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Research paper

Managing wickedness in the Niger Delta: Can a new approach to multi-stakeholder governance increase voice and sustainability?

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Oil companies and NGOS have opened new spaces of participatory governance in Niger Delta.
- Historic shift away from competition among stakeholders fosters collaboration.
- Effectiveness of administrative networks undermined by hierarchy and loss of local control.
- Wicked governance problem requires networks to continuously adapt to changing local context.

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ABSTRACT

Recent efforts by the largest oil companies in Nigeria have shifted their corporate social responsibility to reflect more bottom-up participatory approaches to development and environmental conflict management in the Niger Delta. The newest approach, the Global Memorandum of Understanding, is a model of network governance, clustering groups of communities together into representative boards that make decisions on local development projects. This model could prove to be an important tool for managing conflicts over resources and revenues in Nigeria's main oil producing region. However, the legacy of violent conflicts within and between indigenous groups, militias and the military, government and oil companies amid ongoing environmental devastation from destructive oil extraction practices, makes trust and cooperation difficult, at best. In this context, where conflict runs deep and power is asymmetrical, developing an effective model of local governance for sustainable development is a wicked planning problem. This paper traces the gradual shift from competition to collaboration among stakeholders through the Pan Delta movement for social and environmental justice, which has introduced new voices and values to the debate over the region's future. Qualitative content analysis of secondary data is used to apply the wicked problems framework to the problem of local governance amid the political ecology of social and natural resource conflicts and increasing expectations for public involvement in resource allocation decisions. Similar fundamental political transitions are happening in other African countries. The Niger Delta presents a model case from a region that has been under-studied in the wicked problems literature and discourse.

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1. Introduction

The Niger Delta is comprised of nine states that are home to more than 31 million people living with the devastating environmental, social and economic consequences of the global demand for oil. The volume that flows from the region provides nearly all the foreign exchange earnings and budget revenue for Nigeria, which ranks among the ten countries that supply 60% of the world's oil (IEA, 2013; NNPC, 2013; Obi & Rustad, 2011). Decades of poorly regulated oil exploration and underdevelopment of an area so critical to the national economy have given rise to a history of violent clashes and standoffs between local militants, government officials and the multinational oil companies (MNOCs) (Ikelegbe, 2001; Ite, 2007; Obi, 2001; Obi & Rustad, 2011; Omotola, 2007). Since Shell's discovery of oil in 1956, the balance of power in regional resource conflicts has always rested with the MNOCs.

After Nigeria's independence in 1960, the militarization of the Nigerian state and expanded oil production began a cycle of resource extraction, environmental devastation, and loss of livelihood that provided fuel for decades of resistance movements. Waves of social struggle connected to oil politics began in the late 1960s with Nigeria's civil war and continued through the oil boom and bust between 1973 and 1985. The entrenched oil-military

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alliance galvanized public opposition and community mobilization in the region, particularly the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the 1990s (Watts, 2004). As in other parts of Africa tied to the global oil economy, such as Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo, companies in Nigeria have wielded their power over territories by creating militarized enclaves of extraction that have proved to be good for economic growth and bad for peace and democracy (Ferguson, 2005). In this context, developing an effective model of local governance and sustainable development in the Niger Delta, where conflict runs deep, could be considered a perfect example of a wicked problem.

At present, over a dozen oil companies operate more than 5200 oil wells connected by more than 4400 miles of oil pipelines and 275 pumping stations leading to ten export terminals (NNPC/AAPW, 2004). The MNOCs have carried out extraction recklessly and with impunity. They have taken advantage of federal military power on one hand and the complex factions among local officials, community leaders, members of social movements and militias, fueling ongoing struggles for access to resources and power of the state (Obi, 2001). The loss of livelihoods and lack of jobs, combined with intense militarism and violence has given rise to an economy of conflict based on illegal trade in stolen crude oil, arms smuggling, takeover of oil platforms, kidnappings, oil production disruptions, and violent confrontations with the military. Petro-capitalism and an authoritarian state worked hand in hand to create "economies of violence" at multiple scales and spaces around territory, identity (e.g. youth, women, communal authorities, militias, etc.) and space (Watts, 2004, p. 55).

There is a substantial and important literature describing the power dynamics in the Delta, how the unethical behavior of multinational oil producers, corruption and the lack of adequate resources allocation from the central government and outright neglect gave birth to an insurgent resistance to state corruption, neglect and oil company malfeasance (Ikelegbe, 2005; Jike, 2004; Oriola, 2012). This resistance in turn was met by brutal and deadly force by the country's armed forces. As a result, the Niger Delta is pervaded by the spread of arms and institutions and agencies of violence ranging from the national military to local ethnic militias, armed gangs, pirates, and other criminal elements. Responses to the crisis by the various actors reflect the very real balance of power in the Delta, a constantly evolving process of struggle and control between institutions, groups and individuals, as well as conflicts within the household between women and men (Omorodion, 2004). Although much of the focus on the Niger Delta in this literature and in the media has been on violent conflict, kidnappings and the rise of paramilitary groups, the struggle has remarkably also given birth to a vibrant civil society movement that has engaged in both strategic protest and constructive engagement with government and multinational oil companies (MNOCs) to redress the grievances of local peoples (Olufemi & Adewale, 2012).

In the face of real asymmetries of power between people, government and corporations, this paper advances the notion that the Niger Delta region is also unique in the context of Nigeria, given its very history of tumultuous struggle for local control of resources and self-determination. This history in many ways reflects an (as yet incomplete) transition away from everyday resistance and violence, the so-called "weapons of the weak" used under authoritarian-elite rule when there is no space for democracy (Hydén, 1980; Scott, 2008). A number of significant historical moments have served to increase the political power of the Delta region and its peoples: the history of resistance to state authority initiated by women under colonial rule, the Ogoniland struggle and state murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa under military rule, the rise of militancy and subsequent emergence of domestic and transnational movements for environmental justice and oil revenue transparency, Nigeria's return to multiparty democracy in 1999 and subsequent geopolitical realignment giving the Delta region a greater voice in public decision-making.

Most recently, in 2006, Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) introduced a new way of operating in Niger Delta communities called the Global Memorandum of Understanding (GMOU). The GMOU represents a significant shift in the governance of extractive industries in Nigeria. Prior to its implementation, Shell would enter into bilateral agreements called Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) directly with individual Community Development Committees (CDCs). This meant Shell took on a direct role in funding and implementing development activities (SPDC, 2013). Moreover, the negotiated community benefits were often ad hoc, including funds for standby payments to elders and other arrangements that only served to benefit a select group of community members (Omorodion, 2004).

For the first time, the GMOU clusters groups of communities together with representatives of state and local governments, SPDC and non-profit organizations, such as development NGOs, in a decision-making committee called the Cluster Development Board (CDB). Each GMOU has a non-governmental organization (NGO) that facilitates implementation by assisting with local capacity building, participatory evaluation, and serving as an intermediary between communities and MNOCs. As an approach to the wicked problem of local planning for sustainable development in the Niger Delta, the GMOU has been presented as a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach to achieving corporate social responsibility (CSR), and has been adopted by other oil companies in Nigeria (Aaron, 2012; Ite, 2007).

This latest attempt by SPDC to implement corporate social responsibility through a new model of local decision-making has been derided by some as wishful thinking (Aaron, 2012). The legacy of internecine conflicts within and between indigenous groups, militias, military, government and oil companies amid ongoing environmental devastation from destructive oil extraction practices, makes trust and cooperation difficult, at best. Much of the analysis of democratic governance in Africa is focused, perhaps too optimistically, on the role of civil society as a neutral player holding the state accountable to its citizens (Devarajan, Khemani, & Walton, 2011; Hearn, 2001; Kasfir, 1998). However, there is a need to examine models of governance in African contexts where ordinary citizens do have the opportunity to influence the direction of planning and development. To counter this neglect, this paper uses the concept of wickedness to assess the GMOU as a specific model of local governance initiated by Shell Oil Corporation.

This is carried out in two parts. The first seeks to use political ecology to frame the problem of environmental degradation in terms of the multi-scalar linkages between environmental and political change in the Niger Delta and the emergence of the GMOU model. The second part considers the potential of the GMOU as a model that could address the problem of governance where citizens are only beginning to emerge as real stakeholders, analyzing secondary data from a citizen report card carried out in Delta State GMOU communities by an NGO, Leadership Initiative for Transformation and Empowerment (LITE-Africa). Finally, the findings are used to develop an explanatory model of the GMOU structure and its effectiveness in the context of existing work that explores network models of governance as approaches to wickedness. In doing so, this case is offered as a model from a region that has been under-studied in the wicked problems literature and discourse.

2. A new approach to assessing grassroots democracy in African cities

As originally described, wicked problems are social problems and all planning problems are wicked. Wicked problems are pervasive, occurring in every part of the world across varied social,

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