NIGERIA COUNTRY REPORT

The Fight Against 'Big Oil': Navigating the Murky Waters of Oil Pollution and Exploitation in Nigeria's Delta Region

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Introduction: Oil, Opportunity, and the Deepening Divide

The discovery of oil in Oloibiri, Bayelsa State, in 1956 marked a pivotal moment for Nigeria, positioning the nation as a significant player in the global energy market. Petroleum rapidly became the cornerstone of Nigeria's economy, accounting for over 90% of its exports (Ansari, 2024). This discovery was initially met with optimism, as it promised economic development, infrastructural improvements, and national prosperity. However, while oil revenues flowed abundantly into federal coffers, the benefits remained concentrated in the hands of political elites and multinational corporations. Beneath the surface of the economic prosperity of Nigeria's oil industry lies a complex tapestry of environmental degradation, socio-economic disparities, and political unrest.

Despite generating billions in revenue, oil wealth has not translated into inclusive growth. According to a report from the World Bank (2022), in 2018/19, around 40.1 percent of Nigerians lived below the poverty line (1.93 USD per person per day), meaning that 82.9 million Nigerians were living in poverty. This was more concentrated in rural areas where 52.1 percent of the population were poor, in comparison to 18.0 percent in urban areas. The paradox of plenty – where resource-rich countries suffer from underdevelopment – is starkly visible in Nigeria's Delta region (Auty, 1993). Here, the juxtaposition of oil wealth and systemic poverty is not just an economic anomaly, but a source of social tension and political instability.

The Niger Delta, a region teeming with rich biodiversity and vast oil reserves, is where most of the nation's oil is extracted, yet it remains one of the country's most impoverished and environmentally degraded areas. The Delta region is a deltaic ecosystem with the most extensive freshwater swamp forest and over 75,000 square kilometers of wetland, making it the world's third largest wetland and one of the most ecologically sensitive areas in the world. It is home to the nine oil-producing states in Nigeria (Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers states), which comprise 185 local government areas (UNDP, 2006). Local communities, despite residing atop vast oil reserves, often lack basic infrastructure, access to clean water, and adequate health protection (Amnesty International, 2020). The wealth extracted from the Niger Delta's soil has paradoxically contributed to its destruction.

For exporters and shipping companies, understanding the intricacies of the Niger Delta region is paramount, as the challenges here could have far-reaching implications on logistics, insurance, and international trade. Environmental degradation can hinder transport routes, reduce operational efficiency, and lead to reputational risks for companies perceived to be complicit in environmental harm.

Environmental Destruction and Economic Inequality: Communities on the Brink

Oil Spills and Gas Flaring: A Double-Edged Sword

The Niger Delta has been subjected to frequent oil spills due to pipeline leaks, ruptures, and poor maintenance by oil companies. Oil spills have become a distressingly common occurrence in the region. Between 2011 and 2022, there were 10,463 recorded spill incidents, releasing a combined 507,135 barrels of oil into the environment, according to the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) (Saint, 2023). These spills have devastated local ecosystems, contaminating water sources, rendering agricultural land infertile and disrupting fishing (Chijioke, 2022). In Ogoniland alone, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) found that many water sources contained hydrocarbons such as benzene, a known carcinogen, at levels over 900 times above WHO standards (UN News, 2011).

The impact of oil spills extends far beyond immediate ecological damage. They have severely compromised the livelihoods of the millions of residents who depend on the land and water for survival, as well as their health. Ordinioha and Brisibe (2013) found that oil spills could lead to a 60% reduction in household food security, resulting in a 24% increase in the prevalence of childhood malnutrition. In addition, a UNEP report found that increased rates of cancer, respiratory illnesses, and adult and infant mortality have been reported in areas closest to oil facilities (UNEP, 2011). One study revealed that babies of women who lived near the scene of an oil spill in the Niger Delta before conceiving were twice as likely to die before they reached a month old (Hodal, 2017). The environmental decline resulting from decades of oil extraction has further marginalised the communities inhabiting the region, disrupting traditional livelihoods, endangering lives and fostering deep-seated resentment.

Gas flaring, the practice of burning off natural gas produced alongside crude oil, has also led to air pollution, harming the environment and public health. It is often done to reduce the pressure as the gas comes to the surface, preventing explosions. However, energy firms often also flare gas to save the cost of collecting and transporting the excess gas (BBC News, 2022).

Despite being officially banned in 1984 and reaffirmed through various legislations, the practice continues unabated. Despite around 75 million Nigerians lacking access to electricity, Nigeria flares more gas than any other country in sub-Saharan Africa, releasing nearly 8 billion cubic metres of gas annually (World Bank, 2017). Only seven nations are responsible for 66% of worldwide gas flaring, with Nigeria listed as one of the seven with over 170 gas-flaring sites, all located in the Niger Delta region. The practice releases harmful carcinogenic pollutants such as carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, benzene and other volatile organic chemicals into the atmosphere, all of which increase the risk of cancer and acute respiratory diseases in nearby communities (Jato et al., 2024). Children are particularly vulnerable, with research linking proximity to gas flares to low birth weights, premature births, respiratory diseases in children and higher infant mortality rates (Alimi & Gibson, 2022).

Economically, gas flaring represents an immense waste of potential energy and revenue. Experts estimate that if captured and utilised, the flared gas could power the entire country. According to data from the Nigeria Gas Flare Tracker, a satellite-based technology created by the NOSDRA, N696bn worth of natural gas capable of powering millions of households was flared within the first 11 months of 2023 (Ibrahim, 2023).

Local Communities Left Behind and Youth Unemployment

Despite the Niger Delta's significant contribution to Nigeria’s oil wealth, the local communities in the region continue to experience extreme poverty, lack of basic infrastructure, and limited access to education and healthcare (Craig, 2022). Traditional livelihoods such as fishing and farming have been severely impacted, leading to widespread unemployment and poverty. Infrastructure development has lagged, with many communities lacking access to electricity, clean water, and healthcare facilities.

According to research published in 2011, bout 70% of the community lacks access to clean water, has no passable roads or electricity supply, has shortage of medical facilities, has a large number of dilapidated schools and suffers from severe environmental degradation due to oil production (see Zandvliet and Pedro,

over 70% of rural communities in Nigeria lacked access to safe drinking water, but this problem was exacerbated when in the Delta region (Ishaku et al., 2011). Schools and clinics are often understaffed, underfunded, or entirely absent, perpetuating cycles of deprivation and illiteracy. Youth unemployment in some parts of the Delta exceeds 40%, creating fertile ground for disillusionment and criminality (Akanimo, 2023).

This combination of environmental degradation and economic neglect has created a volatile situation, with unemployment fuelling crime and militancy. High levels of unemployment, especially among young people, have created frustration and resentment towards oil companies and the Nigerian government, who are seen as reaping the benefits of oil wealth while the local population suffers.

Multinational oil companies (MNOCs) operating in the Niger Delta have also been accused of employing a divide and rule strategy to maintain control in oil-producing communities. This approach involves manipulating local power dynamics by rewarding select community leaders—such as chiefs and traditional rulers—with oil contracts and incentives in exchange for protecting oil facilities. These rewards, often distributed through corrupt and exclusionary means, foster competition, mistrust, and conflict among community groups, especially between youth and their elders. Such practices have intensified intra- and inter-community rivalries, deepening social fragmentation and fuelling unrest (Ayuk, 2020).

The absence of legitimate economic opportunities has pushed many youths into artisanal refining, also known as "kpo-fire", which further contributes to environmental degradation and public health risks (Stakeholder Democracy Network, 2022). These informal refineries often operate without safety protocols, leading to frequent explosions and toxic emissions.

Activism, Militancy and International Advocacy: The Battle for Environmental Justice

Resistance from Grassroots Activist Movements and Militant Groups

The plight of the Niger Delta has given rise to a robust activist movement. Many activists and regional leaders advocate for greater local control over oil resources and revenues. They argue that the federal government, in collaboration with multinational oil companies, unfairly profits from oil without equitably sharing the wealth with the Niger Delta people.

Figures like Ken Saro-Wiwa, leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), brought international attention to the environmental and human rights abuses in the region. The Ogoni people, initially under the leadership of Saro-Wiwa, have been at the forefront of the anti-oil struggle in the Niger Delta. On 10 November 1995, Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders were executed by the Nigerian government after leading protests against Shell and the government for the devastation caused by oil extraction. The execution of the ‘Ogoni Nine’ sparked global outrage from, including from world leaders such as South African President Nelson Mandela, leading to the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth and galvanising further environmental activism (Plaut, 2019).

Since then, MOSOP and other grassroots organisations such as the Ijaw Youth Council have continued to demand environmental reparations, economic autonomy, and sustainable development for their communities (Okonta and Douglas, 2001). These grassroots movements have increasingly turned to international platforms like the United Nations and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights to voice their concerns.

However, peaceful activism has often been met with repression, leading some groups to adopt more militant approaches. Many local communities and armed groups engage in “bunkering”—illegal oil extraction—to divert oil for personal gain and draw attention to their cause. This practice has contributed to both environmental degradation and the funding of armed groups. Its increase has further complicated the situation in the Niger Delta, posing security challenges.

One of the most prominent militant groups in the region, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) has historically used sabotage, kidnapping, and attacks on oil infrastructure to demand greater control over oil resources and improved living conditions for the local population. The 2006 hostage crisis, where foreign oil workers were kidnapped by MEND operatives, marked a turning point in global awareness of the Niger Delta crisis (International Crisis Group, 2006). Despite various government crackdowns, MEND’s actions have been mirrored by newer groups such as the Niger Delta Avengers, who in 2016 crippled Nigeria’s oil output through a series of coordinated attacks (Reuters, 2016). The conflict between militants and the Nigerian military has led to violence, displacement of people, and a general breakdown of security in some parts of the

region.

The Pursuit of Justice through International Advocacy and Litigation

International organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been vocal in their condemnation of the oil industry's operations in the Niger Delta. These groups have highlighted the human rights violations, including the displacement of local communities, environmental damage, and the brutal repression of activists (Craig, 2022).

A report published by Global Witness (2018) has also shed light on complicity between local elites and foreign oil companies, who often bypass environmental regulations through bribery and opaque licensing deals. These findings have prompted calls for tighter regulatory oversight and legal accountability through international mechanisms like the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct (OECD, 2023).

In recent years, affected communities in the Niger Delta have increasingly sought justice through international legal systems, often due to the perceived ineffectiveness or corruption of Nigeria's domestic courts. Landmark cases have begun to set legal precedents in holding multinational oil corporations accountable for environmental degradation.

One notable case is Milieudefensie v. Shell, where a Dutch court ruled in favour of Nigerian farmers and held Royal Dutch Shell liable for pollution in several villages (Vetter, 2021). This judgment underscored the possibility of leveraging home-country jurisdictions of multinational corporations to seek environmental justice abroad. It has inspired similar suits in the UK and the US, where Nigerian plaintiffs continue to allege negligence and human rights violations by oil companies operating in their communities (Leigh Day, 2025).
However, these legal battles are often protracted and resource-intensive. Plaintiffs frequently face legal hurdles such as jurisdictional limitations, evidentiary burdens, and the corporate veil doctrine. Yet, the increasing success of transnational litigation has prompted more stringent internal compliance practices within oil companies, especially regarding environmental impact assessments and community relations (Friends of the Earth, 2021).

Domestic courts in Nigeria have made some strides in recent years. In 2020, the Federal High Court ordered Shell to pay N800 billion in damages to communities in Rivers State. (Reuters, 2022). Despite this, enforcement remains a challenge due to bureaucratic inefficiency and resistance from powerful stakeholders. Strengthening judicial independence and regulatory capacity remains a crucial area for reform.

Government and Corporate Responses: Progress or Stagnation?

Federal Interventions to Restore Peace

The Nigerian government has at times declared states of emergency in the Delta, deploying military forces to suppress unrest. However, this heavy-handed approach has been criticised for its lack of long-term solutions to the region's problems (Laville, 2024).

In 2009, the Federal Government Amnesty Programme (FGAP) in the Niger Delta was introduced to resolve violent conflict by granting pardons to militants who surrendered arms. It included a Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) component, resulting in the collection of thousands of weapons and contributing to improved security (Reuters, 2009). While initially celebrated as a major success, especially by the international community, critics argue the program was a temporary fix that failed to address the root causes of conflict. Many scholars labelled it as an exploitative exchange of "peace for oil", suggesting it served oil interests rather than community needs (Nwobueze & Inokoba, 2017). The top-down approach excluded grassroots stakeholders, leaving local communities and rank-and-file militants dissatisfied.

As such, the programme's sustainability and effectiveness remain in question, particularly given the lack of inclusive dialogue and failure to address long-standing grievances. Critics maintain that for long-term peace to be achieved, future interventions must involve broader participation beyond elites and militant leaders (Ayuk, 2020).

Environmental Remediation Efforts and *Corporate Social Responsibility*

In response to mounting pressure from civil society, the Nigerian government and oil companies have collaborated to implement environmental remediation efforts. For instance, the $1bn Ogoniland Clean-up and Restoration Programme, launched in 2017, aimed to address decades of pollution. However, progress has been sluggish, with only 11% of planned sites undergoing remediation nearly a decade after the initiative was urged (Amnesty International, 2020). Reports have highlighted mismanagement and corruption within agencies responsible for the clean-up, undermining public trust. An investigation by the local paper Premium Times revealed that companies with no remediation experience were awarded Ogoni clean-up contracts, with contracts being awarded to an animal husbandry company and a finance and development consultancy, for example (Saint, 2022a). In July 2022, a parliamentary committee summoned environment minister Mohammed Abdullahi and HYPREP management over their failure to clean up Ogoniland despite payment of $1bn for the project (Saint, 2022b). Ultimately, the progress on environmental remediation from governments and oil companies has been slow and inadequate according to local communities and environmental groups (Laville, 2024).

Corporate responses to calls for environmental remediation have also been scrutinised. Some oil companies—most notably Shell—have faced increasing pressure to address the environmental devastation caused by oil spills in the Niger Delta. One of the most internationally recognised incidents is the 2011 Bonga oil spill, in which approximately 40,000 barrels of crude oil were discharged into the Atlantic Ocean from a Shell-operated offshore facility. The spill had far-reaching consequences, affecting an estimated 168,000 people across 350 communities in Nigeria's Bayelsa and Delta States. In response, the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) imposed a $3.6 billion fine on Shell in December 2014. Three years after the Bonga disaster, the Oil Spill Victims Vanguard (OSPIVV), a local nonprofit organisation, filed a legal suit in the United Kingdom, urging the court to compel Shell to clean up the heavily contaminated environment and provide compensation to the affected individuals and communities (Saint, 2022a).

Shell's recent sale of its onshore oil assets in the Niger Delta in March 2025 has raised concerns about a lack of accountability for environmental damage (Rowell and Marriott, 2024). Before the sale, human rights groups emphasised the need for comprehensive remediation before such divestments occurred, arguing that the sale should not be allowed to proceed unless the environmental pollution it caused has been fully assessed (Amnesty International, 2024). In addition, the transition of operations to local companies has brought uncertainty regarding their capacity to manage environmental risks effectively. A 2024 report published by SOMO (the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations) concluded that the oil giant cannot be allowed to leave the Niger Delta without properly decommissioning the deteriorating and abandoned oil infrastructure that it is leaving behind (SOMO, 2024).

Some oil companies have initiated Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes aimed at improving living conditions in the Niger Delta, in an attempt to ameliorate relations with local communities. These programmes focus on health, education, infrastructure development, and poverty alleviation, ranging from building schools to funding healthcare facilities and sponsoring vocational training programmes. Critics argue that these CSR efforts are often tokenistic and insufficient, failing to address the root causes of environmental

and economic harm. Projects are frequently short-term, lack community input, and are primarily driven by the need to maintain a positive public image rather than genuine concern for local development (Zandvliet & Pedro, 2002). Moreover, CSR initiatives have been accused of creating dependencies or exacerbating local power imbalances when allocated through politically connected intermediaries (Aaron & Patrick, 2013). Nevertheless, for exporters and shipping companies, these developments underscore the importance of due diligence and engagement with stakeholders to ensure sustainable and responsible operations.

Conclusion: Charting a Course Towards Sustainable Engagement

The Niger Delta's complex landscape reflects a convergence of environmental, economic, and social injustices stemming from decades of oil exploitation, and the effects of this may be seen for decades to come. According to a UNEP report, full restoration of the Ogoniland region could take 25-30 years to complete after pollution has stopped (UNEP, 2011). While local communities bear the brunt of pollution and poverty, MNOCs and political elites have largely benefited from the region’s resources. Efforts to address the disparities in the region must go beyond compensation and remediation. A just energy transition for the Niger Delta requires structural reforms in governance, inclusive economic development, environmental restoration, and legal accountability.

The global push toward a green energy transition poses both opportunities and risks for the Niger Delta. On one hand, declining global demand for fossil fuels may lead to decreased foreign investment and job losses in oil-dependent communities. On the other, there is potential to redirect investment toward renewable energy, environmental remediation, and sustainable livelihoods. Overall, strategic investments in solar microgrids, eco-tourism, and climate-resilient agriculture could offer a new pathway for development in the region, creating job security and improving the standard of living (Oboro, 2024). To achieve this, collaboration between government, private sector, and international donors is essential. Policy frameworks must align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and include mechanisms for local participation and benefit-sharing.

The lessons of the Delta have global resonance as the world grapples with balancing energy needs and environmental sustainability. For shipping companies and exporters, engaging with the region requires a nuanced understanding of its history, the resilience of its communities, and the evolving dynamics of oil exploitation. As the region continues to grapple with the legacy of oil extraction, stakeholders must prioritise ethical and sustainable practices, as well as proactive community engagement. By doing so, they can foster long-term stability, contributing to a more equitable and prosperous future for the Niger Delta.

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