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OIL THEFT AND THE POLITICS OF RESOURCE CONTROL IN THE NIGER DELTA, 1956-2022

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Abstract: *The discovery of crude oil in commercial quantity in Oloibiri, Bayelsa State in 1956 radically transformed Nigeria's economy and political landscape. However, it also generated fierce contestations over ownership, access, and control of oil wealth. The Niger Delta, as the oil-bearing region, became the epicenter of agitation, violence, and criminality, particularly oil theft and pipeline vandalization. Oil theft has grown into a multi-billion-dollar illicit industry involving local youths, militant groups, political elites, and international networks. This paper interrogates the historical and political dynamics of oil theft and resource control in the Niger Delta, highlighting the interplay between federal dominance, environmental degradation, and regional resistance. The study employs dependency theory as its framework, analyzing how state structures and global oil markets sustain exploitation. Relying on primary and secondary sources, the work argues that oil theft is both a crime and a political statement, reflecting the unresolved tensions in Nigeria's federalism. It concludes that sustainable resolution lies in true resource federalism, community empowerment, and environmental justice.*

Introduction

The Niger Delta occupies a unique place in Nigeria's history as the heart of the nation's petroleum economy. Since the 1970s oil boom, crude oil has accounted for over 80% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and nearly 70% of

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government revenue. Yet, the region remains paradoxically impoverished, with high unemployment, environmental degradation, and widespread insecurity. The contradiction between immense wealth and deep poverty has fueled agitation for autonomy, environmental justice, and resource control. Oil theft, popularly called *bunkering*, has transformed from artisanal refining into a multibillion-dollar transnational enterprise. It involves actors ranging from unemployed youths to political elites and international cartels. This paper explores the historical evolution of oil theft in the Niger Delta, situating it within the broader politics of resource control and the contested federalism of the Nigerian state.

The discovery of oil in commercial quantities at Oloibiri in Bayelsa State in 1956 marked a turning point in Nigeria's political economy. By 1971, Nigeria had joined OPEC and established the Nigerian National Oil Corporation, later merged into the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). The oil boom of the mid-1970s shifted national revenue dependence from agriculture to crude oil exports, which soon accounted for 96% of export earnings. However, successive military regimes centralized oil revenues, reducing the derivation principle from 50% in the 1960s to as low as 1.5% by 1992. This shift weakened the fiscal autonomy of oil-producing states, fueling resentment in the Niger Delta (Nwankwo et al., 2021). The seeds of militancy and oil theft were planted in this period of federal dominance over local resources.

By the late 1980s and 1990s, Niger Delta communities began articulating demands for environmental justice and control of oil wealth. The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, emerged in 1990 to challenge Shell's exploitation and the Nigerian state's neglect. The 1990 Ogoni Bill of Rights demanded political autonomy and environmental remediation, but the state responded with repression, culminating in Saro-Wiwa's execution in 1995. This event internationalized the Niger Delta struggle and galvanized new movements calling for resource control. In December 1998, the Kaiama Declaration by the Ijaw Youth Council insisted that oil belonged to host communities, not the federal government. These historical events linked oil theft to political agitation, with militants later justifying bunkering as economic reparation for decades of neglect (Onah et al., 2022).

Oil theft in the Niger Delta developed alongside political agitation. In the 1980s, it was limited to artisanal refining and siphoning crude for local use. By the 2000s, however, oil theft became industrialized, involving tapping pipelines, loading barges, and transporting stolen crude through international shipping networks. According to NEITI, Nigeria lost about 400,000 barrels per day to theft in 2003, a figure that

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declined after amnesty programs but rose again in the 2010s (Nwozor et al., 2023). The sophistication of bunkering reflects both local complicity and transnational involvement, as foreign vessels often facilitate illegal exports. Communities, frustrated by pollution and poverty, sometimes shield oil thieves, seeing them as redistributors of wealth denied by the state (Iniemiesi & Yoroki, 2024).

The rise of militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in 2006 marked a violent turn in the struggle for resource control. These groups attacked oil installations, kidnapped expatriates, and disrupted production, reducing Nigeria's output by nearly 30% at the peak of the crisis. Oil theft became a key funding source for militancy, with stolen crude sold to finance arms purchases. Amnesty programs introduced in 2009 temporarily reduced attacks and theft, but the underlying grievances remained unresolved (Obigbor, 2025). By the 2010s, new groups like the Niger Delta Avengers revived pipeline bombings and bunkering, underscoring the cyclical nature of the oil theft-resistance nexus.

Oil theft worsens the already fragile ecology of the Niger Delta. Illegal refining often involves crude methods that spill oil into rivers and farmlands, creating toxic waste that devastates fishing and farming. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimated in 2011 that it would take 30 years to clean up Ogoniland, a task still incomplete. Gas flaring, pipeline vandalization, and crude spills have left many communities with polluted water and infertile soil. Nwozor et al. (2023) argue that oil theft directly undermines human security by destroying livelihoods, worsening poverty, and fueling armed conflict. Environmental injustice thus deepens the appeal of oil theft as both survival and protest in the region.

The international dimension of oil theft underscores its complexity. Studies indicate that stolen Nigerian crude often ends up in refineries across West Africa and Asia, facilitated by international smuggling cartels (Chinwe-Sambe-Super et al., 2022). The sophistication of maritime transport and corruption within state security agencies makes interdiction difficult. Foreign demand sustains the illicit trade, with reports in 2019 suggesting that over $3 billion worth of stolen crude left Nigeria annually. This globalized crime economy weakens Nigeria's sovereignty, as local grievances intersect with international profiteering. The inability of the Nigerian Navy and security forces to fully police territorial waters reflects state weakness and complicity in sustaining oil theft (Akinola, 2025).

The demand for resource control remains the ideological backdrop to oil theft. The 1999 Constitution introduced a 13% derivation principle, but Niger Delta elites argue this remains insufficient compared to the 50% retained during the First Republic. Calls for

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restructuring Nigeria's federal system to allow greater fiscal autonomy have grown louder, with the Niger Delta as the vanguard of this movement. However, resource control debates are often co-opted by political elites who simultaneously benefit from oil theft networks (Nwankwo et al., 2021). Thus, the struggle oscillates between genuine community demands and elite manipulation. Oil theft becomes both a criminal economy and a political statement against perceived injustice in revenue allocation. The Nigerian state has historically responded to oil theft with militarization rather than structural reforms. Joint Task Forces (JTFs) and security operations have been deployed since the 1990s, yet theft persists. Surveillance contracts awarded to private companies, such as the 2022 contract to Tantita Security Services, highlight attempts at outsourcing security. Nonetheless, corruption within security forces undermines these efforts, as some personnel are accused of collusion with oil thieves (Opuola-Charles, 2021). Infrastructure protection, while necessary, cannot address the deeper issues of exclusion, poverty, and environmental injustice. Without tackling these root causes, oil theft remains resilient despite heavy militarization.

The history of oil theft and the politics of resource control in the Niger Delta reflects the contradictions of Nigeria's federalism. From the discovery of oil in 1956 to the rise of militancy and bunkering in the 2000s, the region has endured cycles of exploitation, resistance, and repression. Oil theft is not merely an economic crime but a political expression of discontent, sustained by both local grievances and global networks. Its persistence reveals the failure of centralized resource governance, environmental neglect, and elite complicity. As Omokaro (2024) notes, sustainable peace requires integrating environmental justice with inclusive governance structures. A durable solution lies in restructuring revenue allocation, empowering host communities, and building institutions that prioritize equity over centralization. Only then can Nigeria resolve the paradox of wealth and want in the Niger Delta.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Dependency Theory, which emphasizes the structural relationship between dominant centers and marginalized peripheries in the global political economy. Andre Gunder Frank's classical formulation argued that the development of metropolitan powers is sustained by the systematic underdevelopment of satellite regions. In the Nigerian context, the Niger Delta operates as a peripheral economy, where natural resources are extracted for the enrichment of the federal center and global markets, while local communities are left impoverished and ecologically devastated (Curley, 2021). Oil dependency has created an asymmetric relationship in which Abuja, the seat of federal power, thrives on rents from petroleum

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exports while the Niger Delta bears the costs of pollution and violence. As Watts (2021) observes, resource peripheries are socially produced spaces that feed into global oil assemblages, reinforcing dependency structures. This framework highlights how oil wealth entrenches inequality and how resistance movements and illicit economies emerge as counter-responses to dependency.

Oil theft in the Niger Delta fits squarely into the logic of dependency by simultaneously exposing exploitation and resistance. While the illicit siphoning of crude oil undermines state revenue, it also represents a way for marginalized groups to reclaim access to resources denied them through the centralist distribution system. Onogwu and Lawal (2024) note that crude theft not only reduces government revenue but also exposes the corruption that sustains national dependency. Local actors who engage in bunkering often connect with international smuggling cartels, inserting themselves into global oil markets outside the control of the Nigerian state (Watts, 2021). This reflects what Grønland (2025) terms "resource dependence and corruption," where multinational and domestic elites collude to perpetuate cycles of exploitation. Thus, dependency theory helps explain why oil theft is not merely a criminal act but a symptom of deeper structural inequalities.

Moreover, the oil theft issue further explains the depth of dependency in Nigeria. Nwozor et al. (2023) state that the failure of the Nigerian state to manage the oil theft problem is directly related to environmental insecurity, political corruption, and incentives in the global markets. The underdevelopment of the Niger Delta is not accidental but a structural event that ties to a rentier which then centralizes revenues and redistributes them in ways that help strengthen elite control. Nygren (2025) claims that oil extractivism generates: a layered politics, in which dependency is strengthened at various levels by dispossession and ecological destruction. This is reminiscent of Onah et al. (2022), who note that the politics of oil in Nigeria is simply who possesses what, when, and how within a very contentious administrative system. In that sense, oil theft is indicative of both a failure in governance and the persistence of dependency logics in governing resource relations.

And, lastly, the framework exposes the doublesidedness of the Nigerian political economy of oil theft: as a result of dependency and a response to it, simultaneously. On the one hand, the dirty business continues to fuel addiction since stolen crude continues to be sold back into international markets making outsiders richer than the local societies. On the other hand, it is a localized fix to the issue of avoiding centralized forms, which is reminiscent of Frank saying that peripheries can create parallel systems as part of dependency. The

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dependency approach hence enables this research to frame oil theft within the larger context of struggles over control of resources and structural change. It shows that the dilemma of the Niger Delta is not merely a matter of crime or poor governance but rather of institutionalized forms of exploitation related to global capitalism. Thus, the solution to oil theft is to reconsider the federal structure of the country, the way Nigeria distributes its revenues, and its membership in the oil assemblage.

Historical Background of Oil and Resource Politics in Nigeria

The discovery of oil in commercial quantity at Oloibiri in present-day Bayelsa State in 1956 marked a turning point in Nigeria's economic and political trajectory. Before oil, Nigeria's economy was primarily agrarian, with cocoa, groundnut, and palm oil forming the bulk of export revenue (Heaton, 2024). However, the oil boom of the 1970s shifted the country's dependence almost entirely to petroleum. By 1974, petroleum accounted for 82% of government revenues and more than 90% of export earnings (Usman, 2022). Nigeria joined the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1971, aligning its production quotas with global oil markets. The rapid oil wealth transformed Nigeria into a rentier state, but it also deepened fiscal centralization, reducing the autonomy of the federating units (Ota et al., 2022). This new economic order laid the foundation for recurring conflicts over resource ownership and distribution in the Niger Delta.

During the First Republic (1960–1966), resource allocation in Nigeria was based on the Derivation Principle, which granted producing regions 50% of the revenue from their resources (Onah et al., 2022). However, successive military governments steadily eroded this principle. Under General Yakubu Gowon in 1969, the Petroleum Decree vested ownership of all petroleum resources in the federal government (Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2022). By 1981, the derivation share for oil-producing states was slashed to 1.5%, a drastic reduction from the 50% enjoyed in the early 1960s (Ota et al., 2022). This fiscal shift created feelings of exclusion among Niger Delta communities, who perceived the central government as expropriating their wealth while leaving them with environmental devastation. Gas flaring, which began in the 1960s, rose to over 2 billion standard cubic feet per day by the 1990s, making Nigeria one of the world's highest gas-flaring nations (Omokaro, 2024). These policies entrenched the grievances that fueled resource-control agitations.

This would be augmented in the 1990s, especially due to the establishment of the Movement of the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) led by Ken Saro-Wiwa. The environmental protection deficit and the promotion of human rights deficit in the land occupied by the Ogoniland were

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shown by the campaign against Shell Petroleum Development Company organized by MOSOP (Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2022). In 1995, the deaths of Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists at the hands of the General Sani Abacha regime attracted international criticism and increased demands for self-determination in the Niger Delta. The environmental justice, human rights, and resource ownership of the time found an outlet in the oil politics of the time (Iwuoha, 2021). All these movements with the military response by the government like the implementation of the Joint Task Forces were a reminder that oil had in effect become not only an economic resource but also a repressive tool. This was the decade that made the Niger Delta the epicenter of the battle between federalism and localism in Nigeria.

The 2000s brought about a new wave of militancy and oil bunkering that re-established the resource politics of Nigeria. They formed the Movement of the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and attacked the oil rigs and kidnapped foreign workers, not to mention spilling the crude oil on land (Umar et al., 2021). Due to militant activity, the oil production of Nigeria fell to as low as 1.6 million barrels a day in 2006-2009 (Heaton, 2024). Other responses by the federal government were the 2009 Amnesty Programme which provided ex-militants with monthly stipends and vocational training in exchange for disarmament. However, the lawless oil economy never collapsed, and Nigeria reportedly lost approximately 14 billion per year to oil theft in the 2010s (Edo et al., 2024). Distribution of revenue, environmental degradation, and political marginalization are some questions whose answers are yet to be given and which have made oil and resource politics one of the main concerns of the federal complexities in the 21st century in Nigeria.

Oil Theft in the Niger Delta

Oil theft in the Niger Delta has evolved into one of the most entrenched challenges in Nigeria's postcolonial economy. The phenomenon operates at three levels: artisanal refining, illegal bunkering, and large-scale international theft. Artisanal refining emerged in the late 1980s, when unemployed youths began tapping pipelines to extract crude, refining it crudely into diesel and kerosene for local consumption (Omozue, 2021). Illegal bunkering gained momentum during the 1990s, coinciding with political instability and the state's weakened regulatory capacity (Chika & Ndidi, 2022). The most sophisticated dimension involves international cartels that export stolen crude through marine vessels, often aided by foreign collaborators and corrupt Nigerian elites (Akpomera, 2024). According to the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI), Nigeria lost an estimated 200,000 barrels of crude per day to theft in 2019, translating to billions of dollars in annual

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revenue loss. This combination of local and international operations underscores the scale and complexity of the problem.

The economic implications of oil theft are staggering. Amadi-Harry and Ezeh (2022) estimate that Nigeria loses as much as 600,000 barrels per day to oil thieves in peak years, a figure that surpasses the daily output of some OPEC member states. Between 2009 and 2020, cumulative losses were valued at over $45 billion, straining Nigeria's ability to finance infrastructure, education, and health (Opuola-Charles, 2023). The illicit industry is often sustained through the connivance of state officials, security operatives, and oil company workers who provide intelligence and logistical support (Nwozor et al., 2023). Akinola (2025) notes that oil theft has evolved from small-scale bunkering into an organized crime network, with transnational links and sophisticated supply chains. This entrenched collaboration makes enforcement difficult, as attempts to curb theft are often undermined from within. The state's reliance on oil revenue means that theft directly undermines fiscal stability and national security.

Beyond economic loss, oil theft has devastating social and environmental consequences. Artisanal refining leads to oil spills and widespread deforestation of mangrove ecosystems, destroying fisheries and farmland on which local communities depend (Ejiroghene, 2024). According to Omokaro (2024), Nigeria flares approximately 2 billion standard cubic feet of gas daily, much of it linked to pipeline tampering and illegal refining. These activities have contaminated groundwater and reduced biodiversity in one of the world's richest wetlands. Iniemiesi and Yoroki (2024) further observe that oil bunkering escalates insecurity by financing militant groups, who use the proceeds to procure weapons and challenge state authority. This creates a cycle where environmental degradation fuels poverty, which in turn sustains oil theft as a livelihood strategy. Thus, oil theft cannot be understood only as an economic crime but also as a driver of ecological and human insecurity.

Historically, oil theft has also been tied to perceptions of injustice and redistribution in the Niger Delta. Many youths view bunkering and refining not as criminal activity but as compensation for decades of neglect and exploitation by the federal state (Chinwe-Sambe & Nte, 2022). The Amnesty Programme of 2009 temporarily reduced militant violence, but artisanal refining and theft persisted because the root issues of environmental degradation and revenue allocation were unresolved (Omozue, 2021). International dimensions further complicate the problem, as stolen crude is laundered through global markets, implicating actors beyond Nigeria's borders (Akpomera, 2024). This aligns with Nwozor et al. (2023), who argue that state weakness and global demand for

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cheap crude create fertile ground for theft to thrive. Ultimately, oil theft in the Niger Delta reflects the intersection of local grievances, state incapacity, and global complicity. Addressing it requires not only security crackdowns but structural reforms in governance and equitable resource distribution.

Politics of Resource Control

One of the most controversial issues in the postcolonial history of Nigeria is the politics of resource control. Since the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956, petroleum revenues have been pushing agriculture out, resulting in acute struggles over ownership and distribution issues. When the military governments took over power, oil was already the largest source of revenue in Nigeria and the military governments consolidated control over oil. The history reveals that the principle of derivation that provided 50 percent of the resource earnings in the 1960s came down to as low as 1.5 percent through successive military decrees, effectively undermining the fiscal autonomy in the most oil-producing regions. This is where anger and violence were centered in the Niger Delta (Bello et al., 2023).

It was a turning point in the 1990s as organized youth and minority groups were starting to formulate demands in much more acute terms. The most striking was the Kaiama Declaration of 1998, by the Ijaw Youth Council, which demanded self-determination and resource control as the right of oil-bearing people. In the literature, this is generally referred to as a turning point in the resource control battle in Nigeria because the discussion was conducted within the framework of economic justice and ethnic minority rights (Nnabuihe et al., 2025). With the restoration of democracy in Nigeria in 1999, the new constitution established the 13 percent derivation rule of the oil-producing states. However, this difference between the previous 50 percent quota and the reduced quota contributed to unrest, which led to militancy and general oil theft as two simultaneous forms of resistance (Ata-Agboni et al., 2023).

The federal government, rather than treating resource control as a matter of equity, often approached it as a **security crisis.** In the early 2000s, troops under the Joint Task Force (JTF) were deployed across the Niger Delta, leading to violent confrontations and mass displacements. Scholars have shown that these military strategies alienated communities further and entrenched hostilities, making militancy more appealing to marginalized youth (Olumba, 2024). To de-escalate the crisis, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua launched the 2009 Amnesty Programme, which reduced attacks on oil installations in the short term. Yet, this initiative is criticized for failing to address structural injustices, as it primarily provided temporary incentives while leaving the political

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economy of exclusion intact (Igwe & Amadi, 2021).

Regional elites also played a paradoxical role in the politics of resource control. On one hand, they positioned themselves as defenders of Niger Delta interests, demanding reforms in federal revenue allocation. On the other hand, evidence shows that many politicians and contractors simultaneously profited from oil theft networks and patronage systems, turning the struggle into a lucrative political economy (Cohen, 2024). This duality complicates the narrative of resistance, blurring the line between legitimate agitation and elite manipulation. Analysts argue that Nigeria's post-1999 elite bargain was designed to maintain national stability at the federal level, often sacrificing the demands of minority oil communities in the process (Usman, 2022). Thus, the politics of resource control has remained unresolved, keeping the Niger Delta at the epicenter of Nigeria's instability.

Conclusion

Oil theft and the politics of resource control in the Niger Delta are deeply intertwined. Oil theft is not merely an economic crime but a manifestation of unresolved structural inequalities in Nigeria's federal system. The centralization of oil wealth, environmental devastation, and neglect of host communities create conditions that sustain theft and militancy. While military crackdowns and surveillance technologies may reduce theft temporarily, they do not resolve the fundamental grievances. A sustainable solution requires genuine federal restructuring that restores fiscal autonomy, empowers oil-producing communities, and ensures environmental remediation. Only then can the Niger Delta be stabilized and Nigeria's oil wealth harnessed for collective development rather than conflict and criminality.

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