

THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF ADVOCACY AND NETWORKING IN A LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXT

Annie A. Brisibe

In preparation for this conference, I reflected upon the primary motivation for my involvement in human rights campaigns. Given the then ruthless dictatorial military regime in Nigeria, I asked myself, why did I get involved in such a life-threatening venture? As a member of a minority group in the Niger Delta, a region that provides for over 80 per cent of the country's wealth, my people are among the most pauperized groups in Nigeria; our environment one of the most degraded and despoiled in the world. With this reality of imminent extinction of our environment and way of life due to oil exploration and exploitation, it was imperative that I got involved.

The question to be asked is how did we get to this current perilous state? The answer can partly be found in an historical examination of the creation of the Nigerian State. Nigeria as a geographical space came into being in 1914. It was essentially created through a process of gerrymandering by British colonialists for the purpose of exploiting the natural resources within the space they called Nigeria. This was done without the consent or any consideration for the welfare of the indigenous peoples, a vast majority of whom belonged to independent nation states, kingdoms and communities prior to the exercise. As a colonial ruler, the British Crown appropriated for itself exclusive rights to all the mineral wealth above and below the surface of the earth. With this extreme dictatorial action, the economic rights of the indigenous people were denied. In the process of attaining independence, the British cleverly maintained the status quo in the new Nigerian constitution. They further manipulated the electoral process so pliable rulers could continue to secure British interests in the emerging nation.

The Context

With the discovery of commercial quantities of crude oil in 1956 by Shell-BP at Oloibiri in the present Bayelsa State, the expropriation of the land rights of the Niger Delta people intensified. After over 40 years of economic subjugation and escalating physical violence, the people of the Niger Delta found their voices through the various community groups that came into being in the early 1990s. Some of these groups became the ready vehicle for me to express myself and take a stand for my people.

Another impetus for my involvement in advocacy was the adverse effects the hegemonic presence of the Bretton-Woods financial institutions — the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank — had on the economic life of my country. These institutions, coupled with a pliant internal leadership, have imposed a “one size fits all” policy prescription of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) that has further helped to decimate our people economically. In an era of increasing globalization of commerce and capital, it is important that conscious segments of civil society make a concerted effort to network and co-operate to check the ill effects of these forces. Otherwise, much of the world's peoples, especially in the declining

economies of Africa and the rest of the developing world, are doomed to a permanent existence of poverty, social dislocation, and disease.

The Beginning of the Problem

In the aftermath of the structural adjustment policies dictated by the IMF and World Bank, the socio-economic indices in most developing countries continued to spiral downwards. Using Nigeria as an example, in 1960 the birth of the new Nigeria after British dictatorial rule gave rise to a “gate keeping” structure that apportioned benefits to the three major tribes. The leadership of the country continued ruling with an iron fist even after the British left. The struggle for economic dominance by the various competing segments of the Nigerian leadership continued to play out in the policies formulated by the ruling governments (both short-lived civilian governments and almost permanent military governments). In most of these policies, the personal and sometimes sectional interests of the ruling elites superceded those of the national interest. The oil-bearing communities, being a minority group and far removed from the centre of power, were gravely marginalized.

The Invisible Contract

With the discovery of crude oil in 1956 began another era of economic, political, and social domination of people’s rights to survival. Local people in the south-southern part of Nigeria known as the Niger Delta have lived a life of complete self-sustainability without any help from either the state or national government. But after almost 50 years, the promise of economic empowerment has eluded the people, and turned into one of impending economic extinction. The transnational oil companies have destroyed much of the flora and fauna of the Niger Delta region, making it today one of the world’s most endangered environments. The lack of adequate supervision of the oil companies and enforcement of international standards of operation by the government of Nigeria were part of the corrupt deal. This has led to the complete destruction of local communities and the impoverishment of the culture, moral standards, and economy of the peoples of the Niger Delta region. Oil exploration and exploitation have made it impossible for communities to pursue their only source of livelihood and their spirituality.

Women and the Oil Companies

The overwhelming negative effects of the oil companies in the Niger Delta region have been seen, reported, and addressed at various forums. But much of the publicity has highlighted the impact on the environment, economies and human rights violations of men. It is universally acknowledged, however, that women are the pillars of any community. In the Niger Delta, women have always been a source of local revenue generation, family development, human reproduction, and spiritual guidance. The lives of our mothers and grandmothers have been lived with a special connection to the environment and to society. They have traded and traveled wide and far to make an income for their families. They have learned traditional healing methods so as to be able to give life to the sick, and their spirituality has kept traditional beliefs alive.

These contributions have been consciously or unconsciously bypassed. Now their communal ways are gradually becoming history with the destruction of their environment.

The presence of the oil companies has transformed all of these once beautiful, natural lives into an artificial style of living. Homes that were a unit of strong family bonds and a place of peace and love have been turned into battle fields where both boys and girls at very early ages stray into the wild, unknown, and unpredictable circle of “so-called civilization” looking for any means of livelihood to survive. Schools are now empty rooms left for domestic animals to take quick naps. Women have to look elsewhere to provide for their families or turn to prostitution. The question is always, “where will we get our next meal from?” There is no thought for savings, much less for family and communal leisure activities.

In the past, most of the rural communities in the Niger Delta never lacked for food. In fact, food from these communities was transported to urban centers in Nigeria. The reverse is now the case. The downturn of events started in the mid-1970s after the oil boom which made the military controlled leadership of both national and state governments believe Nigeria did not need agriculture anymore. With oil, the country could buy anything it wanted from any part of the world. This deceptive, ignorant, and shortsighted greed of the leaders has led to the complete destruction of agriculture in our local communities.

The distance of the communities from cities and from government has left them at the mercy of oil company staff, both local and expatriate. With all of these social dislocations, we ask ourselves the question, what is our future? And what will be the future of our unborn children? These are simple questions, but questions that took so long to ask due to lack of awareness.

The Ogoni Movement

The most persistent and sustained struggle against the multinational oil companies (particularly Shell) and the Nigerian State was initiated in 1993 by the Ogoni people through their organization, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). The brave acts of the Ogoni in the face of hatred, prejudice, and death must be acknowledged. Their uprising gave us all a new insight into the non-violent struggle for peoples’ rights. MOSOP’s demands became a blueprint for all oil producing communities in the Niger Delta, although for the Ogoni it ended with a bloodbath and sorrow. A government clampdown on MOSOP led to the trial and eventual death of its leader Ken Saro Wiwa and eight others in 1995. Thousands of other Ogonis also suffered at the hands of the military government of General Sani Abacha and its collaborators Shell Petroleum. However, their bravery gave rise to a new revolutionary sense of consciousness among local people in the Niger Delta.

The March to Reclaim our Destinies

In 1998, the Ijaws, the fourth largest tribe in Nigeria with a population of about 12 million, staged a massive, fearless protest against the oil companies. The demands of the youths (males and females) were presented in the Kaiama Declaration, a similar blueprint to the Ogoni Bill of Rights. The Kaiama Declaration was our first advocacy tool, and stated explicitly our demands

as a distinct ethnic nationality in Nigeria. The document was very welcomed and received and was transmitted widely through the Internet, newspapers, magazines, etc. It was a very successful strategy for the Ijaws, as their struggle was now seen as a threat to the status quo of injustice and corruption.

The Ijaws effectively mobilized local communities and networked with several local and international advocacy groups. This gave the struggle the desired publicity that, in turn, made it possible for people such as me to be invited to speak about the issues both locally and internationally. This resulted in creating more awareness, building more networks, and keeping the issues in the news.

Local Advocacy and Networking Strategies

The struggles of Ijaw youths made it possible for both young and old women to find a voice in the midst of all the agitation and protest. The women in the Niger Delta had become victims of rape and sexual harassment; some even became war slaves for the military during the invasion of their various communities. Some of these women joined Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ) to discuss the violence in their communities perpetuated by the military. On January 11, 1999, NDWJ staged a protest against the government and the oil companies for providing arms to the Nigerian military, and also feeding and paying them while they maimed, killed, and raped men, women, and girls.

The women of NDWJ invited the press and other local groups to witness the march. The clampdown on the women by the military generated a lot of sympathy from the press, which led to wider reporting on the issue. This was the most effective awareness creation strategy since the Federated Ogoni Women Association (FOWA) staged a sit-in and strip tease protest against the oil companies in 1993 in Ogoniland. NDWJ realized that publicity is the key element in the success of any campaign. Our focus now turned to building the movement by educating people about the issues and then mobilizing them to take action by joining in events.

Advocacy Strategies and Tactics

The strategies used in our campaign were public education and community mobilization. This included issuing press releases and press briefings; networking with progressive groups; organizing conferences, seminars, and speaking programs; distributing fliers; sending articles for publication in other organizational newsletters; and participating in talk shows and political radio programs. Some of these methods are described below.

Community mobilization. The first major task of the women was mobilization. The question for us was how do we start and where? The executive members of NDWJ, members of the Chikoko movement, and members of the Ijaw Youth Club (IYC) organized a meeting to draw out plans on how and where to start the process of mobilization. In January 1999, members of the organization's three departments: Human Rights, Community Development, and Research and Information started a massive awareness creation campaign on the issues in the Niger Delta.

We focused on the need for all women to be part of the struggle for social change. The approach used in community mobilizing was known as the Peoples Action Approach.

Peoples action approach. The organization believes that power is not about who wins or who loses on important issues, but about determining what issues and actors get to the table in the first place. It focused on strengthening grassroots groups and bringing them together in a coalition to address the discriminatory structures present in the Nigerian system. During a prior visit to the women living in the slums by members of the organization, every woman was encouraged to be involved in the protests. On January 4, 1999, NDWJ members gave a public lecture on the killing of youths and the rape of young girls and women by the Nigerian soldiers in Bayelsa State. Follow-up meetings were then held with the women in the slums, NDWJ, and other organizations. This created awareness and enabled the women to understand the issue better.

Public education. The volunteers focused on public education campaigns in most of the oil producing communities in the Niger Delta. This was done to build women's awareness about the actions taken by the youths and the reasons why they were justified. We also clarified why women's involvement in the struggle for social change was necessary — because in the Niger Delta women do about 75% of the work, both domestic and reproductive chores, and the impact of oil and gas pollution has affected the livelihoods and the health of women the most. The women were made aware that it was their sons, brothers, and husbands who were being killed by the Nigerian military for protesting against the actions of the multinational corporations. And it was their daughters and sisters who were being raped and older women inhumanely treated.

As women who worked the soil, gave birth to children, and worked night and day to feed our families, we realized that our lives were gradually being degraded. It was hard not to be involved.

Community meetings. The women established community cells and started off with community meetings. These meetings had volunteer leaders who organized the community election process with the involvement of local women. The national executives of the organization constantly visited the community units to make sure the structures were still intact and to reinforce the issues. The establishment of community meetings kept the women focused and helped to further enlighten them.

Preparing flyers. Flyers were used to create awareness both within the communities and in the bigger cities. The flyers were prepared on January 2, 1999, and members of the organization and women representatives from the slums distributed them continuously for two days. The women went to sites where there were social functions and visited churches on Sundays to give out flyers as people walked out of the church after the service was over.

Protests. Knowing full well that protests could be very risky, we realized it was the only option to make our voices heard and to show our repugnance towards the activities of the oil companies and the Nigerian government. The situation was tense, people were scared of the massive military presence in most of the communities and the state capitals, but we felt it was most important as we intended to protest very peacefully.

However, it was suspected that the women would be treated just as badly as their male counterparts. True to our thinking the women were not spared as they were flogged, tear-gassed, stripped naked, and locked up during the protest by a combined team of army, police, navy, and mobile police who arrived in four military trucks.

The media. Before the protest on January 11, the women contacted different media houses to inform them about the proposed protest march and the press briefing immediately afterwards. The media houses were also visited by members of our networks — the Chikoko Movement, IYC, Pan African Youth Movement, and Women in Nigeria, Rivers State Branch — to reinforce their support for the proposed protest by the women. This strategy was meant to legitimize the actions of the women.

The violent response from the Nigerian military received negative publicity in the national and local newspapers. This encouraged the women to move on to the next stage of their campaign. In addition to using the Internet as a tool to disseminate information, we started focusing on electronic media such as radio and television. We appeared on television and live radio programs within the Niger Delta and in other parts of the country to speak about the impact of oil pollution in our local communities, the injustice of the Nigerian Constitution and its impact on the people.

Press releases and press conferences. The organization focused on the importance of the media and organized press conferences in collaboration with the IYC, and the Chikoko Movement. The collaboration with these organizations strengthened the actions and activities of NDWJ.

We also built very cordial relationships with the media. This was because we needed them to create adequate publicity about our demands and the violent reactions of the government and the oil companies. We also used the opportunity to show some of the journalists around the oil-producing communities — places they had never been to before.

It was also necessary to sustain the relationship we were developing with the national and international media because there are very few journalists working in the Niger Delta. This was crucial for us. Our stories needed to be told and we needed to move to the next phase of the campaign after awareness had been created and the struggle for resource control and self-determination justified.

Training/seminars. Community members received training on how to organize awareness creation workshops in their area. In addition, NDWJ organized seminars in the local communities and encouraged members to attend the mobile parliament meetings of the Ijaw Youth Council. We were also constantly invited by organizations in the Delta and outside to speak on the struggle. We exploited these opportunities to create more awareness on the issues.

Forming networks and coalition. NDWJ realized it couldn't work in isolation, so it used its volunteers and national executives to initiate a coalition forming process. We wrote letters to various national and local organizations to introduce NDWJ and to ask them to join the network if they believed in its philosophy.

International Alliances

The international relationships created by the Chikoko Movement and the IYC brought NDWJ into the limelight and highlighted the role of women in the struggle in the Delta. We realized international alliances could have a major impact at the international level. NDWJ networked with organizations in the West as part of its strategy to create awareness and build the global force for change in the Delta. Descriptions of some of these international activities are presented below:

Germany 1999. In November 1999, I and my colleagues Chima Ubani of Campaign for Democracy and Isaac Osuoka, the spokesperson of the Ijaw Youth Council, were invited by Pro-Afrika Initiative Germany to conduct speaking programs on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of Ken Saro Wiwa's death. The program was an opportunity for us to meet with German parliamentarians and other interest groups, and to discuss the human rights violations perpetrated by the oil companies and the governments in the Niger Delta region and Nigeria as a whole.

The massive awareness campaign took us to six cities in Germany. We needed to strengthen the relationship with German groups to continue educating the German public and to lobby the German government to take concrete steps towards the oil companies and the Nigerian government in relation to its gross human rights violations.

Holland 1999. I was invited by one of our networks in the US to take part in a conference in Holland as a panelist to speak about the issues in the Delta and the human and environmental rights problems there. The education of the activists attending the conference meant a lot as a few of the other countries represented had similar situations to Nigeria, for example, countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, etc.

Canada 2000. In Brantford, we participated in the Ontario Youth Parliament, along with Common Cause Africa-Canada. The aim was to educate youths and the general public on issues in Nigeria, and to remove the stereotypes the government media had portrayed about the situation in the Niger Delta. This eventually led to the establishment of the first International Youth Parliament in Nigeria in February 2001. While in Canada, we also took part in a conference to discuss human rights issues with representative of the Canadian government, Canadian labor movements, university professors, Owens Wiwa (MOSOP), and Ian Ferguson, the Canadian High Commissioner to Nigeria, who took part via telephone from Nigeria. My colleagues and I discouraged any form of investment in Nigeria and advised the Canadian government to look critically at the present crisis in the Niger Delta. We urged Canadians to see it as a sign of more crises to come as long as the Nigerian government and the oil companies continue to destroy the survival of the people.

Global Youth Connect 2000. NDWJ began building a network with Global Youth Connect and the International Youth Organization after attending its first international youth training on human rights in New Jersey in July. Now Global Youth Connect, IYC, and NDWJ are organizing an educational exchange program between Nigerian and American youth activists. The intention is to continue the publicity building process by encouraging youths in the West to take action, either by writing letters to Congress about the issues in the Delta, organizing a

telephone campaign, staging a demonstration, or using the media, thereby putting pressure on the American government to take some necessary steps.

Oxfam America/COOL Boston 2001. The Boston campaign was part of a strategy by Oxfam America to create more awareness about global crimes all over the world. It was an opportunity for me to educate the student population who attended the conference from all over the US. The speaking program and the workshop resulted in subsequent opportunities to visit some American universities to educate their students. Also there is a plan to start an International African Women's Movement Against Global Oppression (IAWM-AGO), which will start by developing units in American universities. A young African American female student originally from Rwanda has volunteered her time and commitment.

Press Interviews

I have had press interviews all over the US and in Europe about the issues in the Delta. Press interviews help us to clarify some of the reports that the international press feeds to its readers. Being able to get our message out to the public has helped the process to some extent. Radio stations such as Democracy Now, New York; Radio Project, St. Louis; BBC African Series; INRIN; CNN, etc. have been some of our targets for making our voices heard.

Internet

With the gross underdevelopment of communication technology in Nigeria, the use of the Internet as a tool has been our worst fear because the oil companies have used it as a channel to spread their own propaganda. NDWJ and its networks in Nigeria have aligned with networks in the West to disseminate information about the activities of the organization. This has helped a lot as NDWJ and its networks have been able to send electronic messages that could never have been heard or seen otherwise by the masses in the West where the oil companies are headquartered.

The Results

Generally, there have been some very successful impacts in the sense that oil companies have agreed to change their systems of operation and are beginning to listen to the people. For the first time, the Nigerian government has also turned a listening ear to the peoples of the Niger Delta, and has made a 13% budget allocation for the development of the region, an amount that is still being debated by politicians and people from the oil communities. Internationally, our alliances have succeeded in creating massive awareness on the criminal practices of the transnational corporations in Nigeria. Our international alliance has given us hope that some of our demands will be met. Documentation of gross human rights abuses in the Delta by the government and the oil companies is being done by international organizations such as the Human Rights Watch, Project Underground, Environmental Rights Action, Global Exchange, Amnesty International, and Niger Delta Women for Justice. One big breakthrough is the legal action taken against Shell and Chevron in US courts over their human rights abuses in the Niger Delta, especially in relation to the death of Ken Saro Wiwa and others in 1995.

Locally, on the policy level in the country, the governments of the south-southern states have gotten involved and are using the language of resource control and self-determination. This language, which was considered as secessionist bait, is now the language for social change. It is a step towards better results. Communities are very much aware of the situation and are now taking action to bring issues to the oil companies and their selected government representatives whenever there is a need to. More women have joined in the struggle and are organizing conferences and seminars as part of an educational strategy to create awareness. This is also helping to change some of the cultural biases towards women. NDWJ continues to document the atrocities, the environmental pollution, the economic fraud and the human rights abuses of the oil companies in the region.

Challenges

The road definitely has not been smooth. There have been a number of challenges, including extra-judicial killings and rapes. These have created fear in the minds of the people. We have been challenged by government-instigated ethnic crises and efforts to derail the struggle for selfish reasons. Awareness created by the rebirth of the spirituality of the gods of the lands was used both as a weapon of defense and assault on people within the local communities. There have been consistent security checks and organizations in the Delta and their offices have been targeted as “no go areas” with barricades positioned in front of the buildings, thereby making it impossible for anyone to go in. Peoples of the Ijaw ethnic minority are denied both government and oil company appointments because of their demand for justice within the state.

Conclusion

So far I have spent about four years of my adult life after graduating from university as an activist advocating for a change in the attitudes and behavior of oil companies operating in Nigeria. The experience has been that of pain, relief, frustration, but most of all satisfaction. Being an advocate for a cause, even though it may be life threatening, gives me, my colleagues and the people of the Niger Delta the zeal and willpower to continue. However, we could say that life has never proved fair to the oppressed. Having lived under an oppressed society, both as a woman and a minority, it is painful enough to see your entire life and community going into extinction because of greed and disrespect on the part of the government and international oil corporations.

Overall, I have spent 11 years of my life involved in activism, speaking for justice, campaigning for change in the social and political systems as they affect minorities in the Niger Delta region. The journey looks very long, but we all foresee a positive outcome. The only weapon we have is the moral rightness of our cause.

Bibliography

Brisibe, A. (2000). *Effective strategies in advocacy and networking as a means of empowerment*. Independent Study, Coady International Institute, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS.

- Ekine, S., Okon, E., & Brisibe, A. (2001, July). Blood and oil: Testimonies of violence from women of the Niger Delta. In *Articles & Publications*, Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ) website. Retrieved from <http://www.kabissa.org/ndwj>
- Ijaw Youth Council. (1998). *The Kaiama Declaration*: Communique issued at the end of the All Ijaw Youths Conference held in the town of Kaiama, 11 December 1998. Retrieved from <http://www.essentialaction.org/shell/kaiama.html>
- Ijaw Youth Council. (1999, January 23). *Ogele: Bulletin of the Ijaw Youth Council*, No.4. Retrieved from <http://www.kemptown.org/shell/jan23.html>
- Livoti, L. & Maraji, S. (Producers). (2000, March 15). *Delta women on fire: Nigerian women's resistance* [Radio series episode]. Making Contact. Oakland, CA: National Radio Project. Retrieved from <http://www.radioproject.org/transcripts/0011.html>
- Okon, E. (1999). The gender related dimension of racial discrimination. In *Articles & Publications*, NDWJ website. Retrieved from <http://www.kabissa.org/ndwj>
- Onduku, A. (2001). *Environmental conflicts: The case of the Niger Delta*, presented at the One World Fortnight Programme organized by the Dept. of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, UK, 22 November 2001.
- Osuoka, I. (1999, November 22). Killing spree as soldiers invade Bayelsa State. Message posted to <http://lists.essential.org/shell-nigeria-action/msg00616.html>