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Article

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THE ELEME-OKRIKA BOUNDARY CONFLICT: CHALLENGES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The Eleme and Okrika boundary conflict in Rivers State, Nigeria, has remained a prolonged communal dispute with far-reaching effects on peace, development, and social cohesion in the Niger Delta. This paper examines the major challenges and the community engagement strategies adopted over time to manage the conflict. Using the lens of the Corporate Social Responsibility theory, the study explores how peace committees, mediation efforts, youth programmes, and locally led dialogue forums have been used to address the root causes of tension. Drawing on qualitative insights from secondary sources, the study shows that mistrust between communities, political interference, elite domination, and weak institutional frameworks have seriously limited the success of these strategies. It also finds that although some community structures exist, they are often sidelined or manipulated by dominant interests. The study argues that meaningful peacebuilding will depend on inclusive, community driven strategies that are consistently supported, legally protected, and rooted in the lived realities of the people involved.

Keywords: Boundary Conflict, Community Engagement, Conflict Management, Peacebuilding, Eleme, Okrika.

Introduction

The Eleme-Okirika boundary conflict has been a protracted and persistent communal conflict, for several years resulting in tensions, violence and loss of lives, properties, numerous casualties, displacement of families and exacerbating existing social and economic challenges, which have led to a significant negative impact on the affected communities. The conflict revolves around claims to land, resources and cultural Identities, which are deeply rooted in historical and socio-political factors. The historical context includes colonial legacies, such as the demarcation of boundaries by colonial powers, which led to disputes

and competition over land. The socio-political factors such as population growth, urbanization and resource scarcity, have exacerbated the conflicts, creating increasingly volatile conditions. The emergence of the colonial administration and the division of the territories into administrative units complicated the existing tensions between the Okirika and the Eleme. In 1936, there were so many distorted movements that were made by the colonial administration, for instance, the Eleme citizens were moved from the Ahoada division of Owerri Province into the Opobo division in Calabar province, at the same time, some Okirika villages in the mainland were also transferred to Calabar province, from the Degema division. Since both Parties moved to the Calabar Province in 1937, the Eleme Citizens demanded rent from those mainland Okirika, now placed under Calabar Province, the Okirikans rejected the demands on the ground that, they have lived on that Land time immemorial and they cannot just be displaced like that, whereas, the Elemes claimed that, the relationship between the Okirikans and the Elemes was originally based on trade which led the Elemes to invite the Okirikas to occupy their land along the Coastal Areas, now they want to overrule them and take their possession, noting that, what really catapulted the conflict is the entrance of the Multinational Shell BP (as it was then) into the area, from 1959 to early 1960s, when the Nigerian Government decision about managing the downstream sector of the petroleum industry was to site its first refinery in the Okirika-Alesa (Eleme).

The refinery was built through the joint efforts of the Nigerian Government and Shell BP, based on the certificate of title, and at its inception, the project was called the Alesa–Okirika Refinery (jointly named after the two host communities), and the required documents were also jointly signed by the two communities as the host. As alluded to by Nwokeji (2007) in 1969, the Nigerian Government inaugurated the Petroleum Act, which provides that, “only Nigerian citizens or companies incorporated in Nigeria may be granted exploration, prospecting and mining licences, which also provided a joint partnership with the Government on all fresh concessions. Before the Petroleum Act, Oil Corporations operated as private corporations and merely paid tax and statutory revenues to the Government, but all these changed as the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) was established in collaboration with the joint partners (Nwokeji, 2007). With this new development, the Alesa-Okirika refinery became an asset to the government-owned Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). Discrepancies in methods of mapping and lack of clarity or understanding of available legal documentation are the major causes, which led to a series of inter-communal crises, with the intervention of respected and reputable Individuals, corporate organizations, traditional rulers, and different regimes of the government of Rivers State have tried various forms of resolution principles but to no avail.

For instance, in 1937, the Commissioner of the colonial administration was a mediator between the Okirika and the Elemes in the settling of their boundary dispute, but neither of the communities were satisfied with the outcome. None of the communities was satisfied with the outcome of the commissioner’s intervention, and tension remained high until in 1946, both communities had violent confrontations destroying lives and property, which led to the deployment of security agents in the area by the colonial administrator to restore peace, law and order. Also, after the inauguration of the Petroleum Act and the naming of the refinery in 1969, which signifies that, the Alesa- Okirika Refinery became an asset to the Government owned NNPC, with this new development, the government reopened old wounds between the Eleme and Okirika “who owned the refinery”? Even though both communities signed documents to establish the refinery as the legitimate stakeholders, to this day, its owners remain disputed.

Again, the military administrator (Colonel Dauda Komo) during his administration in 1993, Eleme won a court case and insisted they be sole beneficiary of oil profit and also the sole that the name of the refinery be changed to Eleme refinery; the change was effected and the decision led to a bloody, deadly, and property destructive clash. Through the Act of mediation, the military administrator, Colonel Dauda Komo constituted committee in the bid to find a lasting solution to this protracted and persistent crisis, by inviting the two committees for dialogue, each community was mandated to nominate a lawyer as their representative, but due to lack of cooperation on the part of the community representatives and the lackadaisical attitude (half-hearted effort) by the government towards Committee Process, destabilized the whole effort of finding a lasting solution of the Peace making process. Rivers State Deputy Governor and chairman of the state boundary commission, in 2010, during the regime of Rt. Hon. Chibuike Ameachi, the Deputy Governor, Engr. Tele Ikuru assured that the present government would proffer a lasting solution to the lingering boundary problems between Eleme, Okirika and Ogu-Bolo Local Government Area. Engr. Ikuru gave this assurance while Ona boundary demarcation enlightenment/sensitization visit to Eleme Local Government Area. The Deputy Governor, who spoke through the director of conflict resolution and boundaries, Barrister ThankGod Ekine, urged the chiefs, elders and other stakeholders of the area to educate the people on the need to remain peaceful when the forthcoming boundary demarcation exercise begins. He disclosed that a team of boundary experts would soon be doing survey work on the boundary lines between the three local government areas and warned the youths and other categories of persons to desist from doing anything along the boundary lines. Allaying the fears of the people, he explained that the boundary demarcation exercise would be based on the Supreme Court judgment and Charles Granville's committee report on the issue, but all these forms of mediation failed.

Conceptual Clarifications

Conflict: Conflict is an integral part and aspect of human life, unavoidable as far as interactions exist; thus, conflict is an inevitable aspect of existence, and its occurrence is found in almost every nook and cranny of the world. Conflict is dynamic, and so also are the ways by which human beings tackle conflict. According to Michael and Ikiabo (2022), conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction and the concomitant of choices and decisions. Similarly, according to Iroye and Ajeh (2020), conflict refers to a Universal phenomenon existing in all Human Societies resulting from their interactions and relationships, which may be positive or negative. Lamorde and Ibebunjo (2022) perceive conflict as the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving these goals. To buttress this point, Putra (2023) states that conflict occurs when two or more people engage in a struggle over values and claims to status, power and resources in which opponents aim to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals. As described by Omah (2012) states that, conflict is inevitable in human society because, when two or more converge, they must interact to meet certain needs, and in the process of interactions, conflict usually emerges.

Conflict means an expression of hostility, negative attitudes, antagonism, aggression, rivalry and misunderstanding. Adewale (2015) notes, conflict occurs when their interactions between at least two individuals or groups whose objectives differ. But Anyanwu (2017) positively took at the concept of conflict as a natural phenomenon which challenges individuals or groups in a community to strive to manage their disagreements, Differences,

Goals and Interests by transforming their Communities into fairer and more just places to live. According to Devona (2021), Conflict is as old as the creation of the earliest men, it has a multi-dimensional nature, underlying causes, manifestations, and profound impacts on individuals, relationships, communities and societies. It can manifest in various forms, ranging from subtle disagreements to overt hostility, affecting personal, professional, and societal realms. The complex nature of conflict encompasses psychological, emotional, cultural, and structural dimensions, each contributing to its unique dynamics (Britten, (2021). As described by Adeyemi (2022), conflicts are etymological and may be classified as either “actor-oriented” or “system oriented”. Adeyemi perceives conflict as an actor or system where one may be motivated to embrace conflict as an essential part of human interaction, or a problem which needs to be addressed or resolved. He added that, due to the destructive effects of wars and other forms of violent conflict on political order, it is viewed as a dangerous idea.

Conflict Management

Conflict management is the use of processes, tools and skills to find creative and respectful ways to manage disagreements and disputes; this includes the ability to resolve conflict collaboratively through effective communication Skills, such as active listening and assertive speaking. Conflict management allows parties to continue to work together, even in the face of conflict. Various Scholars have defined Conflict management differently, but all end up aiming and pointing in similar directions. Thus, Conflict management is the process of controlling the destructive consequences of conflict, bringing disputants to the table to appreciate these Conflict implications & to forestall future re-emergence. Oyeboode (2012) simply describes Conflict management as “the way man handles or tackles conflict, this implies that there could be good or bad management, depending on how well-thought-out and executed the mechanism or skills employed can achieve desirable outcomes. Conflict management is the method by which conflicts are resolved, where negative outcomes are minimized and positive results are prioritized (Yoromes, 2017). Best (2006) asserts that conflict management “covers the entire areas of handling conflicts positively at different stages, including those efforts made to prevent the Conflict by being proactive” Best (2007) also alluded to the fact that, conflict management entails the process of reducing the destructive capacity of conflict through several measures and approaches by engaging with the parties involved in that conflict. Sometimes, conflict management is often used in conjunction with “conflict regulation” which covers issues of handling conflicts at different stages and the efforts made to prevent the conflict through proactive community engagement strategies.

Community Engagement Strategies

Community engagement strategy is a strategic process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographical location, special interest, or affiliation, to identify and address issues affecting their well-being. Community engagement strategy is a step-by-step plan that details how to involve a community in bringing about Social change. Community engagement strategy can create, enhance and sustain social ties among the community. Community engagement strategy is all about creating a consistent set of processes to nurture members of the communities to invest in their personal development and include them to participate in the resolution of the conflict. The study will highlight various community engagement strategies that will be used

to address the management of the Eleme-Okirika boundary conflict, and the strategies include:

- i. **Mediation:** Mediation is a process where a neutral third party facilitates a conversation between two or more parties in conflict to help them reach a mutually acceptable agreement. Mediation is a voluntary, confidential and structured process for resolving disputes, in which a neutral and impartial third party assist the disputing parties in reaching a mutually acceptable agreement. As noted by Anyanwu (2017), it is an Informal process in which disputing parties discuss their situation, intending to reach a mutually satisfactory agreement or gain new perceptions about a situation, with the help of a neutral third party who serves as an intermediary to assist the disputing parties to reach their agreement or resolution. Mediation involves the intervention, the mediator is an opener of the communication channel, trainer, resource expander, legitimizer, and a process facilitator also, a good mediator will be guided by principles such as-; the principles of impartiality which signifies that the mediator is a neutral facilitator who does not take sides, self-determination, confidentiality indicates that all the proceedings remains confidential, voluntariness in the willingness participation of the parties and can withdraw at any given time and finally, empowerment and education. The management of the Eleme-Okirika boundary conflict involves the facilitation of structured dialogue sessions between representatives of the conflicting parties, aiming to promote understanding, negotiation and the development of agreements towards conflict resolution. The mediation process has been implemented by independent mediators, who are experts, professionals and individuals who are versatile and knowledgeable in their various fields, who are neutral individuals or groups/organizations and do not have an interest in the issue of the conflict, and they include governmental agencies, non- governmental organizations (NGOs) and community leaders, it provides the disputing communities opportunity to engage in constructive communication, express their concerns, and work towards peaceful coexistence. The mediation of the Eleme-Okirika started during the colonial period, for instance, in 1937, the commissioner of the colonial administration was a mediator between the Okirika and the Eleme in the settling of their boundary dispute, but neither community were satisfied with the outcome. Again, during the military administration of Colonel Dauda Komo, through the act of mediation, constituted committee in the bid to find a lasting solution to this protracted and persistent crisis, by inviting the two committees for dialogue, each community was mandated to nominate a lawyer as their representative, but due to lack of cooperation on the part of the community Representatives and the lackadaisical attitude (half-hearted effort) by the government towards committee process, destabilized the whole effort of finding a lasting solution of the peace making process.

Community-Led Peace Committees

One prominent community engagement strategy is the community - led peace committees, which utilize an inclusive approach which contributes to the development of sustainable and locally owned solutions to the conflict. These are members of the conflicting communities that establish local peace committees that empower community members to actively participate in managing the conflict. They are generally referred to as the community development committee (CDC) in most LGAs in Rivers State. The community development committee (CDC) is composed of vibrant youths, having chairmen, vice chairmen, secretaries,

protocol officers, treasurer and other vital positions. The community development committee (CDC) represent the voice of the community and ensures that every segment of the community is well represented. The main objective is to monitor the conflict situation and intervene in the minor disputes, mediating and promoting community cohesion, before they escalate into larger conflicts. To buttress this point, Kumar (2006) states that the peace committee acts as a neutral facilitator, promoting dialogue and understanding among conflicting parties. These committees provide grassroots representation and decision-making, ensuring that the voices of the community members are heard/ considered and decisions are made collectively. Kumar (2006) asserts that, by involving community members, these strategies create a sense of ownership and responsibility, which contributes to the sustainability of the peace-building effort.

Capacity Building Programs

Capacity building programs are conducted to empower community members with skills, knowledge and resources which are necessary to effectively resolve the conflict and also contribute to long-term peace-building efforts. One major aspect of capacity building is to provide training and education on conflict resolution and long-term peace-building, thus equipping the members with tools to peacefully resolve conflict and promote self-sufficiency to empower local communities, enhance the conflict resolution skills of the committee members, including conflict analysis, negotiation, mediation and communication skills. These programs are usually led by experts in the field or facilitated by local community leaders who have undergone such specific training. These programs also promote confidence and empowerment among community members, allowing them to take leadership roles in resolving conflict (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). Some organizations with a capacity building mentality, like the Refinery in 2014, created an avenue for some youths to be trained in some skills acquisition, the then Active General Executive director services of the company, Sir. Ralph Ugwu declares that the youths will receive training in welding and fabrication, carpentry and woodwork, plumbing and pipe fitting, plaster of Paris (POP), fashion designing, GSM repairs, catering services, poultry and fisheries productions, among others. (The Nation, Jan 2014)

Conflict Transformation Workshop

These are workshops that are organized by stakeholders to create an avenue for bringing the representatives of the Conflicting parties from both Communities, which aims to build Conflict Transformation skills among Community members. The workshop allows participants to express their grievances through structured discussions, in which participants are encouraged to actively engage in problem-solving rather than having the mindset of WIN-LOSE. Conflict Transformation Workshop utilizes various forms of Conflict Transformation techniques and tools such as active listening exercises, mediation activities and group discussion. These tools are to facilitate effective communication and problem-solving. In the Conflict Transformation process, apart from participants learning and practice skills related to a deeper understanding of the roots of Conflicts, identifying their own and others' emotions, interests, and positions and facilitating collaborative problem-solving.

Theoretical Framework

The Corporate Social Responsibility Theory (CSR): The Corporate Social Responsibility theory (CSR) is an automated business model that helps a company to be socially accountable to itself, its stakeholders and the public. The proponent of this theory is Howard Bowen, an American economist and Grinnell College president. He is often cited as the “Father of corporate social responsibility.” He connected the responsibility of corporations to society and published a book in 1953 that advocated for business ethics and responsiveness to societal stakeholders. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) means that entrepreneurs take resources from society and are supposed to return them in the condition they were taken for running their business. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a self-built and self-regulating mechanism where a business is supposed to ensure its compliance with law, international law, with ethical standards of business. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) theory emphasizes both the responsibility to make money and the responsibility to interact ethically with the surrounding community welfare.

Application of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Theory to this Study

The corporate social responsibility (CSR) provisions apply to a company registered for a charitable purpose under section 8 of the Companies Act, 2013. Section 135 (1) of the Act states that every company having the specified net worth, turnover, and net profits must establish a CSR community. As for the Eleme-Okirika, some of the organizations like the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) use corporate social responsibility (CSR) to address various issues like education, health, safety and empowerment programs. For instance, the (M.D) managing director of Port Harcourt refining company, Mr Ian Udoh, speaking during the official flag off ceremony of the programme on 31st January 2014, informed both the Eleme and the Okirika youths to take the programme seriously and make good use of the opportunities, as the scheme was part of the corporate social responsibilities of the company pay to its host communities, which is a critical component of economic development that will reduce the unemployment rate and will improve human capacity for sustainable development. The Ag executive director of services of the company, Sir. Ralph Ugwu declares that the youths will receive training in welding and fabrication, carpentry and woodwork, plumbing and pipe fitting, plaster of Paris (POP), fashion designing, GSM repairs, catering services, and poultry and fisheries productions, among others. (The Nation, Jan 2014), but the issue of sustainability is questionable because organizations need to adopt sustainable practices that will have a positive impact on the environment they operate. Apart from NNPC, which operates within the Eleme-Okirika boundary conflict, there are lots of organizations, both multinational and local firms that show no concerns about CSR in the area they operate, this might be due to some challenges such as lack of stakeholder awareness, lack of information, organizational culture and financial constraints.

Some of the solutions to these numerous challenges, is by engaging and involving the stakeholders, and effective communication between the conflicting parties and the organizations, even when the organizations are willing to assist and involve in the affairs of CSR, they might not be communicating with the right set of the community members, also, on the other hand, the community might not gain access to the top management and unknowingly dealing with those who are not the actual personnel in charge of such duties, also, most organizations do not have department in-charge of community relations, even the end of the year party that most meaningful organizations do offer to their host communities, to integrate properly with them is been slide-lined. The multinational oil

companies (MNOCs) and the multinational corporations (MNCs) use the principle of “Divide and Rule” to manipulate members of the communities, to buttress this point, Adunbi (2015) notes that the multinational oil companies (MNOCs) approach encourages and generates conflict among individuals and groups “Pitting Father against children” as a way to defect from their exploitation of the environment. This process ensures that the communities will remain divided which will not promote collective and mutual interest. These two antagonistic approaches will ensure that the multinational oil companies will not be questioned about the atrocities / ill activities towards the two host communities, with the aid of “Divide and Rule Principle”. These oil companies are not helping issues as they maintain control of the people through manipulation, by supporting one or more Chiefs from both communities that are in constant opposition to one another (Ikelegbe, 2013).

Challenges /Barriers of the Community Engagement Strategies (CES)

There are several challenges, barriers and limitations to the Community Engagement Strategies (CES) in the Management of the Eleme-Okirika Boundary Conflict, which can hinder the successful implementation of (CES) and addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that involves a range of Stakeholders, Traditional / Community Leaders, Government Agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and external independent mediators These Challenges include:

- i. **Political Dynamics:** Political Interference may create divisions in the Communities that will inhibit the resolution process, influential personalities in any administration, want to be involved to favor their community, to buttress this point, Emenike (2010) notes that, the Eleme-Okirika Boundary conflict are not solely community-based, but has also been influenced by political dynamics at local, regional and national levels. Political interference is not advisable as it may fuel more problems for the already existing ones and may also create division and disunity within the communities.
- ii. **Lack of Trust:** Building Trust becomes very difficult since the conflict is protracted and persistent. In the Eleme- Okirika boundary conflict, historical grievances and acts of violence have been deep-seated and mistrust between the communities; this lack of trust can be strong enough to bring both conflicting parties together for dialogue and peaceful resolution. Akintola (2015) states that building trust among community members, especially in the context of longstanding conflict, can be a challenging and time-consuming process.
- iii. **Resource Limitation:** Limited Resources such as finance, personnel and infrastructure can be a huge hindrance or challenge in the management of the Eleme-Okirika boundary conflict. Insufficient fund imposes a lot of challenges in the implementation of major activities such as training programs –capacity building programs (CBP) and conflict transformation workshop (CTW), also a lack of competent personnel (facilitators and mediators) can hinder the process. Samuel (2016) asserts that insufficient funding for programs and initiatives can hamper the implementation of Conflict Resolution activities, training programs and Capacity Building efforts.
- iv. **External Influences:** External influences can come in various dimensions; some may have a vested interest in perpetuating the Conflict, or they may seek to manipulate the situation to serve their agenda. Drawing from Okafor & Adeyemo (2014), external influence, such as the involvement of Non-State armed groups or political actors, can complicate Community Engagement Strategies (CES).

- v. **Boundary Conflict:** Geographical Boundaries are man's creation in space due to agitation by individuals, groups, or communities for self-actualization, especially in terms of resource control. (Mgborukor, 2021). Before the colonial era, Nigeria had been battling with many communal, tribal, and political crises that emanated as a result of disagreements over properties such as land ownership and resource control or varied attempts to take over territories, as well as religious beliefs like the Uthman Dan Fodio jihad (Egunjobi, 2015). Boundary conflict refers to conflict over the division of land or water bodies among two or more interdependent countries. This may arise due to cultural or historical claims or competition from resource exploitation. In Nigeria, the causes of boundaries could be colonial-related, geographical, socio-political, economic or governmental factors and physical boundaries, which are naturally occurring barriers between two areas, and the boundaries could be in the form of rivers, oceans, or mountain Ranges. One of the notable natures of conflicts was land disputes, when the economy and land began to appreciate, disputes over ownership became frequent in Nigeria. According to Olabode and Ajibade (2010), the disputes continued to generate tensions and, in some cases, led to the loss of lives and properties in many communities in Nigeria. All these conflicts before and during the post-colonial period were managed and resolved amicably with the aid of ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution). Boundary conflict has one exclusive nature, which is basically inter-communal conflicts that ensure the disagreement between two or more groups clashing due to originality or Indigene-ship Interest.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the Eleme Okrika boundary conflict through the lens of community engagement strategies reveals a complex intersection of historical grievances, political manipulation, elite interests, and institutional weaknesses. While the conflict may appear rooted in land ownership, its persistence points to deeper social, political, and economic undercurrents. This section discusses the key findings of the research, drawing connections between the empirical realities on the ground and the theoretical insights offered by Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) theory and community-based peacebuilding frameworks:

- i. **Historical Grievances as Active Conflict Triggers:** One of the most persistent themes is the role of unresolved historical grievances in fuelling distrust and shaping present-day community relations. The colonial boundary rearrangements of the 1930s, which moved both Eleme and Okrika communities into the Calabar Province without addressing their existing territorial arrangements, created long-term confusion. Emenike (2010) argued that "the colonial administrators failed to recognize the emotional and territorial attachments of local communities, leading to layered misunderstandings" (p. 100). The fact that this administrative reshuffling was never revisited or clarified by subsequent governments meant that each community interpreted the boundary issue through its own historical lens. What is striking is how both communities continue to narrate their histories in ways that affirm their legitimacy while rejecting the other's claims. These narratives are reinforced through local institutions, oral histories, and even religious platforms. In this environment, historical grievances are not just remembered; they are rehearsed and revived. They become rallying points for youth mobilization and community resistance. As such, no community engagement strategy can succeed without addressing this deeper emotional landscape.

- ii. **Mistrust and Poor Follow-Up:** Another key finding is that most formal mediation attempts have failed because they did not inspire trust or produce enforceable outcomes. In 1993, Colonel Dauda Komo initiated a mediation process that involved legal representatives from both communities. However, the outcome was never implemented due to weak political will and growing distrust between the parties. Samuel (2016) pointed out that “the state’s half-hearted mediation created more suspicion than hope, as both sides felt the process had been compromised” (p. 75). Trust is the currency of mediation. Without it, even the most neutral facilitators cannot sustain dialogue. In the Eleme Okrika case, community representatives often arrived at mediation meetings with pre-formed conclusions, refusing to consider compromise. The absence of post-dialogue follow-up mechanisms further weakened the process. Agreements were made without timelines, documentation was poor, and there were no enforcement mechanisms. The communities returned home more aggrieved than they were before the sessions began. This points to a critical gap in the design of conflict resolution processes. Mediation cannot be a one-time event; it must be part of a longer journey that includes capacity building, communication, and continuous engagement. More importantly, facilitators must have legitimacy not just in law but in the eyes of the people they serve.
- iii. **Community Engagement Structures Non-Empowerment:** Both Eleme and Okrika have structures that, in theory, could facilitate peacebuilding. These include community development committees (CDCs), youth associations, traditional councils, and religious leaders. However, the research finds that these structures are often weakened by internal rivalries, poor coordination, and lack of institutional support. Kumar (2006) suggested that “peace committees can only function effectively when they have the backing of community consensus and the support of institutional frameworks” (p. 77). In Eleme and Okrika, peace committees were sometimes seen as tools of local elites or proxies for political actors. Their composition lacked diversity, and their procedures were not transparent. For instance, women and young people were rarely represented, and most decisions were taken by a few individuals claiming to speak for the whole community. This lack of inclusivity undermines the legitimacy of community engagement platforms. In contexts where every group feels entitled to be heard, any appearance of exclusion is quickly translated into grievance. Therefore, strengthening these structures requires more than just creating them; it involves reforming them to reflect the community’s diversity and ensuring they are empowered to act.
- iv. **CSR Initiatives Poor Execution:** One of the more surprising findings is that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, especially those led by oil companies, have not delivered the expected peace dividends. The 2014 youth training scheme by the Port Harcourt Refining Company is a case in point. While the programme covered valuable skills like welding, tailoring, and GSM repairs, it failed to provide post-training support. Trainees were left without equipment, business grants, or market access. Adunbi (2015) observed that many CSR programmes in the Niger Delta are “designed to calm tension rather than to build sustainable peace” (p. 165). This statement is reflected in the Eleme Okrika experience. Instead of building trust, CSR initiatives often fuel suspicion. Communities argue over who benefits more, who was consulted, and how funds were used. The absence of transparency and independent monitoring reduces the credibility of these programmes. Furthermore, CSR tends to focus on short-term deliverables—workshops, grants, and training without embedding those activities in a broader

development framework. There are few efforts to integrate community feedback, build local ownership, or evaluate impact. The result is that CSR becomes a box-ticking exercise for companies rather than a meaningful contribution to peace.

- v. **Peace Process Manipulation:** Another finding is that political actors have consistently used the conflict for personal and strategic gain. Politicians often intervene not to solve the conflict but to build loyalty within their constituencies. In doing so, they take sides, offer biased interpretations of historical claims, and fund selected groups within the communities. Emenike (2010) noted that “politicians see communal disputes as opportunities to assert dominance, reward supporters, and control resources” (p. 105). This has been evident in how boundary demarcation efforts are announced with fanfare and then quietly abandoned. Similarly, peace panels are formed just before elections and dissolved afterwards. This politicization of conflict reduces the space for genuine community engagement. Once a peace process is seen as a political tool, it loses its credibility. Community members begin to withdraw, assuming that decisions have already been made. Those who participate are often stigmatized as political collaborators rather than peacebuilders. The implication is that CES strategies must be insulated from political cycles and influence. They should be driven by neutral institutions and supported by legal frameworks that protect their independence.
- vi. **Poorly Integrated Youth Engagement:** Young people are both actors in and victims of the Eleme Okrika conflict. They have been used to enforce territorial claims, defend community honor, and resist perceived marginalization. At the same time, they suffer the most from economic exclusion, educational disruption, and violence. Yet most community engagement strategies have treated youth as beneficiaries rather than as partners. Workshops and training schemes have targeted youth, but without involving them in the design and planning. As a result, many programmes have failed to address the real needs of young people. Anyanwu (2017) argued that “youth must be seen not just as targets of intervention but as agents of transformation” (p. 59). When youth are invited into decision-making spaces, they bring energy, creativity, and local legitimacy. In Eleme and Okrika, several youth-led initiatives have emerged spontaneously, including peace marches, social media campaigns, and informal mediation. However, these efforts are rarely recognised or supported by formal institutions. There is a gap between grassroots innovation and institutional planning. To close this gap, CES strategies must build stronger bridges with youth platforms. This includes involving youth leaders in planning, funding youth-led projects, and creating mentorship opportunities. Without youth integration, peacebuilding remains incomplete.
- vii. **Absence of Inter-Community Engagement:** Most CES efforts in the Eleme Okrika conflict have been implemented within individual communities rather than between them. While both Eleme and Okrika have organised peace events, trained youth, and formed committees, there have been few joint activities. The result is that each side strengthens its internal structure without building bridges across the divide. Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy (2007) emphasised that “peace is not the absence of war but the presence of relationships that foster coexistence” (p. 90). In the absence of inter-community interaction, misconceptions grow, and stereotypes harden. This is especially problematic for young people who have never interacted with peers from the other side. Joint programmes, whether in sports, education, business, or agriculture are essential to breaking down barriers. When communities work together, they build empathy and discover common interests. Unfortunately, such initiatives are rare in Eleme and Okrika

due to fear, logistical challenges, and political resistance. One exception was the cultural festival held in 2008 that featured participants from both communities. It provided a rare moment of shared celebration. However, it was not sustained. There was no institutional support to turn it into a recurring event. This underlines the need for CES strategies to include regular, structured inter-community engagements that promote dialogue and healing.

- viii. **Institutions Lack the Capacity Coordination of CES:** The final key finding is that institutions responsible for managing community relations lack the capacity, coordination, and independence to carry out their mandate effectively. The State Boundary Commission, local government councils, and the Ministry of Chieftaincy Affairs are either underfunded, politicized, or absent from the conflict zone. Best (2006) stated that “institutions are the pillars of sustainable peace because they ensure continuity, legitimacy, and accountability” (p. 112). Without strong institutions, community engagement becomes vulnerable to disruption. Initiatives depend on personal goodwill rather than policy, and once individuals leave office, the process collapses. In Eleme and Okrika, no standing committee to monitor the conflict, no public database of grievances, and no office where citizens can report violations. Most decisions are taken informally, based on who has access to power at any given time. This institutional vacuum explains why peace agreements are rarely implemented. Even when well-meaning officers emerge, they lack the tools and authority to make lasting changes. Therefore, CES must be embedded within a framework of institutional reform. Without this, peace remains fragile and short-lived.

Conclusion

The participatory, collaborative and inclusive approach is very vital in community engagement strategies that, is rooted in transparency, equity and mutual respect, which can significantly contribute to the boundary conflict, with the aid of community development committee (CDC) the voices of the people were been heard in a way of expressing grievances and participating in decision-making. Again, sincere dialogue, negotiation and mediation will ensure that, the relevant stakeholder through mediators in both communities to dialogue openly, about the grievances, concerns and the interest of their communities. The importance of traditional method of conflict resolution through mediation by respected traditional leaders/elders which will assist in bridging the gap between the modern justice system and the traditional approach; this process is referred to as community-based conflict resolution approach. Also, the interventions and cooperation among the stakeholders, government agencies and the traditional institutions will produce long-term peace sustainability. Capacity building of the community members is very important as it strengthens the conflict resolution skills and the sustainability of peace in long-term.

Recommendations

In order to promote peaceful co-existence in the Eleme-Okirika boundary conflict, effective community engagement strategies should be recommended to include: The community engagement strategies should be well-funded by the relevant stakeholders, which includes the federal government, which can be in the form of budgetary allocation for specific projects and support from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and National Boundary Commission (NBC) to provide technical and financial assistance for conflict resolution efforts and peace-building initiatives. The Rivers State government, which is directly involved in addressing the conflict, should ensure that the funds released are properly monitored and

judiciously utilized for the right purpose. The local government areas (LGAs) are not left out, they may support the funding of community meetings and allocating resources for projects, international NGOs such as the United State Institute for peace (USIP) and other well-known International NGOs have been involved in the funding of conflict resolution and peace-building initiatives in Nigeria especially in the Niger delta region. Both local NGOs and private sector funding, such as the multinational oil companies (MNOCs), multinational corporations (MNCs) and other organizations may contribute to conflict resolution and community development initiatives as part of their corporate social responsibilities (CSR) program. Government should ensure an inclusive, participatory and collaborative approach by involving community member in the decision-making process, to express their grievances, needs and appreciation to the organizations that have genuinely come to their aid. Capacity building should be encouraged by empowering the community members, especially the youths, since the youths are always at the forefront of the conflict. Thus, the training programme on negotiation, mediation, problem solving, leadership development, cross-cultural exchange programs, communication, decision-making skills, conflict resolution mechanisms, peace-building initiatives and reconciliation. Capacity building fosters collaboration between the communities that can address the underlying causes of the conflict and promote peace and development in the area.

Organizing regular meetings of the community members, incorporating both communities, should be encouraged in an inclusive manner. Their voices have to be heard in terms of their grievances, opinions, interest, and in the decision-making processes, via constructive and structured dialogue. There should be appropriate formal negotiation terms from both conflicting parties, with the objectives of the terms clearly stated, and at the end of the process agreement will be reached. There should be engagement of respected neutral third party through the assistance of trained mediators, preferably independent mediators who are experts in such field, to help both parties in agreeable solution. Implementation of important events such as cultural festivals and sports, for instance football can create unity within both communities. The relevant stakeholders should also implement joint economic empowerment development projects such as roads and transportation networks which connects the two conflicting communities, building of schools, health facilities, the development of a marketplace for both communities in a neutral location that is acceptable to both communities and the allocation of the stalls and trading spaces to both members of all communities ensuring that, it will be properly allocated to avert more crisis. Involvement of the traditional rulers and the community elders in traditional conflict resolution mechanism, this can be effective in handling minor disputes and grievances, the mechanism involves mediation, dialogue, negotiation and arbitration where panels of elders or experts hears evidence from both side and make binding decisions. According to Amodu (2019b) Traditional rulers have been an important part of Nigeria's governing structure for generations, even predating the British colonial era. The traditional ruler's role in conflict resolution was based on their extensive knowledge of their communities, their ability to mediate disagreements and their authority to enforce ruling.

To ensure that the strategies outlined above do not remain on paper, their implementation must be properly structured, time-bound, and supported by the right institutions. In the short term, within the first six months, the Rivers State government should immediately initiate a community engagement planning session involving representatives from both Eleme and Okrika. This forum must be open, inclusive, and locally driven, with support from neutral peacebuilding institutions. At the same time, the existing

peace committees in both communities should be restructured and given fresh mandates to operate with renewed legitimacy, especially at the ward level. These committees can begin facilitating initial dialogue meetings, hosting small-scale peace events, and collecting community opinions on shared concerns. This should coincide with financial mobilization from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the National Boundary Commission to support logistics, venue costs, and technical facilitation. From the seventh month up to the eighteenth month, more substantive activities should commence. These include the construction of shared community development projects, like a neutral market, jointly managed roads, and inter-community boreholes. The implementation of these projects should involve joint monitoring teams from both communities to build trust and ensure transparency. At the same time, youth-focused programmes such as leadership workshops, negotiation skills, and small business support schemes should be launched in partnership with NGOs and local training institutes. These can be coordinated with the help of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), whose community development service groups can offer technical assistance. Sports and cultural events should also be institutionalized during this period to create routine, safe, and informal spaces for interaction. Football tournaments, dance festivals, and oral storytelling sessions can go a long way in reshaping perceptions and softening hardened positions.

In the longer term, between eighteen and thirty-six months, attention should shift to legal and structural reform. A participatory boundary clarification exercise should be initiated with the full involvement of community elders, surveyors, and legal experts. This process should not only map physical boundaries but also create mutually accepted frameworks for managing shared land and public spaces. The outcome of this exercise must be gazetted and protected by law. Alongside this, a proposal for a state-level peace-building bill should be introduced in the Rivers State House of Assembly to give legal backing to CES structures, regulate peace committees, and ensure sustainable funding. Finally, by the end of the third year, an independent assessment should be carried out to review the impact of all community engagement initiatives. This review, to be conducted by a neutral academic or research institution, would help identify what has worked, what needs improvement, and what should be phased out or expanded. Through this time-sensitive and layered approach, CES efforts can move from short-term gestures to long-lasting solutions that rebuild trust, create joint value, and reduce the risk of future violence between Eleme and Okirika.

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