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## **ABANDONED OIL WELL AND THE RISKS OF INTERCOMMUNITY CONFLICTS IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION, NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Intercommunity conflicts have been prevalent in many communities in Niger Delta since late 1990s. Most researchers tend to attribute this problem to poverty, electoral malpractices and state corruption. While these issues may have influence on intercommunity conflicts in many communities in the region, little quantitative and qualitative research has been conducted and published on the impacts of abandoned oil wells in relation to intercommunity conflicts in the region. This paper examines the impact of abandoned oil wells on the environment, economic and socio-cultural lives of Oloibiri people where petroleum crude oil was first discovered in Nigeria and produced in commercial quantities in 1956. The study adopted the purposive sampling techniques. Primary and secondary data were obtained



from seventy participants through structured questionnaires, semi structured interviews and literature reviews. Data were analyzed using statistical method and the results are presented in charts. The results obtained show majority of respondents (59%, 57% & 49%), indicating that abandoned oil wells are major sources of environmental, economic and social conflict in Oloibiri respectively. Nonetheless, opportunities exist to reduce the risk of conflict escalations. The paper concludes with strategic recommendations. The commendations could be adopted and applied to tackle similar circumstances in other oil producing communities in Niger Delta.

## KEYWORDS

Abandoned oil wells, environment, economic, intercommunity conflicts, oil companies, Niger Delta.

## INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta Region is located in West Africa, situated at the apex of the Gulf of Guinea, a home to over 31 million people with distinctive traditional heritage and linguistically diverse with more than 40 different ethnic groups. It inhabits 7.5% of the Nigeria land mass, and covers an estimated area of 75,000km<sup>2</sup> (Authority, 2021 & Eweje, 2006). Politically, it is comprised of 9 states in no particular order as follows: Bayelsa, Rivers, Imo, Akwa-Ibom, Delta, Cross River, Ondo, Abia and Edo state. The Niger Delta has the third largest mangrove forest in the world and the largest mangrove forests in Africa (Aroloye, 2019). Its ecological zones are characterized by large swamps, mangrove forest and tropical rainforest with multiple rivers, lakes, streams and creeks. About 12% of Niger Delta land surface is covered by swamps, forest and woodland areas. It is shaded with low lands, regular brackish and fresh water and has a variety of fauna and flora which renders the ecology delicate and very

sensitive to pollution, especially as the local population depends on the natural environment for livelihoods (Sampson & Okechukwu, 2022). Furthermore, Iwebuke & Eike (2021) reported in their studies that the Niger Delta has the richest petroleum deposits in Nigeria, with over 37.2 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, and 187 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves. Also in the region, about 1,182 oil wells have been drilled and exploited in the past five decades by International Oil Companies (IOCs) that were given licenses by Nigeria's federal government. Furthermore, there are approximately 606 oil fields in the Niger Delta, out of which 360 are onshore and 246 are offshore (Philip, 2015). Nonetheless, the total numbers of oil wells in the region have not been documented, in the same vain; records of the numbers of exhausted and abandoned oil and gas wells are not yet known.



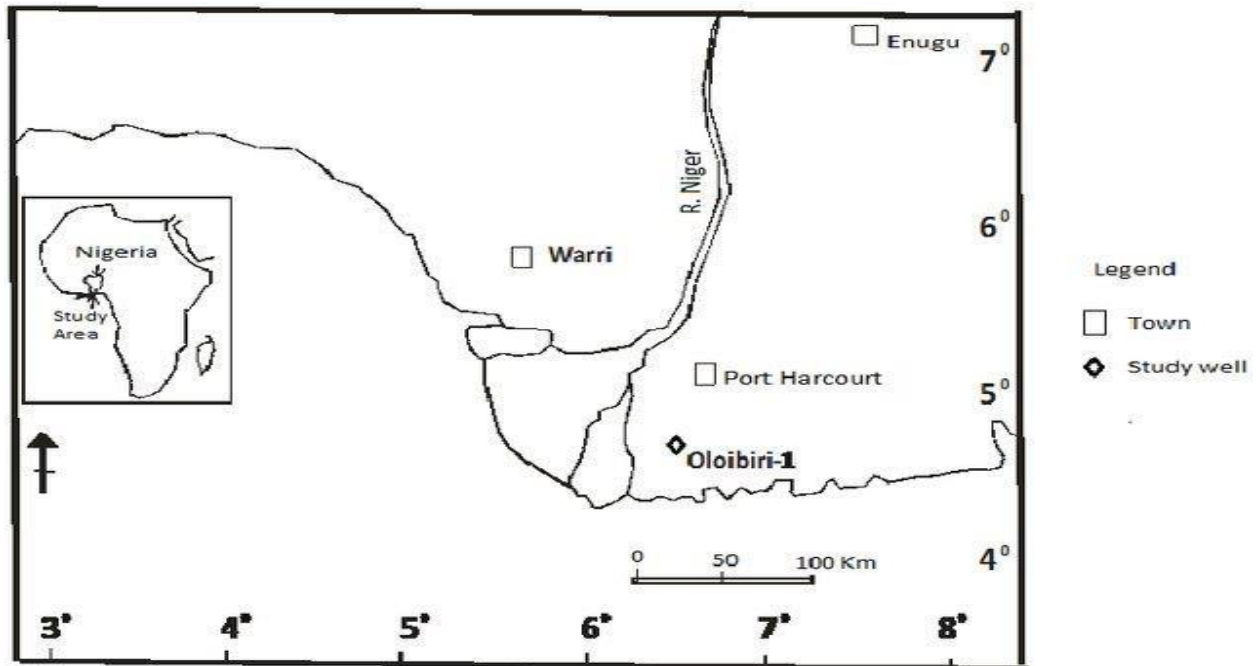
Elwerfelli & Benhin (2018) asserts that the Niger Delta region have the lowest human-capita and infrastructural development index, in comparison with other oil producing countries in the world such as Kuwait, Indonesia, Libya, Venezuela and United Arab Emirates. As at the time of putting this report together, there is no significant infrastructural development in place in the Niger Delta region that is commensurate with the amount of petroleum exploited from the region in the past years. The slow pace and especially the acute lack of human and material development over the years has pitched the Niger Delta on a complex environmental, social, economic and political trajectory of intra and intercommunity conflicts, as well as conflicts with the IOCs and federal government (Beloveth, 2015, Amnesty International, 2009, Augustine, 2005 and Sokari, 2008). The problem have been compounded by lack of transparency and accountability of governance institutions, unemployment, low life span, poor environmental remediation and mitigation measures from the oil companies, cultural breakdown, human rights abuses, illiteracy, and frequent outbreak of diseases and hunger. Unfortunately, the issues of poor infrastructural development in the region are often rationalized by the difficulty of Niger Delta terrain. This disputable excuse from federal and state governments and the oil companies has worsen the people access to basic and fundamental services such as health care facilities, electricity, portable drinking water, and good

road constructions (Nwankwo, 2017, Tosan, 2010). Therefore, apart from the decades of environmental degradation and neglect of the land and people of the region, Watt (2009), reported that the risk of intra and intercommunity conflicts and direct violence in Niger Delta are as a result of frustration among the people, failed expectations and perceived internal colonialism.

### **Location, Prospects and Challenges of the Oil Well 1**

The first commercial crude oil discovery in the Niger delta region was reportedly confirmed at Oloibiri field (OML 29 Oloibiri Oil Well 1) in January 1956 by Shell D'Arcy (later Shell-British Petroleum and now Shell Petroleum Development Corporation). The Oloibiri oil well 1 is located around longitude 6026'E and latitude 4065'N (Figure 1) (Jacinta, Edward & Yahaya 2012). The Oloibiri oil field has a sphere of influence comprised of six communities namely Otuabagi, Opume, Otuogidi, Otuaba, Akoloman and Otuokeme. However, the Oloibiri Oil Well 1 is majorly geo-located within the landmass jointly owned by Otuabagi, Otuogidi and Opume. The three communities have an estimated population of 25,000 people and their traditional occupations are fishing, farming and small scale entrepreneurship. The Oloibiri well 1 environment is a wetland characterized by swamps, streams and small rivers that empty into the Atlantic Ocean. It is also a home to biodiversity and endemic fauna and flora including medicinal plants which are under studied. The land is a fertile alluvial soil that supports bumper

agricultural productivity, and has mineral deposits such as gravels and sand amongst others.



**Fig. 1. Location of Oloibiri oil well 1 at Otuabagi (Adopted from Jacinta et al. 2012)**

Oloibiri being the first place where Crude oil was discovered in commercial quantity in Nigeria is pivotal to the economic, social, political and environmental history of the people of Niger Delta in particular, and Nigeria, West Africa and beyond. At the Oloibiri Oil Well 1 location, there lays the capped wellhead and a rusted sign post with the inscription, “Oloibiri Well 1, drilled June 1956, 12,008 feet (3,700 meters)”;

and today, it lays desolate. The implications of the abandoned oil wells are imperative to the communities’ socio-cultural relationship as well as the economic and environmental conditions of the people (Amnesty

International, 2011) and have grave potentials for intercommunity conflicts. The Oloibiri people are currently plagued with diverse environmental, socioeconomic and public health issues. Public health issues such as birth defects, cancer, various illnesses and deaths have been linked to the persistent adverse effects of petroleum hydrocarbons. Though human health impacts due to contaminated land have not been empirically studied in the study area; however, surrogate data from other regions exist. For instance, a study carried out by UNEP (2011) on Environmental Assessment in Ogoni land in the Niger Delta found that



oil spill can last over 40 years in the soil and water and continue to generate severe environmental health hazards.

Since SPDC ended oil production in Oloibiri Oil Well 1, community folks whose environment, farmland lands and livelihoods were damaged by oil spills have not been compensated by either SPDC or Nigeria federal government (Iyenemi, Utchay, Francis & Sheriff, 2014). Equally, no alternative economic livelihoods have been established or set up by multinational oil companies or government agencies to assuage the sufferings of the affected communities. Despite media hypes on government interests and promises to develop the place over the years, and the attendant frequent visits by high profiled political and government functionaries in the country including former Heads of States at federal and governors at the state levels (Excellencies, President Olusegun Obasanjo, Dr. Goodluck Ebebe Jonathan, and Abdulsami Abubaka). There is no single infrastructural development project in relation to the abandoned oil well on ground in any of the host communities to indicate that government is interested in protecting the historical Oloibiri oil well site that has been abandoned for decades now. Furthermore, there is no single functional health Center provided by government or multinational oil companies within Otuabagi, Otuogidi or Opume. Also, the community dwellers are drinking contaminated water from the river or earthen ponds that make them vulnerable to

various water born diseases and illnesses and the communities are in darkness as a result of no public electricity supply.

Given the importance of the Oloibiri Oil well 1 for the purpose of historical and archeological evidence, and for being the first place where crude oil (Hydrocarbons) was discovered and exploited in commercial quantity in the Nigeria and West Africa (Jacinta et al. 2012); there is need to protect and preserve the historical site for the future generations, and for the benefit of the state and the Niger Delta as a research and archeological site. This requires practical demonstration of commitment especially from the federal government for the establishment of Center for Environmental Excellence as was recommended in the UNEP report on Ogoni land and possibly an oil museum that will attract visiting experts, researchers, students and visitors from overseas and within the country to learn and know more about the exhausted oil well (UNEP, 2011).

The Vanguard newspaper (2016) reported that the people of Oloibiri believed that the issue of lack of development, intercommunity conflicts, environmental pollution, and poverty in their communities are directly related to the abandoned oil well which the IOCs and Nigeria federal government have not addressed. Although, there is common awareness of IOCs engagement in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSRs) to a significant degree in Oloibiri,



and other oil producing communities in the Niger Delta. However, there is a strong negative perception of the IOCs in most communities regarding their failures to implement full Corporate Social Responsibility practices, and this include the issue of abandoned oil wells especially the case of Oloibiri Community (Amadi, Abbey, & Nma, 1996). Equally, over the years, the CSRs of IOCs had not included provision of sustainable integrated skills development and livelihood initiatives for employment creation and provision of food security. Moreover, the people of Oloibiri and other oil producing communities in Niger Delta seem to have lost confidence in the Nigeria federal government as a result of state corruption, lack of political will and capacity to implement and enforce national regulatory standards that promote peace, environmental sustainability and economic empowerment of the people in oil producing communities in the Niger Delta over the years (Nsemba, 2018, Nseabasi, 2005 & Kate, 2009). Therefore, there is generally low expectations from the federal government by the people of the study area and many oil bearing communities in the Niger Delta to proactively intervene and resolve issues of intercommunity conflicts and socioeconomic challenges that could arise in relation to abandoned oil wells (Edo & Albrecht, 2021).

## **2.0 The History of Abandoned Oil Wells and Socioeconomic and Environmental Conflicts in Oloibiri**

The Oloibiri oil well site is surrounded by some of the oldest communities in Ogbia kingdom in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa state of Nigeria. It was founded during the 13th century as the district headquarters of Ogbia kingdom. Interestingly, Otuabagi at Oloibiri was the first community in Ogbia Kingdom to have Standard One to Six academic level of education in the early 1930s, which is equivalent to some modern day tertiary standards of education. Consequently, the community was an educational hub that many people from different parts of Niger Delta visited and schooled up to tertiary level. As a major settlement with high population, in time some natives migrated to nearby areas and settled down to start new villages. Today, there are about 20 satellite communities collectively known as Oloibiri clan with a first class paramount ruler. Interestingly, it was in Olobiri where Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro, the first popular Niger Delta minority rights' activist was born in 1938. It was also there that late Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro completed his standard six tertiary educations before he later joined the Nigerian army (Elias, 2007).

According to Aniefiok, Udo, Margaret and Sunday (2013) the process of exploration and exploitation of petroleum products in Nigeria started as far back as 1908, when German surveyors that worked for





Nigerian Bitumen Corporation, began prospection and exploration of Tar Sand dump in the Southern Nigeria. These pioneering efforts suddenly ended in 1914 due to the outbreak of World War I. Nonetheless, in late 1937 Shell D'Arcy, a consortium of Iranian transnational oil company (later British Petroleum) and Royal Dutch Shell was granted exclusive concessionary right over Nigeria. However, the outbreak of World War II (1939-1945) ended the initial oil exploration activities by Shell D'Arcy. Consequently, the process of exploration, exploitation and production of petroleum resources from the Niger Delta started in 1946 after World War II when Shell D'Arcy drilled a number of oil wells in 1951. The first commercial crude oil discovery in the Niger Delta region was confirmed at Oloibiri oil field in January 1956 by Shell D'Arcy (later Shell-British Petroleum), Eweje, (2006).

The discovery of oil at that time at that location was a surprise to both the prospectors (Shell-British Petroleum Corporation) and to the indigenous people of the area. This is because the indigenous people had not seen crude oil before then, and had no knowledge of the chemical and physical properties of crude oil, and their effects on the environment, livelihood and social lives. Moreover, they were not familiar with the technology and techniques that was used to unearth the oil. Additionally, this was so also because Shell-British Petroleum and the Nigeria government did not hold public sensitization programmes to educate the

host communities concerned. Furthermore, the people at the time were not aware of the negative ecological, social and economic outcomes and impacts associated with the exploration and production of crude oil (Kabari, Frederic & George, 2017). Consequently, they were unable to make reasonable and effective demands for adequate environmental clean-up and air emission control measures when the first oil spill occurred as a result of high gas pressure from the first oil well. Furthermore, community people were afraid to make serious request from Shell-British Petroleum, as Nigeria was yet to gain independence from the British government. Thus, they honored the company personnel as colonial masters.

Most importantly, before the exploration of oil in commercial quantity in 1958, there were incidents of oil spills in Oloibiri environment that sometimes lasted for several weeks and months. The spills occasionally resulted to infernos and caused environmental disasters as it affected the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. This was observed in the narrative of Regent Chief Elder Ipkesu S.F during a one-on-one semi structured interview at his residence in Oloibiri community in 2017. He expressed himself as follows:

“At that time, the people of Oloibiri were ignorant and vulnerable to manipulations, Shell took advantage of this to poison our environment with spills for several months without opposition, prior to the first major oil spill that shocked the whole country. Being an agrarian



and rural community that depended on farming and fishing, the means of livelihood of our people were severely affected by spills. The persistent spills were thick and caused siltation in rivers and swamp waters that emptied into the sea. Spills also sank into the ground and polluted underground water” (6 February 2017).

This situation made the indigenous people to realize the implications of oil spills into their environment even without being sensitized; and quite clearly, this marked the beginning of the socioeconomic hardship and challenges in Oloibiri in relation to the discovery of oil wells, and their subsequent abandonment. In another semi structured interview with High Chief Adogu, a member of Otuabagi community Council of Chiefs, fervently expressed his thought as follows:

“When Shell-British Petroleum started commercial oil production in 1958 they laid pipelines through forests, farmlands, creeks and rivers from oil wells at Oloibiri to Bony terminal at Port Harcourt in River state, where they gathered and exported the oil oversea. No compensation was paid to landlords and no royalties were recognized. Actually, Shell-British Petroleum paid no royalties to any Oloibiri person at the time, and I believe that Shell’s action was deliberate because they had business history and they knew what they were supposed to do. The Oloibiri people felt deprived of their legitimate benefits” (6 February 2017).

However, after Nigeria become independent from the British government in 1st October 1960, the federal government claimed ownership of oil wells at Oloibiri and took over exploration and production operations from Shell-British Petroleum (Musa, 2018). In 1970, the Nigeria federal government established the Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR), and later created the Nigerian National Oil Corporation (NNOC) in 1971 that was later changed to Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) in 1977 and now the National Petroleum Corporation (NPC) in 2021. In order to take full control of the petroleum industry, the federal government nationalized Shell-British Petroleum Corporation in 1979. Consequently, Shell British Petroleum was changed to Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria - SPDC (Aniefiok et al. 2013). The Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) of Nigeria that assumed oil production also did not attend to the problems of social and economic hardship caused by oil spills in the study area and other affected communities in the Niger Delta. Additionally, SPDC did not carry out social and environmental impact assessment, though it employed unskilled workers from catchment, but did train them on specific formal skills. Hence, there was no good host community relationship between SPDC and the adjoining communities.

Furthermore, after 20 years of oil exploration and production from the first oil well at Oloibiri (1958-1978),





SPDC abandoned the well in 1978 on the ground that the pure crude oil had exhausted, and the quality of remnant oil in the well were either not economically viable or was below international standard. Since then, SPDC have not taken steps to assess the impacts of the abandoned oil well at Oloibiri community.

### **Factors Influencing Intercommunity Conflicts in Oloibiri in Relation to Abandoned Oil Wells**

A major factor influencing intercommunity conflicts in Oloibiri in relation to abandoned oil wells is the painful reality of daily economic hardship facing the people. The people of Oloibiri feel deprived and marginalized of the benefits of oil that was explored, found and produced in high commercial quantity for many years by SPDC and the federal government. The continuous economic hardship experienced by the people over the years has resulted to deep seated grievances against SPDC and the federal government as well as other oil companies. This observation has been corroborated by previous studies which indicated that Oloibiri people feel that multinational oil companies only took away the oil in their land, and polluted soil, water, air and biodiversity without developing the people and the community (Musa, 2018, Aaron, 2005 & Obia, 2010).

Another factor that aggravated intercommunity conflicts in Oloibiri is the failure of SPDC and federal government of Nigeria to keep to their promises. For instance, in 2007 SPDC signed a General Memorandum

of Understanding (GMOU) with five satellite communities in Oloibiri clan that play host to several oil wells (Otuabagi, Otuogidi, Ogbia town, Otuaekeme and Opume community) collectively known as the Oloibiri cluster. It was agreed in the GMOU that SPDC would pay certain amount of money as annual development fee to the cluster communities in order to spur physical infrastructural development and human resource development. The agreement was witnessed by the Bayelsa state government. However, till date, SPDC has not taken steps to implement the GMOU. Similarly, in 2015 SPDC came to Oloibiri community and made promises to rebuild Oloibiri primary health care system including hospitals, maternity centers and local health centers with the sum of One Billion Naira. Yet, since then SPDC has not revisited any of the communities or initiated any process of fulfilling that promise.

In 2001 the Federal Government of Nigeria proposed to build Oil and Gas Research Institute, Oil Museum and a Library in Oloibiri. These projects were aimed to serve as homage to the entire Oloibiri clan, and as symbols of remembrance of Nigeria early history of oil exploration. The foundation stone of the proposed oil museum was laid by a former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, but, until now nothing has been done meaningfully on ground (Vanguard, 2016). Additionally, in August 2010 the Bayelsa state government publicly announced her intention to



partner with a Chinese firm to build a Greenfield oil refinery at Oloibiri, but it was not implemented. These failed promises subtly bred an atmosphere of suspicion, mistrust and betrayals between cluster communities thereby fueling the risk of intercommunity conflicts.

### **The Antecedents of Intercommunity Conflicts in the Oil Rich Niger Delta Region**

Traces of intercommunity conflicts in the Niger Delta became noticeable 9 years after the commencement of commercial exploitation of oil by the federal government. For instance, in 1966 late Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro at the age of 28 initiated and led a militant group known as Ijaw Volunteer Force. The group consisted of about 59 people mainly fellows of his Ijaw ethnic nationality. The agenda of the group was primarily to make Niger Delta region an independent country. To that end, they declared a Niger Delta Republic which revolted against the Nigerian army for 12 days, but were outnumbered and subdued by Nigerian army (Jike, 2004, Inoni, Omotor, & Adun, 2006). They undertook the revolution as a means of demanding social justice, and economic and political freedom from the Nigeria government and oil companies as a result of social neglects and ethnic discrimination against the Niger Delta people using Oloibiri as example (Ajao & Anurigwo, 2002). Decades after late Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro and his group were defeated, the narrative has not changed.

Consequently, the entire people of Niger Delta started demanding for resource ownership, control and advocating for self-determination as a way of drawing attention to decades of environmental pollution, degradation and neglect of the land and people.

Sequel to Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro demand for economic freedom, human rights recognition, and environmental cleanup, as well as political justice in 1990, Kenule Saro-Wiwa from Ogoni clan in Rivers state (Niger Delta, Nigeria) initiated and organized an active grass root movement known as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). It was a non-violent and peaceful diplomatic pressure group. MOSOP advocated for the rights of the Ogoni people for self government, adequate environmental cleanup, and remediation of Ogoni land polluted by oil spills, and also a fair share of the oil wealth in the Niger Delta. However, in 1992 Saro Wiwa was imprisoned by the Nigeria military government without trial for several months. Following this, in 1993 MOSOP organized a peaceful protest of about 300,000 Ogoni people which drew international attention to the suffering of the Ogoni people. With this protest, MOSOP successfully stopped SPDC from operating in the whole of Ogoni land. However, SPDC retaliated through connivance with the Nigerian State under the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha, and as a result Saro Wiwa was arrested, tortured in detention, tried in a military court



and executed on November 10, 1995 along with six others (Elias, 2007 & Ibaba, 2008).

The death of Kenule Saro Wiwa ultimately led to a new phase of protest and agitation in the Niger Delta against multinational oil companies and the federal government. These agitations were popularized through declarations by various ethnic groups in Niger Delta including the Kaiama Declaration (1998) by the Ijaws, the Oron People's (1999) Bill of Rights, Urhobo Economic Summit Resolution (1998), the Akalaka Declaration (1999), and the Warri Accord (1999). In all of these declarations, the common denominator or central objective was self-government, the independence of ethnic nationalities in the region, and resource control. The extreme activism that followed these declarations quickly snowballed into a resilient culture of youth militancy through the emergence of various militant groups (Elwerfelli & Benhin, 2018). Some of the prominent militant groups include: Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Egbesu Boys, Niger Delta People's Salvation Front, Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), and Joint Revolutionary Council and Militant Camps across the Niger Delta, amongst others. Consequently, the militant groups engaged in violence and rebellious activities against the Nigeria federal government, and multinational oil companies. Among their activities was interruption of Petro-businesses, destruction of oil

facilities and installations, violent threats to oil workers, kidnapping of oil workers for ransom and the proliferation of oil bunkering and artisanal refineries. Until 2009 government's responses to this development were repressive rather than dialogue. Hence, this aggravated the situation and further led to more breakdowns of law and order in the Niger Delta such that it took huge economic toll on the polity and became difficult to implement the Budget of the federal government (Okonta, 2006, Omotola, 2006, Okpuri & Ibaba, 2008).

However, on June 25th 2009, the Nigerian State under the leadership of President Umaru Yar'Adua offered an amnesty to militant groups in the Niger Delta. The amnesty programme encouraged militants to publicly disarm, accept dialog and embrace peace in exchange for vocational training, youth employment, monthly stipends and social integration. Thus, about 30,000 purported militants from the various groups and their leaders signed up between 2009 and 2011. This development did not only reduce the insurgency and brought relative peace and stability to the region, it offered the government the opportunity to address and proffer lasting solutions to the grievances and demands of Niger Delta people. Unfortunately, that opportunity was lost to political gamble and bad governance. Consequently, until now several issues that triggered the insurgency remain largely unaddressed (Aluko, 2001 & Eweje, 2006).



The lack of transparency and accountability in the oil industry gave way to corruption and self-enrichment of political office holders of successive administrations. This is another cause of social conflicts in Niger Delta. Additionally, since early 1990s, many communities in the region have had military occupations. For instance, in 2003, the federal government drafted a team of military force tagged 'Operation Restore Hope' to strategic locations in Niger Delta with an express order to brutalize people, and render invalid persons who dare to publicly protest against the prevailing social and economic condition of the peoples in oil producing communities (Human Rights Watch, 2002). Today, the latest military occupation in the region is the Joint military Task Force (JTF), a combined team of the Nigeria army and mobile policemen that was deployed to Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta state since 2006. Obi (2010) stated that this military occupation has perpetrated state violence against innocent civilian population in different forms including wanton killings, public harassment and women sexual abuses (Inoni, Omotor & Adun, 2006).

The risk of violence, intra and intercommunity conflicts has increased in Niger Delta since late 1990s as a result of the negative aspects to state militarization, light arm proliferations, social breakdown of cultural values, poverty, low self-esteem, struggle for land ownership, physical and structural violence against women and girls, sharing of proceeds of oil from petro-businesses,

and survival of the fittest mentality (World Bank, 2003). According to Ekine (2005) most violent conflicts are another dimension of State sponsored violence against the people of the region, many conflicts pitch one community against the other, sometimes occurring with no previous history of rivalry. Therefore, abandoned oil wells at Oloibiri reflect the symbol of state marginalization of the people of Niger Delta, upon which different intra and intercommunity conflicts have developed and escalated.

### **Environmental Impacts of Abandoned Oil Well**

Some authors assert that abandoned oil wells whether owned or orphaned have inherent risks to the environment; human health and the ecology because they are prone to leak secretly underground (AAAS, 2021). Among the chemicals known to seep out from abandoned oil wells and pollute air, soil, surface water and underground water are Methane, Benzene, Hydrogen sulfide and Arsenic (Jeff, 2021). Even the smallest leaks can adversely affect human health and the local environment including the impacts of methane on climate change if they remain un-addressed or undetected for many years (Authority, 2020). Given that the abandoned oil well in Otuabagi at Oloibiri clan in Bayelsa state has remained unmaintained, unchecked and unattended to by Shell/SPDC for several decades and the host communities have continued to raise alarms over possible gas leakages and emission from the



abandoned well; there is an urgent need to carry out expert technical assessment of the condition of the well to ascertain if the well is still in good condition or otherwise.

Literature review shows that gas leakages are common phenomenon from abandoned oil wells, for instance Bradstock (2021) reported that across the United States and Canada, methane is leaking out from over four million abandoned oil wells and gas wells and this has contributed significantly to climate change. Similarly, in the Gulf of Mexico, thousands of abandoned oil wells are leaking methane into the Ocean, beyond methane emission; some wells have been confirmed to releasing nitrous oxide, benzene and carbon dioxide into the environment (Jeff, 2010). Equally, Cathy (2021) emphasized that there are over two million abandoned oil and gas wells specifically in the United States which are ignored or forgotten by the oil companies that drilled them, and are believed to be seeping out harmful chemicals to the environment which are dangerous to human health and the ecology. Furthermore, Czeslaw, Tadeusz and Bogumila (2015) cited the work of Ten, Feng and Wang (2013) who carried out studies titled, “Total petroleum hydrocarbon distribution in soils 63.21`21`and ground water in Songyuan oil field, Northeast China”. The authors investigated the distribution of Total Petroleum Hydrocarbons (TPH) in underground water and soil and found that TPH were detected in most

samples in both confined and unconfined water aquifers. They concluded that the TPH pollutants were from abandoned oil wells in the environment where the samples were collected.

Considering the global incidents of gas leakages from abandoned oil wells onshore and offshore from abandoned oil facilities as reported in many scholarly literatures, the concerns of host communities in Oloibiri as regards the possibility of gas leakage from the oil well that was abandoned over forty years ago by Shell/BP cannot be undermined. Furthermore, over the years, no thorough empirical studies have been conducted to ascertain the condition of the abandoned oil well in Oloibiri and the communities have no information and awareness of the consequences of gas leakage from the well on their human health and the environment.

### **METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE**

A total of Seventy (70) copies of questionnaire were administered to respondents to illicit appropriate responses to the study quest. The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is cost effective, flexible and meets multiple needs and interests based on the purpose of the study and knowledge of the population. Specifically, the maximum variation type of purposive sampling was applied and its basic principle is to gain in-depth insights into phenomenon by looking at it





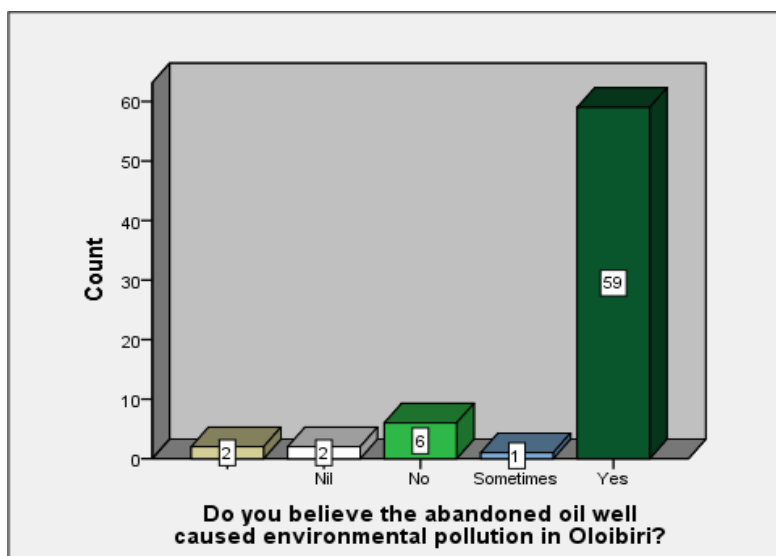
from different angles. The primary and secondary methods of data collection were also used. Primary sources included the use of questionnaire, observations, and semi structured interview at Oloibiri community. Generally, data gathered was premised on the social, cultural, economic and environmental challenges facing Oloibiri as a result of the abandoned oil wells; risk to peace, and opportunities to reduce and prevent the risk of intercommunity conflicts in Niger Delta using Oloibiri as a case study. The secondary method of data collection used in this study includes information obtained from journal publications, reports, books, and newspaper publications. Data were analyzed using statistical software and presented in charts for the purpose of clarity.

## RESULTS

The results from respondents input are presented and illustrated in charts below. The issues interrogated range from economic to cultural, environmental and social conflicts related and in line with the abandoned oil well-1 at Oloibiri.

### Data on Environmental Concerns

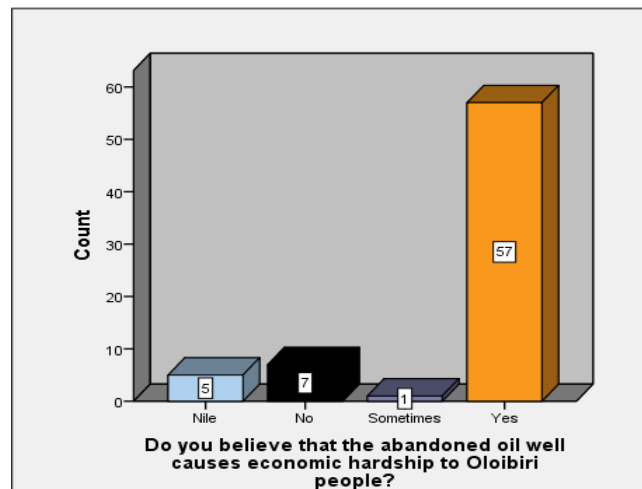
Data on respondents input on the possible pollution of the land and people of the oil well 1 area are contained in Fig.1. Results indicated that majority of the respondents (59%) attested to the fact the abandoned oil well has had significant impact on their environment.



**Fig.1: Abandoned Oil Well 1 and Environmental Pollution**

### Data on the Economic Impact of the Abandoned Oil Well 1 on the Oloibiri People

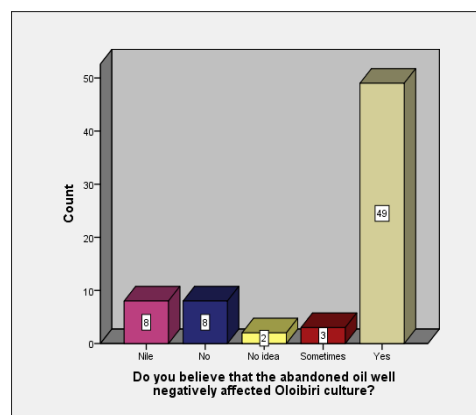
Data on the relativity between the abandoned Oil Well and economic challenges of the people of Oloibiri is illustrated in Fig.2. Results revealed that majority of respondents (57%) associate their current economic challenges with decades of inadequate attention paid to issues that emanated from the Oil Well till date.



**Fig. 2: The association of Oil well with the economic hardship suffered by the Oloibiri people.**

#### **Data on the Negative Impact of the Abandoned Oil Well 1 on the Culture of the People.**

The issue of the impact of the Oil well on the Culture of the people of Oloibiri was analysed as shown in Fig.3. Again, results show majority of the respondents (49%) alluding to the fact that the abandoned oil well has negetaively impacted on their cultural practices.

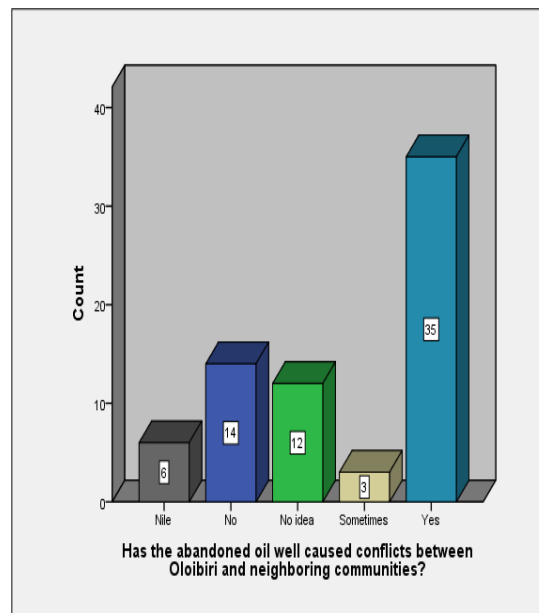


**Fig.3: The negative impact of the abandoned oil well on the culture of the people.**



### Data on Conflicts Between Oloibiri and Neighboring Communities

Information on the inter community conflicts between Oloibiri and neighboring Communities is contained in Fig.4. Results indicate that a loose majority of respondents (35%) are in agreement that conflicts exist between Oloibiri and neighboring Communities.



**Fig.4: Abandoned Oil Well as Source of inter-Community Conflict**

### Data on Abandoned Oil Well and Regional Conflict

On the relativity between abandoned wells and conflicts in the Niger Delta region, majority of the respondents polled (42%) attested to the fact there is a direct positive relationship between abandoned oil well and conflicts witnessing in the Niger Delta as rightly detailed in Fig. 5.

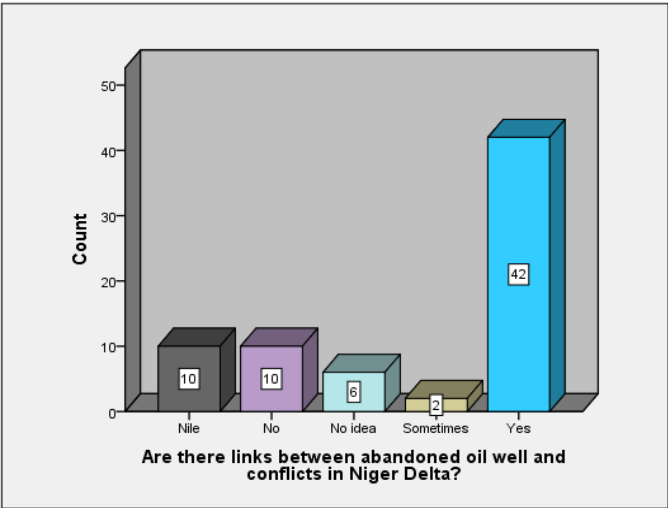


Fig. 5: Links Between Abandoned Oil Wells and Conflicts in the Niger Delta Region

Data On The Possible Reduction Of Conflicts Caused By The Abandoned Oil Well At Oloibiri

Information on the possibility of reducing conflicts caused by the abandoned Oil Well at Oloibiri is contained in Fig.6. Results show clearly that majority of respondents (42%) opined that conflicts caused by the abandoned oil well can be reduced.

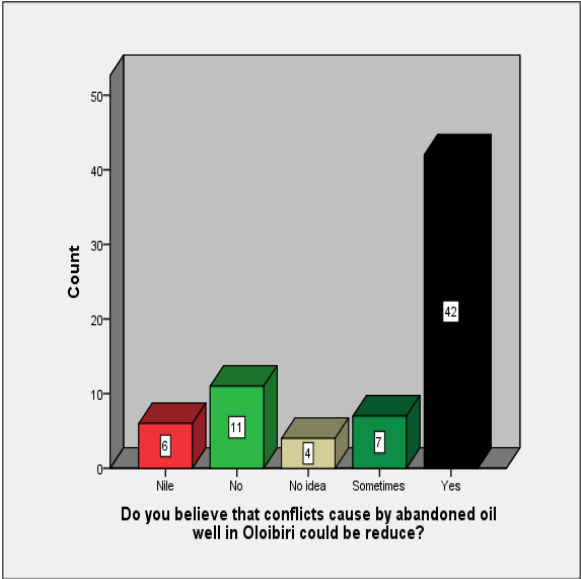


Fig. 6: Respondents' view on conflict reduction



## **DISCUSSION**

Generally, the study revealed a number of concerns that the people of Oloibiri have as a result of the abandoned oil well. It is important to note that the effects of abandoned oil well in the community are not confined to the site where the oil wellhead is located. Rather, it spreads and adversely affects different parts and needs of the people including their means of making a living, peace, culture and environment. Evidently, 50% of participants believe that the abandoned oil well remains a source of economic hardship to their community, while 40% expressed the view that it negatively affects their culture. Additionally, as much as 59% of participants clearly indicated that the abandoned oil well depletes and pollutes natural resources and natural services and exacerbates the impacts of climate change. Furthermore, some respondents points out that the abandoned oil well has been a source of conflicts between Oloibiri and neighboring communities for the past decades. Equally, 42% of participants agreed that conflicts in Niger Delta have bearing with abandoned oil wells in other oil producing communities. However, 42% of respondents agreed that intercommunity conflicts in Oloibiri that results from the abandoned oil well can be reduce and resolved.

These findings are similar to that published by Omofonmwan and Odia (2009) that some oil facilities belonging to oil companies in several communities in

the Niger Delta have been deliberately left to rot, deteriorate and degrade without replacement or repairs. Consequently, abandoned oil facilities of various types serve as continuous source of conflicts in different forms in many oil producing communities. A thorough analysis of the survey result indicates that the risk of intercommunity conflicts in Niger Delta in connection to abandoned oil wells or facilities has increased over the years, and escalated into pockets of conflicts. However, many of the conflicts sometimes seems unconnected to it, but underneath are remotely caused by it. This observation is in line with the thoughts of Aniefiok et al. (2013) who expressed in their paper 'Petroleum Exploration and Production: Past and Present Environmental Issues in the Nigeria's Niger Delta' that all the participants polled agreed that the problem of abandoned oil facilities in Oloibiri, and by extension the entire Niger Delta requires local, national and international interventions. Majority of the respondents expressed the need for a restored, remediated and productive ecological system as ingredient for peace. The respondents also expressed that the provision of community basic infrastructural facilities such as functional health centers, clean portable drinking water, good roads and establishment of social development institution are vital to reduce and prevent conflicts. The belief expressed by majority of respondents that conflicts caused by the abandoned oil well can be resolved and reduced, reflects their willingness to dialogue with





federal agencies and SPDC for an enduring peace in their communities, and alleviate their prevailing social and economic predicaments. The Niger Delta being one of the foremost Nigeria's economic main stay; its stability is strategic to peace not only in West Africa but globally. Generally, the result of the research shows that a collaborative effort based on sincerity of purpose, rooted in community based participatory method involving major/principal stakeholders including SPDC, States and Federal governments is crucial to stem the tide of intercommunity conflicts from the abandoned oil wells in Oloibiri and other communities in Niger Delta.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

It is evident from the findings obtained from the study that the respondents have similar concerns to those identified by organizations such as UNDP, Nigeria Vanguard News Paper, World Bank, and Amnesty International. The common themes are environmental, economic, social and cultural conflicts in the Niger Delta in relation to oil exploration activities by IOCs, lack of infrastructural development, abandoned oil wells and facilities and their negative impacts on the lives of host communities. The Federal and State governments are recognized as having important roles to play to improve the living standards of host communities and protect them against environmental pollution from abandoned oil wells or facilities. Also, oil companies are urged to adopt best-fit global Corporate

Social Responsibility practices to stem the culture of abandoning oil wells or facilities after explorations, and take proactive steps to restore all sites already polluted and or abandoned in Oloibiri and other communities. It is therefore recommended that:

- i. The federal government and SPDC should carry out adequate Social Impact Assessment (SIA) on the impacts of abandoned oil well or facilities in the lives of the Oloibiri people. This will help them identify specific and major social challenges facing the people and prioritize intervention strategies for effective solutions to the challenges.
- ii. IOCs should integrate livelihood skills development programs in their CSRs to empower host community members with capacity and ability to become self-dependent and employable.
- iii. The Bayelsa State Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Mineral Resources and Federal Ministry of Environment should enforce periodic integrity checks on the oil well to ensure that worn out equipment are replaced and the well plugged to stand the test of time.
- iv. The IOCs should carry out Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) at the location of the abandoned oil well and areas directly affected by it in order to development proper



- environmental remediation and ecological recovery methods in Oloibiri and environs.
- v. The SPDC should carry out a strategic technical assessment of the oil well to determine potential gas leakages and where possible, take necessary steps to renew their equipment to avoid dangerous gas leakage from the well.
- vi. The Federal and State government should provide basic amenities such as reliable and stable portably water system and regular electricity supply using alternative renewable technology options such as solar and wind energy, and equally provide proper access roads to and within Oloibiri in order to stimulate local businesses to empower the people economically to alleviate poverty in the area.
- vii. The Federal government and multinational oil companies should apply multidisciplinary approach for inter-community conflict risk mitigation strategies. They should work collaboratively with community elders, women and youth leaders. And constantly opt for dialogue and reward for peace in their relationships with local communities in Niger Delta.
- viii. The Federal government, through its monitoring and evaluation agencies, should regularly carry out environmental compliance audit in oil companies operating in

- communities and ensure that IOCs fully adhere to corporate social responsibility standards in compliance with federal and state environmental laws governing the oil industry.
- ix. iv. More research efforts should be encouraged to identify all the communities having inter-community conflict in Niger Delta, including the exact nature of such conflicts in connection with abandoned oil facilities. Such research should also produce recommendations for long term solutions.

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