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A B S T R A C T
The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Act of 1992 aimed to make the environment a central theme in development in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the extent of engagement with local cultures in the Nigerian EIA process is not statutorily guaranteed. While most EIAs in Nigeria have been for oil and gas projects in the Niger Delta, and have focused strongly on the biophysical environment, socio-economic and cultural aspects have remained marginal. The palpable neglect of community perceptions and cultural diversity in social impact assessment (SIA) in this region prone to conflict has tended to alienate the people in the decision-making process. Thus, despite claims to compliance with regulatory requirements for EIAs, and numerous purported sustainable development initiatives by international oil companies (IOCs), the region continues to face multiple sustainability challenges. This paper situates local perceptions and cultural diversity in participatory development and canvasses the integration of community perceptions and cultural diversity into SIA in the Niger Delta region. It is argued that doing this would be critical to ensuring acceptance and success of development actions within the context of local culture while also contributing to sustainable development policy in the region.

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1. Introduction
Following the discovery and exploitation of petroleum in the Niger Delta since the 1950s, the region witnessed the development of numerous oil and gas-industry related projects ostensibly with little regard to their consequences on the local environment, culture and socio-economy (Obi and Rustad, 2011). However, in apparent recognition of the place of the environment in development, resulting from the increasing global drive towards sustainability in the 1980s and beyond (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), some major oil companies in Nigeria initiated Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), the absence then of statutory requirements for EIA notwithstanding (Olokesusi, 1998). The Environmental Impact Assessment Act No. 86 was auspiciously decreed into being in 1992 by the military government of Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1992). This Act was, therefore, a landmark legislation that made it mandatory for certain categories of public and private projects to undergo the EIA process (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1992; FEPA, 1995; Echefu and Akpofure, 2003; Ogunba, 2004; Ameyan, 2008).

The Act also made provision for public involvement in the process of environmental decision-making (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1992; Federal Environmental Protection Agency, 1995; Adomokai and Sheate, 2004). In spite of this bold step which aimed to make the environment a central theme in development, early EIAs unfortunately paid scant attention to socioeconomic and cultural consequences of development action while social management strategies of likely consequences of development action seemed to have taken the back seat in the scheme of things (Olokesusi, 1998; Nwafor, 2006). Social impact assessment (SIA), though a relatively recent development in the impact assessment process in Nigeria, has continued to evolve rapidly as a sphere of activity (Akpofure and Ojile, 2003; Nwafor, 2006; Nzeadibe and Ajaero, 2010).

Yet, the extent of engagement with the local communities in SIA in Nigeria remains debatable while the process itself seems to have paid little regard to the views and participation of communities likely to be affected by development interventions (Echefu and Akpofure, 2003). Such engagement when it occurs, ’can assist in developing open, meaningful dialogue, and can influence decision making, build trust, legitimacy, capacities, address community concerns, manage expectations, tap local knowledge and negotiate mutually beneficial futures that are more sustainable and locally relevant’ (Franks (2012, p.10).

In the Niger Delta, recent anecdotal evidence suggests that the above situation may be changing, apparently forced largely by the diverse

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political economic ramifications of the region's petro-economy and implications of instability therein (see, for example, Watts, 2007; Obi, 2010; Zalik, 2004), and also the unprecedented desire of International Oil Companies (IOCs) in the Niger Delta, who under increasing pressure, litigations and scrutiny from the public, rights activists, NonGovernmental Organizations (NGOs) and the global media want to be seen as environmentally and socially responsible corporate citizens (Greenwood, 2007). Hence, the Niger Delta has undoubtedly become the region in which the greatest number of EIAs for development projects has been undertaken in Nigeria (see, for example, Silas, 2013; Shell Petroleum Development Company, 2014).

Regrettably, assessments of impacts of development projects in the oil and gas industry of Nigeria's Niger Delta region have tended to be predominantly oriented toward the biophysical environment while socio-economic and cultural aspects appear to occupy a subaltern position. While examination of the biophysical parameters tends to be amenable to more precise instrumental measurement, modelling and prediction, SIA remains a far cry even though issues of local perception and acceptance as well as cultural sensitivity are critical to success of development projects (Meredith, 1992). In this context, Shepherd and Bowler (1997, p.729) have argued that “even when the scientific characterization of risk is thorough, complexities persist because what is ‘acceptable’ depends on more than scientific criteria; acceptability depends on public perception”. Accordingly, projects being undertaken in areas prone to conflicts and violence such as the Niger Delta would require more meticulous and painstaking attention to issues of public receptiveness as shown in positive local perception and cultural sensitivity (Akpofure and Ojile, 2003; Nwafor, 2006; Nzeadibe et al., 2015). In other words, a people centred approach to development intervention, that is, development where people matter, needs to be taken on board in project execution. Unfortunately, this approach has been lacking in most EIA studies in the Niger Delta region. In the light of the above, the present study posits the need for incorporating the perceptions of communities and cultural sensitivity in SIA for development projects. This is anchored on one of the fundamental principles of development that ‘the existence of diversity between cultures, within cultures, and the diversity of stakeholder interests need to be recognized and valued’ and that ‘local knowledge and experience are valuable and can be used to enhance planned interventions’ (Vanclay, 2003, p.9).

While previous studies on the Nigerian petro-economy have alluded to the importance of community perceptions (Idemudia, 2007; Nzeadibe and Ajaero, 2010); it has not been central to any earlier studies. Reinforcing this observation, Idemudia (2011, p.178) has noted that, ‘the failure to pay attention to the “psychological contract” and to integrate community perceptions into the design and implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives has meant that oil multinationals companies (MNCs) are often unable to secure community support’. The present study attempts to build in both community perceptions and cultural sensitivity into the SIA process in Nigeria, arguing that the approach offers scope for local acceptance and successful project implementation outcomes. We now zero in on a conceptual clarification of the nexus between community perception, cultural diversity and participatory development using Nigeria’s Niger Delta region as a case study.

2. Community perception, cultural diversity and participatory development in Nigeria

Public participation is arguably the touchstone of effective social impact assessment (SIA) as it enhances the democratic content of development actions (Bond et al., 1999; Appiah-Opong, 2001; UNECA, 2005; O‘Faircheallaigh, 2010; Vanclay and Esteves, 2011). Indeed, Rega and Baldizzone (2015, p.160) acknowledged the role of public participation in reducing the likelihood of conflict by ensuring representation of different interests and values, and by promoting transparency in any intervention or project development undertaking. The Nigerian EIA process rightly provides for public consultation with a range of stakeholders as a statutory process and EIA will not be approved without going through it. Unfortunately, the extent of engagement with local cultures is not statutorily guaranteed (see Nwafor, 2006; Lawal et al., 2013; Silas, 2013). Since assessments of the social impacts of development activities are meant to be participatory (Akpofure and Ojile, 2003), seeking the views and active involvement of stakeholder communities would be positive since ‘EIA is not EIA without consultation and participation’ (Wood, 2002, p.277). To reinforce the need for public participation, Esteves et al. (2012) assert that SIA is now conceived as being the process of managing the social issues of development. According to these authors, “good SIA practice is participatory; it supports affected peoples, proponents and regulatory agencies; it increases understanding of change and capacities to respond to change; it seeks to avoid and mitigate negative impacts and to enhance positive benefits across the life cycle of developments; and it emphasizes enhancing the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged people” (Esteves et al., 2012: 34).

The Niger Delta region, the hub of the oil and gas industry in Nigeria, is inhabited by diverse vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. In spite of the sheer diversity of peoples and nationalities in the region, it is confounding to observe that cultural differences among communities are not adequately factored into development strategies and practices (Idemudia, 2014, p.161). Although Idemudia (2007, p.371) approvingly stated that there is widespread acknowledgment that community perceptions, expectations, and the sociocultural mores that inform these perceptions are central to the dynamics of conflict in the Niger Delta region, nonincorporation of such local values in project implementation in the region has tended to alienate local populations in the decision making process. Unfortunately, studies on community perceptions and expectations have been undertaken mainly in the context of social investments and corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices in oil and gas producing Niger Delta (Idemudia, 2014; Ojo, 2012); but, rarely as an important ingredient in participatory development, which could considerably facilitate project implementation. Thus, Appiah-Opoku (2001, p.70) observed that “the involvement of local people may also help the assessment team to understand local resource-use and nuances, and use local value sets to interpret, evaluate, and monitor project impacts on local communities”. Therefore, views and support of stakeholder communities are important if development projects are to be sustainable.

Taking a nuanced understanding of the basic issues in EIA, some authors such as Echefu and Akpofure (2003, p.72) have argued that “public participation in the Nigerian EIA process is not statutorily protected yet current realities have encouraged public involvement as the communities have become aware of the need to protect the environment…”. These authors nevertheless posit that ‘knowledge of the locality can enhance the EIA process’. Given the above scenario, the remarkable divergence of opinion concerning the extent of community involvement and nature of local perceptions in the EIA process in Nigeria’s Niger Delta is noteworthy. For example, Dadiowiei (2009) argues that communities in the Niger Delta have never been involved in the EIA process and as a result seem to have a poor perception of EIA; while Adomakoi and Sheate (2004) believe that community participation has increased and improved over the last two decades due to increased awareness, development of the EIA Act, better education and information sharing among all stakeholders (especially communities). In spite of these diametrically opposing viewpoints, the present study contends that assessments of socioeconomic and cultural consequences of development action on local communities, for good reason, deserve the highest level of priority just as has been applied to some health problems in Africa (CDI Study Group, 2010) and should therefore take on board the views and expectations of locals in decision-making if a successful outcome is to be expected. In this regard, the recent observation of Glucker et al. (2013) appears timely and apposite. These authors posit that ‘if no attention is being paid to the different views and expectations of participants, people’s willingness to participate may decrease which, in turn, may
negatively impact on the effectiveness of the overall assessment procedure’ (p.106).

But what perceptions do Niger Delta communities have about development projects and their local environmental resources likely to be impacted by oil-related development projects and how could such perceptions influence sustainable development policy in the Niger Delta? These questions are pertinent to the extent that while it may be argued that local perceptions often mirror reality, spatial behaviour of communities may rightly or wrongly be framed around those perceptions (Getis et al., 2008; Nzeadibe and Ajaero, 2010). Accordingly, perceptions would seem to be invariably linked to the cultural environment in which individuals and groups of people are born, develop or operate (Meredith, 1992). Indeed, community perceptions have often formed the basis for corporate–community engagement in the Niger Delta petro-economy (Idemudia, 2007, 2011; Nzeadibe et al., 2015). As Chindo (2015, p.5) has recently argued, ‘studying communities’ perceptions and beliefs are not an end in themselves; rather they are a means to developing resources and the communities’ potential contribution to decision making. Given Nigeria’s reputation with the oil curse, integrating communities’ perceptions of risks at the planning stage of project would improve social and environmental outcomes’. The need, therefore, to integrate community perceptions in participatory development cannot be overemphasized.

Similarly, improving social wellbeing of indigenous communities is often related to the quantum of efforts put into protecting and preserving their culture, the very essence of their existence, which such communities perceive as their heritage and wealth, for which economic valuation is almost impossible. Hence, the value of a people’s culture to their lives and development is incalculable while any attempt at defilement of the culture in the process of development or perception thereof often elicits a backlash resulting in projects stymied by community problems, violence or litigations. On the other hand, many Nigerian communities are known to be emotionally and spiritually connected and committed to their cultures and would feel threatened or abused when their hallowed cultural practices are desecrated or when their cultural institutions are not given due respect (Nzeadibe and Ajaero, 2010). According to UNESCO (2011, P.3), “there are things that we regard as important to preserve for future generations. They may be significant due to their present or possible economic value, but also because they create a certain emotion within us, or because they make us feel as though we belong to something – a country, a tradition, a way of life”. These are known as cultural heritage. Such things “might be objects that can be held and buildings that can be explored, or songs that can be sung and stories that can be told. Whatever shape they take, these things form part of a heritage, and this heritage requires active effort on our part in order to safeguard it” (UNESCO, 2011, P.3).

Unfortunately, however, the present study observes that issues of cultural sensitivity and diversity have eluded previous socioeconomic impact studies of new investments in Nigeria’s Niger Delta. These previous studies do not seem to have adequately integrated practices recognizing and sensitive to local culture and priorities in the project area. Hence, despite the conduct of purportedly robust and sophisticated impact assessments, local perceptions and cultural practices and sensitivities are often ill considered in such assessments (See, Echefu and Akpofure, 2003; Nwafor, 2006).

Taking cognizance of the multiple sociopolitical and development problems associated with oil and gas activities in the region, the case is being made for integrating community perceptions and cultural diversity in SIA of qualifying development projects if such interventions aim to be sustainable. It is based on the premise that with the current emphasis on sustainability of development, social impacts need to be treated as priority as the nonattainment of the social pillar of sustainability can in many ways affect the achievement of the economic and environmental pillars1. More importantly, with the recognition of cultural diversity as the fourth pillar of sustainability (UNESCO, 2001), integrating cultural diversity into SIA would not only be appropriate but also go a long way in ensuring local acceptance of development actions, within the context of culture, which itself is regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs (UNESCO, 2001).

The nexus between cultural diversity and participatory development has been clearly articulated by UNESCO (2001, p.4) which argues that cultural diversity is a factor in development and that cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. It, therefore, becomes one of the roots of development understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also, as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence. Accordingly, Meredith (1992, p.126) opines that, “local values and aspirations must be embodied in any vision of development and that ‘sustainability is impossible where indigenous populations are dispossessed, forcibly dislocated, or disenfranchised”. In this vision, cultural diversity is the fourth policy arm of sustainable development. Arguably, integrating cultural sensitivity in development projects offers scope for protection of cultural heritage of local communities, which will go a long way in reducing conflict with a consequent trickledown effect on the three other pillars of sustainability.

This study examines this presupposition using thirty (30) agrarian communities in Niger Delta of Nigeria facing imminent oil and gas development activities, which promise to be revolutionary to their socio-cultural environment.

3. The study area

3.1 Scope

The area covers the two (2) states of Imo and Rivers. Between these two states, a total of five (5) Local Government Areas and thirty (30) communities make up the Project area. This comprises eleven (11) communities in Ohaji/Egbema LGA and one (1) community in Owerri West LGA of Imo State. In Rivers State, the Project area encompasses ten (10) communities in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni (ONELGA) LGA, seven (7) communities in Emohua (EMOLGA) LGA, and one (1) community in Ahoada East LGA. The communities are within the Assa North–Ohaji South Gas Development Project. This project is a $3.5 billion gas plant aimed at boosting power generation in Nigeria. The project comprises Imo state axis (Primary Treatment Facility (PTF)/Field Logistic Base (FLB)) and Rivers state axis (Pipeline communities). Fig. 1 is a map showing the Niger Delta as a geopolitical region in Nigeria according to the Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004).

3.2 Method

Prior to the field data collection, contacts were established and discussions initiated with the communities through their Community Liaison Officers/Speakers of Community Government Councils (CCGs). In carrying out this social impact assessment (SIA), participatory methodologies were extensively utilized. The mixed but complimentary methods of data collection employed in the study include Consultation visits to Key Stakeholders, Key Informant Interviews, Community Fora,

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1 This view was expressed by James C. Nwafor, Professor of Geography and Executive Director of Environment & Development Policy Centre for Africa (EDPCA), Enugu, Nigeria, in an interview held at Agura Hotels Abuja during panel review of EIA of Centena City Project, Abuja (24–27 August 2014). Nwafor is also author of the book Environmental Impact Assessment for Sustainable Development: the Nigerian Perspective.
in the communities and Household Questionnaire Survey using Strategic Random Sampling. Obvious advantages are derived from mixing methods in a participatory research (Dunning et al., 2008; Mason, 2006; Creswell et al., 2006; De Lisle, 2011).

Painstaking efforts were made to identify and consult relevant stakeholders. Primary Stakeholders comprise Local Councils, traditional rulers, cabinet chiefs, Community Development Committees (CDCs), community elders, men, women and youths. Secondary stakeholders are made up of Imo and Rivers State Governments respectively, representatives of Federal and State Ministries of Environment, representative of Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR), project proponents, EIA consultants and experts. Consultations for the Assa North-Ohaji South EIA project involved key stakeholders meeting and Group Discussions in the host communities. Consultation processes in these communities involved sensitization of Imo and Rivers state governments on the proposed project through letters to the offices of the Executive Governors, sensitization of the affected Local Government Councils through letters to the office of the Honourable Chairmen, involvement of the Imo and Rivers States liaisons and the Federal Ministry of Environment in the field work, and consultation and participation of identified project communities in field data gathering process. Plate 1 and Plate 2 show evidence of stakeholder consultation and engagement in the Niger Delta communities. Consultations in these communities were held at meetings with all stakeholders being present. A representative of the project proponent gave the key note address and intimated the people of the proposed project and the EIA processes. During these fora, opportunity was given for questions and concerns to be raised by communities. All questions and concerns were properly addressed by the project representative and consent was given for the communities to be assessed.

During the conduct of the study, representatives of communities and other interest groups participated in scoping exercise for setting the research agenda and approach. In addition, CGC/CDC representatives and community youths were incorporated into the research team for data collection. During community fora and Group Discussions, different groups in the community such as Women, Traditional Ruling Council (TRC) and Youths robustly engaged and interfaced with the SIA team. This gave communities opportunity to raise their concerns about the project, while some of their fears regarding the likely consequences of the project were allayed in the process.

Data collection was in two phases dictated by accessibility of communities due to the flooding experienced in some of them during the 2012 flood disaster in Nigeria. The first phase of the data gathering...
exercise was from October 2012. In the first phase, twenty-five (25) communities in Imo and Rivers states were accessed while five communities namely Obrikom, Okpurukpu-Ali, Okansu, Ogbogu and Obor communities in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni LGA (ONELGA) could not be accessed as a result of the flooding. Eventually, these communities were accessed during the 2nd phase of data gathering in November 2012 when the floods had receded. Appendix 1 shows the communities visited during the SIA study, while Appendix 2 summarizes the socio-demographic characteristics of LGAs in the study area. Appendix 2 shows the similarities in some key social indicators among the study communities. It is argued that since the communities have similar socio-demographic and environmental characteristics, they are also likely to have similar development status and needs, while also likely to experience similar impacts on their sociocultural life following the implementation of development activity of this magnitude (Nzeadibe et al., 2015). Participants at the Group Discussions included Traditional rulers (Ezes), Community Development Committee (CDC), Opinion leaders, men, women, and youth representatives. The various interest groups were presented with the details of the socio-economic study and with their consent the participants’ names, contacts, occupations, and positions in the community were documented. During the Group Discussions, relevant issues and questions on socio-economic variables were raised and answers solicited from the participants according to their relative positions in the community and levels of knowledge. Essentially, socio-economic issues raised included their way of life (socio-cultural), economy (main occupations and sources of income), and available social infrastructures among other issues. Traditional governance and conflict resolution mechanisms as well as the role of women in community development also came under focus. During these visits, the researchers were notified of cultural sensitivities and taboos of local communities. The researchers participated in the project both as independent practitioners in the SIA and as scholars in evaluating the process and outcome. The research team comprised geographers who specialized in environmental/community management and population studies, and also archaeologists trained in SIA, cultural tourism, and cultural resource management. Their knowledge of corporate-community engagement occasioned by ill-conceived development projects is imperative for strangers working in local communities to be familiar with and respect cultural sensitivities and perceptions of communities is imperative for social acceptance of development projects.

4. Results

4.1. Indigenous perceptions of socio-cultural and natural resources

Communities in the area are made up of predominantly Christians (96%) who belong to various orthodox and Pentecostal denominations. A significant number of persons, however, practised African Traditional Religion (ATR). Autochthonous cultures are especially vulnerable to unwelcome sociocultural modification occasioned by ill-conceived development activity. Additionally, burial grounds, rivers and forests are held sacred by the natives. Non-natives living or working in the area may not be conversant with traditional religious practices and rules on shrines and so may inadvertently break traditional religious rules by engaging in culturally unacceptable behaviour. Thus, the need for communities in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni LGA (ONELGA) could not be accessed as a result of the flooding. Eventually, these communities were accessed during the 2nd phase of data gathering in November 2012 when the floods had receded. Appendix 1 shows the communities visited during the SIA study, while Appendix 2 summarizes the socio-demographic characteristics of LGAs in the study area. Appendix 2 shows the similarities in some key social indicators among the study communities. It is argued that since the communities have similar socio-demographic and environmental characteristics, they are also likely to have similar development status and needs, while also likely to experience similar impacts on their sociocultural life following the implementation of development activity of this magnitude (Nzeadibe et al., 2015). Participants at the Group Discussions included Traditional rulers (Ezes), Community Development Committee (CDC), Opinion leaders, men, women, and youth representatives. The various interest groups were presented with the details of the socio-economic study and with their consent the participants’ names, contacts, occupations, and positions in the community were documented. During the Group Discussions, relevant issues and questions on socio-economic variables were raised and answers solicited from the participants according to their relative positions in the community and levels of knowledge. Essentially, socio-economic issues raised included their way of life (socio-cultural), economy (main occupations and sources of income), and available social infrastructures among other issues. Traditional governance and conflict resolution mechanisms as well as the role of women in community development also came under focus. During these visits, the researchers were notified of cultural sensitivities and taboos of local communities. The researchers participated in the project both as independent practitioners in the SIA and as scholars in evaluating the process and outcome. The research team comprised geographers who specialized in environmental/community management and population studies, and also archaeologists trained in SIA, cultural tourism, and cultural resource management. Their knowledge of corporate-community engagement occasioned by ill-conceived development projects is imperative for strangers working in local communities to be familiar with and respect cultural sensitivities and perceptions of communities is imperative for social acceptance of development projects.

Land is a resource on which most development activities take place. The practice of acquisition of land across the study area is predominantly by inheritance from family land. Inheritance of land is patrilineal. Men generally own property but it was noted that women (wives) were allowed to own property such as farmlands, livestock, houses and cars provided they had the permission of their husbands to do so. In all the LGAs, at least 55% of the respondents got their land through inheritance. Apart from inherited land, the next most common means of land acquisition in the LGAs is by buying the land. It should be noted that traditionally, right of ownership of a parcel of land is accorded to the buyer not only when the value of the land in money is paid to the assignor or donor; but also, when the assignee fulfills all cultural rites associated with land transfer of ownership. Except for Ahoada LGA, at least 20% of respondents from each of the other LGAs indicated that they bought some of the parcels of land they presently own. Fig. 2 shows the pattern of land acquisition in study LGAs.

4.2. Natural resources and uses

A number of plant species encountered during the fieldwork are known to have significant economic importance. Such plants produce edible fruits, food crops, palm oil, palm wine, medicine and herbal remedies and materials for roofing of houses. Some root and tree crops produce various substances which serve as inputs in the production of consumer and industrial goods demanded locally and internationally. They include plantain (Musa sapientum), yam of different species (Dioscorea spp.), cocoyam (Colocasia esculenta), mango (Mangifera indica), maize (Zea mays), pineapple (Ananas comosus), oil palm (Elaeis guineensis), rubber (Hevea brasiliensis), cashew (Anacardium occidentale), orange (Citrus sinensis) and coconut (Cocos nucifera). In addition, these crops serve as sources of food and nutrition for the inhabitants. This study also notes the numerous species of mammals such as monkeys, rabbits, grass cutters, antelopes and bush pig on land, and fish,
shell fish, periwinkles and crabs in the streams and rivers in the study area. These resources provide sources of food and revenue for the people in the area. Despite the fact that nature reserve is abundant in the area, poaching and indiscriminate felling of trees for cooking, building and fuel purposes have depleted the forest and the fresh water bodies in some of the communities. Evidence of lumbering activities, hunting and sacrifice by adherents of ATR was seen at a number of places such as the banks of the Nwagbakobi River.

4.3. Perception of importance of resources at state levels

It has been argued that awareness and perceptions of environmental resources often shape action or inaction on the resource (Nzeadibe and Ajaero, 2010). Perception of importance of resources is a reflection of how the communities would view tampering with such resources especially with regard to locally unacceptable practices likely to be associated with the proposed oil and gas development activities. Consequently, it is desirable that any developmental activity would manage such resources cautiously and meticulously in cooperation with the communities to avoid resentment and violence from affected communities.

Findings of the study show that in both states, about 45% of respondents view forest resources as the most important environmental resource. Fig. 3 shows perception of importance of cultural resources in the study area, while Fig. 4 gives details of community perceptions of the relative importance of environmental resources in Imo and Rivers States.

5. Discussion

The perception of the importance of environmental resources across the LGAs follow the same pattern as that of the State-level perception of these resources. From Fig. 3, it can be seen that forest resources are the more valued across the study area, while animals and ancestral sites are less valued. This is probably because the communities are agrarian, where heavy reliance is placed on land resources for sustenance by community members. On the other hand, ancestral sites are more of resources or investments for the state in the areas of tourism and cultural heritage management and are perceived to provide little direct material benefits to individuals in the communities. From Figs. 3 and 4, it is apparent that communities place value on the environmental and cultural resources and may be hard pressed to give up such resources since the livelihood of a significant number of people in the study area depends on these resources. Thus, development activities perceived as intrusive or invasive that have the potential to damage or significantly degrade or reduce the value of these resources would usually not be welcome. This is the context in which project proponents need to appreciate community perception of their sociocultural and environmental resources and take steps to protect and enhance them. Local knowledge is essential to maintaining a balance between preservation of cultural values and development. A commitment to sincerity, environmentally responsible, culturally sensitive and socially responsive project execution will go a long way in avoiding and/or reducing the tensions usually associated with the execution of projects of this nature in the Niger Delta region.

5.1. Community perceptions of socio-environmental problems and quality of life (QoL) expectations

The need to integrate community perceptions and QoL expectations in social impact assessment projects in the oil and gas sector in Nigeria has been canvassed (Nzeadibe and Ajaero, 2010). As Kitchen and Muhajarine (2008) pointed out, there has been growing interest in applied quality of life research and involving the community in the research process with the ultimate goal of improving the social and economic circumstances of people. With this in mind, views of community members were sought regarding the proposed development project. Commonly perceived environmental problems in the area include soil erosion, rainstorm, gas flaring, acid rain leading to corrosion of roofing sheets, excessive heat due to gas flaring, soil infertility, water and air pollution, oil spillage and indiscriminate dumping of waste, loss of biological resources, including wildlife as well as impact on the domesticated livestock in the area.
On the other hand, numerous social problems exist across most communities in the project area. Common social problems, which were reported during the fieldwork ranges from youth restiveness and unemployment, stealing, poverty, juvenile delinquency, land disputes, inter-family feud to chieftaincy disputes, inter-communal clashes and prostitution.

Similarly, issues were raised regarding possible social problems that the project may generate in the area with their attendant negative consequences. Some of the issues related to the perception that Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between company and communities may not be honoured by the company and that the company may introduce “divide and rule” system so as to polarize the communities. Unequal treatment of communities in provision of amenities, pollution of land, air and water as well as soil infertility with consequent decline in crop yields/harvest was also identified community concerns.

Also, youth restiveness (if MoU is not adequately implemented), gas blow-out leading to fire outbreak and threat to life and property, corrosion of roofing sheets from gas flaring, desecration of sacred sites and groves across communities, and permanent loss of family land and livelihoods arising from land take, violation of traditional values and culture especially their festivals and other forbidden activities and places in communities by expatriates and non-indigene on the staff of project proponent as well as proliferation of social vices and negative foreign cultures are similarly perceived as likely socio-environmental problems in the study communities. Again, increased pressure on social and economic systems that would exceed their carrying capacities, increased incidents of road accidents arising from increase in traffic and conveyance of heavy duty equipment, inadequate compensation for loss of land, economic trees and other resources were also believed as likely consequences of the proposed development action.

5.2. Quality of Life (QoL) expectations of communities

Despite these perceptions of environmental and social problems by communities concerning the proposed gas development project, optimism was, however, expressed regarding the benefits of the proposed project to the communities. QoL expectations of project communities as expressed by members of the communities during group discussions centred mostly on the following major themes: provision of gainful employment for the teeming unemployed population in the area; stimulation of socio-economic development with provision of infrastructures and ancillary services, availability of micro-credits and seed capital to farmers and entrepreneurs, human development programmes in the form of youth training on skills acquisition and educational opportunities/scholarships for more employment of youths in the oil and gas industry.

5.3. Cultural heritage/property of the study communities

Cultural heritage is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values. Cultural heritage is often expressed as either intangible or tangible cultural heritage (ICOMOS, 2002). Cultural heritage can also be viewed as the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or community that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. Cultural property, on the other hand, deals only with the physical or tangible cultural heritage of a society. Cultural heritage distinguishes between tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage. Tangible cultural heritage includes historic buildings/towns, monuments, landscape, works of arts, artefacts, etc. Intangible cultural heritage consists of folklore, language, knowledge, traditional performing arts (theatre, music, dance), traditional handicrafts, traditional food, oral traditions and other aspects of human activity.

This study found that communities in the study area are rich in intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and values. In most of the communities, different festivals are celebrated and quite a number of items are considered sacred or tabooed. Various shrines and sacred groves also exist. A word about the cultural import of sacred groves is important at this point. According to Ormsby (2012, p.1), “sacred groves are forested sites that have cultural or spiritual significance. They exist around the world and represent a long-held tradition of community management of forests. While most sacred sites are not tourist destinations, tourism may represent a method to provide additional protection for sacred sites, including revenue to help with management and conservation. Tourism can celebrate the cultural aspects of the site, in the case of cultural heritage tourism, or ignore them as is often the case with mass tourism”. Taboos also perform social control functions in the communities and helps in maintenance of orderly community life.

The significance of cultural resources lies in their quality of life contributions to the region: they are seen as places of quietude, safety and communing with ancestral spirits and by default, such places are wildlife sanctuaries and conservation areas because some human activities such as agriculture, construction and urbanization are prohibited in the areas. Although individuals may visit such places, they are often not allowed to hunt animals or harvest crops found in the groves. In other words, the groves act as protected areas based on cultural norms and mores.

Historical buildings and artefacts are also included in the category of cultural property. Plate 3 shows a historic building requiring rehabilitation at the palace of Nye Nwe Ali in Egbeda/Ulimini community. This building has been inhabited by many generations of traditional rulers and is a repository of cultural artefacts, which have been preserved over several generations and as such may qualify to be declared a monument by the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM). In addition, several cultural festivals are celebrated in the area. These festivals help to strengthen social cohesion and values, providing opportunities for social interactions in the process (Nzeadibe and Ajaero, 2010). These include traditional wrestling festivals and football competitions, which are entrenched cultural activities and are held annually. Appendix 3 presents the ICH and cultural resources of the study communities and their socio-cultural significance in the Niger Delta.

A look at the presentation in Appendix 3 shows that similar festivals are celebrated across communities further accentuating the strong kinship and social ties among them. This indicates that these localities share great affinity in terms of ethnic and genealogical connections. Another observation that should be pointed out here is that both Christians and non-Christians celebrate these festivals. Such festivities engender a...
strong sense of social cohesion and community which is highly valued in the study area.

5.4. Significance of the community square as cultural heritage

Many of the communities visited have a place of congregation of the community members. A word on the import of community square in study communities is pertinent at this point. Community square is sometimes a place of religious worship, refuge, recreation, reflection and general appreciation of nature away from the sweltering tropical weather conditions. The square is often adorned with a canopy of trees which are frequently old and have some history behind them that serve as shed away from the sun. It is a sort of ‘community commons’, which any member of the community or even strangers are free to use and enjoy. It often serves as a mini market where petty trading activities could take place. As a place to commune with the ancestors, community members often frown at acts that desecrate the community square such as open defaecation or waste disposal. As such, community members take turns to periodically sweep and clean the square and its surroundings. Community square is also a place for convergence of Annual Women’s August gatherings\(^2\) and also a meeting place during community fora otherwise known as Aladimma in some Niger Delta communities. Aladimma refers to the community forum which sees that there is order in the land. Aladimma is for this reason the highest political and social forum for Igbo-speaking communities of the Niger Delta, where important decisions regarding the governance and welfare of the community are taken. It comprises all adult males and sometimes females of the native community and is led by the elders drawn from the heads of the family units, who act as official representatives of their family groups. For a more detail examination of the role of the Aladimma Institution in conflict resolution and traditional governance and justice dispensation in communities of Niger Delta see Njoku (2008). In other words, the community square serves to improve the quality of life outlook of communities. Plate 4 shows the oldest man in Obile community blessing kolanuts presented to SIA team as part of cultural heritage and sign of traditional hospitality at the community square.

6. Conclusions

This study has argued about the relevance of community perceptions and diversity of cultures in the assessment of socioeconomic impact of development activities as distinct from CSR in the oil and gas industry in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The study argues that integrating community perceptions and cultural diversity in SIA will not only enable IOCs to secure their social licence to operate (SLO), i.e., the ongoing acceptance and approval of a mining development by local community members and other stakeholders that can affect its profitability (see, for example, Thomson and Boutilier, 2011; Prno, 2013; Prno and Slocombe, 2012; Moffat and Zhang, 2014; Owen and Kemp, 2012), and will also build positive corporate–community relations with trickle down effects on conflict prevention and sustainability of development (Idemudia, 2014).

Given Bice and Moffat’s acknowledgement of the substance of SLO to include cultural sensitivity, the present study notes also the role of SLO in managing community relations and perceptions as shown in research unravelling a critical link between SLO and SIA (Bice and Moffat, 2014). Hence, this research is an effort to integrate the concepts of community perceptions and cultural diversity within an overarching sustainable development paradigm (Bice, 2014) in a region characterized by poor socioeconomic and infrastructural development, violence and conflict arising from perceived inequities in the governance of petro-resources, and unmitigated environmental degradation (Nzeadibe et al., 2015). Thus, in order to ensure that the fourth pillar of sustainable development is attained in the region, the study is of the view that regular and sincere communication with communities can be an effective way to counter negative perceptions. Issues of disclosure and openness by companies are important in building sustainable partnerships and mutual trust and these should be taken on board in dealing with communities. This will facilitate the prevention of conflicts with host communities while also benefitting its corporate image. Again, social sustainability influences the drive towards economic and environmental and companies want to be seen as socially responsible and responsive to the needs of projects communities with the communities receiving the proposed project on a positive note and looking forward to a mutually beneficial relationship with the proponent on the project.

It would appear that most of the communities were receptive of the project and showed great enthusiasm to partner with the proponent to realize the project. However, they were cautiously optimistic about the proponent given some of their recent experiences with the company. We posit that it would help in a tremendous way the company’s corporate image recovery drive if they engage in frank and open discussions with stakeholder communities and if they steadfastly implement any agreements they freely enter into. Again, the proponent should endeavour to sustain the communication line with communities and ensure that community concerns are given priority attention in the implementation of the project. This could build more confidence between the communities and the company and would ultimately benefit both for sustainable development.

Cultural heritage of communities are the very essence of their existence; they must, therefore, be thoughtfully managed if it is to survive in an increasingly globalizing region where impacts of instability in the region on the global political economy of oil can be significant. To achieve this, the researchers advocate for a true partnership between communities and company; and this can only occur if all sides develop a genuine appreciation for each other’s aspirations and values. As such, company needs to acquire an awareness of cultural heritage management concepts, ideals and practices; and must endeavour to comprehend the complex phenomenon of cultural property and its modus operandi. Therefore, through mutual understanding, both can build on their shared interest with a view to achieving sustainable development.

Lastly, it will make corporate–community relations sense for companies to invest in programmes to evaluate from time to time community perceptions in the Niger Delta. As has recently been argued, community perceptions are not constant; therefore their measurement needs to be

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\(^2\) For more discussion on the sociological and cultural relevance of Women’s August meetings in Nigerian communities, see, for example, Odoemene (2011).
undertaken on a regular basis and seen as an ongoing corporate activity (Idemudia, 2014, p. 161). This study has canvassed incorporating local perceptions as strategy to tackle the social impacts engendered by oil and gas activities. It is further noted that “development processes which are not founded upon local knowledge and ‘ways of being’ counteract sustainability by relying on external models and methods that may be inappropriate to the local cultural landscape” (UNESCO, 2001, p.54). In conclusion, this study avers that integrating local knowledge, cultures and perceptions in SIA will ensure local acceptance of the planned developments while also contributing to the formulation of sustainable development policy in the Niger Delta region.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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