

STAKEHOLDER ACTIVISM THROUGH NONVIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

Multinational oil corporations seek reliable access to petroleum reserves. In the Niger Delta region, their strategies adversely impact the indigenous population with human and property rights violation and abject poverty. Protests have been countered by deadly repression. This paper presents the case of nonviolent strategies adopted by a class of stakeholders – the women of the Niger Delta region. It analyzes their successes and failures in terms of a set of prerequisite conditions that must be met for such strategies to be effective. Nonviolent action is found to offer a viable alternative for persuasion of corporations.

INTRODUCTION

The oil sector is the lifeblood of Nigerian economy, generating 95 percent of its foreign exchange earnings and 80 percent of government revenues, and about \$280bn from oil over the past three decades. Yet, the people of the Niger Delta region live in crushing poverty, even while surrounded by the oil wealth of southeastern Nigeria. World Bank estimated in 2002 that about 66 percent of the population struggled to survive on less than \$1 a day. The situation has worsened over the years. In 1985 this figure was 43 percent. Two specific factors have been cited as the causes of deprivation and poverty in the Niger Delta region: (1) forced seizure of family or communal land by the Federal Government in favor of the oil companies, and (2) pollution of adjoining lands, creeks, rivers and the sea on which the people depend for their livelihood. The federal government gets 60 percent of oil revenues and the multinational oil corporations get 40 percent. Nothing is shared by the marginalized residents of Niger Delta. There is a perceived lack of transparency in the government's management of oil revenues. As a matter of fact, the government is not very visible in the Niger Delta. Oil corporations are clearly visible. However, they do not accept responsibility for providing basic services to the locals. They ascribe that role to the government. Apart from a brief period between 1979 and 1983, Nigeria was ruled by a succession of military governments from the mid-1960s to 1999. During this period, a small group of senior military officers accumulated extreme wealth and business and political power. Matters are exacerbated by corruption within both, the industry and the government. Nigerian social structure is characterized by its ethnic diversity and tribalism. There are about 250 ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. The Yoruba tribe of the southwest, Igbo of the southeast, and Hausa-Fulani of the north, collectively comprise the majority. They are among the Nigerian elite. The Ijaw, Itsekiri and others inhabiting the Niger Delta region are the minorities. Living in a swampy deltaic terrain, they are cut off from development, health care, modern industries and social infrastructure. Educational opportunities are limited. The government and oil companies place priority on expedient and efficient extraction of oil. The impact on other environmental and human resources is generally ignored. Oil spills, natural gas flaring, deforestation, and river dredging have all caused severe degradation of the environment. Soil, water and marine pollution have compromised the relationship between the people and their land, and the traditional modes of livelihood of the native population. Disadvantaged, various tribes in the region vie for recognition by the oil companies, see other tribes as their enemies, and seek to protect or defend their respective meager social capital. Perceiving their aspirations neglected, property rights violated, environment destroyed, culture denuded, and basic rights abridged, many men in the Niger Delta region

have resorted to violent strategies including kidnapping and intimidation of foreign oil workers, extortion of individuals, attacks on oil and electricity infrastructure, pipeline vandalism, robbery, smuggling, and murder. Government, military, police and corporations respond severely. Human rights groups estimate that more than two thousand people have been killed in the past decade by security forces protecting the interests of the multinational oil corporations. Government policies and the *modus operandi* of the oil transnational corporations have resulted in deep divisions and intense competition amongst communities and among members within communities. Also, it has fueled intense anger and internecine conflict between the Niger Delta tribes, eroding trust between them.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF CORPORATE AGGRESSION

In a fast changing milieu, where time is deemed a scarce resource, the pressure of expediency and efficiency do not allow time for acquisition of knowledge, education of those involved or affected, and application of wisdom. Organizational bureaucracies are designed to affect change efficiently, and systems are designed to overcome delays. The human fallibility of the individual is overcome through dehumanized processes. Markets are described as territories to be captured, and competition in the marketplace as the enemy. Dehumanization can lead to aggressiveness. The language deployed is often one of *linguistic violence*, often twisted to perpetuate unjust influence over consumers or other stakeholders. Stakeholders generally have imperfect information. With the stakeholders already at disadvantage, corporate communication and advertisement is often viewed as a coercive and sometimes even violent form of persuasion designed to promote the objectives of the corporation. The objective of its rhetoric seems designed to overcome consumer or other stakeholder resistance. Impersonal and anonymous, it concurs with the demands of bureaucratic predictability. Additional factors, rooted in the regional colonial and post-colonial history, influence the impact of the multinational oil corporations on the land and inhabitants of the Niger Delta. With substantial proportion of the revenues flowing to the government, this should, nevertheless, improve the lot of the people. Unfortunately, the bureaucratic infrastructure processing the nation's assets is riddled with corruption. The multinational oil corporations have remained a source of significant wealth and income for Nigerian officials. Billions of dollars are siphoned off in oil deals by the ruling elite and its business partners. Any restriction on the operations of oil majors would be counter-productive to the interests of those involved in these dealings. Consequently, six oil companies – Shell, Mobil, ChevronTexaco operating as Chevron and Texaco, Elf and Agip continue to control all but about 5 percent of Nigeria's oil production. The absence of diversification of the oil industry has had the consequence of shutting out the population of Niger Delta from the benefits of the enormous wealth yielded by their lands.

MARGINALIZED WOMEN AND THEIR RESPONSE

Women in the Niger Delta have been adversely impacted by oil exploration. A dispute over municipal boundaries between the Ijaw and the Itsekiris in 1997 escalated into a bitter three-year war. Men from various tribes attacked each other with machetes and guns, aiming to gain control over oil land so as to press their demands on the multinational oil corporations. Their battles has left entire villages razed and hundreds killed. In situations of communal strife, economic deprivation, military repression, and armed conflict, women, children and the elderly are least empowered and suffer the most. The women are victims of neglect from their own men, attacks from other tribes, and repression from the oil companies and the military, while they remain the primary keepers of the culture and community. In the Niger Delta, it is the women who fish, far, care for the livestock, process and sell food, collect water and firewood, bear and raise children, tend to the elderly, and run the household. The aftermath of violence, ethnic or otherwise, lingers among women long after the shooting and the unrest has ceased, especially

when their husbands, fathers and sons have been killed or maimed. They endure serious hardship as they look for means to support themselves and their families. They suffer rape and military prostitution.

In the summer of 2002, the women decided to stand up to injustice and confront it at the grassroots level. Disappointed and frustrated with the lack of progress through various militant and violent tactics adopted by their men, women from the Itsekiri tribe wrote to ChevronTexaco demanding better living conditions and employment for their youth. ChevronTexaco did not respond. The women took action. On July 6, 2002, about 150 unarmed village women, ranging in age from 30 to 90, from six different tribes, with a core group of Itsekiri, marched silently to the ChevronTexaco's Escravos export facility and occupied it. They made camp on the oil platform, festively singing songs of solidarity, and effectively halted the flow operations. Their move was a well planned and coordinated, executed with superior tactical skills. Aircrafts and helicopters were unable to land. Boats were unable to dock. Material flow stopped. No supplies could be delivered. All exits were blocked. More than 700 Nigerian, American, British, Dutch and other foreign employees of ChevronTexaco were trapped in the facility. The women sang their hearts out. They danced. They continued so, while also tending to their babies and children. In a male dominated society, they had asserted themselves and become a unique breed of hostage takers. The women had been deliberate in excluding their husbands, brothers and sons from their protest. Earlier actions by their men, which included attacking the oil facilities and abducting oil workers, had generally led to more violence against them and little gain. ChevronTexaco had used armed forces to quell protests and takeovers by men. Once more, ChevronTexaco could have chosen to use force. But they had no idea how to deal with a takeover by a band of women singing solidarity songs. Moreover, after seizing the export facility, the women upped the ante. They invoked a local taboo – a powerful traditional shaming gesture – to maintain control over the facility; they threatened to take off their clothes should the security officers attack them. In doing so, they would shame both, the multinational companies and their own men. The corporate management and their security forces were confounded. The symbolism of removing their clothes, in their particular culture, would be intolerable to their intended target and to the society in general. Disrobing by women in public is considered a serious and permanent curse, related to mothering, agricultural productivity and fertility in general. Thus empowered, the Itsekiris held sway over the oil corporation for 10 days. ChevronTexaco's main, multimillion dollar oil export terminal in the Niger Delta region was paralyzed. It was losing production of 500,000bbl of oil each day. Unlike the past, this time ChevronTexaco surrendered. The corporation relented and signed a memorandum of understanding. The women had demanded employment opportunities for their children, greater economic empowerment, and an enhanced infrastructure. They promised to hire at least 25 women over the next five years. Apparently, the women's expectations were modest.

Nine days after the Escravos takeover, hundreds of Ijaw women in Gbaramatu, about 50 miles to the east, mobilized as well. Late on July 15, Ijaw women quietly readied six speedboats for a secret mission. At dawn next day, with four stern looking Ijaw women leading them, 1500 women from ten Ijaw communities headed toward for the ChevronTexaco flow-stations that are fenced in with barbwire fences and iron bars and guarded by police, soldiers and naval personnel toting assault rifles. Chanting, "Enough is enough", the women stormed and seized four oil flow-stations operated by ChevronTexaco. The Ijaw women, too, declared that their action was to draw attention to widespread poverty in villages with nothing to show for over 30 years of the company's existence in their region. The Ijaw women, too, like the Itsekiris, threatened to remove their clothes, if attacked. Ijaw men warned that they would burn down all Chevron oil facilities if police tried to forcibly remove or otherwise harm their women. However, to their husbands, brothers and sons, these women assigned no role in their protest. The women broke up into groups of about 400 on each flow-station. Then they ordered all oil workers and

security personnel to vacate the facilities, who yielded to the will of the determined women without any opposition. This seizure stopped the flow of a total of 110,000bbl of oil per day. At the end of another 10 days, the oil company executives presented the women with a memorandum of understanding. The memorandum promised creation of a cottage industry, increase in scholarship bursaries to the communities, setting up of a fish and poultry farm to supply the terminal's cafeteria, micro-credit project financing, and at least 10 jobs per year over the next five years for people representing each of the various Ijaw communities. With the agreement in place, women, many with babies tied to their backs, danced and sang, and left. No hostage was harmed. The facilities suffered no damage. As the seizure came to an end, Nigerian Army moved in to prevent vandalism. However, strict orders were issued to leave the women alone. Later, the oil company thanked the women for not doing harm to their assets and personnel, and for keeping their production capabilities in tact. Why did the women of Niger Delta succeed where their men had failed? Why had they been so effective in having their demands met this time but not in the past? To gain some insight in these regards, we now examine some aspects and attributes of nonviolent action.

PREREQUISITES AND CONSEQUENCES OF NONVIOLENT PERSUASION

Potter [1] examined Gandhi's statements on the nature of nonviolence, and categorized the conditions that Gandhi described as rendering nonviolence impracticable or impossible. Three such categorized were thus identified. He found, (i) types of external circumstances that render nonviolent techniques inadvisable or unworkable or unlikely to succeed; (ii) characteristics of the agents, organizations, or individuals proposing nonviolent action that preclude success; and (iii) techniques which will defeat the purpose of nonviolence.

Environmental prerequisites

There are various environmental conditions which by their very existence render nonviolence impossible. The first condition is the desired outcome. Refusal by an individual to comply with a law, which the individual acknowledges to be just, does not constitute nonviolence, even if the individual is not violent. Just laws are enacted to ensure more beneficial states through compliance. Actions are not nonviolent unless they are intended to lead to more beneficial states or, at least, to maintain the present level of justice [1]. The action taken by the tribal women in the Niger Delta region against ChevronTexaco was to improve the lot of the people who were living in an environment being exploited to their detriment. Their action was directed to bring about a more beneficial state, which in the final analysis, had the potential for being beneficial not only to the majority, but to all involved. The women were aware that meeting their demands would require minimal effort on part of the oil corporations. Nonviolence is "precluded unless the resistance is undertaken as a response to an instance of violence." [1]. The nonviolent initiative by the women of Niger Delta was executed in face of a history of violent reprisal by the military and corporate security forces. Absence of "true and substantial issue," too, is said to precludes the use of nonviolence [1]. There were a number of true and substantial issues involved in the case of the Itsekiri and Ijaw protests.

Agency prerequisites

Cowardice is entirely inconsistent with nonviolence. Potter [1] also cited that lack of self-respect precludes nonviolent action. That is, if their self-respect dictated to them that ignoring the insults was the most appropriate retaliation, only then would such inaction be an exercise of nonviolence. Indeed, the women of the Itsekiri and the Ijaw tribes did not go crazy in rage or lose their heads in their anger.

They were dignified, festive, and had their emotions in control, as they sang and danced. Potter [1] infers from Gandhi's writings that the person or people against whom the nonviolent resistance is practiced must possess the intellectual capacity to be able to recognize in the agent the pure motives, which impel him to practice nonviolence. The women of the Niger Delta region had the capacity to inflict serious damage to the ChevronTexaco facilities that could have resulted in significant economic loss for the oil enterprises and their associates. Indeed, ChevronTexaco had been warned that their entire facilities could be destroyed by the tribal uprising. The women refrained from destructive strategies, both before and after gaining control of the facilities. They had the ability and the opportunity to inflict violence, but demonstrated to the oil corporations that they did not will to do so. The oil corporations, too, clearly had the intellectual capacity to discern this nuance. The nonviolent course of action taken by the women effectively transformed their adversaries into initiating a program of shared economic development.

Methodological prerequisites

The method adopted must avoid greater injustice than existed previously. The issue is confounded by the axiom that what is violent for one may not be so for another, and what was violent then may not be so now or vice versa. As such, there exists a need for ongoing critical appraisal of the impact of the nonviolent action. Therefore, openness is a prerequisite for nonviolence. If the methods of the agent involve secrecy, they do not meet the requirements of nonviolence. This requirement emerges from Gandhi's assertion that truth and nonviolence were two sides of the same coin [1]. Feedback is also essential because the objective of the nonviolent strategy is to bring about a change of heart in the opponent. One who practices methods of nonviolence to resist oppression must then be constantly aware of the effect these methods generate in the opponent. Indeed, the women of Niger Delta had approached their opponents with an open agenda. Their strategy was transparent. Their demands were specific and well publicized. There were no hidden agenda. Their demands for economic infrastructure and development, setting up for poultry farms, etc, stood to benefit the oil corporations as well, in the form of a partnership, with the women as vendors to the cafeteria.

SOME HOPEFUL SIGNS

On May 5th, 2005, it was reported that the US oil giant ChevronTexaco had determined that the money it gives to the oil producing communities in the Niger Delta region in economic aid was "inadequate, expensive and divisive." A year earlier, Royal Dutch/Shell had admitted that its non-transparent approach to handing out aid had exacerbated conflict in the Niger Delta. In August 2005, President Obasanjo, too, surprised everybody when he confirmed allegations of Nigerian police abuse its citizens. Hopefully, these developments suggest that the conversation has begun.

REFERENCES

- [1] Potter, K.H. Explorations in Gandhi's theory of nonviolence. In P.F. Power (ed.). *The Meaning of Gandhi*, 91-117, Honolulu, Hawaii: The University Press of Hawaii, 1971.