



Integrating community perceptions and cultural diversity in social impact assessment in Nigeria



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ABSTRACT

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Act of 1992 aimed to make the environment a central theme in development in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the extent of engagement with local cultures in the Nigerian EIA process is not statutorily guaranteed. While most EIAs in Nigeria have been for oil and gas projects in the Niger Delta, and have focused strongly on the biophysical environment, socio-economic and cultural aspects have remained marginal. The palpable neglect of community perceptions and cultural diversity in social impact assessment (SIA) in this region prone to conflict has tended to alienate the people in the decision-making process. Thus, despite claims to compliance with regulatory requirements for EIAs, and numerous purported sustainable development initiatives by international oil companies (IOCs), the region continues to face multiple sustainability challenges. This paper situates local perceptions and cultural diversity in participatory development and canvasses the integration of community perceptions and cultural diversity into SIA in the Niger Delta region. It is argued that doing this would be critical to ensuring acceptance and success of development actions within the context of local culture while also contributing to sustainable development policy in the region.

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1. Introduction

Following the discovery and exploitation of petroleum in the Niger Delta since the 1950s, the region witnessed the development of numerous oil and gas-industry related projects ostensibly with little regard to their consequences on the local environment, culture and socio-economy (Obi and Rustad, 2011). However, in apparent recognition of the place of the environment in development, resulting from the increasing global drive towards sustainability in the 1980s and beyond (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), some major oil companies in Nigeria initiated Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), the absence then of statutory requirements for EIA notwithstanding (Olokesusi, 1998). The Environmental Impact Assessment Act No. 86 was auspiciously decreed into being in 1992 by the military government of Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1992). This Act was, therefore, a landmark legislation that made it mandatory for certain categories of public and private projects to undergo the EIA process (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1992; FEPA, 1995; Echefu and Akpofure, 2003; Ogunba, 2004; Ameyan, 2008).

The Act also made provision for public involvement in the process of environmental decision-making (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1992; Federal Environmental Protection Agency, 1995; Adomokai and Sheate, 2004). In spite of this bold step which aimed to make the environment a central theme in development, early EIAs unfortunately paid scant attention to socioeconomic and cultural consequences of development action while social management strategies of likely consequences of development action seemed to have taken the back seat in the scheme of things (Olokesusi, 1998; Nwafor, 2006). Social impact assessment (SIA), though a relatively recent development in the impact assessment process in Nigeria, has continued to evolve rapidly as a sphere of activity (Akpofure and Ojile, 2003; Nwafor, 2006; Nzeadibe and Ajaero, 2010). Yet, the extent of engagement with the local communities in SIA in Nigeria remains debatable while the process itself seems to have paid little regard to the views and participation of communities likely to be affected by development interventions (Echefu and Akpofure, 2003). Such engagement when it occurs, 'can assist in developing open, meaningful dialogue, and can influence decision making, build trust, legitimacy, capacities, address community concerns, manage expectations, tap local knowledge and negotiate mutually beneficial futures that are more sustainable and locally relevant' (Franks (2012, p.10).

In the Niger Delta, recent anecdotal evidence suggests that the above situation may be changing, apparently forced largely by the diverse

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political economic ramifications of the region's petro-economy and implications of instability therein (see, for example, Watts, 2007; Obi, 2010; Zalik, 2004), and also the unprecedented desire of International Oil Companies (IOCs) in the Niger Delta, who under increasing pressure, litigations and scrutiny from the public, rights activists, NonGovernmental Organizations (NGOs) and the global media want to be seen as environmentally and socially responsible corporate citizens (Greenwood, 2007). Hence, the Niger Delta has undoubtedly become the region in which the greatest number of EIAs for development projects has been undertaken in Nigeria (see, for example, Silas, 2013; Shell Petroleum Development Company, 2014).

Regrettably, assessments of impacts of development projects in the oil and gas industry of Nigeria's Niger Delta region have tended to be predominantly oriented toward the biophysical environment while socio-economic and cultural aspects appear to occupy a subaltern position. While examination of the biophysical parameters tends to be amenable to more precise instrumental measurement, modelling and prediction, SIA remains a far cry even though issues of local perception and acceptance as well as cultural sensitivity are critical to success of development projects (Meredith, 1992). In this context, Shepherd and Bowler (1997, p.729) have argued that "even when the scientific characterization of risk is thorough, complexities persist because what is 'acceptable' depends on more than scientific criteria; acceptability depends on public perception". Accordingly, projects being undertaken in areas prone to conflicts and violence such as the Niger Delta would require more meticulous and painstaking attention to issues of public receptiveness as shown in positive local perception and cultural sensitivity (Akpofure and Ojile, 2003; Nwafor, 2006; Nzeadibe et al., 2015). In other words, a people centred approach to development intervention, that is, development where people matter, needs to be taken on board in project execution. Unfortunately, this approach has been lacking in most EIA studies in the Niger Delta region. In the light of the above, the present study posits the need for incorporating the perceptions of communities and cultural sensitivity in SIA for development projects. This is anchored on one of the fundamental principles of development that 'the existence of diversity between cultures, within cultures, and the diversity of stakeholder interests need to be recognized and valued' and that 'local knowledge and experience are valuable and can be used to enhance planned interventions' (Vanclay, 2003, p.9).

While previous studies on the Nigerian petro-economy have alluded to the importance of community perceptions (Idemudia, 2007; Nzeadibe and Ajaero, 2010); it has not been central to any earlier studies. Reinforcing this observation, Idemudia (2011, p.178) has noted that, 'the failure to pay attention to the "psychological contract" and to integrate community perceptions into the design and implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives has meant that oil multinational companies (MNCs) are often unable to secure community support'. The present study attempts to build in both community perceptions and cultural sensitivity into the SIA process in Nigeria, arguing that the approach offers scope for local acceptance and successful project implementation outcomes. We now zero in on a conceptual clarification of the nexus between community perception, cultural diversity and participatory development using Nigeria's Niger Delta region as a case study.

2. Community perception, cultural diversity and participatory development in Nigeria

Public participation is arguably the touchstone of effective social impact assessment (SIA) as it enhances the democratic content of development actions (Bond et al., 1999; Appiah-Opoku, 2001; UNECA, 2005; O'Faircheallaigh, 2010; Vanclay and Esteves, 2011). Indeed, Rega and Baldizzone (2015, p.160) acknowledged the role of public participation in reducing the likelihood of conflict by ensuring representation of different interests and values, and by promoting transparency in any intervention or project development undertaking. The Nigerian EIA process

rightly provides for public consultation with a range of stakeholders as a statutory process and EIA will not be approved without going through it. Unfortunately, the extent of engagement with local cultures is not statutorily guaranteed (see Nwafor, 2006; Lawal et al., 2013; Silas, 2013). Since assessments of the social impacts of development activities are meant to be participatory (Akpofure and Ojile, 2003), seeking the views and active involvement of stakeholder communities would be apposite since 'EIA is not EIA without consultation and participation' (Wood, 2002, p.277). To reinforce the need for public participation, Esteves et al. (2012) assert that SIA is now conceived as being the process of managing the social issues of development. According to these authors, "good SIA practice is participatory; it supports affected peoples, proponents and regulatory agencies; it increases understanding of change and capacities to respond to change; it seeks to avoid and mitigate negative impacts and to enhance positive benefits across the life cycle of developments; and it emphasizes enhancing the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged people" (Esteves et al., 2012: 34).

The Niger Delta region, the hub of the oil and gas industry in Nigeria, is inhabited by diverse vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. In spite of the sheer diversity of peoples and nationalities in the region, it is confounding to observe that cultural differences among communities are not adequately factored into development strategies and practices (Idemudia, 2014, p.161). Although Idemudia (2007, p.371) approvingly stated that there is widespread acknowledgment that community perceptions, expectations, and the sociocultural mores that inform these perceptions are central to the dynamics of conflict in the Niger Delta region, nonincorporation of such local values in project implementation in the region has tended to alienate local populations in the decision making process. Unfortunately, studies on community perceptions and expectations have been undertaken mainly in the context of social investments and corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices in oil and gas producing Niger Delta (Idemudia, 2014; Ojo, 2012); but, rarely as an important ingredient in participatory development, which could considerably facilitate project implementation. Thus, Appiah-Opoku (2001, p.70) observed that "the involvement of local people may also help the assessment team to understand local resource-use and nuances, and use local value sets to interpret, evaluate, and monitor project impacts on local communities". Therefore, views and support of stakeholder communities are important if development projects are to be sustainable.

Taking a nuanced understanding of the basic issues in EIA, some authors such as Echefu and Akpofure (2003, p.72) have argued that "public participation in the Nigerian EIA process is not statutorily protected yet current realities have encouraged public involvement as the communities have become aware of the need to protect the environment...". These authors nevertheless posit that 'knowledge of the locality can enhance the EIA process'. Given the above scenario, the remarkable divergence of opinion concerning the extent of community involvement and nature of local perceptions in the EIA process in Nigeria's Niger Delta is noteworthy. For example, Dadiwei (2009) argues that communities in the Niger Delta have never been involved in the EIA process and as a result seem to have a poor perception of EIA, while Adomokai and Sheate (2004) believe that community participation has increased and improved over the last two decades due to increased awareness, development of the EIA Act, better education and information sharing among all stakeholders (especially communities). In spite of these diametrically opposing viewpoints, the present study contends that assessments of socioeconomic and cultural consequences of development action on local communities, for good reason, deserve the highest level of priority just as has been applied to some health problems in Africa (CDI Study Group, 2010) and should therefore take on board the views and expectations of locals in decision-making if a successful outcome is to be expected. In this regard, the recent observation of Glucker et al. (2013) appears timely and apposite. These authors posit that 'if no attention is being paid to the different views and expectations of participants, people's willingness to participate may decrease which, in turn, may

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