



NIGER DELTA

ECONOMIES OF VIOLENCE

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ECONOMIES OF VIOLENCE

Petroleum, Politics and Community Conflict in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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Economies of Violence: Petroleum, Politics and Community Conflict in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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Research Problem

The Niger Delta of Nigeria, the heart of the country's oil production, has become an archetypal case of what John Keane (1996) has called a "zone of violence". Home to some of the largest, and highest quality, oil deposits on the planet, the recent history of the Niger Delta has been intimately associated with a commodity of unprecedented economic and geo-strategic significance and value that has, for the better part of three decades, been the lifeblood to the Nigerian economy (Watts 2000; 1997; Ikein 1990; Lewis 1996; Khan 1994). The meeting ground of unimaginable wealth – perhaps \$600 billion in oil exports since 1960 – and the unremitting economic and political marginality of a complex mosaic of ethnic minorities, the delta has provided the fertile soil in which youth militancy, communal violence and intense struggles over customary authority has flourished over two decades or more (Okonta 2001; ERA 2000; HRW 1999; Douglas and Okonta 2000). A gradual slide into what the US State Department has referred to as political chaos in the Delta, poses very sharply the crisis of rule and legitimacy in the Nigerian Federation itself. Currently, the central political questions confronting President Obasanjo in the run-up to the April 2003 elections are "resource control", the minorities question and "self-determination", a trio of issues with momentous consequences for the entire architecture of the Nigerian constitution. The politics of resource control emerged precisely from the long struggles from below launched by historically marginalized ethnic minorities and oil producing communities in the face of what the famous Ogoni activist Ken Saro-Wiwa (1989) dubbed the "slick alliance" of transnational oil companies and the Nigerian state (more precisely, the Nigerian

National Petroleum Company [NNPC] and its security apparatuses). In the wake of the Ogoni movement, the Delta oil complex has spawned a raft of self-determination movements: Ijaw (INC.), Isoko (IDU), Urhobo (UPU), Itsekiri (INP), Ogbia (MORETO) among them. Many of these struggles are environmental in some way, triggered by the terrifying costs of resource extraction. Nigeria has some of the highest spillage and flaring rates anywhere in the world; between 1976 and 2001 there were over 5000 spills amounting to 2.5 million barrels, equivalent to ten Exxon Valdez disasters within a confined deltaic zone. These political movements are however multi-faceted and complex because they are at once environmental, youth, human rights, ethnic, and democratization movements.

It is no exaggeration to say that the conflicts within the Niger Delta strike to the very heart of Nigeria's political future. While the ethnic character of the state and of formal party politics has been a staple of Nigerian scholarship (Forrest 1995, Okpu 1977, Obi 2001), the genesis and trajectories of local and community conflicts across the Delta – arguably the geo-strategic center of the Nigerian federation – remain wholly undocumented and not well understood. The US State Department refers to the minority and “anti-oil movements” as “terrorist” and to the “restive” youth movements as violent and undemocratic. A recent CIA report sees the crisis as a result of “environmental stresses” (CIA 2000). Even those who champion the role of civic associations have seen the mobilization of youth and ethnic minorities in particular, as “negative and “perverse” (Ikelegbe 2001). Furthermore at the practical-political level, crises and conflicts within the oil producing communities are dealt with ineffectively by *ad hoc* government commissions in the absence of a cadre of local conflict mediators and local governance institutions. *What is lacking are accountable local institutions and forms of governance through which communities can deal directly with companies and government agencies and resolve local disputes (to produce, in short, forms of governance capable of linking capital and community), and correlatively serious academic studies of the dynamics of conflicts in the oil producing communities themselves* (HRW 2002; Frynas 2000; Kemedi 2002).

The central question addressed by this project is why are oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta – where communities here refer to villages, towns, ethnic territories,

and in some cases urban communities in which some form of oil-related production and refining activity is located -- the site of intense conflict and violence (what we call “petro-violence”)? Community violence existed in the military period (1983-1999), and has deepened and proliferated in the period since the return to democratic rule in 1999, and in a number of well-publicized instances the conflicts and related armed violence have required state intervention and peace commissions to attempt to halt the political violence (for example Nembe, Warri and Peremabiri). We focus on six important case studies (see below) that are exemplars of the “oil complex”: that is to say a configuration of community, oil company, and state and local government institutions generative of conflict. *Our central, and most general, claim is that the conflicts at the local level emerge from challenges to customary forms of community governance, precipitated by the presence and activities of oil operations, and expressed through struggles over land rights, and access to company rents and resources.*

The conflicts among the sampled communities are, we propose, always locally rooted, reflecting the particular historical configuration of customary forms of rule and governance, company activity, the history of inter-ethnic relations, and local government and state forces. Conflicts, we predict, can be broadly of two sorts: intra-community and inter-community (recognizing that both may operate simultaneously, and one may spill over into, or be generative of, the other). The former involves struggles over customary and authority by youth groups, women’s organization, cultural groups, and ruling elites. The latter refer to inter-ethnic, and sometime inter-clan or inter-kingdom conflicts typically over territory and access to land and estuarine/marine resources. We *hypothesize at least four different sorts of conflict patterns: first, conflicts within the community between chiefly rule and various insurgent social groups; second, conflicts between communities over property and territorial control of oil bearing lands or oil installations; third, conflicts engendered by communities struggling to create their own local government or electoral districts as a means of securing access to federal petroleum revenues; and fourth, conflicts in oil producing communities that spill-over into diasporic communities elsewhere in, and outside of, the Delta.* Our goal is to understand the dynamics of petro-violence both to understand the nature of the governability crisis in the Niger delta but also to generate insights into the institutions and processes capable of securing peace in a region characterized by

long-standing marginalization, undemocratic forms of customary rule, corporate irresponsibility, and state corruption.

Theoretical Framing

We seek to locate our analysis of “petro-violence” and the “oil-complex” in relation to three bodies of theoretical work, and to provide a critique of each. The first operates under the sign environmental security. Throughout the 1990s there has been a growing interest in the environment as a source of political conflict and as the post Cold War security issue. Prompted by the work of Robert Kaplan (*The Coming Anarchy*, 2000) Michael Klare (*Resource Wars*, 2001), and Tad Homer-Dixon (*Environment, Scarcity and Violence*, 1999), the field of environmental security speaks to a panoply of sub-national conflicts associated with environmental degradation, rehabilitation, and conservation. In his enormously influential essay, “The Coming Anarchy”, Robert Kaplan conjured up a picture of an African continent in the throes of an apocalyptic crisis: impoverished, undernourished, and driven to barbaric acts of violence, and crushed under the unbearable weight of “eco-demographic” pressures. Much of this scholarship recapitulates two ideas of great antiquity: one is demographically-induced scarcity as a causal agent for sub-national conflict (via Malthus), and the other is environmental determinism (whose genealogy can be traced back to the Greeks). “Greenwar” hypotheses suffer, however, from a crude Malthusianism, a simplistic theory of environmental agency, and an untenable theory of political economy and political action (see Peluso and Watts 2001).

A second body of work focuses on the relations between resources, politics and civil conflict. One thread has focussed on polities dominated by oil revenues (Karl 1997; Coronil 1997; Khan 1994) and the ways in which rent-seeking produces “petro-regimes”. In Nigeria, for example, oil rents have historically sustained a parasitic ruling elite, and provided the wherewithal for the state to purchase a sort of political consent among the regions and to maintain the delicate northern hegemony within a competitive multi-ethnic polity. Formally, the mechanism of consent is through the “derivation principle” by which oil rents and royalties are distributed to the states, complemented by massive institutional corruption and rent-seeking (Ikporokpu 1996; Okilo 1980). Another thread, following the lead of Jeffrey Sachs and the IMF, have posited a strong

association between resource-dependency, corruption and economic performance. Sachs and Warner (1995) argue that one standard deviation increase in the ratio of natural resource exports to GNP is associated with a decrease of just over 1% in the growth rate (irrespective of the endogeneity of corruption, commodity price variability and trade liberalization). Leite and Weidemann (1999) of the IMF believe that for fuels the figure is 0.6% and due “entirely to the indirect effect of corruption” (1999:29). For Michael Klare (2001) oil is a dwindling resource – and a key strategic one – that will necessarily be generative of inter-state conflict (see also Homer-Dixon 1999). This line of reasoning, developed by Paul Collier of the World Bank using resource-dependency as a way of thinking about rebellion, especially in Africa, sees oil as central to the *economics of civil war*. It permits, indeed encourages, extortion and looting through resource predation (at least up to the point where 26% of GDP is dependent on resource extraction). It is the feasibility of predation (by states or rebel groups) that determines the risk of conflict. Rebels predate through secession. For Collier the risks are greater because of resource dependency than ethnic or religious diversity. For Michael Ross (2001, 1999) oil is a “resource curse” due to its *rentier effect* (low taxes and high patronage dampen pressures for democracy), its *repression effect* conferred by the direct state control over sufficient revenues to bankroll excessive military expenditures and expanded internal security apparatuses, and a *modernization effect*, namely the “move into industrial and service sector jobs render them less likely to push for democracy” (2001:357). But if oil hinders democracy (as though copper might liberate parliamentary democracy?), one needs to surely appreciate the centralizing effect of oil and the state in relation to the oil-based nation-building enterprises that are unleashed in the context of a politics that pre-dates oil.

Much of this work either elides oil with incumbent politics, or as Collier does, presumes a predation proneness for what is in fact the dynamics of state and corporate enclave politics. What is striking in all of this work is lack of any *local level dynamics* (as opposed to the relations between states and ethnic communities) and the total invisibility of both transnational oil companies (which typically work in joint ventures with the state) and with the intersection of local politics and petro-capitalism. Rather than see oil-dependency as a source of predation or as a source of state military power,

we explore how oil-capitalism produces particular sorts of enclave economies and particular sort of governable spaces characterized by violence and unstable rule (see Watts 2003).

The third body of theory speaks to ethnicity, ethnic mobilization and ethnic conflict (see Wimmer 2002; Niezen 2002; Maybury Lewis 2003). Much of this work has been especially helpful in understanding Nigerian federalism and post-colonial politics. Mamdani's excellent account (1996, 2000) of how cultural indigeneity became the basis for claims making in Nigeria is especially insightful in thinking about the conflicts engendered around ethnicity as a basis for doing politics, and the ways in which ethnicity is invented, and reinvented, in relation to the booms and busts of the oil economy (see Mustapha 1999; Obi 2001). Our concern however is to provide studies of local forms of community and ethnic mobilization that stand in relations to extraction – in which land, customary law, territoriality and the presence of oil companies are all key -- and to see how ethnic and other forms of identification (gender, generation (youth), chieftainship, clanship) are reconfigured around forms of traditional authority and locally specific forms of capitalist development (see Peluso and Watts 2000; Li 1996; Brysk 2000). To our knowledge there are no studies that have attempted to use oil-producing communities as crucibles within which identity politics – and attendant conflicts – are forged.

The focus of this project is to understand the local conflicts in the Delta in relation to the political economy of oil – that is to say a particular extractive economy. The Niger Delta is in a sense a sort of “company region”, an oil producing zone driven by a particular extractive logic. It is the relation of extraction to violence – economies of violence – that we seek to explore through a comparative community study. The goal is to understand the relations between resources, firms, states and communities and the circumstances under which the oil-producing communities become sites of extreme conflict and violence. The conflicts emerge in our view out of a crisis of community governance in the presence of oil and oil companies, that serve as a basis for claims making by ethnic groups, youth, local elites, and civic groups. These conflicts, turning on territory and on access to the company, can be contained within a community but may spill over into inter-community conflicts among proximate or contiguous

communities, or may be displaced to diasporic communities elsewhere in the region or the federation.

Research Design

This project follows a comparative case-method approach in which a sample of six communities has been pre-selected. The cases are all important documented instances of important oil-producing communities in which there has been, and is, a recorded history of intra and inter-community conflict in relation to oil production within their territorial jurisdictions. In order to capture important variability among the communities, case selection was based on: (i) geographical variation (the six communities are distributed across the Niger delta oil producing states reflecting a variety of environmental, rural-urban, and resource conditions), (ii) ethnic diversity (Ijaw, Itsekiri, Ogoni, Uhrobo, Ibibio, and Ilaje) and their related forms of community governance, and (iii) all of the major oil corporations (Shell, Chevron, Mobil, Agip, NNPC) and their subsidiaries and service companies. What each case has in common is a particular tripartite configuration of community (which for our purposes is a cultural form of community governance and authority), an oil company (in effect a joint venture between a major and the NNPC, its associated concessions and industrial plant), and state and local government institutions. Our task is to understand the emergence of situational conflicts, and their dynamic qualities, that emerge from the intersection of community, company and state (the local “oil complex”). The six cases are as follows:

- **Ogoni/ Eleme /Okrika (Rivers State).** In this case a complex of mutually re-enforcing conflicts – one between Ogoni and Okrika, and the other between Okrika and Eleme, an Ogoni Kingdom wherein their ‘Ogoniness’ is in question – turn on inter-kingdom and inter-ethnic relations with respect to territorial claims over oil-bearing lands. The conflict is primarily one over land and property rights, but because the land at issue is the site of the NNPC owned Port Harcourt Petroleum Refinery, it encompasses the Nigerian state in an important way. The growing urbanization of Alesa-Eleme Community and Okrika main town and its satellites complicates the conflict. Youth groups and mafia-like “employment and contract” syndicates, drawing membership from mainly the unemployed are openly

challenging traditional authority (local chiefs etc.,) who themselves are struggling for relevance in a rapidly changing context.

- **Warri (Delta State).** In this urban setting, the conflicts reflect a complicated mix of politics (local government creation and electoral ward delineation), oil revenues (Chevron) and longstanding historical animosities. Three ethnic groups - Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo - lay claim to ownership of Warri, or sections of it, as a prerequisite for using local government as a means to acquire federal oil funds (and contracts) and access to Chevron. Federal troops and Navy personnel stationed in the town, ostensibly to protect oil facilities, have also been drawn into the conflict, leading local leaders to charge that their people are being 'recolonised' by the Nigerian state. The heavy military presence has also triggered renewed calls for 'true federalism' 'resource control,' and a national conference to 'redefine the basis of association with Nigeria' in these communities.
- **Epebu/Emadike (Bayelsa State)** Inter-community violence has resulted in the complete destruction and dispersal of the Emadike community. The conflict centers on rival claims to ownership of oil-rich land under concession to the Nigeria Agip Oil Company (NAOC), a subsidiary of ENI. The two communities were hitherto tightly-knit by family ties and historical antecedence.
- **Ilaje (Ondo State).** The conflict between the Ilaje and Arogbo communities of Ondo State addresses customary fishing rights and oil rich land. The Ilaje have strong historical ties with the Yoruba, whereas the Arogbo are considered as one of several Ijaw clans, in spite of much cultural assimilation. This case generated important ancillary conflicts: firstly where it spilled over to Lagos where there were bloody clashes between the Ijaw and the Yoruba in 1999. And subsequently, in Odi in Bayelsa State where a group of youths killed several policemen and the Nigerian Army, in response, destroyed the entire community in the process.
- **Nembe (Bayelsa State).** Nembe community is one of the biggest and oldest oil producing areas in the Niger Delta, an area in which Shell has figured centrally. The rivalry between youth factions (self-designated as "cultural groups") in the community, supported by politically-well connected local patrons, has over the past ten years resulted in the loss of lives and damage to property. The intra- community

conflict has resulted mainly from the undermining of traditional community governance by rival youth groups aided, wittingly or unwittingly by the oil industry, which patronizes youth factions on the basis of their militancy, strength and capacity to provide Mafia-like protection services.

- **Eket (Akwa Ibom State).** Ibeno, Eket, Onna, Ekeffe and several other communities are immediately impacted by the activities of the Mobil Producing Oil Company. Eket is a key oil bearing community in Akwa Ibom State where Mobil has its main installations. Conflict occurs in this case between the communities and the oil company over mainly offshore territorial jurisdictions which provides a different set of dynamics to the other on-shore cases. A major oil spill in 1998, which decimated fish life and rendered thousands destitute and on the verge of starvation, has served as a touchstone of community grievance against Mobil.

Field Methodology and Data Collection

The central and overarching hypothesis is that local oil concessions – as a territorial claim – and the presence, and activities, of the oil companies, constitute a challenge to customary forms of community authority, and customary inter-ethnic relations principally through the property and land disputes that are engendered, and via forms of popular mobilization and agitation to gain access to (i) company rents and compensation revenues, and (ii) the petro-revenues of the Nigerian state largely through the creation of local state governments. This configuration of company, community and state we call the “oil complex”. The actors, agents and dynamics will, we hypothesize, vary across the cases: in some cases youth and generational forces are key, in some cases gender, in others the clan or the kingdom, in some cases local chiefly or governmental authorities, and in others the forces of the local state. It is the task of our empirical research to explicate these particular and local dynamics – the ways in which these forces and powers singly, or in complex concatenations, produces different sorts of intra and inter-community conflict - while retaining a common structural concern with what we call the “oil complex”.

Each community case study will take place over 2 months, consisting of detailed ethnographic enquiry by one of the PIs in collaboration with local postgraduate research students and a local NGO (OND). The intention is to trace the genealogies of the

conflicts, the discourses and tactics employed by the parties, the changing character of leadership, and the cultural specificity of the movements themselves. Each case will rest on a common set of data requirements:

- The reconstruction of the history of conflict in the community to the present (including the actors and organizations, the specific events, the objects of conflict)
- The history and configuration of oil company activities
- An inventory of the impact of oil production on ecosystems and livelihoods (including spills, blowouts, resource loss, compensations claims)
- The nature of customary political authority
- Inter-communal relations and patterns of identity formation
- Systems of access and control over resources, especially land and water/marine rights
- Systems of constitutional and legal dispute resolution

We are fully aware of the sensitivity and the ethical complexities of working in conflicted community settings. All of the PIs have worked in such situations and bring a vast experience to working under such circumstances. One of the PIs through his NGO work, particularly Our Niger Delta (OND) a local Niger Delta NGO for which he presently serves as head of programs, has spent the better part of the last ten years working in these communities; the project's close working relationship to ERA – the most widely respected of the Delta wide NGOs – adds enormous legitimacy and credibility to our endeavor. Our Niger Delta has carried out several activities in conflicted areas, including the British Commonwealth and Foreign Office and Royal Netherlands Embassy funded Bayelsa (Coastal Zone) Conflict Management and Participatory Development Program which is working with six major communities/kingdoms in the coastal area of Bayelsa State to address complex conflicts amongst the communities and to transform the relationship between these communities to that of cooperation in a joint development program. Another is the Niger Delta Conflict Data Map project, which is collating field data on major conflicts in the Niger Delta with a view to providing basic information to key stakeholders and other interested parties. The PIs have already conducted prior research in Ogoniland and in

Nembe – two highly sensitive areas – and are convinced of the feasibility of such a project. The specific data will be collected from the following sources:

- Focus groups with key constituencies (youth groups, women's groups, council of chiefs)
- Open-ended interviews with key actors (chiefs, company representatives, local government officials, senators and congressmen, youth and women's group leaders)
- Small scale targeted surveys for key communities and issues
- Government Peace Commissions and Reports
- The in-house libraries of some human rights organizations (CDHR, CLO) and some of the larger NGOs (ND-HERO, EMIROAF, ERA, Academic Associates Peace Works)
- Personal memoirs and diaries
- Interviews with journalists, lawyers and activists involved in legal disputes
- Participation in key community meetings
- Newspapers and secondary texts

The significance of this sort of ethnographic, comparative case-study approach is that it sheds important, and hitherto undocumented, light on the micro-dynamics of the oil producing communities – and the oil-complex more generally – that is wholly missing from the scholarly literature. Furthermore, such scholarship will not only illuminate the theoretical analysis of resource conflicts – much of which is in our view as empirically thin as it is theoretically ambiguous – but provides a framework for thinking about prescriptive and policy questions in what is one of the most contested regions in Nigeria. Our findings will, in this regard, provide a basis for understanding conflict genesis and conflict resolution, but also assist the development of governance structures at the local level capable of providing, in a fraught and difficult setting, some semblance of peace and democracy. While Nigeria is the geographical focus of this study, the centrality of similar oil politics in Ecuador, Angola, Indonesia and Kazakhstan suggests that the project may be able to speak to a much wider audience.

Outputs: Research, Training and Education

The project encompasses three related activities. The first is production and dissemination of scholarly knowledge and publications on a wholly neglected aspect of

conflict in the Niger Delta through in-depth ethnographic case studies encompassing a variety of settings. Second, the training of Nigerian postgraduate students who will assist in the case study research, and the training of NGO activists and community organizers through Workshops using the research findings to assist conflict resolution and new models of community-company governance. And third, the preparation of educational materials that can be deployed by a plethora of institutions (schools, community groups) for peace-building purposes. The anticipated outputs are as follows:

- *The first systematic analysis of the conflicts in oil-producing communities*, the results of which will be disseminated in the IIS Working Paper Series (hardcopy and on-line), an end of project Conference for Nigerian academics, policy makers, company representatives, and activists to be held at CASS (Centre for Advanced Social Science) who have a Niger Delta Research Network capable of providing the institutional forum in which the Conference can be held. Resources from the grant will be provided to CASS who will organize the event. Keynote speakers will be: Okey Ibeanu (MacArthur), Cyril Obi (NIIA), Dan Omoweh (NIIA), Julius Ihonvbere (Ford), Femi Falana (CDHR), E.Alagoa (UPH), Yinka Omorogbe (Petrojournal), A.Gbadegesin (UI), Nnimmo Bassey (ERA). A small paperback book project summarizing the case studies and findings will be printed locally at low cost under ERA auspices (similar to it's *The Emperor Has no Clothes* volume). Research findings will be published in reputable academic journals such as *Human Rights Quarterly*, *World Politics* and *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.. Copies of the case study data and research materials will be deposited with the Nigerian host institutions.
- *The training of Nigerian postgraduate students*, and the funding of their thesis projects, by the PIs in conjunction with local participating Nigerian universities. The students will be responsible for the data collection and analysis in collaboration with the PIs.
- *A series of Community and Activist Workshops* – one in each of the oil producing states – designed for NGOs and community groups working in the Delta. The goal is to make the research findings available to such groups and to design a workshop, prescriptive in nature, to assist community activists in working in conflicted communities and designing conflict resolution strategies and models of community-corporation governance. A related goal is to focus on the relationship between

resources, underdevelopment and conflict, particularly as it relates to the inclusiveness or otherwise of community governance structures. Healthy inter-community dialogue, and the transparency or otherwise of community/oil company relations will also be a focus of the workshop, building on our case studies to show how these impact on conflict or peace. ERA and OND have substantial experience hosting such workshops. Keyote speakers will include Orono Douglas (ERA), Joy Yowika, Dr. Sam Ebiye (Odi General Assembly), Father Mathew Kukah (Oputa Commission), Dr. M. Akobo (South-South Movement) and representatives of human rights (CLO, NIHR, CRO, CDHR), youth and community organizations (IYC, Chikoko), NGOs (Oilwatch Africa, Institute for Humanitarian Law, Niger Delta Women for Justice), government (NDC, MNR, NNPC), and the oil companies and their liason officers.

- *A briefing for journalists* to promote the research findings and their policy implications to be held in Port Harcourt organized in conjunction with *Guardian* journalist Ibiba Don-Pedro.
- *The preparation of educational materials* in the form of readers that can be used in schools to familiarize students and local communities with the dynamics of conflict, conflict transformation, and peace-building in the Delta.

Protection of Human Subjects

This project has been submitted to the University of California, Berkeley Committee on Human Subjects, and it will comply with the University human subjects research protocol. All persons interviewed are guaranteed confidentiality and all personnel, all of whom have substantial experience working in the Delta under conditions of extreme insecurity, will be vigilant in the protection of all informants.

Institutional Affiliations

This project has two counterpart institutions: Environmental Rights Action [ERA], and the Center for Advanced Social Science [CASS], both located in Port Harcourt. Research in delta oil-producing communities and the ability to interview youth and ethnic minority movements across the region would be impossible without the institutional support of ERA which is *the* umbrella-organization for much of the new politics in the Delta; all of the PIs have worked for ERA and/or serve on their Board.

OND, which has longstanding relations with ERA, will provide the indispensable access to the oil communities. Professor Onoge, Director of CASS, is a Harvard-trained sociologist and oversees a CASS project on the political economy of the Niger delta. Affiliation provides access to library materials and to Nigerian research faculty working on research relevant to this project. In addition, the PIs have longstanding affiliations with the University of Port Harcourt and the Niger Delta University. These three academic institutions will be key in providing Nigerian postgraduate students for the case study research, and provide the institutional context for the end of project Conference.

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