SUMMARY OF KEY OBSERVATIONS AND CONCERNS

Observers reported a generally peaceful election in Bayelsa State.

Press and observers were also relatively free to carry out their monitoring duties.

It was generally observed that INEC has failed to distribute election materials on time and carry out an organised accreditation process, which resulted in significant delays throughout the day and undermined the integrity of the operations.

These electoral process problems and irregularities leave INEC’s handling of the presidential election in Bayelsa State open to criticism from citizens, political parties, politicians and impartial observers.

SDN’s observers were disappointed in the basic performance of INEC and its failure to learn simple lessons of punctuality and organisation from previous election exercises and experiences, and suggests that these issues are addressed in time to improve confidence and trust in time for the Gubernatorial elections on 11 April.

OVERVIEW OF BAYELSA STATE ELECTIONS OBSERVATIONS

The late arrival of materials and staff at polling units followed a similar trend across all observed States in the region.

Given previous documented experiences in the 2014 gubernatorial elections in Ekiti and Osun states where the super RACs were introduced, SDN assumed that INEC had devised a means to ensure early arrival of personnel and materials at the units and were disappointed that this was not the case.

Likewise problems with the card readers or poor capacity amongst their operators was widespread.

Observers reported that units were generally not marked clearly for easy identification. Voters could not find their units easily. Many voters expressed frustration at not locating their polling units. The low turnout observed may partly have been as a result of this as some voters went home in anger and did not return.

There was a lack of official incident report forms at most polling booths observed.

Some units had insufficient numbers of ballot papers and in some cases ballot papers arrived unsealed.

It was observed that INEC officials were not adhering to standard electoral processes on several occasions with lack of transparency and inappropriate activities by INEC officials reported.

ODI Community Ogien Ama unit 2 - When asked for information on the number of registered voters INEC staff said they were not authorized to divulge that information. INEC staff insisted that they were not authorized to give observers ANY information regarding the number of accredited voters. This is a violation of INEC’s regulations mandating observers to request, and obligating election day officials any information necessary for proper assessment of the process.

Vote buying was carried out in the open in some areas. This is a failure on the part of stakeholders to act in accordance with the electoral act. It once again confirmed concerns that most voters will base their choice on how much material inducement they got instead of the capacity of a candidate to deliver.
**RECOMMENDATIONS**

INEC must be seen to step up professionally and logistically in Bayelsa State in time for the state house of assembly election on 11 April to ensure that voters’ trust is restored and tensions are diminished before the next round of voting.

INEC should work to ensure that its staff are fully trained, brought into line and that they fully understand the processes, procedures and protocols of upholding free and fair elections. This understanding then needs to be demonstrated to voters to ensure they have confidence in INEC as an institution.

**SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS AND REPORTS RECEIVED**

**Reports related to logistics, delays and materials:**

In SILGA Ward 10 Card Readers were sent to the wrong units, causing significant delays in the process.

In SILGA Ward 1 accreditation started at 9:30am. In SILGA Wards 9, 10 and 11 accreditation did not start till 1:00pm. Too much time was wasted trying to verify the fingerprints of voters that failed the fingerprint authentication.

In Obunagha, at 10:45, it was reported that there was an absence of INEC officials, accreditation and voting materials.

Observers reported that units were generally not marked clearly for easy identification. Most voters could not find their units. In SILGA Ward 10, Unit 007, the polling booth was not orderly, it was crowded and ballot boxes were not visible to voters.

In some units in SILGA Ward 9 there were still no ballot papers in some units as at 3:30pm (Units 9, 2, 8 and 4)

Observers reported the poor performance of card readers at several units. The statistics for Polling Unit 1, Unit 2 (Primary PU) and Unit 10 that was captured:

- Polling Unit 1: Card Reader success – 10, Fail - 63
- OGS Oloibiri, Polling Unit 2: Card Reader success – 15, Fail - 128
- Polling Unit 10: Card Reader success – 13, Fail - 53

At KOLOKUMA/OPOKUMA LGA only 76 voters out of a total of 214 were accredited.
Voter turnout in the areas observed averaged around 40% of those registered.

Reports of polling and collation irregularities:

It should be noted that in most units in SILGA, materials came unsealed, officials didn’t announce to voters the guidelines neither were they shown the election materials.

SDN observers also reported, that at SILGA Ward 10, Unit 7, one person couldn’t find his name on the voters register yet he was allowed to vote because he insisted.

Incident forms were in short supply and were not filled out on the spot. For example in Silga Ward 10, Unit 007, the “EC14H” and “EC14J” incident forms were absent. However, INEC officials improvised by using a notebook, writing the name and ticking the picture of accredited voters on the unit register.

Unsuccessful voters, who at accreditation did not fill out the incident forms were told by poll officials that the forms would be filled on their behalf.

Our observers recorded numerous accounts regarding lack of transparency in the collation of the results. It was witnessed that ballot papers were not counted in front of voters or at the collation centre, but instead were taken to other hidden locations for counting.

It was also reported that INEC had refused to announce the results without explanation. Such secrecy of the results had undermined the credibility of the process.

Secrecy in announcing results wasn’t challenged by many voters. No efforts at mandate protection. Voters retired after voting. Little concern was given to result announcement.

The results were not announced as stipulated by INEC and some polling units did not post the results at the polling units.

ODI Community Ogien Ama unit 2 - There were no records of the number of accredited voters made available to either the party agents or observers before the voting started.

ODI Community Ogien Ama unit 2 - The incident forms were mostly filled by the INEC officials in the polling units visited. In all the 7 polling units visited only two had the card readers validating the owners of the PVCs.

ODI Community Ogien Ama unit 2 - When asked for information on the number of registered voters INEC staff say they were not authorized to divulge that information. INEC staff insisted that they are not authorized to give observers ANY information regarding the number of accredited voters in most of the polling units visited.

Reports related to security, intimidation and violence:

Voting happened peacefully in all areas observed, although security personnel were largely absent in units. Observers noted that had the situation turned violent it could have been very difficult for the security staff to handle this.

Secrecy in voting was also not strictly adhered to. In most units party agents and unidentified persons aided some voters in voting and dropping the ballots in the boxes. Observers reported vote buying was done in the open in some localities.

ODI Community Ogien Ama unit 2 - There was slight pandemonium as some youths who wore security identification were arrested by the combined team of the Nigerian Army.

ODI Community Ogien Ama unit 2 - One thing that stood out was the absence of queues at the polling unit observed. It was a clear departure from what was observed in other elections. Voting was quite peaceful. Women formed the bulk of the voters in all the polling units visited.