

Resolving the Niger Delta Conflict In Nigeria

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Introduction

In this paper, I present a case study of intractable conflict in the oil-producing region of Niger Delta in southern Nigeria. The conflict has been raging for more than ten years because of the Federal government's neglect of economic and environmental security in the communities and inability to understand the dynamics of the conflict. This, combined with identity, group behavior and ethnicity make it complex and difficult to resolve. Specifically, this paper investigates the potential utility of the Sequential Interactive Forum (SIF) model of problem solving to help move the conflict gradually to the point of being ready for mediation or negotiation while taking advantage of the present lull in hostilities and the desire for peace in the region.

Studies on intractable conflicts (Lewicki, et al. 2003; Putnam and Wondolleck, 2003; Azar, 1990; Kriesberg, 1999; Deutsch 1973) depict the complex nature of conflicts, the way in which disputants interpret issues and how patterns of interactions among different cultural groups impact problem-solving success or failure. These dynamic patterns and cognitive attitudes, norms, moral sanctions and regulative procedures of constituent parties, contribute to the intractability of a conflict. In the literature, it is argued that these patterns could easily become institutionalized behavior over time and accepted by the society if 'taken for granted' (see Gray, et al. 2007). Therefore, a way out of the conflict is to change these socialized perceptions and behavior that often block the way for problem solving.

Although this paper focuses on the Niger Delta conflict in Nigeria, it will propose a lesson that could be useful to other developing countries experiencing ethnic

conflicts. Sequential Interactive Forum is a problem-solving instrument of change and transformation of conflict through unfettered communication between parties. Pertinently, it also represents an incremental or one-step-at-a-time approach to problem solving that might lead to restoration of strained relationships and a change of each party's perception of the other. Sequential Interactive Forum is attractively a process of rediscovery, reflection and understanding. This is the first interactive stage of problem solving. Reaching understanding means that you have discovered how to move on to avoid obstacles to further discussions, and this comes also by probing feelings and needs. This is not an easy task, but demands consistency and commitment.

This process represents an extended model of problem solving that borrows from the early works of Herbert Kelman (1979, 1996, 1997, 1998), John Burton (1969), and Ronald Fisher (1972; 1983). But for any problem solving to be effective in a fast growing multicultural and globalizing world, an adequate model of conflict resolution is needed that will heavily emphasize both the outcome and the process of transformation. Sequential Interactive Forum as a model incorporates two other important approaches such as "cultural competency" and "coaching of parties" or stakeholders in skills of conflict resolution. The effectiveness of Sequential Interactive Forum (SIF) is programmed to use a pre-forum interaction (or mock forum) to coach the disputants on useful skills separately, before bringing them together for a major forum of deliberation. These additional features distinctly differentiate it from the existing problem solving models. Such combination if understood might help the process of predicting the dynamics of interaction between disputing parties, develop some sensitivity of the parties towards each other, and improve their communication capabilities. Asking the right question, analyzing pertinent data and information and listening attentively to the disputants will facilitate change of cognitive behavior patterns and perception about the conflict that over time have been institutionalized or taken for granted.

This study analytically examines policy strategies used by the various regimes in Nigeria to address the demands of the Niger Delta communities, demands that relate to distribution of resources and protection of the much-polluted ecological environment because of intensive oil exploitation in the area. Understanding why these measures failed will enable us draw important lessons from it, with a view toward making policy recommendations to the government that will save Nigeria from further bloodshed. Although this article focuses on Nigeria, it will also propose lessons that could apply to other developing countries experiencing ethnic conflict.

In this article, I explore how patterns of cognitive behavior have become acceptable practice that not only institutionalize the conflict, but also militate against bringing the parties to the table to address underlying problems. The role of a third party is to create the right atmosphere that helps stakeholders to discover within themselves the strength to deinstitutionalize and find satisfactory solutions to their conflict.

Nigeria has had enough bloodshed and economic devastation and the moment is ripe for a new policy choice aimed at restoring ethnic harmony. The majority of Nigerians thirsts for an amicable resolution of the Niger Delta conflict but lack the conducive atmosphere to air their demands without fear of being arrested. In this vein, convening Sequential Interactive Forum in the country is a very important step. The literature shows such an interactive process will be cost effective, and will help reduce the intense competition for oil resources and accumulated hatred and mistrust in the region. The study will conclude that Nigeria risks a major ethnic conflict and disintegration if the government fails to convene a Sequential Interactive Forum (SIF) to discuss major issues in the country and the Niger Delta conflict as soon as possible.

I will argue that the probability of successful resolution of the Niger Delta conflict is a function the country's capacities, and available local community capacities. In cognizance that effective policy action is inclusive, that offers an arena for leaders to explore differences in the society and empowers the communities and government officials to redefine, "reframe" (see Gray, 2004) and creatively find a solution to the Niger Delta conflict.

The first part of this article will present a brief overview of intractable conflict and how such conflicts are institutionalized. Secondly, it will examine the concept of Sequential Interactive Forum and the process. The third part will look into the historical background of the Niger Delta conflict with a view to understanding the parties and the causes of the conflict, as well as the patterns of interaction used in this violence. The fourth section will look into the requisite and application of SIF to the case study as a pragmatic and strategic mode of interaction and problem solving that empowers disputing parties to decide how to resolve their conflict satisfactorily. Literature for this paper is mainly from secondary sources, mostly books and journals relevant to this study among others.

The Nature of Intractable Conflict

The most difficult thing in conflict theory is the definition of conflict itself. Understanding conflict is important in order to identify kinds of human behavior that is conflictual as well as how to resolve it.

Conflict is defined as a struggle between social groups that see each other as incompatible. These social groups with different frames of mind, beliefs, perceptions, values, and feelings fight or compete with each other for their basic needs with the intention to "prevent, interfere, and injure" (see Deutsch 1973,p.10). In some instances, aggrieved communities will use any means at hand to attain their desired goals.

When groups are in conflict, they tend to think differently about the other side, and the causes underlying their dispute. The first thing that happens is the framing

events around them and by so doing justifying whatever their actions might be as the right reaction. Absolute belief in one's behavior is reinforced by stereotyping and other inimical attitudes projected towards their opponents. The society in this situation is therefore; socialized to imbibe a particular imagined belief of superiority through, and distance from, other opposing views and interpretations. In this vein, the virtue of one's own group and worth reifies a more dominant attitude.

In conflict, major distortion of perceptions of the presumed enemy is prevalent. This behavior leads to the psychological need to dehumanize the other and create a "we" and "they" dichotomy. Furthermore, the enemies are stigmatized as outsiders, or those who do not belong to the community, power hungry folks, dominants, and evil incarnates. This social dichotomy and attitude belie the formation of national, ethnic or group identities and behavior as well as determine whether group relationship will be based on cooperation or conflict. Furthermore, the experience of communities and groups in the hands of a majority ethnic group plays a significant role in escalation of conflict. When the defeats, suffering and humiliation experienced are recalled, they affect how people and individuals interpret the present. This greatly influences the conflict giving it a connotation of a historic and intractable conflict.

Intractable conflicts are defined as conflicts that are persistent and destructive despite repeated attempts at resolution (Gray et al. 2007, 1416). According to Coleman (2000, p.430), these conflicts are deadlocked and resistance to escalation with the aim of doing harm on each other. In his earlier studies, Burton (1987) describes them as "deep rooted" conflicts, while Azar (1990) labeled it "protracted social conflict". Intractable conflicts though they are similar to other conflicts are probably the most complex and difficult to resolve because of being more divisive involving more layers of agencies and social organizations, weaving complex and overlapping issues and typically fostering destructive and self-perpetuating patterns of interaction (Putnam et al 2003).

The socio-psychological process that intractable conflicts set increases the possibilities of escalation of hostilities or violence. Conflicts act like a cancer worm that spreads faster to destroy social fabrics of a nation. In literature, protracted conflicts do not begin as intractable rather they can become destructive through escalation, negative sentiment, and hostile cognitions that change the interactions and dynamics of the conflict (Gray et al.2007, 1416). Some of these conflicts involve multiple stake holders (Coleman, 2000, 428), complex issues like religion, culture, identity and more especially "the satisfaction of basic needs such as those of recognition, and distributive justice" (Azar, 1990, 2).

The enduring antagonistic sets of perception and interactions between communal groups in conflict and the state, conditioned by fear, and other belief systems set a stage in which one group tries to out-scheme the other by using all available adversarial means, including armed force to eliminate the opponent.

Intractable conflicts also involve tangible or negotiable issues such as resource distribution disputes, or competition for power and self-determination.(Coleman, 2000, 2003; Kriesberg, 1999). In Africa and other third world, countries such conflict have surfaced and are threatening democratization and economic development. In extant literature, deep-rooted conflicts become intractable and complex when combined with other volatile cleavages like religion and culture. The conflict pervades all aspects of people's lives and they see no way to exit than to continue fighting until their opponents are incapacitated. Moreover, the destructive conflagrations especially those in Africa defy means and strategies to manage them. A case in point is the genocidal conflict in Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Darfur in Sudan.

Intractable conflicts also have destructive consequences. Over time the conflict if not resolved weakens the civil society, (Azar, 1990, pp.13-16) de-legitimizes governmental institutions, destroys the economy and frustrates developmental goals. As the situation worsen, poverty, crime, unemployment of youths, and lack of basic needs drives events on the ground to destructive paths or "relative deprivation, a precursor for ethnic conflict."

Additionally, any attempts made by different parties to distance themselves from one another leads to disruption of relationships, and impaired communication links between them. Mutual isolation and impaired communication creates distorted images of what the other side is like, its goals, demands, and strategies. Parties in intractable conflicts systematically construct the views of society members in a way presenting one's own society as being moral, just, and their opponents as immoral, belligerent, intransigent, irrational or extreme. As these destructive perceptions continue over time, they become ossified. "Meaningful communication between and among conflicting parties dries up, and ability to satisfy communal acceptance needs is severely diminished." (Azar, 1990, 17)

Good relationships and communication are very critical requirements in resolving conflicts and any strategy that fails to address these issues might not be effective in the end. Instead the psychological and social dynamics of group interaction that develop over a long period of time might produce a template for institutionalized behavior whereby people would feel that the way they treat others unlike themselves is normal and acceptable in the society.

Scholars agree that "behavior becomes institutionalized when the conscious cognitive process that underlies it become commonly used, taken for granted, and reciprocated by disputants" (Scott 2001, p.48 as cited in Gray et al 2007, p.1420). What this definition shows is the importance of seeking the causes of destructive conflicts through the prism of institutionalization that "reflect repetitive, habitual patterns of actions that are reinforced by social consensus" (ibid, 1421). Such behavior in a society is realizable through coercive mechanism such as shunning or shaming, through culturally prescribed norms of how to behave in the society (Scott, 2001). Scholars argue that institutionalized patterns of intractable conflicts

accounts for what keeps these conflicts in a virtual ‘lockdown’ state. Furthermore, this will guide towards finding strategies and means of resolving the conflict as well as de-institutionalize the habitual patterns of behavior.

In this respect, this article concurs with Coleman (2000, 449), that “our greatest hope in dealing with intractable conflicts is to find the means to avert them” and replace them with constructive regulation and institutionalized behavior capable of sustaining ethnic group co-existence.

If we understand conflict as a cancer worm that a society has developed, then it behooves us to conduct proper analysis and treat the cause of the conflict and not the symptoms. Beyond ascribed simplistic ideas of dealing with conflicts is the need for a strategy to resolve pertinent intangible and tangible needs involved. A major cog in the wheel of resolving conflict is the mindset that disputes could be resolved in the setting where they occur. In prolonged and intractable conflicts, where animosities, hatred, and emotions have accumulated over time, a new approach is required, one that is capable of addressing the entire psychological backlog generated.

Sequential Interactive Forum (SIF) as a Dispute Resolution Tool for Intractable Conflicts

Sequential Interactive Forum (SIF) is an interactive model of conflict resolution facilitated by a neutral third party in collective brain-storming, and analysis to bring about change in the behavior of disputants at the dialogue table. The presence of different types of unresolved conflict in Africa and elsewhere indicates that much has to be done in testing new models of problem solving not only in international conflicts but also in intra-ethnic group conflicts.

Previous scholars (e.g., Fisher, 1972) have introduced several problem-solving approaches that form the bedrock of major studies about resolving ethnic conflicts in the field. Most of these early scholars borrow from the pioneering work of John Burton (1969) who first applied it to his third party interpersonal level of analysis known as “controlled communication.” Walton (1969) used it in his study on interpersonal peacemaking and third party consultation, while Satir (1967) applied it in her joint Family Therapy focusing on improved lines of communication, and reducing of threats among clients. At inter-group level of analysis Blake and Mouton (1961) used it in managing inter-group disputes in stressing on changing conflict situations from a win-lose intervention to collaborative problem solving. Levinson (1954) earlier used it as an inter-group model in area of community conflict workshop. Lakin (1972) applied this third party approach to the dispute between Arabs and Jews in Israel. Fisher (1972) as third party “consultation” borrowing from Burton developed its descriptive model. Following the success of the approach in conflict resolution Burton (1986, 1987) and his colleagues further

improved on it as “problem-solving”.

Professor Herbert Kelman and colleagues have injected more energy to boost the study and application of the interactive problem-solving model especially in their popular work on Israeli and Palestinian conflict. (kelman and Cohen, 1976; kelman, 1979, 2002),and followed by the “problem-solving forum,”(Edward Azar, 1990; Burton and Duke, 1990 Fisher,1997;Mitchell,2005);and “continuing workshop”(Kelman, and Ronhana, 1994).

Irrespective of different names these eminent scholars ascribed to their models, they have not differed much from common definition and characteristics of the concept. Interestingly, their work produced plausible strategies in conflict resolution that emphasize the process and roles of the third party mediator, behavior of participants and the type of environment where the dialogue will be convened. Uniquely, these models are non-agreement reaching oriented problem solving. However, they are tailored to identify commonalities among stakeholders and help them understand themselves by sincere and open communication, a prerequisite for making peace.

According to Fisher (1983, p.301, 1997) interactive conflict resolution is a strategy “for direct intervention in situations of inter-group conflict ... Consisted of small group’s problem solving discussions organized by social scientists practitioners in the role of a third party.” This discussion according to Fisher (1983) is not tailored only to help conflicting parties deal with the negative aspects of their dispute but help parties restore impaired relationships. While concurring with these views, Kelman (1997) added that it is also “a vehicle for change in national policies and in the larger conflict system.”

Sequential Interactive Forum, therefore, is a model of problem solving that provides an unfettered climate and template for stakeholders and participants to attain the desired goal of reaching rapport and understanding instead of immediate resolution of dispute. This method of conflict resolution is not mediation, although it employs the expertise of mediators. It only serves as a foretaste for a future joint mediation process that is focused on reaching agreement. Scholars have made known and discussed some of these differences (See Fisher, 1972, 1983; Kelman, 2008) in comparing their “consultation”, ‘controlled communication” and “problem solving” methods with other traditional strategies of conflict resolution. Contrastingly, the novelty of the Sequential Interactive Forum “lies in human relation skills, of sharing feelings and perceptions understanding the dynamics and social relationships and being knowledgeable of the sources and processes of conflict and methods of resolution”(Fisher, 1983, p.305). The professionals must first establish trust in order to encourage sharing of participants’ ideas about their perceptions and basic relationships. However irrespective of these differences in roles, scholars (Fisher, 1972; Wall, 1981 as cited in Fisher, 1983, 305) still believe that the professionals on both sides of the isle do almost the same thing, but with different approaches and methods.

This kind of interaction between groups or stakeholders in a dispute lays great emphasis on improving disjointed lines of communication that has contributed to the escalation of animosities, analyzing basic relationships between the groups and material resources in a way that might help resolve their problem, and influence public opinion. The approach is decidedly non-coercive, non-evaluative, relatively non-directive, and seeks exploration and creative problem solving with respect to basic relationships; rather than settlement of specific issues through negotiation.”

Deep-rooted conflicts often involve intangible demands as well as tangibles, such as claims over scarce resources (Putnam and Wondolleck, 2003), distribution of economic and political benefits which is also associated with power imbalances. They are also based on a denial of basic needs of individuals or groups like identity, security and participation.” Unless identity needs are met in multi-ethnic societies, unless in every social system there is distributive justice, a sense of control, and prospects for pursuit of all other human societal developmental needs, instability and conflict are inevitable” (Burton, 1991, p.21). Edward Azar explains that groups will do whatever is in their power to regain it. The complexity of such conflicts demands the use of SIF as an appropriate method of conflict resolution to prevent escalation, since indulging in litigation or arbitration does not resolve the intangible demands nor address the emotional problem of the disputants. In most conflict, people want their opinions to be heard and respected by the other side, and any ad hoc decision or rush towards resolution gives impetus to intensify agitation and violence. Any interactive forum dialogue needs time and cannot be rushed, and very importantly is an interaction between equals (Bohm, David 1991) where power relations need proper adjustment. It’s worthwhile to note that the flexibility and objective of this sequential process of problem solving differentiates it from other conflict resolution models like arbitration. It takes the participants sequentially through conflict hurdles with a view to resolving one problem effectively before going to the next issue. SIF is therefore a change-oriented and analytical process of conflict resolution facilitated by unbiased and multi-cultural sensitive professional, social scientist, and mediator, who assist disputants in identifying salient issues in conflict. This is only realizable through good communication that leads the parties towards changing their attitudes and perceptions of themselves and repairing strained relationships.

Respective of circumstances and the nature of conflict, SIF, as a socio-psychological model of problem-solving is a continuing process, drawn over time to account for all major issues in conflict and especially to guarantee equal participation of all disputants and their representatives, giving them all chances to be heard. Though in some situations issues might be resolved in one meeting, under other conditions, this could demand persistence and continued dialogue, before a rapport can be reached to end hostilities.

SIF takes cognizance of all these while at the same time using each stage of the meeting to coach disputants and stakeholders separately on basic conflict resolution

skills that are necessary for the smooth facilitation of the process. This new quality is a combination that distinguishes this approach from the pioneering methods. Emphasis on coaching conflict resolution skills is a step in the right direction in the field that will help diffuse the prevalent “emotional climate” (de Rivera and Paez, 2007, 237) and produce a conducive atmosphere during the process. In the literature, pioneering scholars recognized the need for acquisition of these skills. In his study clarifying mediation techniques Clark Kerr (1954, as cited in Rehmus 1965, p.120) concluded that “one of the greatest contributions of mediation is to supply the parties negotiating skills which they lack to allow them to find areas of settlement that exist but which their own negotiating awkwardness prevents them from seeing or realizing.” Another scholar Billikopf (2004) followed suit by popularizing this method of interpersonal conflict resolution in a pre-caucusing session. These are important skills parties will be using all the time in the future to resolve different kinds of community problems, family issues and inter-personal conflicts without the help of a mediator or third party (See Billikoff, Gregory, 2004, p.31). In view of the effects of emotional out bursts during the process, scholars agree that coaching stakeholders can present a “perspective using neutral and non-provocative language” (Hobbs, 1999 cited in Billikopff, 2004, 118). In multiethnic and hierarchical societies, it is pertinent to be aware of the need for parties, especially the government officials to build and save face (Ting-Toomey, 2001, 17). Conflict resolution skills such as good communication, listening, acknowledgement of the other and controlling emotions prepare the parties to enter into a forum with confidence and without fear thus creating a harmonious atmosphere. The goal of SIF is to help solve problems non-violently.

Conflict resolution requires us to communicate effectively, appropriately, and creatively in different conflict interactive situations. It requires us to be knowledgeable and respectful of different worldviews and ways of dealing with a conflict situation (Toomey, 2001, pp.396-7). Emphasis on acquiring communication skills is a key to any successful problem solving. In intractable conflicts where ethnic groups relationships have been impaired, communication links broken, and emotions are running high, the pertinence of ensuring a harmonious atmosphere for the process and its successful out come cannot be overemphasized.

According to Gregorio Billikopf (2004) who applied the coaching method in interpersonal conflict resolution, “one mediator role is helping participants develop and strengthen these critical skills. These are the very skills they will need in the future, when they negotiate through conflicts without the help of a mediator” (Billikopf, 2004, p.31).

Participants who have some of these skills will participate cordially in any interactive forum, and be less likely to damage the process. Educating groups earlier will definitely add new values and quality to the over all process which might help defuse anger. Teaching parties how to communicate effectively while presenting a perspective without using provocative language and without causing

the other to lose face is considered paramount to understanding the issues in conflict.

The ability to listen to others is a skill that might assist clients to look inward and review their actions and decision. In a problem solving workshop listening creates an atmosphere of great respect which lets the other person know you hear and understand him or her. As far as building relationships are concerned, this skill of trying to understand others is useful. Good communication skills are required to encourage stakeholders to talk directly to each other showing empathy.

Though much emphasis is placed on basic communication skills, there are other “process management skills” (Harris, 2005, pp.149-50) that are useful. These are helping disputants talk in turns, restating, being non-judgmental and paraphrasing each other’s statement. It suffices to state that incorporating coaching of skills in SIF not only will offer the parties tools of conflict resolution to be used all the time, but also will increase the probability of reaching rapport required for a joint agreement oriented mediation stage. Cultural insensitivity to the norms and values of the host society could jeopardize any interactive problem solving process. Understanding people’s cultural behavior can assist in promoting better relations among cultural groups. Scholars concur that from culture we learn the language of relationships that connect us to others confirming our belonging and deepening our purpose. Sequential Interactive Forum (SIF) as a model affirms the metaphor of culture as a life source that both animates and heals conflict (Lebaron, 2003, p.4) and at the same time informs the capacities, practices, and tools to resolve it.

Sue and colleagues have provided a comprehensive definition of multicultural competence to depict, “a helping professional having an awareness of his or her own assumptions, values, and biases; understanding of the world view of culturally distinct clients (parties), being able to develop appropriate intervention strategies and techniques ...” (Sue, et al. 1998 as cited in *ibid*, pp.63-64). According to Chen and Starosta (2000, 407), “intercultural competence concerns getting the job done and attaining communication goals through verbal and nonverbal behaviors in intercultural interaction”.

In the literature on interactive problem solving, pioneering scholars drew attention to sensitivity of professionals and social scientists in the field (John Burton, 1969; Young, 1967). In his seminal work cited by Fisher (1972, p.75) John Burton posits, “Professional knowledge presumes knowledge in a number of areas conflict theory, group processes, perception communication, sensitivity training, attitude formation and change, conflict management practices, and general knowledge specifically related to the system within which the third party is working”. Inducing “mutual positive motivations”, treatment of issues in conflict, and regulating of the overall interaction of disputants are tied to sensitivity of the values and cultures of a given area among other things. This model is cognizance of norms, and cultural fluency as a tool for decoding and moving through conflicts that deepens a sense of collaborative problem solving, limiting escalation of violence or dispute and

transforming it into a learning experience for both disputants and professionals alike. Succinctly, LeBaron and Pillay (2006, p.12) concurs, “To be fluent with culture is to recognize it as a series of underground rivers that profoundly shape not only who we are but how we cooperate and engage conflict”.

As a result, conflict resolution is based on the cultural fluency (LeBaron and Pillay, 2006,p.19) of practitioners, facilitators, social scientists, conflict management practitioners and mediators. Without cultural competency, the professionals will find it very difficult to build bridges and restore confidence especially in multiethnic societies.

The absence of a competent professional can affect the success of any process of conflict resolution. Conflict is a cultural challenge and challenges professional practitioners and mediators to sharpen their skills in working across cultures, recognizing that there is a wider community of interests and that the history of the dispute itself may provide many insights into how perceptions have formed and how to deal with them effectively rather than focusing on immediate resolution. SIF is useful for diagnosing and de-institutionalizing conflict focusing on creating a harmonious atmosphere for repairing strained relationships and impaired communication links.

Sequential Interactive Forum (SIF) Process

Sequential Interactive Forum as problem solving strategy places much emphasis on the need for an unfettered communication among parties, as a means of managing intractable conflict. Its essence is learning something new from disputes based on analysis, a process that respects and permits hearing the opinions of participants from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Through such engaged interaction based on good communication and listening skills, shared rules, norms and structure, people can experience the “dual sensation” of experiencing themselves and simultaneously experiencing others (Martin Buber,1947) by so doing transforming their relationships. Convening an interactive problem-solving forum demands new approaches and strategy that includes, “efforts to coordinate autonomous organizations without the authority of a hierarchy” (Whetten and Bozeman, 1984, p.21).

SIF as a process of problem solving has the potential for changing perceptions and lives of disputants. It will affirm hope and help nurture bonds of relationships between groups and individuals through sincere and open communications. Rebuilding such relationships is not often easy, but requires a change of behavior, perseverance and tenacity to continue talking even when the results are not obvious. The model is informed by the context and nature of the dispute that is sometimes neglected by practitioners.

SIF is a third party facilitated interaction made up of small sequential forum of parties in conflict. These stage-by-stage meetings inspire and motivate disputants to talk about their differences and the relationships that underlie their anger towards one another. SIF can realize this goal only if disputants or stakeholders are ready for dialogue. The outcome of the problem-solving process is not necessarily aimed at reaching any agreement but rather to give disputants the opportunity to explore in detail their relationship, deinstitutionalize cognitive behaviors that inundate the dispute and decide to move to the next stage. It is worth taking into consideration that there might be several psychological and legitimate reasons why parties do not chose to reach agreement at a sitting. Probably the time is not ripe or they are not ready to face shame or loss that would enable them to move ahead. In some instances past historical experience and lack of confidence or trust may cause sessions of the problem-solving forum to be extended. The process of organizing a forum begins by setting the stage of the events.

Scholars concur that setting the stage for any problem solving is not an easy nut to crack. Surmounting the militating obstacle will depend on many factors that have gingered animosities which disputants themselves cannot overcome. According to Professor Gray (1995), “the obstacles include historical and ideological barriers, power disparities among stakeholders, societal level dynamics, and differing perceptions of the level of accepting risk, technical complexity, political and institutional norms”. In the literature, many of these patterns are rooted in cognitive patterns of activities that produce a toxic brew of emotions and misperceptions that parties arm themselves with to justify their cause. Intractable conflict is therefore akin to cultivating “weeds” in the garden of our lives or society. The weeds we nurture will grow and turn into briars and become difficult to uproot. Through lack of visionary political designs and needs-sensitive policies, governments plant weeds of conflict in their societies that cost a lot of energy and resources to remove.

The Niger Delta Conflict

The contemporary history of the Niger Delta represents the predicament of minority groups in Nigeria since flag independence, that is, being “afraid of ethnic domination and discrimination in development” (Crowder, 1962, 264). These groups have allegedly suffered from ‘marginalization’ and relative deprivation from successive governments in Nigeria (See Suberu, 1996; Osaghae, 1998). In the literature, such deprivations and neglect often result in ethnic group mobilization to use all available means to fight for their unmet human needs.

Since 1990, a growing number of scholars and social scientists have developed interest in the study of the Niger Delta and the causes of the on-going conflict. Studies have paid attention to a) the patterns of accumulation surrounding oil wealth, poverty (Omeje, 2007, 44; Okonta, Ike and Douglas, 2002) and the implication for conflict, b) the Niger Delta communities and relations to oil

produced from their soil (Loola G., 1981; Watts, 1997, Suberu, 1996), c) petrol wealth and its problem (Watts, 1994, 1997; Khan, 1994; Karl T., 1997), and d) management of minority conflicts (Suberu, 1996; Osaghae, 1998). There is, however, a consensus in the literature that lack of transparency in governance, corruption among government officials and poverty in the oil producing areas spurred the prevailing conflict. The story of Niger Delta is very complex and does not fit in to any one characterization. Scholars who see the conflict as rooted in oil and its distribution (Watts, 1994) which did not bring much needed “petrolic” modernization but economic underdevelopment and ecological catastrophe, might be right.

Ad-hoc policy choices made by former Nigerian military dictators and their sycophants who ruled Nigeria in the early 1980s and 90s to satisfy the demands of the oil-producing region sparked the flame of conflict that has engulfed the Niger Delta. Nigeria therefore seems to have fallen into the group of oil rich countries “where policy makers collectively fall into wealth induced stupors”(Salant, 1995, p.310). The abject neglect, marginalization, endemic poverty, and disease conditions that prevail in the Niger Delta area have sensitized the people, mobilized them to seek justice and human rights. The Niger Delta communities are demanding satisfaction of their tangible needs for good health care facilities, drinking water, and equal distribution of oil wealth, equipped schools, and job opportunities for the growing population of youths. These are all legitimate needs of a marginalized lot in a country blessed with mineral wealth.

Nigeria derives its wealth from oil. The country used to derive her foreign exchange from the sales of agricultural produce like palm oil, cocoa and groundnuts in the 1960s. The end of the Nigeria-Biafran civil war in 1970 brought about increased oil exploration and extraction from the creeks of the delta that prominently spurred vast economic and social development in the mid-seventies. Significantly, this was the time Nigeria earned a lot of foreign reserve and wealth from sales of crude oil following the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. The government used the proceeds from oil to develop some parts of the country but neglected southern regions defeated in the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. Nigeria oil earnings rose quickly from \$4.733 billion in 1975 to \$10 billion in 1979 and reached a windfall sum of \$15 billion in 1980 (Cyril, Obi 1998, 267). Since its independence in 1960, the Nigerian government accrued \$350 billion in oil reserves (Sala I. Martin and Subramanian 2003, 3). This era marks the beginning of the “locust years” or “natural resource curse” in Nigerian history. It was a period of oil politics and “squander mania”, white elephant projects, corruption and ethnic conflicts.

Responsibility, good governance, and leadership did not match with the blessing of the newfound “black gold” (See Michael Watts, 1997) and as a result it seems to have become a “curse” on a country of well over 120 million citizens. This might be so because of the bitter and competitive politics it has heralded since then, which has pitted ethnic groups and individuals against each other as they struggle for resource control. A country’s economic performance, if it were a blessing, would

have sustained positive ethnic group relationships and improved the well-being of the people. But contrarily, in Nigeria the wealth of this great nation was misappropriated and pocketed by greedy military administrators while neglecting the needs of the populace.

Following the carting away of barrels of crude oil for sale, and the huge amount accruing from this transaction, the oil producing communities awoke to remind the federal government of their special entitlement and privileges commensurate with the wealth coming from their land. The elites and community leaders were quick to point out the environmental and health hazards caused by the pollution of their soil and water because of intensive mining in the creeks. The Niger Delta elites have been stressing that to address the issues required, among other things, change of the guidelines by which government financial allocations are made to the oil producing states, favor the non-oil producing parts of the country. Additionally they argue for more federal government compensation for polluted agricultural lands due to oil exploitation.

More than 20 ethnic groups live in the Niger Delta area. The total area occupied by these communal groups is about 70,000 square kilometers, with more than 20 million inhabitants dispersed into nine of the 36 states in the federation. It is here that popular oil companies including Shell, Agip, Exxon Mobile, and Chevron (among others) have their operational bases.

These Delta communities whose livelihood depends on farming and fishing were afraid and concerned about their future survival and subsistence in the light of the ecological or environmental disaster. According to scholars, substantial, unfavorable changes in the environment are extremely disastrous to the vital economic activity of the populations (Kirill Kondratyev, et al. 2000, ix). These environmentalists also explain that human beings could equally provoke such disasters by the use of technology or by dangerous natural phenomena (ibid, 2000, ix). In the case of the Niger Delta, the disaster was manmade as a result of intensive oil exploitation and spillages as well as disruption of oil pipelines by militants. The danger and consequences of this human ecological transgression is increasing in the form of waterborne diseases, water blindness, food shortages, lack of good drinking water, and endemic poverty, which contour the social fabric of the people in the Niger Delta. The failure of the Nigerian government to take measures that could change the oil boom from a liability to an asset for economic development and welfare of its people has become the most troubling part of the country's wealth. According to a World Bank estimate, only one percent of the population (i.e. the states and indigenous investors) because of corruption and predatory activities enjoy 80 per cent of the oil revenue (Omeje, 2007, p.44). Furthermore, a 2006 United Nations report placed Nigeria in the 159th out of 177 countries on its Human Development Index and reported that more than 70% of Nigerians live on less than US\$1 a day (UN 2006 as cited in ibid, 45). The grim picture in this region invoked further demands from leaders of the oil-bearing states related "to the disposition of mineral land rents, the application of the derivation principle to the

allocation of federally collected mineral revenues, the appropriate institutional and fiscal responses to the ecological problem of the oil producing areas, the responsibility of the oil prospecting companies to the oil producing communities and the appropriate arrangements for securing the integrity and autonomy of the oil producing communities within the present federal structure”(Suberu, 1996, 27).

Amidst globalization, and the increase of modern goods streaming into the country, the Niger Delta communities feel neglected. They have a rising population and are among the poorest, least urbanized communities in the country. The problem is structural because of inarticulate government policies that were not tailored to address the demands of the oil-producing region of Nigeria.

Successive military and civilian administrations in the country since 1984 tried to resolve the burning issue of revenue allocation and resource distribution, based on the principle of fairness. For example, President Ibrahim Babangida took an appeasing first step by increasing appropriation to the oil producing states from 1.3 percent to 3 per cent of oil fund for development. The administration subsequently established the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) with special allocation for the development of communities in the Delta region. These measures did not satisfy the demands of the southern states and oil producing communities. Instead, it increased protests against government policy and demands for more. OMPADEC was accused of gross corruption, mismanagement, and award of contracts to agents of the military administration. The community leaders were demanding 50 per cent of the total revenue from oil as well as payment of accrued land rents from the oil prospecting corporations due to them.

In response, the military government led by Sani Abacha, made an increased provision of 13 percent of oil revenue to the region based on the principles of “derivation” in the revised Nigerian constitution. This increase in financial allocation also made provisions for addressing ecological pollution of the Ogoni soil and other areas where transnational oil companies, such as Dutch Shell and Chevron, are carrying out exploration.

Under the Abacha rule, corruption, personalized rule, over centralized fiscal policy, combined with the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), worsened the economic situation in the country, and made it quite difficult for the government to concede more to the oil producing ethnic communities of the Delta. This volatile situation of poverty and deprivation in Nigeria confirms “resource curse,” theory and scholars view that in mineral rich countries, “policy makers unprepared to manage their new found wealth are invariably blanketed with advice from the world bank and other international organizations” (Salant, 1995, 310).

Economic hardship and increasing insecurity were reflected in growing social turmoil, manifest in a radical youth protest, workers’ strikes, and mass demonstrations against governmental policies that neglected and denied people their basic needs. The region has become vulnerable to ethnic sensitivities over lack of

basic infrastructure, arable farmlands and economic development. Different groups in their varying demands used different “frames” and cognitive perceptions to fight for their rights. These include blaming and categorizing others as “indigenes” and none “indigenes” to bolster their self-concept and positions in the distribution of wealth. The engendered open political ferment among elites, warlords, and traditional leaders polarized the region, disrupted relationships, and blocked avenues of communication between ethnic groups and the government of Nigeria. The situation led to the formation of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni people (MOSOP), the Ethnic Minority Organization of Africa (EMIROAF), and the Ijaw Ethnic Minority Rights Protection Organization and the Southern Minorities Movement (Obi, 2000, 269). These organizations are leading campaign to challenge Shell Oil Company for environmental compensation and the Nigerian state for direct control of the oil wealth from their soil. Many prominent Delta activists including Ken Sara Wiwo lost their lives in the struggle for the rights of the people in the oil-producing region.

The policies that led to the radicalization of the civil society are to blame for the violent events in the Niger Delta region through 1998-1999. This period also witnessed massive protest and mobilization against the military regime of General Sani Abacha by the Ijaw Youth Council, Ijaw National Council and Movement for the Survival of the Ijaw ethnic nationality. Allegation of marginalization of the ethnic minorities and denial of their demands for equal distribution of natural resources in the federal system escalated conflict in the Delta. In the literature of conflict resolution, denial of such basic needs like security and autonomy often sparks violent conflicts (John Burton, 1970). The demands of the oil producing communities later expanded to include autonomy in a new federal system, self determination and return to the old allocation formula based on the principle of “derivation” Instead of the current practice where population and territorial size and other criteria that favors the non oil producing regions, as well as federal compensation for the environmental pollution as a result of oil extractions. The movement (MOSOB) began as a non-violent civil society agitating for a peaceful resolution of the problems of the Niger Delta popularizing their views and anger through rallies, public enlightenment campaigns and seminars aimed at creating people’s awareness about the suffering of their communities. They later mobilized using ethnic appeal and became radicalized as anti-state and transnational oil corporations. The group protested against the corruption and lack of transparency in the administration of OMPADEC and also strongly denounced the composition, which according to some of the members, allegedly excluded the representatives from other oil producing areas such as Ondo, Edo, and Delta states (see National Concord, 11 December 1992:B2 cited in Suberu, 1996, 36).

In Nigeria oil wealth that was supposed to be an expandable pie, became fixed with some people now intensively fighting to get a cut at all costs. The assumption that there could be more oil wealth to go around the country through good management and cooperation gave way instead to the belief that more for one group means less for others. While in some other oil rich countries resources have improved

economic development, it is causing havoc in Nigeria in the form of ethnic competition, conflict and disruption of relationships. The inability of Nigeria to address the Niger Delta issue stems from the absence of good governance along with the knowledge and expertise thereof. There is also a lack of adequate mechanism to manage conflicts. These are dimensions of governance (Dean, M.1999) needed to improve the economic wellbeing of the citizens amidst great wealth.

How Government Handled the Situation

In the literature the scholarly notion that democracy contributes to inter-ethnic peace receives great attention (see Clark and Nordstrom, 2005, pp. 251-2). Nevertheless, this is also dependent on the type of regime, norms and institutions in a particular country. In Nigeria, the types of democratic dispensations and weak federal institutions that existed since independence fell short of possessing the required norms of peaceful resolution of inter-ethnic conflicts. The pseudo-democracy, which the military dictators created, was very autocratic and exclusive to a few privileged groups and individuals who don't have the interest of the country at heart. This could equally be said about the civilian administrations (1990-2007) that came to power through flawed electoral processes and as such lack popular support.

As far as managing the Niger Delta issue is concerned, the government has taken some steps, which were not acceptable to the communities. In his seminal work, Rotimi Suberu (1996) exposed the various strategies the military dictators have used to address the underlying issues in the Niger Delta conflict over the years. It might be pertinent to add that even after the return of Nigeria to democratic dispensation in 1999, the strategies of handling ethnic group conflicts and demands have not significantly changed. However, according to Suberu, government responses "have been redistributive, reorganization and/or regulative or repressive in nature. Redistributive state responses to ethnic minority grievances have involved token revision in federal revenue sharing arrangements to accommodate and assuage the stringent claims of oil producing communities to a significant proportion of economic resources obtained from their localities" (Suberu, 1996, xii). For example, the earlier mentioned increase in federal allocations to oil producing areas from 1.5 to 3 percent of federally accrued oil money was increased to 15 percent by the Abacha regime and the allocation of more funds for the treatment of the polluted farming lands was increased from 1 per cent to 2 per cent of federal account.

These distributive gestures did not help to assuage or satisfy the demands of the oil producing states and the communities who felt cheated by the federal government and oil producing companies. The Delta communities wanted more funds, arguing that the proposed allocation did not fully compensate for the ecological damage to their agricultural land the economic welfare of the region.

The immediate consequences of this were the routine kidnapping of foreign employees of the Transnational Oil Companies, and sabotage of oil companies and their installations by community activists and thugs, leading to further oil spillages and economic losses for both the government and the oil producing companies. Following the increased sabotage and violence, Shell Oil Company was forced to suspend operations in Ogoni-land in early 1993. In 1994 other oil producing companies like Elf and Agip reported losses worth millions of dollars as a result of community protests and disruptions (Cyril Obi, 2000, 271). In addition, between 1998 and 2003 there were more than 400 disruptions of oil pipes and installations in the Niger Delta. Within this period, the violence and attacks have cost the government a lump sum of \$6.8 billion in revenue accruing from oil sales.

It is vital to address the importance of leadership and choice of policies before such a volatile situation escalates. According to Richard Samuels, articulate leaders “will demonstrate a range of creative ways to combine resources and ideas and to seize opportunity” (as cited in Nanneri Keohane, 2005, pp.705-6) and find realistic solutions to groups’ problems. Instead, the military dictators in Nigeria preferred the use of military force as a strategy of conflict resolution maintaining what Dean (1999) calls ‘authoritarian governmentality.’ An articulation of generalized uses of the instrument of repression with bio-politics “regards its subjects capacity for action as subordinate to the expectation of obedience” (Dean, 1999, 209).

In 1992, President Babangida dissolved many cultural associations and groups, which were agitating for their human needs and rights in the Niger Delta (Suberu 1996, pp. 43-44). By enacting decrees government agents were giving impetus to scout for and arrest leaders of these associations like Ken Sara Wiwo, in order to intimidate and stop their mobilization efforts in the region. The government also reacted to the demands of the communities by choosing the adversarial method of conflict resolution. It uses litigation, ad hoc tribunals, judicial commissions of inquiry, and military decrees to discourage protests. Litigation and ad hoc tribunals may serve the interest of the government and some supporters, but as far as conflict management of the Niger Delta conflict is concerned, it stops short of satisfying all stake holders. What the communities want is a sequential interactive forum for equal participation and unfettered dialogue that has eluded the Delta people and Nigerians as a whole since independence. Failure to grant the communities a chance to be heard, the government has continued to fan the embers of violent disruptions and conflict in the area. The Nigerian leadership was authoritarian, and by harassing citizens they not only hampered transition to democracy but also impeded consolidation of democracy in the country. The “military regimes typically favor apolitical solutions To ethnic problems, subordinate human rights to omnipotent decrees, and regard even the mildest redress-seeking ethnic movement as a direct challenge or threat to authority, to be put down by violent means”(Eghosa Osaghae,1998, 13). In any civilized country dispute resolution is best addressed collaboratively and consensually by being empathic, listening to the people’s side of the story with a view to making the right decisions.

However, although the Nigerian government used limited force indiscriminately to subdue agitators, it's pertinent to concede that such strategy is usually applied when issues like territory, prestige and survival of a regime are at stake. The government considered the threat to the source of the country's livelihood (oil installation and companies), the demand for territorial autonomy and loss of human lives as highly "salient" issues under contention. For the government, the cost of inaction might have been greater.

Since we believe that force is not the appropriate approach to managing a group's anger, the saliency of the problem should also be closely examined. This understanding does not exonerate officials from the despicable strategy of banning and the use of force.

However, the use of military force exposes the bankruptcy of any effective conflict resolution policy and viable security mechanism to address group animosity. The government's militarization policy in the Delta is being misconstrued by the Niger Delta communities as a way of protecting the interests of the multinational oil companies and predators operating in the creeks. This also explains why militant groups target security forces patrolling the waters in the creeks. This situation has also created an air of suspicion, insecurity, and lack of trust among the community leaders and government officials.

The federal government has also tried to stem the violence by meeting some of the demands of the communities in the Niger Delta which include among other things the creation of state and local government authorities. This design was tailored to appease those communities clamoring for federal presence in their areas and also to address the "disproportionate contribution to national wealth and equally disproportionate suffering of its people" (The Guardian, 20 March 1992, 11, cited in Suberu 1996, 41). In the new democratic dispensation, the former president Olusegun Obasanjo also took steps to manage the conflict by appointing Niger Delta indigenes to high government positions. Projects have been initiated to improve social and economic infrastructures, pay compensation and provide educational scholarships for youths in the region. Special bodies such as Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB), the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), and the Consolidated Council on Social and Economic Development of Coastal States (COSEND) were established to oversee development projects in the Delta. Nevertheless, irrespective of these, the Movement for Emancipation of Niger Delta declared that government needed to do more for them commensurate with the amount of oil wealth the Delta soil produces for the country. The militant movement opined that the commissions, so far established were conduit pipes for government and its agents to divert public funds for personal gains. What the communities are agitating for is a type of localized control of oil resources and rent for the development of their region (Ukoha, 2009). Moreover, they are threatening to continue violence, disruption of oil pipelines, and kidnapping of oil workers until their whole demands are met.

The Need for a Conflict Resolution Process

The importance of managing this conflict cannot be over emphasized. Democratization in Nigeria will lose its gains and can only be sustained when plural mechanisms for addressing expected grievances or conflicts are established and utilized. Thus in Nigeria the need for conflict resolution process is guided by the necessity of keeping community or people together avoiding disintegration. What is important is not who is right or wrong but understanding through active listening with each other to find solutions to the problems. What SIF offers is a pathway to social justice and transformation, which comes through unfettered exchanges or interactions.

Common sense and vision demand change in the way all sides frame this conflict, and seek an effective strategy to resolve the conflict collaboratively, restoring strained relationships and trusts. The government and officials need a face-saving exit and dialogue without which the country will continue to fan the embers of conflict. According to Otite (1999, 8), "Conflict resolution performs a healing function in societies. It provides opportunities for the examination of alternative pay-offs in a situation of positioned disagreement and restores normalcy in societies by facilitating discussions and placing parties in conflict, in situations in which they can chose alternative positive decisions to resolve differences"

The Niger Delta is like a volcano in the heart of Nigeria and a sore in the mind of the present leadership. The present level of conflict could be likened to a steam from the volcano site. The question Nigerians should not be asking is whether this volcano will erupt, but when. As far as conflict management is concerned Nigeria has never fared very well, and past strategies implemented to resolve disputes have failed because of lack of will from a predatory regime, and collaborating elites feeding on oil rent.

The most important determinant for Sequential Interactive Forum (SIF) is the ripeness of the moment to initiate interactive problem solving forum of the stakeholders. Professional advice from Richard Holbrooke (1998) in this regard is worth taking note of. According to him, "the best time to hit a serve is when the ball is suspended in the air, neither rising nor falling. We felt that the equilibrium has arrived, or was about to ..." (as cited in Michael Greig 2001, 691).

In tune with that sports allegory the ripe moment for the resolution of the Niger Delta conflict has come as evidenced in the perception of losses weighing on all the stakeholders in the dispute. In the literature, scholars believe that resolution will be more successful when conflict costs have become intolerable and both sides realize that they may lose too much by continuing their disputes (Pruitt 1981, Berkovitch and Langley, 1993). The suffering and continuing loss of revenue and devastation has reached such an alarming level that government and the communities are signaling intention to discuss underlying issues that spurred the violence.

Exploitation and mining in the Niger Creek have paradoxically increased human hardship and deprived many households in the area of their basic sources of subsistence and livelihood. The pollution of the environment and oil spillage in farming fields does not bode well for a poverty-stricken region. The potential impact of these transgressions by Transnational Oil Companies and the federal government against the fish farmers equals little catches for the market and family subsistence. The ugly sight of floating dead fishes on the riverbanks only increases the anger of the Ijaws and Ogonis who are known for their acumen in fishery. The lack of good source of drinking water and festering waterborne diseases would have sent a message to a caring administration to give priority to the lives and well-being of its people. Therefore, compounded by the spillages on farming lands, the Delta people had all the impetus to protest for a halt and change of government behavior towards them. Unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of will by government agents to study the reasons for the communities' anger, hence the explosion of violence to attract attention to their plights. The soil of the Niger Delta is good for some staple food and vegetable farming, but with the present situation and worsening armed violence in the region, many families have abandoned farming. Youths who could not farm to subsist were routinely vulnerable to recruitment by warlords and militias competing for rent appropriations from the oil companies. In summary, all the deprivation, poverty and government neglect in this region was responsible for violent mobilization in the Niger Delta region. However, scholars in the area indicate that the number of the people that want to dialogue and resolve the dispute now, outnumbers those who want to gain from the booties of flaring conflict and disorder. The efforts by local communities to dialogue and reconcile their minor differences (i.e the Pereambiri conflict resolution brokered by the Nembe Peace and Reconciliation Committee) is a momentum for initiating a Joint Interactive Mediation to assist these moderate voices in search of peace and transformation.

Another impetus for SIF came in June 2006 barely a few weeks after taking the oath of office; the newly elected leader of Nigeria Musa Yar'Adua dispatched his vice President Jonathan Goodluck abroad to seek assistance in resolving the Niger Delta conflict. In his earlier speech the president had promised to use every resource available to address this conflict in the spirit of fairness and justice (The Nigerian Guardian June 1, 2007). Another moment of ripeness was the setting up of the Niger Delta Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee, which was inaugurated on July 2, 2007 by Vice President Goodluck Jonathan in the Delta city of Port Harcourt. The committee was expected to liaise with the groups in the region, including security agencies, and report back recommendations for stemming violence to the federal government (see [http://www.Nigeriafirst.org/printer_7476.5html.july3, 2007](http://www.Nigeriafirst.org/printer_7476.5html.july3,2007)). In his own statement, the chair of the committee, Senator David Brigidi echoed, "this activity (the violence) is impacting on our economy" (ibid.).

On the local or community level, community organizations, youth groups and NGOs, some of which have affiliations abroad, are discussing the Niger Delta conflict and how to manage it but none has come up with a strategy to resolve the

issues underlying the community agitations and demands. The activities of some of these are well intentioned, and most pertinently signal a ripe moment for applying Sequential Interactive Forum (SIF) strategy to manage the conflict. What is required in this direction is proper diagnosis of the conflict by neutral experts and mediators in order to facilitate the sequential interactive meetings of stakeholders.

It is our belief that litigation and perhaps biased judicial inquiries might not be the best strategy to manage the conflict if parties want satisfactory resolution. This is because in the process not all stakeholders' voices are heard and the contexts in which disputes arise has not been well addressed. Because of this adversarial approach of conflict resolution, what remained was deep the psychological need to dichotomize and establish "indigenes and non-indigenes", "enemies and allies" (see Folger, J.P., and Jones, T.S., 1994).

The road to stemming hostilities in the Delta might not be an easy task considering the very nature of the enduring militant groups, with their legacy of mutual mistrust and pains that have been hindering calls for resolution. The situation in the Niger Delta therefore calls for a pragmatic and transformative interaction tailored to mending relationships between all stakeholders, allowing venting of emotions and restoring strained communication links.

SIF: A Case of Niger Delta Conflict

This study tries to show that the conflict in the Niger Delta continues because institutional strategies (Gray et al. 2007, Pruitt and Rubin, 1986) of conflict management in Nigeria are not effective in addressing fundamental issues. Failure to understand the dynamics in the Delta conflict led to applying wrong strategies and tools to it. The strategy of dispatching more security forces to the area to quell violence might not be the best solution, though it will in a short term discourage violent attacks on the oil installations and offices of the foreign oil companies.

The government has in recent times inspired or organized local meetings in the region to resolve some of the issues. It is feared that some of these local activities, which are not well coordinated, have become part of the problem rather than the solution. Government initiatives to negotiate with the militants and community leaders failed to yield the expected result and have not restrained violent militancy and kidnapping of oil workers. Hence, the suggestion is that SIF will engender trust and confidence required for a collaborative joint analysis of the contending issues in conflict.

This kind of interactive "ping-pong" brings to the table a wealth of ideas and experience for the resolution and transformation of the dynamics of a complex conflict from a lose-win to a win-win situation. This knowledge drawn from

professionals of different skills and discipline also helps to illuminate the intractable nature of the conflict and cognitive behavior of disputants. The Niger Delta conflict did not start overnight. It has been lingering over time “unregulated”(Deutsch, 2005), “volatile”(Gricar and Brown, 1981) and lawless. Moreover, the disputants’ behavior that reflects repetitive, habitual patterns of actions that sometimes are reinforced by social consensus (see Gray, et al 2007, 1421) has equally institutionalized the conflict and militates against resolution. As this article has shown, conflict in the oil producing region of Nigeria brought along psychological baggage such as fear, insecurity, emotional out-bursts and misperception of the others. This live ammunition should be diffused to ensure harmonious deliberations. In other words, psychological safety of the disputants is equally cardinal to SIF as a model for resolving intractable conflicts. Due to the quality and diversity of shared information during these unofficial forums, participants and stakeholders may “reframe” their formally held views about the conflict, also a necessary step to de-institutionalizing the conflict. This change is the driveway to reaching common ground opening the channel for a joint negotiation session in future if the parties are willing to do so.

SIF Acknowledges Cultural Diversity and Inclusion in Niger Delta

As earlier stated, SIF differs from pioneering works on problem solving because it lays emphasis on cultural inclusion and competency. This cultural saliency is sequel to the dynamics, diverse forces and developments, as well as social integration and interaction, which emphasizes cultural diversity in our society. The Sequential Interactive Forum model of problem solving is not oblivious to the synergy between culture and conflict in Niger Delta. As the importance of problem solving increases today, practitioners and third party mediators focus on cultural inclusion and not only on diversity of the Niger Delta people.

This model also recognizes the complexity of the conflict with so many ethnic groups and stakeholders involved, competing for turf and oil rent in the region. This model ensures the provision of a good deliberation environment for the stakeholders to participate freely without fear of any type of government intimidation or power imbalance during the process. Parties to the interactive forum will be treated equally. The process will not allow room for ethical doubts and suspicion which might torpedo the sessions. The process is tailored to encourage mutual confidentiality among participants and as well discourage any forms of bias or partiality from mediators or expert practitioners.

The Niger Delta is home to well over twenty ethnic and linguistic groups spread into nine of the thirty-six states of the federation. Competent problem solving in the society must take cognizance of this reality and require professionals to be sensitive to differences as well as similarities of the people. The additional “cultural fluency” (Tatsushi Arai, 2006, p.58) of professionals in SIF will generate an atmosphere of openness and trust, a prerequisite for building peace among disputants. Through initial interviews and analysis of the Niger Delta conflict, social scientists and

conflict management professionals have to identify major beliefs and behaviors that influence the problem setting and outcome of the process. Furthermore, the cultural competency of third party professionals in interactive problem solving forum sensitizes them to be aware of their own biases when making quick decisions about the conflict styles of others (Stella Toomey, 2001). SIF provides an adequate and harmonious interactive environment and opportunity for conflict resolution within the party's cultural context. The application of this model will tend to move beyond cultural awareness in practice and be acclaimed as an approach of problem solving capable of respecting the cultures of the various communities and stakeholders in the Niger Delta conflict.

SIF Recognizes Wider Stakeholders' Participation

In Niger Delta, multiple stakeholders have emerged following the escalation of conflict claiming to represent and protect the interests of their communities. But through proper stakeholder analysis and mapping, third party professionals will be able to identify and invite only those influential representatives of their people, government and oil companies to the interactive forum. Stakeholders mapping also assists in accommodating formally marginalized groups whose absence might jeopardize peace-building moves. Moreover, the complexity, the number and diversity of parties who are involved in the conflict is a force to be reckoned with in problem solving (Jeff Conklin. <http://www.cognexus.org/wpf/wickedproblems.pdf>). The neutral professionals and mediators in this process employ the use of open-ended questionnaires to determine the willingness of disputants to participate in the dialogue and identify organizational handicaps that might impact on the success of any Sequential Interactive Forum process. Additionally, adequate analysis of parties and their affiliations and interests gives the mediators and professionals the knowledge base to advice parties on the viability and different approaches to their conflict. Scholars believe that at this stage "the group can then create a mission statement, frame the issues, and develop technical information that will guide the deliberation for a long time" (Susskind, McKernan, & Thomas-Lamer, 1999). Problem solving or negotiations have failed primarily because professionals do not start by collecting and analyzing stake holder's data and information about the dispute. In unofficial interactive forum, experts consider stakeholder analysis as a continuing process until the end of the forum because of how it might influence the dynamics of the situation. Applied to the Niger Delta conflict, SIF will also recognize the equality of all parties in brainstorming and problem analysis aimed at uncovering the root causes of the on-going dispute.

Commitment to the process

One of the determining factors to a successful forum in Niger Delta will be the level of commitment invested in the process by the professional mediators and experts. Viable peace in the region is therefore possible if the facilitators are well dug-in in the process. This commitment is necessary to move the sequential forum forward taking cognizance of the cost of abandoning the dialogue because of any flimsy reasons. In a complex and emotion-laden conflict like the Delta situation professionals are advised to put more time in the forum to show a high sense of

responsibility and determination to see the parties reach rapport by improving communication links. By engaging the stakeholders and encouraging continuing dialogue, communities of the Niger Delta and government officials alike, will find creative ways to resolve pertinent selected issues on the table. All parties to the forum may have different expectations about the length and outcome of the process. Therefore, the object of fruitful deliberation is not to achieve success at all costs, but a commitment to “modest expectation about what is achievable and what constitutes success” (Hampson, 1997, pp. 749-50). Some government orchestrated talks to resolve the dispute over resource distribution failed partly because officials lacked the knack and dexterity to dig in to the end. Hampson notes “lack of ‘staying power’ or inability to muster the resources that are needed to build a secure foundation for settlement or some process of inter-communal re-conciliation” (Hampson, 1997, 749). While staying committed to help disputants is emphasized, the professionals should not place the goals so high or low so as to attract criticism and give the other party impetus to withdraw when the assignment is almost done. Unlike any government organized meeting or conference, SIF provides all parties the opportunity to vent emotion, save face, reframe the issues in conflict and make suggestions about how to stop the violence in their communities.

Ethical challenges during the process

Third party professionals facilitating Sequential Interactive Forum in Niger Delta will be confronted with the issue of ethical behavior. Professionalism demands that parties be treated with utmost respect, fairness and equality without any sign of favor. We are aware of the controversy in the field of conflict resolution concerning whether a mediator or professional should remain “neutral” or “impartial”. An overview of states’ code of ethics in some American states by McCorkle (2005, 170) informs, “Neutrality refers to the relationship that the mediator has with the participants. If the mediator feels, or any one of the parties or their attorneys states that the mediator’s background or personal experiences would prejudice the mediator’s performance, the mediator should withdraw from mediation unless all parties agree to proceed.” While we try to avoid the “murky” waters of ethical ambiguity in conflict resolution, we prefer to use the word “impartiality” in this process that according to Cohen and his colleagues means “unbiased relationship with each disputant” (Cohen, et al.1999, 342 as cited in McCorkle, 2005, 166).

The problem solving Forum shall be composed mainly experts whose ethnic identities are impartial in the eyes of all participants. Pertinently, and as practitioners share information with parties, great emphasis is placed on confidentiality. This is a prerequisite for building trust among participants. No confidential information will be disclosed without the permission of the party concerned. Because the forum will concentrate in leading the parties to understanding their dispute and restoring relationships, documents that parties will like to keep confidential will not be discussed.

In view of the intractability of the conflict in the Niger Delta, these professionals will also strictly avoid any conflict of interest at any stage of the forum. Problem-

solving experts and mediator assistants will therefore strive to avoid any dealing or relationship that might be misconstrued as biased behavior. Such unethical behaviors that will compromise or appear to compromise third parties' impartiality are capable of constipating the harmonious flow of the interactive exchange between stakeholders. The process will be harmonious and free of acrimony when third party professionals declare early on any relationships and connection they might have with the parties and their representatives that will raise eyebrows during the forum. Sequel to this the parties will therefore decide whether to continue the deliberation or not, in order to maintain the integrity of the forum.

Analysis and Conclusion

The Niger Delta conflict exposes weakness in the capacity of institutions and the state to manage such intractable violence. The obvious of these weaknesses is the state's reactive, rather than proactive efforts. Despite warning signs of environmental disaster, poverty and underdevelopment with the probability that it will lead to violence, the military dictators and successive governments in Nigeria did not do much to avert conflict. In order to become proactive, government and politicians should have to change their policies of "piece meal" and militaristic approaches to conflict management. The hostilities generated by human suffering, casualties and disruption of means of subsistence as a result of the activities of warlords and government armed forces, further complicate any moves to bring parties to a problem solving table. It is therefore necessary that the government engage the warlords and community leaders constructively to identify solutions to the ongoing violence in the Niger Delta.

Successful resolution of the Niger Delta conflict requires a more effective and pragmatic decision making procedure which prevents citizens from trying to resolve disputes through violent means, and increase the pressure on the state government to respect the human rights and demands of the citizens. This article, suggests the potential and relevance of Sequential Interactive Forum as an approach to resolving the Niger Delta conflict. I am sure that the institutionalization and application of SIF will help illuminate contours and underlying causes of the violence, as well as become a template for addressing ethnic groups' demands in the country. The effectiveness of the model might mean a lot for Nigeria and other societies in Africa experiencing protracted conflicts. In fact, it is my belief that most of the frenzied or ad-hoc attempts by successive military regimes in the country to manage the conflict were merely cosmetic and, as a result, exacerbated the violence.

Sequential Interactive Forum will be effective when combined with coaching in conflict resolution skills, cultural competency and commitment of the facilitators and stakeholders to the process. As a problem-solving instrument, it will help disputants and stakeholders to address the attendant persistent and regularized patterns of interaction that characterized the conflict through unfettered dialogue

sequentially organized. This includes de-institutionalizing the conflict, fraught with moral sanctions, norms and other inimical cognitive behaviors used by various communities and some government officials. The Niger Delta conflict did not start recently; it has lingered and simmered for years without being managed by government because of some military leaders exploiting it for their own benefits. Over time, the conflict has produced a toxic brew of emotions, hatred, stereotypes, prejudice, mistrust and enmity. These psychological backlogs of problems often left unresolved in any adversarial process block avenues to address problems in the region.

The strategy outlined in this article, if well conducted, can be useful in repairing strained ethnic groups' relationships and impaired lines of communication links between different competing groups on one hand, and with government officials on the other hand. This is a critical necessary step towards managing the dispute effectively.

Analysis of the conflict from the socio-psychological level has shown that the violence in the region stems from the episodes of structurally-based disparities institutionalized in the society, and denial of people's basic human needs (Burton, 1979). This point of view also reflects the opinion of other scholars who believe that such a conflict has root in structure-based inequalities that worsened the living conditions in the oil producing areas. These types of depraved conditions in a multiethnic community often "give rise to psychological processes including destructive inter-group ideologies" (Staub, 1999 as cited in Christie, 2007, 7). The most difficult conflicts to resolve are those involving competing ethnically legitimated claims to the same resources and land, as in the case of the Urhobo and Ishekiri conflict mentioned in this article. However, the existing claims of land or more oil resource rent in the Niger Delta does not account for the magnitude of the human carnage and devastation that has occurred. This is attributed to the establishment of ethnically defined administrations in Nigeria that failed to recognize ethnic minority communities as equal partners in the democratic process.

The Sequential Interactive Forum can be a much more useful tool to encourage in-depth analysis of the conflict, and explore alternative solutions to the needs and demands of the various communities in the oil-producing area. These techniques and other professional skills of the appointed third parties will also encourage the acknowledgement of parties' negative cognitive perceptions (Lewicki, et al. 2003), norms and moral sanctions that were applied over time in the conflict, and help them change their attitude towards each other. Pertinently, the stakeholders are facilitated to diffuse emotions, and reduce stereotyping each other, and see commonality in their vulnerability in the conflict. The ongoing violence, human carnage, and economic sabotage in the form of oil pipe disruption and kidnapping of oil company workers in the creeks is taking its toll on the economic development of the country and global oil supplies.

The Niger Delta conflict resembles the proverbial small finger stained by palm oil that might spread to the other four fingers. To avoid the spread of this conflict, honesty and accountability in leadership are needed for managing oil revenues and dealing with the people's agitation. Nigeria is at a crossroads in history and citizens' expectations have never been so high. The literature suggests that conflict in itself is not bad, and people need not avoid it or pretend it does not exist. It only signals that something is wrong in our relationship with others. For visionary leaders, conflict could mean an opportunity to be creative and reason with other stakeholders to face a particular challenge. This common venture could be "a super-ordinate goal." The existence of a common goal based on a common interest may be useful in preventing conflict escalation if such goal is valid, valued highly by all the stakeholders, urgent, demanding of immediate action, and worthy of joint efforts.

In Nigeria, there may be many definitions and assumptions about what kind of super-ordinate goal is acceptable to all. Some people might consider economic development for Niger Delta communities and the country as a whole to be a primary goal. However, for others, economic development stops short of having sufficient motivating power to stop agitations because such development is nothing new in Nigeria. Another example of a common goal might be to preserve national unity. This also might raise the dust of controversy in some regions... though it is a salient point. Successive governments in the country have over 'flogged' the issue while at the same time perpetuating conflict to divert attention from failures in leadership and from intractable social and economic problems (see Richardson and Wang, 1992).

Irrespective of how the disputants and government define the conflict in the oil-producing region, it is very clear that the majority of Nigerians would like a government which is sensitive to and will guarantee the satisfaction of peoples' basic human needs. This might be a 'super-ordinate goal', which has been lacking in the country since independence. Resolving the Delta conflict, will involve taking steps to disrupt different cognitive interpretations of the situation, which means giving up culturally accepted meaning systems and practices that tend to distance and marginalize ethnic groups in the region. It will also mean relaxing the coercive use of force and other adversarial methods that block the exploration of alternative behavior (Gray, et al. 2007).

This study has shown that Nigeria faces the grim conflict of resource distribution. The prevalent and endemic poverty, ecological disaster and youth frustration, especially at a time of huge financial windfall because of high oil sales shall continue to be a mobilizing force for the communities and militant groups agitating for oil resource ownership. The emotional climate in the Niger Delta and Nigeria as a whole will not be diffused so easily without participants sitting together to reframe issues of "derivation" as a strategy of oil wealth distribution and also the burning question of citizenship in Nigeria. These two key issues cannot be disregarded, as their resolution will determine the unity of the country and will

continue to generate further discussion among scholars and policy makers alike. Studying the Niger Delta conflict, I have recognized that this conflict has the propensity or potential to threaten the federal structure of Nigeria and spark off a wider ethnic conflagration if it is not resolved. Any escalation will attract the presence of the international forces to protect free flow of crude oil to the market, a situation Nigeria would not like to witness at this time.

This justifies the suggestion of a process of problem solving facilitated by neutral, multicultural competent professional third parties as a plausible panacea for the Niger Delta conflict. The third party in this process should be persons with great negotiation skills, prestige and knowledge about the conflict, and commanding certain social and political strength and commitment in resolving the conflict. SIF will be successful when the third party facilitators come from Nigeria and not from outside the country because of the complexity of the conflict. Instead, Nigeria has to look within and select men and women of wisdom from both sides of the conflict, capable of examining situations objectively from different perspectives without bias. Although this method is not flawless, if applied, it will offer Nigerians the opportunity to explore some of the main issues in the conflict, for example, issues of oil rent ownership, resource distribution in Nigeria, and the environmental pollution problem caused by oil extraction and spillages in the Niger Delta.

The attractiveness of SIF as a conflict resolution method has been presented in this article as a stepping-stone towards developing a pragmatic tool for helping communities and leaders analyze conflict and come out with creative solutions themselves. The process will inspire political leaders, militant warlords and the Delta community to loosen their cognitive barriers by permitting a shift in how they perceive the others, especially those tagged and marginalized as “non-indigenes”. The pre-negotiating forums will be suitable template to address these and other institutionalized behavioral issues that might be a cog-in-the-wheel of problem solving. This is because the forums offer an environment for parties to save face and discuss without fear and intimidation.

While conceding that the successive regimes that ruled this country for more than two decades have done something to appease the oil producing communities, the strategies used were adversarial. The shortcoming of adversarial methods is that they do not address the emotional problems of the parties, nor give equal hearing to all the stakeholders. This often leads to a win-lose situation where one party tends to dominate the process because of its position of power and resources. The outcomes of tribunal inquiries, court actions, and official inquiries initiated by governments in Nigeria were never satisfactory nor were they able to meet the demands of the communities because of corruption, and politicized ethnicity. Since the Niger Delta conflict could not be resolved through official conferences, litigation, by the use of force, SIF as an alternative strategy is hereby suggested to stem further human carnage in this oil-producing region. Past efforts to convene national discussions on the fate of the Federation of Nigeria and oil resource distribution failed even before it began. The failure was because of lack of analysis

of the causes of conflict, poor communication, poor stakeholders' participation, corruption and to an extent cultural insensitivity.

Since independence, Nigerians have never had any responsible and meaningful dialogue with their leaders that would establish trust or even permit "verbalizing unexpected expectations" from different cultural and ethnic groups. This prosperous African country needs an "interactive democracy" that offers citizens, policy-makers, the media, civil society, and elected officials the equal chance for a healthy and sincere exchange, especially when it comes to decisions affecting peoples lives, basic needs, and security. The common practice of muzzling communities' voice and neglect of their demands for justice, and equality in the present dispensation is a denial of people's inalienable basic needs, and a precursor for ethnic conflict (Burton, 1970, 1979).

From the perspective of governance and conflict resolution, the policies of Olusegun Obasanjo and President Umaru Yar'Adua's governments have failed to reverse the top-down strategy of addressing social grievances, which has affected the emotional health of Nigerian citizens. Nigeria needs governance with responsibility and commitment that will restore people's confidence in their leadership. A responsive government geared towards alleviating poverty, providing education, basic infrastructures and jobs for youths is needed in the Niger Delta and in the country as a whole. To resolve conflict effectively Nigeria needs leadership and governance that strictly adheres to the democratic principle of dialogue and equal participation in decision-making. This kind of leadership and governance does not come easily but should be negotiated, tested and adjusted to the Nigerian realities. Sequential Interactive Forum (SIF) equally provides opportunity for Nigerians to discuss questions of good governance and political decision-making reforms, which will prevent conflicts in the Niger Delta and other parts of the country. Convening SIF today will leave the impression of an "open door" democracy where citizens freely sit down face to face to settle their differences non-violently.

In this study, the brief historical overview of the Niger Delta region and its cultural diversity accentuates the need for a model of conflict resolution that will analyze and identify various cultural assumptions about choice and decision, the process of adapting to intercultural stress and choice of areas of deliberation. The importance of combining cultural competency to the model of problem solving stems from the belief that the success of the process will be great as a result of mutual knowledge of values and origins in relation to the cultures of the participants, which is an important ingredient for building trust and confidence.

The Nigeria government seems overwhelmed by the conflict in the Niger Delta because the conflict has defied all mechanisms to manage it. The weakness of different institutions of mediation like the judiciary and police and other security apparatus, because of favoritism and corruption, poses a great security problem for the country, and has equally exposed the bankruptcy of conflict management

capabilities. Nigeria should undertake an urgent review of these institutions and adjust them to meet basic human needs of the citizens in order to avoid disintegration. The reality of the country's multiethnic composition is enough to sensitize the leadership to a) see the challenges posed by the Niger Delta conflict as an opportunity to change its militaristic and adversarial politics that negate problem solving and b) embrace more collaborative decision-making policy that empower citizens' partnership with oil resource management in Nigeria.

The Sequential Interactive Forum does not replace functions of other institutions of democracy. Instead, its application is complementary and introduces new ways to interact and resolve conflicts in a democratic dispensation to avoid conflict. While studies on problem solving or conflict resolution will remain the concern of scholars in years to come, application of Sequential Interactive Forum process will be a template for creating a culture of peace in Nigeria and other developing countries.

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