



The Struggle of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: The Duality of Liquid Gold and Poverty

Elisha, Otekenari David ^{a*} and GBARANBIRI, Iselema ^b

^a Department of Economics, Faculty of Social Sciences, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria.

^b Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria embodies a profound paradox of resource wealth and persistent poverty, where abundant oil resources have failed to translate into economic prosperity for local communities. This theoretical research delves into the complex socio-economic landscape that has defined the region's challenging trajectory, exploring the intricate dynamics that have perpetuated systemic inequalities. Through a comprehensive analytical approach, the study examines the multifaceted factors contributing to the region's ongoing struggles. The research methodology involves a critical synthesis of existing literature, historical documentation, and scholarly analyses to unpack the deep-rooted economic, political, and social mechanisms that have shaped the Niger Delta's development. The paper highlighted that despite being home to Nigeria's primary oil

*Corresponding author: E-mail: otekenari.elisha@iaue.edu.ng;

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resources, the region has experienced extensive environmental degradation, economic disenfranchisement, and political exclusion. Colonial legacies and subsequent extractive economic practices have systematically undermined local communities' potential for sustainable development, creating a cycle of poverty amid immense natural wealth. The research highlights the limitations of singular policy interventions, arguing that legislative frameworks like the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) cannot singularly resolve deeply entrenched structural challenges. The paper suggested a transformative approach that encompasses economic diversification, robust environmental protection, transparent governance, and genuine community empowerment. The study concludes that addressing the Niger Delta's challenges requires more than superficial policy interventions. It necessitates a profound commitment to structural transformation, recognizing the fundamental rights of local communities and creating genuine opportunities for sustainable, inclusive economic progress.

Keywords: Niger Delta; duality; liquid gold; poverty.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria, situated in southern Nigeria, is a significant oil-producing area in Africa. Covering over 70,000 square kilometers, it borders the Gulf of Guinea and the Benue River. (Olukæjire et al., 2024). This vast and diverse region comprises coastal plains, mangrove swamps, and rainforests, and is home to over 30 million people from more than 50 ethnic groups, including the Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Igbo, and Yoruba. These groups spread across nine states - Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers - each have their unique geography, language, and culture (Okolo et al., 2024). The region has a complex history, having been colonized by the British in the 19th century and later devastated by the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970).

The conflict resulted in widespread destruction, and damaging of oil and gas infrastructures, leaving the local population to suffer from malnutrition and disease (Baxter, 2015). In response, the Nigerian Government established the Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (OPADEC) in 1992 to focus on development in the core oil-producing states and later expanded to Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), covering all nine states in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, with a broader mandate to address development challenges (Idahosa, 2011; Francis, 2017). Despite these initiatives and significant funding, the needs of the Niger Delta people remain largely unaddressed, leading to growing resentment and anger towards the government, contributing to the current volatile situation in the region.

As noted by Elisha (2023), the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is a unique and complex area with a

long history and numerous challenges. While rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, and timber, these resources have often been exploited by foreign companies and local elites, exacerbating the region's problems. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria, rich in oil and gas resources, has suffered immense environmental degradation due to extraction and transportation activities (Chijioke et al., 2028). Oil spills have contaminated waterways, ecosystems, and farmland, while toxic gas releases have polluted the air. Infrastructure development has led to deforestation, habitat destruction, and loss of biodiversity, severely impacting the health and livelihoods of the local population, who rely on natural resources for sustenance, water, and income (World Bank, 2016).

Political instability and violence have plagued the region, eroding trust between the government and local communities (Ata-Agboni et al., 2024). This instability has hindered efforts to address pressing issues like poverty and unemployment, making it challenging for international organizations to provide aid. The displacement of communities, resulting from environmental disasters, has led to the loss of livelihoods, cultural heritage, and traditional ways of life. Many displaced individuals have struggled to find employment, leading to increased poverty and inequality, with some young people turning to crime, exacerbating regional violence and instability.

The Niger Delta's crude oil and petroleum products, dubbed "liquid gold," have been a double-edged sword for Nigeria. While they have fueled the country's economy and generated significant wealth, they have also exacted a heavy toll on the environment and local communities (World Bank, 2016). The term

"liquid gold" underscores the value and importance of these resources, which are vital to Nigeria's economic well-being. However, the extraction and production of these resources have come at a devastating cost to the Niger Delta people and ecosystems, leading to environmental degradation, social upheaval, and widespread poverty. Despite the economic benefits of oil and gas production, including infrastructure development and contributions to Nigeria's overall economic growth, the "liquid gold" industry has also perpetuated poverty and inequality in local communities. The region's wealth has not trickled down to the local population, leaving many to suffer the consequences of environmental damage and social injustice.

In Bayelsa State, the construction of oil platforms and pipelines has resulted in the displacement of communities, forcing them to leave their ancestral homes and relocate to resettlement areas (World Bank, 2016). Although these areas have some basic infrastructure, they lack the resources and opportunities available in the communities' original homes, leading to increased poverty and inequality. The displacement has resulted in the loss of traditional livelihoods, such as fishing and farming, causing food insecurity and further exacerbating poverty. The liquid gold industry's impact on young people in the Niger Delta has been particularly devastating, as they face limited access to education, healthcare, and job opportunities. This has led to a rise in illegal activities, including oil theft and piracy, among young people in the region (World Bank, 2016).

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020), the oil and gas sector has had a mixed impact on the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, generating economic benefits but also causing severe environmental damage, political instability, and limited opportunities for residents. The report highlights the disparities in human development across different parts of the region and advocates for a more equitable management of natural resources. Human Rights Watch (2019) reported on the failure of Shell and other multinational oil companies to adequately clean up oil spills in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The report revealed that between 2015 and 2018, there were over 3,800 oil spills, many of which were not properly cleaned up. The report documented the negative impacts on local communities, including health issues, loss of livelihoods, and environmental damage. The

report urged Shell to take responsibility for cleaning up oil spills and to ensure that local communities receive fair compensation for the damage caused.

The UNDP and Human Rights Watch reports shed light on how the scarcity of opportunities for young people in the Niger Delta has contributed to the region's violence and instability (Ajebon, 2021). According to the UNDP report, the lack of job opportunities, particularly in the oil and gas sector, has driven young individuals to join criminal organizations as a means of survival, leading to an escalation in violent conflicts over control of natural resources (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). Furthermore, the Human Rights Watch report highlights how youth unemployment has fueled a brain drain in the region, as many young people seek better prospects elsewhere, resulting in a shortage of skilled workers and hindering economic progress. This perpetuates the cycle of poverty and instability, underscoring the urgent need for addressing the root causes of these issues.

Despite the numerous challenges plaguing the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, there are encouraging signs of progress and hope. In recent years, a growing movement has emerged to safeguard the environment and protect the rights of local communities (Ison, 2020). Various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been established to promote sustainable development and advocate for the rights of the Niger Delta people. These organizations have played a crucial role in raising awareness about the region's issues and pushing for change. Although progress has been slow, there is optimism that the region can transition towards a more sustainable and equitable future (Messerli et al., 2019). Furthermore, initiatives have been undertaken to promote sustainable development and conserve the region's natural resources. While these efforts have faced significant obstacles, they have contributed to increased awareness and some progress, such as heightened government attention to the region's problems. These developments offer a glimmer of hope for a better future for the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Friends of the Earth Nigeria (FoEN) is a shining example of an NGO dedicated to promoting sustainable development and protecting the rights of the Niger Delta people. As a yesterday grass root organization, FoEN works tirelessly to advance sustainable development in the region

and hold the oil and gas industry accountable for its environmental and social impacts (Friends of the Earth Nigeria, n.d.). FoEN has played a vital role in shedding light on the Niger Delta's environmental and human rights issues, empowering local communities to advocate for their rights, and building their capacity to demand justice. Against this backdrop, this paper delves into the complex struggle of the Niger Delta, where the wealth of "liquid gold" contrasts starkly with the harsh reality of poverty.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

2.1 Liquid Gold in Niger Delta

'Liquid gold' has a few different meanings, depending on the context. In general, it refers to something precious, like oil and petroleum products. In the context of this paper, "liquid gold" refers specifically to oil and petroleum products. These are extremely valuable resources that have shaped the history and economy of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The term also highlights the environmental and social costs of extracting and using these resources, as well as the unequal distribution of wealth and resources (Lang, 2010; Asikhia, 2010). Watts (2016) also defined liquid gold as the petroleum wealth extracted from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Watts further uses the term to highlight the role of oil in shaping the history and politics of the region. He also explores how oil has been both a source of wealth and a source of conflict and violence. Watts emphasized that oil has played a dual role in the Niger Delta. On the one hand, it has brought wealth and development to the region. On the other hand, it has also led to social and environmental destruction. This duality is what Watts refers to when he calls oil "liquid gold." It is a valuable resource that has also caused a lot of harm.

The Niger Delta is a region in the southern part of Nigeria, made up of nine states and many ethnic groups. The region has a rich history, with evidence of human occupation going back to the 5th century. Over time, the region has been influenced by various powers, including the British, who colonized the region in the 19th century (Brass, 2010). The discovery of oil in the region in 1956 transformed the region's economy, but it also led to several social, political, and environmental challenges. In the 19th century, the region was under the control of the British, who imposed their own legal, political,

and economic systems on the region. This led to the marginalization of many ethnic groups and created a divide between those who benefitted from British rule and those who did not. The discovery of oil in the region in the mid-20th century led to a boom in the region's economy, but also several challenges (Feldman, 2010).

The challenges associated with the oil industry in the Niger Delta include environmental damage, such as oil spills and gas flaring. There have also been political challenges, including armed conflict between the Nigerian government and a pressure group from the region, like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta [MEND] (Nwajiaku, 2010). Additionally, there have been social challenges, such as poverty and unemployment.

2.2 Causes of the Struggle of Duality of Liquid Gold and Poverty in Niger Delta region of Nigeria

The causes of the duality of liquid gold and poverty in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria are complex, but some key factors (Tornyvainen, 2018; Ribadu, 2018; Okafor, 2020) include:

Colonial Rule and the Legacies of Colonialism: Colonialism was the period when the region was under the control of foreign powers, such as the British. During this time, the region was exploited for its natural resources, such as oil. When the region gained independence, many of the systems that had been put in place by the colonial powers remained, including the unequal distribution of resources and the control of the oil industry by foreign companies. These legacies of colonialism continue to shape the region today, leading to the duality of liquid gold (oil) and poverty. The unequal distribution of resources is one of the key legacies of colonialism in the region. During the colonial period, much of the wealth generated by the oil industry was exported to the colonial powers, rather than used to benefit local communities. After independence, oil revenue continued to be concentrated in the hands of a small elite, while the majority of people in the region remained poor. This unequal distribution of resources has exacerbated poverty and inequality in the region (Karl, 2007).

The Niger Delta's Plunder (How Political Cronyism Exacerbates the Region's Suffering): The Niger Delta's struggles with poverty and environmental degradation are

further compounded by the political class's self-serving interests. Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), politicians appoint their loyalists to enable them to loot public funds meant for the region's development (Obasi & Anyaegbu-Austin, 2023). This cronyism perpetuates the cycle of poverty and undermines efforts to address the region's pressing issues. The political class's prioritization of personal gain over the welfare of the Niger Delta people exacerbates the duality of "liquid gold" and poverty, ensuring that the region remains mired in suffering despite its natural wealth.

Unclear and Biased Boundary Delineation by Leadership: The term "unclear and biased boundary delineation" refers to how political boundaries were established during and after the colonial period. These boundaries were often drawn without regard for local communities and their traditional territories, which led to conflict over land and resources. In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, this has been a major factor in the conflict over oil, as different ethnic groups have claimed ownership of oil-producing areas and the revenue generated by the oil industry (Elum et al., 2024).

The Power of Multinational Oil Companies: Multinational oil companies have a lot of power in the Niger Delta, both economically and politically. These companies control the extraction and sale of oil, and they have a lot of influence over the Nigerian government (Ibaba, 2008). They often use this influence to get preferential treatment, such as tax breaks and immunity from prosecution. This has led to corruption and a lack of transparency, which has further increased poverty and inequality in the region.

Greed and Self-Centeredness: It also plays a significant role in the struggle of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The region's wealth has often been exploited by self-serving leaders and elites, who prioritize their interests over the well-being of the people. This self-centeredness has led to corruption, embezzlement, and mismanagement of resources, further entrenching poverty and underdevelopment in the region. The self-greed of a few has come at the expense of the many, as the region's natural resources are plundered, and the people are left with little to show for it. This self-centeredness has also fueled conflict and violence, as different groups and individuals vie for control of the region's resources, perpetuating a cycle of violence and instability. The struggle of the Niger Delta is thus not only a

result of external factors but also of internal dynamics, where self-greed and self-centeredness have contributed to the region's underdevelopment, suffering and environmental degradation (Khasoane, 2019).

Lack of Transparency and Accountability in the Management of Oil Revenue: Transparency and accountability are key factors in the effective management of oil revenue. In the Niger Delta, there has been a lack of transparency in how oil revenue is spent, leading to mismanagement and corruption. For example, oil revenue is often diverted into the pockets of corrupt officials, rather than being used to improve the lives of ordinary people. This lack of accountability has further exacerbated poverty and inequality in the region (Rosenstein, 2005).

Lack of Economic Diversification: Economic diversification is the process of developing other sectors of the economy beyond oil, such as agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism. In the Niger Delta, there has been a lack of economic diversification, which has made the region overly dependent on oil (Usman, 2022). This has been exacerbated by the fact that the oil industry has not created many jobs for local people, leading to high levels of unemployment.

Political Marginalization: The region has been historically excluded from political power and decision-making, leading to a lack of representation and voice in the country's affairs. For instance, the Niger Delta's voice has been silenced, its people marginalized and excluded from the table of power. For too long, their interests have been ignored, their needs overlooked, and their rights trampled upon. It is time to listen, to empower, and to include, that the region may finally flourish and its people thrive (Dowie, 2011).

Political Disenfranchisement: The Niger Delta's struggle is exacerbated by political disenfranchisement, a systemic silencing of their voices. Denied meaningful participation in the political process, their interests are ignored, and their needs are overlooked (Nnanta Amadi, 2023). Their votes are suppressed, their representatives co-opted, and their concerns dismissed. This powerlessness perpetuates the duality of liquid gold and poverty, as the region's wealth is plundered, and its people remain mired in poverty, their potential unfulfilled, their future uncertain. The silence is deafening, the struggle real.

Inadequate Representation in Key Institutions: The Niger Delta's struggle is compounded by inadequate representation in key institutions. With few sons and daughters in positions of power, their voices are muted, and their interests marginalized (Strutton, 2014). The region's concerns are overlooked in policy decisions, and their needs are ignored in resource allocation. This lack of representation in critical institutions like the military, judiciary, and civil service perpetuates the duality of liquid gold and poverty, as the region's wealth is exploited, and its people remain poor, powerless, and voiceless.

Economic and Political Factors: The economic and political factors are very interconnected. On the economic side, the lack of economic diversification, infrastructure, and services has led to a lack of opportunity and high levels of poverty (Papageorgiou & Spatafora, 2012). On the political side, corruption, a lack of transparency, and the influence of oil companies have created an environment that does not benefit local people and encourages illegal activity. These factors combine to create a situation where poverty and inequality are widespread and difficult to overcome.

Youth's Quest for Wealth: In addition to the economic and political factors, youth unemployment and lack of opportunity have also been cited as a cause of the duality of liquid gold and poverty. Many young people in the region have turned to illegal activities, such as oil theft and joining criminal groups, to make a living. This has further destabilized the region and increased the divide between rich and poor (Ugor, 2013).

2.3 The Effects of the Niger Delta Region's Struggle

The effects of the region's struggle have been devastating (Simon-Hartley & Okpanachi, 2020; Braga et al., 2017). Some of the affected areas include:

Effect on the Economy: the lack of development has led to widespread poverty, high unemployment, and low levels of education. This has caused a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape. In terms of health, the lack of infrastructure and services has led to a high infant mortality rate, high levels of disease, and a lack of access to clean water (World Health Organization. Centre for Health Development, 2010). In terms of society, there is a high level of

crime and violence, and the region has become a breeding ground for armed conflict and civil unrest.

Effect on the Environment: the oil industry has had a significant impact. Oil spills have polluted water supplies and damaged local ecosystems. Gas flaring has led to air pollution and increased greenhouse gas emissions. This has led to health problems for local people and has contributed to climate change. In terms of culture, the region's traditional way of life has been disrupted by the oil industry, leading to a loss of identity and cultural heritage (Patz et al., 2014).

Socio-Economic Effect: the most notable impact has been the destruction of traditional livelihoods. Many people in the region have traditionally relied on fishing, farming, and other subsistence activities for their livelihoods. The pollution from oil spills and other forms of environmental damage have made it difficult or impossible for people to continue these activities. This has led to an increase in poverty and a decrease in quality of life. An example of how the region's struggle has affected people's lives is the case of the Ogoni people. The Ogoni are an ethnic group in the Niger Delta who have been heavily impacted by the oil industry (Odey, 2021). Their traditional fishing and farming livelihoods have been destroyed, and they have been subjected to violence, including extrajudicial killings, from both government forces and private security firms. They have also faced significant economic and social marginalization.

The Impact on Local Communities: there have been several impacts on local communities in the Niger Delta. One major impact has been the loss of access to land and resources. For example, communities have been forcibly relocated to make way for oil drilling and other infrastructure projects. This has disrupted traditional ways of life and led to the loss of cultural heritage. In addition, many communities have been exposed to high levels of pollution, including toxic fumes and water contamination. This has caused a range of health problems, including respiratory illnesses, skin diseases, and birth defects. One specific example of the impact on local communities is the case of the community of Bodo, in Ogoniland. Bodo is a fishing village that was severely impacted by two oil spills in 2008 and 2009. The spills were caused by a pipeline leak, and they resulted in the contamination of a

large area of land and water (Bassey, 2017). This led to the loss of livelihoods for many residents, as well as serious health problems. In 2015, the oil company responsible for the spills agreed to pay \$77 million in compensation to the community.

2.4 Liquid Gold and Poverty in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

Poverty is a complex and multi-faceted issue, but the UN defines it as a state in which people lack the necessities of life, such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and healthcare. In the Niger Delta, the liquid gold industry has been a major contributor to poverty. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines poverty as "a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information (UNDP, n.d). In the Niger Delta, the liquid gold industry has been a major contributor to poverty in several ways. The unsustainable practices of the liquid gold industry, such as gas flaring and oil spills, have damaged the environment and the livelihoods of local communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This, along with unregulated labor practices that lead to poor working conditions and low wages, and widespread corruption and mismanagement of the industry, has resulted in a lack of development and an increase in poverty in the region.

For example, the industry has displaced many people from their homes and destroyed traditional livelihoods, such as farming and fishing. In addition, the pollution caused by the industry has damaged crops and contaminated water sources, further exacerbating the problem. One of the most pressing issues in the Niger Delta is the high level of poverty. According to the UNDP (nd), over 70% of the population in the region lives below the poverty line. This poverty is linked to several factors, including the lack of economic opportunities, the lack of access to education and healthcare, and the displacement of communities by the liquid gold industry. Additionally, the lack of infrastructure, such as roads, has limited access to markets and other economic opportunities (Banerjee et al., 2020).

In addition to the direct impacts of the liquid gold industry on poverty, there are also several indirect impacts. For example, the presence of the industry has led to an influx of people to the

region, putting further strain on the limited resources and infrastructure. Additionally, the corruption and mismanagement of revenue from the industry have led to a lack of investment in the region, further perpetuating the cycle of poverty (Adekeye, 2016). Again, the struggle and activities of the liquid gold as led to the destruction of traditional livelihoods is linked to poverty. One of the most significant examples of this is in the fishing industry. Many people in the Niger Delta rely on fishing for their livelihoods, but the liquid gold industry has had a major impact on this sector. Oil spills have contaminated the waters, leading to a decline in fish populations and making it unsafe for people to consume the fish. This has led to a loss of income and a deterioration in people's health. Additionally, the destruction of farmland has also had a significant impact on poverty in the region.

How liquid gold causes poverty in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria includes:

2.5 Liquid Gold and Health Impacts in the Niger Region of Nigeria

The health impacts of the liquid gold industry are significant and far-reaching. The pollution from oil spills, gas flaring, and other aspects of the industry have led to a range of health problems, including respiratory diseases, skin disorders, cancer, and birth defects (Hart, 2012). Additionally, the lack of access to clean water has led to an increase in waterborne diseases. The combination of these factors has led to a high rate of morbidity and mortality in the region. One of the most common health problems associated with the liquid gold industry is respiratory disease. This is caused by exposure to air pollution from gas flaring and other forms of pollution. The most common respiratory diseases include chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, and other respiratory infections. In addition, there is evidence that the high levels of pollution in the region are associated with an increased risk of cancer, particularly lung cancer (Anele & Dokubo, 2010).

Another significant health impact of the liquid gold industry is on maternal and child health. Exposure to pollutants, particularly in women of childbearing age, has been associated with an increased risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, low birth weight, and birth defects (Prouse, 2021). Additionally, infants and children in the region have a higher risk of mortality due to respiratory infections, diarrheal diseases, and malnutrition.

These health problems have significant consequences for the population of the Niger Delta, both in terms of individual health and the economic well-being of the region. The destruction of livelihoods and the loss of traditional farming and fishing practices have led to a loss of food security and an increase in malnutrition in the region. This has impacted the physical and cognitive development of children, leading to a cycle of poverty and health problems. Furthermore, the loss of livelihoods has led to poverty and unemployment, which in turn have led to an increase in stress and mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety (Arena et al., 2022).

The stress of losing one's livelihood and the pressures of living in poverty can have a major impact on mental health. Moreover, the loss of cultural identity and the destruction of traditional ways of life have also contributed to poor mental health in the region. This has been particularly acute for indigenous people, who have a strong connection to their traditional lands and way of life.

2.6 The Liquid Gold and Conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has a long history of conflict, which has been exacerbated by the presence of the liquid gold industry. The discovery of oil in the region led to competition for access to resources, which has led to conflict between different ethnic groups (Egbe, 2016). Additionally, the unequal distribution of oil revenue has led to resentment and conflict between communities. The presence of multinational oil companies has also led to clashes between local people and the companies, as well as between the companies and the Nigerian government. All of these factors have led to a history of violence and conflict in the region (Nwankwo, 2017).

One of the most notable instances of violence in the region was the conflict between the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Nigerian government. MEND is a group that has been advocating for a more equitable distribution of oil revenue and greater autonomy for the region (Le Billon, 2009). The conflict has led to thousands of deaths and widespread displacement. More so, the effects of the region's struggle have led to several social movements and activism. One of the most notable examples is the Ogoni Bill of Rights,

which was created in 1990 by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People. The Bill called for the right to self-determination, clean water, and the ability to decide how natural resources are used (Okonta & Douglas, 2003). It also sought compensation for the environmental damage caused by oil companies.

2.7 The Change to Overcome the Struggle of the Duality of Liquid Gold and Poverty in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

The change that is needed to overcome the struggle of the Niger Delta is multifaceted (Atumah, 2011; Ozimah, 2016).

Unity in Diversity among the People of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria: Unity in diversity among Niger Deltans would be a potent force for change, helping to overcome the struggle of liquid gold and poverty. By bridging ethnic and linguistic divides, Niger Deltans can foster a sense of shared identity and purpose, encouraging collaboration and collective action. Inclusive decision-making would ensure all voices are heard, building trust and social cohesion, and reducing conflict and violence. Marginalized groups would be empowered, and a united front would increase bargaining power and leverage. Investments and partnerships would be attracted, driving economic growth and development. The region's rich cultural heritage would be showcased, promoting tourism and cultural exchange. Most importantly, a sense of shared responsibility would inspire collective action to address challenges, enabling Niger Deltans to harness their collective strength, creativity, and resilience to build a brighter future for all (Ighedosa, 2020).

Visionary Representative among the People of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria: A visionary representative would be a beacon of hope for the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, shining a light on the path to progress and prosperity. By amplifying the voices of the marginalized, they would ensure that the concerns of the people are finally heard and addressed. With a champion's passion, they would fight for inclusive development, prioritizing education, healthcare, and infrastructure to build a strong foundation for the region's future. Transparency and accountability would be their guiding principles, ending the corrupt practices that have long plagued the region. By empowering local communities to control their

resources and destinies, they would unlock the potential for self-determination and true autonomy. With a unifying vision, they would bring together diverse groups, ending conflict and violence, and fostering a sense of unity and purpose (Alfoqahaa & Jones, 2020). By attracting investments and partnerships, they would diversify the economy, reducing dependence on oil and ensuring a sustainable future. With a deep respect for the environment, they would promote sustainable practices, protecting the region's precious ecosystem. And by empowering the youth, they would create jobs, opportunities, and a brighter future for generations to come. A visionary representative would be the change-maker the Niger Delta needs, breaking the cycle of poverty and exploitation, and unlocking a brighter future for all.

A technical blueprint (where we are, where we want to be, and how we want to get there): A technical blueprint for the Niger Delta would guide the region towards a brighter future. It would acknowledge current challenges, including environmental degradation, infrastructure gaps, and poverty (Okon, 2010). Then, it would envision a future with sustainable economic growth, environmental restoration, and improved infrastructure and services. The blueprint would outline a step-by-step plan, divided into short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals. It would focus on establishing a regional development agency, launching infrastructure projects, and implementing environmental cleanup programs in the short term. In the medium term, it would prioritize economic diversification, human capital development, and strengthening institutions. In the long term, it would aim for sustainable economic growth, universal access to healthcare and education, and regional development leadership.

Transparency and Accountability in the Management of Oil Revenues among the People of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: Transparency and accountability in the management of oil revenues refer to the need for the Nigerian government and oil companies to be open and honest about how oil revenue is being spent (Ado, 2016). This includes publishing detailed financial reports and ensuring that the money is spent by the law. There also needs to be independent oversight of the industry, so that there is a system of checks and balances in place. In addition, local communities need to be more involved in decision-making about how oil

revenue is spent, so that they can benefit from the industry.

Investment in Alternative Sources of Livelihood among the People of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: Investment in alternative sources of livelihood refers to the need to provide economic opportunities for people in the Niger Delta beyond the oil industry. This includes investment in agriculture, tourism, and other industries that can provide jobs and income. This is important because it can reduce poverty, improve health, and reduce conflict. It is also important for environmental reasons, as it can reduce the pressure on the environment from the oil industry. In addition, it can help to build local capacity and develop skills that can be used in other industries (Post & Altman, 2017).

Commitment to Environmental Protection: A commitment to environmental protection refers to the need to address the environmental damage that has been caused by the oil industry in the Niger Delta. This includes cleaning up oil spills and gas flaring, as well as protecting natural resources, such as rivers and forests. It is also important to protect the health of the people living in the region, who have been affected by pollution and contaminated water. In addition, there needs to be investment in renewable energy, such as solar and wind power, to reduce the reliance on oil (Sen & Ganguly, 2017).

2.8 The PIA and its Implications on the Region

The Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) was passed in 2021, to reform the oil and gas industry in Nigeria. The act aims to increase transparency and accountability, as well as improve the management of oil revenues (Oyebami et al., 2022). The act also seeks to address environmental damage caused by the oil industry while promoting the participation of local people in the industry. Overall, the act has the potential to improve the oil industry in the Niger Delta, but it remains to be seen how effective it will be in practice.

One of the most significant provisions of the PIA is the creation of a new regulatory body, the Nigeria Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC). The NUPRC will be responsible for regulating the oil and gas industry, including licensing, compliance, and enforcement. The act also includes provisions for the establishment of a fund to compensate

people affected by oil pollution. In addition, the act seeks to address the issue of gas flaring, which has been a major source of air pollution in the region. The act requires companies to reduce their gas flaring to zero by 2025. Another key provision of the PIA is the requirement for oil companies to contribute to a fund that will be used to develop the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This fund will be used for projects such as infrastructure development, education, health, and job creation. The act also includes provisions for the development of host communities, which are those that are directly affected by oil and gas operations. The act requires companies to contribute a percentage of their profits to a community development fund (Aziza et al., 2023).

Overall, the PIA has the potential to bring significant benefits to the Niger Delta:

First, increase revenue from the industry which could be used to improve living standards in the region. The increased revenue from the PIA could be used to improve the quality of life for people in the Niger Delta in several ways (Nnabugwu et al., 2022; Oyebode & Adinoyi, 2022). First, it could be used to invest in infrastructure, such as roads, schools, and hospitals. This could lead to improvements in health, education, and quality of life, the money could be used to create jobs, either through direct employment in the oil and gas industry or through the development of other industries. This could lead to a reduction in poverty and an increase in opportunities for local people.

Second, greater involvement of local/host communities in decision-making could lead to more sustainable development. Currently, local communities in the Niger Delta have very little say in how the oil and gas industry is run. This has led to conflict and resentment; as local people feel that their voices are not being heard. The PIA could change this by giving communities a greater say in how the industry is managed. This could include things like the right to approve projects and a greater share of the profits from the industry. It could also include more consultation and dialogue between companies and communities (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010).

Third, the reduction of gas flaring which could have a negative impact on the environment and the health of local people. Gas flaring is the burning of natural gas that is released during the

extraction of oil. It has several negative effects on the environment and the health of local people. It releases several pollutants, including greenhouse gases, which contribute to climate change as well as toxic pollutants, such as benzene and carbon monoxide, which can cause health problems such as cancer and respiratory diseases. Reducing gas flaring could have a significant impact on the health of local people and the environment. The PIA also has the potential to reduce corruption in the oil and gas industry (Akerere, 2024).

In essence, the PIA is a significant piece of legislation that could have a positive impact on the Niger Delta people with a strong potential to improve living standards, reduce corruption, and protect the environment (Opara, 2022). However, several challenges need to be overcome, including the need for effective implementation and the need to ensure that host communities are consulted and involved in decision-making.

2.9 Calls for Sustainable Development and Social Justice

The plight of the Niger Delta people has sparked calls for sustainable development and social justice. Activists, NGOs, and concerned citizens have been advocating for fair compensation and greater autonomy for the region. They argue that addressing the challenges faced by the Niger Delta is essential for achieving long-term stability, economic growth, and social harmony within Nigeria (Ikelegbe, 2013; Ilo, 2020).

The calls for sustainable development and social justice in the Niger Delta are multifaceted. There is therefore a need for:

Environmental Justice: Addressing environmental challenges while taking into account the social, political, and economic dimensions of the issue.

Social Justice: Promoting equality and opportunity for all, while taking into account the environmental and economic dimensions of the issue.

Economic Justice: Promoting economic development while taking into account the social, political, and environmental dimensions of the issue.

Political Justice: Promoting democracy and the rule of law, while taking into account the

environmental, social, and economic dimensions of the issue (Siloko, 2024).

3. CONCLUSION

The Niger Delta is a region blessed with immense natural wealth, yet plagued by poverty and neglect. The contrast between its potential and the harsh reality of its people's lives is a stark reminder of the need for urgent action. The government and stakeholders must come together to address the socio-economic challenges that have long held the region back. To build a brighter future, we must prioritize equitable distribution of wealth and resources, ensuring that the benefits of the region's natural riches are shared by all. Sustainable practices and environmental stewardship are crucial to preserving the region's fragile ecosystem and protecting the health and well-being of its people. Infrastructure development and social services must also be prioritized, providing access to quality education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. The environment must be protected, and the impact of pollution and degradation addressed, to ensure a healthy and thriving ecosystem for generations to come. The calls for sustainable development and social justice in the Niger Delta are multifaceted, demanding a comprehensive approach that addresses environmental, economic, social, and political justice. By working together, we can create a more just and prosperous future for the people of the Niger Delta, unlocking the region's full potential and building a brighter future for all. It is our collective responsibility to act and to ensure that the wealth of the Niger Delta benefits all its people, not just a privileged few.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of this manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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