

PAN-NIGER DELTA YOUTH FORUM

OUTCOME OF DIALOGUE IN RIVERS, BAYELSA AND
DELTA STATES 2015



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

“Youth must take action and be agents of change. What role are we playing as individuals to create change? We believe in stereotyping. What can we do to influence things around us? I am a musician and I organized a program titled ‘Stop Violence against Women’. It was a popular program and many people participated in it. Very soon, I will organize another one. There is need therefore to enlighten poor ones especially those in the creeks. For this engagement to have the expected impact, we need to expand the scope of trainees from seven to seventy, to seven hundred and seven thousand.”

Abiye Howells

“This programme is good especially in a region like ours where people have very few opportunities like this to properly dialogue and discuss. Things like this should be encouraged to deepen the understanding of the issues of the Niger Delta. The same problems that were a problem over a decade ago are still unaddressed today. It is therefore important to discuss, not just looking at problems but solutions. This programme is not just about talking but giving feasible solutions to the N/D issues. I was encouraged and we should continue in this light.”

Chidi Robinson

“The meeting was productive in that it really gave us opportunity to ventilate our feelings about issues concerning this region, against the backdrop of a new government that has postured themselves in a manner that indicates change. At this point in time am happy because we rubbed our minds together and agreed on a specific direction for certain issues. I am convinced that it will lead us out of the present situation which we find ourselves in. Specifically, the whole issue of sustainable economic development plan for this region is key because we cannot continue to be in a region that is generating wealth and continue to live in poverty and the type of poverty that having the potential to mortgage the future of our children. Part of the way forward that we have talked about is giving this region the same investments that other regions of this country enjoy. The region will be able to generate commercial activities that could drive the economy of the region in a more sustainable manner.”

Sebastian Kpalap

OVERVIEW OF THE PAN-NIGER DELTA YOUTH FORUMS

The sense of disenfranchisement amongst youth across the Niger Delta has been growing since the change of government in May this year. The new President has been taking a considered approach to policy formulation and engagement with different stakeholders.

The new administration has not yet articulated its vision for the Niger Delta. As a result, the youth in the region are concerned that the pledges for national development made by the Federal Government may not be inclusive and therefore an opportunity to address the problems of the region in a comprehensive manner will be lost.

The Dawn in the Creeks team and Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN) brought together youth from different ethnic, religious and potential militant group leaders from across the Niger Delta together to discuss the region's future. A series of events in Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States to amplify voices calling for change as part of an ongoing effort towards empowerment of citizens.

The aim was to understand their aspirations and to ensure that they participate in discussions about the future of their region and contribute to building a peaceful and prosperous future of the Niger Delta.

Bringing together more than 200 youth overall, the sessions gave an insight into the prevalent needs and concerns. The sessions were designed to generate ideas about possible areas for a constructive engagement with the government going forward.

It was a unique forum for exchange of information and dialogue that, if continued, has the potential to address the drivers of conflict and make a significant contribution to the stability, development and prosperity of the Niger Delta region.

"Programmes like this must be continue to be organized so that we have a common agenda to present to the government at all levels and oil companies"

Pepper Khadeejah

"This programme was enlightened, educative and stimulating because we have different people from different walks of life to share ideas."

Chainman Mgbaegbu

"Today's meeting shows that young people are aware of the issues and have reasonable contributions and recommendations that can bring about lasting solutions."

Inyingi



OUTCOME OF THE PAN-NIGER DELTA YOUTH FORUMS

After establishing a consensus on the challenges faced, attention at the events shifted to develop viable solutions. All those participating in the summit expressed sincere commitment towards constructive engagement with the incoming administration. The hand of collaboration has been extended by the youth.

It was agreed that it is time for the informed, progressive, and development-focused citizens of the Niger Delta to get involved in the discussion about the future of the Niger Delta and to lead the stabilisation of their region.

The three main areas of focus for each of the interactive sessions were: Sustainable Economic Growth, Environmental Sustainability, and Regional Security and Empowerment. The following is a summary of the recommendations emanating from the dialogue.

RIVERS STATE YOUTH FORUM: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

1) Sustainable Economic Growth

The consensus from our discussions was that in order to achieve Sustainable Economic growth, the following needs to happen in the Delta:

- a) *Economic diversification to counteract the overdependence on oil and gas: focusing on agriculture, harnessing the natural fertility of the Delta to counteract the dependence on oil and gas, promoting local production and content and reviving value chains*
- b) *Government-led investment in education: reviving technical colleges, emphasising targeted skills, reviewing the academic curriculum, de-emphasising the prevalence of certificates over real knowledge and skills, increasing orientation counselling in schools.*
- c) *Promotion of knowledge transfer: spreading ideas of entrepreneurship through youth networks, for example.*
- d) *Undertaking projects to attract investment: reviving Niger Delta ports, dredging waterways, creating an industrial park, investing in infrastructure;*
- e) *Tackling corruption; community driven investigation of Rivers State government expenditure to improve government transparency and accountability*
- f) *Developing sources of sustainable energy*
- g) *Reducing over- reliance on oil companies and engage local governments*
- h) *Carrying out needs assessment as foundation for development planning*
- i) *Emphasis on skills and human capital development*
- j) *Implementing environmentally friendly projects*

“We cannot continue to be in a region that is generating wealth and continue to live with the type of poverty that will mortgage the future of our children. Part of the way forward is giving this region the same investments in infrastructure that other regions enjoy. The Delta would be able to generate commercial activities that could drive the economy of the region in a more sustainable and diversified manner”

Sebastian Kpalap

“There is need for a multi-stakeholder and compliance committee to monitor the implementation of projects, policies and programmes concerning the economic development of the region”

Gbosi Yirakpoa Vincent

RIVERS STATE YOUTH FORUM: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

2) Environmental Sustainability

We agreed that our environment suffers from the following degradations: pollution due to both illegal artisanal refineries and industrial emissions; improper waste management; inadequate sanitation; deforestation and mangrove depletion; erosion, sea encroachment, and flooding.

To improve the condition of our environment, we agreed that we need to lobby oil companies and government agencies to address the above issues and reduce environmental damage. We established that the following steps will be necessary:

- a) *Persistent community-driven action and advocacy to counteract government and NOSDRA inaction and adopt the Petroleum Industry Bill (PIB)*
- b) *Implementing and using the UNEP report for political leverage: this high-profile report is an unprecedented exposure of the level of degradation in the Niger Delta and could be a useful tool for pressuring local, federal, and state governments.*
- c) *Land reclamation*
- d) *Understanding the importance and implications of the Petroleum Industry Bill (PIB) and adopting it;*
- e) *Improve legal framework and reform environmental law enforcement systems*
- f) *Lobbying oil companies for sustainable Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies;*
- g) *Carrying out environmental audit*

"There will not be sustainable development without sustainable legislation"

Chidi Robinson

"We must be ready to move to the House of Assembly and express our issues and concerns. We should challenge the law passed by lawmakers if it is not beneficial. We must be ready to criticize the politicians constructively. Responsible CSR must be implemented in communities".

Pabon Baribene

"The UNEP report was very valuable for highlighting the environmental destruction, but it has still not been implemented. The government has played politics with it. Our communities need to peacefully and persistently advocate for its implementation."

Belemaa Papiame

RIVERS STATE YOUTH FORUM: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

3) Regional Security and Stability

Everyone agreed that the Delta needs its youth to act as positive agents of change. Our discussions resulted in the following recommended measures:

- a) *Initiating conflict resolution through dialogue*
- b) *Addressing root causes of militancy: youth unemployment and lack of legal opportunities*
- c) *Re-appraisal of the Amnesty Programme*
- d) *Creation of job opportunities, especially for young people*
- e) *Reorientation of our own values towards peaceful advocacy and dialogue*
- f) *Entrepreneurial training for youths*
- g) *Youth inclusion and participation in political affairs and decision-making*
- h) *Women empowerment and mobilisation*
- i) *Engagement of younger generations through “Catching them young” programmes (sporting events, talent shows etc.)*

“Youth must take action and be an agent of change. We need to engage and enlighten poor youths, especially those in the creeks.”

Abiye Howells

“If we fail to take any positive steps today, it will affect our children tomorrow.”

Umoh Idionsit

“By focusing on building trust through dialogue with all stakeholders, we can foster peace and security.”

Dr. Young Nkpah



BAYELSA STATE YOUTH FORUM: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

1) Sustainable Economic Growth

We agreed that the costs and difficulty associated with setting up and running a business in the state have driven the economy into the ground. There is no substantial economic activity for the youth to be engaged in, and our brightest talents are driven into illegal activities and violence to make ends meet.

The youth in Bayelsa are ready to change this, but we need the government to improve the situation for businesses and channel investments to the region. The consensus from our discussions was that in order to achieve sustainable economic growth, the following needs to happen in the Delta:

- a) *There needs to be a more favorable business environment to sustain investment in a wider range of sectors to develop a more diverse economy in the region*
- b) *Agriculture should be a priority area. Division headquarters should have responsibility to implement a comprehensive Action Plan for the region and coordinate the operation of cooperatives. The region is well suited for rice, cassava, palm fruit and plantain growing. Investment in processing machinery will help develop this economy locally.*
- c) *Fish and snail farming is a traditional livelihood for inhabitants but the economy has collapsed due to the competition of frozen imports. Investment in production can revive the sector.*
- d) *Investment to help meet the demand for bottled water is highly needed to meet demand in the state*
- e) *Access to dependable power is not available so investment and further deregulation of the power sector is needed. We have the advantage of being close to the sources of power, so the State government should invest in generating and distributing power. We want a plan for how this will work over 4-years.*
- f) *Legalise modular refineries and attract investment so that jobs are created in the region and the fuel shortage problem is*
- g) *Investment is needed in activities that would boost tourism in the region, such as publicity for local festivals such as wrestling and boating regattas.*
- h) *A renewed relationship between inhabitants of the region and the multi-national oil companies making profit from the resources contained within. Start with greater engagement with the youth to hear their voice, and work towards relocation of country headquarters to their operational areas.*

BAYELSA STATE YOUTH FORUM: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

2) Environmental Sustainability

The consensus was that pollution from faltering oil pipelines and gas flaring is a real strain on the local environment. It is polluting the waters and the air, and a hazard to the wellbeing of ourselves, our children, and future generations.

We know that the problem is well known worldwide, and it is just the failure of government to enforce legislation on oil companies which allowing the problem to continue. The consensus from our discussions was that in order to ensure environmental sustainability, the following needs to happen in the Delta:

- a) *A general and thorough environmental clean-up needs to be carried out across the Niger Delta states. The youth have the willpower to implement the work outlined in the recommendations of the UNEP report. We are just waiting for the political will to kick-start the process.*
- b) *Pipelines are leaking all over the region, and the old equipment is open to sabotage which worsens the situation. Oil companies need to maintain their facilities and if they cannot they should be shut down until they comply with the right standards.*
- c) *The major polluting companies responsible for the havoc should come forward and participate in the debate with the youth. So far it has been mainly one way dialogue. We want to know they are listening, and hear why they are not improving.*
- d) *There needs to be a significant investment in waste recycling to sort out the daily mess that is accumulating in the creeks*
- e) *Deforestation is becoming a real problem in the state. There needs to be a plan to restrain deforestation and encourage forestation. Most people use wood for household energy needs, so if access to power improved they would not have to chop the trees.*
- f) *Oil theft and illegal refining is most prevalent in Bayels and is making the creeks uninhabitable. Something must be done to address the issues that are pushing the youth into this nefarious activity: unemployment lack of benefit from the oil.*

BAYELSA STATE YOUTH FORUM: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

3) Security and Stability

This is a critical issue at a critical time. With disenfranchisement growing amongst inhabitants of the creeks we are all wary about what could happen when the Amnesty Programme stops this year.

There must be an answer from the Federal Government soon or else the uncertainty could drive people towards desperate measures. Our discussions led to the following recommended actions:

- a) *The approach of the Federal Government's Niger Delta Amnesty Programme was based on misconceptions and therefore failed to address the root causes of the conflict. The programme has failed to train youth in skills that can be directly applied in the local economy. To be more sustainable, the youth need to be trained in the right skills so that they can earn a living and better themselves and their country.*
- b) *The heavy presence of the military throughout the state creates unnecessary tension amongst the population. To start with, government representatives should have less security personnel attached to them to free up resources for the creeks where they are most needed.*
- c) *State government back-peddled on pledge to engage cultists and they have returned to violence. Many of these are hidden in the creeks and engage in kidnapping and sea piracy. The new administration needs to find ways to bridge trust with these youth and negotiate*

DELTA STATE YOUTH FORUM

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

1) Sustainable Economic Growth

The consensus among participants on the day was that the region has been let down by the failure of leadership. Plans for the region are not at all clear, and projects that do happen are often disjointed and act towards crossed purposes.

Key sectors that have been abandoned by the government are agriculture and solid minerals, and by investing in infrastructure projects that reconnect the region they can be resuscitated. The consensus from our discussions was that in order to achieve sustainable economic growth, the following needs to happen in the Niger Delta:

- a) *More clear roles for implementation of projects to address the failure of leadership. A starting point would be to merge the responsibilities of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Niger Delta Ministry.*
- b) *For the majority of the population agricultural is the source of sustenance: both food and employment. It should therefore be central to plans. In addition to investment in crop production, attention is needed in poultry, fish farming, and piggeries.*
- c) *Sea ports have collapsed and the dependent economy has gone along with them. Restoration would be an immense source of direct employment, and would also unlock the potential for other businesses in the state who are faced with the bottleneck of receiving and sending goods. Functional ports at Warri, Koko, and Sapele would invigorate the region.*
- d) *The solid minerals industry would be the first to prosper from improved ports. Raw goods abundant in the region such as lime stone, clay, ore, and tin could be exported.*
- e) *Infrastructure development is crying for more investment. Completion of the coastal rail line would be the best place to start.*
- f) *It is not easy to get the right skills for employment. If there were dedicated vocational skill acquisition centres then many would flock there for enlightenment. Plans should include provisions for Information Communications Technology (ICT) centres to prepare youth for the demands of the modern economy.*
- g) *Lastly, but no less pertinent, is the issue of improving electricity coverage. Energy resources are being squandered while people live and work in darkness. Better power means a stronger economy.*

DELTA STATE YOUTH FORUM

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

2) Environmental Sustainability

We depend on the environment around us for our wellbeing and prosperity. It is therefore painfully apparent that it is being destroyed through the negligence of oil exploration. The consensus from our discussions was that in order to ensure environmental sustainability, the following needs to happen in the Niger Delta:

- a) *Hold a Niger Delta Energy Summit to birth a real access to power plan that is sensitive to the environment. This should include the people who live there too, not the usual forceful decision-making.*
- b) *The government is squandering all available sources of energy and creating pollution in the process. They should research available sources such as natural gas, waste, and wind energy.*
- c) *Update environmental laws to act as a deterrent to the destructive activities running rampant and ruining the environment, such as gas flaring and oil spillage.*
- d) *In conjunction, there needs to be a repeal of the compensation laws so that communities receive their fair dues, and the perpetrator of the damage fixes the mess when something goes wrong.*

DELTA STATE YOUTH FORUM

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

3) Security and Stability

The cycle of violence seems like it is never going to end. The Amnesty Program has not changed the situation which bred youth angry with the government. We see it now that children in the creeks are growing-up with the militancy mentality seeping into their every act. It is evident in school play and discussions and there should be immediate interventions to change this culture.

One of the main reasons that there is no change and the Niger Delta Amnesty programme has failed overall is that the youth were not engaged in the design or delivery. Instead of the skills, tools and motivation to go out to earn a trade as a fisherman, they have been sedated and fattened up on fish. The government is going to take away the fish and the youth will be hungry again, but also still be jobless. Our discussions led to the following recommended actions:

- a) *Surveillance jobs in the creeks will make the region better off. Youth will be given employment, which means they will not have to resort to illegal activities, and at the same time be tackling the enduring problems through their work.*
- b) *Transparency of government budgets and analysis of payments will help reduce resentment stemming from the feeling that allocations are not fair.*
- c) *Enforce accountability of members of the government and companies through litigation. We see them getting away with all kinds of illegal activities and it sets the worst example.*
- d) *The Yaoundé declaration, which reaffirmed the important role that National Institutions must play both with regard to their responsibilities vis-à-vis governments and their responsibility to promote human rights and provide remedy when those rights are violated, should come into force and be led by the Federal Government to safeguard the Niger Delta water ways.*

CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE NIGER DELTA

Within the thematic discussions it is clear that the following issues are critical for the Niger Delta youth:

- **Economic Diversification**

The youth have an overpowering desire to work so the unavailability of productive employment is one of the main conflict drivers – this leaves them few opportunities other than violence and participation in the illegal economy. The business environment is abysmal and the Federal support is not forthcoming. Meanwhile, communities are surrounded by constant reminders of the wealth accruing to the Federal Government from the extraction of oil in the region.

- **Environmental Sustainability**

The neglect of the environment in oil exploration has made the region one of the most toxic places on the planet. The cumulative effect of spills from aging pipelines and flaring at flow stations has destroyed the ecosystem and polluted the waters and land upon which the people depend. No attention to sanitation or waste management is aggravating the situation.

- **Regional Security and Stability**

The new administration has made it clear that it will not continue to support those enrolled on the Amnesty Programme under the same terms as the previous government. The youth agree that the Programme was not effective in addressing the underlying issues that caused the violent conflict in the region, and fear that by removing the lucrative payments in place there will be a return to violent conflict and attacks on oil infrastructure.

The ideas emanating from the dialogue have been consolidated and will be reviewed by prominent leaders in the region. Following this, the next stage in the process will be to develop the ideas into policy recommendations through research and consultation. The aim is to take the landmark process of civic engagement right up to the Federal Government to inform decision-making for the region.