# Multinational Organizations and Management of Youth Restiveness: An Assessment of the Coping Strategies of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) in Rivers State, Nigeria

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### [0166] Abstract

*The Niger Delta in Nigeria, which is known for being the epicenter of the oil and gas industry has experienced severe violence and socio-economic challenges that have led to oil multinational corporations adjusting their operations commensurately. The underlying causes of the violent conflicts include failure of the state and multinationals to provide the much-needed human and infrastructural development in host communities amidst deleterious environmental challenges. This has led to long years of different forms of agitations and social conflicts by mostly youth groups. This study assesses the coping strategy of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) in terms of managing youth restiveness in Rivers state, Nigeria. Within a social conflict perspective, the study examines how SPDC copes with youth violence and the effectiveness of associated strategies. Using a descriptive design, data were collected from 300 SPDC staff through the use of questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings reveal that youth restiveness in the state has over the years proven to be a huge source of threat to the operations of the company and that SPDC's major coping strategy despite trying several social investment approaches such as the Global Memorandum of Understanding (GMoU), remains largely the divestment of its onshore assets. This is considered very effective as it has reduced the direct impact of youth led conflicts on the company's operations. Based on this, the study recommends among others that companies buying off SPDC assets should prioritize the democratic model associated with the GMoU, especially in areas where it has not been established since the model has helped in mitigating conflicts in areas where it is currently in use.*

**Keywords:** Coping strategies, multinational organizations, youth restiveness, social conflict and SPDC.

## Introduction

Nigeria has witnessed unprecedented violence and a dwindling business scenario in her oil rich Niger Delta region, leading to massive divestment of assets by major multinational oil corporations. One important remote cause of this, is the partial failure of the state and its multinational cohorts to provide the much-needed development in the host communities. The low level of human capital development in the region has led to the emergence of warlords in control of large chunks of territory, often very rich in mineral resources (Adeyemi, 2004; Raimi, 2017; Piate, 2014). Hence, the emergence of different restive groups in the region goes a long way to show the extent to which the intensity of the grievance of the people could be measured. These militant activities have had far reaching negative consequences for oil exploration and production in the area (Piate, 2025). Each of these restive groups purports to fight for the rights of their communities and in particular, to rectify perceived exclusion, political domination and injustice, limited access to economic resources and social services, among others (Piate, 2025).

There are no doubts that long years of conflicts in the Niger Delta is a dangerous development given the country's complex dependence on oil and gas as its major source of wealth. Ganiyu (2007) supports the claim when he adduced that the emergence of militant uprising in the region is as a critical challenge to socio-economic activities especially for the oil and gas industry. This situation is particularly more problematic when the threat to lives and properties resulting from kidnapping, pipeline vandalization and crude oil theft are taken into consideration (Piate, 2025). There is an indication that the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), a prominent militia group, remains largely active despite the Presidential Amnesty that was granted in 2009. According to Akinwale (2020), this group continues to maintain a tacit force that threatens the relative peace that came in the wake of the amnesty project. In addition to this covert and sometimes overt threat, several other forms of social unrests involving youths in the region presents huge adverse implications for industrial growth and productivity.

Drawing from the above, the potency of the Presidential Amnesty programme for ex-militant youths in the region has attracted mixed opinions concerning its feasibility in terms of addressing peace and creating the needed environment for social investment. The first set of persons maintain that the amnesty has brought relative peace to the region while others see it as a way of getting the region more and more entangled in exploitation (Okonofua, 2016; Raimi, Bieh, & Zorbari, 2017; Oluwaniyi, 2021). Amidst these polar arguments, you have others whose focus is on the management of the resources linked to the implementation of the amnesty project. Here, the SDN (2021) notes that mismanagement and corruption pose significant impediments to the effective implementation of the programme, with massive cases of diversion of funds by elites, thereby compromising the fundamental objectives of amnesty project.

Although a lot of media attention has been given to the amnesty programme and its role in mitigating conflict in the Niger Delta region, social tensions continue to prevail mostly as a result of the failure to sustain the gains of the amnesty project (Ebiede, Langer & Tosun, 2020), prompting a renewed wave of concerns by researchers concerning post-amnesty youth unrest and peacebuilding. This clearly shows that the underlying drivers such as destruction of local livelihoods, social exclusion, environmental degradation and huge deficits in human and infrastructural developments (Raimi & Boroh, 2018) have remained largely unresolved. The progressive neglect of the major causes of pre-amnesty conflicts in the Niger Delta seems to have altered the trajectory of violence in the region, with new forms emerging in a manner that shows sustained resistance to the Nigerian state and multinational oil corporations operating in the region (Piate, 2025). Interestingly there are a lot of studies (Ebiede et al., 2020; Mai-Bornu, 2020; SDN, 2021; Oluwaniyi, 2023) on the violent conflicts in the Niger Delta that have in one way or the other discussed the causes and consequences without necessarily delving into the coping strategies of oil and gas companies all these years.

While we can agree that the various studies discussed above have in one way or the other contributed to our understanding of social conflict in the Niger Delta region and its effects on the overall development of the country, there is presently no in-depth and empirically grounded study on how major multinational corporations have been able to cope with such conflicts while still maintaining production activities. The present study is an attempt to fill this scholarly gap and to provide empirical knowledge on the problem under study. Hence, the focus here is to provide an analysis of the coping strategies of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) with respect to youth restiveness in their areas of operation.

Essentially, the study will provide answers to the following questions: What is the extent of the threat posed by social conflict such as youth restiveness to oil company personnel and installations? What are the existing mechanisms or strategies employed by oil companies to cope with youth restiveness in the Niger Delta region? How effective are these coping strategies?

**Review of Related Literature**

The Niger Delta region houses a significant part of the exploration and production activities associated with the oil and gas industry in Nigeria and this is carried out within a wetland ecosystem that is about 70000 square kilometers, making it one of the largest in the world (Olukaejire et al., 2024). The region is significant in the context of the petroleum industry because it accounts for 90 percent of the nation's oil revenue and its natural gas reserves are increasingly recognized as a huge potential source of future income. Despite these abundant natural resources and the associated wealth generated from it, the region remains one of the poorest and most underdeveloped in Nigeria, with troubling deficits in socio-economic indicators that puts it below the national average (Nwankwo, 2015). The coexistence of massive natural resources wealth and absolute poverty in the region has been largely described as a paradox with scholars attributing it to various factors such as capitalist exploitation, deliberate marginalization, insufficient environmental regulation and pollution (Owolabi, 2021).

Sadly, environmental issues arising from the activities of the multinational oil corporations in the Niger Delta region, such as oil spills, gas flaring and destruction of local habitats, have generated severe adverse consequences for local communities. Increasingly, the environmental problems continue to threaten the biodiversity of the region, but more problematic is the massive negative impact this has had and continues to have on the local communities' traditional livelihood systems, especially fishing and farming thereby entrenching widespread poverty (Ite et al., 2013; Olukaejire et al., 2024). Hence, long years of these adverse impacts on the human and environmental realities of the region has triggered protracted social unrests and conflicts, as mostly youths demand a fairer share of the resources extracted from their land (Nwankwo, 2015). Conflicts between oil companies and local communities in the Niger Delta have basically revolved around issues of land ownership and compensation for land appropriation as well as compensation for environmental damages due to oil operations (Nwankwo, 2015). Furthermore, local communities have frequently disputed the causes of oil spills and the eligibility of the companies to pay compensation, raising questions about the adequacy of such payments when the eventually do (Owolobai, 2021).

The historical backdrop of these conflicts includes significant events such as the Ogoni uprising in the late 1980s and the Kiama Declaration by the Ijaws in 1998. These movements marked a shift towards more organized and militant forms of protest, leading to the emergence of groups like the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) (Owolabi, 2021). Violence escalated in the region amidst widespread perception that oil companies and the Nigerian government have consistently failed to address the grievances of the local populations, especially as it relates to environmental destruction and inadequate compensation (Amnesty International, 2022).

Shell, the major multinational player in Nigeria's oil industry, has identified political, social and environmental concerns as the three core factors that precipitate community disturbances in Nigeria. The political factors include lack of reasonable share of oil revenue, which is complicated by the high population growth rate putting pressure on land, thus bringing about deforestation, over-farming and soil erosion. Another factor is the emergence of a new generation of well-educated youths aware of the

disparity between urban and rural centres and believing that Multinational oil companies have the wherewithal to redress this social gap. Due to long years of agitations and social conflicts in the form of youth militancy, the number of community disruptions to oil operations increased significantly. Some estimates indicate that social conflicts and militancy have led to a reduction in onshore oil production by approximately 30% in the past few years, reflecting a persistent trend of instability in the region (Nwankwo, 2015). In addition to losses associated with production, oil companies have faced huge financial setbacks, leading many of them to shift their focus towards offshore oil activities perceived to be less exposed to disruptions (Owolabi, 2021). The Amnesty International (2022) has reported that illegal oil bunkering activities, conducted mostly by aggrieved youths who are armed to the teeth in the Niger Delta region, further exacerbates the situation, especially as the report notes that Nigeria loses between 150,000 and 300,000 barrels to oil bunkering activities on a daily basis.

Despite the government clampdown on illegal oil bunkering, it remains a huge source of funds for youth-based armed groups, contribution to recent dimensions of social conflicts in the region (Piate and Ukere, 2024). Obi (2014) notes that many militant warlords have publicly acknowledged their involvement in oil theft, framing it as a legitimate means of income for impoverished communities affected by oil exploitation activities. This position resonates with the views of Watts (2007) who noted that illegal oil bunkering is considered as a form of resistance against socio-economic injustices faced by the host communities in the region.

With the progressive shift in the dynamics of conflicts in the Niger Delta, it is safe to say that the role of the multinational companies in dealing with problem of conflict has not been encouraging. Shell Petroleum Development Company for instance, has been severely criticized as being largely a part of the problem, especially because of its divide and rule tactics that has been known to exacerbate crisis (Nwankwo, 2015). These tactics have been reported to undermine community cohesion and exacerbate divisions among local populations, traditional institutions, and leadership structures (Piate, 2014). Research indicates that Shell's corporate practices have frequently led to the fragmentation of community relationships. For instance, the company's engagement strategies often prioritize certain factions within communities, thereby fostering resentment among those who feel excluded from negotiations and benefits (Oviasuyi & Uwadiae, 2010). This has resulted in a scenario where local communities are pitted against one another, complicating efforts to achieve a unified stance against the adverse impacts of oil extraction and environmental degradation (Piate, Kia and Obisung, 2025). The environmental consequences of Shell's operations also play a critical role in fueling conflict. Oil spills, gas flaring, and pollution have devastated local ecosystems, leading to significant health issues and loss of livelihoods for many residents (Najeh, 2022). The lack of adequate response to these environmental crises has led to increased anger and frustration among local communities, who often view the company as prioritizing profit over the well-being of the people and the environment.

**Theoretical Framework**

*Social Conflict Theory* This study adopts the social conflict perspective given its robust insights that better captures the main objectives outlined in this paper. Its ability to theoretically capture the interplay between the activities of the multinational corporations and social conflicts in local communities in the Niger Delta makes it a befitting theory for this study. The major assumption of this theory is that every society is inherently characterized by conflicts amongst different classes in society and this is mostly due to inequalities in wealth, power and access to resources. Within the context of our study, the massive wealth generated from the extraction of oil has not translated into equitable benefits for local communities. Instead, these communities often experience marginalization and social exclusion in terms of making decisions that affects them (Nwankwo, 2015). Hence, this creates a fertile ground for conflict, as youths

become progressively frustrated with their socio-economic conditions, while perceiving companies like Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) as complicit in their oppression. However, while the assumptions of the theory as it relates to conflict addresses the issue of youth restiveness, there is also the hidden aspect of the role of power in mitigating conflict. This is mostly seen as manipulative power or ideology and this provides a window of understanding on how the multinational organizations, like SPDC have managed to navigate the conflict terrain in the region over the years.

**Materials and Methods**

For the purpose of this study, the descriptive research design was employed. The population of this study is the entire staff of SPDC operating in Rivers State. The population of SPDC in the state is estimated at 2,35. The sample size for this study is 300. To select the sample, two levels of sampling techniques were adopted. The first is the stratified random sampling which was used to divide the population into strata such as lower level workers, supervisors and managers. Thereafter, the simple random sampling technique was applied to select respondents from each stratum. The research instrument that was used in the study is a self-designed questionnaire. The percentage and frequency methods involving the use of graphs, tables and pie charts were employed to analyze the data. This was done by calculating percentage values for each response proportionate to the total response rate.

**Results**

This section is focused on analyzing the data gathered in the course of the fieldwork. As indicated above, percentages and frequencies were employed for the data analysis. Thereafter, the findings were discussed in line with the key objectives that were initially set in the study. In the course of the fieldwork, 295 questionnaires were collated for analysis.

*Socio-Demographic Presentation* The major components of the socio-demographic information collected from the fieldwork are as follows: age, sex, marital status, number of children, educational status, category of SPDC Staff and religion of respondents.

Table 1: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION COLLECTED

| Variable | Category | New Frequency (n) | New Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | Below 19 | 6 | 2 |
| | 20-29 | 38 | 13 |
| | 30-39 | 177 | 60 |
| | 40-49 | 62 | 21 |
| | Above 50 | 15 | 5 |
| Total | | 295 | 100 |
| Sex | Female | 50 | 17 |
| | Male | 245 | 83 |
| Total | | 295 | 100 |
| Marital Status | Single | 21 | 7 |
| | Married | 212 | 72 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Divorced | 56 | 19 |
| | Widowed | 9 | 3 |
| *Total* | | 295 | 100 |
| *Educational Qualification* | BSc/HND | 192 | 65 |
| | MSc/Bed/MBA | 56 | 19 |
| | PhD | 6 | 2 |
| | Other | 44 | 15 |
| *Total* | | 295 | 100 |
| *Job Categories/Position* | Casual Staff | 192 | 65 |
| | Middle Management | 50 | 17 |
| | Senior Management | 21 | 7 |
| | Director | 3 | 1 |
| | Other | 30 | 10 |
| *Total* | | 295 | 100 |

Table 1 above presents comprehensive data on the age, sex composition, marital status, educational qualification, and job categories of respondents who participated in this study. The age distribution of respondents reveals that a majority, 177 (60%), are within the age bracket of 30-39 years. Respondents aged 20-29 years constitute 38 (13%), while those between 40-49 years make up 62 (21%). There are 15 (5%) respondents above 50 years old, and 6 (2%) are below the age of 19. The sex composition indicates a significant gender disparity, with 245 (83%) of respondents being male and only 50 (17%) being female. The marital status distribution shows that 212 (72%) of respondents are married, 56 (19%) are divorced, 21 (7%) are single, and 9 (3%) are widowed. This indicates that the majority of respondents are married. In terms of educational qualifications, the majority of respondents, 192 (65%), hold BSc/HND degrees. Those with MSc, Bed, or MBA degrees make up 56 (19%), while 44 (15%) have other degrees, and 6 (2%) possess PhD degrees. The job categories of respondents reveal that 192 (65%) are casual staff, 50 (17%) are middle management staff, 21 (7%) are senior management staff, 3 (1%) are directors, and 30 (10%) belong to other categories.

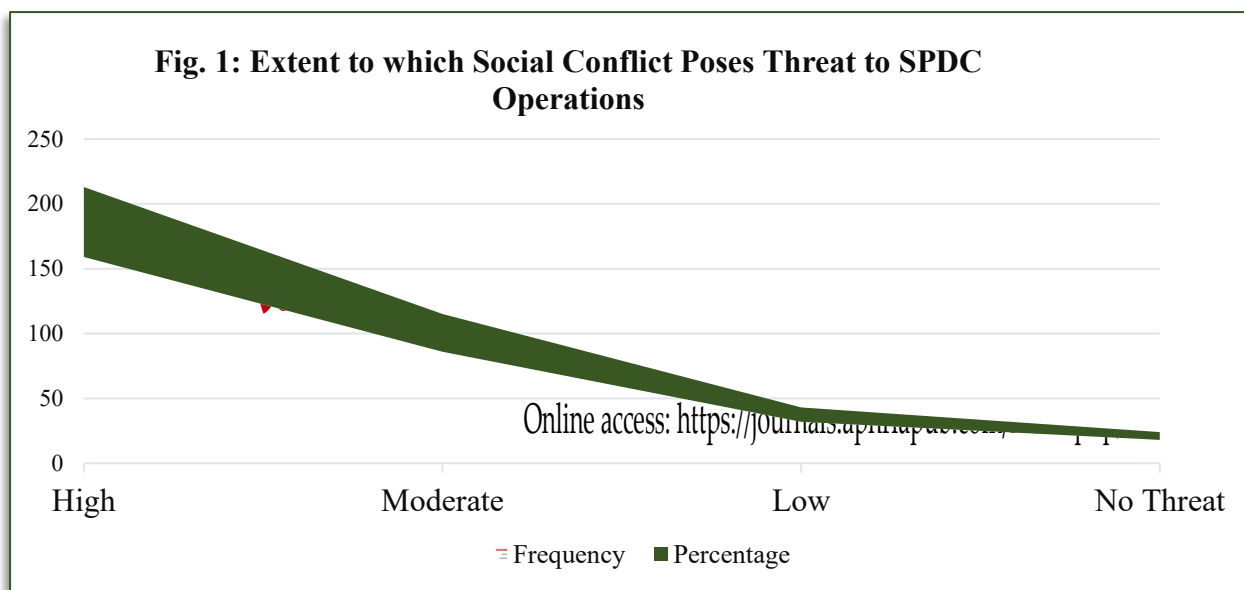**Fig. 1: Extent to which Social Conflict Poses Threat to SPDC Operations**

Fig 1 above shows data on the extent to which social conflict poses threat to SPDC operations in the study area. The data shows that 159(54%) of the said threat level is high as a result of social conflict, 86(29%) of them said moderate, 32(11%) of them said low, while 18(6%) of them said SPDC's operations are not under threat. The data largely supports the annualized production profile as compiled by SPDC. This is because, during the height of militancy and youth related insurgencies in the Niger Delta region or the pre-amnesty period, SPDC witnessed severe threat to her installations and personnel to the extent that production dropped significantly as evident in the chart below:
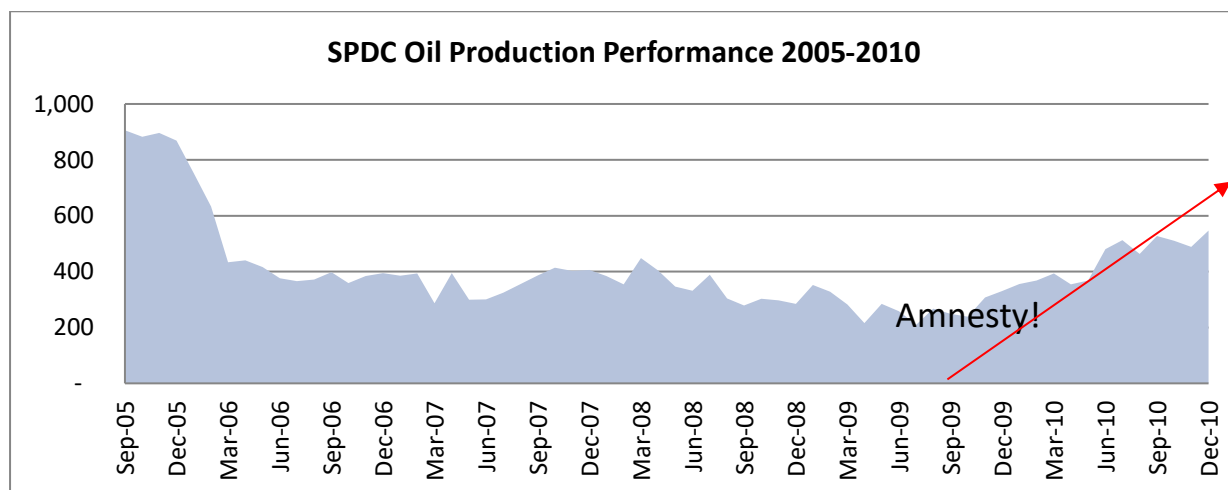


*Plate 1: Impact of Militancy on SPDC's Production. (Source: SCDMIS)*

The chart above is derived from the Sustainable Development Management Information System (SCDMIS) of SPDC. The data simply shows the progressive reduction in oil production performance of the company from 2005-2009 as a result of social conflict which took the form of militant uprising in the Niger Delta region. However, the upward looking red arrow in the chart indicates a reversal of the old

trend to a new production growth level resulting from the gains of the Federal Government Amnesty Programme for militants in the region.

The seriousness of the threat level of conflict to SPDC is tied mostly to some variables. The most significant of these, is the issue of footprint spread. In this regard, SPDC's footprint in the Niger Delta, is much wider when compared to other multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region. Hence, SPDC is far more exposed to threats resulting from social conflicts. Below is a map of the footprints of the case study organization.
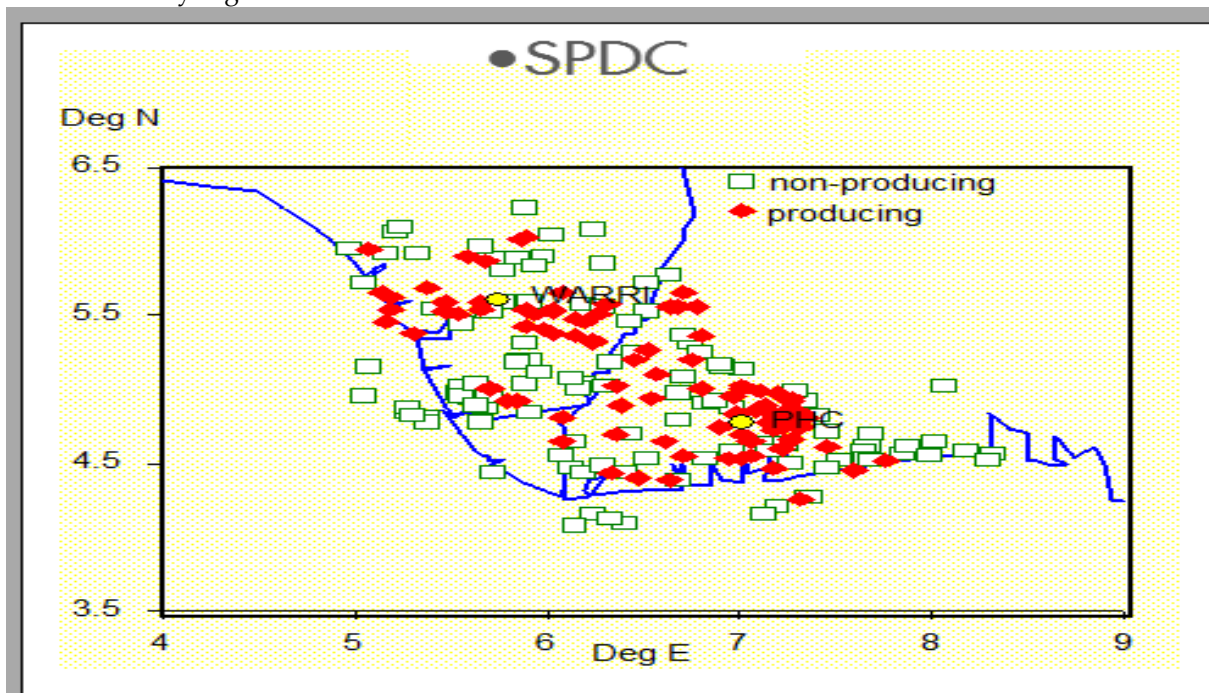


*Plate 2: SPDC Footprints in the Niger Delta Source: SDMIS, 2020 (red dots signify footprints)*

It is important to note that SPDC's vast operations in the Niger Delta exposes the company more to the social threats than any other oil producing company in the region. However, other reasons have been put forward as to why SPDC as a company experiences more hostilities than other companies in the region. Consequently, the understanding of the social environment in which these companies operate provided the push to find out how they cope with conflicts within their operational environment. This is presented in the chart that follows.

**Fig. 2: SPDC's Social Conflict Coping Strategy**

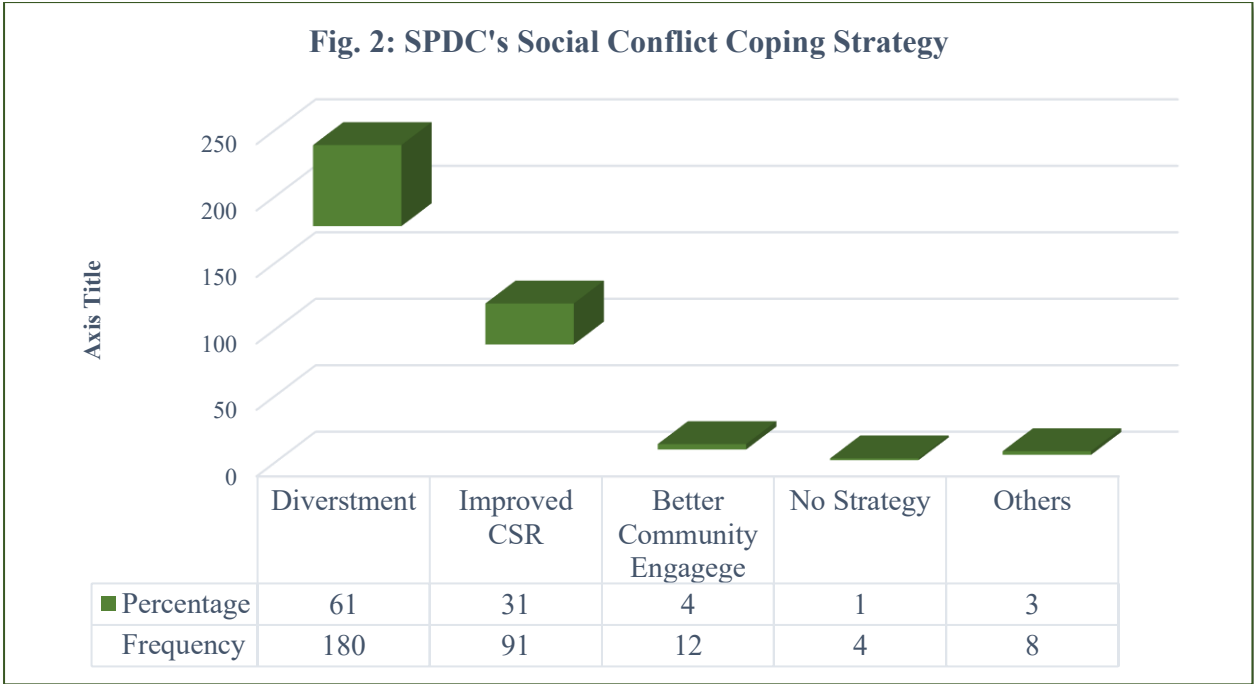| | Divertsment | Improved CSR | Better Community Engagege | No Strategy | Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ■ Percentage | 61 | 31 | 4 | 1 | 3 |
| Frequency | 180 | 91 | 12 | 4 | 8 |

Fig 2 above is a histogram that shows data on the coping strategies of SPDC in terms of managing social conflicts within its operational areas. From the chart, 180(61%) of the respondents said it is through divestment, 91(31%) of them said improved corporate social responsibility, 8(3%) said better community engagement, 8(3%) said there is no coping strategy, while 8(3%) said others. Drawing from the interviews to support this data, a significant number of the respondents who said improved CSR, point to the Shell Global Memorandum of Understanding (GMoU) as a community engagement strategy that enabled a good relationship between the communities and SPDC thereby providing the enabling environment for peace and production.

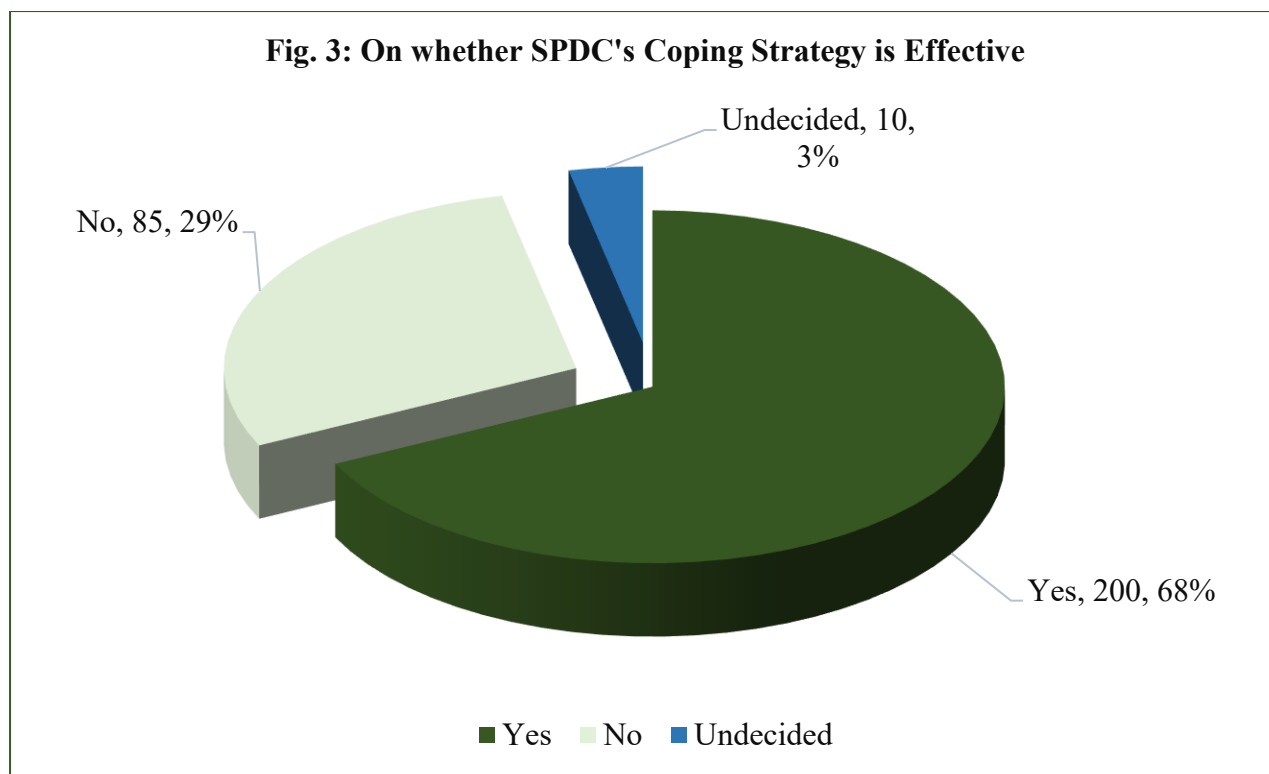**Fig. 3: On whether SPDC's Coping Strategy is Effective**



Fig 3 above shows data on the effectiveness of SPDC's social conflict coping strategy. The data reveals that 200(68%) of the respondents seem to agree that the existing coping strategy is effective, 85(29%) disagreed with this, while 10(3%) of them were undecided. This goes to show that the GMoU model of CSR and conflict resolution approach is an effective strategy in terms of mitigating social conflict in the company's operational areas especially when compared to past CSR paradigms or approaches.

**Discussion of Findings**

The first finding of the study, which is tied to the first objective, was presented in Fig 1 above. Based on the data, the results revealed that a significant number of respondents in SPDC 54% agreed that social conflict in their operational area has had high a threat level to the company's operations. In addition to this, discussions with top management respondents revealed a trend in coping strategies since the conflict in the Niger Delta region became overtly violent. For instance, top management workers drew attention to the fact that the high incidence of kidnapping of expatriate workers led to a strategy that ensured that all expatriates reside in the companies' residential area with heavy security guards usually made up of the Nigeria Armed Forces. Moreover, movement of expatriates is highly restricted as they are only officially encouraged to move from the residential area on company vehicles, with security, to offices and back to the residential areas which are heavily guarded by armed security men and watch dogs round the clock. According to the interviewees, this strategy helped to put some measure of positive constraints on the social life of the expatriates and reduced the incidence of kidnap and hostage taking which was a critical tool in the conflict.

Also, a few of the interviewees revealed what they consider a follow-up strategy to the one discussed above. According to them, measures were put in place to ensure that no SPDC vehicle is branded with any of the companies' logos or emblems. It is on record that community youths almost always attack vehicles that carry the companies' logo or emblem whenever they are sighted in the

community. This strategy of using vehicles without any company insignia has helped to conceal all SPDC staff whose operational capacity falls within the host communities' reach.

The study also found that coping strategies continually evolve as a result of changes in social conflict in the organizations operational areas. For instance, with regards to SPDC, the need for a paradigm shift to address CSR issues necessitated the emergence of the Global Memorandum of Understanding (GMoU) as the flagship of social investment and conflict mitigation. With this paradigm shift, social value creation moved from involvement mode to empowerment mode where communities take charge of their development needs. In other words, community participation became the entrenched in the community relations framework of SPDC. Although a significant proportion (61%) of the respondents point to the selling of assets under the divestment strategy as the major coping strategy adopted by the company especially in land area, the GMoU model seems to be the dominant theoretical and practical shift in strategy when social conflict is taking into consideration in SPDC.

However, the most effective model that the company (SPDC) has adopted to address massive destructions to its operations as a result of sustained agitations and social conflicts is the divestment model. The company has significantly sold its major onshore assets to several local firms with a shift in operational strategy to offshore production where it is believed that its operations would be safer. This approach is considered to be a more effective way of reducing adverse impacts of conflicts and social risks to the business of SPDC in the Niger Delta region.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

There is a general consensus that conflict in any society is ubiquitous. In other words, there is no society where conflict does not exist. However, the nature and scope of conflict and the measures for mitigating conflicts are relative. This is why there has to be consistent empirical research of this nature in order to undestand the many dimensions of social conflicts and the merging management frameworks or strategies in the quest to tackle such conflicts. In this study, there was a widespread understanding amongst respondents on the threat posed by social conflict to oil installations and personnel in Rivers State. This is because most of the respondents who participated in the study lamented the effect of community disturbances on production. Based on this, it is easy to conclude that social conflict poses significant threat to oil and gas industry operations in the study area. It is also the conclusion of this study, that coping strategies in terms of social conflicts by SPDC has mostly led to divestment despite the effectiveness of the GMoU framework. In other words,

*Recommendations (a)* Oil companies should continually provide the enabling environment for community members or all stakeholders located in their operational areas to make inputs in their corporate social responsibility plans. This would ensure that all interests are imbued into the CSR plan as a proactive measure to manage community expectations and concerns that could trigger violence and conflict. (b) As a follow-up to the first, there is the need to periodically engage communities on human and social capital development needs. This has the potential of acting as an early warning signal framework and an avenue to address emerging community needs before they degenerate into deep social conflicts. (c) Companies buying the assets of SPDC should adopt the GMoU model given its democratic character. Hence, the GMoU Model should be deployed in areas where it currently does not exist. Given that areas without GMoU recorded more social conflicts than areas with GMoU, it therefore means that the model is an effective grievance management framework that needs to be strengthened in their areas of operation. (d) Generally, youths are more involved in social conflicts in the host communities where SPDC operates. So, companies buying over SPDC's assets need to take cognizance of massive youth unemployment in these areas. As a result, there is the need for employment creation targeted at youths in order to gainfully engage them. This will ensure that their energy is channeled towards productive ventures rather than all kinds of insurgencies in the community.

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