



# NIGERIA:

## Empowering Women, Transforming Society

A SOLIDARITY CENTER PUBLICATION

## NIGERIA: A Political and Economic Snapshot



Nigeria, a nation with 36 states and more than 250 ethnic groups, suffered nearly 16 years of military rule before a new constitution was adopted in 1999, ushering in a peaceful transition to civilian government. In April 2014, Nigeria became Africa's largest economy, ahead of South Africa.

Yet with massive economic inequality generated by political instability, corruption, inadequate infrastructure and poor macroeconomic management, Nigeria faces daunting challenges in maintaining the internal stability necessary to achieving a strong democracy. Its success in doing so is key to the promotion of democracy and stability in West Africa.

Although oil revenue accounts for 80 percent of Nigeria's income, Africa's most populous country imports most of its fuel because successive governments have failed to invest in local refineries. Few of its 175 million inhabitants have benefited from the oil windfalls. More than 90 percent of Nigerians live on less than \$2 a day. Both the percentage of children in full-time education and life expectancy are significantly below the average for sub-Saharan Africa.

Residents of the Niger Delta, where oil was discovered more than 50 years ago amid vast swaths of tropical rain and mangrove forests, suffer from higher rates of poverty than the rest of the country. There, the discovery of oil has also brought human rights violations, according to Amnesty International. Niger Delta residents must cope with environmental degradation—240,000 barrels of crude oil are spilled in the region each year, harming the sectors and those who engage in fishing and crop farming. Often exposed to dangerous chemicals and with little access to medical care, women and children are especially vulnerable.

Workers, their unions and broader civil society have served as a mainstay of opposition to the Nigerian government's widespread lack of transparency and accountability. In January 2012, hundreds of thousands of Nigerians waged a nationwide strike to protest the government's removal of a long-standing fuel subsidy, which would have led to soaring food and fuel costs. The longest mass protest by Nigerian civil society turned into a demand for government accountability, a goal that civil society groups continue to work for today.



# WITSOJ: TRAINING AND MOBILIZING WOMEN AND YOUNG PEOPLE:

**Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta is made up of three core states—Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States. There, corruption, environmental degradation and human rights abuses abound, presenting enormous challenges to citizen participation in civil society. Yet a unique grassroots coalition based in the Niger Delta, working with unions and other local non-governmental organizations, is providing a platform for women in urban and rural communities across the delta states to demand transparency, accountability and social justice through legitimate elections and participatory budgetary processes.**

**Born out of necessity to combat injustices in the Niger Delta, Women Initiative for Transparency and Social Justice (WITSOJ) is training and mobilizing women and young people to effectively engage in the democratic political process, hold local lawmakers accountable and achieve concrete goals in their communities.**

## Forming a Firm Foundation through Coalition Building

WITSOJ formed in 2007, after a Solidarity Center workshop in Warri, a major oil city in Delta State. "Women from all Niger Delta states were represented, and we were asked to go back to our communities and ask for social justice," said Dr. Jennifer Spiff, who heads the organization. Following the Solidarity Center training, more than 200 women from a variety of organizations and communities met in Port Harcourt, and from there, the coalition reached out to additional women-based organizations.

Members of the new group—initially called the Niger Delta Women Coalition—then met with relevant stakeholders to discuss the organization and its goals. The Nigeria police, the Economic and Financial Crime Commission and the Nigerian Television Authority were among organizations the women sought out. The coalition also strategically crafted its board of directors by approaching professionals, such as lawyers and journalists, whose expertise would make significant contributions to WITSOJ campaigns.

As a coalition of more than 20 local organizations, WITSOJ regularly taps into the expertise of its members and has the support of clergy, such as the Catholic Daughters of Charity, "who give the coalition the religious approval as co-agents of change in our society," says Spiff.

Some of the local organizations working in coalition with WITSOJ include the Federation of Ogoni Women's Association and the Rivers Women in Agriculture. Nigeria's national labor bodies, the Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC), also are coalition members. The NLC and the TUC spearheaded the January 2012 nationwide protests, challenging government corruption and questioning the government's ability to transparently handle the profits generated by its proposed removal of the nation's fuel subsidy.

WITSOJ has worked closely with others in the national trade union movement, especially with Women in PENGASSAN (the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria). PENGASSAN members have called for transparency in the government's handling of profits from its vast oil



From left: **Dr. Jennifer Spiff**, WITSOJ national coordinator; **Hon. Barrister Leyii Kwanee**, deputy speaker of the Rivers State House of Assembly; and **Ijeoma Dom-Nwachukwu**, national chairwoman of Women-in-PENGASSAN.

Photos: Ken Nwueh



reserves, demanding that oil income fund infrastructure repair and create environmentally safe refineries.

Ijeoma Dom-Nwachukwu, national chairwoman of Women in PENGASSAN, says the union supports WITSOJ's efforts in fighting for "the women who are marginalized in rural areas." In just one example she cited, union women joined the Beiru community in its campaign for a health center, and the two organizations call on each other regularly for support. "We challenge ourselves, come together and think together to find a way to move forward."

The union's deep roots in local communities adds credibility to WITSOJ. The partnership with the union "gives WITSOJ the leverage to be trusted as an organization owned by the masses," said Spiff. "Working people see trade unions as representing the people, and believe that WITSOJ cannot be hijacked by politicians, since it has a union collaboration." Unions also have shared their organizing expertise with WITSOJ.

## Training and Mobilizing Women and Young People

WITSOJ launched its grassroots education and outreach efforts with one-day workshops for women and youth on participatory governance within local government areas, the governing structures within Nigerian states. To date, more than 5,000 women have taken part in these hands-on workshops, which include those from the Niger Delta local government areas of Andoni, Opobo.

In Rivers State, WITSOJ has achieved successes that range from increasing local budget transparency to improving health care facilities. As an essential component of attaining these goals, WITSOJ educates and trains often impoverished local women about their democratic rights, enabling them to pursue active citizen engagement with their public officials by monitoring budget performance, participating in the electoral process and holding lawmakers accountable for providing basic services.

"Sometimes (local residents) think they should beg for health care services, schools, roads," said Sarah Emmanuel-Apia, a lawyer and WITSOJ leader. "Because of the way the government has been running its affairs, they think they must beg. We show them the (Nigerian) constitution and the budget and (show them that) these things should come to them even without asking—and if they don't get it they should come together to make their demands."

## Why Women?

WITSOJ focuses on training women in large part because "women are the most vulnerable and are on the receiving end of social injustice," said Dr. Jennifer Spiff, WITSOJ coordinator.

Empowering women also "is an advantage" in achieving concrete goals, said WITSOJ member Gold Minimah. In Nigerian society, "men are perceived to be militant. (Politicians) listen to women. Even the men listen to us."

Victory Goodluck, a farmer from the Ihuike community in Ahoada East Local Government agrees. "It is a good strategy to focus on women because women are instruments of change, and WITSOJ has enlightened us to know our rights and the power of women in bringing our desired vision into full manifestation." Goodluck has taken part in a WITSOJ budget workshop and one on community participation in governance.

Describing a typical WITSOJ member, Spiff paints a not-so-typical portrait of a special individual, "a fearless, bold woman who wants to give voice to the voiceless regardless of how it affects her."

Once trained, the women use the tools they learned in WITSOJ workshops, such as involving recognized community leaders, like local chiefs, and telling their stories to the press. "More and more women are becoming conscious (of their rights)," said Spiff. "We see them asking local leaders questions and also following up with local government officials on these questions."

In just a few years, WITSOJ has trained and empowered thousands of women and young people. In 2012, the coalition organized and mobilized six communities to engage with public office holders on economic policy formulation. A campaign for Rivers State budget transparency in 2009 succeeded when the state added the budget to its website.

In 2011–2012, WITSOJ undertook a voter education campaign in advance of Nigeria's general elections. WITSOJ focused on women, young people and first-time voters in 23 local government areas of Rivers State, ultimately mobilizing more than 2 million Rivers State citizens to participate. The coalition also ran a four-month paid media campaign program on popular radio station, WOZOBIA, and participated in election monitoring.

WITSOJ's get-out-the-vote efforts proved so successful that the coalition was asked to take part in a national postelection

conference to describe citizen's engagement in the election process. WITSOJ turned to voter mobilization after it became "imperative for women to engage the electoral process meaningfully and shun political patronage," said Spiff. "The coalition ensured free and fair elections ... where peoples' vote must count."

Lawmakers in the Rivers State government have taken note of WITSOJ's success. Hon. Barrister Leyii Kwaneke, deputy speaker of the Rivers State House of Assembly, has met with WITSOJ and supports its goals.

"The people who are represented want to know what is done with their resources," he said. "We must enhance accountability."

## Empowering Thousands of Women

When WITSOJ comes into a community, its first step is to investigate residents' needs. In Oyigbo, a town northeast of Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State and the main hub of Africa's biggest energy industry, WITSOJ found that the health clinic was dilapidated. WITSOJ trainers, with Solidarity Center support, held a workshop for the women in the area and discussed the Rivers State Health Policy to show them they have a right to medical facilities. The women took it from there, campaigning to achieve a functioning clinic.

On a late September day in 2011, hundreds of these women—from the Egberu, Afam-Ukwu and Afam-Nta communities—gathered in Oyigbo. They had repeatedly tried to talk with the local government council about their dire need for a functional health center but had been

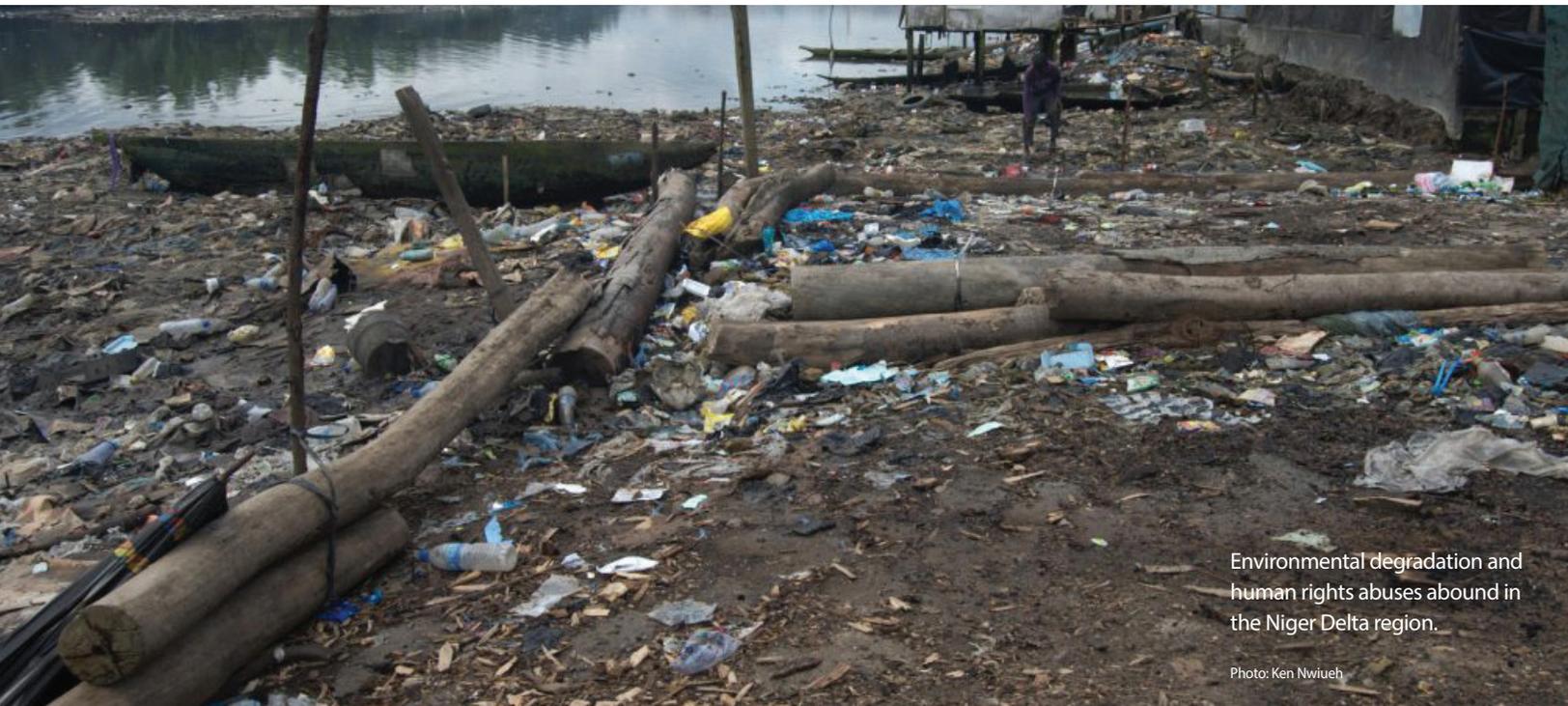
ignored. With no health facilities nearby, access to medical care required traveling long distances, a costly expense few impoverished residents could afford, and a journey that further endangered the health of women and their children.

The women marched to the council building to demand the government meet with them. The council secretary instructed security to lock the gates, but as the guards tried to barricade them, the women pushed the gates open, singing as they did. They would be heard. Because of their persistence, the council chief of staff met with them and, at their request, asked the state to renovate and update the area's dilapidated health clinic. The government also built a well-equipped health center at nearby Obuakpu, achievements sparked by WITSOJ but carried out by community women empowered through WITSOJ's training and education.

"Maternal mortality is very high here," said Emmanuel-Apia. "It's normal here for women to die giving birth. If bringing the health center will help them live longer, we will support it."

The campaign for a health care clinic in Oyigbo was one of three such efforts, along with those in Ahoada and Ikwerre, for improved health facilities that WITSOJ launched in 2011. Holding local governments accountable for fulfilling the Rivers State health policy was the group's first step toward moving beyond citizen education to bringing about concrete achievements.

Throughout the process, "WITSOJ has made women realize the need for gender equality, and that most times, women can become as good ambassadors in leadership as their male



Environmental degradation and human rights abuses abound in the Niger Delta region.

Photo: Ken Nwueh

counterparts,” said journalist Gold Minimah, an active WITSOJ member.

WITSOJ has achieved success in the face of daunting obstacles. Rivers State’s own promotional brochure describes development and governance challenges as including, in part: “inadequate infrastructure—roads, healthcare, education, water, health and power; unstable legal environment; food insecurity; insecurity of lives and property; (and) corruption.”

Poor infrastructure means that merely getting women together in one place for workshops is costly and cumbersome, often requiring the group to go to extraordinary lengths to traverse vast distances. Minimah says WITSOJ must charter speed boats to meet with women in their communities, which is possible only “when boat owners don’t need them for fishing.”

Political corruption is another big impediment to effecting positive change, said Spiff, because it “makes most officeholders indifferent to a community’s plight.” Funding the coalition’s activities is also difficult. WITSOJ raises most of its funds from membership dues and local fundraising.

WITSOJ’s success also has generated the ire of some politicians, who feel threatened by the prospect of hundreds or thousands of new voters dissatisfied with the status quo and ready to hold lawmakers accountable.

## Going Forward

Since its founding, WITSOJ has honed its original, broad goal of increasing overall budget transparency and now focuses on the areas of health and education. A WITSOJ education and health coordinator analyzes health and education budgets and tracks developments and spending. At present, the coalition also is continuing its electoral outreach by educating women in advance of the 2015 national elections.

In the long term, WITSOJ would like to broaden its reach beyond Rivers State to other Niger Delta states, to ensure more citizens become active participants in civil society. WITSOJ leaders say the vision is to expand “into communities where there are cries for social justice and educate more people in these communities on the need to be part of governance.”

Through coalition building, careful preparation in advance of campaigns and strategically tapping into influential networks, WITSOJ has empowered Niger Delta women to “understand that governance is not only political, but that it affects everybody who has a conscience,” said Minimah. “In helping to correct injustices which affect everybody, it is also the means of offering or rendering services to our state and the country as a whole.”



Photo: Ken Nwueh

## The Kpor Community's Struggle for Potable Water



Photo: Ken Nwueh

Hundreds of miles south of Port Harcourt, dozens of towns and villages dot the swampy delta lowlands in Gokana, a local government area in Rivers State. Gokana's capital, Kpor, is among the many farm and fishing settlements along the peninsulas, and Kpor's 150,000 residents are also some of the area's most impoverished, frequently suffering blows to their livelihoods when oil spills clog the lakes and rivers. A 2010 BBC report on the aftermath of an oil spill in Kpor described how "sunlight bounces from an eerie black lake, and dragonflies hover over cauldrons of tar."

Not only is Kpor's surface water polluted, but the village has never had access to potable drinking water. Residents suffered cholera and skin diseases. Children were especially vulnerable, becoming sick with diarrhea and cholera. Tired of the threats to their children, mothers sought a solution.

In April 2012, some 50 women from Kpor gathered at the Kpor Community Primary School for a WITSOJ workshop on budgeting and advocacy. The women identified potable drinking water as their goal. WITSOJ then helped prepare them

to publicly describe the personal hardships they and their families experienced without clean drinking water, and taught them how to take their demands for boreholes (clean water wells) to the government. WITSOJ also trained the women in reaching out to others in the community to educate and mobilize them around the issue.

After WITSOJ held an April 2012 press conference in Port Harcourt, the local women "took it from there," said Sarah Emmanuel-Apia, a lawyer and WITSOJ leader.

Within a few months, hundreds of women had poured into local government council offices and even traveled to the House Assembly in Port Harcourt, Rivers State capital, to meet and talk with lawmakers about the critical need for potable water in Kpor. One of the women, Dimebari Dugbor, a Kpor farmer raising her three children alone after the death of her husband, said until the women took action, political leaders had not responded to their concerns. The community felt abandoned. But after the women joined forces, lawmakers "promised us that they will attend to our problems and give us our rights."

Ceciliar Anthony, a farmer who lives in the Kpor community with her husband and three children and who took part in the campaign for clean drinking water, added that, "WITSOJ activities brought responses from the leaders who have made firm promises for the first time."

By 2013, Kpor had two boreholes, the community's first access to potable water.

WITSOJ's involvement with the Kpor-area women extends to training and educating them about their role in the democratic governance process and equipping them with the tools for effective action. In doing so, WITSOJ has empowered them to carry on the process on their own.

Esther Garrick, a farmer and a leader in the Kpor community, said WITSOJ's budget training made her realize that money spent by the government is the people's money and should be accounted for. Further, Garrick said she never dreamed she would meet and talk with "the leader of the community." As a result: "I am now a better leader."

## 5 THINGS THAT WORKED

*Despite formidable political, economic and geographic obstacles, WITSOJ achieves concrete victories by working with allied organizations and within local communities through the following steps.*

- 1. WITSOJ first conducts a situational analysis.** The organization investigates communities to determine which lack government support for basic services, researches the inadequacies in the provision of those services and looks into laws and policies to understand how best to make its arguments for those services.
- 2. WITSOJ educates and mobilizes citizens about their democratic rights.** Achieving transparent, accountable government is a fundamental first step, and understanding basic laws and government processes is key to that insight.
- 3. WITSOJ mobilizes community members to meet with service providers.** One of the most effective strategies for attaining concrete results is for women to jointly meet with lawmakers and public officials and let them know how a problem, such as a lack of basic medical facilities or nearby schools, impacts their lives and their families' lives—and demand change.
- 4. WITSOJ partners with labor unions and builds deep roots in the community.** The union partnerships give credibility to WITSOJ efforts, as do alliances with respected religious and secular organizations. The partnership with unions also helps the widely dispersed WITSOJ with organizing.
- 5. WITSOJ does not give up.** “Push, push your demands until you achieve them,” says Spiff. “Our advice and our hope to women in other communities struggling with the same issues as WITSOJ is that they should keep the faith; ensure they have strong leadership; organize rather than agonize; mobilize rather than complain; engage public office holders—and you will be amazed at the number of successes you will achieve just the way we did.”



Photo: WITSOJ

### CONTACT INFORMATION

Dr. Jennifer Spiff  
WITSOJ Coordinator  
+2348033429859  
womeninitiativefortransparency@yahoo.com  
info@witsoj.org  
<http://www.witsoj.org>

### RESOURCES

The primary sources for this publication were first-person interviews conducted by the Solidarity Center. Notes on other sources can be found on the Solidarity Center website, [www.solidaritycenter.org](http://www.solidaritycenter.org)

### ABOUT THIS SERIES

Working people, regardless of country, want a government that is transparent, representative and accountable to its citizens—and which acts to better all citizens' economic circumstances. Around the world, labor unions and worker organizations play an important role in advocating for fundamental human rights, ensuring the voices and aspirations of workers are part of the national dialogue, and advancing policies that better serve civil society and promote equitable economic growth and humane development. *Catalysts for Change*, an ongoing series produced by the Solidarity Center with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy, features the working people, their unions and activists who are advancing worker rights and greater equity in their societies, often under trying circumstances. Their experience and efforts provide real, transferable lessons for others seeking to effect positive change.

### SOLIDARITY CENTER

The Solidarity Center partners with workers to build more just societies worldwide. Find us at:

[www.solidaritycenter.org](http://www.solidaritycenter.org)  
888 16th St., NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20006

[www.facebook.com/solidaritycenter](https://www.facebook.com/solidaritycenter)  
[www.twitter.com/SolidarityCntr](https://www.twitter.com/SolidarityCntr)

Copyright 2014