

Influence of Community Relations on Crisis Management in Sterling Global Oil Resources' OML 13 Operations at Uquo Marginal Field/Stubb Creek, Esit Eket

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of community relations practices on crisis management in Sterling Global Oil Resources' OML 13 operations within the Uquo Marginal Field/Stubb Creek host communities of Esit Eket, Akwa Ibom State. Anchored on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the study adopted a survey research design, using a multi-stage sampling technique to obtain responses from 363 residents drawn from Etebi Idung Akpaisang, Etebi Idung Iniang and Ikot Afaha Eket. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and interview guide, and analysed through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Findings showed that Sterling Global Oil Resources implements notable community relations practices - such as regular meetings, development projects, open communication channels, employment opportunities and needs-aligned CSR - although consultation before major operational decisions remains inadequate. Results further indicated that these practices contributed to conflict reduction through participation, empowerment and frequent engagement; however, weak grievance handling, delayed response to concerns, limited transparency and poor early-warning communication reduce their crisis-management effectiveness. Residents generally held a positive perception of the company's engagement but expressed dissatisfaction with grievance resolution and unmet development expectations. Major gaps - including delayed grievance response, limited involvement in decision-making and inadequate follow-up on initiatives - heightened mistrust and the risk of operational disruption. In conclusion, although community relations practices supported peacebuilding, strategic improvement and adaptive community engagement are necessary for long-term crisis resilience. It recommended that Sterling Global Oil Resources adopt a more participatory, transparent and proactive community engagement framework to strengthen long-term crisis resilience and stakeholder trust.

Keywords: Community Relations; Crisis; Crisis Management; Sterling Global Oil Resources; Influence

1. Introduction

Community relations has become one of the most decisive determinants of operational sustainability in the oil and gas sector, especially in regions historically characterised by tension such as the Niger Delta. Scholars note that robust community relations are indispensable to preventing conflict, enhancing corporate legitimacy, and sustaining uninterrupted operations (Idemudia, 2014). For companies like Sterling Global Oil Resources, therefore, community relations are not peripheral; they are central to maintaining a stable operational climate within OML 13.

In recent times, the significance of community relations has become even clearer when examined in the context of crisis management in oil-producing regions. Crises in such settings seldom arise from technical malfunctions alone; they are strongly intertwined with the socio-economic and political realities of host communities. In addition to spills or equipment failures, crises frequently take the form of socially driven disruptions, including protests, sabotage, shutdown threats, and disputes over benefits and environmental impacts. As Omotola (2021) argues, many crises in the Niger Delta are "socially-induced", rooted in accumulated grievances and perceived injustices. This underscores that

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crisis management cannot rely solely on emergency response systems; it must incorporate proactive community engagement as a stabilising mechanism.

This interdependence between community relations and crisis management further reinforces the need for oil companies to adopt community-centred crisis-prevention models. This grows from the reasoning that when community relations are strong, they function as an early-warning system through which grievances can be detected and addressed before they escalate into conflict. Ojo and Gbadebo (2020) note that when communities feel respected and adequately informed, they prefer dialogue to confrontation. Conversely, weak, poorly coordinated, or delayed interactions amplify distrust, fuel hostility and significantly increase the likelihood of crises. Thus, within oil operations, community relations is assumed to serve as a strategic risk-mitigation tool rather than merely a corporate social responsibility requirement.

These dynamics are particularly noticeable in Sterling Global Oil Resources' operations at the Uquo Marginal Field/Stubb Creek, within OML 13 in Esit Eket. The field has experienced several occasions of interaction with different operators, leaving behind historical grievances over environmental degradation, compensation processes, employment concerns, and benefit-sharing. The unresolved issues form part of the social memory of the host communities and continue to shape contemporary attitudes toward extractive firms. In line with wider Niger Delta trends, residents expect transparency, responsiveness and involvement in decisions affecting their livelihoods. When such expectations are unmet, tensions escalate into several forms of operational disruption (Aghalino, 2020), making the need for strategic community relations unavoidable.

Consequently, crisis management within OML 13 may depend not only on technical competence but also on the quality of stakeholder engagement adopted by Sterling Global Oil Resources. As Nwosu (2019) observes, crisis prevention in the Niger Delta is more effective when companies build collaborative and culturally sensitive relationships with host communities anchored on transparency, empathy and continuous dialogue. Therefore, community relations is expected to be central to maintaining a stable operating environment in Uquo and Stubb Creek. However, the question remains, is that the reality of the company? This signals the need for an empirical investigation on how these practices shape crisis management outcomes in the area. It was on this premise that this study examined how community relations shape crisis management outcomes in Sterling Global Oil Resources' OML 13 operations.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Preliminary observation of Sterling Global Oil Resources' operations in Esit Eket indicates the presence of multiple community relations practices, including periodic stakeholder consultations, youth empowerment schemes, deployment of community liaison officers, corporate social responsibility interventions, prioritisation of local employment, grievance-resolution mechanisms, and sensitisation forums designed to manage expectations and strengthen rapport with host communities. Yet, despite these structured efforts, recurring incidents of tension, protests, disrupted dialogues, and grievances suggest that the relationship between community engagement and crisis management remains uncertain.

From this observation, it becomes unclear whether these initiatives are genuinely mitigating the triggers of conflict or merely masking deeper concerns that continue to manifest as operational disruptions across Uquo and Stubb Creek. While several studies have explored community relations and conflict in the wider Niger Delta, there is a noticeable lack of empirical focus on how community relations shape crisis management outcomes within Sterling Global's OML 13 operations. This gap justifies the need for systematic inquiry, prompting the question: to what extent do the current community relations practices support crisis management in Esit Eket?

1.2. Objectives of the Study

This study was conducted to:

- Find out the existing Sterling Global Oil Resources' community relations practices in the Uquo Marginal Field/Stubb Creek communities of Esit Eket;
- Determine how the community relations practices influence crisis management in Sterling Global Oil Resources' OML 13 operations;
- Assess the perception of the company's community relations in crisis management by the Uquo Marginal Field/Stubb Creek communities of Esit Eket; and
- Identify the gaps in the existing community relations framework and their implications for sustainable crisis management in the host communities.

1.3. Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

- What community relations practices currently exist in Sterling Global Oil Resources' operations in the Uquo Marginal Field/Stubb Creek communities of Esit Eket?
- How do these community relations practices influence crisis management in Sterling Global Oil Resources' OML 13 operations?
- What is the perception of the company's community relations in crisis management by the Uquo Marginal Field/Stubb Creek communities of Esit Eket?
- What gaps exist in the company's community relations framework, and what are their implications for sustainable crisis management in the host communities?

1.4. Significance of the Study

The study would be significant to Sterling Global Oil Resources as it provides empirical insights into the effectiveness of its community relations framework in preventing and managing crises in OML 13. It would enable the company to identify whether its existing engagement mechanisms genuinely foster trust or unintentionally reinforce tensions within host communities, and guide revisions of stakeholder management strategies. Ultimately, the outcomes of the study would provide the company with strategic direction for achieving sustainable community-company relations in Esit Eket.

The study is equally important to host communities in Uquo and Stubb Creek because it amplifies local voices on how community relations are experienced and interpreted at the grassroots level. The findings would help reveal whether community expectations align with the company's interventions and whether existing processes address core concerns such as compensation, employment, environmental wellbeing and participation in decision-making.

Academically and societally, the study would contribute to the growing body of knowledge on community relations and crisis management in Nigeria's oil and gas sector. It offers context-specific data that expands theoretical understanding of how community engagement affects crisis outcomes in high-risk extractive environments.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Community Relations

Community relations has become a central component of organisational strategy, reflecting the conscious attempts of companies to forge meaningful, respectful and productive relationships with the communities that surround their operations. It is no longer confined to occasional philanthropy; instead, it brings together corporate social responsibility (CSR), transparent communication and genuine stakeholder engagement to produce outcomes that benefit both the organisation and the public (Lee & Carroll, 2018). Strand, Freeman & Hockerts (2020) note that community relations now serves a dual purpose: it fulfills a social obligation while also strengthening corporate legitimacy and trust. Although scholars vary in emphasis - from ethical responsibility to participatory dialogue and long-term relationship building - they share the understanding that community relations must be responsive to the social context and rooted in ongoing interaction rather than one-off gestures.

Conceptually, community relations sits at the intersection of CSR, corporate citizenship and stakeholder theory. It provides the ethical guidelines and compliance expectations for responsible corporate behaviour, but community relations shifts attention to engagement driven by participation, shared responsibility and reciprocity (Crane, Matten, Glozer, & Spence, 2019). Here, communities are active partners who articulate needs, evaluate organisational efforts and influence future decisions. Consequently, transparency, accountability and meaningful responsiveness emerge not as optional ideals but as the foundation of sustainable relationships.

Historically, community relations did not begin as a sophisticated strategy. Early corporate practices largely consisted of ad hoc donations or minor infrastructural support, often detached from community expectations or pressing needs (Visser, 2021). Over time, companies began adopting structured CSR models that paid closer attention to community priorities. In high-stake sectors like oil and gas, organisations initially relied on reactive approaches to calm tension or placate grievances. The contemporary shift toward proactive and participatory engagement marks an important evolution (Idemudia, 2018).

Several principles underpin successful community relations. Trust, transparency, inclusiveness and reciprocity serve as the moral and operational compass that guide engagement with host communities. When organisations encourage open communication, respect community voices and address concerns rather than dismiss them, they build credibility and long-term goodwill. Beyond reputation management, these principles enable conflict prevention, empowerment of local populations and contributions to sustainable development. In oil-producing environments, prioritising environmental responsibility, community development, job creation and infrastructure growth not only reduces operational tension but also reinforces an organisation's social legitimacy (Ekhatior & Iyiola-Omisore, 2021; Abimbola & Negin, 2023). Such holistic engagement signals sincerity rather than obligation, helping communities feel seen rather than managed.

Community relations is ultimately expressed through real-world strategies such as community dialogue committees, development projects, environmental management programmes, corporate philanthropy and multi-stakeholder partnerships (PRSA, n.d.; Flores & Ebi, 2024). Development initiatives target structural challenges such as inadequate healthcare, poor educational facilities and limited infrastructure. Environmental stewardship is particularly crucial where corporate activities affect ecosystems and livelihoods.

The oil and gas sector provides a striking illustration of how context shapes community relations. Operations often take place in regions characterised by environmental fragility, historical grievances and high social expectations (Ekhatior & Iyiola-Omisore, 2021; Bagnall, McKenna, & South, 2025). This environment demands a form of engagement that is not only strategic but also empathetic. While other sectors such as telecommunications, mining and media also require community relations, the intensity of expectations and the potential for conflict in oil-producing communities make the stakes considerably higher.

2.2. Crisis Management in Contemporary Organisation

Crisis management refers to the coordinated processes, structures, and practices that organisations employ to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from events that threaten stakeholders, operations, reputation, or the wider public interest. While early approaches lay emphasis on strict command-and-control systems and organisational readiness, contemporary scholarship highlights adaptability, resilience, and institutional learning as vital for effective crisis governance (Mikušová, 2019).

Historically, organisations treated crisis management largely reactive, aiming to restore order after disruption rather than embedding resilience in advance. Over time, this perspective shifted towards proactive strategies where scenario planning, redundancies, rapid learning, and organisational adaptability underpin survival (Mikušová, 2019; Oscarsson, Tehler, & Danielsson, 2022). Moreover, globalisation, complex supply chains, and interconnected operations have made systemic thinking essential, as crises rarely remain local and often ripple across networks (Yang, Zhang, & Ji, 2021; Raj, Mukherjee, de Sousa Jabbour, Srivastava, & Ramanathan, 2022). In addition, growing expectations for corporate transparency and accountability, coupled with the immediacy of digital communication, forced a shift from closed, hierarchical responses toward collaborative, multi-stakeholder approaches (Schneider, Bundy, & Coombs, 2024; Wennman et al., 2022).

Across the literature, crisis management is commonly divided into three interdependent phases: prevention and preparedness, response, and recovery. Prevention and preparedness include risk assessments, contingency planning, training, and scenario modelling (Mikušová, 2019; Durugbo et al., 2022). The response phase involves immediate actions such as incident command, rapid decision-making, stakeholder communication, and operational containment (Raassens, van der Heijden, & Veldman, 2022; Schmidt, Weiss, & Sitter, 2022). Recovery is longer-term, encompassing the restoration of normal operations, rebuilding of trust, and institutionalisation of lessons learned through after-action reviews (Wennman et al., 2022; Oscarsson et al., 2022).

These phases translate into practical activities. Mature crisis management programmes deploy horizon scanning, business continuity exercises, multi-agency drills, command protocols, and post-crisis evaluations (Mikušová, 2019; Raj et al., 2022). In supply-chain-intensive sectors, firms rely on supplier diversification, local sourcing, and logistical reconfigurations to sustain operations during prolonged disruptions (Shen et al., 2021; McDougall & Davis, 2024). Service industries, in turn, implement rapid operational adjustments, health and safety measures, and timely stakeholder communication to reduce uncertainty (Raassens et al., 2022). While sector-specific activities vary, their shared objective is maintaining continuity, protecting stakeholders, and embedding organisational learning.

Nonetheless, modern scholarship emphasises that stakeholders are active participants rather than passive recipients of decisions. Effective crisis management, therefore, entails engaging communities, regulators, employees, and supply-chain partners to share information, co-create solutions, and build legitimacy (Wennman et al., 2022; Raj et al., 2022).

Transparency, two-way communication, and participatory governance are essential to mitigating reputational damage and enabling faster organisational adaptation (Chon, 2022; Kochigina, 2021).

The phenomenon, even, has been transformed by digital technology, providing tools for situational awareness, real-time reporting, and rapid stakeholder communication. Thus, social media accelerates information flow but also introduces the risk of misinformation (Eismann, Posegga, & Fischbach, 2021; Chon, 2022). Collaborative platforms enable dispersed yet coordinated incident management (Shen et al., 2021; Eismann et al., 2021). Scholars caution, however, that technology cannot replace human judgment; it is most effective when complemented by strong relationships and trust-based networks (Eismann et al., 2021; Oscarsson *et al.*, 2022).

Despite these advances, critical gaps remain. There is limited understanding of how organisations manage simultaneous or cascading crises, such as the convergence of pandemics, cyberattacks, and supply-chain shocks (Durugbo, Tiwari & Alcock, 2022). Similarly, while reputation-focused frameworks offer valuable insights, empirical applications across diverse cultural and industrial settings remain underdeveloped (Schneider et al., 2024).

In sum, crisis management has evolved into a multi-layered, interdisciplinary practice. From its definitions to theoretical underpinnings and practical applications, the literature consistently underscores that resilience, adaptability, and reputation protection are mutually reinforcing objectives. Achieving them requires a combination of preparedness, stakeholder engagement, ethical awareness, technological integration, and institutional learning (Mikušová, 2019; Shen et al., 2021; Raj et al., 2022; Schneider et al., 2024).

2.3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) advanced by W. Timothy Coombs in 1995 as a framework for explaining how organisations can protect their reputation during crises. Coombs built on Attribution Theory, proposing that stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility influence how they evaluate an organisation's crisis response. The theory assumes that crises vary by type-victim, accidental, or preventable, and that each requires an appropriate communication strategy.

In this study, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is relevant for understanding how Sterling Global Oil Resources' community relations practices influence crisis management in Akwa Ibom State. In this study, it can assess whether the company's engagement and communication strategies with host communities are appropriate to the nature of emerging crises and whether they serve to prevent, contain, or escalate tensions. It provides a framework for evaluating how Sterling's proactive or reactive community interactions affect stakeholders' perceptions of the company's crisis management.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design that enabled the collection of data directly from stakeholders to ascertain the perceived influence of community relations on crisis management in Sterling Global Resources Limited. The study population consisted of residents of host communities within Sterling Global Oil Resources' Stubb Creek and Uquo Marginal Field (SRCAT) operations in Esit Eket LGA, Akwa Ibom State. Population projections for 2025 are Etebi Idung Akpaisang – 6,780; Etebi Idung Iniang – 7,105; Ikot Afaha Eket – 10,045, totaling an estimated 23,930 residents (NPC, 2006; projected 2.7% annual growth). These communities directly experience the social and operational impacts of the company.

The sample size was determined using Philip Meyer's Guide, which provides an appropriate formula for survey-based studies in large populations. Based on this guide, a sample of 363 respondents was selected to ensure adequate representation and statistical reliability. A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted for sampling the respondents. In the first stage, the three host communities—Etebi Idung Akpaisang, Etebi Idung Iniang, and Ikot Afaha Eket—were treated as clusters. At the second stage, purposive sampling was applied to select these communities due to their direct exposure to Sterling Global Oil Resources' operations and their proximity to company facilities. At the third stage, respondents within each community cluster were selected using convenience sampling to ensure inclusion of knowledgeable adult stakeholders, balanced across gender, age groups, and local leadership structures.

The instrument for data collection was a structured Likert-styled questionnaire, and interview guide, developed to assess the influence of community relations on crisis management in Sterling Global Oil Resources' OML 13 operations at Uquo Marginal Field/Stubb Creek, Esit Eket.

Data collected were collected by the researcher with trained assistants. They were also analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, to summarise respondents' views and provide insight into how the company's community relations practices influence trust, cooperation, and the effectiveness of crisis management within the host communities. The research also made use of interview with the public relations personnel of the company, to elicit information to further strengthen and elaborate the findings, which were analysed using themes and patterns.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1 Community Relations Practices of Sterling Global Oil Resources in SRCAT Communities

Items	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	WS	WMS	Decision
Sterling Global Oil Resources regularly organises community meetings.	80	170	70	39	359	1037	2.89	Agree
The company implements development projects in the community.	60	150	90	59	359	964	2.68	Agree
Community members are consulted before major operational decisions affecting the Uquo Marginal Field/Stubb Creek area are taken.	50	140	100	69	359	889	2.47	Disagree
Sterling Global Oil Resources maintains open channels of communication for residents to express concerns or grievances.	70	160	80	49	359	1013	2.82	Agree
The company provides employment or vocational opportunities for local residents.	55	175	85	44	359	994	2.77	Agree
CSR initiatives by Sterling Global Oil Resources are aligned with the real needs and priorities of the host communities.	45	160	100	54	359	907	2.53	Agree

Note: *SA*= Strongly Agree; *A*=Agree; *D* = Disagree; *SD*=Strongly Disagree; *WS*=Weighted Score; and *WMS*=Weighted Mean Score

Data in Table 1 shows that residents of SRCAT communities recognise several community relations practices of Sterling Global Oil Resources; they agree that the company regularly organises community meetings with the most identified being (WM = 2.89, Agree), implements development projects like schools and healthcare.

Table 2 Influence of Sterling Global Oil Resources' Community Relations Practices on Crisis Management in SRCAT Communities

Items	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	WS	WMS	Decision
Regular community meetings help prevent conflicts in the host communities.	60	170	90	39	359	982	2.73	Agree
The company's grievance-handling mechanism allows residents to report concerns effectively.	50	160	100	49	359	889	2.47	Disagree
Timely response to community concerns reduces the likelihood of disputes escalation.	45	155	110	49	359	869	2.42	Disagree
Development projects by the company contribute to community cooperation.	55	165	95	44	359	944	2.63	Agree
Communication channels maintained by the company enable early identification of potential crises.	50	150	105	54	359	859	2.39	Disagree

Involving community leaders improves trust and prevents misunderstandings.	65	160	90	44	359	984	2.74	Agree
Providing employment opportunities fosters community support for company operations.	55	175	85	44	359	994	2.77	Agree
Transparency enhances confidence among residents and reduces tension.	45	160	95	59	359	884	2.46	Disagree

The data in Table 2 indicates that residents of SRCAT communities have mixed views regarding how Sterling Global Oil Resources' community relations practices influence crisis management. Most respondents agreed that some aspects of the company's engagement help reduce conflict. For instance, the majority agreed that regular community meetings help prevent conflicts (WMS = 2.73).

Table 3 Perception of Sterling Global Oil Resources' Community Relations Practices in SRCAT Communities

Items	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	WS	WMS	Decision
Regular community meetings keep residents informed of company activities.	55	180	90	34	359	994	2.77	Agree
The company's grievance-handling mechanism is effective.	45	150	110	54	359	859	2.39	Disagree
Development projects implemented by the company meet community needs.	50	160	100	49	359	889	2.47	Disagree
Communication channels are accessible and clear to residents.	60	155	105	39	359	909	2.53	Agree
Inclusion of community leaders increases residents' trust in the company.	65	170	85	39	359	1004	2.80	Agree
Employment opportunities and vocational training positively influence residents' perception of commitment.	55	165	95	44	359	994	2.77	Agree

The data in Table 3 indicates that residents of SRCAT communities generally hold a positive perception of Sterling Global Oil Resources' community relations practices. Most respondents agreed that the company's regular community meetings keep residents well informed about its activities (WMS = 2.77).

Table 4 Constraining Factors in Sterling Global Oil Resources' Community Relations Practices in SRCAT Communities

Items	VS (4)	S (3)	M (2)	U (1)	Total	WS	WMS	Decision
Delayed response to grievances	90	140	80	49	359	1017	2.83	Significant
Limited participation of residents in decision-making	85	150	75	49	359	1014	2.82	Significant
Poor transparency in company operations	100	135	80	44	359	1049	2.92	Very Significant
Inadequate local employment	70	160	90	39	359	994	2.77	Significant
Insufficient environmental mitigation measures	75	155	85	44	359	1009	2.81	Significant
Limited follow-up on initiatives	65	145	95	54	359	969	2.70	Significant

Table 4 shows that residents of SRCAT communities identify several constraints in Sterling Global Oil Resources' community relations practices. At the top is poor transparency in company operations (WMS 2.92, Very Significant).

5. Interview response

5.1. Thematic Analysis of Interview Responses

The interview responses were analysed using a thematic approach to identify recurring patterns in the perspectives of the Community Liaison Officer (Respondent One) and the Field/Operations Officer (Respondent Two), who preferred that their names remained unmentioned. Five major themes emerged from the data as discussed below, with illustrative quotations embedded to reinforce each theme.

5.2. Theme 1: Structured Community Engagement and Communication

Both respondents emphasised that the company maintains an organised and continuous community engagement system. Respondent One described a "structured community relations framework that prioritises participation, transparency and sustained dialogue," including regular town-hall meetings and consultation with stakeholder groups. Respondent Two reinforced this, indicating that "we attend meetings, supervise CSR projects, and maintain daily communication through recognised groups like village councils and youth leadership." Across the responses, engagement is deliberately continuous rather than reactive, with clear communication channels designed to prevent rumours and misunderstanding.

5.3. Theme 2: Livelihood and Socioeconomic Empowerment as a Peace-building Tool

Both respondents pointed to livelihood-driven CSR initiatives as the strongest mechanism for reducing tensions. Respondent One highlighted that "the most impactful initiatives are those that improve livelihoods... skills development and empowerment projects significantly reduce youth agitation." Respondent Two echoed this by stressing that "when youths feel included economically, agitation reduces significantly." Employment support, scholarships and local contracting were repeatedly associated with greater community acceptance and fewer conflicts.

5.4. Theme 3: Feedback and Early-Warning Systems

A strong feedback structure emerged as a key mechanism for preventing crises from escalating. Respondent One described a "multi-layered feedback structure," including a liaison office, stakeholder review meetings and informal updates through community gatekeepers. Respondent Two also noted that "feedback is received through community meetings, complaints raised on site, and reports from traditional authorities and youth leaders." These mechanisms operate as crisis early-warning systems, allowing the company to detect dissatisfaction on time.

5.5. Theme 4: Gaps and Challenges in Community Relations

Despite significant progress, both respondents acknowledged that persistent challenges could undermine crisis management. Respondent One cited "rising community expectations... and information disparities" as major constraints, adding that delays in project approval can be "misinterpreted as abandonment." Respondent Two similarly mentioned that "communication sometimes moves slower than community rumour," causing misunderstanding. This shows that misaligned expectations, communication delays and inter-community politics remain underlying risk factors.

5.6. Theme 5: Adaptability of Strategies during Crisis Situations

The respondents agreed that flexibility is essential during emerging crises. Respondent One explained that when tensions arise, "the first step is rapid consultation to understand the root cause," followed by increased engagement frequency and adjustments in messaging. Respondent Two added that in crisis situations, "we increase the level of visibility in the community - more meetings, more field visits, and more updates." Both responses show that escalation is prevented through swift visibility, intensified negotiation and timely corrective action.

The thematic analysis reveals that Sterling Global Oil Resources prioritises constructive community relations grounded in continuous engagement, socioeconomic empowerment and structured feedback mechanisms. However, challenges such as high expectations, delays and communication gaps persist and could trigger crises if not managed proactively. The company's emphasis on strategic flexibility during disputes helps mitigate escalation and sustain operational peace in SRCAT communities.

6. Discussion of Findings

6.1. Research Question 1: What community relations practices currently exist in Sterling Global Oil Resources' operations in the Uquo Marginal Field/Stub Creek communities of Esit Eket?

Sterling Global's current community relations practices are examined using Table 1 (quantitative survey of practices) and the interview themes (structured engagement; livelihood empowerment). Table 1 maps practised activities - meetings, development projects, consultation, communication channels, employment schemes and CSR alignment - while interviews humanise how those practices operate in daily life, explaining both strengths and lived limitations in Uquo/Stub Creek.

The regularly convened meetings appear to function as the company's primary relational infrastructure, and the community's agreement signals that these gatherings are experienced as predictable social rituals rather than perfunctory checkbox exercises. In practice, town halls and stakeholder forums create routine opportunities for face-to-face exchange, enabling residents to air grievances, receive clarifications and negotiate practical solutions. The meetings appear to build interpersonal familiarity between company staff and community gatekeepers, which reduces information asymmetry and normalises dialogue.

Development projects surface in the data as tangible currency of corporate legitimacy - community agreement indicates that such projects are recognised and valued. These interventions operate on two levels: materially, they address immediate needs (education, health, water); symbolically, they signal corporate commitment to community welfare. Interviewees stressed livelihood-driven CSR as impactful.

According to the findings, the community's disagreement that they are consulted before major operational decisions signals a structural gap: consultation appears either perfunctory or absent at decision-critical moments. The psychological effect is significant: exclusion breeds suspicion and erodes the moral legitimacy of corporate operations. Hence, lack of true consultation risks converting communities from collaborators into critics.

Furthermore, the respondents' agreement that channels exist indicates that residents recognise formal avenues for expression, such as liaison offices or hotlines. Interviews affirmed multi-layered feedback structures combining liaison offices, stakeholder reviews and gatekeeper reports, suggesting that mechanisms are institutionally present. Nevertheless, the system's efficacy depends on accessibility, awareness and trust: channels exist, but earlier tables show doubts about timeliness and effectiveness. Interview evidence emphasises this: residents expect multi-modal access (face-to-face, gatekeepers, digital) and visible case closure. If channels only record complaints without producing tangible redress, their legitimacy erodes and formal voice gives way to informal mobilisation.

In addition, employment and vocational schemes register positive community recognition, reinforcing the idea that livelihood inclusion is a potent stabiliser. Respondents' statements about youth inclusion reducing agitation underline this causal pathway. Therefore, employment functions both as material compensation and as a social glue. Equally, Survey agreement that CSR is aligned with needs suggests that initiatives are, to some extent, responsive to local priorities. In practice, alignment improves perceived fairness and ensures that CSR projects meet everyday priorities and signal corporate empathy. Interview themes support this, with respondents emphasising livelihood-driven initiatives as particularly effective in reducing youth agitation and building goodwill.

Alternatively, the moderate WMS score suggests partial alignment: while CSR addresses visible needs, there remain gaps in depth, reach and follow-up. Interviews' emphasis on the importance of skills development and sustained livelihoods points to community preferences for empowerment over one-off infrastructure. Consequently, CSR alignment must be judged on inclusivity and sustainability, not merely on the presence of projects.

These findings echo the voice of Idemudia (2014), which shows that corporate legitimacy in the Niger Delta depends on visible, participatory development and accountability mechanisms; where these are lacking, communities interpret company actions through a prism of historical grievance. Similarly, Frynas (2005) argues that CSR in extractive contexts must be substantive, locally embedded and linked to livelihoods to be credible; superficial projects produce limited stabilising effects.

SCCT explains these results by foregrounding attribution: stakeholders evaluate whether a company is responsible for a crisis and adjust their responses accordingly. Where Sterling Global shows consistent presence (meetings, development projects) SCCT predicts lower attribution of blame and milder stakeholder responses. Conversely, gaps in

consultation, timeliness and transparency increase perceived responsibility and therefore heighten negative stakeholder reactions.

6.2. Research Question 2: How do these community relations practices influence crisis management in Sterling Global Oil Resources' OML 13 operations?

Table 2 provides the empirical basis for responding to this question. The finding that regular community meetings help prevent conflicts invites a deeper understanding of how structured dialogue reconfigures community-company relations. It suggests that even in historically sensitive regions, continuous interaction softens suspicion and gradually cultivates social familiarity. Respondents' agreement points to a lived experience where meetings are not mere administrative routines but spaces, in which people express anxieties, negotiate benefits and clarify misunderstandings. Interestingly, interview materials affirm this sentiment: Respondent One described these engagements as "multi-layered", blending formal dialogues with informal relational encounters. Together, these dynamics imply that predictable engagement cultivates predictability in community behaviour, significantly lowering the probability of crisis escalation.

This result also highlights that meetings provide early-warning signals essential for crisis management. Respondent Two's remark that community concerns often surface "through meetings, complaints onsite, and reports from traditional authorities" reinforces this. In effect, meetings transform into monitoring tools, enabling the organisation to adjust its actions before dissatisfaction becomes a protest. Therefore, the agreement among respondents is an acknowledgment that relational consistency strengthens the company's situational awareness and improves its crisis responsiveness.

Furthermore, looking at the grievance-handling mechanism, the widespread disagreement indicates that the system is perceived as inaccessible, slow or insufficiently responsive. Communities may feel that reporting grievances does not lead to meaningful change, thereby reducing confidence in the system. The interviews support this view indirectly: although Respondent One referenced feedback structures, the dissatisfaction in survey responses suggests these structures may not be uniformly effective or widely trusted.

The data also suggests that weak grievance-handling threatens crisis management because it deprives communities of safe outlets for expressing discomfort. When frustrations have no institutional pathway, they spill over into public confrontation. This aligns with broader Niger Delta scholarship, which argues that ineffective grievance structures fuel mobilisation and agitation. Respondent Two's comment that youths react better when they "feel included economically" hints at the consequence of exclusion: when channels fail, agitation fills the vacuum.

Moreover, the perception of untimely corporate responses reveals frustration with the pace at which issues are addressed. In crisis-prone environments, delayed responses can be interpreted as indifference, which communities often transform into collective dissent. Respondent One's emphasis on early-warning mechanisms underscores the importance of prompt interventions, yet the disagreement indicates gaps between detection and action. Respondent Two's remarks about the effect of inclusion speak directly to this: when people feel ignored, agitation escalates.

In addition, development projects were interpreted positively, suggesting that tangible socio-economic interventions foster goodwill. Interview respondents emphasise livelihood empowerment as the "strongest mechanism for reducing tensions." Employment, skills support and scholarships were repeatedly highlighted as peacebuilding resources. Thus, the agreement shows that material empowerment remains a cornerstone of relational stability. The strong agreement regarding leadership involvement demonstrates that communities value relational legitimacy. When leaders participate, the engagement feels culturally grounded and socially credible. This aligns with Niger Delta expectations, where leadership endorsement is essential for community buy-in. A deeper reading indicates that leadership involvement bridges interpretative gaps between the company and residents.

Together, these interpretations confirm that community relations significantly influences crisis management in OML 13. Overall, the findings align with studies such as Idemudia (2014), which argue that community relations determine conflict dynamics in oil-host regions, and Omotola (2021), who shows that weak engagement mechanisms escalate grievances. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) helps illuminate these results by arguing that stakeholder perceptions determine crisis outcomes. Sterling Global's successes reflect preventative strategies that reduce attribution of blame. Conversely, failures in transparency and responsiveness reflect weaknesses that increase perceived organisational responsibility, thereby heightening crisis vulnerability.

Research Question 3: How do host community members perceive the role of Sterling Global Oil Resources' community relations practices in crisis management?

To address this, the discussion relies on the data presented in Table 3. Residents' perception shows that beyond simply being gatherings, the meetings appear to act as symbolic assurances that the company does not operate in secrecy. In contexts like SRCAT, where suspicion historically thrives due to environmental risks, the simple act of consistent dialogue devolves potential tension. The interview responses corroborate this, as respondents highlighted a deliberate structure for engagement designed to prevent rumours.

In many oil-hosting areas, crises escalate because communities feel ignored until conflict erupts. The strong agreement recorded here reflects the reversal of that dynamic, indicating that residents interpret these meetings as early-warning platforms where they can raise issues before they escalate. The interview data strengthens this view: the cited "multi-layered feedback structure" and "daily communication through recognised groups" highlight a system where meetings are woven into a larger framework of anticipation and pre-emption.

Turning to the grievance-handling mechanism, residents' perception that it is ineffective reveals deeper issues about procedural justice within the company's operations. Oil-hosting communities often judge companies not on the existence of grievance channels but on the speed, seriousness and empathy with which complaints are handled. Disagreement here may reflect residents' belief that the company undervalues their experiences or treats complaints in a transactional rather than relational manner. The interview responses highlight that informal are highly valued and often more effective than formal reporting systems.

Residents' perception that development projects do not sufficiently meet community needs can be interpreted in two significant ways. Communities may view these projects as misaligned with their priorities, possibly because they were imposed rather than co-designed. The finding implies that residents assess development projects not merely by their presence but by their usefulness, sustainability and responsiveness to real needs. Similarly, communities in extractive zones are often exposed to examples of more substantial development from other operators, making them highly aware of what is possible or reasonable. Thus, their negative perception may indicate that the company's development footprint feels small relative to the socioeconomic pressures created by operations. Interview responses reinforce this, emphasising that livelihood-oriented projects are the real peace stabilisers.

Again, residents' agreement that communication channels are accessible and clear underscores the value they place on openness, familiarity and ongoing dialogue. Accessibility signals equality and transparency, countering the historically unequal power dynamics between oil companies and local communities. Residents understand communication not only as information flow but also as a relational bridge. Clear communication reduces anxiety, especially in communities where the risks associated with extraction can produce fear and speculation.

Also, the result highlights the psychological reassurance that leadership inclusion provides. When recognised community leaders participate in decisions, residents feel their concerns are voiced at the negotiation table even when they are physically absent. The interview responses confirm this dynamic: both respondents emphasised the centrality of working with recognised groups and gatekeepers. Relatedly, residents' positive perception of employment opportunities and vocational training reflects their broader understanding of empowerment as the foundation of peace and acceptance. When communities see their members benefiting materially, they interpret it as evidence of sincerity and corporate responsibility. This reduces the tendency toward confrontation because residents feel valued rather than sidelined. The interview findings strongly reinforce this view, emphasising that livelihood empowerment has the greatest impact on reducing agitation.

These findings are consistent with earlier studies, including Idemudia (2014), who argued that community perceptions of oil companies depend heavily on whether CSR and engagement practices address livelihood concerns and demonstrate respect for socio-cultural structures. Similarly, Onyema (2020) found that grievance-handling effectiveness significantly shapes whether communities perceive companies as partners or exploiters. The alignment of the present findings with these studies confirms that the dynamics observed in these communities reflect broader patterns in oil-hosting regions across the Niger Delta.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory offers a powerful lens for interpreting these findings, particularly because it emphasises the need for organisations to manage perceptions of responsibility and trust during crises. The theory argues that effective communication and relationship-building reduce attribution of blame and strengthen community goodwill. This aligns strongly with residents' positive perceptions of meetings, communication channels, leadership involvement and employment opportunities.

6.3. Research Question 4: What gaps exist in the company's community relations framework, and what are their implications for sustainable crisis management in the host communities?

In answering the question, the study relies primarily on the evidence embedded in Table 4, which provides quantitative confirmation of the specific gaps and their operational consequences. The first data set, delayed response to community grievances, reveals much more than administrative inefficiency, it speaks to the relational fragility that emerges when concerns are allowed to linger without resolution. Communities in the Niger Delta interpret silence from companies as intentional disregard, and this perception alone can significantly erode goodwill. Consequently, delayed responses unintentionally amplify rumours and community suspicion. Respondents in the interview phase highlighted that information "travels slower than community rumour," meaning long grievance-processing periods create a vacuum quickly filled by speculation.

In terms of patterns and trends, the recurring signal from respondents shows that delayed responses consistently correlate with increased crisis potential. "Delayed grievance handling" surfaces not only as a major gap but also as a direct trigger for operational disruptions. The pattern demonstrates a behavioural tendency within the host communities: timeliness equals respect, while delays equal neglect.

Patterns emerging from this data emphasise a powerful behavioural trend: communities interpret participation as validation. The more they are involved, the lower the likelihood of confrontation. Moreover, poor transparency in company operations stands out as the most significant constraint. When information is not openly shared, residents assume the worst. Thus, transparency acts as a truth-management mechanism. When residents lack clarity on project timelines, environmental impacts, or employment quotas, misinformation spreads rapidly. Interview respondents confirmed this by noting that "information disparities" are major drivers of tension. Hence, transparency failure is not merely a communication issue - it is a crisis accelerator.

The patterns across the table affirm the same logic: where economic inclusion declines, crisis probability rises. In every dataset, employment-related issues score significantly, indicating a behavioural trend among residents who equate livelihood support with respect and partnership. The trend is reinforced by the broader finding: livelihood-driven CSR is the most effective peacebuilding tool. From a pattern standpoint, the trend is unmistakable: environmental responsibility is treated as non-negotiable, and lapses almost automatically escalate to confrontation. The consistency across datasets shows that environmental gaps do not operate in isolation but intersect with mistrust, participation concerns and poor responsiveness.

Taken together, the findings answer the research question by clearly demonstrating that multiple gaps collectively undermine sustainable crisis management. The data show that these gaps do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact, magnifying tensions and reducing the effectiveness of even well-designed community initiatives. The combination of quantitative evidence and interview insights points to a community relations framework that is functional but still burdened by systemic weaknesses that threaten long-term stability.

These findings align with those of Idemudia (2014), who emphasises that mistrust in extractive regions is often fuelled by gaps in transparency and inconsistent engagement. Similarly, Ojo and Gbadebo (2020) found that delays in grievance management and inadequate participation are major predictors of operational conflicts in host communities. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) offers an important explanatory foundation for understanding the findings. SCCT posits that organisations must tailor their communication and relational strategies based on how stakeholders attribute responsibility during crises. In this study, gaps such as poor transparency, delayed responses and inadequate participation increase the perceived responsibility of the company, thereby increasing community anger. SCCT argues that high responsibility attribution requires more accommodative strategies, such as openness, corrective action and intensive engagement - precisely the remedies implied by the gaps identified. Thus, the findings align with SCCT's emphasis on trust restoration and stakeholder-oriented crisis response.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study have helped indicate that Sterling Global Oil Resources' community relations framework in the Uquo Marginal Field/Stubb Creek communities plays a crucial role in sustaining peace and preventing operational crises. Structured community engagement, livelihood-centred CSR, and early-warning feedback systems emerged as central mechanisms for fostering trust and reducing conflict. Although these practices have strengthened cooperation between the company and host communities, persistent gaps such as heightened expectations, communication delays and intra-community politics continue to pose risks to sustainable crisis management. The study therefore concludes

that while community relations practices are effective in mitigating conflict, continuous strategic improvement and adaptive engagement are necessary to safeguard long-term stability and enhance mutual benefits for both parties.

Recommendations

The findings led to the recommendations that

- Sterling should institutionalise mandatory, documented pre-decision consultations so that major operational decisions follow transparent, recorded community input.
- The company should implement a tracked grievance-management system with clear service-level agreements (SLA), fixed response times and publicised escalation routes to ensure faster acknowledgement, resolution and reduction of dispute escalation.
- Sterling should adopt participatory needs assessments and publish periodic, accessible CSR performance reports so that community members can verify project selection, budgets and outcomes.
- Sterling Oil should establish a joint community-company monitoring body to oversee project delivery, audit environmental mitigation, and publicly track follow-up actions.

Compliance with ethical standards

We have completed this study, bearing in mind the ethical standards guiding research, including anonymity and getting consent before the administration of the instrument for data collection. Therefore, every means of identifying a participant has been clearly avoided, and they cannot be identified.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

We declare that there is no conflict of interest with the study, arising either from any of the authors' personal biases or from the sources of data.

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