuma, Okrika, and Degema amongst others. Apart from churches and the clergy, many corps members have also been part of this aspect of inter-group relations.

The geographical factors are not only important in the production and exchange of commodities. They also influence diversification of human interactions, including migrations, marriages, sporting and hunting activities, conflicts, cultural borrowings and external influences on the various communities of the Niger Delta.

The geographical factor has also influenced the incidence of militancy in the region. Various militant groups have benefited from the strategic advantages offered by the topography of the area. For instance, they have utilised the creeks and swampy nature of the area to establish camps and bases to plan their struggle against the state. In the camps, they recruit, initiate and train new members. Largely, the camps serve as sanctuary and hideouts for the militants and their victims.

Militants have also contributed to the shaping of inter-group relations with the formation of several groups which draw members from different ethnic groups and sub-groups across the region, with specific agitation for improved government intervention in the region. Notable among these are Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), and Movement for Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Most of these groups are dominated by indigenes of Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers States.[24]

Attempts to understand youth force-based activism, crime and deployment of violence to agitate for improved revenue allocation and resource control have mostly focused on reasons for youth restiveness in the region rather than the strategies that have been and are being deployed to address the social problem. A participatory and reflexive multi-track approach to youth-focused human development initiatives is neglected, omitted and

[24] O. Otite, O. The Complexities behind Nigeria's Niger Delta Crisis. *Born Black Magazine* issue 6, 2009. http://www.bornblackmag.com/Crises-Niger-Delta.html

absent in education and development initiatives of the state and oil companies. Investigations showed that the youth of the Niger Delta are bright, determined, optimistic, eager to learn and anxious to prosper. Therefore, the energy, enthusiasm and abilities in youth should be harnessed to make Niger Delta peaceful.

Benefits of Inter-group Relations Since 1956

The traditions of origins of the various Niger Delta groups indicate that they had long lasting interactions spanning years before the advent of colonial rule in Nigeria. Such traditions underscore the underlying unity of the present Niger Delta region. Dynastic relationships, state formation and empire-building processes did not only provide the peace and security that encourage more intimate relationship but also provide and promote cultural homogeneity and a healthy ideological climate to foster the prevailing harmonious contacts.

Inter-group relations in the region have facilitated and promoted trade amongst different groups. These have also helped them in enhancing their festivals and ritual events. It was through intra- and inter-group relations that they became aware of those that are warriors and those that require the assistance of neighbouring groups for sustenance and protection through language and cultural affinity. The festivals in different communities enhance intra-group relations with integration value in the region.

Intra- and inter-group relations have enhanced the political interests of groups that cooperate both in clamouring for a common front and in nominating candidates of political parties for elections. The emergence of Dr Goodluck Jonathan as President, Federal Republic of Nigeria in 2009-2015 attests to this fact. Such relations have greatly promoted inclusive citizenship, business, sports and cultural diplomacy, which have helped to boost youth empowerment, wealth creation and the gross domestic product (GDP). Liberal democracy and accountable governance will hasten the process of nation building

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the issue of intra- and inter-group relations in the Niger Delta. The history of intra- and inter-group relations in the Niger Delta has been overshadowed by the resource issues across the region. Most groups in the region have either been brought to the negotiation table in some ways or disintegrated by disputes over resources, particularly oil revenues. Many groups have been able to benefit from inter-group relations, while others have complained of being excluded and marginalised in the socio-economic life. It is suggested that groups should focus on the positive side of inter-group relations and sacrifice hostility for peace and sustainable development in the region. If the communities address the lingering disputes over representation, intra-group conflicts will be a thing of the past because the question of how to identify the right individuals to represent them in their relations with government and oil companies would not arise.

A new way forward will require that people must love those who hate them and respond to hate with love, show compassion and understanding to people of other groups. People must have a responsibility to rise above their prejudices and appreciate the nuances that characterise inter-group relations in a plural society like the Niger Delta. People must amplify their potential for harmonious co-existence, avoid the temptation to demonise whole groups by judging them by their most extreme fringes, and intentionally marginalise agents of intolerance and hatred and deny them the ability to influence impressionable hearts and minds.

As Niger Deltans and practitioners of empathy, it is our primary peacebuilding responsibility to seek common ground. This is a basis for regional peace and development.

Development of a non-formal and formal peace-focused education in the Niger Delta as well as development initiatives is germane to conflict prevention, conflict management, peacebuilding and human rights. The aim is to give knowledge that can enable people and groups to relate with one another more peacefully; promote compromise with democratic ideals

over and above contention; raise consciousness to curb hostility and discrimination tendencies to make Niger Delta a development oriented region.

The Society for Peace Studies and Practice (SPSP), which I am a member of, has a role to play in organising the people of Niger Delta for peacebuilding. The society is already doing an excellent job in getting the voice of the Niger Delta heard at national and international levels. The SPSP could help to promote conflict transformation if supported by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) as part of the efforts in linking leadership, peace and sustainable development. I call on the NDDC to host a future conference of SPSP. At such a conference, participants can present well-researched papers specifically on intra- and inter-group relations, leadership and sustainable development goals. This will provide a more intellectual perspective to the issue of nation building and will make Niger Delta a truly peaceful and prosperous region.