

## Democracy: The Root Cause of Militancy and Underdevelopment in the Niger Delta

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<p><b>Corresponding Author</b> Kelvin Chibenumoso Opara</p> <p>Department of Theatre and Film Studies Rivers State University</p> <p><b>Article History</b></p> <p>Received: 06 / 01 / 2025</p> <p>Accepted: 20 / 01 / 2025</p> <p>Published: 22 / 01 / 2025</p>	<p><b>Abstract:</b> This paper critically investigates the complex interrelationships that exist between corruption, democratic governance, and underdevelopment in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Even after democracy was established in 1999, there are still ongoing socioeconomic problems and escalating levels of militancy in the Niger Delta region. This study investigates the relationship between democratic government, militancy, and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta, using a qualitative research methodology based in political economy theory. This theory highlights how, in post-colonial situations, political institutions, economic policies, and social outcomes interact. The study is important because it examines how democratic processes have worsened underdevelopment and encouraged militant activities. These mechanisms are beset by systemic corruption and inefficient policy execution. The article examines the political and economic mismanagement that Nigeria's democratic system entails, and its findings reveal the government's shortcomings in attending to the concerns and demands of the Niger Delta populations. It reveals the methods by which elected officials subvert development money and prolong poverty by abusing democratic structures for their own personal gain using a thorough case study approach.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Democracy, Governance in Nigeria, Corruption, Militancy, Niger Delta, Institutional Reforms</p>
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### Introduction

Southern Nigeria's Niger Delta region is well-known for its enormous oil reserves and substantial economic impact on the nation. The region has experienced persistent underdevelopment and an increase in militant activity despite its abundance of natural resources. This paradox poses important questions regarding the government's influence on the Niger Delta's socioeconomic environment. According to Smith (2010, p. 23), "since Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999, expectations were high that democratic governance would lead to improved transparency, accountability, and development". The reality, though, has been very different. According to Ogundiya (2010), "democratic processes have often been marred by systemic corruption and mismanagement, aggravating the socioeconomic problems in the region rather than fostering development" (p. 204).

Theoretically, democracy should advance socioeconomic advancement, equitable resource distribution, and sound governance. Agbibo (2012) claims that "democratic government in the Niger Delta, however, seems to have reinforced the current power structures and made it easier for public resources to be diverted for private benefit" (p. 67). According to Ikelegbe (2013), "this has not only hindered development but also fueled grievances among the local population, leading to the rise of militant groups that challenge the state's authority and demand a fairer share of the region's oil wealth" (p. 102).

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According to Ebegbulem (2011, p. 34), "the Niger Delta is underdeveloped, as seen by the region's poor infrastructure, deficient healthcare and educational systems, and high unemployment rates". The area is still among Nigeria's most destitute despite a number of government programs and significant revenues generated from oil. In the voice of Ibaba (2011, p. 71), "this discrepancy shows how seriously democratic administration has failed to meet the requirements of the Niger Delta's communities".

Furthermore, these difficulties have been made worse by the widespread corruption in Nigeria's democratic institutions. As put by Uzochukwu (2018, p. 45), "money allotted for development projects is frequently embezzled or mismanaged, resulting in incomplete or subpar projects that fall short of the needs of the populace". According to Watts (2004), this systemic corruption feeds the cycle of poverty and underdevelopment and erodes public confidence in democratic institutions (p. 12).

In the Niger Delta, there is a complicated and multidimensional relationship among democracy, corruption, and militancy. This paper aims to investigate how democratic governance has led to the rise of militancy and persistent underdevelopment in the region, instead of mitigating its issues. This study intends to shed light on the underlying reasons of the Niger Delta's misery and offer strategies for real reform and

sustainable development by analyzing the interactions between political processes, economic policies, and social outcomes.

### Theoretical Perspective

The Political Economy Theory is the foundation of this study. This theory focuses on the connections between political and economic institutions and how these connections affect societal outcomes. It focuses on the relationship between political forces and economic policies, and how the latter in turn affect social and economic conditions. This theory is especially useful for deciphering complicated problems in places like the Niger Delta, where political choices and commercial activities have a significant impact on developmental outputs.

The Political Economy Theory offers a strong foundation for understanding how democratic governance has fueled militancy and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta. Because of Nigeria's democratic institutions' propensity for political manipulation and economic mismanagement, the region's abundant oil resources have not translated into widespread economic progress.

Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) assert that "the Political Economy Theory suggests that the type of political institutions in a nation has a major impact on the degree of economic mismanagement and corruption" (p. 75). Smith believes that "electoral fraud and the influence of powerful elites frequently jeopardize Nigeria's democratic processes. By controlling economic resources and enriching themselves at the expense of public welfare, these elites take advantage of their political influence" (2010, p. 23). According to Ogundiya (2010), "this misallocation of resources exacerbates underdevelopment and fuels grievances among members of the local community" (p. 204).

The Niger Delta's problems can be thoroughly examined using Political Economy Theory as a lens. Through an analysis of the relationship between political institutions, economic policies, and socio-economic outcomes, the theory shows how the existing form of democratic governance has exacerbated underdevelopment and militancy. This theoretical framework emphasizes that in order to bring about long-lasting peace and prosperity in the area, institutional reforms that support accountability, transparency, and inclusive development are needed. In the words of Osaghae (2011, p. 89), "sustainable growth and stability in the Niger Delta can only be attained by tackling the underlying causes of corruption and mismanagement".

### Democratic Governance in Nigeria

When Nigeria moved from military to democratic government in 1999, expectations for political stability, transparency, and socioeconomic growth were very high. According to Diamond (2008), "there was anticipation that the shift from military to democratic government would result in notable transformations, such as the development of stronger institutions and the promotion of good governance practices" (p. 93). But, there have been several difficulties with Nigeria's democratic experience that have weakened these high hopes.

Ogundiya (2010), concurs with Smith that "the electoral processes in Nigeria have been characterized by significant irregularities, including vote rigging, violence, and the manipulation of results. These issues have led to widespread public disillusionment with the democratic system" (p. 204). The legitimacy of elected officials has been undermined and political

instability has been exacerbated by the failure to hold free and fair elections.

A major issue facing Nigeria's democratic government is corruption. Political and personal gain often take precedence over public service by elected officials, which results in the stealing of public resources and funds. Poverty is sustained and development efforts are thwarted by this systematic corruption, particularly in resource-rich regions such as the Niger Delta. "Effective governance is severely hampered by corruption, which has spread to all tiers of government, from local councils to the highest state positions", according to Uzochukwu (2018, p. 45).

The fragility of political institutions further undermines democratic governance in Nigeria. "The judiciary, legislature, and other regulatory bodies often lack the independence and ability to effectively implement laws and regulations", according to Suberu (2007, p. 11), who supports the aforementioned idea. Because of this institutional weakness, corruption is able to flourish and policies intended to redress socioeconomic disparities and promote development are unable to be implemented.

The Niger Delta is severely affected by these governance problems. Agbibo (2012), bemoaned that "the diversion of resources by corrupt officials had left the local population mostly unaffected despite the region's enormous oil wealth" (p. 67). As Ikelegbe would say, "the inability of democratic government to address the grievances of the Niger Delta people has stoked anger and given rise to militant groups vying for a larger portion of the region's resources" (2013, p. 102).

According to Ebegbulem (2011, p. 34), "the Niger Delta's high unemployment rates, inadequate infrastructure, and poor healthcare and educational systems are all consequences of ineffective democratic governance". Again, Osaghae (2011), agrees that these conditions have fostered militancy, as disenfranchised youths turn to armed groups in their pursuit of social justice and economic opportunities (p. 89).

Nigeria's governance problems call for extensive changes that prioritize bolstering democratic institutions, increasing accountability, and improving transparency. Establishing the rule of law and guaranteeing the judiciary's independence are essential steps in creating effective governance, according to Suberu (2007, p. 19). Furthermore, according to Diamond's (2008) claim, "empowering civil society and promoting citizen participation in governance processes can aid in holding elected officials accountable and cultivate a culture of transparency and accountability" (p. 107).

Nigeria's democratic government experience serves as a reminder of the intricate relationship that exists between political processes, corruption, and socioeconomic outcomes. Underdevelopment and insurgency have been exacerbated in the Niger Delta by democratic institutions' inability to attend to the demands and frustrations of the indigenous populace. Achieving sustainable development and regional peace requires bolstering democratic governance via institutional reforms and anti-corruption initiatives.

### Corruption and Its Implications

In Nigeria, corruption is a serious problem that is ingrained in the country's political and economic systems. An era of accountability and transparency was predicted to begin with the emergence of democracy in the year 1999. However, Smith (2010)

claims that “under democratic rule, corruption has continued and even grown, undermining development efforts and extending socioeconomic problems” (p. 23). The endemic corruption that permeates Nigeria's democratic institutions has dire consequences for the Niger Delta, intensifying militancy and undermining development there.

Corruption in the Niger Delta takes the form of improper handling and stealing of development-related funds. Agbibo supports the aforementioned idea by stating that, despite the region's significant oil revenues, unscrupulous politicians and government officials often siphon off these resources (2012, p. 67). This resource diversion has resulted in inadequate infrastructure, subpar healthcare, and little opportunities for education, leaving the local population in extreme poverty.

The Niger Delta's access to and quality of essential services are directly impacted by political corruption. According to Oguniye (2010, p. 204), money intended for public projects like schools, hospitals, and roads often ends up in private accounts, leaving behind unfinished or subpar infrastructure. Ibaba (2011) claims that the underdevelopment of the area and the locals' frustration—who see little progress in their living conditions despite the wealth generated from their land—are caused by this lack of essential services (p. 71).

The Niger Delta's socioeconomic disparities is further aggravated by corruption. According to Watts (2004, p. 12), the wealth generated from oil does not trickle down to the local communities, instead it benefits a small elite linked to the political system. The Niger Delta's militant activities are fueled by animosity and grievances stemming from the corruption and injustice of the ruling class. Osaghae (2011) provides support for the aforementioned assertion by stating that youths, in particular, are affected by high unemployment and limited opportunities, which leads many of them to turn to militancy as a method of both political expression and economic survival (p. 89).

The Niger Delta's widespread corruption and consequent underdevelopment have made it a haven for insurgency. Naturally, organizations like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) have emerged, claiming that they are fighting for the local population's rights and development (Courson 2009, p. 17). These militant groups assert that they utilize ammunition to carry out their militant operations in the region because the federal government and multinational oil companies take advantage of the region's resources without providing fair compensation or development opportunities for local communities.

Because corruption erodes public trust in democratic institutions, it threatens democracy's core underpinnings. According to Diamond (2008), “citizens lose faith in the democratic process and its capacity to bring about equitable development when they perceive political leaders as being corrupt and self-serving” (p. 107). As in the case of the Niger Delta region today, this disillusionment can result in political apathy or, on the other hand, radicalization and support for militant operations as an alternative means of seeking justice and development.

### **Underdevelopment in the Niger Delta**

Because of its enormous oil reserves, the Niger Delta is one of Nigeria's most resource-rich regions, but it is still largely undeveloped. According to Watts (2004), “the bulk of Nigeria's oil revenues, which are the backbone of the country's economy, come from this region” (p. 12). Nevertheless, the local population's

standard of living has not increased as a result of this wealth. Rather, according to Ebegbulem (2011, p. 34), “the revenues from oil extraction have primarily benefited the federal government and multinational oil companies, while the Niger Delta populations continue to live in poverty”.

The absence of basic infrastructure in the Niger Delta is among the most obvious signs of underdevelopment. Adequate road networks, dependable electricity, and clean water are lacking in many communities. Practically speaking, the researcher's astute observation indicates that some of the best structures and roads that we currently use were built during the military era. The lack of infrastructure in the area negatively impacts both the region's economy and standard of living. Ibaba (2011), for example, argues that “bad roads hinder trade and transportation by making it harder to reach marketplaces and essential services” (p. 71). Moreover, Agbibo (2012, p. 67) states that “the absence of electricity impairs both domestic life and commercial activities, worsening poverty and impeding economic progress”.

Two important industries that demonstrate the underdevelopment of the region are healthcare and education. The Niger Delta's population has poor health outcomes as a result of insufficient healthcare facilities and shortage of medical doctors. According to Ebegbulem (2011), “common health challenges include waterborne diseases and high rates of maternal and child mortality” (p. 36). In a similar vein, the educational system suffers from a shortage of qualified teachers, dilapidated school buildings, and inadequate funding. As Ikelegbe (2013) would add, “these difficulties lead to low rates of literacy and low levels of educational achievement, which further solidifies the poverty cycle” (p. 105).

Another important aspect of the Niger Delta's underdevelopment is environmental degradation. The local environment has been severely damaged by oil company operations such as gas flaring, oil spills, and other damaging activities. According to Osaghae (2011, p. 89), “these operations have negatively impacted fisheries, which are essential sources of income for many communities, and contaminated water bodies and arable land”. According to Courson (2009), “the state of the environment is deteriorating, which has an impact not only on agriculture and health but also on local grievances against the government and oil firms” (p. 17).

High rates of unemployment are a major problem in the Niger Delta, particularly among the youths. Even though the area contributes to the national economy, there are still very few employment opportunities in the area. According to Watts (2004), “a contributing factor in this economic marginalization is the government's and the oil companies' lack of funding for local job creation and skills development programs” (p. 15). According to Osaghae (2011, p. 91), “the lack of employment opportunities pushes many young people to engage in illegal activities, such as joining militant groups that offer cash incentives and a sense of purpose”.

### **Democratic Processes and Corruption**

A fundamental component of democracy is the integrity of election processes. But in Nigeria, the democratic process has been seriously compromised by electoral corruption. According to Oguniye (2010), “fraud, violence, and manipulation plague Nigerian elections frequently, undermining public trust in democratic institutions” (p. 204). Moreover, Smith (2010), asserts

that “election manipulations guarantees that political power is concentrated in the hands of a few elites who often have more interest in furthering their own interests than in the good of the public” (p. 23).

Clientelism and patronage systems are two important ways that corruption infiltrates Nigeria's political processes. According to Uzochukwu (2018), “political leaders create a culture in which holding public office is perceived as a means of personal enrichment rather than public service by using state resources to buy loyalty and win votes” (p. 45). In the words of Suberu (2007), this patronage system weakens democratic institutions by promoting loyalty to personal interests rather than to democratic principles and policies” (p. 95).

In Nigeria, political parties often serve as vehicles for corrupt practices. Usually, they are controlled by powerful elites who make use of their positions to amass wealth and power. As Ikelegbe (2013) puts it, “this control over political parties stifles internal democracy and impedes the creation of policies that may address problems like militancy and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta” (p. 102). Furthermore, according to Ogunidiya (2010), “the existence of godfatherism and the absence of genuine political competition ensure that political officeholders continue to answer to their benefactors rather than the electorate” (p. 206).

The effects of corruption on democratic processes on development and governance are significant. According to Watts (2004), elected officials have little motivation to enact policies that benefit the broader populace when electoral outcomes are determined by corruption rather than the will of the people (p. 50). This situation is especially evident in the Niger Delta, where poverty and underdevelopment have been sustained by poor handling of oil revenues and disregard for development initiatives.

Nigerian civil society organizations have been actively promoting accountability and transparency in spite of these challenges. Agbiboa (2012), states that “these organizations push for electoral reforms, expose corrupt practices, and put pressure on the government to uphold democratic values” (p. 68). However, the widespread corruption and opposition from powerful political interests often hinder their work.

Far-reaching effects on stability, development, and governance are caused by corruption in Nigeria's democratic processes, especially in the Niger Delta. Patronage systems, electoral fraud, and judicial corruption undermine the efficacy of democratic institutions and prolong the cycle of militancy and underdevelopment. To tackle these problems, extensive electoral reforms, judicial independence reinforcement, and strong backing for civil society campaigns that encourage accountability and transparency are all necessary.

### **Economic Mismanagement**

The misallocation of resources in Nigeria is a clear indication of economic mismanagement, especially with regard to the Niger Delta. According to Watts (2004), “the region's rich gas and oil reserves contribute significantly to the nation's income” (p. 50). Nevertheless, these funds are often misdirected and do not end in the hands of the communities who are most affected by oil extraction operations. A small group of elites benefits from the diversion of much of the funds through corrupt means, which keeps such funds from being used for sustainable development projects. The Niger Delta's poverty and underdevelopment are made worse by this misallocation.

Financial leakages and inefficiencies in the budget are two important aspects of Nigeria's economic mismanagement. Poor planning and implementation are common problems with government money budgeted for Niger Delta development projects. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption frequently prevent funds designated for infrastructure, healthcare, and education from reaching their intended goals. Agbiboa (2012), asserts that “these financial leakages lead to inadequate or poor-quality projects, depriving the local populace of essential necessities” (p. 67).

According to Smith (2010), “a basic problem in economic mismanagement is the absence of accountability and transparency in revenue management” (p. 27). Corruption can flourish in an atmosphere where oil revenues and government spending are opaque. The lack of clear mechanisms to monitor revenue flows and expenses implies that money intended for development is easily embezzled by corrupt authorities. In addition to undermining public confidence in the government, this lack of accountability exacerbates the region's persistent underdevelopment.

Nigeria's economic policies have frequently fallen short of meeting the specific needs of the Niger Delta. Other sectors that are essential to the economy of the nation, like agriculture and fisheries, coal, gold, etc, have been overlooked in favor of oil extraction. According to Watts (2004), “this narrow concentration on the economy not only leaves the region vulnerable to fluctuations in oil prices, but it also fails to consider the broader economic development that is required to stabilize and diversify the local economy” (p. 52). A large number of Niger Delta people lack a sustainable source of income due to the neglect of other economic activities, which exacerbates social unrest and poverty.

Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region, exhibits a high degree of economic mismanagement due to misallocation of resources, inefficiencies in the budgetary process, poor policy execution, and a dearth of accountability and transparency. The region's underdevelopment and militancy have been sustained by these problems, which are made worse by the disregard for wider economic development and the harmful influence of multinational oil companies. Comprehensive economic reforms, transparent governance practices, and a dedication to inclusive and sustainable development are necessary to solve these issues.

### **Conclusion**

The Niger Delta's complex dynamics of democracy, corruption, and underdevelopment highlight the delicate relationship between socioeconomic realities and political governance. Nigeria's practical implementation of democracy has been plagued by notable setbacks, despite its theoretical promises of accountability, inclusivity, and equitable resource distribution. These shortcomings are especially noticeable in the Niger Delta, where the local populace's living conditions have not improved or significant progress has resulted from the democratic processes.

One of the greatest obstacles to Nigeria's democracy continuing to function effectively is corruption. The misallocation of resources that could have been used for development initiatives in the Niger Delta is the result of public funds being diverted, patronage structures in place, and a lack of accountability. Economic mismanagement, which is characterized by money leakages and inefficient budgeting, has made the region's underdevelopment even worse, leaving essential services

Unsatisfactorily supplied and important infrastructure projects incomplete.

In the Niger Delta, underdevelopment and militancy are intertwined, creating a vicious cycle. According to Agbiboa (2012, p. 68), the local populace becomes more militant due to the region's underdevelopment and economic hardship, which further exacerbates underdevelopment by disrupting economic activities and discouraging investment. Ending this cycle calls for an all-encompassing strategy that tackles the underlying structural problems that underpin the region's ongoing underdevelopment as well as the immediate causes of militancy.

Comprehensive reforms are necessary to address the issues of democracy, corruption, and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta. These reforms should focus on improving electoral integrity, enhancing transparency and accountability, and ensuring effective policy implementation. According to Uzochukwu (2018, p. 45), fostering good governance and bolstering democratic institutions are crucial first steps in establishing an atmosphere that fosters peace and sustainable development.

The international community and civil society organizations are vital to the Niger Delta's efforts to advance accountability, transparency, and sustainable development. Through funding, technical aid, and advocacy, these organizations can offer crucial support in holding the government and oil companies accountable for their actions. These organizations can play a major role in boosting local capacities and promoting greater cooperation in order to address the difficulties facing the region.

In conclusion, systemic corruption and the shortcomings of democratic government are at the core of the problems that the Niger Delta is facing. These problems have sustained a vicious cycle of underdevelopment and militancy, resulting in a complicated socioeconomic dilemma that calls for a variety of approaches to be solved. By addressing the structural causes of corruption and ensuring the effective implementation of policies, it is possible to create a more just and equitable society. The active engagement of civil society and the international community will be crucial in supporting these efforts and ensuring that the promises of democracy translate into real improvements in the lives of the Niger Delta's residents.

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