Repositioning community groups for effective Covid-19 engagement to promote successful implementation of the clean-up exercise
OGONILAND

Repositioning community groups for effective Covid-19 engagement to promote successful implementation of the clean-up exercise

Stella Amani
SWAYA

Emem J Okon
KEBETKACHE

Michael Cowling
UNEP

Dr Simeon Sam Kabari
CEHRD
Fishermen no longer catch any fish and farmers no longer harvest. Extensive hydrocarbon contamination of soil, vegetation, ground and surface water has had a tremendous impact on the livelihoods of the Ogoniland residents.

The unbearable conditions that the Ogoni community members are forced to live in should not be inflicted upon anyone. It is comforting to know that United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), Kebetkache Women Development & Resource Centre, Kallop Humanitarian and Environmental Center, Society for Women and Youths Affairs (SWAYA), and Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development (CEHRD) are some of the organisations that share these sentiments.

To hasten the need for positive change in the community of Ogoni, IANRA prioritized the build-up to a webinar that was held on the 5th of March 2021. The objective was to expose the developments surrounding community involvement in the clean-up process. The number of attendees was a true sign of solidarity in the fight against women and female youth exclusion for the remediation project...a true sign that interested project stakeholders are advocating for positive change in Ogoniland.

Housekeeping rules were adhered to, under the leadership of the facilitator, Ms Emem Okon, the Executive Director, Kebetkache Women Development & Resource Centre. She then swiftly opened the floor, for IANRA Coordinator, Dr Wole Olaleye, to give background information about the clean-up project. In order to reach a broad spectrum of listeners and readers, the ‘#OgonilandOSRRWhatNow’ tag was adopted. OSRR abbreviated for Oil Spill Remediation & Restoration – striking the iron while it's hot, if you ask me.
Kicking off some of the burning issues surrounding the clean-up project was United Nations Environment Programme representative, Michael Cowling, who highlighted the following:

- UNEP environmental assessment in the region of Ogoniland was conducted in 2011. The assessment was well received by former President, Goodluck Ebele Azikiwe Jonathan.

- 34 oil pipeline spills were identified at the time and the number has increased, to date.

- The oil spills confirmed that there was illegal / artisanal refining taking place in the community of Ogoni.

- The profile of contamination was found to be quite deep, with severe damage to the soil, surface water and most importantly, health.

- Post the assessment by UNEP, infrastructure of communication was then set up, through the appointment of Community Liaison Officers.

- The initiative was undertaken in order to aid the Ogoni community members the ability to relay their grievances to the CLOs, whose mandate was to relay the grievances to HYPREP.

- To one’s dismay there is still an oil pipeline running through the Ogoniland region. This inherently escalates the number of oil spills and further exacerbates the opportunity for oil bunkering.

- These individuals tap into the oil pipeline and transport the oil elsewhere, where it is then sold internationally or refined locally.

Tackling the matter of women and female youth exclusion was Executive Director, Stella Amani from Society of Women and Youth Affairs (SWAYA) organization, who raised the following plights:

- The “Livelihood training” was initiated and implemented by HYPREP. The shocking revelation is that only 1200 women have been absorbed into the programme. SWAYA finds this number to be insignificant as the women and young female youth population is much greater in the community.

- Participation in the clean-up project is on the lips of every woman and female youth, yet their outcry is falling on deaf ears.

- Women are at the forefront of wanting to change the status quo in Ogoniland, as they are forced on a daily basis to collect polluted water which they utilize to complete their household duties.

- In essence, women are on the receiving end of the crisis in Ogoniland.
PUBLIC NOTICE

PROHIBITION!
CONTAMINATED AREA

PLEASE KEEP OFF

BY ORDER: HYDROCARBON POLLUTION RESTORATION PROJECT (HYPERP)
FEDERAL MINISTRY OF PETROLEUM RESOURCES
CONTACT: 08030064605
IANRA picked up on the following action steps to be taken for the clean-up:

- IANRA will continue to engage HYPREP and other project stakeholders.
- IANRA will continue to seek a clear work-plan for the clean-up exercise.
- IANRA will ensure that the “women and livelihood” training is according to women’s needs.
- IANRA will look into the issue of site abandonment.
- IANRA will ensure strong engagement on women’s participation.
- IANRA will look into the legislature for HYPREP and the clean-up exercise.

Placing the vital missing pieces to the puzzle was Dr Simeon Sam Kabari, from the Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development (CEHRD) organization, who reminded attendees about the important role that stakeholders play in seeing a project through to success.

The following were noted by the speaker:

- HYPREP needs to pay attention to all project stakeholders, those with low, medium and high influence and interest.
- HYPREP needs to improve their stakeholder mapping and ensure that all project stakeholders’ needs or queries are answered.
- The purpose of the remediation has to be clearly outlined to the community members by relevant parties.
- Community engagement will assist in understanding their needs.
- The community seeks to understand the reasoning behind low polluted sites being given priority.
- Political interference also remains a challenge and HYPREP has to find an amicable solution.
- However, communities are still optimistic that the process may meet their needs. It is to their strong belief that HYPREP will follow legislative processes in order for there to be a positive outcome for the project.
- Community and project-stakeholder engagement at the moment has not been successful.
The objectives that IANRA had set out for the webinar were greatly met, as the invited speakers further delved into the substance of the matters at hand, in Ogoniland. The Q&A session was vibrant and most certainly added the zeal for getting an insight into community concerns.

Some of the questions and concerns that were raised by the guests were the following:

- The reason/s for the prioritization of low-risk areas, rather than focusing on high-risk areas.
- The reason/s for the delay in commencing the clean-up exercise.
- The reason/s for excluding female youth participation.
- The reason/s for political interference.
- The reason/s for African countries not being included in the exercise.
- The reason/s for the non-existence of clean-ups in coastal areas of Nigeria, where the epicenter of oil spills exists.

The panelists responded accordingly to the individual questions/concerns that were raised and as one can distinguish, the community members of Ogoni are aware of activities happening around them. The panelists were able to provide clarity and restore transparency to the general public concerning the clean-up exercise. According to one of the delegates, the notion of “us and them” has to be abolished by project stakeholders. Indeed, a problem shared is a problem solved. IANRA resolved in knowing that project stakeholders will continue to be engaged, so that Ogoniland will be restored to its original state – a land that was once free from the shackles of oil spills.

At the end of the meeting Mr. Anthony Aalo, the Executive Director of Kallop Humanitarian and Environmental Center gave the closing remark and vote of thanks. In his remarks, he called on the Ogoni communities to stand up and speak for themselves at all times. He thanked the panelist and participants for their prompt acceptance to be part of the discussions, and urged them to give their support to better our community and the environment.