

Effective Corporate Social Responsibility (Csr) Delivery as Panacea for Restiveness and Conflict in The Niger Delta: Role of The Mass Media



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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta has been a cauldron of restiveness and violent conflicts. Most of these conflicts result from the failure of the multinational corporations operating in the region to adequately discharge their Corporate Social Responsibility to the people. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the issue of Corporate Social Responsibility as the panacea for the restiveness and conflict in the region as well as the crucial role the mass media have to play in assisting the corporate organisations to effectively discharge their obligations to the people. It is propounded here that failure to disseminate relevant information in this regard has led to mistrust and misunderstanding which eventually culminate in restiveness and conflict. The role of the media is therefore equally examined. The paper discovers that the media are constrained in the performance of this role. These constraints are presented and ways of tackling them are proffered.

KEY WORDS: Conflict, Corporate Social Responsibility, Development, Mass Media, Niger Delta, Nigeria, Restiveness,

INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta refers to the coastal area of Nigeria where the river Niger empties its contents into the Atlantic Ocean. It has been described by Eyinla and Ukpo, and World Bank (as cited in Omodero, C.O, Ekwe, M.C. & Ihendinihu, J.U., 2018) as “the most extensive mangrove forest regions in the world” (p.165). It is an area endowed with oil mineral resources which Nigeria, as a country depends on for its economic survival. The region, “where most of Nigeria’s oil reserves are found” (Uyiosa, 2018), accounts for a substantial part of the Gross National Product (GNP) of the country.

Despite the natural endowment of the Niger Delta with its economic potentials, the region remains one that is in dire need of development. The exploration and exploitation of oil by multinational companies are activities that have resulted in restiveness and conflict in the area. The several conflicts have been either against the government and the oil companies or inter-communal clashes in which members of the community rise up in arms against themselves. The problem, in most cases, is the need for equitable sharing of resources or for the government to develop the area. The need to develop the area stems from the fact that the region gets far less than it should from the government, based on its contribution to the country’s revenue. Again, the exploration and exploitation of oil remains quite devastating. From time to time, the region has continued to suffer the effects of oil spillage either due to the oil companies’ lackadaisical attitude to the people’s welfare, as they neglect to adopt international standards of exploration, or through sabotage by criminals who continue to wreak havoc on the nation’s economy by bursting oil pipes to scoop the product for personal benefits. Thus, the environment remains devastated with the people’s traditional means of livelihood such as fishing and farming adversely affected. The people have become relatively, the most disadvantaged in the world, compared with the standard of living of other people having similar economic potentials in other parts of the world.

In view of the above-described scenario, the region has remained one of the most unsafe for human existence, with its attendant degeneration into a militant enclave generally. Insecurity remains high as kidnapping, armed robbery, murder and other nefarious activities continue to be daily occurrences. Even then, the environment cannot as a result of pollution effectively support human habitation. Most parts cannot provide or sustain portable drinking water due to pollution of the soil by spilled oil. Most times the spillage that seeps from burst pipes is left unattended to by the oil companies which results in further devastation of the environment. These companies would often engage in the argument that criminals involved in bunkering were responsible for such spillages and they absolve themselves of any liability including paying compensation to the people affected. Such an argument, untenable as it sounds, does not even incline government to compel even a quick response to reduce the damage such spillage does to the environment. It must equally be noted that the resort to oil bunkering by those referred to as criminals is borne out of the need

Effective Corporate Social Responsibility (Csr) Delivery as Panacea for Restiveness and Conflict in The Niger Delta: Role of The Mass Media

by these so-called criminal elements to get what they regard as their own fair share of the proceeds of the natural resources in their land. The feeling, then, is if the government cannot share national resources equitably among the people, resulting in the impoverishment of the area that contributes the major share of such resources, then the people of the region should go ahead and help themselves.

This attitude and action are the result of failure on several fronts. One of such fronts is the government that has consistently failed to provide basic essential infrastructure to enable the people enjoy the basic needs of life. The people cannot continue to live in abject squalor when the nation's economy depends mainly on the resources got from under their very feet. The people may have felt differently had the government, over the years striven to provide the basic needs of life, such as good health care facilities, schools, roads, clean water and so on.

The provision of the above enumerated basic needs is not just the exclusive obligation of the federal government but part of the Corporate Social Responsibility of multinational companies that operate in such region. CSR as noted by Makpor and Leite (2016) is the giving back to the society, in appreciation, by companies that operate in any society. It therefore, behoves the multinational companies to fulfil their CSR obligation to the people. It is believed that this obligation is not being adequately discharged. Hence restiveness and conflict have remained endemic in the region. Most times, youths in such neglected communities take up arms to protest or even compel a stoppage of a particular company's ongoing work because of the failure of such a company to discharge its CSR obligation. It is against the above discussed scenario that this paper examines the issue of CSR as a way out of the perennial restiveness and communal conflicts plaguing the Niger Delta, with a direct focus on the role the mass media can play towards ensuring the effective discharge by companies of their CSR. The paper assumes that the failure by these companies to discharge their CSR obligation is a fundamental factor responsible for the various conflicts in the region. A conceptual framework has been formulated to guide the discourse. This framework exposes the situation in the region. A theoretical framework also authenticates the basis of the discourse as the paper eventually proffers ways of tackling the constraints confronting the media in the performance of their role in this regard.

CONCEPTUAL/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As has been stated, the Niger Delta refers to the area around which the River Niger empties its contents into the Atlantic Ocean. HE (2011) notes that "the Federal Government includes Ondo, Edo, Imo, Cross River and Akwa Ibom states as part of the Niger Delta" (p. 202). But Essien (2008) extends the list from the five states listed above to seven. These according to him are "Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Ondo and River States" (P. 293). Okon (as cited in He, 2011) however states that: The region is bounded in the east by the Calabar flank on the west by the Benin Flank, on the south by the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Guinea and finally on the North, by the Anambra basin/Abakaliki anticlinorium and Afikpo syncline (P. 202)

The position adopted in this paper, however, is that the Niger Delta refers to the areas of Southern Delta State of Nigeria, entire Rivers, Akwa Ibom and Bayelsa states and Southern parts of Edo, Ondo and Cross River states. This position is adopted because the stated areas have a similar terrain and have experienced the negative impact of oil exploration over the years. The region has witnessed most of the conflicts by which the Niger Delta is referred. So they share similar challenges in terms of environmental degradation.

On the other hand, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has to do with what a corporation does for its host community to enable it operate effectively and enhance better working conditions for its staff, as well as improving the people's welfare. Amao (2014) likens the definition of CSR to the proverbial touch, from various angles, of an elephant by a team of the blind, which, a particular touch of a spot could not be used to describe the elephant in its totality. Corroborating Amao, Grubin (2018), emphatically states that "CSR is a concept with many definitions and practices. The way it is understood and implemented differs greatly for each company and country." Based on the observations above, the *Financial Times* (as cited in Pontefract, 2017) refers to CSR as "a business approach that contributes to sustainable development by delivering economic, social and environmental benefits for all stakeholders." It is clear from this definition that corporations have the responsibility of delivering benefits to those hosting their operations. In the case under reference, the oil or multinational corporations should deliver social, environmental and economic benefits to host communities. These benefits include economic empowerment of the people through employment and provision of basic amenities such as roads, schools, healthcare centres and portable water, depending on the most important needs of the people. CSR has become so crucial that it is fast becoming the driving force of development in the absence of government. Fallon (2017) has stated that "a 2017 study by Cone Communications found that more than 60 percent of Americans hope businesses will drive social and environmental change in the absence of government regulation." This belief stems from the fact that they would support and patronise only those companies that support an issue they care about.

The mass media have been described in various ways by various scholars. But central to the concept of mass media is the fact that they effect mass communication. The focus then is on their functions. Flowing from this, He (2009) defines the mass media as "systems of mass communication" (p. 17). This connotes that they are gadgets used to effect mass communication. The

Effective Corporate Social Responsibility (Csr) Delivery as Panacea for Restiveness and Conflict in The Niger Delta: Role of The Mass Media

communication is for the purpose of informing the people about what is going on in their environment, which will enable them take decisions that will improve their well-being.

In a developing country, such as Nigeria, the media should perform their functions to aid the nation's development. This brings to the fore the development media theory. McQuail (1983) sums up the tenets of the theory in six functions. But of interest to the issue here are two of these tenets. These are:

- i. Media must accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy.
- ii. Freedom of the media should be open to economic priorities and development needs of the society. (McQuail, 1983, p. 121).

Folarin in modifying the six tenets as posited by McQuail, reworked the two stated above to read:

1. Media should accept and carry out positive development task in line with nationally established policy (or in line with national ideology), without prejudice to their traditional functions of information, education and entertainment of the public.
2. Media should also accept and help in carrying out the special development tasks of national integration, socio-economic modernization, promotion of literacy and cultural creativity (2002, p. 37).

The above makes it imperative for the mass media to play a very important role in ensuring that multinational companies in the Niger Delta fulfil their CSR obligations to their host communities. This is crucial if development in terms of socio-economic modernisation, promotion of literacy and cultural creativity is to be realised. It is the submission here then, that the mass media must assist the companies to discharge their CSR obligations to the people, not only for the purpose of sustainable structural development but also in the interest of justice and fairness. This would enable a peaceful coexistence with restiveness and conflict largely reduced. The question now is, whether it is the inadequate or ineffective discharge of CSR by multinational companies in the Niger Delta that is responsible for conflict and restiveness in the region. If it is so, how can this responsibility be effectively discharged and what role can the mass media play in the process? These questions can best be answered through a brief review of the Niger Delta situation. This is to situate the discourse in proper perspective.

THE NIGER DELTA SITUATION

The Niger Delta presents a region with perennial crisis. Apart from inter-communal conflicts in which neighbouring communities engage in warfare against themselves, the major crises involve the federal government and the oil companies, as well as other corporations operating in the region. Most times inter-communal clashes result from the struggle for land, especially when such a parcel of land has been discovered to have petroleum deposits or earmarked for the siting of an industry. In the words of Ibaba (2005), the crisis in the Niger Delta results from "land alienation, unfulfilled promises for compensation, political marginalisation, socio-economic inequalities, dishonest leadership, communication gap, inadequate research and cultural disorientation" (p. 24). Esikot and Akpan (2013) who believe that the main causes of the crises are exploration and exploitation of oil have submitted that the people's awareness of the contamination of their environment without appropriate compensation by the oil companies or the federal government spurs "them to resort to violent conflicts and militancy, as ways of getting their existential problems resolved" (p. 3).

In fact the devastating effect of oil exploration and exploitation cannot be quantified as the very existence of those affected is seriously jeopardised. Etuk (2001) sums up the situation in this way:

The fall outs from the activities of oil companies leave their farmlands either dug up or devastated by fires their rivers and fishing creeks are polluted by massive oil spillage both accidental and from sabotage, which leave the fishing grounds bereft of aquatic life. Even the very air they breathe is contaminated with pollutants from gaseous emissions, the rain which falls on their land is acid rain which destroys instead of nourishing their crops, which thus becomes susceptible to strange pestilence (p. 5)

Also, most times, the oil companies do not adhere to international standards in the conduct of their activities. And this constituted the genesis of the Niger Delta crisis which came to the fore with the agitation by the foremost environmentalist, Ken Saro Wiwa. The military government at the time, headed by General Sani Abacha, sensing that such an agitation would give rise to a bigger one, sought to nip it in the bud, by having Saro Wiwa and eight of his Ogoni kinsmen executed on November 10, 1994 (Cayford, 1996). They had been found guilty of murder in a sham trial on October 30, 1994. But rather than wait for the expiration of the mandatory 30 days within which the "convicts" could appeal, they were hurriedly killed. Ikari (2016) notes that "Amnesty International declared Saro Wiwa 'prisoner of conscience' killed for his political beliefs and international campaign against shell."

However, the killing of Saro Wiwa did not bring the agitation for a better environment to an end. Rather it progressed from mere agitation into the fight by the Niger Delta people for the control of the resources in their land; thus, emerged the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) - a militant group, in 2006. The Niger Deltans were fed up with their condition even "as oil provides 95 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and 80 percent of the government's budgetary revenues" (Davis, 2010, p. 43). The people could not continue to live in squalor while resources in their land are exploited to develop other areas. Before MEND, there was the Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV) led by Ateke Tom. There was also the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Asari Dokubo. These earlier militant groups were not as deadly as MEND which indulged in

Effective Corporate Social Responsibility (Csr) Delivery as Panacea for Restiveness and Conflict in The Niger Delta: Role of The Mass Media

blowing up oil pipes as a way of stopping further exploration and exploitation of oil in the region. But, as noted by Bekoe (2005), these groups metamorphosed from the violence that attended the 2003 elections during which politicians manipulated these groups and used them to actualize their aspirations.

It was impossible to resolve the crisis resulting from militancy even as the country lost billions of dollars in oil revenue. In 2009, President Umaru Yar'Adua instituted the amnesty programme whereby militants who agreed to lay down their arms were granted amnesty, trained and economically empowered. "This exercise witnessed a total of 26,808 militants surrendering their arms and ammunition and being granted amnesty which involved co-opting or integrating them into the society as well as training them" (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2017, p.11). This was the first stage of the programme. Other stages, second and third, were also noted by Ajodo-Adebanjoko (2017). According to her:

The second stage involved government setting up demobilization camps for the demilitarization and rehabilitation of the militants, while the third stage involved government's engagement with the leadership of the combatants and ex-combatants as well as non-combatant youths, for employment and socio-economic empowerment. This therefore brought an end to the spate of bombings and kidnappings in the region and led to an increase in oil outputs (p. 20).

The federal government, has so far, sustained this programme till date, but this and other efforts have not completely stopped restiveness, agitations and conflicts in the region. Rather, by late 2017 there was the threat of the commencement of violence. In fact, in January, 2018, a militant group, Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) threatened to renew hostilities characterized by bombing of oil installations across the Niger Delta. Another group, the Niger Delta Agitators gave the NDA their support in their quest (Jeremiah, 2018). This came barely a month after the NDA issued the federal government a four- week ultimatum to make available the sum of one billion dollars for the development of the region, as the government had approved the same amount to fight insurgency in the North East region of the country (Amaize & Umoru, 2017). In September, 2020, same threat was re-issued as the federal government rehabilitated some group of insurgents in the North East of the country.

Threats aside, militant activity as well as other crimes such as oil bunkering and cult clashes had greatly affected revenue from oil, thereby threatening the nation's economy and stunting infrastructural development. Okinbaloye (2016) rightly notes that "militancy was indeed taking its toll on the Nigerian economy with the country losing over 1.8 billion naira daily due to attacks on oil installations by militants." With this renewed threat, it is obvious that more revenue will be lost. It is therefore imperative for a more proactive step to be taken to restore peace and ensure more revenue for development. A significant step in the right direction is the more effective discharge of the CSR obligation by companies operating in the region.

It has already been noted that these companies have not been discharging their responsibilities effectively. Most times, the people picket the offices of these companies in an attempt to force them to discharge their CSR obligation. Such disturbances forced most of these companies to move their operational headquarters from the Niger Delta region to Lagos and Abuja. This further denies the states in the region much needed revenue in form of taxes from these companies. Also some of the infrastructures provided by these companies are substandard and do not stand the test of time, as classroom roofs and walls become dilapidated in a short while, without renovation. The squalid environment in which the people live is usually in sharp contrast to the opulent, ostentatious and modern houses of the oil workers in their midst.

The above leads to corruption as a few people would sabotage their own people to improve their own standard of living. This begets mistrust among them, especially as corruption has become endemic in the country. Most times accusations become rife that some prominent members of the communities collect money meant for executing projects and misappropriate such money. This results in restiveness and conflict. A case in point is the allegation against the Itsekiri Regional Development Council (IRDC) which has been accused of misappropriating the sum of 11 billion naira meant for development of the region. Chief Rita Lori-Oghebor, a prominent Itsekiri woman, sued the (IRDC), DESOPADEC (Delta State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission) and Chevron in a High Court on account of their alleged fraudulent activities. The said money was part of the CSR from Chevron, an oil company operating in the Itsekiri area of the Niger Delta (Kumolu, 2017). Acts, such as this, fuel communal crisis.

It is crucial therefore that the companies in strong collaboration with the federal government must not only begin to maintain their commitment to the provision of social amenities, but must increase the quantity and improve the quality of what they provide as CSR. It is the failure of both the federal government and these companies in this regard that continues to generate crisis. So they must take adequate steps to alleviate the people's abject condition. Ordinarily, it is the government that should ensure that these companies discharge their CSR obligations adequately, through policies and other regulations. But government seems to have failed in this regard. The mass media also have an important role to play in not only assisting the companies but also ensuring that a peaceful atmosphere prevails between the companies and their host communities. The media can play this role in a number of ways.

Effective Corporate Social Responsibility (Csr) Delivery as Panacea for Restiveness and Conflict in The Niger Delta: Role of The Mass Media

It has been well noted that the CSR endeavour of the companies operating in the region is not being effectively discharged. Part of the failure stems from lack of understanding by the people of the amenities provided for them. This equally results from failure to effectively communicate the benefits of such amenities to the people concerned. This, thus, exposes the importance of the media. Lack of factual information leads to rumour mongering, mistrust and conflict as the people would begin to suspect each other of insincerity. Some may even capitalise on such a situation to connive with the companies to sabotage the communities for their selfish benefits.

The issue here then, is that the mass media must give publicity to the various CSR endeavours engaged upon by the companies. The media must ensure that only the truth about such activities is published. There should be no speculative information, as this can lead to rumour peddling. This point is corroborated by HE (2011) when he declares that the mass media should ensure that “the truth and nothing but the truth is disseminated. Half-truths and rumours must be avoided in the purveyance of information” (p. 205). And in the communication of information to the people, the mass media must engage in development communication which, according to Meomeka:

is not merely a matter of transmitting information about how things can be done better by using available facilities, it is much more than the exchange of problem – solving information. It involves the generation of psychic mobility or empathy, raising aspirations, teaching of news skills and encouragement of local participation in development activities (as cited in HE, 2002, p. 59).

The companies must be encouraged by the mass media to involve the people in the provision of amenities, by engaging their services. Such a development would further empower the people, thereby constituting part of the companies’ CSR. Any failure or inadequacy in the discharge of any company’s CSR should be investigated and publicised. This is in order to elicit the people’s understanding of the issues as they affect them. Once they understand the situation, restiveness should be curtailed and conflict would be avoided.

Where necessary, the media must represent the people and assist them to demand for their entitlements. For example, the host communities of oil producing companies under the platform of HOSTCOM have been accusing the federal government and the companies of delay in the payment of gas flaring penalty to the communities (Emmanuel, 2018). In another instance, Ebegbulem (2018), reports that the Nigerian Petroleum Development Company (NPDC) claims that it has spent 606 million naira on host communities’ welfare in the Niger Delta as regards “skill acquisition, health and educational materials between 2016 and 2017” (p. 45). Claims like the two mentioned above should be thoroughly investigated by the mass media and findings reported appropriately. Such adequate reportage would ensure better understanding of the situation and help to nip any possible conflict between the host communities and the companies in the bud. The media must also agitate for the prosecution of the corrupt persons in the communities who misappropriate the funds meant for the communities’ development. This is to ensure transparency in future dealings.

The media must equally draw attention to the plight of the people especially where environmental degradation and threat to their means of livelihood are involved. The fact that a spill results from sabotage does not absolve the operating company of responsibility. The media must publicise such spill and ensure that the company is aware of its responsibility to the people regarding their welfare. The media should therefore provide space for the people to air their views especially during conflicts. Corroborating this view, HE (2011), citing Nwanne, submits that the mass media, without hesitation, be ready to create equal space and time for all those involved in a conflict to project their views. However, the media must go beyond merely providing space and airtime. They must engage in appropriate analyses of the issues that result in such conflicts and emerge with a viewpoint that should be acceptable to a majority of the people. Such an exercise would enhance the better understanding of such issues. This will eventually culminate in an amicable resolution of the crisis thereof.

The media, above all, must carry out periodic inspection of the facilities and amenities provided as part of the companies’ CSR. This is in order to know their state of existence and communicate same to the companies and if the companies neglect to act, then they can publish the information. The media should also keep records of the CSR activities, such as the number of the people trained, those economically empowered and so on. This could equally be published in order to avoid the mistrust that follows the inadequate information regarding such figures.

In all this, the mass media must also highlight the challenges faced by these companies in the process of fulfilling their CSR obligations. Also, the needs of the host communities should be highlighted. This would enable the companies and the host communities to work out a template for such communities’ development.

In conclusion then, the mass media should monitor the CSR activities of the various companies operating in the Niger Delta and hold them accountable to their host communities. It is when such development takes place would there be some understanding of the operational situation by the communities. It is then the environment would be better protected. And it is then, also, most of the restiveness and conflict in the region would be curtailed.

CONSTRAINTS OF THE MEDIA

The mass media cannot be expected to play the important role as stated above without encountering some challenges. In fact they are seriously constrained by certain factors which impede the successful performance of this stated role. The Niger Delta is a dense

Effective Corporate Social Responsibility (Csr) Delivery as Panacea for Restiveness and Conflict in The Niger Delta: Role of The Mass Media

mangrove forest with countless creeks. It is therefore very difficult to navigate. In fact the Nigerian military has found it extremely difficult to flush out militants that continuously threaten oil exploration because of the difficult terrain. It is therefore quite impossible for journalists and other media personnel to navigate the terrain for the purpose of monitoring and reporting news about the CSR activities of companies operating in the region. Most areas can only be accessed with small canoes and boats. It is therefore a most dangerous venture for any media man desirous of carrying out independent investigation of the CSR activities of companies in the area, to go there.

In addition to the above stated constraint, there is insecurity. Kidnapping for ransom, cult activities involving wanton killing, as well as robbery, are rampant crimes in the area. Most times, the criminals overwhelm security operatives, killing some of the personnel. The criminals have been operating for years and when they are wiped out, others emerge to continue the activities, and thereby giving vent to the feeling that criminality is a lucrative and legitimate business in the region. It is therefore a risk for any media personnel to engage in a venture that may result in his kidnap.

Mistrust is another constraint. The people have been marginalised for so long and extremely impoverished that they can now hardly trust anybody, such as a journalist, who comes to represent their interests. They feel so neglected and abandoned. So, anybody coming to inquire about their existence may likely be viewed with a lot of suspicions. They may then become uncooperative.

Another formidable constraint is the literacy level of the people. Most of them are not literate, so the issue of using the print medium cannot arise. Only radio with its wide spread and cheap acquisition can be used in this regard. Even then, the local language has to be employed for proper understanding of the message. Television needs electricity. But the entire country is grappling with electricity shortage. Most areas are without electric power supply.

A holistic approach needs to be adopted in tackling the foregoing constraints. First, the government and the operating companies must engage the media and make them partners in the dissemination of relevant information needed by the people in respect of the CSR activities of the companies. In this regard, the companies and the government should sponsor regular trips by media men to the area, for the purpose of getting regular information about the needs of the people.

The media men must be tested professionals that should be well selected to assist the government through development communication. They must not succumb to corruption and should resist being bribed to support the companies against the people. Most importantly, the government should incorporate the local media of the people to explain its policies and the CSR activities of the companies. The people will relate to such media better. In this regard, respected members of the communities can be employed to do the translation and explanation of the information in the local languages. This would make for proper understanding of the situation. These recommendations, if considered and implemented, would help to curtail restiveness and reduce conflict in the region.

CONCLUSION

The Niger Delta crisis is a crucial one with grave implications for the entire country. The crisis has resulted in the proliferation of arms and ammunition in the region. Apart from the amnesty programme which has served to curtail restiveness and reduce conflict, the CSR delivery of the companies operating in the region must be improved upon so that peace and development can be realised. More small-scale industries that make use of raw materials from the region should be established to create jobs for the teeming, unemployed restive youths, who, by virtue of their idleness are engaged in criminal activities. There must be transparency in the dealings of the companies with the people. It is when they get appropriate information that the people would understand the companies and their activities. Once such an understanding is achieved, mistrust would no longer be the problem. Restiveness and conflict would be curtailed if the companies discharge their CSR obligations effectively and this could be achieved with the active support of the mass media.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors solemnly declare that there is no conflict of interest in this research work and its publication.

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Effective Corporate Social Responsibility (Csr) Delivery as Panacea for Restiveness and Conflict in The Niger Delta: Role of The Mass Media

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