

SundaySpecial

How Ken Saro-Wiwa, co-martyrs are rebuilding Ogoniland from the dead

- \$5m Kiisi Fund opens development scheme with focus on human capital
- BB Fakaie, other highly trusted citizens put in charge

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Ogoniland is witnessing quiet revolution outside the ever-controversial schemes such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) or the clean up exercise, but from the activities of its sons that died as martyrs led by Ken Saro-Wiwa.

The then late head of state, Sani Abacha, may have hanged Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni-9 in 1994 but the worldwide troubles from it did not allow the king to sleep. At the end, the martyrs have won huge enablement that have made them to launch a development fund that is now creating a silent revolution especially in human capital development and other physical infrastructure projects.

The \$5m or N2bn seed capital came from \$15.5m which families of Saro-Wiwa and the others won in New York in 2009. They used the fund to create a Foundation that is strictly managed along international standards in order to keep delivering value in the area to all Ogoni.

The scheme is managed by an environmentalist, lawyer, former lawmaker, and recently the secretary to Imo State government, Uche Onyeagucha, who hails from Obinze, Owerri West. A true Port Harcourt boy, he worked with Oronto Douglas and Ken Saro-Wiwa to bring justice to Ogoniland on the vast environmental devastation and injustice done to the area. He suffered several detentions in his career of fighting against military dictatorship. He served as legal adviser to the Ijaw Youth Council and founder-member of Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria, as well as founder, Right to Know, among others. He is chairman of the Foundation.

Now, the Foundation has a Governance/Programme Subcommittee overseen by one of Africa's most celebrated and trusted education transformers and an international researcher of repute, BB Fakaie, who revived the Bori Polytechnic and was later drafted for eight years to rescue the then traumatised and degenerated Rivers State University of Science and Technology, now Rivers State University.

Fakaie hails from Kbangha in Nyokhana district of Khana LGA, Rivers State. He was a Commonwealth Academic Staff Scholar and



L-R: BB Fakaie, a student in the middle, and Uche Onyeagucha

lecturer at the University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN), before transferring his service to his home state starting at the RSUST. He is on record to have transformed the Bori Poly to a strong institution in Rivers State before taking the RSUST to the best state-owned university in Nigeria with earth-shaking legacies such as 1000 computer centre, online examinations, total automation of admission, results, payments, and hostel allocations and student identification.

Other board members include tested men and women such as Chet Tchozewski (President of the RTC Impact Fund), Deezia Hannah Karikpo, Lebatam B. Ndegwe (PhD), a public health sector/toxic exposure expert who is now the project director. It looks like who are put in charge of the foundation is as crucial as the fund itself because of the high propensity for fraud, waste and mismanagement in Nigeria's national life.

Now, Kiisi has been sponsoring development projects in Ogoni made up of four local council areas of Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme through some accredited civil society organisations (CSOs). They later changed their model and rather created a foundation to directly execute various programmes and projects especially in human capital development and health.

Background of the fund

Ogoni land is now known globally for struggle over environmen-

tal disasters. Studies show that in 15 years from 1976 to 1991, there were reportedly 2, 976 oil spills of about 2.1 million barrels of oil in Ogoniland, accounting for about 40 percent of the total oil spills in Shell worldwide.

The struggle of Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists eventually led to the cessation of oil production activities in the area in 1993, but widespread environmental damage was already done.

According to a handbook, one of the first philanthropic actions of the plaintiffs of the 2009 Wiwa vs. Shell lawsuit was the creation of the Kiisi Trust Fund with \$5

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million out of the \$15.5 million out-of-court settlement in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York.

At the time of the settlement, the Ogoni plaintiffs stated that the Kiisi Trust "should stand as one legacy of the labours of our heroes past." This incredibly generous and selfless act by the plaintiffs was intended to be used by the Kiisi Trust Fund to support programmes in education, health, community development, and other benefits for the Ogoni people and their communities, including educational endowments, skills development, agricultural development, women's programs, small enterprise support, and adult literacy.

In 2016, according to records made available to BusinessDay-Sunday, the Trustees of the Kiisi Trust, in a competitive bidding process, hired TrustAfrica to oversee the management of the fund as a donor-advised-fund manager on behalf of the Trustees of the Kiisi Trust in Nigeria.

The funds of the Kiisi Trust are kept in separate bank accounts from TrustAfrica's bank accounts, with most of the funds held in an investment portfolio with a reputable international investment firm, where it is generating additional income for the Kiisi Trust.

The Trust operates as a community foundation that advances the original aims and intentions of the plaintiffs of the Wiwa vs. Shell lawsuit.

A land full of projects

GreenPad Concepts partnered with the Kiisi Trust in 2018 for their funded project 'Enabling Menstrual Hygiene in Ogoni Communities.' The project promoted women's feminine hygiene and reproductive health in the four Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Ogoniland.

GreenPad Concepts partnered with the Ministry of Education, School Authorities, and Maternity Health Centers to reach out to 8,000 women in 10 communities (Alesa, Alode, B-Dere, Bodo, Bera, Kpor, Kpite, Nonwa, Kabangha, Gwara) through sensitization on menstruation, proper feminine hygiene, and reproductive health.

Additionally, in a bid to salvage the cultural taboo surrounding the female menstrual cycle, GreenPad Concepts used discarded banana and plantain fibers to produce an affordable, highly absorbent, six-months biodegradable sanitary pads.

They distributed these free sanitary pads to 3,000 Ogoni women and 1,000 free packets of sanitary pads to 1,400 schoolgirls in community secondary schools.

A study conducted by Joint Medical Life Savers (JMLS) showed that four out of every 10 Ogoni children die within their first three months of life. In 2018, Joint Medical Life Savers partnered with the Kiisi Trust with their funded project "Saving Lives at Birth."

The project aimed to reduce ma-

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ternal and newborn mortality in Ogoniland by training, certifying, and equipping 200 Midwives and Nurses with skills and resources to provide emergency obstetric care and newborn resuscitation. The organisation created and published a training curriculum and manual used to train 20 Senior Midwives (5 from each of the LGAs of Ogoniland) as peer educator trainers. The peer educator trainers were recruited to the JMLF team to help train an additional 200 trainees (Midwives, Nurses, Community Health Extension Workers, and Traditional Birth Attendants) across over 42 communities. JMLS also produced 280 Lifesaver birth kits; each delivery kit contained a delivery mat that had the pictorial algorithms for diagnosing and treating postpartum bleeding and birth asphyxia.

Luther Welfare for Children at Risk Development Centre (Luther Welfare) implemented a project in 2018 titled 'Promoting Alternative Livelihoods for Sustainable Agriculture.' This project aimed to improve community members' socio-economic standards through alternative livelihoods activities such as sustainable farming, economic empowerment, and social stability. The project had beneficiaries mentoring groups to ensure that community women and men become gainfully self-employed. Luther Welfare equipped over 500 beneficiaries from the Eteo community in Eleme Local Government Area with knowledge/skills in the agro-based fields of poultry, piggery, snail farming, fish farming, and mushroom growing. Furthermore, beneficiaries were grouped into twenty (20) groups made up of twenty-five (25) members to promote sustainable investment through cooperative farming and peer mentorship.

The cooperative groups improved networking among beneficiaries in maximizing opportunities to produce markets which in turn increased their earning power.

Divine Benevolent Care Organisation (DBC) implemented their funded project 'Re-igniting Hope: Enhancing the Reading Culture in Ogoni' in 2019. The project targeted students in SS3 from widowed households who were preparing for their final examination and needed alternative source of light to study (solar lamps).

The project provided solar lamps to 100 students from 5 communities (Kaa, Gwara, Luawii, and Kono-Boue) in Khana LGA of Rivers State to aid with studying for their West African Examination Council exams. The project aimed to imbibe a reading culture and increase the exam pass rate among the target project beneficiaries. During the lockdown and movement restrictions caused by Covid19, DBCO distributed 200 pieces of facemasks and writing materials to the 100 students writing the 2020 West African Examination Council.

Change of strategy

The Trust adopted the disbursement of funds to community-based organisations in 2017 to carry out projects. But between 2017 and 2020, the Advisory Council reviewed and approved 35 grant applications out of over 64 which resulted in impacting 30,861 beneficiaries in 68 communities across the four local government areas of Ogoniland. The Trust supports projects in seven thematic areas: agriculture, women's programs, peace-building, education, governance, health, youth skills development/SME.

The board explained why it had to change the approach. "Though these early interventions were critical in piloting new ideas and innovations, it ultimately undermined the sustainability of these local community-based organisations because it trapped them in project-cycle funding.

"This approach, though well-intentioned, also, unfortunately, too narrowly defined the scope of work of the Trust in Ogoniland and led to some entitlement and divisions between organisations and community representatives. The approach also buried the name and face of the fund owners (Kiisi) while projecting the medium of implementation, though something was actually intended to allow Kiisi lie low."

The report said: "The need to execute the true mandate of the original grantors to the Trust has led to a more expanded strategic approach that focuses more on long-term planning and sustainability, targeting larger organisations and institutions with a mandate to serve Ogoniland, resulting in a bigger impact and reach of funded interventions.

While project/institutional support to organisations constitutes the majority of the work of the Trust, the Trust also has two other programmatic areas— professional development and skills sharing for young Ogonis through the Ogoni NextGen Internship programme and advancing the educational careers of Ogoni students through the Ogoni Scholarship Fund.

Human capital development

Saro-Wiwa was a lover of education and scholarship. He is known to have promoted this in his Ogoni in every position he found himself. From the great beyond, through Kiisi, he still does it.

Called the Ogoni Scholarship Fund, it aims to become a beacon for Ogoni scholars anywhere with the thirst for education and in improving not only their lives but the societies in which they find themselves, the brochure says.

The Trust hopes that the Ogoni Scholarship Fund would remain a permanent legacy of the Trust in Ogoniland. It looks to a time when students can successfully earn their degrees, and the process is not burdensome or postponed;



Ken Saro-Wiwa

when young adults can focus their energy and means on their careers and serving the greater good rather than paying off loans or having to re-enroll in school after dropping out for financial reasons.

Records show that during the pilot phase, the Trust awarded 18 scholarships to final-year Ogoni students in tertiary institutions across Nigeria, to support their work in producing their dissertation projects. In the second phase of the scholarship scheme (2020), the Trust awarded scholarships to 124 second year students, 23 third year students (a bonus package not initially planned for at the beginning of the second phase of the scholarship scheme), and 199 final-year students.

"This was made possible by incorporating some of the lessons learned on outreach and communication from the pilot phase of the scholarship scheme that resulted in over 600 applications received in 2020." By the end of 2020, some 341 had benefited, and by end of 2021 and if 2022 is added, there 689 scholarships awarded so far.

Human capital also involves getting hands-on experience and exposure in the workplace. Managers of the scheme realize that this gives advantage to some regions who bring in their young ones early to master the processes.

Now, instead of complaining and agitating, Kiisi (from the dead heroes) pushes Ogoni young professionals into industries to get

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first-hand experience and thus position them for openings.

It is called, Ogoni NextGen. This scheme admits that with over 200 million population and 80m youths, opportunities are scarce and only the best can capture them. Rivers State is about eight million population and almost two million are youths with over 36 per cent unemployment rate.

"The Trust's attempt to address the growing unemployment challenge is by building the next generation of active and responsible civil society practitioners in Ogoniland

by equipping them with necessary 21st-century skills for the future.

"In this pursuit, the Ogoni NextGen Internship programme offers 3 – 12 months' paid internship to young Ogonis at the start of their professional careers. With a focus on building the next generation of responsible and active civil society actors, the internship programme has at its core the following components: research and report writing, grant management, and communication.

By 2020, the report says: "The Trust has successfully had two classes of the internship programme, graduating six interns, of whom four are now gainfully employed full-time at reputable businesses and organisations in Rivers State."

By this, soon, Ogoni may not be among those complaining about marginalisation but may be those easily capturing positions in sensitive places around the world due to capacities acquired through Kiisi and would be opening more doors for their kinsmen and women. This may be another strategy in resource control fight; a sustainable and effective one.

Ogoni future under Kiisi

If this pace of human capital transformation and other physical infrastructure development projects continue undisturbed, the future of Ogoniland would look different, according to some board members. The management of the Fund was also made stronger by bringing in the likes of Fakae and Ndgwe.

The board said a more aggressive fundraising strategy will also be implemented with the aim to at least double the initial endowment to the Trust, allowing it to deepen its support to institutions in the Ogoni area. Perhaps, in the near future, mega organisations such as the HYPREP, NDDC, oil majors, Ecological fund, may find Kiisi worthy for donations to ensure credible application and project execution. That is what a good name and strong brand may do to the Trust if the managers keep building up the reputation capital.

"This is coupled with an investment strategy that is low risk, investing in US bonds and conservative markets globally.

"Success to the Trust is an empowered Ogoniland with strong institutions mandated to provide different values. "An underlying thread amongst all the components and aspirations is the need to change mindsets from an entitled one to an empowered and accountable one."

Conclusion

In life and in death, Saro-Wiwa and his co-martyrs have lived on and have continued to make positive impacts on the Ogoni landscape and on the people the playwright so loved. If other development agencies copy the Kiisi formula, Ogoni may become a national model and pacesetter.