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The Impact Of The Amnesty Programme ON Rural Communities IN NIGER DELTA:

**PERSPECTIVES ON THE EXPERIENCES AND
VIEWS OF SAMPLED COMMUNITY MEMBERS**

Policy Brief Paper By

Centre For Population And Environmental Development, CPED

This Policy Brief is supported by the *Think Tank Initiative Programme* initiated and managed by the *International Development and Research Centre (IDRC)*

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PREFACE

This policy brief is the first in the series of communication to policy and decision makers on the on-going research project of the *Centre for Population and Environmental Development (CPED)* titled “*Amnesties for Peace in the Niger Delta: a critical assessment of whether forgiving crimes of the past contributes to lasting peace*” funded by the *International Development and Research Centre (IDRC)* under its peace and nation building program.

CPED’s Policy Brief Series is designed to draw attention to key findings and their policy implications as projects are being executed. This edition which focuses on the assessment by the inhabitants of rural communities in the Niger Delta of the impact of the Amnesty Programme on their communities is based mainly on the outcome of the qualitative case study of selected communities in the region in which key stakeholders participated in the research process through key informant interviews and focus group discussions.

We are particularly grateful to IDRC as well as the *Think Tank Initiative* for the support to CPED which has enabled the Centre to carry out the study and the publication of this policy brief. We also appreciate the cooperation of the leaders at various groups and community-based organisations in the sampled communities for their collaboration with CPED in the on-going implementation of the project.

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INTRODUCTION

The challenges of development in the Niger Delta are well known and these challenges date back to the colonial era and include environmental degradation and destruction of livelihoods; poor infrastructure and lack of access to health, education and social services. Many interventions have been made by governments at all levels, the private sector, individuals, religious bodies and development partners over the years. Yet the development challenges persist. It was these problems that led to the emergence of militancy that characterized the region for the past 25 years. It is against this background that the Amnesty Programme of the Federal Government which has been welcomed by all stakeholders within

and outside the country was established. Since the commencement of the Amnesty Programme, stakeholders have acknowledged that the Federal Government through the programme had good intentions for granting the militants amnesty with the hope that the gesture would effectively stop the raging restiveness in the crisis-ridden Niger Delta Region, help considerably in the socio-economic development of the area, engage the ex-militants in gainful employment, as well as other meaningful activities that could help improve their living conditions. Under the programme, thousands of youth have been undergoing vocational training in various centres within and outside the country for acquisition of skills

in relevant fields. Some are enrolled in formal schools. Since the commencement of the Amnesty Programme in 2009, violence has dropped and oil production has risen. The Amnesty Programme for Niger Delta militants has been able to recoup an average of N33 billion into the nation's coffers annually. The Niger-Delta now appears rather peaceful and optimistic in the future. Sustaining the relative peace in the region is a pre-condition for sustaining a long term and stable growth and development in the region. This is a pointer to realization of Millennium Development Goal of poverty reduction in the region in particular and Nigeria as a whole in general.

However, a key expectation of the Amnesty Programme is the remarkable improvement in the well being of the people living in rural

communities in the Niger Delta region that have not benefitted from effective development intervention activities over the years of violence and conflict. In fact, governments in Nigeria have argued that the prevalence of violence in the Niger Delta has prevented meaningful development in the region. Consequently, communities at the grassroots level were optimistic that with Amnesty Programme, they would begin to experience remarkable development activities in their localities. One of the implementation challenges of the Amnesty Programme relate to the participation of communities affected by the violence in the activities of the programme. It is in this context that the perception of the inhabitants of rural communities whose development have been hampered by years of violence in the region is essential for the overall

examination of the impact of the Amnesty programme on rural communities in the Niger Delta region.

This policy brief is based on the findings of an on-going research on *“Amnesties for Peace in the Niger Delta: a critical assessment of whether forgiving crimes of the past contributes to lasting peace”* The project is funded by the Canada’s *International Development Research Centre (IDRC)*, Ottawa, Canada. The overall objective of the study is to critically interrogate the amnesty and the political settlement leading to it, in terms of perceptions, discourses and conversations that undergird it; the nature of bargains, understanding and consensus constructed around it; the content and methods of the Amnesty; the nature of inclusiveness, equity, justice and gender sensitivity; the levels of

legitimacy and sustainability of the settlement; the challenges of compliance, implementation and accountability, and the impacts on violence mitigation, conflict resolution, peace building and state building. The project’s specific objectives include: conducting a comprehensive review and analysis of the nature, drivers and expressions of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta region and assess the impacts that the amnesty programme has had on conflict mitigation, peace building, national stability, and the potential for conflict re-occurrence; mapping out the experiences, challenges and lessons facing the amnesty programme as a form of political settlement in the Niger Delta and the implications for sustainable peace and nation building in Nigeria and more broadly in other countries in sub-Saharan Africa; and assessing

the extent to which the amnesty programme was inclusive, and whether this inclusiveness contributed to its sustainability.

This policy brief presents the findings of the qualitative surveys of the impact of the amnesty programme in a sample of rural communities in the Niger Delta region entailing key informant interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders and groups. The policy brief is therefore based on the views of the inhabitants of the communities with respect to their experiences on the implementation of the Amnesty programme. It also presents the recommendations the community members provided to improve the implementation of the amnesty programme and the development of their communities.

Ethical and Security considerations

The Niger Delta region is still a volatile area despite the relative peace which the Amnesty programme has brought to the region. Consequently, conducting a study in the Niger Delta requires both security and ethical considerations. With respect to security protocol, this was designed to protect the researchers in the field and the respondents so that they are not harmed during the process of conducting the surveys. One component of the security and ethical protocol is the fact that the rural communities in which the surveys were carried out are not disclosed so as to protect the inhabitants from any harassment. The research protocol entailing the research methodology and the survey instruments were approved by the University of Benin's Ethical Review Committee. Permission was

also obtained from the traditional authorities in the respective communities. For each participant interviewed, informed consent was obtained. Similarly focus group participants also gave their consent before being asked to participate in the discussions. The project research team informed the participants regarding the purpose, methods and procedure of the study. The participants made an informed choice to take part in the study, and did so freely and voluntarily. They were asked to give verbal approval before the commencement of the interactions while in some cases, respondents and participants were asked to sign or thumb print on a form to indicate that they had given their informed consent to be interviewed. They were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or discontinue their participation at any time. The

privacy of the participants was respected throughout the surveys and all information collected has been kept strictly confidential just as the communities were kept confidential. The participants' anonymity was sustained by substituting their names with numbers or codes. Participants were treated fairly and any unclear information was clarified for them during the focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

Methodology

Using the sample survey methodology, six communities were selected from Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States for the detailed community interaction. In each community, a qualitative, descriptive and exploratory research design was used to examine a variety of issues relating to the impact of the Amnesty programme

in their communities. The population of the qualitative survey comprised key stakeholders in the communities including traditional leaders, elders, men, women and the youth. Key informant interviews entailed collecting data by means of unstructured questionnaires which lasted between 60 and 120 minutes each, using the direct contact approach. The unstructured interviews were carried out more like normal conversation, but with a purpose which in this case is their assessment and perceptions of the Amnesty Programme, particularly as it affected their locality. During the interviews, probing questions were asked in order to elicit more information from the participants and show participants that the researcher was interested in their experiences. The interviews were recorded by means of a tape recorder to prevent loss of data, and

transcripts were made of the recordings. The research team made appointments with the participants and interviewed them while they were off duty at where they worked, or at their homes.

Of the various issues discussed during the key informant and focus group discussions, three of them are reported in this policy brief as follows: (i) Community participation in Peace Building through the Amnesty Programme; (ii) Communities and employment component of the Amnesty Programme; and (iii) Communities, the Amnesty programme and social infrastructure development. The transcripts and notes from the focus group discussions and key informant interviews were analysed using content analysis. At the first step of the analysis, the transcripts and notes were reordered to the

topics addressed by the discussion. At the second step of the analysis, issues that were brought forward repeatedly or were discussed at length by the participants, and relevant parts from each FGD and notes were ordered by these issues, using a 'cut and paste' method. The third step was to make a summary of the results for each FGD, based on the issues examined in the discussions. The summaries were reviewed by an external expert to test whether the summaries were good representations of the FGDs and the summaries were then revised based on the expert's comments. Finally, an overall summary of the discussions was made. Thus the views reported in this policy brief represent the findings of the qualitative survey based on a small randomly selected sample of stakeholders in the target communities.

Community Participation in Peace Building through the Amnesty Programme

Key informant respondents and participants at the focus group discussions agreed on the need for peace in the Niger Delta in general and in their communities in particular. They recognized the fact that long term sustenance of peace and security in the Niger Delta which is important for the development of Nigeria depend upon reconciliation and peace building in the Niger Delta. They concluded that the need for a programme to transform the conflict in the Niger Delta and build strong relations based on trust and confidence is therefore welcomed. They pointed out that peace building and reconciliation based on truth, justice, forgiveness and security of all and sundry has the capacity to endure. The Amnesty

programme is therefore a good beginning. The community members however pointed that sustainable peace is only achievable if all key stakeholders are involved in the process either as actors or beneficiaries.

It is in this context that key informants and participants at the focus group discussions pointed out that the Amnesty programme is largely exclusive of most of the victims of the violence in the Niger Delta, especially the inhabitants of the communities where most of the violence took place over the years. They argued that their villages were targets of attack by the militants as well as the government military response carried out mainly by the Joint Military Force. In this respect, the community members argued that the Amnesty is largely exclusive as it targets mainly militants

without consideration for the victims of militancy and hostage taking in the region. Mothers and Children who had lost fathers and sons and homes and have been displaced by the conflict were not included in the amnesty package. They argued that their exclusion can therefore be explained by the fact that they did not directly carry arms or engaged in violence.

One Participant Pointed out as follows:

“Amnesty granted to the militants it seems serves only as a strategy to enable the government and oil companies to continue with oil exploration in order to bring in revenue to government. This strategy the government adopted amounted to throwing money at issues affecting the Niger Delta instead of addressing them head on.”

Another participant added as follows:

Amnesty did not meet the need of the grassroots population of the Niger Delta region, especially those living in the rural communities that were major targets of violence. Amnesty is basically only an act of freeing militants and not to develop the area. Amnesty is not a development act, and it has explained itself in the sense that, despite amnesty peace has not permanently come to the region. The main aspiration of the people is for the government to come and develop the area and improve on the socio-economic lives of the people. It does not address the socio-economic needs of the people. Amnesty does not take care of the inequality that exists, the sprawling poverty, environmental degradation and the widespread unemployment that exist in the region.

Some of the respondents asked the following questions “*Are the militants*

the only deprived in Niger Delta?” Is the amnesty programme and the attention given to the ex-militants not reinforcing the frustration of those who did not take up arms against the Nigerian state? They pointed out that answering these questions is essential to resolving these frustrations which is a requirement for peace – building in the Niger Delta communities.

The issue of involving the communities in the actual implementation of the Amnesty programme was raised frequently by the key informants and focus group discussants. They pointed out that the limited efforts to reach the communities by the amnesty programme have often been hijacked by people living in urban areas who have access to those in authority. The community members are not happy because they are sidelined in the implementation

process. One of the key informants pointed out as follows:

“The case of peace building in the Niger Delta is often determined at the federal capital territory Abuja rather than through the initiatives of those affected. It was deduced from the qualitative data that there was more politics in peace building initiatives than in conflict initiatives, because they are frequent and involve government expenditure, so peace building processes in the Niger Delta were described as political and full of deceit: ... Imagine someone who has lived all his life in Lagos city was made the chairman of the amnesty programme in our community area- just because he is a member of the ruling party! What does he know about the origin of conflicts in this community? Does he know the number of cult groups causing trouble in this community? Does he know those sponsoring violence in this area? These are questions we should ask ourselves.”

Finally, participants pointed out that sustainable peace is not going to be achieved in the region except communities whose natural resources are exploited unabated are involved in the exploitation process. One participant in the focus group discussion emphasized this when he stated as follows:

“The exclusion of Niger Delta communities in the control and management of the upstream and downstream operations of the oil industry is disastrous to their very existence as a people. For instance through various legislations by the Federal Government and some State Governments, the local communities on whose lands oil is exploited, have been divested of their entitlements to their land and the oil produced from it. Indigenes of the Niger Delta hardly ever benefit from the allocation of Oil Prospecting Licenses and are totally excluded from crude oil sales

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notwithstanding the fact that it is the local communities and the people that directly suffer from oil spillage, gas flaring, acid rain, and other forms of environmental degradation and pollution”

Communities and Employment Component of the Amnesty Programme

Participants in the key informant and focus group discussions emphasized the employment challenges facing the youth in their communities and the contribution which the Amnesty programme is supposed to make to the amelioration of the situation. They argue that their communities have greater percentage of the unemployed population in the Niger Delta region because most of the employment opportunities are in the urban areas. According to them, this fact originally led to some of the

youth in their communities becoming militants so as to meet their basic needs. They therefore criticized the employment and training component of the Amnesty programme which appears to benefit a few militants most of which are not from their communities. The participants pointed out that youth in their communities in need of training and employment are not listed as politicians use party machinery to identify those who should benefit. In most cases, the few beneficiaries from the communities are those living in urban areas.

One Participant Pointed out as follows:

“Training and employment in the Amnesty programme should be extended to all the local inhabitants in the community, otherwise, it could send a wrong signal to others who have been

excluded from the exercise that crime pays and may serve as a driving force for others to want to take arms for recognition. The amnesty package should not be implemented as a standalone act, but must be carried out within a comprehensive peace process.”

Another participant expressed the view that *“addressing the militants alone while neglecting the deplorable situation, the underdevelopment and poverty, governmental and corporate misgovernance, all of which led to the militancy and later criminality in the region will no doubt spell doom for the amnesty programme. This is because the number of militants presently being reintegrated under the programme constitutes only a small percentage of the Niger Delta population.”*

In the context of the need to train and employ youth in their communities, the key informant

respondents and focus group discussion participants noted the neglect of women as beneficiaries of the programme. They pointed out that the Amnesty programme granted the militants is skewed towards the male gender as if the female were not part of the communities. One of the participants pointed out that:

“The issue is that militancy is associated with both the male and female youth. Therefore, whatever must be done must also consider and accommodate the female gender, the children and the elderly. In order to avoid a situation where a crop of young girls or ladies could rise up to carry out another round of criminality and demand for their rights, there is need to involve the female community members as key beneficiaries of the programme. Therefore, amnesty as a strategy must involve both male and

female gender and possibly the children.”

Similar sentiments were expressed by other participants with respect to how their communities are deprived despite the Amnesty programme. A typical sentiment expressed by an interviewee was: *“Regarding our suffering, the government has done nothing: “We have oil wells, but no benefits and no employment.”* This sentiment was expressed time and again across the communities interviewed, providing strong local justification for illegal oil refining being a community right. Another interviewee said:

“The government and oil companies are collecting our oil, and we don’t have jobs, no money, so we have to collect the oil and refine our own. We have no fish in these creeks because of

pollution; even the few farmers we have, their farm lands have been polluted with oil, so they all joined the practice of illegal oil refining.”

Communities, the Amnesty Programme and Social Infrastructure Development

The level of infrastructure in the Niger Delta has always been poor. The situation is compounded by the difficult terrain of the region. There is abundant evidence to show that in the past, the Niger Delta region suffered from administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructure and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, abject poverty, filth and squalor and endemic conflict. Infrastructure development is a necessity for economic growth, development and improvement in the quality of life of citizens. There is the need for

massive infrastructural development of the Niger Delta including the building of houses, roads, railways, electricity, water, schools, hospitals etc.

The key informant respondents and focus group participants emphasized the point that over the years, the excuse has been given by government and other development agencies that conflict and violence are the major constraints to development in the region. They pointed out that they were made to believe that unless peace is restored in the region, it will be difficult to carry out development activities in the remote communities of the region. Most of the participants in the discussions pointed that after about five years of relative peace following the Amnesty programme, very little social and infrastructural facilities have been provided in their

communities, rather so much noise has been made on Amnesty in the region.

A Participant Stated as follows:

“The Niger Delta region is supposed to be one of the most developed regions in Africa occasioned by the availability of oil. But the reverse is the case. There is low level of development in the region with lack of basic social amenities which have continued to engineer the activities of militant like kidnapping, vandalisation of oil pipeline and platforms.”

Another participant pointed out that one would have expected that with the Amnesty and relative peace, infrastructural development should have advanced in most communities but that is not the case. He criticised the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) as follows:

“In the eyes of the masses, NDDC has become a jack of all trades and master of none. The Commission embarks upon any project ranging from the building of six classroom blocks; cottage hospitals; provision of laboratory equipment, building of bridges construction of roads, canalization, rural electrification to the provision of potable water. The Commission's inability to concentrate on a few areas results in wasted efforts. The vast majority of the rural communities in Niger Delta including our own do not feel the impact of the activities of the NDDC and indeed the Amnesty Programme.”

Recommendations by Participants to Inform Policy on improving the implementation of the Amnesty Programme and other Associated Government Development activities

A large proportion of the discussants at the various focus groups pointed out that the Amnesty programme is a welcome development in the efforts to promote peace and development in the Niger Delta. However, they all agreed on the need to improve on the prevailing situation by implementing some recommendations which they have suggested. These recommendations which they believe will impact on the wellbeing of the people in the rural communities of the Niger Delta include the following:

- The Federal Government should pay more attention to the developmental challenges of the communities of the Niger Delta;
- It has become imperative for government to review the NDDC Act to ensure the

Commission's functions are limited in scope. The present Act gives the powers to do everything and that is why it does appear that nothing is being done that benefits the rural communities;

- The multinational companies are sources of conflict and the Federal Government has a moral responsibility to supervise their conduct, even though they are private businesses.
- Attention must be paid to the supervision of the Boards and Agencies set up to address the issues of: agricultural development, housing, education, health, employment, Water supply, Power and Energy and Infrastructure (roads, rail, sea and air).
- The community development strategy in the Niger Delta area should emphasize extensive grass-root participation. The management of the development of the communities should be drawn from relevant community-based groups including the youth, the traditional rulers, religious groups as well as village associations;
- The Amnesty Programme's skill acquisition package promises a better future for both the local populations and the companies if well managed. Upon the completion of their training in oil related skills, the companies should ensure that they are recruited and engaged in the industry

through the reservation of some employment quota for the local inhabitants, especially those living in the communities, thus making the local people identify with the companies operating in their environment;

- The success of the Amnesty package depends on the collaboration of the state governments, local governments, the oil companies, NDDC, the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs and other intervention agencies. Each of these levels of government, corporations and agencies must strive to contribute their own quota to the success of the programme, practically in the area of training and skills acquisition.

Conclusion

The qualitative survey of selected rural communities in the Niger Delta shows that the inhabitants of these communities have not felt remarkably the impact of the Amnesty programme in terms of improving their wellbeing. They expressed the view that government and multinational corporations exploring and exploiting the oil resources in their communities are basically insensitive to the plights of the inhabitants. They expressed strong views that there should be a change of attitude and approach by the government and oil companies in the context of the on-going Amnesty programme. The politicisation of community needs and corrupt practices among government officials, party affiliates or loyalists, have put the oil producing communities in a perpetual state of denial and

conflict. Lastly, the people concluded that the Amnesty programme means nothing if people in the rural communities do not have access to food for their families, good health care, good

education, access to resources for a good life, and political development.