

Illuminating Hope: Empowering the Niger Delta with Sustainable Access to Electricity

By Anthony Osibajo

The energy crisis in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta, poses a significant challenge due to the glaring contrast between the potential for power generation and the actual supply. This issue affects over 200 million people, leaving them without sufficient electricity. According to the World Bank's 2022 Energy Progress Report, Nigeria has the world's most significant energy access deficit, with approximately 45% of its population, including those in the Niger Delta, lacking access to the national power grid. This deficit not only hampers socioeconomic development but also presents a considerable obstacle in the fight against climate change, especially in a region like the Niger Delta, known for its vast oil reserves.

The energy shortage has widespread implications, impacting sectors such as education, healthcare, and agriculture, exacerbating socioeconomic underdevelopment, and contributing to climate change. While Nigeria can generate over 12,000 Megawatts of electricity, it needs help to deliver even 4,000 Megawatts, creating a substantial gap in meeting the energy needs of its population. Electrification is a fundamental driver of socioeconomic progress, improving the quality of life and fostering economic growth. However, in the Niger Delta, where geographical and infrastructural challenges make connecting communities to the national grid difficult, off-grid solutions become essential. Studies indicate that the region has significant potential for harnessing renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind energy.

Despite the potential of renewable energy, the Niger Delta still faces obstacles in its implementation. These obstacles include problems with institutions and policies, technological difficulties, incomplete data, sociocultural aspects, financial limitations, political hindrances, and limitations on decision-making. Collaboration between communities, investors, and developers is essential for the success of these initiatives.

With many populations in the coastal communities across Niger Delta living without electricity, there comes a need for a model that is sustainable, easy to replicate, and reduces the risks of investments in off-grid areas like the Niger Delta coastal communities. An example of such a model is the Access to Energy (A2E) model promoted by the Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND). PIND's A2E model provides reasonably priced renewable energy, which boosts income and productivity, creates new job opportunities, and elevates the general quality of life of these communities. It also advances Goal 7 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The model's core involves reducing risks for investors and power developers, incentivizing them to provide energy services to these underserved areas while ensuring community stakeholders are involved in decision-making processes and own the project outcomes.

PIND initiated its Access to Energy project in 2018, and by 2022, it had improved the livelihoods and well-being of over 10,000 residents in these communities, benefiting close to 3,000 homes and businesses. PIND has facilitated the development of about 40 solar mini-grids in majorly coastal communities, working with power developers, investors, and local stakeholders. It also continues providing Technical Assistance to support off-grid mini-grids using renewable energy solutions in several communities across the Niger Delta, such as Ogheye, Ogbinbiri, Opia, Gbokoda, Kpokugbene, Gbagira, Akinsolu, Molutehin, Ugbo Nla, and Obe Jedo, Lomileju, Awoye, and Odofado.

Locals in these communities attest to the benefits of increased electricity supply, pointing to its role in lowering crime, improving security, enabling children to study at night, supplying vital healthcare services in clinics, and revitalizing small businesses.

The A2E model promoted by PIND is indeed a game changer. In 2023, it was incorporated into the USAID Power Africa Health Electrification and Telecommunication Alliance (HETA) project, focusing on providing electricity to healthcare facilities besides households and businesses. At the end of the project, 12 healthcare facilities across the Niger Delta were electrified, with 187 micro, small and medium enterprises, 466 households, and over 2800 people benefitting from the power connection to the facilities.

With the Niger Delta Development Commission and Petroleum Industry Act-established Host Community Development Trusts (HCDTs) looking to promote the use of clean energy/developmental projects in the region, there is an opportunity to adopt a sustainable model that will not only provide clean and reliable electricity but also empower the community stakeholders to participate in sustainable development actively.

As we approach a moment of reckoning, the achievements made possible by the A2E model in the Niger Delta highlight a universal reality: having access to energy denotes empowerment rather than just power. It represents opening doors of opportunity for people who have long been marginalized. It serves as a reminder that development is possible when creativity and willpower come together.

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