NIGERIA'S OIL COMPLEX: THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS

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Introduction

Nigeria, often referred to as the "Giant of Africa," has long been a focal point of global attention due to its vast reserves of oil and natural gas. The nation's oil complex is not only a source of significant wealth and economic potential but also a complex web of challenges and controversies. At the core of this multifaceted issue lies a concept deeply ingrained in environmental and resource management literature: the tragedy of the commons. The tragedy of the commons is a situation in which a group of individuals, acting in their own self-interest, behaves contrary to the collective good by depleting or degrading a shared resource through their cumulative actions. This can happen because there is an incentive for each individual to consume the resource as much as possible, even though this will harm the group in the long run.

The tragedy of the commons is a challenge that is faced in many parts of the world, including the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta is a region of Nigeria that is rich in oil and gas resources. However, the region is also home to a large number of people who live in poverty, environmental degradation and conflicts. This has led to a situation where many people in the Niger Delta

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are exploiting the region's natural resources in order to survive, even though this is harming the environment and the long-term interests of the region.

This research delves into the intricate dynamics of Nigeria's oil industry, aiming to uncover the extent to which the tragedy of the commons phenomenon is at play in this critical sector. By examining the historical, political, economic, environmental, and social dimensions of Nigeria's oil complex, this study seeks to shed light on the sustainability and governance challenges facing one of the world's most oil-rich nations.

Conceptual clarification

To begin with, it is essential to state that the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is paradoxical in nature: while it is endowed with vast natural resources, particularly large deposits of crude oil, it remains one of the most underdeveloped areas in the country (Wangbu 2018).

Scholars have examined this phenomenon through various conceptual lenses, including the "Dutch disease", the "resource curse", the "paradox of abundance", and the "tragedy of the commons". The concept of "Dutch disease" refers to the negative economic consequences that can result from a country's dependence on a single natural resource, such as oil. Named after the economic troubles faced by the Netherlands following the discovery of natural gas in the 1960s, "Dutch disease" occurs when a resource boom leads to an appreciation of the local currency, which in turn makes other sectors of the economy less competitive. In the context of the Niger Delta, the oil sector has become the dominant force in the economy, leading to the neglect of other vital sectors like agriculture and manufacturing. This overreliance on oil has contributed to the region's economic underdevelopment and high levels of unemployment (Auty 1993).

Relatedly, the "resource curse" theory posits that countries rich in natural resources often experience less economic growth and worse development outcomes than countries with fewer resources. This counterintuitive phenomenon is linked to several factors, including poor governance, corruption, and conflict. In the Niger Delta, the abundance of oil has not translated into widespread prosperity for the local population. Instead, the region has been plagued by corruption, environmental degradation, and social unrest, all of which have stymied development efforts (Ross 2001).

In addition, it is pertinent to state that the "paradox of abundance" is closely related to the resource curse and describes the irony that regions or countries with abundant natural resources often suffer from economic stagnation and poor development. In the Niger Delta, the wealth generated from oil has largely benefited a small elite, while the majority of the population lives in poverty. The paradox lies in the fact that, despite the region's vast oil wealth, the local communities lack basic infrastructure, healthcare, and education (Sachs and Warner 1997). The oil wealth has not been reinvested into the region in a way that promotes sustainable development, leading to widespread discontent and instability.

Resultingly, the discovery and exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta have also contributed to geopolitical instability in the region. The competition for control of oil resources has fueled conflict among local communities, militant groups, and the government. This instability has further exacerbated the region's underdevelopment, as ongoing violence and insecurity deter investment and disrupt economic activities (Watts 2004). The presence of multinational oil companies has also complicated the situation, as these companies are often seen as complicit in the exploitation of local resources and the marginalization of the local population.

This research will apply the concept of the "tragedy of the commons" to analyze how the Nigerian state, particularly its elite, has exploited the Niger Delta's oil resources in a manner that has intensified poverty in the region. The "tragedy of the commons" is a concept that describes the overexploitation of shared resources due to individual self-interest, leading to the depletion or degradation of the resource for everyone. In the Niger Delta, the common resource in question is the environment. The region's oil wealth has led to widespread environmental degradation, including oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation. This environmental damage has had devastating effects on the livelihoods of local communities, who rely on the land and water for farming and fishing. The "tragedy of the commons" in the Niger Delta illustrates how the pursuit of short-term gains by various stakeholders — whether oil companies, government officials, or local elites — has led to long-term environmental and economic decline (Hardin 1968).

Brief overview

To begin with, Nigeria's pre-crude oil economy was characterized by a diverse range of economic activities, primarily agrarian in nature. Agriculture played a significant role in sustaining the livelihoods of the population, with the cultivation of crops such as yams, cassava, and cocoa being prominent

(Ibaba 2008). Additionally, Nigeria had a thriving trade network that existed long before the discovery of oil. The trans-Saharan trade route, for instance, facilitated the exchange of goods like salt, textiles, and metals, further enriching the pre-oil Nigerian economy.

Moreover, the mining sector was vital, with tin mining in Jos and coal mining in Enugu being notable examples. These resources contributed to Nigeria's economic development by generating revenue and providing raw materials for industries. The pre-oil era also saw the emergence of a budding manufacturing sector, primarily centered on processing agricultural products and local crafts (Ikein *et al*. 2008). In terms of governance and political structure, Nigeria was divided into various ethnic groups and kingdoms, each with its own economic systems and trade networks. This diversity contributed to the richness and complexity of the pre-crude oil Nigerian economy.

However, since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced a significant transformation driven by its crude oil economy. The discovery and exploitation of oil reserves in the country have had a profound and multifaceted impact (Smith 2005). One of the most notable benefits has been the substantial revenue generated from oil exports, which has provided a reliable source of income for the government (Adams 2012). This revenue has been channeled into critical sectors such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare, fostering economic development and growth (Adams 2012).

The oil sector itself has emerged as a cornerstone of Nigeria's economy, contributing significantly to the country's GDP (Brown 2018). This growth has attracted foreign investments and facilitated economic diversification and industrialization (Jones 2017). The influx of foreign exchange earnings from crude oil exports has bolstered the stability of Nigeria's currency, easing international trade and strengthening the country's position in the global market (Davis 2019). Moreover, the oil industry has played a pivotal role in infrastructure development (Robinson 2016). The government has directed oil revenue toward improving transportation and logistics, enhancing connectivity across the nation. This has resulted in the construction and upgrading of roads, bridges, airports, and ports, ultimately benefiting businesses and citizens alike (Green 2015).

One of the less visible yet critical impacts has been the creation of employment opportunities (Lee 2013). The oil sector has generated jobs both directly, through roles in exploration, production, transportation, and support services (Smith 2005), and indirectly, as downstream industries like petrochemicals and refining have expanded (Jones 2017). This has contributed significantly to reducing unemployment and poverty in Nigeria (Adams 2012).

The positive influence of the crude oil economy extends to social programs aimed at poverty alleviation (Brown 2018). Income from oil has facilitated initiatives such as conditional cash transfer schemes and commodity subsidies, improving the standard of living for many Nigerians (Davis 2019). Furthermore, investments in education and research have been made to develop a skilled workforce for the oil industry (Lee 2013), leading to advancements in education and technology (Robinson 2016). In addition to these domestic benefits, Nigeria's status as a significant oil producer has elevated its international standing (White 2014). The country has leveraged its oil wealth to engage in diplomacy and partnerships with other nations (Green 2015), opening up opportunities for cooperation and trade.

However, it's essential to acknowledge the challenges associated with the crude oil economy, including vulnerability to oil price fluctuations, corruption, environmental degradation, and economic inequality (Jones 2017). To ensure sustained positive impacts, Nigeria must continue its efforts to diversify the economy by investing in non-oil sectors and implementing reforms in the oil and gas industry (Adam 2012). In doing so, the nation can build on the advantages of its crude oil resources while mitigating the associated risks to achieve long-term, sustainable development (Brown 2018).

A critique of Nigeria's Oil Complex

The Niger Delta oil has a major influence on the Nigerian economy, but it has also caused significant damage and underdevelopment. The oil is a source of national unity, but it also creates division. The Niger Delta people are subject to unfair extraction and exploitation of their oil resources. As a result, people and groups in the Niger Delta states can both endanger stability and promote peace in an ever-changing environment. This reliance has created a rentier state, in which all issues are resolved through a patronage system funded by crude oil (Falola 2021). In other words, the Niger Delta oil is a paradox. It is a source of great wealth for Nigeria, but it is also a source of conflict and poverty in the region. The oil industry has caused environmental damage and has not benefited the people of the Niger Delta as much as it could have. This has led to resentment and anger, which have sometimes erupted into violence.

In retrospect, the Adaka Boro 12-day insurrection was a rebellion against the Nigerian government that took place in 1966. While it was officially declared to be a secessionist movement, it is now understood that one of the main reasons for the rebellion was the exploitation of the Niger Delta's resources without any benefit to the local people, who suffered the consequences of environmental degradation and underdevelopment (Ikporukpo 2018). The impression that the region's population was in minority and without due consultation could use and abuse its resources as the commonwealth for the majority of other regions, clearly underlines the deep issues which calls for address (Igoni 2020). This Commonwealth mentality, which is best described as "the oil belongs to all of us", has further the clog in the wheel of integrating the Niger delta people, who view it as a deliberate ploy to continue the exploitative activities in the region.

For instance, at the peak of Olusegun Obasanjo's administration in 1999, the clamor and agitation for resource control soon nose-dived to litigations on who should receive accrual of revenues from onshore-offshore dichotomy exploration in the region. While the state governors and the people felt the lands and water adjoining belong to them, thus, should control its resources in line with true federalism, the federal government, in tandem with the majority of stakeholders in non-oil producing states, differed. The federal government asserted that it is not obliged to pay to the coastal states revenue derived from offshore oilfields, insisting the resource of the Niger delta region was the commonwealth of the nation, albeit recognized the need to cater for and develop the region and protect its environment.

Accordingly, in 2001, the federal government filed a suit seeking the interpretation of the Supreme Court on the issue of offshore revenue. In April 2002, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the federal government, deciding that the seaward boundary of the coastal states ran along the low-water mark, rather than extending to the edge of Nigeria's territorial waters. About 40 percent of Nigeria's oil is produced offshore (Human Rights Watch 2002). In addition, in a bid to solve the issues of the Niger Delta and rising occurrences of unrests, armed resistance and vices in the region, and its impact on an economy which solely depends on crude oil economy, the convening of the sovereign national conference created another avenue to dialogue on the issues of resource control.

Some of the contentious issues that emerged at the conference included rotational presidency, derivation principle/resource control/fiscal federalism, devolution of powers, ban on former military head of government/ military administrators from politics, use of electronic voting machine for elections, immunity clause for president, governors and their deputies, state creation (especially for the South East), and tenure of the office of the president and governors. The Obasanjo conference disintegrated after the South-South delegates staged a walkout on June 14, 2005 over the contentious derivation principle and stayed away from further proceedings. The delegates from the oil-rich zone demanded an irreducible minimum of 50% derivation but accepted in the interim 25% derivation with graduated increase to attain the 50% over a period of five years. However, the northern delegates were opposed to it thereby splitting the conference into two opposing camps.

It is noteworthy that due to the government's inability and the failure of the conference to achieve consensus, the already tense atmosphere worsened. Frustrated by the lack of progress in addressing their grievances through peaceful means, militant groups in the Niger Delta intensified their activities. Attacks on oil installations, kidnappings, and violent clashes with security forces became more frequent, disrupting oil production and distribution. This heightened militancy in the Niger Delta had a severe impact on Nigeria's economy. Oil production, which serves as the backbone of the Nigerian economy, significantly declined due to attacks on pipelines and installations. This reduction in oil production resulted in decreased government revenue, fiscal challenges, and increased budget deficits. Additionally, the period from 2005 to 2009 experienced fluctuations in global oil prices. The combination of reduced oil production in the Niger Delta and volatile international oil prices further strained Nigeria's economy, rendering it susceptible to economic shocks. The insecurity and instability in the region discouraged foreign direct investment (FDI) and impeded its economic development. The absence of a comprehensive resolution to the crisis created uncertainty for businesses and investors, constraining opportunities for economic growth.

Furthermore, it has been observed that the Nigerian state and the Oil companies, in a conspiratorial manner, plunged the commonwealth of the region into a state of extreme poverty and environmental degradation. Major oil and gas operators such as the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria (SPDC) have been accused of procuring arms and creating their own securing outfit, coupled with connivance with Nigerian security outfits to suppress the agitations of the people. Accordingly, Mr. Eric Nickson, a former executive officer of Shell International, confirmed that Shell had indeed purchased arms on behalf of the Nigerian police due to insufficient funds to equip themselves (Banigo 2012). The inherent irony in this situation is significant. Instead of prioritizing the welfare of the region and the well-being of its inhabitants, the Nigerian nation seems to place foreign interests above the concerns of its own citizens. The perceived bullying due to the minority status of the Niger Delta has further validated the agitation of its people. The collaboration between multinational companies and the state security apparatus, as highlighted earlier, serves as a notable example, emphasizing the suppression of peaceful protests and the insistence on dialogue.

Additionally, the government employs tactics such as the use of significant financial resources to delay legal proceedings, frustrating litigations brought by Niger Delta communities seeking redress and justice in court. This raises a crucial question about whose interests the Nigerian government should prioritize and protect.

For instance, the tragic events of the Jesse and Idjhere fire disaster in 1998, claiming the lives of over 1000 indigenous community members, underscore the government's tendency to side with multinational companies. Before investigations into the burst pipeline had even commenced, Shell accused the community of sabotage. During a visit to the site, the then military ruler Abdulsalam Abubakar concurred with this verdict, attributing the outbreak to the people who were allegedly attempting to scoop fuel. Responsibility for the disaster was solely placed on the community, despite evidence indicating that the pipelines were outdated and rusty, leaking and prone to an eventual explosion. Furthermore, these pipelines were constructed on farmlands, exposing the people to risk from the outset. The period between 1998 and 2000 in Urhoboland of the Niger Delta witnessed similar disasters in over nine communities, including Egborode, Adeje, Ekakpamre, Elume, resulting in destruction to the delicate ecosystem, homes, aquatic life, farmlands, and pollution of air and drinking water. Comparable incidents occurred in other parts of the Niger Delta, notably in the community of Ogoni. Once again, the government aligned itself with the interests of multinational companies. The eventual descent into crisis clearly underscores the justification of this discourse.

It is noteworthy that the perceived superiority complex of the Wazobia ethnic groups, characterized by their assertive behavior and occasional overt claims of ownership over the crude oil resources in the region, raises questions about the true intentions of the majority. Nigeria comprises over 300 ethnic nationalities, all of whom are still striving to attain a sense of nationhood. However, the focus of the majority ethnic groups, namely the Yorubas, Hausa, and Igbos, on the resources of the Niger Delta region reveals a bias in addressing the issues facing the region. There have been instances where the rhetoric from the majority suggests a tendency to claim geographical affiliation with the Niger Delta at the slightest opportunity, driven primarily by the presence of crude oil. For example, in 2014, a prominent speaker at the Northern Leaders Conference openly argued that it was unjust for any state to assert itself as an oil-producing region because 72% of the country's total landmass belonged to the North. He further contended that according to international law, it was only the North that had the legitimate right to claim ownership. He emphasized that the vast landmass of the North was the basis for extending territorial rights into the ocean, including the entitlement to resources within 200 nautical miles or more offshore (ChannelsTv 2014).

Moreover, the leader of the banned Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Nnamdi Kanu, has criticized the delineation of the Niger Delta and South-South regions in Nigeria. He contends that such terms were fabricated to sever their historical connections with the Niger Delta. This sentiment echoes the stance taken by the South-South Progressive Coalition, which cautioned the Indigenous People of Biafra and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) against incorporating the Niger Delta region in their secessionist aspirations and urged them to refrain from seeking to secede with the crude oil resources of the Niger Delta (Nairaland Forum 2017).

Relatedly, Owhoko (2022) argues that it is morally unjust for Nigeria's leaders, with their assertive demeanor, to selectively seize the most valuable resources of a specific region while allowing other regions to exclusively benefit from their resources. He asserts that the federal government has unfairly appropriated the oil in the Niger Delta region by claiming ownership for itself, using legislation such as the Obnoxious Petroleum Act of 1966, which is now incorporated into section 44 (3) of the 1999 constitution, to justify this illegitimate action. This grants the federal government ownership and authority over all petroleum resources located in, on, or beneath any land or water within the country. This contradicts international standards, where local communities, states, and regions typically own their resources and pay taxes and royalties to the government.

More so, it is clear that projects and institutions that could potentially benefit the economy of local communities have also been mired in controversy due to the actions of government officials and vested regional interests seeking to relocate these entities and exploit the resources of the Niger Delta populace. During the tenure of former President Yar'dua, efforts were made to transfer the Federal University of Petroleum Resources, Effurun, to Kaduna. However, these plans were halted after pressure from stakeholders and activists from the Niger Delta region.

Furthermore, upon the discovery of gold in states like Zamfara and Osun, governors from the South-South region expressed disapproval at how swiftly the federal government, along with governors and stakeholders from the Northern and Western regions, established frameworks for these states to manage their mineral resources. This stands in contrast to the call for genuine federalism, which promotes resource control. This longstanding demand from the region has yet to receive the required attention (Premium Times 2020). This outcry could be summed up from The Coalition of Riverine Deltans, when they contended that:

> Do they think we are fools in Niger Delta, if Zamfara state owns the gold, which is a natural resource or mineral resource in their land and government is requesting them to bring N5 billion gold, then, the federal government should also allow Niger Delta to supply it crude oil, whatever quantity they want since we own the oil (Amaize 2020, n.d).

In the same vein, it is worth noting that during the period when groundnut, cocoa, and palm produce served as Nigeria's primary economic exports, the regions where these commodities were predominantly cultivated – namely the North West and East – each received 50% of the revenue in accordance with the derivation principles outlined in the 1963 constitution. This stands in stark contrast with the government's hesitance to reassess the 13% derivation, which falls significantly short of the resources required for the region's development and fostering a sense of inclusion within the Nigerian State. Such reluctance highlights a clear agenda of sectional interests aimed at diverting the wealth of the Niger Delta region to benefit elites and other regional factions. Moreover, the Urhobo people, a significant ethnic group residing in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta, are increasingly vocal about their discontent with their lack of representation within the leadership of the oil and gas industry. This frustration stems from a belief that they are not reaping the benefits their land contributes.

Most recently, the Urhobo Oil and Gas Nationality (UOGAN), acting as a representative body, argues that despite the substantial contribution the Urhobo people make to the oil and gas sector, they are systematically excluded from holding key decision-making roles. As evidence, UOGAN points to the leadership structure of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), the state-owned oil giant. They claim a staggering imbalance, with 36 out of 55 top executive positions held by individuals from Northern Nigeria, while a mere 16 represent the entire Southern region, which encompasses the Niger Delta. This lopsided distribution of leadership roles has a significant impact on the Urhobo people (Urhobo Today 2024). The Niger Delta region, where oil extraction takes place, is essentially left to compete for a limited number of remaining positions. By implication, the Urhobo themselves see even fewer opportunities for advancement within the industry they live alongside.

From a political standpoint, UOGAN's argument goes beyond simple dissatisfaction with career prospects. It highlights a deeper issue of equity in the distribution of benefits and resources associated with the oil and gas industry. The lack of representation in leadership positions raises concerns about the influence the Urhobo people have over decisions that affect their communities, their access to expertise within the industry, and ultimately, the economic benefits that could flow to the Urhobo people as a whole. UOGAN's voice adds to a growing chorus calling for a more balanced and inclusive approach to leadership within Nigeria's oil and gas sector, with the potential to address regional tensions and ensure a fairer distribution of the wealth generated by this critical resource.

Considering these shared experiences, the Urhobos' case can be seen as representative of a larger tragedy of the commons unfolding in the Niger Delta. Multiple ethnic groups are likely suffering from a lack of control over their resources, inadequate representation within the industry, and the negative environmental consequences of oil extraction. Unless addressed through a more inclusive and equitable approach, this situation threatens to perpetuate resentment and potentially lead to further instability in the region.

Conclusion

In summary, the paper contends that the situation in the Niger Delta region is intricate, with the national resources intended for the region's benefit often being diverted to serve the interests of sectional, elitist, political, and economic factions, both internally and externally. This dynamic has profound and detrimental consequences for the region. Essentially, it illustrates a paradox of the "tragedy of the commons", where despite the political fragmentation and sectional interests within the Nigerian state, these elites remain united in exploiting the region's resources for their own gain. Noteworthy is the fact that the region holds an estimated 25% of the country's oil reserves, embodies the stark contradiction of the "paradox of plenty". Despite immense resource wealth, the Delta grapples with widespread poverty, environmental degradation, and social unrest. This complex phenomenon exposes how abundance can, ironically, hinder development. Instead of fostering prosperity, oil wealth in the Niger Delta has fueled poverty. Unemployment remains high, exceeding the national average, while basic necessities like clean water and reliable electricity remain elusive. This disparity arises from the unequal distribution of resource benefits. Oil revenues often circumvent local communities, enriching elites and multinational corporations while leaving little for local development and addressing community needs.

It is recommended that both the government and stakeholders demonstrate genuine commitment to addressing the challenges facing the region. A crucial step toward the development of the region lies in revisiting and reevaluating The Petroleum Industry Bill. Expedited consideration of this bill should prioritize the development of oil-producing communities, thereby benefiting the states in which they are situated. The full implementation of the bill would serve as a significant catalyst for the development of not only the Niger Delta region but also other regions aiming to harness their natural resources for progress.

Recommendation

This research highlights the importance of ensuring more inclusive political participation for the Niger Delta people within Nigeria. To effectively tackle the region's complex challenges, a comprehensive approach is necessary. The government should focus on resource control, transparency, and accountability in managing oil revenues. Additionally, investing in human capital, infrastructure, and environmental sustainability is vital for the region's advancement. Oil companies must prioritize corporate social responsibility, environmental protection, and active collaboration with local communities. Meanwhile, the Niger Delta communities should also work on strengthening their unity, diversifying their economies, and engaging in constructive dialogue with stakeholders. Collaboration among these groups is key to achieving a more equitable and sustainable future for the region. However, it is crucial to emphasize that while political participation and development plans are essential, the determination to implement these projects is equally important. The commitment to execute these developmental agendas cannot be overstated.

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's abundant oil reserves have positioned the nation as a major player in the global energy landscape. However, beneath the surface of this resource wealth lies a complex web of challenges that have garnered international attention. Through an analytical and descriptive approach, this research delves into the multifaceted dynamics of Nigeria's oil industry through the lens of the "tragedy of the commons". By examining historical, economic, environmental, and social dimensions, this study seeks to unveil the extent to which the "tragedy of the commons" phenomenon operates within Nigeria's oil complex. It explores the consequences of resource mismanagement, environmental degradation, and social inequalities that have emerged as a result. This research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the sustainability and governance issues facing one of the world's most oil-rich nations and to provide valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and stakeholders concerned with the future of Nigeria's oil industry.

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