

## ***Making communication work for the rural agriculture in the Niger Delta: the Global Citizen Journey experience***

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**Abstract.** Communication is not a panacea for the removal of constraints to rural agriculture. But when accompanied with vision, hard work, patience, persistence, great courage and above all trust, it does bring new understanding and resources for all involved. It can create committed farmers in the community better disposed to working and understanding one another while bridging cultural and economic differences. The Global Citizen Journey demonstrated the practicability of these in November 2005 when Members of this organization traveled to the riverine communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria to build the first friendship library in the region. The library, stocked with books (including agricultural books), computers, video and DVD players and soon to be provided Internet access is fast translating into a gateway for receiving and communicating with the world. The Global Citizen Journey's visit also opened up windows of agricultural opportunities; I, being an Agriculturist and delegate demonstrated to the rural women on how to grow and process cassava. This is now leading to the formation of a women cassava grower and processing group in the community. Another delegate also took the women through a session on how to practice fish farming and cattle rearing. Since after the journey, a web based yahoo group has been formed to continue the networking begun at the village. New communication channels are opening up for the rural agriculture in these communities, thus offering means for bridging the gaps between rural farmers, agriculture professionals and agricultural organizations

**Keywords.** Communication, vision, patience, persistence, courage, trust, rural agriculture, farmers, community, Global, Citizen, riverine, Niger, delta, Nigeria, library, books, cassava, agriculture

### ***Introduction***

Despite technological advancement in Information and Communication Technology all over the world, the riverine farmers in the Niger Delta of Nigeria still have poor access to information. The oil companies operating in the region do so with reckless abandonment, caring little for the environment their concern being to drill all the crude oil possible within the environment without giving anything substantial back, but rather leaving behind devastations, hunger, poverty, miseries, hopelessness and death. These environmental abuses have led to the Niger Delta people distrusting the Nigerian government, being hostile to the Oil companies and having disdain for non-governmental organizations who claim to have the solution to their problems. The environmental degradation also has led to the failure of many reconciliatory / developmental programs embarked upon in the past for the Niger Delta people. Executors of such programs usually are viewed with suspicions and there fore could not communicate their good intentions to the people who already perceived their projects as mere window dressing an insincere.

The Global Citizen Journey (GCJ) is a nonprofit organization with a vision of deep, ongoing connections that build understanding and bridge cultural differences with bonds of peace. The GCJ mission is to create opportunities for this to happen, especially in places like the Niger Delta, which is little known beyond their borders.

### ***The Niger Delta Puzzle***

According to GCJ (2005), Niger Delta is the seventh-largest oil-producing region in the world and an increasingly major supplier to the United States. A number of international oil corporations are drilling there, with few if any environmental controls. The environment has suffered significantly, with unburied pipelines leaching oil into the soil, natural gas flares polluting the air around the clock (Figure 1), and oil fouling the once fish-rich waters. The local population has also suffered.

Despite the region accounting for more than 75% of Nigeria's export earnings since 1975, it however remains the poorest region in the country (Wikipedia, 2006). Poverty and environmental issues have created unrest in the region. The livelihoods of the community, which were traditionally fishing based, are now being threatened as result of deterioration in fishing. Any effort geared toward finding lasting solution to the Niger Delta puzzle, must provide alternative means of livelihood for the people.



Figure 1. Gas flaring in the Niger Delta (courtesy of Leslye, 2006)

### **Distrust: Barrier to Effective Communication**

The Niger Delta communities lack information on how to cultivate their arable land for food and money, consequently, their arable land waste away all through the years. Meanwhile, the people live in penury, insecurity and misery every day. The people have kept on blaming the Nigerian government, the oil multinationals and the world superpowers for their predicaments. This has caused them to either withdraw into their shells or take up arms as self-defense in extreme cases. The oil multinationals do not help matters, as their only interest has been to drill all the crude oil possible in the region without giving anything substantial back. Governmental agencies and NGO's trying to resolve the puzzle through messages of hope, peace and development have all met with very little success. Their messages though well articulated have failed to touch the heart of the people, obviously due to communication barriers nurtured over time by distrust.

### **Building Bridges of Trust**

Before GCJ Executive Director Susan Partnow and GCJ Nigeria Director Mary Ella Keblusek visited the Niger Delta villages in September 2004 on a planning trip, Mr. Joel Bisina, GCJ host country Director and his team had already done the groundwork for the success of the trip. Partnow's visit heralded the foundation laying ceremony of the Niger Delta Friendship Library during which same period former warring communities of the Ijaws and the Itsekiris were brought to celebrate together. Partnow and Bisina first conceived the vision for the journey in November 2003 in the US, when the two first met in an international peace conference. In the spirit of oneness, understanding and conflict resolution their dream was coming to pass in their very eyes.

In the footsteps of Partnow and Bisina, members of the Global Citizen Journey in November 2005 traveled to the Niger Delta to resolve the puzzle there once and for all (Figure 2). As a member of the GCJ team to the Niger Delta, comprising of 19 Americans and 21 Nigerians, we lived in Oporoza, a village in the riverine region of the Niger Delta for one week working with the locals and communicating heart-to-heart with them. Our physical project was a regional library, the first public library in the entire region. We shared unique cultural gifts, learning from each other and finding the joy of common human ground. We also participated in dynamic workshops on compassionate listening, conflict resolution and other topics to promote cross-cultural communication and leadership development. We created relationships that extend the connections between individuals, villages and organizations beyond the trips themselves. We worked hard, sweated, danced and laughed in the face of many challenges and were moved to tears by the conditions in this region. We made deep connections and learned an enormous amount-about each other and our village hosts. The Niger Delta Friendship library was successfully completed and commissioned on November 28. The doors are opened and more than 1300 books-most of them brought by GCJ delegates in boxes and suitcases-are now available to the community (Figure 3, 4, 5 and 6). Current information exchange now takes place between these riverine villages and the rest part of the world.



Figure 2. A grand welcome for GCJ by the Women



Figure 3. The GCJ Delegates pose in front of the new library (courtesy GCJ, 2005)

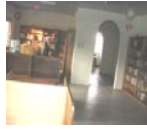


Figure 4. The Library reading section



Figure 6. The Library computer room

### ***Communicating Agriculture through GCJ***

As an Agriculturist and member of the GCJ team to the riverine of the Niger Delta, I observed that their land was very suitable for cassava cultivation (Figure 7, 8 and 9). Cassava is a hardy crop requiring very little input to grow. Cassava is also the major staple in the diet of most Nigerians including the Niger Deltans and is fast becoming an income-generating crop capable of eradicating poverty.



Figure 9. Healthy cassava plants in Oporoza, Niger Delta

Under the atmosphere of compassionate listening created by GCJ, the author taught and demonstrated to interested women members the art of cultivating, processing and marketing of cassava (Figure 10, 11 and 12). This currently is resulting in the formation of a cassava women group in the area. The Chairmen of both Oporoza and Warri South-west local government area also showed interest in the crop. In the same line, another delegate also took the women through a session on how to practice fish farming and cattle rearing, which generated a lot of interest and is now resulting in the formation of small cooperative groups in the community. Since, after the journey, a web based yahoo group has been formed to continue the networking begun at the village. New communication channels are now opening up for the rural agriculture in these communities, thus offering means for bridging the gaps between rural farmers, agriculture professionals and agricultural organizations.



Figure 11. Demonstration of manual processing of cassava to the women group



Figure 12. The author with the Cassava Women Group

### ***Compassionate Listening produces trust***

Compassionate listening is a tool for effective communication and reconciliation, based on a simple yet profound formula for conflict resolution: adversaries give each other the gift of listening. This in turn produces trust, understanding and cooperation for mutual benefits. Through this philosophy the GCJ has not only build a friendship library in the Niger Delta but also bridges of communication and understanding, with respectful and trusting relationships at every level of our dealings.

### ***Conclusion***

The GCJ messages of hope and self-development to the impoverished but yet misunderstood people of the Niger Delta have been accepted and digested with high degree of enthusiasm and joy; trust and hope is rekindled in the communities visited. As a result, new visions have been born; vision of cassava production, processing, and marketing, vision of animal rearing and vision of fish farming in the riverine communities. For the first time, a team of kind hearted American / Nigerian volunteers made possible effective communication between high government officials, local community leaders, and representative of the oil company winding into a further and deeper networking opportunities and co operations. The Niger Delta Friendship Library has thus become a symbol for new partnership for development not only in the riverine communities but also throughout the Niger Delta. The Global Citizen Journey's visit has opened up the hitherto dreaded creeks to the admiration of the world. Thus, the world for the first time is being made to experience the rich culture, resourcefulness and benevolence of the Niger Delta people. These in turn are producing better understanding and empathy for the people of the Niger Delta. All these happened because of the vision, hard work, patience, persistence, and great courage and above all trust of 40 ordinary people who were ready to take extra ordinary step. Definitely, the Niger Delta will never remain the same again.

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