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Oil, Militancy, and National Security: The Nexus in the Niger Delta

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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta has remained a central arena of conflict in Nigeria's national security architecture due to its vast oil wealth and persistent patterns of militancy. This study examines the nexus between oil exploitation, militancy, and national security in the Niger Delta, situating the analysis within the framework of the resource curse theory. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from academic literature, policy documents, government reports, and credible media sources. Data were systematically collected and subjected to documentary analysis, employing qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, narratives, and underlying dynamics linking oil production to militant activities and security challenges. The findings reveal that oil wealth, rather than fostering development, has intensified socio-economic marginalization, environmental degradation, elite capture, and weak governance, collectively fueling grievances and militant mobilization in the region. Militancy, expressed through pipeline vandalism, oil theft, kidnappings, and armed confrontations, poses significant threats to national security by undermining economic stability, reducing state revenue, militarizing the region, and eroding public trust in state institutions. The study concludes that the persistence of insecurity in the Niger Delta reflects a broader manifestation of the resource curse, where governance failures and inequitable resource management transform natural wealth into a source of conflict. It recommends inclusive governance reforms, environmental remediation, equitable resource distribution, and sustainable development strategies as critical pathways to breaking the cycle of oil militancy insecurity in the Niger Delta. The study contributes to existing scholarship by deepening the understanding of how resource-driven conflicts intersect with national security in resource-rich developing states.

KEYWORDS

Militancy, security, exploration, poverty, marginalisation, degradation.

1. Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria represents one of the most profound paradoxes of resource wealth and socio-economic insecurity in the Global South. Since the discovery of oil in commercial quantities in the 1950s, the Delta has become the epicenter of Nigeria's petroleum economy, contributing an estimated 80% of government revenue, 95% of export earnings, and roughly 90% of foreign exchange receipts (Willies, 2024; Owolabi & Okwechime, 2007). Despite this economic centrality,



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the region remains chronically underdeveloped, environmentally degraded, and socially unstable, creating conditions that have given rise to widespread militancy (Willies, 2024; Ezirim, 2018).

Although oil wealth significantly boosts national income, the rents from petroleum have been unevenly distributed, marginalizing local communities and entrenching socio-economic injustices (Ezirim, 2018). Longstanding environmental degradation caused by oil spills, gas flaring, and neglect of infrastructural development has deepened frustration among indigenous populations who see little benefit from resource extraction on their lands (Willies, 2024). This structural deprivation, in combination with poverty and youth unemployment, forms the backdrop against which militant actions have emerged (Oluwatoyin, 2010, as cited in Ezirim, 2018).

Militancy in the Niger Delta is often traced to the failure of peaceful protest and political negotiation to secure control over resources and equitable distribution of oil rents. After years of promulgating grievances through civil society and nonviolent agitation, various militant groups, most notably the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), emerged in the early 2000s as armed insurgent movements targeting oil infrastructure, government officials, and multinational oil companies (Okoli & Ntol, 2025; Willies, 2024). These groups employ tactics such as sabotage of pipelines, kidnappings of oil workers, illegal bunkering, and violent clashes with Nigerian security forces, actions which not only disrupt production but also signal deeper socio-political alienation (Ezirim, 2018; Nwogwugwu et al., 2022).

While militants in the Niger Delta often articulate a rhetoric of resource control and environmental justice, scholarship also highlights the complexity underlying their actions, with some research identifying “petro-rentier criminality” in which militancy and organized crime intertwine with illicit activities such as oil theft and black-market sales (Okoli & Nachanaa, 2025). Thus, militia activity cannot be read solely as political insurgency but must also be understood in relation to broader networks of economic crime and structural inequalities.

The nexus between oil and militancy has direct implications for Nigeria’s national security. Disruptions in oil production due to militant attacks have historically led to significant revenue losses, undermining government capacity to provide public services and weakening its fiscal stability (Ezirim, 2018; Willies, 2024). Additionally, the persistence of violent unrest manifested in sabotage, kidnapping, and maritime insecurity poses challenges for state authority and law enforcement, compelling large allocations to military and policing expenditures that could otherwise be invested in development (Ezirim, 2018). Scholars argue that the sustained presence of armed groups and the militarization of the region threaten not only economic stability but also social cohesion and institutional legitimacy. The state’s reliance on force in responding to militancy, including military crackdowns and security task forces, has sometimes exacerbated tensions, creating cycles of resistance and repression that further entrench insecurity (Ezirim, 2018; Okwechime & Owolabi, 2007).

Despite periodic amnesty programs and government interventions designed to reduce violence, militant activity persists, reflecting unresolved structural grievances in the Niger Delta (Owolabi & Okwechime, 2007; Willies, 2024). Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that sustainable stability in the region requires more than short-term security measures; it demands inclusive governance, equitable resource sharing, environmental remediation, and meaningful economic development that addresses the root causes of conflict (Willies, 2024; Ezirim, 2018).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing Militancy

An aggressive, antagonistic, and confrontational form of collective action that uses both violent and nonviolent tactics to advance a cause or philosophy is frequently referred to as militancy. For example, it is defined as a “collective action that is adversarial, confrontational, and motivated by grievances.” Other definitions describe militancy as being “combative or predisposed to fight,” or as involving “force or strong pressure to achieve social or political change,” emphasizing its aggressive or forceful character (Peterson & Thorn, 1994). Its expression can range from terrorism and violent

insurrection to acts of noncooperation, civil disobedience, and protest. For instance, as demonstrated by the American civil rights struggle, nonviolent militancy includes protests and civil disobedience. Guerrilla warfare, terrorism, or insurgency, such as that practised by the Viet Cong or ISIS, are examples of violent militancy (Peterson & Thorn, 1994).

A common identity, alienation, and discontent are often the core causes of militancy. Feelings of exclusion or frustrated ambitions can psychologically drive aggressive behavior. From a sociological perspective, recruitment into militant activities is often enabled by strong social networks and a shared sense of group identity (Easy Sociology, 2024). Contemporary militant actors often organize events not only to create impact but also to attract media attention. In the rapidly changing realm of digitally mediated politics, these “media events” help amplify their message. Extremism, insurgency, and militancy are distinct yet connected ideas. According to one analysis, an organised armed conflict against a state, frequently with external assistance and political goals, is known as an insurgency (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defense Studies & Analyses, 2014).

2.2. Security

Despite its widespread use in academic and policy contexts, the term “security” lacks a broadly accepted definition. It creates what academics call the paradox of security by invoking both the promise of safety and the possibility of violence. A consensus definition of the term is not feasible or always desirable because it depends so heavily on historical, political, and social context (Jarvis & Holland, 2014). Historically, security has been centered on the state’s ability to survive external threats, especially during the Cold War. However, in the post-Cold War era, security studies have broadened to encompass societal, human, and environmental dimensions, reflecting growing concerns about sustainability, individual well-being, and cultural integrity (Baldwin, 1997; Rothschild, 1995). This expanded focus includes ecological security, which explores how issues such as natural resource scarcity, climate change, and environmental disasters threaten both states and individuals. and economic and cultural security, which focuses on maintaining identity and artistic integrity while highlighting how global shocks and cultural conflicts pose new security risks (Herz, 1950). According to Baldwin (1997) and others, security is an “essentially contested concept” shaped by values and therefore open to multiple interpretations. Baldwin argues that, due to its diverse applications, ranging from state to human security, and its inherent inconsistencies, security is more often conceptually misunderstood than fundamentally debatable.

2.3. Structural Causes: Oil Wealth, Marginalization, and Environmental Degradation

A dominant strand of scholarship on the Niger Delta crisis situates the region’s protracted conflict within the broader analytical framework of the resource curse and rentier state theory, which posit that states heavily dependent on natural resource rents often experience weak institutions, poor governance, and violent contestations over resource control. In the Niger Delta context, oil wealth has paradoxically deepened socio-economic exclusion rather than fostering inclusive development. Watts (2004) argues that the abundance of oil has entrenched a political economy characterized by centralized revenue control, elite capture, and the systematic exclusion of oil-producing communities from decision-making processes. This has resulted in persistent feelings of dispossession among local populations, who bear the environmental and social costs of extraction while receiving minimal benefits.

Scholars further contend that the rentier structure of the Nigerian state has weakened accountability and fostered corruption, thereby limiting the state’s incentive to invest in human development and infrastructure in oil-producing regions (Owolabi & Okwechime, 2007). Consequently, oil-bearing communities experience chronic poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural neglect despite their strategic importance to national revenue generation. This contradiction has become a central grievance around which resistance and conflict have coalesced.

Environmental degradation has compounded these structural inequalities. Decades of oil spills, gas flaring, and industrial pollution have devastated farmlands, mangrove forests, and aquatic ecosystems that sustain local livelihoods. Babatunde (2023) demonstrates that environmental degradation in the Niger Delta has directly undermined food security, reduced household incomes, and heightened vulnerability among rural populations. The destruction of traditional means of subsistence has intensified perceptions of injustice and reinforced narratives of exploitation by both the state and multinational oil corporations.

The literature consistently identifies environmental harm as a catalyst for social mobilization and violent resistance. Nwanolue and Okeke (2022) argue that environmental degradation functions not merely as an ecological issue but as a political grievance that symbolizes the broader marginalization of Niger Delta communities. Owolabi and Okwechime (2007) similarly frame environmental destruction as a threat to human security, emphasizing its implications for health, livelihoods, and social stability. These intersecting dimensions of poverty, ecological damage, and governance failure provide a structural foundation for militancy and insecurity to emerge.

2.4. Structural Drivers of Militancy in the Niger Delta

Scholarly literature attributes militancy in the Niger Delta primarily to environmental degradation, livelihood insecurity, and governance failure. Unaam (2024) and Barnett and Adger (2007) argue that environmental change undermines human security by reducing access to livelihoods and increasing vulnerability to conflict, particularly in contexts of poverty and weak governance. In the Niger Delta, oil exploration has severely damaged ecosystems, destroying traditional economic activities such as farming and fishing and generating widespread socio-economic grievances.

This argument is reinforced by Okpara, Stringer, and Dougill (2020), who identify resource scarcity and weak institutional structures as key drivers of conflict. Similarly, Onimisi and Okoli (2025) emphasize the role of governance failure, socio-economic marginalization, and inadequate policy responses in sustaining armed violence. Collectively, these studies suggest that environmental injustice, economic exclusion, and institutional weakness created conditions conducive to militant mobilization in the Niger Delta.



2.5. Transformation from Protest to Armed Resistance

Militancy in the Niger Delta developed gradually from peaceful protest to armed resistance following the perceived failure of nonviolent strategies. Early activism, particularly by Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, relied on dialogue and international advocacy to demand environmental protection and control over resources. The repression of these movements and continued neglect of community demands, however, generated widespread disillusionment and radicalization.

This shift culminated in the emergence of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, which framed militancy as a response to state violence, environmental injustice, and economic exclusion. While early militant activities emphasized political demands such as resource control and community development, the movement later evolved to include criminal activities, including oil theft, kidnapping, and illegal bunkering.

2.6. Political Economy and Youth Alienation

The persistence of militancy is further explained by its integration into informal economic networks surrounding oil extraction. Augustine Ikelegbe argues that illicit oil economies created self-sustaining systems of violence, enabling militant groups to recruit unemployed youths, acquire

weapons, and sustain prolonged confrontation with the state. This development blurred the boundary between political resistance and organized crime.

Alienation theory complements this explanation by linking militant mobilization to structural exclusion. The **African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes** (2008) describes armed attacks and sabotage as forms of violent protest through which marginalized youths seek recognition and bargaining power, highlighting militancy as a response to entrenched socio-political exclusion rather than mere criminality.

2.7. Security Impacts: National and Regional Implications

Studies on internal security challenges in Nigeria indicate that violent non-state actors continue to undermine national stability due to weak policy responses and socio-economic grievances (Onimisi & Okoli, 2025). Similar dynamics are evident in the Niger Delta, where militancy linked to oil exploitation has become a major threat to national security. The literature is overwhelmingly in agreement that militancy in the Niger Delta constitutes a major threat to Nigeria's national security and economic stability. Attacks on oil infrastructure, including pipelines, flow stations, and export terminals, have repeatedly disrupted crude oil production, resulting in substantial revenue losses for the Nigerian state. Given Nigeria's heavy dependence on oil revenues, these disruptions weaken fiscal capacity, undermine development planning, and constrain the state's ability to provide public goods (Ezirim, 2018). Beyond economic consequences, militancy has eroded state authority and challenged the monopoly of violence traditionally associated with sovereign power. Persistent attacks and the emergence of armed non-state actors signal the fragility of state control in the region, raising concerns about internal security and territorial integrity. The securitization of the Niger Delta has also diverted national resources toward military operations, often at the expense of social investment.

At the regional level, insecurity in the Niger Delta has had spillover effects on maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, a vital corridor for global energy supplies and international trade. The proliferation of piracy, oil theft, and armed robbery at sea has increased shipping costs, raised insurance premiums, and discouraged foreign investment. Nwogwugwu et al. (2012) further demonstrate that persistent insecurity negatively affects foreign direct investment inflows, reinforcing cycles of economic stagnation and underdevelopment. The literature also critically examines the state's militarized response to militancy. Bassey (2012) argues that heavy-handed security operations have often exacerbated local grievances, resulting in civilian casualties, human rights abuses, and further alienation of host communities. Rather than resolving the conflict, militarization has in some cases entrenched cycles of violence and resistance, undermining long-term national security objectives.

2.8. Policy Responses: Amnesty, Governance, and Conflict Management

In response to escalating militancy, the Nigerian government has implemented various conflict management strategies, most notably the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP). The programme aimed to demobilize militants through disarmament, rehabilitation, and reintegration, offering financial incentives and vocational training. Several scholars acknowledge that the amnesty led to a temporary reduction in violence and a partial restoration of oil production (Ezirim, 2018).

However, the amnesty programme's limitations are widely documented. Critics argue that the initiative focused narrowly on armed actors, neglecting broader community grievances and the structural drivers of conflict. The exclusion of women, non-militant youths, and affected communities from the benefits of the programme generated new forms of resentment and inequality. Moreover, the emphasis on stipends and training failed to address deeper issues such as environmental remediation, political inclusion, and equitable resource governance.

Contemporary literature increasingly advocates for holistic and preventive approaches to peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. Environmental peacebuilding scholars emphasize the need for stricter environmental regulation, corporate accountability, and meaningful engagement between oil com-

panies and host communities. Natural resource governance frameworks similarly stress the importance of decentralizing resource control, promoting transparency, and ensuring fair revenue sharing as prerequisites for sustainable peace.

2.9. Failed Governance and Lasting Poverty

Despite the vast revenues from oil extraction, local communities continue to live in poverty. Billions of dollars exit the delta without translating into infrastructural development or improved living standards. High youth unemployment and inadequate public services persist, exacerbating the region's vulnerabilities (WIRED).

Restoration efforts, including UNEP's cleanup plans in Ogoni-land, projected to span decades, have been stalled or mismanaged. Agencies such as HYPREP, tasked with environmental remediation, have faced criticism for corruption and poor implementation of cleanup efforts (AP News; The Guardian).

In response to this ongoing crisis, many locals have turned to illegal oil refining, or "bunkering," a hazardous but increasingly common source of livelihood amid deepening poverty and high youth unemployment (Wired, 2013). The cycle of environmental harm, livelihood collapse, and illicit economy fuels rising discontent.

The 2009 Amnesty Program, designed to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate militants, achieved initial success by encouraging over 10,000 militants to surrender arms (nearly 3,000 weapons and 300,000 rounds of ammunition), thereby reducing armed hostilities (Center for Security Studies).

2.10. Gap in Literature

Existing scholarship on the Niger Delta crisis is extensive, particularly in examining oil exploitation, environmental degradation, militancy, and underdevelopment. A dominant body of literature has focused on the socio-economic and environmental consequences of oil extraction, emphasizing issues such as poverty, unemployment, ecological destruction, and community-state-corporate relations. While these studies have provided valuable insights into the root causes and manifestations of conflict in the Niger Delta, several critical gaps remain.

First, much of the literature treats militancy primarily as a localized socio-economic or environmental response, with limited systematic analysis of its broader implications for Nigeria's national security architecture. Studies often emphasize community grievances and developmental deficits without sufficiently situating militancy within the wider context of state security, economic stability, and territorial integrity. As a result, the interconnectedness between oil-induced conflicts in the Niger Delta and national security challenges—such as revenue loss, militarization, criminal networks, and state legitimacy—remains under-theorized.

Second, although the resource curse theory is frequently referenced in discussions of resource-related conflicts in Nigeria, its application to the Niger Delta has often been descriptive rather than analytical. Many studies invoke the theory to explain underdevelopment and conflict, but fail to rigorously interrogate the specific mechanisms through which oil wealth translates into militancy and security threats. There is a paucity of studies that explicitly link the core assumptions of the resource curse—governance failure, rent-seeking, elite capture, and weak institutions to the emergence and persistence of militancy as a national security problem.

Third, the methodological orientation of existing studies reveals another significant gap. A substantial proportion of the literature relies on primary data, particularly interviews and surveys conducted at the community level. While valuable, such approaches often produce fragmented or localized findings that limit broader analytical generalization. Conversely, there is limited use of systematic documentary analysis that synthesizes existing scholarly, policy, and institutional sources.

es to provide a holistic and longitudinal understanding of the oil–militancy–security nexus in the Niger Delta.

Finally, thematic integration remains weak across the literature. Many studies examine oil politics, militancy, or security as discrete phenomena, rather than as interrelated processes within a single analytical framework. This fragmentation obscures the cumulative and reinforcing effects of oil exploitation, militant violence, and state security responses over time.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a theory-driven, methodologically rigorous analysis of the nexus among oil, militancy, and national security in the Niger Delta. By applying the resource curse theory through qualitative content and thematic analysis of secondary data, the study provides an integrated perspective that bridges local grievances and national security concerns, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the existing body of knowledge.

2.11. The Resource Curse Theory

The resource curse theory, also referred to as the paradox of plenty, posits that countries endowed with abundant natural resources—particularly non-renewable resources such as oil, gas, and minerals—often experience slower economic growth, weaker institutions, poor governance, and higher levels of conflict than resource-poor countries (Auty, 1993; Sachs & Warner, 2001). Contrary to classical economic expectations that natural resource wealth should stimulate development, the resource curse thesis argues that reliance on extractive resources can generate structural distortions that undermine long-term socio-economic and political stability.

At its core, the resource curse theory challenges the assumption that natural resource abundance is inherently beneficial. Instead, it suggests that the manner in which resources are managed, distributed, and governed determines whether they become a blessing or a curse. This framework has been widely applied to oil-producing states in the Global South, including Nigeria, where petroleum wealth has coexisted with poverty, conflict, and underdevelopment.

2.12. Economic Dimensions of the Resource Curse

One of the key economic mechanisms associated with the resource curse is Dutch Disease, a phenomenon whereby large inflows of foreign exchange from resource exports lead to currency appreciation, making non-resource sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing less competitive (Corden & Neary, 1982). In resource-dependent economies, this often results in an economic monoculture, in which the state becomes excessively reliant on a single commodity for revenue.

Sachs and Warner (2001) empirically demonstrate that countries with high levels of natural resource dependence tend to exhibit lower growth rates than those with more diversified economies. In Nigeria, oil dependence has weakened agricultural productivity and industrial development, contributing to unemployment and income inequality. The volatility of global oil prices further exposes resource-dependent states to economic shocks, fiscal instability, and budgetary crises.

2.13. Political and Governance Dimensions

Beyond economic distortions, the resource curse theory emphasizes the corrosive effects of resource wealth on political institutions and governance. Resource rents provide governments with substantial unearned income, reducing their reliance on taxation and, consequently, weakening the social contract between the state and citizens (Ross, 2001). When governments do not depend on citizens for revenue, incentives for accountability, transparency, and democratic responsiveness diminish. This dynamic often fosters rentier-state behavior, in which political elites prioritize control over resource rents over productive economic management or inclusive governance. In such contexts, corruption, patronage networks, and elite capture of resource revenues become pervasive

(Karl, 1997). Nigeria's oil economy exemplifies this pattern, as oil revenues have historically been centralized and distributed through patron-client networks, reinforcing political exclusion and regional inequality.

2.14. Resource Curse and Conflict

A central contribution of the resource curse literature is its explanation of the link between natural resources and violent conflict. Scholars argue that valuable resources increase the stakes of political competition, incentivizing both state and non-state actors to engage in violence to gain or maintain access to resource rents (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). Resource wealth can finance armed groups, prolong conflicts, and weaken state capacity to maintain order.

In oil-producing regions like the Niger Delta, resource abundance has intensified local grievances over ownership, control, and environmental damage. Watts (2004) contends that oil has transformed the Niger Delta into a zone of "petro-violence," where struggles over resource control are embedded in broader histories of marginalization and state neglect. The presence of oil infrastructure also provides strategic targets for militant groups, making violence a tool for bargaining and visibility.

2.15. Social and Environmental Dimensions

The resource curse theory also incorporates social and environmental dimensions, particularly in extractive regions. Resource extraction often leads to environmental degradation, community displacement, and loss of livelihoods, exacerbating poverty and social tensions (Bebbington et al., 2018). When environmental harm is not adequately compensated or remediated, affected populations may perceive extraction as exploitative, reinforcing resistance and conflict.

In the Niger Delta, widespread oil spills and gas flaring have devastated ecosystems and traditional livelihoods, deepening social exclusion and fueling grievances that align with resource curse dynamics. Environmental injustice thus becomes a critical mechanism through which resource wealth translates into instability rather than development.

2.16. Strengths of the Resource Curse Theory

One of the major strengths of the resource curse theory lies in its counterintuitive insight. By challenging the assumption that natural resource abundance automatically leads to economic prosperity, the theory offers a powerful explanation for why many resource-rich countries continue to experience poverty, inequality, and instability. This conceptual shift has been particularly influential in development studies and political economy, encouraging scholars to interrogate governance structures rather than relying solely on resource endowments (Auty, 1993; Sachs & Warner, 2001).

The theory is also empirically robust. Numerous cross-national and longitudinal studies provide statistical evidence linking heavy dependence on natural resource exports to slow economic growth, weak institutions, and authoritarian tendencies (Ross, 2001; Sachs & Warner, 2001). These empirical foundations make the theory attractive for comparative analysis and policy evaluation, especially in oil-producing states such as Nigeria, Angola, and Venezuela.

Another significant strength is the theory's interdisciplinary applicability. The resource curse framework integrates insights from economics, political science, sociology, and security studies. It explains not only economic stagnation but also governance failures, corruption, democratic erosion, and violent conflict. For instance, the theory effectively accounts for the emergence of militancy in resource-rich regions by linking competition over resource rents to political exclusion and violence (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

The theory is particularly valuable in explaining conflict dynamics in extractive regions. It highlights how valuable resources increase the incentives for armed struggle, finance rebel movements,

and prolong conflict. In the Niger Delta, the theory helps illuminate why oil wealth has intensified rather than alleviated insecurity, as control over oil rents becomes a central axis of political and violent contestation (Watts, 2004).

Finally, the resource curse theory has strong policy relevance. By identifying governance failure, lack of transparency, and rent-seeking as key mechanisms of underdevelopment, the theory informs policy prescriptions to improve resource management, strengthen institutions, and promote accountability. Initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) draw directly on insights from resource curse scholarship.

2.17. Weaknesses of the Resource Curse Theory

Despite its explanatory power, the resource curse theory has several notable weaknesses. A major criticism is its deterministic tendency. Early formulations of the theory often imply that resource abundance inevitably leads to poor development outcomes, overlooking cases where resource wealth has been successfully managed. Countries such as Norway, Botswana, and Canada challenge the theory's universality, demonstrating that strong institutions and sound governance can transform resource wealth into sustainable development (Brunnschweiler & Bulte, 2008).

Closely related to this is the theory's insufficient attention to institutional variation. Critics argue that the resource curse does not adequately explain why some resource-rich states fail while others succeed. By treating resources as the primary causal factor, the theory risks underestimating the role of historical trajectories, political institutions, leadership choices, and global economic structures (Karl, 1997).

Another weakness lies in its overemphasis on economic indicators. Much of the early empirical literature focuses narrowly on GDP growth and export dependence, which may obscure broader dimensions of development such as human security, environmental sustainability, and social well-being. As a result, the lived experiences of communities in resource-rich regions—particularly environmental degradation and cultural displacement—are sometimes under-theorized.

The resource curse theory has also been criticized for conceptual ambiguity. There is no consensus on how to measure "resource abundance" or "resource dependence," leading to inconsistent findings across studies. Some scholars argue that it is dependence on resource rents, rather than resource abundance per se, that produces negative outcomes (Brunnschweiler & Bulte, 2008).

Additionally, the theory tends to underplay the role of external actors, including multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and global commodity markets. In regions like the Niger Delta, the actions of multinational oil companies and fluctuations in global oil prices significantly shape local outcomes. Yet, these factors are often insufficiently integrated into explanations of the resource curse.

Finally, critics argue that the theory provides limited micro-level explanations. While it effectively captures macro-structural dynamics, it is less effective at explaining why specific communities or groups choose violent resistance, how identities are mobilized, or how local power relations shape conflict trajectories. Consequently, scholars increasingly complement the resource curse theory with frameworks such as human security, environmental justice, and political ecology.

2.18. Relevance of the Resource Curse Theory to the Niger Delta

The resource curse theory remains highly relevant to understanding the Niger Delta crisis. The region's experience reflects many of the theory's core propositions: heavy dependence on oil revenues, centralized control of resource rents, environmental degradation, weak governance, and violent contestation over resource control. Oil wealth has not translated into broad-based development for host communities; instead, it has intensified inequality, fueled militancy, and undermined national security.

By situating the Niger Delta conflict within the resource curse framework, scholars can link local grievances to broader structural dynamics of the Nigerian political economy. However, contemporary studies increasingly emphasize the need to complement the resource curse theory with governance, human security, and environmental justice perspectives to fully capture the complexity of oil-related conflict in the region.

3. Research Method

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying primarily on descriptive and analytical approaches to examine the nexus between oil exploitation, militancy, and national security in the Niger Delta. A qualitative design is considered appropriate because the study seeks to explore complex social, political, economic, and environmental dynamics that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurements alone. Issues such as marginalization, environmental injustice, militancy, and security are deeply contextual and require interpretive analysis to understand actors' motivations, power relations, and historical processes.

The study is also explanatory in nature, as it goes beyond mere description to interrogate why oil wealth has contributed to conflict and insecurity rather than development. By situating militancy within the broader framework of the resource curse theory, the research design enables a systematic analysis of causal relationships between oil wealth, governance failures, and violent resistance.

3.2. Sources of Data

The study relies exclusively on secondary data, drawn from reputable and authoritative sources. These include peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, policy reports, government publications, and documents from international organizations. Journals such as *Geopolitics*, *World Politics*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *Africa Development*, and *Oxford Economic Papers* provide theoretical and empirical insights into resource conflict, militancy, and national security.

Secondary data also includes reports from credible institutions such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, Amnesty International, and academic research centers focusing on peace, security, and environmental governance. Newspaper reports and media publications are used cautiously and primarily to contextualize events, not as primary analytical evidence.

The use of secondary data is justified by the sensitivity of militancy and security issues in the Niger Delta, which makes primary data collection through interviews or surveys potentially risky, ethically complex, and logistically challenging.

3.3. Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through systematic documentary analysis. Relevant literature was identified using academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and university repositories. Key search terms included *Niger Delta militancy*, *oil and conflict*, *resource curse theory*, *national security in Nigeria*, and *environmental degradation in oil-producing regions*.

Selection criteria were based on relevance to the study objectives, academic credibility, and recency, with preference given to peer-reviewed publications and widely cited works. This ensured that the study is grounded in established scholarship while also engaging with contemporary debates.

3.4. Method of Data Analysis

The study employs qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to interpret the collected data. Content analysis allows for the systematic examination of texts to identify recurring patterns, arguments, and narratives related to oil exploitation, militancy, and security. Through thematic analysis, the data were organized around key themes, including resource control, environmental degradation, youth alienation, militant mobilization, and state security responses.

The analysis is guided by the resource curse theory, which serves as the principal analytical framework. This theory provides a lens for interpreting how oil wealth shapes governance structures, economic incentives, and conflict dynamics in the Niger Delta.

3.5. Study Area

The geographical focus of the study is the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, comprising oil-producing states such as Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River. The region is selected due to its strategic importance as the hub of Nigeria's oil production and as the epicenter of militancy and oil-related insecurity. Concentrating on the Niger Delta allows for an in-depth examination of how local grievances intersect with national security concerns.

3.6. Validity and Reliability

To enhance validity, the study triangulates data from multiple scholarly sources, ensuring that consistent findings across different studies support arguments. The reliance on peer-reviewed literature and established theoretical frameworks further strengthens the analysis's credibility.

Reliability is ensured through transparent documentation of data sources and consistent application of analytical procedures. By using widely accepted concepts and theories, the study allows for replication and comparison with similar research on resource conflict in other regions.

3.7. Analysis of the Study

This study analyses the nexus between oil exploitation, militancy, and national security in the Niger Delta by situating empirical realities within the broader theoretical framework of the resource curse. The analysis reveals that militancy and insecurity in the region are not isolated phenomena but are deeply embedded in Nigeria's political economy of oil, characterized by structural marginalization, environmental degradation, and governance failure.

4. Results

4.1. Oil Wealth and Structural Contradictions

The analysis demonstrates that oil wealth in the Niger Delta has generated profound structural contradictions. While the region serves as the backbone of Nigeria's national economy, contributing the bulk of export earnings and government revenue, it remains characterized by poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural decay. This paradox aligns closely with the central proposition of the resource curse theory, which argues that resource abundance can undermine development when governance institutions are weak.

Evidence from the literature shows that oil revenues are centrally controlled by the federal government, leaving host communities with limited influence over resource management and revenue allocation. This centralized rent distribution system has entrenched feelings of exclusion and injustice among the Niger Delta communities. Rather than functioning as a catalyst for development, oil wealth has reinforced inequality and fostered resentment, thereby creating fertile ground for conflict and resistance.

4.2. Environmental Degradation as a Catalyst for Conflict

A critical finding of the analysis is the central role of environmental degradation in transforming economic marginalization into active resistance. Oil spills, gas flaring, and land contamination have destroyed traditional livelihoods such as fishing and farming, undermining food security and household income. This environmental harm is not merely incidental but systemic, reflecting regulatory failures and weak enforcement mechanisms.

The analysis shows that environmental degradation functions as both a material and symbolic grievance. Materially, it deprives communities of sustenance and economic security. Symbolically, it represents neglect, exploitation, and injustice by the state and multinational oil corporations. These dual dimensions intensify community alienation and legitimize militancy as a form of protest in the eyes of affected youths.

4.3. Militancy as a Response to Marginalization and Alienation

The study's analysis indicates that militancy in the Niger Delta emerged as a response to prolonged political and economic exclusion, particularly after the failure of peaceful advocacy to secure meaningful reforms. Early nonviolent movements sought dialogue and institutional change, but state repression and policy inertia eroded confidence in peaceful engagement.

As a result, armed militancy became a strategic alternative through which marginalized youths sought visibility, leverage, and access to resources. The analysis confirms that militancy initially had strong political undertones, centered on demands for control over resources, environmental justice, and community development. Over time, however, militancy evolved to incorporate criminal activities such as oil theft and kidnapping, reflecting the emergence of a conflict economy that sustains violence.

This transformation supports the argument that militancy in the Niger Delta cannot be understood solely as criminality or insurgency. Rather, it represents a complex hybrid of political resistance and economic survival within a structurally constrained environment.

4.4. Implications for National Security

From a national security perspective, the analysis reveals that militancy in the Niger Delta poses both direct and indirect threats to Nigeria's stability. Directly, attacks on oil infrastructure disrupt production, reduce government revenue, and weaken fiscal capacity. Given Nigeria's dependence on oil income, such disruptions have far-reaching consequences for national development planning and service delivery.

Indirectly, prolonged insecurity erodes state legitimacy and challenges the state's monopoly over the use of force. The persistence of armed non-state actors signals institutional weakness and undermines public confidence in government authority. Furthermore, the spillover of insecurity into the Gulf of Guinea has regional and international implications, affecting maritime security, trade, and foreign investment.

The analysis also highlights the counterproductive effects of militarized state responses. Heavy reliance on security forces has often escalated tensions, resulting in civilian casualties and human rights abuses that further alienate local communities. Rather than eliminating militancy, coercive approaches have, in many cases, deepened cycles of violence and resistance.

4.5. Assessment of Policy Responses

The analysis of policy interventions, particularly the 2009 Amnesty Programme, reveals a pattern of short-term stabilization without long-term resolution. While the amnesty reduced violence tem-

porarily and restored oil production, it failed to address the structural drivers of conflict, such as environmental degradation, youth unemployment, and inequitable resource governance.

The study finds that the focus on disarmament and stipends treated militancy as a security problem rather than a development and governance challenge. By prioritizing former militants over affected communities and nonviolent youths, the programme inadvertently reproduced inequalities and created incentives for future violence.

This outcome underscores the limitation of reactive policies that do not tackle root causes. Sustainable security in the Niger Delta, as the analysis shows, requires integrated strategies that combine environmental remediation, inclusive governance, economic diversification, and community participation.

4.6. Theoretical Implications

The findings largely validate the explanatory power of the resource curse theory in the Niger Delta context. The theory effectively explains how oil wealth, when mediated by weak institutions and exclusionary governance, generates conflict rather than development. However, the analysis also reveals the limits of a purely structural explanation. Local agency, youth identity, environmental injustice, and the role of multinational corporations add layers of complexity that the resource curse theory alone cannot fully capture. Consequently, the study reinforces the argument that the resource curse should be treated as a conditional, context-sensitive framework, complemented by human security and political ecology perspectives.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the nexus between oil exploitation, militancy, and national security in the Niger Delta through the lens of the resource curse theory. The findings reveal that Nigeria's oil wealth has served less as a driver of development and more as a catalyst for marginalization, environmental degradation, and governance failure. These structural conditions fostered grievances that initially manifested as peaceful resistance but later evolved into armed militancy, as the state's inability to address demands for equity, environmental justice, and inclusive governance fueled the escalation. The study further demonstrates that militancy in the Niger Delta has transformed over time into a hybrid phenomenon combining political resistance with criminal economic activities, thereby complicating security management. While state responses—particularly militarization and the 2009 Amnesty Programme—produced temporary reductions in violence, they failed to address the structural roots of the conflict. Consequently, insecurity in the Niger Delta continues to pose serious threats to national economic stability, energy security, and regional maritime safety.

Recommendations

The study recommends comprehensive reforms in Nigeria's resource governance framework to ensure transparency, accountability, and equitable distribution of oil revenues to host communities. Environmental regulation and remediation should be strengthened, with strict enforcement of compliance by multinational oil corporations to restore livelihoods and reduce ecological injustice.

Security strategies should shift from predominantly militarized responses to development-centered peacebuilding approaches that prioritize youth employment, infrastructure development, and social welfare. The Amnesty Programme should be restructured into a community-based reintegration model that includes women and non-militant youths and focuses on sustainable economic empowerment rather than stipends.

Finally, institutionalized multi-stakeholder engagement involving government, local communities, civil society, and oil companies is essential for fostering trust, mitigating conflict, and promoting long-term stability in the Niger Delta.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the literature by reinforcing the relevance of the resource curse theory while demonstrating its conditional nature in the Niger Delta context. It advances scholarship by integrating environmental degradation and human security into analyses of oil-related militancy, offering a more holistic understanding of conflict dynamics.

The study also conceptualizes Niger Delta militancy as a hybrid political–criminal phenomenon sustained by conflict economies, helping to explain the limitations of coercive and amnesty-based interventions. By linking oil exploitation, militancy, and national security within a single analytical framework, the research provides a concise empirical and theoretical contribution relevant to resource-conflict studies, policy formulation, and peacebuilding practice.

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