

**MARITIME SECURITY
CHALLENGES AND OIL THEFT IN
THE NIGER DELTA: IMPLICATIONS
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta, a region of immense economic importance to Nigeria due to its vast oil reserves, faces critical challenges stemming from maritime insecurity and oil theft. This paper examines the complexities of maritime security threats and oil theft in the region and their profound implications for Nigeria's sustainable development. Oil theft, driven by socio-economic deprivation, weak governance, and entrenched corruption, has not only resulted in significant revenue losses but has also fueled environmental degradation and social instability. Piracy, illegal oil bunkering, and sabotage of oil infrastructure have contributed to escalating maritime insecurity, threatening national and regional economic interests. The environmental impact, including widespread pollution of waterways and farmlands, has undermined local livelihoods and hampered long-term sustainability. Moreover, the socio-political implications, such as the rise of militant groups and criminal syndicates, have deepened the region's instability, complicating efforts for peace and

development. The paper argues that addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that integrates security reforms, economic diversification, environmental restoration, and community engagement. Strengthened governance, anti-corruption measures, regional cooperation, and international partnerships are also critical to combating oil theft and securing maritime borders. Furthermore, inclusive development programs that create economic opportunities for the region's inhabitants, particularly its youth, are essential for breaking the cycle of poverty and criminality. By adopting a multi-pronged strategy, Nigeria can address the underlying causes of maritime insecurity and oil theft, paving the way for sustainable development and lasting stability in the Niger Delta.

Key Words: Maritime; Niger Delta; Oil Theft; Security; Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

The Niger-Delta region of Nigeria has incessantly experienced widespread insecurity, which can be attributed to several variables such as the region's heterogeneous natural resources, geographical vulnerabilities, and environmental and demographic conditions (Obiam, and Amadi, 2022). Even though international and regional stakeholders took some actions to counter the threats, the anticipated successes were hampered by a number of innate issues, including poorly coordinated international and regional initiatives, a lack of situational awareness and response capabilities, and a lack of strong legislative and judicial frameworks (Olofin et al, 2021). Nigeria's coastal regions' economic growth is mostly influenced by the degree of threats to its maritime domain from international maritime security (Lampsey, 2019). The Niger Delta's

coastal region is abundantly rich in gas and oil reserves, which play a major role in the economic growth of Nigeria as a whole as well as the states in the Niger Delta region. The region's widespread maritime security threats, particularly oil theft and sea piracy, has cost Nigeria approximately \$600 million in lost export revenue (Shafa, 2011). This has an impact on the well-being of coastal residents whose primary source of income is the maritime industry.

The Nigeria's Niger Delta region, a large and ecologically varied area, has long attracted attention from all over the world because of its substantial oil deposits. Since the late 1950s, when oil was discovered, the region has been vital to Nigeria's economy. The intricate past of the region has established the groundwork for the current problems it faces, paramount among them being the persistent problem of oil theft (Nwalozie, 2020). Thus, the area is beset by a plethora of issues, the most urgent of which are maritime security and oil theft. Investigating the complex interactions between oil theft in the Niger Delta and marine security, as well as the implications for sustainable national development, is the aim of this study.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Due to its intricate web of relationships that links the world's regions, oceans and seas have become increasingly significant for the success of the global economy in the twenty-first century (Soremi, 2019). Ninety percent of world trade by volume and seventy percent of trade by value, according to estimates from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), is carried out through sea (Moses, 2023). Around 93,000 ships and 1.25 million seafarers are in charge of a startling 6 billion tons of cargo in the worldwide maritime trade since the Second

World War (Olofin, et al, 2021). Thus, seaborne trade has doubled every ten years since then. In this century, however, the world community has recently witnessed the resurgence and growth of maritime insecurity and piracy, one of the oldest crimes against trade in history in many regions of the globe.

The Niger Delta region is both a critical hub for global oil supply and a focal point for various security challenges, particularly maritime insecurity and oil theft. These security issues have severe implications for sustainable development in Nigeria, a country that relies heavily on oil for economic stability. Scholars have explored the intersection of oil theft, maritime insecurity, and sustainable development, revealing a complex web of governance failures, socio-economic challenges, and environmental degradation. (Nwalozie, 2020). To this extent, the paper examined the factors for the growth of maritime insecurity and oil theft in the Niger Delta region and its implication towards achieving Sustainable Development in Nigeria. Also, the paper identified the challenges associated with curbing maritime threat and oil theft in the Niger Delta region towards achieving the Sustainable Development in Nigeria.

Thus, the paper interrogated the following questions: what are the causes of maritime insecurity and oil theft in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria? What is the impact of maritime security and oil theft on national development in Nigeria? What are the challenges associated with curbing maritime threat and oil theft in Nigeria?

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Maritime Security

According to Bueger (2015), the concept of maritime security, also known as 'marine safety' addresses the safety of ships and maritime installations with the primary

purpose of protecting maritime professionals and the marine environment. It implies the regulation of the construction of vessels and maritime installations, the regular control of their safety procedures as well as the education of maritime professionals in complying with regulations. The concept of maritime security has changed over time as a result of historical developments, judicial decisions, and international accords. It does not have vessel protection as its main goal; protecting ports and coastal regions as well as taking into account issues with economic stability, environmental preservation, and national security (Pandey and Prashanthi, 2023). The need of security has increased due to naval wars and piracy. Waterways and economic channels need to be protected, as nations have realised (Pandey and Prashanthi, 2023). Boris (2016) provided a definition of international maritime security by highlighting the threats that exist in the maritime environment. This is why issues like drug trafficking, environmental crimes, accidents and tragedies on the sea, and the proliferation of weapons are covered. Although the definition of international marine security given above is negative, it can be positively characterised by drawing a connection between it and the blue economy.

The Concept of Oil Theft

Oil theft is the unlawful extraction or theft of crude oil by individuals who may or may not be in possession of proper documentation from the relevant government agency to utilise or market the commodity. According to Francis, Lapin, and Rossiasco (2012), licenced oil companies that engage in unethical tactics and extract crude oil in excess of the officially authorised quantity are considered to be involved in oil theft. Oil theft includes, among other things, the unlawful bunkering of crude oil, the operation of illegal

refineries, and the lifting of crude oil by licenced companies by dubious means above the official government allotment (Lampthey, 2019).

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is the concept of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UN, 2022). This principle emphasizes the balance between economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. The most widely accepted definition comes from the Brundtland Report (1987), formally titled *Our Common Future*, which states: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). From the definition above, three elements of sustainable development viz: economic growth, environmental stewardship and social equity. Respectively, economic growth involves progress that improves quality of life, generates employment, and reduces poverty while ensuring responsible use of resources (UN Environment Programme, 2019) while environmental stewardship has to do with protecting natural ecosystems, reducing pollution, and managing natural resources responsibly to avoid long-term environmental degradation (UN, 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of specificity and directions, the paper utilises the sustainable development theory as a concave Lense through which the domain of oil theft and maritime security challenge can be viewed. The term "sustainable development" has been the most repeated in various books and

articles (Crowther, Seifi, and Moyeen, 2018). While the use was basically conceptual, it was Enders & Remig (2015) who made an attempt to theorise the reality of sustainable development. While building on the foundation of sustainability theory, they noted that sustainable development theory" refers to a set of principles and concepts that guide the efforts to achieve sustainable development. Thus, according to the Brantland's report entitled: "Our common future," sustainable development is defined as a development which will satisfy the needs of the present time without using future generations' abilities for fulfilling their needs (Zahedi, 2019). With this description, sustainable development is a process by which the people of a country satisfy their own needs and improve their lives' level without utilizing the resources that belong to the future generations and wasting future wealth to provide their immediate demands.

The theory is central to understanding the implications of maritime security challenges and oil theft on Nigeria's long-term development goals. In the case of the Niger Delta, sustainable development theory highlights three basic dimensions which are central to the subject matter of this paper. Firstly, sustainable development in the region depends on managing oil resources effectively and curbing illegal activities such as oil theft. As opined by Ikelegbe (2013), the continuous loss of oil revenue undermines national development and perpetuates reliance on a single economic resource thereby hindering diversification. This is the economic dimension. On the second note, oil spills and environmental degradation caused by oil theft and maritime insecurity threaten the ecological balance of the Niger Delta. UNEP (2011) argued that since the region's natural resources are being destroyed at an unsustainable rate, this goes against the idea of environmental sustainability. Future

generations' access to clean water, fertile land, and biodiversity—all essential for sustainable livelihoods—is hampered by the long-term environmental damage. On the third angle, sustainable development theory emphasises social inclusion and the reduction of inequality.

The persistent marginalisation of communities in the Niger Delta and the lack of socio-economic opportunities contribute to the rise of militancy and criminal activities such as oil theft. That is why Ibeanu (2006) posits that without addressing these social inequalities, sustainable development in the region will remain elusive. The discussion here therefore represents the whole gamut of interconnectedness of oil theft, maritime security and sustainable development in the Niger Delta.

MARITIME SECURITY ISSUES AND OIL THEFT IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION

Maritime security challenges and oil theft in the Niger Delta are deeply interconnected and have profound implications for Nigeria's economic sustainability. This issue of oil theft manifests in the transportation of stolen oil via the Niger Delta's extensive creeks and rivers to offshore tankers or hidden refineries. As (Onuoha, 2013) observed, this illegal trade requires control over maritime routes, leading to the involvement of criminal groups that operate on land and sea. These groups often turn to piracy, hijacking vessels, and smuggling operations to sustain their networks, creating a cycle of insecurity. This marks the established relationship between maritime insecurity and oil theft in the Niger Delta which automatically led to the formation of militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in the region (Obasi, 2011). Although MEND agreed to a government

amnesty in 2009, splinter groups and new militant Organisations have continued to operate in the region, engaging in oil theft and other criminal activities as a means to finance their operations (Nwachukwu, 2020). The rise of militancy is closely tied to the socio-economic conditions of the region, particularly the lack of development and marginalisation of local communities (Okeke and Idike, 2016). As a result, militants often portray themselves as defenders of the people, attacking oil installations and siphoning oil as a form of resistance against the Nigerian state and foreign oil companies.

Beyond the preponderance of militancy in the region, maritime security issue and oil theft have been intertwined by the interplay of weak governance and socio-economic instability. According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB, 2019), over 90% of global kidnappings at sea occur in the Gulf of Guinea, particularly off the coast of Nigeria. Pirates in the region often target oil tankers and merchant vessels, kidnapping crew members for ransom and sometimes hijacking ships to steal crude oil (Bakpo, 2023). This threat has grown in recent years, despite efforts by regional governments and international partners to enhance maritime security. As opined by Onuoha (2009), the increase in piracy and kidnapping in the Niger Delta can be attributed to several factors: The region's maritime security apparatus is under-resourced and lacks adequate technology and manpower to effectively monitor Nigeria's vast coastal areas. Secondly, the lack of viable economic alternatives in the region contributes to the rise of piracy as a means of livelihood. Lastly, Pirates often collaborate with militant groups operating in the region, which makes piracy not only a criminal issue but also a socio-political one (Obi, 2010).

Another dimension in which maritime security and oil theft in the region

have manifested is the area of illegal oil bunkering. This involves the process of siphoning crude oil from pipelines or stealing it from oil facilities for sale on the black market, is another major maritime security challenge in the Niger Delta (Akpomera, 2013). Estimates suggest that Nigeria loses between 100,000 and 400,000 barrels of oil per day to theft, resulting in billions of dollars in lost revenue annually (Nwachukwu, 2020). Adeb (2024) noted that in 2022, Nigeria lost \$700 million every month to oil theft while also revealing that Nigeria lost 619.7 million barrels, valued at N16.3 trillion, to crude oil theft from 2005 to 2021. This large-scale theft is often facilitated by a well-organized network of local and international actors. The high rates of unemployment and poverty in the Niger Delta drive many youths into criminal activities such as oil bunkering. For many, it is one of the few means of making a living in a region where legitimate economic opportunities are scarce (Watts, 2004). Secondly, Corruption within security forces and government agencies often allows oil thieves to operate with impunity. It is not uncommon for law enforcement officials to be bribed or even actively involved in illegal bunkering (Ikelegbe, 2013).

MARITIME SECURITY AND OIL THEFT: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

The intersection of maritime insecurity and oil theft in the Niger Delta poses a significant threat to Nigeria's sustainable development goals. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to economic growth, environmental sustainability, and peace, are deeply affected by the ongoing challenges in this region. To this extent, the implications for sustainable

development is discussed using three basic perspectives.

Economic Implication: Maritime insecurity undermines Nigeria's ability to harness its natural resources for national development. As Bakp (2023: 7) argued, "oil theft in Nigeria has affected the revenue of all layers of government". The number of barrels of crude oil has been affected due to hot-tapping, cold-tapping or when it's been transported. In March 2023, Nigeria incurred a substantial loss of 65.7 million barrels of crude oil, valued at \$83 per barrel, translating to a staggering revenue loss of N2.3 trillion because of oil theft. Also, Aro (2023) noted that Nigeria lost N16.25trn to crude oil theft in 11 years. The huge losses the country have experienced from this debacle has resulted in the huge economic distortions due to the long period of over reliant on oil without concrete plan for economic diversification. Thus, economic diversification, a key component of sustainable development, is also hindered by the continued reliance on oil exports and the instability in the oil-producing regions (Ikelegbe, 2013). That is why Otaha (2021) argued that since the involvement in oil exportation, there has been near collapse of the non-oil sector, which in the past contributed the bulk of Nigeria's export earnings.

This has rendered the propensity for sustainable development tenuous. Beyond dwindling revenue, another economic implication of oil theft and maritime insecurity is unemployment. Bloomberg (2013) argued that oil theft in Nigeria has led most of the International Oil Companies (IOCs) to exit from many of their onshore ventures. This development, even though some of these companies have commenced new operations off shore, has brought about massive job cut offs in the country (Daily

Trust,2014) thereby demonstrating the volatility of mineral dependent economy.

Environmental Implication: The environmental damage caused by oil theft and pipeline sabotage has a long-term impact on Nigeria's ability to achieve sustainable development. According to Akpomera (2013), The destruction of ecosystems in the Niger Delta affects agriculture, fishing, and the health of local communities. Oil spills not only destroy the natural environment but also increase the vulnerability of the region to climate change, further complicating efforts to promote environmental sustainability (UNEP, 2011). Nigerian oil theft operations have resulted in untold environmental contamination and degradation. Due to the criminals' careless handling of the oil pipelines, there are constant oil spills which pollute the land, air, and water aspects of the ecosystem (Bakpo, 2023). As Enakireu and Airen (2014) noted, the release of oil into an ecosystem can have a catastrophic effect and can be considered ecocide. Large areas of the mangrove forests have been destroyed. These forests are particularly vulnerable to oil since it is held in the soil and discharged yearly during inundations.

According to (Mahmoud, 2019), an estimated 10% of Nigerian mangrove ecosystems have been wiped out either by settlement or oil. The rainforest which previously occupied some 7,400km² of land has also disappeared as well. That is why Ikelegbe (2013) opined that the spilling of oil in densely populated areas have gone farther covering a large area, contaminating the soil and groundwater and harming crops and aquacultures. Thus, the consumption of dissolved oxygen by bacteria feeding on the spilled hydrocarbons has contributed to the death of fish in the aquatic environment. In agricultural communities, often a year's supply of food can be destroyed

instantaneously, because of the careless nature of oil operations in the Delta, the environment growing increasingly uninhabitable (Enakireu and Airen, 2014). Many residents of the impacted areas have lost essential human rights like health, access to food, clean water, and employment opportunities while also lamenting health problems, such as respiratory difficulties and skin sores thereby causing immense desire to migrate (Soremi, 2019).

Social Implication: Maritime insecurity and oil theft fuel social conflict and has exacerbated poverty and inequality in the Niger Delta region, consequently, Nigeria at large. According to Boris (2016), the region has experienced decades of neglect, underdevelopment, and marginalization, which have given rise to militant groups and violent insurgencies. These conflicts erode social cohesion, undermine governance, and hinder efforts to promote peace and security (Agbu, 2005). The outcome of oil theft that has been occasioned by maritime insecurity has resulted in a high level of social conflict. According to Obi (2010), proceeds from oil theft are often used by warlords in the country to acquire weapons and also to recruit and train fighters. These acquisitions and re-enforcement provide the criminal armed groups with resources they need to perpetuate their engagement in the illegal activity. In a bid to sustain receipt for oil rents, the Federal government often deploys military troops to the Niger Delta to rid the region of criminality. The militarization of the region has led to occasional face-off between the criminals and the military with reported casualties on both sides. Apart from the face-offs with the military, criminal groups also engage in hostilities among themselves over distribution of appropriated resources and alleged collaboration with security agencies (Ikelegbe, 2008). This continuous conflict

threatens the security architecture of the region. That is why the incessant surge in insecurity in the Niger Delta has affected the development of the region. They affected government social agencies and non-governmental Organisations. Young people of school age may choose to join oil theft gangs in order to acquire more wealth. This led to loss of man power as most of them end their live (Bakpo, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The maritime security challenges and oil theft in the Niger Delta have emerged as critical issues with profound implications for Nigeria's sustainable development. These challenges not only threaten the stability of the Niger Delta but also undermine the broader economic, environmental, and social foundations necessary for Nigeria's sustainable development. At the heart of the problem is oil theft, which has become deeply entrenched in the region, driven by a combination of socio-economic marginalization, unemployment, and a history of poor governance. The disconnect between the region's resource wealth and its underdevelopment has fueled resentment against the Nigerian government and multinational oil companies, creating an environment where criminality and violence thrive. The economic consequences of oil theft are severe, with Nigeria losing billions of dollars annually in oil revenue due to illegal activities. Also, the environmental degradation caused by oil spills and illegal refining operations presents long-term threats to sustainable development. The environmental damage, combined with the failure of oil companies and the government to take adequate responsibility for cleanup efforts, poses significant challenges to achieving environmental sustainability in the region.

Socially, the security challenges and oil theft have fostered a culture of violence, lawlessness, and corruption in the Niger Delta. Militancy and criminal activities have eroded social cohesion, deepening the distrust between local communities, the government, and oil companies. In conclusion, maritime security challenges and oil theft in the Niger Delta pose significant threats to Nigeria's sustainable development. The economic, environmental, and social impacts of these challenges are intertwined, creating a vicious cycle that undermines the country's long-term growth and stability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the far-reaching implications of maritime security challenges and oil theft in the Niger Delta for Nigeria's sustainable development, a multi-faceted and holistic approach is needed to address these issues. Below are recommendations to mitigate these challenges and promote sustainable development in the region:

Strengthen Governance and Combat Corruption: A significant driver of maritime insecurity and oil theft in the Niger Delta is weak governance and entrenched corruption. The Nigerian government must prioritize strengthening institutional capacity and accountability to effectively address these challenges.

Improve Environmental Management and Cleanup: Environmental degradation resulting from oil theft and illegal refining has devastated the Niger Delta's ecosystems, threatening both human and environmental health. Immediate steps are needed to restore the environment and prevent further degradation.

Promote a Non-Elitists Community Engagement and Development: Local communities in the Niger Delta have often been excluded from the benefits of oil production, leading to distrust and

resentment toward the government and oil companies. Ensuring that local communities are involved in decision-making and development efforts is critical for building trust and reducing insecurity.

Enforce Legal Frameworks and Strengthen Judicial Processes: Weak enforcement of laws and judicial processes has allowed maritime crime and oil theft to flourish in the Niger Delta. Strengthening Nigeria's legal frameworks is critical for deterring and prosecuting offenders.

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