

## **Collective Action: A Self-Help Approach to Building Adaptive Capacity in Oil Impacted Communities of the Niger Delta**

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### **Abstract**

The study examined the role that collective action plays as a self-help approach to enhancing the adaptive capacity of crude oil impacted communities in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Relying on triangulation of quantitative and qualitative approaches of data collection, the study was composed of 610 questionnaire respondents and 36 in-depth interviewees as well as 36 focus group discussants, all drawn from oil impacted communities in Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa states. The study revealed a significant sense of concern for community welfare amongst respondents and this has strongly improved the level of collective action among members of the communities. With a mean score of 3.7, the study indicates that respondents strongly linked their ability to adapt to the shocks arising from oil-induced environmental degradation to the levels of collective action obtainable in their various communities. Furthermore, the specific case study analysis of Bille Women's Forum, Age Grade Associations and the Umutu Development Union proved that local institutions were instrumental, not only to the well-being of their members, but they also provide opportunities for collective action through which communities' development and adaptive capacity are enhanced. Based on the findings, the study submits that collective action is a veritable approach to strengthening the adaptive capacity of oil impacted communities in the Niger Delta. The study recommends an urgent need for the government and non-governmental development interventionist organizations to robustly engage with and enhance the capacities of community institutions in the region.

**Keywords:** Adaptive Capacity, Collective Action, Environmental Degradation, Niger Delta, Self-Help.

### **Introduction**

The place of collective action in engendering community development and self-help initiatives within communities is becoming increasingly recognized by scholars and development experts. This is even more evident in contexts where communities are faced with severe environmental and economic shocks that present livelihood uncertainties. In this regard, Jack and Eke (2018) posit that collective actions often mediated and pursued through formal and informal community groups have potential to be an effective tool for social resilience and adaptive capacity in polluted and marginal environments. Collective action in communities is also known to have the capacity to enhance the management of common-pool resources. Also, information/idea-sharing promotes the community's potential to collectively proffer solutions to local problems including

environmental change and management, while also enabling mutual benefits amongst community members (Cavaye, 2004).

Studies on collective action and its role in building community adaptive capacity such as Markelova, Meinzen-Dick, Hellin and Dohrn (2009), as well as Hellin, Lundy, and Meijer (2009) have shown that collective action is a significant ingredient for mainstreaming resilience into social systems. They further argue that local community institutions such as producer organizations can facilitate the collective action process and effectively help members to (i) share risks, (ii) access new markets, (iii) learn new skills, (iv) access new technologies and diversify income. Similarly, Ireland and Thomalla (2011) in their study of collective action and community adaptation to environmental risks in Asia, reported that collective action plays a significant role in building adaptive capacity mediated through social networks which are a particularly important component of collective action and the entire adaptation process. Drawing from the foregoing, it is evident that collective action plays a significant role in promoting the adaptive capacity of local communities to environmental shocks. The veracity of the above submission notwithstanding, its applicability to the grossly polluted environment of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is yet to be ascertained, thereby, suggesting a gap in the existing literature. It is in an attempt to bridge this knowledge gap that this study explores the role that collective action plays in building the adaptive capacity of oil impacted communities of Nigeria's Niger Delta.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

This section provides clarifications for the key concepts/variables utilized in the study.

#### **i. Environmental Degradation**

Environmental degradation as defined by the study refers to a situation when the state or quality of the environment is deteriorating as a result of the contamination and depletion of land, water and air resources as well as the destruction of ecosystems, habitat loss and biological diversity loss. The oil-rich Niger Delta region is known to be one of the most polluted and degraded ecosystems in the world as over 60 years of oil exploration according to Jack, Akujobi, Dan-Axe and Azubuike (2016) has resulted in widespread oil spillages, gas flaring and deforestation.

## **ii. Collective Action**

Collective action refers to a situation where a group of people voluntarily engage in a common action to pursue a shared interest (Matta & Alavalapati, 2006; Meinzel-Dick, DiGregorio, et. al, 2004). For Scott and Marshall (2009), collective action is an ‘action taken by a group (either directly or on its behalf through an organization) in pursuit of members’ perceived shared interests. Collective action according to Fabusoro and Sodiya (2010) takes the form of organizing, through institutions, by which individuals adopt coordinated strategies to obtain higher collaborative benefits to reduce their joint harm. It can be in the form of resource mobilization, activity coordination, information sharing or development of institutions (Poteete & Ostrom, 2004). Collective action as applied in the study, hence, refers to a process through which social groups identify and define problems, as well as search for and collaboratively implement solutions.

## **iii. Adaptive Capacity**

Adaptive capacity according to Nelson, Adger and Brown (2007 cf. Nyamwanza, 2012, p. 3) is the precondition necessary for a socio-ecological system to be able to adapt to disturbances: it is represented by the set of available resources and the ability of a system to respond to disturbances, including the capacity to design and implement effective adaptation strategies. On its part, the United States Agency for International Development (2009 cf. Colombi & Smith, 2012, p. 1) emphasizing the cultural dimension of adaptive capacity, argues that adaptive capacity depends on the following: (i.) economic well-being (ii) ecological well-being (iii) the extent of natural resource dependence (iv) infrastructure (human-built or natural) (v) effectiveness of institutions and governance systems (vi) insurance (vii) secure land tenure (viii) viable mediation measures (ix) viable information and communication systems. Extrapolating from the above, adaptive capacity as conceived in this study refers to the ability of a social group or community to develop adaptation strategies aimed at recovering from environmental stress and livelihood shocks arising from oil pollution and gas flaring.

## **Materials and Methods**

The study utilized a mixed-method research design involving the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The study was conducted in 6 oil impacted communities of the Niger Delta including Bodo and Bille in Rivers state, Polaku and

Ogboinbiri in Bayelsa state, as well as Umutu and Kokodiagbene communities of Delta state. The choice of the study area, geographically speaking, is based on the fact that they constitute the core of the Niger Delta region and they are most disproportionately impacted by crude oil-induced environmental degradation.

For the quantitative aspect of the study, the Taro Yamane sample size calculation technique was utilized to derive a sample size of 610. Also, for the selection of households into the sample, the study relied on the systematic random sampling approach. To determine the sampling interval (the space between each selected household), the researcher divided the calculated sample size by the total average of the households sampled across the communities. Accordingly, the average household sampled across six communities becomes  $610/6 = 101$  while the sampling frame across the six communities is  $610/101 = 6$ . This implies that 610 questionnaires were systematically distributed across the six communities and every 6<sup>th</sup> household was selected to participate in the study.

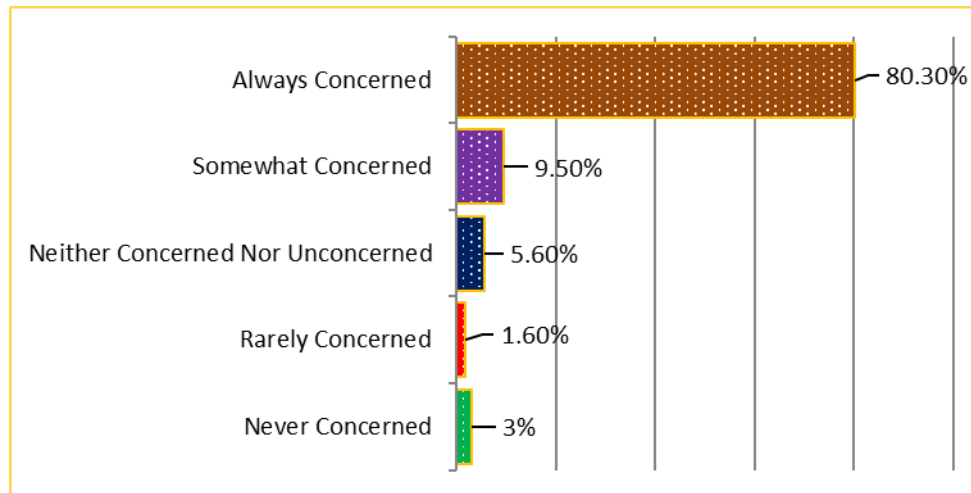
On the other hand, the qualitative study involved 36 In-depth Interviews (IDIs) respondents and 36 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) participants who were all purposively sampled from across the six communities. The quantitative data retrieved from the questionnaire were coded, cleaned and analysed using simple percentages as well as mean statistics and presented with the aid of descriptive tools such as graphs and charts. The qualitative data retrieved from IDIs and FGDs were transcribed and analysed using the thematic and content analysis techniques.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section presents the analysis of the results and discussion of the findings of the study. The quantitative results were presented first, followed by the qualitative results in form of case studies.

### **Respondents' Concern for Community Welfare**

To ascertain the willingness of respondents to pursue a collective action, the study examined the level of respondents' concern for the welfare of their communities. Findings from the survey as presented in Fig. 1 below reveal that whereas 80.3% of the respondents assert that they are always concerned with the welfare of their community, 9.5% of them reported that they are somewhat concerned.



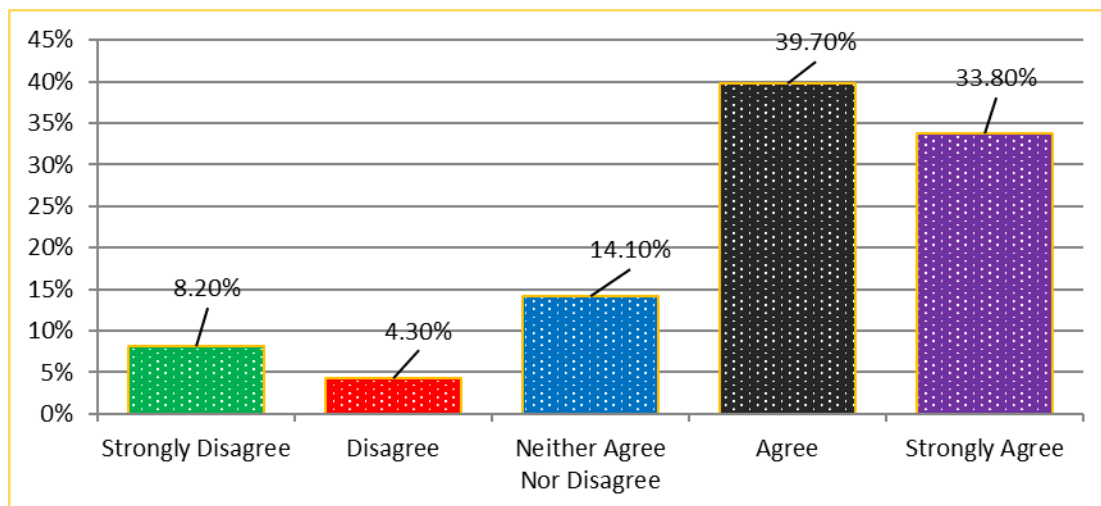
**Fig. 1: Distribution of Respondents by Concern for Community Welfare**

Source: Fieldwork, 2018

More so, while 5.6% of the respondents averred that they are neither concerned nor unconcerned with the welfare of their communities, 1.6% of the respondents said that they are rarely concerned and 3% of them argued they are never concerned with community welfare. This trend showed that majority of the respondents are always concerned about the welfare and well-being of their communities.

### Respondents' Perceptions of Collective Action in Community

The survey also examined the perception of the respondents on whether community members contribute time, energy and monies in solving local common problems collectively.



**Fig. 2: Distribution of Respondents by Perception of Collective Action**

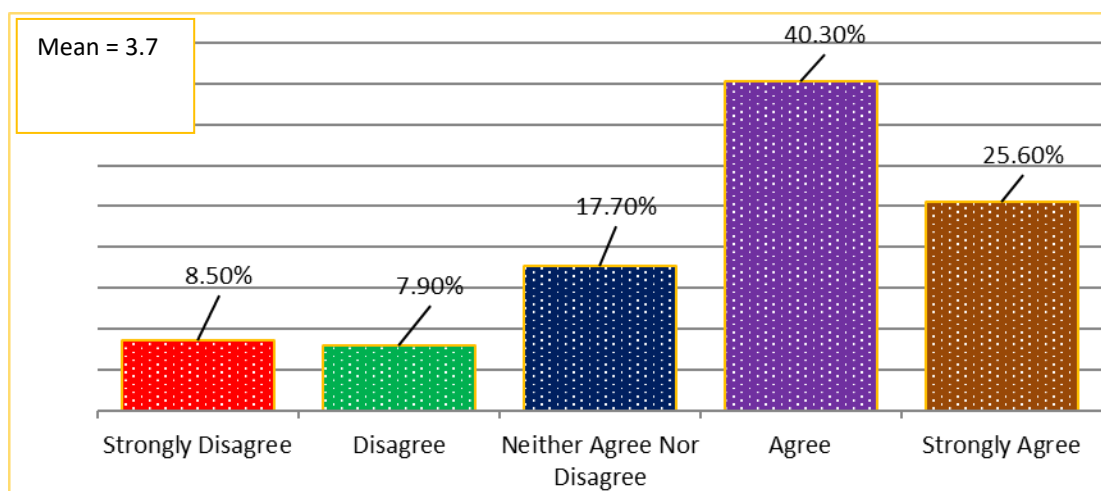
Source: Fieldwork, 2018

Data from the survey as presented in Fig. 2 above indicate that whereas 8.2% of the respondents strongly disagreed with the notion that members of their communities contribute time, energy and money to solve common problems, 4.3% of them disagreed with the assertion and 14.1% of the respondents remained neutral as they neither agreed nor disagreed with the notion.

Also, while 39.7% of the respondents agreed to the notion that members of their communities contribute time, energy and money to solve common problems, 33.8% of the respondents strongly agreed to the assertion. The data, therefore, imply that the majority of the respondents (73.5%) attests to a strong presence of collective action in their communities.

### Collective Action and Adaptive Capacity

The study further investigated whether collective action in communities promotes the capacity of households to adapt to the impacts of environmental degradation. Hence, respondents were asked if their participation in collective activities/actions has provided resources which have enabled them to adapt. The results as shown in Fig. 3 below indicate that whereas 8.5% of the respondents strongly disagreed with the notion, 7.9% of them disagreed. However, while 17.7% of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the notion, 40.3% of the respondents agreed and 25.6% of them strongly agreed with the notion that participation in collective actions in their community promotes their capacity to adapt to environmental degradation.



**Fig. 3: Perception of Whether Collective Action Enhance Adaptive Capacity**

Source: Fieldwork, 2018

Furthermore, the result produced a mean response of 3.7, which is far above the 2.5 mid mark thereby indicating that participation in collective activities has promoted the capacity of respondents to adapt to the impacts of environmental degradation in their communities.

### **Qualitative Case Studies**

While the quantitative data presented in the previous section has shown that collective action initiatives promote communities' adaptive capacity, the study, however, revealed that collective actions are mediated through local community-based institutions. These institutions provide several benefits to members and provide them with the opportunities to collectively solve local problems and promote self-help developmental projects for the communities at large. This finding was corroborated by Jack and Eke (2008) who identified about 103 local institutions existing in these study communities that serve as safety nets and sources of local insurance which provide households with opportunities for resources and materials exchange as well as galvanizing collective action that promotes livelihoods and adaptive capacity.

Consequently, three local institutions were identified to be most remarkable and instrumental in promoting adaptive capacity in the study communities and these institutions are succinctly discussed below as case studies.

#### **a. Bille Women's Forum**

The Bille Women's Forum is a prestigious women-based organization which was established about two decades ago by women of Bille Kingdom in Rivers State to galvanize themselves for the pursuit of the collective interest and progress of the community. The forum is led by a three-year tenured executive with a president and 11 executive members of cabinet representing the 11 communities in Bille Kingdom. The members of the cabinet are nominated by their respective communities, the representatives of the Egbele-Ereme (society of menopausal women) and the Amayanabo-ta (wife of the Amayanabo – King of Bille) who acts as the patroness. The Bille Women's Forum has been instrumental to the promotion of the livelihoods of the women in the community as well as contributing to community development. This, it has been able to achieve through voluntary contributions by members of the forum, payment of levies and so on. In this regard, the forum meets once every month on the third Saturday of the month and during meetings, members pay an answering fee or due of ₦500. In addition to internal contributions by members, the forum also acts as a mediator between the women in the community and external

actors such as oil companies operating in the community and the government. The women's forum, over the years, has been able to attract soft loans to women in the Kingdom from the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and this has largely impacted positively on their livelihoods as most women utilized such loans to diversify their livelihood with many engaging in petty trading and other business enterprises. Similarly, the women's forum has attracted skill acquisition training in areas such as hairdressing, tailoring, and so on from Eroton Exploration and Production Company as well as the Degema Local Government Council for women in the kingdom. Also, the women's forum has acquired a market cargo boat donated by the SPDC (see plate 1) which the women use to ferry agricultural and consumable goods between Bille and Port Harcourt. The forum generates its revenue from the market cargo boat from where finances for the welfare of the women and contributions to community development are sourced.



**Plate 1: Bille Women's Forum Market Cargo Boat Donated by SPDC.**

Source: Fieldwork, 2018

Describing the contributions of the Bille Women's Forum to the well-being of women in the Kingdom, the President of the forum asserts thus:

The Bille Women Forum has been able to penetrate SPDC and secured soft loans for the women to trade with. That is why if you go to the town you would see many women with small kiosks all over. Also, we were able to assist in equipping the maternity clinic in the community ... The forum also got the boat from SPDC, it has been in operation for 10 years ago. When the last one got bad SPDC built

another one for us. We use to carry goods to and from Port Harcourt to Bille with it, and the monies that accrue goes into the women's purse and if we have any challenge, we solve it from our savings.

KII/Female/President BWF/Bille/2018

Similarly, appraising the activities of the Bille Women's Forum as an institution that contributes to community development, the executive of the Bille youth organization had this to say:

Yes, the women's forum is community nominees appointed for the welfare of the women... The women of this community appealed to these oil companies to give them a cargo boat and that boat is what they use to transport goods. They are getting small income from the boat from which they support themselves and the community. When there is a problem in the community and money is not available, the chiefs call them and borrow money from them. FDG/Youth Group Executive/Bille/2018

The findings from the study indicated that most respondents in Bille Kingdom attested to the fact that the women's forum as a self-help institution has been instrumental to the development of the community, as well as enhancing the adaptive capacity of members of the community.

#### **b. Age Grade Associations**

Age grade associations happen to be a strong source of social capital for individuals and households in the study areas, especially in Bille and Umutu communities. This position has been rightly observed in a previous study by Jack and Eke (2008) who reported that in Bille community alone, there are over 10 age grade associations and in Umutu, there are 8 age-grade associations to which some of the study participants belonged. About their roles in promoting adaptive capacity, the study discovered that age grades provide members benefits such as mutual support in times of crises or celebrations as well as providing them opportunities for collective action and engendering community development. In Bille Kingdom, the study revealed that age grade associations have contributed tremendously to the development of the community as grade associations have provided diverse forms of infrastructural amenities (see plate 2) for the communities thereby promoting the communities' adaptive capacity generally.

Describing the role of age grade associations in promoting the adaptive capacity and community development, a Chief in Bille Kingdom asserts thus:

There are several age grade associations in the community, myself I belong to one. If there is any problem in the community, age-grade rally round their members, contribute monies and assist the community. Like the tomb of our late

Amayanabo, HRM King Carrie Ogili, Agbaniye-Jike (XIII), Amayanabo of Great Bille Kingdom, was erected by the 56 cultural age groups. Similarly, three different age grade associations contributed and built the internal bridge for us. My age group, the 58 association for instance when we celebrated our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we bought some computer sets for the secondary school students. We are currently renovating the ICT centre as we expect to purchase more computers. Also, there is another group called Daughters of Bille Ambassadors, they are Bille daughters who are married outside, they are also contributing to the computer project. So, when they bring more computers, we would include it to ours and donate them to the students. KII/Male/Community Chief/Bille/2018



**Plate 2: Infrastructural and Cultural Projects by Age Grades in Bille Community**

Source: Fieldwork, 2018

The role of age grade associations in promoting community development and by extension adaptive capacity of communities cannot be overemphasized as they are a veritable tool that enables both poor and wealthy members of the community to galvanize themselves and initiate self-help projects, while also strengthening collective action in the community.

### **c. Umutu Development Union**

The Umutu Development Union (UDU) is a community-based organization that has existed for close to five decades with the sole mandate of fostering development in Umutu community of Delta State. The UDU has its headquarters in Umutu with several satellite branches across the country and overseas where Umutu people are resident. The UDU is headed by a Chairman and his cabinet members who are elected for three years to serve the community through collective

actions for community development. The study revealed that the UDU has been the pioneering agent of development in the community before the creation of Delta state and the advent of oil and gas exploration in the area. One peculiar approach the UDU utilizes to engender collective action and raise funds for community development is the celebration of the Igili Day (see plate 3) which is held annually on the Saturday before Easter Sunday. The Igili Day is a festival that brings all the sons and daughters of the community both in Nigeria and overseas back home to feast and contribute monies for specific developmental projects in the community. Direct observations by the researcher during the 2018 Igili Day festivities revealed that several groups in the community such as age grade associations, social clubs, committee of friends' associations, cooperative societies and so on were present at the occasion with each group announcing their donations as contributions to the community purse for developmental projects. Also, several UDU chapters from across the country were equally represented by their members and executives.

Describing the emergence and primary function of the Umutu Development Union, the Secretary to the Umutu Community Oil and Gas Management Committee (UCOGMC) asserts thus:

Before the discovery of this marginal oil field and oil exploration in our community, we have what we call the Umutu Development Union. It was previously a youth organization that metamorphosed into a community affair. We organized ourselves, family to family, because we have UDU Port Harcourt branch, we have UDU Bayelsa branch and in diaspora etc. Whenever they come back home, they make their contributions to the common purse. They have a central committee where delegates will be sent from different branches too, the chiefs, youth, age grade, women, would go and have discussions. They would decide on what to do with the money they have realized. The Igili Day celebration is all about fund-raising. This has been the mechanism the community has devised in developing itself. For example, the Umutu Secondary School we have today which the government now operates started as a self-help project. Every development in this community has started as self-help after which we hand over to the government. KII/Male/Secretary UCOGMC /Umutu/2018

Corroborating the above position and establishing the essence of the Igili Day celebrations, the Vice President of the Umutu Development Union added:

We raise funds by asking families or individuals. For instance, today we had a festival called Igili day, and every year there must be Igili day set aside for fundraising purpose. It is usually held on the Saturday before Easter Sunday. We gather predominantly Umutu indigenes-sons and daughters and we may decide to

invite one or two people from outside the community and what we normally do is to raise money for the community projects. Like now we are building another secondary school as this current one is overpopulated. That is how we help ourselves. KII/Male/Vice President/UDU/2018

Adding his voice to the essence and importance of the Umutu Development Union and the celebration of the Igili Day, an executive member of the Umutu youth organization had this to say:

Due to this Igili day that we have just done, we raised money to enable us to execute one or two projects for the community. Our brothers and sisters from the diaspora and our families donate monies. Like this one we just did, the six major families in the community donated the sum of ₦50,000 each, while for individuals some donated ₦500,000, ₦300,000, ₦200,000 and so on. So, these are the monies with which we execute developmental projects in the community. FGD/Male/Youth Group/Umutu/2018



**Plate 3: Igili Day Celebration, Umutu Community, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018.**

Source: Fieldwork, 2018

Consequently, it becomes evident that the Umutu Development Union and Day celebration approach is a model that has been highly successful and sustainable for the Umutu people. This approach has ensured their continued development even in the near absence of government or any other external intervention. This has strengthened the adaptive capacity of the Umutu people about the negative impacts of oil and gas exploration in their community.

## Conclusion

The study investigated the role that collective action plays in building the adaptive capacity of oil impacted communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The study has demonstrated that where there is a strong sense of concern for community welfare and well-being, the level of collective action among community members can be a source of interest-based support and community-wide development. More so, local community-based institutions such as development unions, age grades and socio-cultural groups provide community members with the opportunity to organize themselves and galvanize resources in solving common community-based problems. Collective action through these institutions has enabled and strengthened the adaptive capacity of individuals and the general community in terms of staying apace the socio-economic, livelihood, and socio-cultural risks arising from crude oil-induced environmental degradation. Given the foregoing, the study concludes that collective action is a veritable approach to strengthening the adaptive capacity of oil impacted communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is, therefore, recommended that the government and other non-governmental development interventionist organizations that are concerned with improving the livelihoods and well-being of the oil impacted communities in the Niger Delta region should robustly engage with and enhance the capacities of community-based institutions in the region. This can be achieved through regular stakeholders' engagements, townhall meetings and needs assessments of oil impacted communities, while development intervention resources, knowledge, technology and skills can be diffused into communities through community-based institutions.

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