

# Oil, Environmental Degradation and Conflict in the Niger Delta: A Political Economy Analysis

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<p>Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.</p>	<p><i>The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has remained a major site of conflict and insecurity despite decades of oil exploitation that generates the bulk of the country's national revenue. This study critically examines the Niger Delta crisis by analyzing the interconnections between environmental degradation, governance failure, and socio-economic marginalization. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study relies on secondary data drawn from scholarly literature, government documents, policy reports, and publications by international and civil society organizations. The analysis is anchored on the political economy framework, which explains how centralized resource control, elite domination, and weak institutions have shaped patterns of exclusion and conflict in oil-producing communities. The findings reveal that persistent environmental pollution, inadequate compensation, corruption within intervention agencies, and limited community participation have intensified poverty, youth restiveness, and militancy in the region. Although government initiatives such as the Presidential Amnesty Programme and development agencies have contributed to short-term stability, they have failed to address the structural roots of the crisis. The study argues that sustainable peace and development in the Niger Delta require environmental justice, fiscal restructuring, accountable governance, and strengthened civil society engagement.</i></p>
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## Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria occupies a central position in the country's political economy due to its vast oil and gas resources. Since the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantities at Oloibiri in 1956, the region has served as the backbone of Nigeria's economy, accounting for the majority of foreign exchange earnings and government revenue (Okonta & Douglas, 2003; Watts, 2008). Comprising nine oil-producing states Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers the Niger Delta is home to over thirty million people drawn from diverse ethnic nationalities, including the Ijaw, Ogoni, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ibibio, and Efik.

Rather than functioning as a catalyst for development, oil exploitation in the Niger Delta has generated profound social dislocation and political instability. Scholars have described this condition as the "paradox of plenty" or "resource curse," where resource abundance coexists with

underdevelopment, inequality, and violence (Azaiki, 2003; Obi, 2010). Decades of oil exploration have resulted in extensive environmental damage through oil spills, gas flaring, deforestation, and pollution of water bodies, severely undermining traditional livelihoods such as fishing and farming (Ibaba & Olumati, 2009).

The persistence of environmental degradation has intersected with weak governance structures and centralized resource control to fuel grievances among host communities. Nigeria's federal arrangement, reinforced by legal instruments such as the Petroleum Act of 1969 and the Land Use Act of 1978, vests ownership and control of mineral resources exclusively in the federal government. This framework has effectively excluded oil-producing communities from decision-making processes regarding the exploitation of resources located on their ancestral lands (Ikelegbe, 2001).

The failure of the Nigerian state to adequately address these grievances has contributed to the escalation of conflict in the region. While early forms of resistance, such as the non-violent advocacy of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), emphasized dialogue and environmental rights, state repression and neglect gradually gave rise to militant resistance (Saro-Wiwa, 1992; Human Rights Watch, 1999). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, armed groups such as the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) emerged, engaging in pipeline vandalism, oil bunkering, and kidnapping as strategies to draw attention to their demands (Watts, 2008). These developments transformed the Niger Delta into one of the most militarized regions in Nigeria, with significant implications for national security and economic stability.

This study examines the Niger Delta crisis by analyzing the interconnected roles of environmental degradation, governance failure, and socio-economic marginalization. Anchored in the political economy framework, the study seeks to contribute to existing scholarship by highlighting why past interventions have yielded limited success and by advancing policy-relevant insights for sustainable peace and development in the region.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite contributing the bulk of Nigeria's oil revenue, the Niger Delta region continues to experience persistent underdevelopment, environmental degradation, and violent conflict. Decades of oil exploration have resulted in widespread pollution of land and water resources, undermining traditional livelihoods and exposing local populations to serious health risks. Yet, successive Nigerian governments have failed to translate the region's resource wealth into sustainable socio-economic development for host communities.

Although various intervention strategies such as the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission, the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, and the Presidential Amnesty Programme were introduced to address these challenges, their impacts have remained limited and largely unsustainable. Corruption, poor accountability, and elite capture have weakened these initiatives, while environmental remediation efforts have been slow and inadequate. As a result, militancy, youth restiveness, and insecurity persist, threatening both regional stability and national economic security. The core problem, therefore, lies in the failure of existing governance structures and policies to address the structural roots of the Niger Delta crisis, particularly environmental injustice and inequitable resource governance.

### **Literature Review**

Scholarly discourse on the Niger Delta crisis has evolved around key thematic areas, including resource control, environmental degradation, governance failure, militancy, and the role of the state and non-state actors. Existing literature broadly agrees that the crisis is rooted in structural inequalities embedded in Nigeria's political economy rather than isolated acts of criminality or violence.

One dominant strand of literature focuses on the political economy of oil and resource control. Scholars such as Ikelegbe (2001; 2005) argue that Nigeria's centralized federal system has created a pattern of exclusion in which oil-producing communities bear the environmental and social costs of extraction while receiving minimal benefits. According to Ikelegbe, the monopolization of oil resources by the federal government and political elites has generated intense competition, grievances, and conflict in the Niger Delta. Obi (2010) similarly situates the crisis within the broader framework of petro-capitalism, emphasizing how oil wealth has reinforced elite domination, weakened accountability, and undermined development in oil-producing regions. These studies highlight the structural nature of the conflict and challenge state narratives that frame militancy as mere criminal behavior.

Another significant body of literature examines environmental degradation as a central driver of conflict in the Niger Delta. Ibaba and Olumati (2009) document how oil spills, gas flaring, and pipeline leakages have devastated farmlands, polluted rivers, and destroyed aquatic life, thereby eroding the economic base of local communities. Azaiki (2003) describes this condition as a profound injustice, noting that environmental destruction has occurred alongside the systematic neglect of host communities. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2011) provides empirical evidence of severe ecological damage in Ogoniland, describing the situation as a public health emergency requiring decades of remediation. These studies collectively demonstrate that environmental degradation is not only an ecological issue but also a catalyst for social unrest and political mobilization.

Closely related to environmental concerns is the literature on poverty, unemployment, and youth restiveness in the Niger Delta. Akpan (2010) observes that despite massive oil revenues, the region records high levels of poverty and unemployment, particularly among youths. This socio-economic deprivation has created fertile ground for militancy, oil bunkering, and other illicit activities.

The emergence and evolution of militancy have also attracted extensive scholarly attention. Watts (2008) provides a detailed analysis of armed resistance in the Niger

Delta, linking the rise of militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) to long-standing grievances over resource control and environmental injustice. Ibaba (2008) notes that while early militant movements were rooted in genuine demands for justice and development, prolonged conflict and state repression contributed to the criminalization of the struggle. This shift, according to Alapiki (2005), weakened social cohesion and introduced new forms of violence that further destabilized the region.

Government responses to the Niger Delta crisis constitute another important theme in the literature. Studies assessing intervention mechanisms such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, and the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) reveal mixed outcomes. Ikelegbe (2005) argues that these interventions have been undermined by corruption, weak institutional capacity, and lack of community participation. While the Amnesty Programme reduced large-scale violence and restored oil production in the short term, critics contend that it failed to address fundamental issues such as environmental remediation, sustainable livelihoods, and governance reform (Ifeka, 2010). As a result, peace in the region remains fragile and dependent on continued state patronage.

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, notable gaps remain. Many studies focus on single dimensions of the crisis such as militancy, environmental damage, or state intervention without sufficiently integrating these factors into a unified analytical framework. There is also a tendency to emphasize short-term security outcomes over long-term structural reforms. This study seeks to bridge these gaps by adopting a political economy perspective that connects environmental degradation, governance failure, and socio-economic marginalization as mutually reinforcing drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Political Economy Theory, which emphasizes the interaction between economic structures, political power, and institutional arrangements in shaping social outcomes. The theory posits that conflicts in resource-rich societies are not accidental but are rooted in unequal power relations, centralized control of resources, and the prioritization of elite interests over those of local communities. Within this framework, the state is viewed as a key actor that mediates access to resources, often in ways that reinforce inequality and marginalization (Ikelegbe, 2001; Obi, 2010).

One major strength of Political Economy Theory lies in its ability to provide a structural explanation for conflict and underdevelopment. Unlike approaches that attribute

violence to greed or criminality, the theory highlights how historical patterns of resource control, weak institutions, and elite domination create conditions for persistent conflict. It also integrates economic, political, and environmental dimensions, making it particularly useful for analyzing complex resource-based conflicts such as the Niger Delta crisis. Furthermore, the theory draws attention to issues of accountability, governance, and power, which are central to understanding why development interventions often fail in resource-rich regions.

Despite its strengths, Political Economy Theory has been criticized for placing excessive emphasis on structural factors while downplaying individual agency and cultural dynamics. Critics argue that the theory sometimes overlooks internal community divisions, criminal motivations, and the role of non-state actors in perpetuating violence. Additionally, its broad scope can make empirical testing challenging, as it does not always provide clear causal pathways between structure and behavior. These limitations suggest the need for careful contextual application rather than rigid determinism.

## Application of Political Economy Theory

In applying Political Economy Theory to the Niger Delta crisis, this study interprets environmental degradation, militancy, and governance failure as outcomes of Nigeria's centralized resource governance system. Laws such as the Petroleum Act of 1969 and the Land Use Act of 1978 are viewed as institutional mechanisms that transfer control of oil resources to the federal government and allied elites, thereby marginalizing host communities. The theory helps explain why state-led interventions, including the Presidential Amnesty Programme and development agencies, have achieved limited success due to corruption, elite capture, and weak accountability. By foregrounding power relations and structural inequalities, Political Economy Theory provides a robust framework for understanding the persistence of conflict and the conditions necessary for sustainable peace and development in the Niger Delta.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis to examine the structural causes and consequences of the Niger Delta crisis. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to analyze governance structures, environmental issues, conflict dynamics, and policy responses rather than measure variables statistically. Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed academic journals, books, government publications, policy documents, and reports produced by international organizations and civil society groups, including UNEP, UNDP, Human Rights Watch, and Niger

Delta-focused advocacy organizations. Data selection was guided by relevance to key themes such as environmental degradation, resource governance, militancy, state intervention, and civil society engagement in the Niger Delta. The study relied on authoritative and widely cited sources to ensure credibility and reliability. Collected data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, which involved identifying recurring patterns, arguments, and explanations within the literature. These themes were then systematically examined in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

Anchored in Political Economy Theory, the analysis focused on how power relations, centralized resource control, and institutional weaknesses have shaped environmental injustice and conflict in the Niger Delta. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive and critical understanding of the crisis while remaining suitable for a focused journal article. The use of secondary data also ensures that the study aligns with ethical research standards and remains within the scope of existing empirical and policy-based evidence.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **Environmental Degradation and Livelihood Disruption**

Environmental degradation remains one of the most visible and consequential drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta. Decades of oil spills, gas flaring, and pipeline leakages have severely damaged the region's fragile ecosystem, contaminating farmlands, rivers, and creeks that constitute the primary sources of livelihood for local communities. Studies show that fishing and farming activities have declined significantly due to polluted water bodies and infertile soil, resulting in widespread economic hardship (Ibaba & Olumati, 2009; Obi, 2010). The UNEP (2011) environmental assessment of Ogoniland provides empirical confirmation of this crisis, revealing hydrocarbon pollution levels far above internationally acceptable standards and identifying long-term health risks for residents.

From a political economy perspective, environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is not accidental but reflects weak regulatory institutions and the prioritization of oil revenue over environmental protection. The failure of the state to effectively regulate multinational oil companies and enforce environmental standards has reinforced perceptions of injustice and neglect. Consequently, ecological damage has become a powerful mobilizing factor for resistance and agitation, transforming environmental grievances into political conflict.

### **Centralized Resource Control and Governance Failure**

Nigeria's centralized system of resource governance constitutes another critical factor sustaining conflict in the

Niger Delta. Legal instruments such as the Petroleum Act of 1969 and the Land Use Act of 1978 vest ownership and control of oil resources in the federal government, effectively excluding host communities from decision-making processes and benefit-sharing (Ikelegbe, 2001). This governance structure reflects what Political Economy Theory describes as elite domination, where state institutions serve the interests of political and economic elites rather than local populations. The concentration of power at the federal level has weakened accountability and reduced incentives for responsive governance in oil-producing regions. Despite constitutional provisions such as the 13 percent derivation principle, development outcomes in the Niger Delta remain poor, suggesting that revenue allocation alone is insufficient without institutional transparency and community participation. Ikelegbe (2005) argues that this governance failure has created a legitimacy crisis for the Nigerian state in the region, as communities increasingly view state institutions as exploitative rather than protective.

### **Poverty, Youth Unemployment, and Militancy**

The interaction between environmental degradation and governance failure has intensified poverty and unemployment, particularly among youths in the Niger Delta. Despite the region's oil wealth, socio-economic indicators remain poor, with high levels of joblessness and limited access to social infrastructure (Akpan, 2010). Political Economy Theory explains this paradox as a consequence of unequal resource distribution and structural exclusion.

Youth unemployment has played a significant role in the rise of militancy and criminal activities in the region. Frustration arising from economic deprivation, combined with visible wealth generated from oil extraction, has fueled resentment and radicalization among young people. Armed groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) initially framed their activities as struggles for resource control and environmental justice (Watts, 2008). However, prolonged conflict and state militarization contributed to the criminalization of militancy, with oil bunkering and kidnapping becoming alternative sources of income (Ibaba, 2008). This shift underscores how structural neglect can transform political resistance into sustained insecurity.

### **State Response and the Limits of Intervention**

Successive Nigerian governments have responded to the Niger Delta crisis through a combination of militarized and developmental strategies. Military interventions temporarily reduced attacks on oil infrastructure but often resulted in human rights abuses that deepened local grievances (Human Rights Watch, 1999). These responses

align with political economy critiques that view coercive state action as a means of protecting revenue flows rather than addressing community welfare.

The introduction of the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) in 2009 marked a strategic shift toward negotiation and reintegration. While the programme contributed to short-term stability and restored oil production, its long-term effectiveness remains questionable. Critics argue that the programme focused narrowly on ex-militants while neglecting broader community development and environmental remediation (Ifeka, 2010). Similarly, development agencies such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs have been undermined by corruption, weak oversight, and project abandonment. These shortcomings illustrate how elite capture and institutional weakness limit the impact of intervention efforts.

### **Role of Multinational Oil Companies**

Multinational oil companies remain central actors in the Niger Delta crisis. Operating through joint ventures with the Nigerian state, companies such as Shell and Chevron have been accused of environmental negligence, poor corporate social responsibility practices, and inadequate engagement with host communities (Okonta & Douglas, 2003). Political Economy Theory highlights how the alliance between the state and multinational corporations prioritizes profit and revenue generation over environmental sustainability and social justice. Although some oil companies have implemented corporate social responsibility initiatives, these efforts are often fragmented and insufficient to address long-term developmental challenges. The failure to institutionalize binding community development agreements has contributed to mistrust and recurring conflict. As long as oil companies operate within a weak regulatory environment, environmental degradation and community resistance are likely to persist.

### **Synthesis of Discussion**

The analysis demonstrates that the Niger Delta crisis is sustained by the interaction of environmental degradation, centralized resource control, weak governance, and socio-economic exclusion. These factors reinforce one another, creating a cycle of grievance, resistance, and state repression. Political Economy Theory provides a coherent framework for understanding why past interventions have failed and why conflict persists despite periods of relative calm. Without structural reforms that address environmental justice, institutional accountability, and inclusive governance, the Niger Delta crisis is likely to remain unresolved.

### **Findings**

Based on the qualitative analysis of existing literature and policy documents, the study makes the following key findings. First, environmental degradation caused by oil exploration particularly oil spills, gas flaring, and water pollution has significantly undermined traditional livelihoods in the Niger Delta. This ecological damage has intensified poverty, food insecurity, and health risks, thereby deepening local grievances against the state and multinational oil companies.

Second, the study finds that Nigeria's centralized system of resource control has contributed to persistent marginalization of oil-producing communities. Legal and institutional frameworks that vest ownership of oil resources in the federal government have excluded host communities from meaningful participation in decision-making and benefit-sharing, reinforcing perceptions of injustice and exploitation.

Third, governance failure, characterized by corruption, weak regulatory institutions, and poor accountability, has limited the effectiveness of state intervention mechanisms such as the Niger Delta Development Commission and the Presidential Amnesty Programme. While these initiatives achieved short-term stability, they failed to address structural issues such as environmental remediation and sustainable development.

Fourth, youth unemployment and socio-economic exclusion emerged as critical factors driving militancy and insecurity in the region. The lack of viable economic opportunities has facilitated the recruitment of youths into armed groups and criminal networks.

Finally, the study finds that civil society organizations have played an important role in advocacy and resistance, but their impact has been constrained by political repression and limited institutional support. Overall, the findings indicate that the Niger Delta crisis is rooted in structural political and economic inequalities rather than isolated security challenges.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined the nexus between oil exploitation, environmental degradation, and conflict in the Niger Delta within a political economy framework. Drawing on qualitative analysis of secondary data, the study demonstrates that the persistent crisis in the region is deeply rooted in structural inequalities embedded in Nigeria's system of resource governance. Despite the Niger Delta's central role in sustaining the national economy, host communities continue to experience environmental destruction, socio-economic deprivation, and political marginalization.

The analysis shows that environmental degradation has severely undermined traditional livelihoods, contributing to widespread poverty and insecurity. The failure of regulatory institutions to enforce environmental standards, coupled with weak accountability mechanisms, has allowed multinational oil companies to operate with limited regard for ecological sustainability. These conditions have transformed environmental grievances into broader political conflicts, reinforcing cycles of resistance and state repression.

By applying Political Economy Theory, the study provides a holistic explanation of why peace efforts in the Niger Delta remain fragile. The findings underscore the need to move beyond militarized and short-term solutions toward structural reforms that prioritize environmental justice, inclusive governance, and sustainable development. Addressing the Niger Delta crisis is not only essential for regional stability but also critical for Nigeria's long-term economic and political sustainability.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several policy and governance reforms are necessary to address the structural roots of the Niger Delta crisis and promote sustainable peace and development.

First, there is an urgent need to strengthen environmental regulation and enforcement in the Niger Delta. The Nigerian government should fully implement the recommendations of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report on Ogoniland and extend similar environmental assessments to other oil-producing communities. Regulatory agencies such as the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) should be empowered with greater autonomy, technical capacity, and funding to effectively monitor oil company activities and sanction violations.

Second, reforms in resource governance are essential to promote inclusiveness and equity. This includes reviewing existing legal frameworks particularly the Petroleum Act and the Land Use Act to enhance community participation in resource management and decision-making. Transparent mechanisms for benefit-sharing between the federal government, oil companies, and host communities should be institutionalized to reduce grievances and build trust.

Third, development interventions in the Niger Delta should prioritize sustainability and accountability. Agencies such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs must undergo institutional reforms to address corruption, project abandonment, and elite capture. Community-based development planning should be adopted to ensure that projects reflect local needs and enhance ownership.

Fourth, addressing youth unemployment should be a central component of peace building efforts in the Niger Delta. Government and private sector actors should invest in vocational training, skills acquisition, and employment opportunities linked to both the oil

Finally, the role of civil society organizations should be strengthened through legal protections and institutional support. Civil society actors play a critical role in environmental advocacy, community mobilization, and accountability. Creating an enabling environment for their participation would enhance transparency and promote non-violent engagement between the state, oil companies, and local communities.

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