

Promoting Community-based youth participation in peace building in Niger Delta region and Policy Implication

About CPED Policy Brief

Centre for Population and Environmental Development (CPED) policy brief series is designed to draw attention of stakeholders to key findings and their implication as a research is conducted. The general objective is to contribute to a body of evidence that can influence the development, modification and implementation of policies across various sectors in Nigeria. The primary focus, therefore, is to outline actionable recommendations for policy influence and result utilization by government institutions and other key stakeholders in Nigeria.

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Introduction

By the late 1990s, a mosaic of diverse civil groups including: community-based organizations, environmental rights groups, advocacy groups, ethno-cultural and youth groups had emerged which began to champion the cause of the people in the region. The militant agitation was a forceful attempt to compel oil based benefits, redress grievances and seek self-determination. A key characteristic of the conflict and violence in the Niger Delta is the dominant role of youth. Over half of the population of the Niger Delta is under the age of 25, and about 42 percent is between 15 and 29. While youth in the Niger Delta are growing in number and faced with limited livelihood opportunities in the environment characterized by war and violence, there is increasing concern about 'youth' as obstacles to the consolidation of peace and development in the region because they are key actors in the prevalence of conflict and violence. Any sustainable effort to promote peace and mitigate conflict in Niger Delta must therefore focus primarily on the youth. The conflicts and wars of the Niger Delta are unavoidable if we do not engage the youth constructively. The youth require motivation and ownership to make contributions to the process of peace building and conflict mitigation. Family and community support to the youth are crucial and mobilisation of parents, community leaders and local institutions are essential strategies in promoting peace building in the Niger Delta. The policy brief intends to contribute to the promotion of sustainable peace in Niger Delta by advocating for the promotion of community-based youth participation in peace building and conflict mitigation. Supporting youth participation in a positive way will offer a renewed sense of civic purpose, disincentives for violent activity, and reduce the risk of renewed violence in Niger Delta.

Background

This policy brief is based on the findings of CPED on-going implementation research on "*The Impact of Climate Change on agricultural production in Nigeria*". The project is one of the small scale implementation research programmes with support from the *Think Tank Initiative* funded by Canada's *International Development Research Centre (IDRC)*, Ottawa and other donors. The overall goal of the project is to reduce violence in Nigeria's Niger Delta communities by empowering and mobilizing the youth to work with other stakeholders to promote positive changes in their communities, by preventing local incidents from escalating into violence. The policy brief intends to contribute to the promotion of sustainable peace in Niger Delta by advocating for the promotion of community-based youth participation in peace building and conflict mitigation.

Examples of conflict and violence involving youth in Niger Delta communities

The most common and vicious forms of conflict, in terms of lives lost and property destroyed are: **(i)** intra-community; **(ii)** inter-community; **(iii)** inter-ethnic; and **(iv)** community-oil company conflicts. A major characteristic of the conflict and violence in the Niger Delta is the dominant role of youth as key actors and drivers of conflict. Two Examples of intra-community conflict and associated violence are outlined in this section. In Ogbogoro community, for example, violent intra-community conflict has flared sporadically since 1998. Under dispute is the 1978 agreement that the community reached with an oil services company, ARCO. It requires the company to pay a modest annual rent to the community, and replaced an earlier agreement with a single family voided by a court after a protest by the rest of the community. In 1993, OIL (Nig) Ltd. and West African Field Services leased the property when ARCO left. They signed an agreement that promised higher rent, contracts and jobs to local people. This raised the stakes for Eze Oha, the traditional head of the community, because he became responsible for distributing the compensation to the community. At the same time, a new candidate emerged who made a successful claim to the right to serve as the traditional head. This divided the community into two camps, with one behind the old ruler and one behind the new ruler. Several lawsuits were filed and pending in court when, as a result of rising tension in the community, the Rivers State Military Administrator set up a Caretaker Committee and representative council to disburse the benefits from the oil companies to the indigenous members of the community. In 1998, supporters of the new ruler violently challenged the Committee's attempt to collect fees for market stalls. Hell then broke loose. Rampaging youths engaged in gun battles, burnt down houses and destroyed millions of Naira worth of property. At the end, two Youth Forum members were dead, 50 houses had been burnt to ashes, Waterfront Youth fled the community to become refugees. Gun totting teenagers became armed robbers and extortionists.

Another struggle for an adequate share of the benefits from oil resulted in the so-called 'Nembe War'. In Nembe, like Ogbogoro, the oil companies (Shell, Agip, etc.) negotiated an agreement with the chiefs on compensation, contracts and job opportunities. As usual, the chiefs kept a disproportionate share of such benefits, appropriating most of the money for themselves and assigning most contracts to their front companies. Even jobs in the companies could be obtained only through the nomination of the chiefs. In the late 1990s, excluded youths organized to interject themselves into these transactions. They started harassing oil workers, taking hostages, occupying flow stations, etc. to make the oil companies negotiate with them and make side payments. The side payments usually amounted to such huge sums that soon the youths split into factions to make separate demands. Rival gangs emerged, and soon second and third generations of youth gangs were extorting money from the oil companies. Once when the first-generation youths were away to collect their largesse from the state headquarters, Yenagoa, a younger group, took control of Nembe and banished them. Violent clashes by rival youth gangs imposed a reign of terror on Nembe until the community rose in 2000 to resist. The result was heavy loss of lives and property.

What is evident from these examples of intra-community conflict is that they arise because of struggles over the sharing of benefits from oil. Quite often a community's traditional ruler or council of elders, which negotiates with the companies, is at the centre of such conflicts. When some people perceive unfairness in the distribution of compensation, they organize to challenge the existing order and seek its overthrow. This is one of the major causes of the breakdown of traditional authority in most oil-producing areas. Traditional rulers have lost their legitimacy partly because of greed and partly because there is not enough money to satisfy everybody anyway. The consequences of the weakening of the traditional socio-political order are far-reaching. Youths no longer respect not just their chiefs, but all authority structures. Having experienced the sudden wealth that can be obtained by taking matters into their own hands, they want to deal directly with oil companies themselves. Unfortunately, most lack entrepreneurial skills. They fritter away their ransom money, so they constantly have to engage in extortion to maintain themselves.

The Framework for the promotion of community-based youth participation in peace building

There is substantial evidence in the literature to support a community-embedded approach to promoting youth participation in peace building and conflict mitigation. In the context of the Niger Delta situation the *guiding principles* articulated by the *United Nations Interagency Network on Youth Development*, which were officially launched on April 24th 2014, in New York, alongside the UN General Assembly Thematic Debate on Ensuring Stable and Peaceful Societies, can be domesticated in the development of community-embedded interventions in Niger Delta region as outlined in the paragraphs below:

(i) Promote young people's participation as an essential condition for successful peace-building: Rather than simply acknowledging the youth in Niger Delta as victims or perpetrators of violence, it's vital to engage them as social actors with their own contributions. This entails the identification of key youth and youth led-organizations that can be trained in peace-building initiatives and working with them.

(ii) Recognise and build on young people's diversity and experiences: All young people in Niger Delta are not the same. The definitions of youth vary according to contexts. There is need to develop targeted strategies to involve youth from different ages, backgrounds, gender, ethnicities, and disabilities.

(iii) Sensitivity to gender dynamics: Gender sensitivity is a multi-faceted concept that requires that vulnerabilities and grievances of young people in conflict in Niger Delta are affected by their gender. Thus there is need to develop strategies to specifically reach out to young women, promote their engagement, and create a safe space to raise their specific issues.

(iv) Enabling young people's ownership, leadership and accountability: There is need to partner with young people in Niger Delta who are influential among their peers and foster their leadership skills, while simultaneously ensuring participation of marginalized young people.

(v) Do no harm: When designing youth programs in Niger Delta, efforts should be made to ensure that project activities do not create potentially difficult or dangerous situations for the youth participants, during and after their participation.

(vi) Involve young people in all stages of peace-building program: The most successful initiatives take youth from being passive beneficiaries to full contributing partners of the peace building process. There is need to include the youth when identifying critical peace-building and post-conflict interventions in Niger Delta through tailored and age-appropriate methodologies.

(vii) Enhance the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and competencies of young people: Successful promotion of youth participation in peace building in Niger Delta should focus building young people's skills in mediation, negotiation, conflict resolution, communication, life skills and social norms. Opportunities for young people to share goals and aspirations with adults and among themselves must be created.

(viii) Invest in intergenerational partnerships: Rather than working with youth in isolation, peace-building projects seeking the engagement of youth in Niger Delta should also include parents and community elders. It is critical to strengthen intergenerational partnerships by facilitating dialogue, understanding of and opportunities for cooperation among youth, parents and elders.

(ix) Introduce and support policies that address the full needs of young people: Policy makers should normally support the development of inclusive policies that address the needs and aspirations of young people, contribute to young people's empowerment by promoting sustainable, long-term and collaborative initiatives for and with young people.

Conclusion

Enhancing structures that promote the participation of youths in peace-building processes in Niger Delta region will actively contribute to young people's engagement with decisions and activities that affect their wellbeing. Policies and institutions that enable investment in children and youth to succeed at the micro and macro levels should be encouraged. These could take the form of full multi-sectoral programmes that target youth in specific areas of activity, such as employment creation and/or peace building projects. Like every other human being, young people need channels for self-expression; a medium or forum which engages them with the democracy or government of the day which promotes self actualisation and dissuades them from taking violent options in their lives. Substantial evidence confirms that youth's participation in peace and security processes increases the likelihood and sustainability of peace. Nevertheless, youth's representation in conflict prevention and resolution efforts has grown only minimally in Nigeria. Efforts must be made to improve the situation. This explains justification for this policy brief.

Acknowledgment

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ABOUT CPED

The Centre for Population and Environmental Development (CPED) is an independent Think Tank organization dedicated to promoting sustainable development and reducing poverty and inequality through policy oriented research and active engagement on development issues. CPED is located in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. The Organisation was formally registered in Nigeria by the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) in 1999. CPED is a member of different Think Tank Networks including the “West Africa Think Tanks Network (WATTNet)”, and also a beneficiary of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI), a multi-donor program of the *International Development Research Centre (IDRC)*, Canada. The Centre’s Executive Director is **Professor Emeritus Andrew Godwin Onokerhoraye**, vice chancellor University of Benin (1992-1998).

CPED core programme areas can be broadly categorized into: Action Research; Policy Engagement, Communications and Advocacy; Intervention Programme and Capacity Building for Policy makers, CSOs and Mentees from allied institutions. CPED research agenda covers (1) Climate change with particular reference to the wetland and coaster regions (2) Gender and development (3) Health Systems and Health Care Service Delivery (4) Research on Governance and Development (5) Peace Building and Development in Niger Delta Region (6) Growth, Development and Equity.

CPED has three major organs designed to achieve its mission as follows: Board of Trustees; Committee of fellows and Management. The Board of Trustees comprised of people who have distinguished themselves in public and private service and are mainly interested in contributing to development in Nigeria through policy research and intervention activities. The Board of Trustees has the responsibility of assisting the organization in raising funds for its activities and in monitoring all its programs and expenditure. The Board meets every quarter to review the activities of the Centre. CPED committee of fellows comprise of Nigerian-based researchers and those based abroad. The fellows are involved in the various research, advocacy and intervention projects of CPED both at the proposal development stage and during execution. Most members of the Board of Trustees are also fellows of the Centre since they are involved in some of the action research and intervention project activities that are in their area of specialization. The executive Director of the Centre is the head of the management of CPED and he supervises the overall activities in each of the Divisions.