

CHAPTER 10

Oil and accountability issues in the Niger Delta

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The politics of oil in Nigeria has attracted considerable activist and academic attention in recent years (Rowell and Goodall 1994; Okonta and Douglas 2003; Frynas 2000; Naneen 2004). Amid allegations of human rights abuses, environmental devastation and state corruption, the Niger Delta has come under increasing global scrutiny. Accountability in the region is intimately tied to the politics of resource extraction and the governance of abundance. The lack of accountability over how oil is extracted and who benefits in the Niger Delta has led to demands by many different community-based groups for their rights to the resource to be respected and guaranteed. They demand accountability from different actors, including the state and transnational corporations. The emergence of these community-based groups, especially youth organisations and women's groups, has resulted in the creation of new informal structures of governance.

The focus of this chapter is on community-level processes and politics as the site for accountability struggles, though these are linked to a wider context in which the state (federal and local), and transnational corporations are important actors. In order to understand how community-based politics relates to overarching questions of accountability and oil, this chapter draws on participatory research conducted using popular theatre, in which communities tell their own stories about rights and exclusion, and in this way identify for themselves where change is needed. Given the context of conflict and tension in the Niger Delta, drama is an important tool because it provides insights into the community-level politics of accountability, a topic neglected in many of the other studies on oil and politics in the region. The meanings and representations of oil at the local level challenge the idea of a 'resource curse' and open up the

relationship between community-level politics and processes and the wider context of political and commercial interests.

Many studies on the Niger Delta, especially following the death of activist Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995, have focused on the federal government and its failure to deliver development to communities in the region (see Johansen 2002; Ekeh 1999); even Shell's shortcomings are explained through the failure of the federal government to enforce rules and regulations. In contrast, our focus is on the accountability of other actors, including the private sector. To explore these issues, we begin with an overview of how the abundance of oil contributes to a lack of accountability in the Niger Delta. We briefly summarise the literature focusing on oil as a 'resource curse' that undermines the prospects for improving accountability, as well as on other contributory factors. We discuss the complex relationships between actors – including the government, transnational corporations (TNCs) and communities – and the accountability demands they make. The main focus of this chapter, however, will be community-level politics, explored through performance, drama and their relationship to state and corporate accountability.

The Niger Delta and the politics of abundance

The abundance of oil in Nigeria has made the country dependent on oil for revenue generation. Revenue from oil is controlled and distributed by the government. Corruption has made politics in Nigeria very lucrative, with politicians spending huge amounts to get into office. Once in office they and their business collaborators become the active beneficiaries of the centralised system of bureaucracy, through which they are then able to manipulate the distribution of the state's resources to enrich themselves through corrupt means. Since oil alone accounts for 80 per cent of Nigeria's budgetary allocations, there is a lot of wealth at the disposal of those in political office, which has led to capital-intensive projects in which overhead costs far outstrip actual disbursements to people-centred programmes (Mutizwa-Mangiza 1990: 43; Olowu and Wunsch 2004: 65). The crude oil output from Bayelsa and Delta states accounts for 90 per cent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and over 80 per cent of its GDP (Okon 2003: 4). With each election, politicians promise to return more oil revenue to the communities from which it was derived, yet once in power these promises are largely unfulfilled and frustration mounts, often leading to violence.

The term Niger Delta refers to both the immediate area where the River Niger shreds into tributaries and empties into the Atlantic Ocean

and the contiguous zones and communities that are geographically defined by the creeks that have formed as a result of the interaction of the Niger and the ocean. It covers an area of about 70,000 square kilometres extending from Akwa-Ibom State through Cross River, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta and Edo to Ondo State. In its extended form it also includes Abia and Ebonyi states. The region is made up of several ethnic groups including Annang, Efik, Egi, Ibibio, Ijaw, Isoko, Ikwerre, Itsekiri, Ndokwa, Ndoni, Ogba, Oron, Urhobo, Ibo and Yoruba (Okon 2003: 1).

The people of this region are traditionally fishers and farmers. A large part of the population was also involved in trading, production of crafts, oil palm milling, timber extraction, boat building and local gin brewing. With the discovery of oil, there has been a remarkable shift from these means of livelihood to other sources centred on oil and oil exploration. In this sense, the production of oil has redefined livelihoods, the economy and politics in the region (Eson *et al.* 2004: 197). In comparison to other parts of the country, the region has inadequate infrastructure and high unemployment rates. There is, therefore, a correspondingly high level of tension and community-based conflict. Another effect of oil extraction and processing is the diminishing sustainability of livelihoods from forest products and marine resources due to environmental pollution and degradation caused by oil exploration activities.

At the same time, the advent of oil extraction has raised awareness among different groups of people in the area. Women's and youth organisations, as well as development unions and associations such as Ijaw national youth organisations (mostly formed after the discovery of oil), have become highly mobilized. This growing involvement in the politics of oil is informed by feelings of oppression and marginalisation, and alienation from the 'dividends' of oil manifested in an absence of education and employment. In turn, this contributes to a crisis of citizenship in Nigeria, where national citizenship has little meaning in comparison with other geographical and ethnic identities (Abah and Okwori 2005: 73).

There is consensus that a crucial way to address poverty, and the lack of accountability poor people experience, is to gain more control over resources, especially oil; people in the Niger Delta have been trenchant in calling for this (Eson *et al.* 2004). They believe that only through self-determination and direct control of the oil found on their land will they be able to use the revenue from oil to better their lives. The reality is that oil wealth is seen in Nigeria as a 'national cake' and politicians, the military and civilians scramble to get a slice of it.