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HOW TO TRANSFORM THE LIVES OF 1.6 MILLION PEOPLE IN NIGERIA

Since 1997 Pro-Natura has managed a world-recognised participatory development process in the Niger Delta that started with the people living in the Akassa Region. Today, Akassa's model has generated what has been called 'An Attractive Revolution' which continues to grow.

The development of Nigeria's Akassa programme, situated on the coastal sand ridges, between the Atlantic and the mangroves of the Southern Niger Delta, is considered today one of the most successful models of sustainable development in the world.

Initiated in February 1997 and led by Bill Knight, the project evolved out of a partnership between Pro-Natura International (Nigeria) (PNI) and the BP/Statoil Alliance.

The partnership selected a community - in this case a remote and neglected coastal one – which could be greatly affected by a future oil spill, and implemented a community-driven sustainable development strategy.

Akassa, an area of coastal barrier islands located on Nigeria's south-western tip, was targeted through computer modelling, which predicted the potentially devastating consequences of an off-shore oil spill. Fifteen years later, Akassa is labelled by others as 'a haven of peace' and the home of 'an attractive revolution' www.pronatura-nigeria.org

Given the unique opportunity of working without outside interference, PNI began by implementing a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) programme that enlisted the direct involvement of the local population in the appraisal of their natural resources and assets. The PRA process, quite different from traditional 'top-down' developmental policies, proved to be a successful community awareness and mass mobilization exercise, out of which a genuine, community-based, gender-balanced and peace-promoting agenda was generated during a period of 9 months.



Boama Market: raised above flood level by the villagers, has a quay where visiting market boats tie up.

Local traders and shoppers travel by canoe.



Making nets: as everyone depends on fishing, good natural resource management is a matter of concern.

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This process deliberately considered the ideas and concerns of the often invisible or disregarded sectors of society including women, youth and ‘the poorest of the poor’ - in essence an exercise in democratic participation and community mobilization that produced a logical framework planning matrix and development plan.

The paramount elements of the matrix were inclusiveness, honesty and openness in agenda planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting. This plan included diverse projects such as agriculture, self-financed micro-credit, the creation of 18 health centres and a revolving Drugs Fund. All of this, and much more, attracted technical assistance and funding from within the community while also garnering outside multiple donor and other support, especially technical and mentoring assistance from VSO (Voluntary Services Overseas). The combination of technical assistance, funding and community involvement has produced a self-reliant and well-managed community.

This partnering process culminated in the implementation of a number of micro-projects proposed by the numerous interest groups, called ‘ogbos’, within the Akassa. These ‘ogbos’ were composed of groups of community members including women, youths and chiefs. With the required capacity building inputs from PNI, these projects were empowered with the appropriate knowledge that would allow institutional development.

The Akassa Development Foundation for democratic governance

Critical to this process was the development of an umbrella institution, under which these interest groups could operate effectively but which was also capable of representing their best interests by building businesslike partnerships with secondary stakeholders and thereby leveraging funding for the community as a whole. In due course, The Akassa Development Foundation (ADF), a corporate community-based organization was required to gradually take over PNI’s facilitating role and so allow PNI to exit.



Regular meetings of micro-credit ‘ogbo’ help build savings, capacity, trust and confidence and ensure repayments.



The Akassa Development Foundation Secretariat: provides technical support for community projects; services donor needs for monitoring, evaluation and financial reporting.



With the development of the community squarely placed on the community's own shoulders, the ADF now plays a coordinating role at every stage of the project cycle while also taking ownership of each completed project.

Capacity building remained at the heart of the development process in Akassa

An integrated development programme that tackled poverty, health and education, natural resources management and infrastructural needs was implemented at a grass roots level in this community where most local people had little or no formal education.

Additional skill-sets were needed at the ADF level, which would allow community representatives to interact responsibly, as a corporate body, with government, donors and the oil industry. PNI's training section, the Institute for Sustainable Development, supported the teaching of development skills by the Akassa community members to others from visiting communities. Today over 200 individual community members have benefited from this training across the Niger Delta.

The Akassa community has pioneered the paradigm shift in community development in Nigeria

The Akassa model was borne out of a desire to understand the fundamental challenges of sustainable development, or, in Prof. Robert Chambers' words: 'to upend the normal; to stand convention on its head; to put people before things, and *lowers* before *uppers*'.

First, PNI sought to question and find solutions to issues of how available developmental funding is spent in community development in under-represented and under-served communities.

Second, PNI questioned the feasibility of replicating this process, if given a different set of circumstances at local, national and international levels. With the help of PNI, the Akassa community has pioneered the paradigm shift in community development in Nigeria.



'Chief Oloh's Rest House' provides accommodation to visitors to Akassa's 'Living University'.



Chief Bill Knight, OBE, the creator and original driving force behind the PNI Akassa Development Program, now in New York, remains an active member of the Akassa National Council of Chiefs. Here he is joined by two of those chiefs.



The active participation of the ordinary people of Akassa in the decision-making process has spurred transparency, accountability and has engendered trust in their ability to manage their affairs through their own Community Development Foundation (CDF). The CDF model also allows for the registration of a community NGO as a corporate entity, a formality that begins to change the concept of poorer communities only ever being able to achieve an informal status.

The process has helped forge real partnerships, has built trust and confidence, has helped responsible new leaders to emerge and has empowered local ownership and management of development programmes.

The Akassa process is now helping over 1.6 million people

Fifteen years later, this is still being hailed as a tangible example of partnership success between Pro-Natura International and the Akassa people in their goal towards achieving sustainable development; it has inspired a number of similar programmes in 13 communities across four Southern Nigerian states helping over 1.6 million people and in 40 local governments areas in northern Yobe state. The success of the programme was fully acknowledged by the World Petroleum Council in South Africa and Madrid.

What has happened in Akassa has not been short of accolades, won locally as well as from the international community. Professor, J.G. Frynas¹, has likened it to 'best development practice' along the lines advocated by the World Bank or Oxfam¹.



Mr. Friday Idogiye Amain, Programme Coordinator at ADF.



Akassa Woman's Association has played a major role in improving Educational standards in Akassa. Here, a glimpse into a nursery school.

(1) Jędrzej George Frynas, "The False Development Promise of Corporate Responsibility", *International Affairs*, Vol. 81 , No. 3 (2005)

