

# **NIGERIA: USING A VARIETY OF ADVOCACY TOOLS IN THE NIGER DELTA**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Nigerian advocacy group Environmental Rights Action / Friends of the Earth Nigeria (ERA / FOE Nigeria) began work in the Niger Delta in the last quarter of 1993 with an environmental survey of Niger-Delta communities. The central objectives of the survey were to understand the issues of survival; the impact of resources on livelihood of local people; the state of the environment; and the interrelationship between the people, their environment, and outsiders such as corporations, governments, or international agencies.

## **FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY**

Members of the survey team traveled from community to community, and from one ecozone to the other, over six months. They then returned to the ERA headquarters in Benin City to analyse the findings.

The environmental surveyors found that:

- There is an environmental, economic, and moral crisis threatening to destabilize the region.
- The crisis was linked to the exploitation of the resources of the region to the exclusion of local people, and without regard to their environment.
- The crisis was caused by a combination of corporate, governmental, transnational, and local interests.
- The overall ecosystem of the Niger Delta is severely stressed and may collapse.
- There is an absence of good governance in the region.

ERA management noted from the environmental survey report that the following problems needed urgent attention:

- The heavily polluted environment of the region
- The unacceptable poverty in the communities
- The role of corporate entities doing business in the region
- The lack of federal and state government involvement
- The lack of accurate environmental information on the Niger Delta
- A population frightened by the activities of the Nigerian military throughout the Niger Delta
- General hopelessness, voicelessness, anger and frustration
- Inter- and intra-communal conflicts

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## **FAVOURED TOOLS AS VEHICLES FOR CHANGE AND INTERVENTION**

Based on ERA's understanding of the situation, it adopted the following tools to return the Niger Delta to ecological health and her people to the path of hope and happiness:

- Resistance
- Strategic Information Access and Provision
- Community Empowerment
- Lobbying
- Mass Education
- Networking and Alliance Building
- Litigation

### **Resistance**

In 1999, ERA/FOE Nigeria hosted the Oilwatch Africa Conference and General Assembly in Port Harcourt where a definition of "resistance" was unanimously adopted. "Resistance," in the environmental context, was understood to mean "*the right to say no and mean it in defence of our collective environmental and human rights in order to achieve positive change.*"

Resistance had been used by ERA in its advocacy programme in the Niger Delta largely because of a lack of corporate responsiveness; the failure of the government to listen to the complaints of local people; and, above all, the urgent demand that we at ERA join in the defence of local people and our endangered environment.

Resistance is anchored on direct action: peaceful protests; naming and shaming; blockades; and occupation of the properties or facilities of those responsible for environmental damage.

### **Strategic Information Access and Provision**

Access to information is vital to any serious campaign. ERA tries to get information from corporate actors, the local environment, the communities, allied organisations abroad, etc. It then makes such information available to the public. ERA developed the Delta Information Services of the Environmental Rights Action (DISERA). Through this vehicle, information that affects the Niger Delta is received and disseminated.

The DISERA publishes the *Niger Delta ALERT*, a monthly bulletin, which is distributed electronically, through the Internet, and in hard copy. Newspapers and magazines occasionally cull items from it and may follow up on some of the issues depending on interest.

DISERA also publishes a quarterly journal called *ERACTION*. The journal targets results from new research, findings, and analysis of environment and development issues in an in-depth way.

Also, our strategic information programme ensures that local people interact with people outside their immediate area. We have platforms such as environmental testimonies, which enable local people to have their voice heard nationally and globally. The *ERA Field and Monitor Reports* ensure that environmental events or actions are noted, celebrated, or condemned as field officers and monitors dispatch the information.

## **Community Empowerment**

One of the most challenging problems facing any underdeveloped society is how to mobilize itself to overcome internal problems. Where externally driven problems add to the internal ones, it becomes more difficult, and external help becomes a compelling necessity. Communities of the Niger Delta face a double challenge because of the resources under their stewardship. Oil and gas, along with the waterways and ocean, attract both national and international attention.

ERA works in partnership with the communities to identify local problems through Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and in setting up community institutions as agencies for change. Some of the earliest tools in this regard were the Community Resource Centres (CRC) and the Rural Environmental Action Project (REACT).

The CRCs are mainly centres of self-help. A typical CRC may contain a meeting room, a small library with essential books for local teachers and students, and a community micro-credit scheme for women. The CRC is managed by the CRC Board of Trustees, which is made up of all sectors of society. The Board discusses and works to resolve community issues such as environmental, political, educational, or economic problems. CRCs in the Niger Delta were first established in Okoroba, Botem-Tai, Anyama, and Sangana, all communities in the present Rivers and Bayelsa States. The goal of the CRCs is to mobilize local action for economic, environmental, and educational security as well as sustainable development and peaceful co-existence. ERA believes that an empowered community can take adequate care of itself!

## **Lobbying**

ERA sometimes uses this tool as a vehicle to achieve the objectives it has set for itself. It involves lobbying government agencies like the National and State Assemblies, to enact laws or review existing laws so as to protect the people and their environment. ERA also works in collaboration with international agencies by providing local information that may help such international agencies put pressure on our government so that unhealthy practices are discontinued.

An example of such a campaign is our Tobacco Control Project (TCP) under the Trade and Development Programme. The TCP lobbied relevant government ministries and provided information on similar and favourable practices from other parts of the world. In one well-known example, ERA, together with the Federal Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization (WHO), did a training programme on tobacco control for members of the National Assembly. The programme emphasized possible new legislation. It was noted that tobacco cultivation encourages the destruction of tropical forest, harms human health, and creates huge costs to the nation's health care system. The Ministry of Health, the WHO, and ERA agreed that something had to be done. The campaign is still on, and TCP has recently released a report, "Death and Destruction: the

Tobacco Attack on Nigeria,” which highlights many problems and disadvantages of tobacco in Nigeria.

### **Mass Education**

ERA facilitates cross-sectoral interaction and education through workshops, seminars, and conferences. The lack of educational opportunities is a major hindrance to sustainable development in the Niger Delta. ERA held the view that the trend should be reversed. To address this issue, the organization has over the years organised several region-wide and community educational programmes through workshops, seminars, and conferences .

ERA organized a constitutional conference in 1999. The purpose was to address the failure of the Nigeria military constitution of 1999 to provide peaceful co-existence and environmental security for the citizens of Nigeria, especially those from the Niger Delta. It was an occasion to be educated about the history of Nigeria and constitutionalism generally. ERA also organises roundtables through the Democracy Outreach Programme, where topical issues are discussed. Recently, the organisation launched the Community Environmental Parliament (CEP) project, where community members can discuss issues affecting their livelihood.

This mass education tool is complemented by publication of reports, books, bulletins, and other materials to get the information to the reading public worldwide.

### **Networking and Alliance Building**

ERA either aligns with existing networks or helps to form new networks together with other organizations. This is because environmental problems are interconnected and agents of environmental damage may have common ancestry. Such networks or alliances become avenues for sharing information and strategies (if not tactics), and coordinating joint actions to address environmental problems.

ERA is a member of the Friends of the Earth International, a global environmental movement in over 60 countries. The group also is part of Oilwatch International, an anti-fossil fuel group working to protect local people affected by oil and gas production. ERA works with many groups and institutions including the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO); Human Rights Watch; Amnesty International; Institute for Policy Studies (IPS); the Bank Information Center (BIC); the Ecumenical Community for Corporate Responsibility; the International Rivers Network; Project Underground; Rain Forest Action Network; the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation. The goal of such networks and alliances is to work for justice, whether environmental, social, or economic.

### **Litigation**

The law courts can sometimes be avenues through which ERA challenges lawbreakers, especially the transnational corporations operating in the Niger Delta region. Both the threat of legal action and the actual suit can be deterrents.

ERA has started a number of cases in the name of some of its leading members on a variety of issues, including environmental impact assessments (EIA), resource use and management, and environmental justice.

ERA also encourages communities and affected people to sue identified culprits. The organization thus supports the community's quest for justice through this or other means that are constitutionally expedient.

## **ADVOCACY TOOLS IN ACTION**

### **Choosing the Tools**

The advocacy tools described above cannot in themselves act to produce the results envisaged by ERA. The tools must be made to work. Thus, the appropriateness of a particular tool for a particular problem also determines its success. Whether to choose one or more of the above tools will depend on a variety of factors including:

- The climate and culture of the locality
- The issue and the actors involved
- The urgency of the matter needing resolution
- The history of the instigator of the problems
- The interplay of forces supporting or opposing change
- The availability of resources
- The possibility of a holistic, rather than partial, resolution

### **Two Advocacy Project Examples**

ERA's programmes in the Niger Delta and the organisation's use of advocacy can be appreciated by briefly examining two campaigns – one concluded and the other ongoing – in the Niger Delta. The projects are (1) the campaign to stop the large agro-industrial programme in the central axis of the Niger Delta, funded by the European Union; and (2) our Corporate Accountability campaign directed at the fossil fuel industry operating in the Niger Delta.

#### **(1) The European Union Risonpalm LOPPY Project**

In early 1994, ERA field officers became aware of an oil palm lowland project at Yenagoa that was funded by the European Union (EU) and owned by the Rivers State Government, otherwise known as the Risonpalm LOPPY (Lowland Oil Palm Project around Yenagoa) project. The project was designed to occupy 78,700 hectares of rain forests and wetlands by cutting the forest and destroying the wetlands through 82 kilometers of dykes and some 365 kilometers of drainage channels to expel "excess water" from the project area. The whole area would be replaced by a monocrop of oil palm, which is known to grow well in the region.

ERA studied the project area, consulted renowned experts on biodiversity (such as Professor Bruce Powel of the Institute for Pollution Studies (Biodiversity unit), University of Science and Technology Port Harcourt) and met with the General Manager of Risonpalm, Mr. G. Omereji. The

organisation obtained relevant documents on the project and visited communities that were, or may be affected by the project.

At the end of our study and consultation, it was resolved by ERA management that the EU Lopy project should be halted or reviewed, or both, so as to pave the way to a people- and environmentally-friendly livelihood programme.

ERA identified the following advocacy tools as necessary to enable us to achieve our objective: resistance; local empowerment; strategic information access and provision; alliance building; mass education; lobbying; and, if all else failed, a lawsuit against the Rivers State Government, Risonplam, and the European Union.

ERA field officers traveled to Yenagoa, Swali, Azikoro, Agbura, Panksia, Otuobula 2, Atissa and Engenni villages, and to Mbiama by the Orashi River. The people expressed their worry over the project, especially as it would take away their fish ponds, farmlands, etc. Members of some communities swore “we would rather die than surrender our land to the Risonpalm company.”

As tension rose in the project area, the dreaded mobile police force resorted to unlawful tactics, including arrest, torture, and intimidation. The situation was made worse by the fact that Nigeria was under military dictatorship, and there was no rule of law.

ERA noted that local people resented the project and were resisting it through protest letters, complaints, and demonstrations. We supported them in many ways, especially by telling the EU and Risonpalm that their project was not desirable.

We had a meeting with EU officials in Lagos, met the General Manager of Risonpalm in Port Harcourt, and gave local people a voice on the issue.

We mobilised the local media, attracting the prestigious Nigerian Guardian to do a major report entitled RESOPALM SCAM, which exposed the project for what it is. ERA published leaflets and information packs – “PALM Frauds”, which highlighted the danger of the project and provided vital information to all who needed it.

We traveled to London and lobbied the office of Edward Heath, former British Prime Minister, and also briefed environmental justice groups and movements such as the World Development Movement (WDM), Friends of the Earth UK, and several others.

As our campaign intensified, the EU set up an interim mid-term review of the project, which recommended, among other things, that local people become involved in the large-scale programme through what the EU called a Small Scale Development Unit (SDU). Some officers were recalled, and eventually the project was put on hold for the advertised reason that the EU had imposed sanctions on Nigeria following the execution of environmentalist, writer, and Ogoni nationalist Kenule Saro-wiwa.

It has been over three years since the country returned to civilian democracy, but no mention of the project has been made. Our conclusion is that our campaign showed the EU project as formulated to be economically and environmentally unwise.

## **(2) ERA Corporate Accountability Campaign on Fossil Fuel Extraction**

No other work of ERA has been as challenging as our ongoing campaigns for corporate accountability, with specific focus on the fossil fuel consortia represented by companies such as Shell, ChevronTexaco, ExxonMobil, Agip, and Elf, among others.

Following our study and appraisal of the region and the issues involved, we began by writing letters to groups and institutions able to assist us and the people of the Niger Delta in their struggle for environmental justice and survival. We also contacted the companies—especially Shell—to discuss how the company could change the way it was doing business in the Niger Delta. Several meetings were held with top Shell officials. The meetings were held in early 1994 to impress on the company the necessity to do things justly and to remedy the environmental damage the company had caused.

On the part of the company we noted the following:

- A “we-know-what-we-are-doing-and-we-are-right” attitude
- Apparent disdain for local people
- Irresponsible environmental practices
- Waste of resources
- Arrogant use of power
- Carelessness about the livelihood of local people

We initially thought we could provide a bridge between the people of the Niger Delta and the corporations. We were wrong. When we took a pro-people position, such as when ERA members supported the Ogoni campaign for survival, the oil industry frowned. We broke off further contact until things improved for local people. The military authorities in Port Harcourt arrested ERA members. Some went underground in Ibadan and others went into exile in South Africa and Ghana.

The main tools available to ERA at this time were education and resistance. The organisation wrote several reports, including “Terror in Ogoniland.” We assisted visiting human rights and environmental groups so that important information could reach people in the West who could influence these companies’ shareholders in the hope that they would get the companies to change their ways. We organised protests and named the corporations involved in the actions against local people. We encouraged communities to put in place institutions such as Community Resource Centres (CRC) as places of self-empowerment. We lobbied governments, especially European and American governments, through briefings of members of parliament, so that specific and favourable resolutions could be passed concerning Nigeria and the oil companies. We organised and participated in community teachings and village training programmes (through Rural Environmental Action (REACT)), and we encouraged the formation of networks and alliances so as to help compel the companies to account for their environmental actions.

We instituted legal action against some of the companies, like Shell in Nigeria, and encouraged local people whose rights were violated to sue companies like Chevron in their home countries (such as the United States of America).

There is no way ERA can work alone. We worked in alliance with groups addressing fossil fuel issues, including Project Underground, Friends of the Earth, and Institute for Policy Studies. On livelihood matters, including human rights and environmental issues, we worked with groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO).

ERA supported local groups, CBOs, NGOs, and peoples' movements in their struggle for self-determination, resource control, as well as social, economic, and environmental justice. This helped in the "globalisation of the grievances" of the Niger Delta people. The hope is that through this effort, help will come from both within and outside of Nigeria. Help came, but not enough, and the struggle is still ongoing as I write.

## **OBSTACLES**

In Nigeria, environmental justice advocacy is not an easy undertaking. It can be a matter of life and death. Almost all members of ERA have at one time or the other been arrested, detained, or assaulted. The stage of Nigeria's development may play a role in the high incidence of human rights violations targeted at local people and ERA activists. The social and political structure is, therefore, an identified obstacle. A political system that has no respect for the rule of law can hardly have respect for the protection of the environment, much less for those promoting environmentally responsible practices.

Corporate obstinacy and the colonial political heritage, which is yet to be restructured to give forth true democracy and accountability, are also obstacles.

Poverty, illiteracy, and inadequate consciousness are obstacles working against ERA's dream of a sustainable Niger Delta. The great disparity in resources between local peoples and the oil companies makes local people very vulnerable to promises of future income.

There are also not enough resources to carry out the advocacy the way we at ERA want to do it. We are limited by lack of funds in part because donor agencies do not want to fund things that have the resemblance of "radicalism."

Inadequate, and sometimes absent, infrastructure hampers our work as well. How do you send an email to your partner when there is no electricity?

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Groups and individuals wanting to use any of the tools described above must bear the following recommendations in mind.

## **Human resources as assets**

No advocacy tool can succeed without a commitment from those who are to use it. The people must believe in the struggle or issue that is the subject of the campaign. It is better to take time and identify the right human beings, and train such persons well in the use of the tools, than to rush into a campaign hoping that you will get efficient along the way. The campaign will collapse and many lives will become endangered by such ill-preparedness. Also, human resources must at all times be motivated. There must be new challenges and innovations or else the people will become disinterested.

## **Use of tools**

Under no circumstance must campaigners depend on only one set of tools. What is best is a combination of several tools at any given time.

## **Always be ahead**

You must not allow the identified entity that you are trying to change to be ahead of you. If the entity is ahead of you, you will only be reacting, and the other party will not take you seriously. Also, never let your opponent identify you with only one tool or strategy.

## **Do not worry much over setbacks**

That you cannot win all the time is a well-known saying. When you lose, let the loss be a reference point for hard work, not a setback. You will become entrapped in the setback and will not make progress. Always ensure that there are reviews so as to present the opportunity for reflection.

## **Know when to declare “it is all over”**

You can continue to advocate until justice is done, but you must also know when to make peace with a repentant environmental transgressor. When the horse is dead, do not flog it with your tool; go and keep it safe.

## **Beware of surprises and underplay your expectations**

No matter the amount of preparation before deciding to use any of these tools, remember that the unexpected frequently occurs. This could throw your advocacy programme to the wind. Thus, have minimal expectations only, but have hope and believe in your potential success.