

Oil, Environment, and Lifeworlds in the Niger Delta

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Introduction

In a poem filled with grief and anger, Obari Gomba (1999) urges us to pause and acknowledge the agony of the Delta. He recounts how grave voices tell of the Delta that spurts its sorrow, a mess of oil sludge. Many have recounted the Niger Delta crisis over the last fifty years from the perspectives of environmental decay, political violence, and economic boom and bust (Jack, 2025; Babatunde, 2020). In this *Special Issue*, we are delighted to present articles that highlight the intersection between oil extraction, environmental transformation, and everyday lifeworlds in the Niger Delta. How women farmers, artisanal refiners, and traditional rulers make sense of continuous gas flaring, recurrent oil spills, and palm trees that refuse to bear fruit. While these issues are central to people's lived experiences throughout the Delta, they are rarely the focus of academic research.

This *Special Issue* is the product of selected papers from the conference *Oil, Environment, and Lifeworlds in the Niger Delta: Environmental History Approaches*, held in July 2024 at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The conference was organised under the research project *Environmental Histories of Resource Extraction in Africa (AFREXTRACT)*, funded by the European Research Council. While more than 30 papers were presented at the conference, the ones included in this *Special Issue* have been through a rigorous peer review process, ensuring their high quality. They offer significant knowledge on how oil extraction impacts the environment and how the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region recreate their lifeworlds amidst increasingly precarious ecological conditions.

The Niger Delta continues to be relevant on the global research and development agenda, not only because scholars and practitioners are eager to increase the volumes of existing literature inspired by the region but fundamentally because, with each day that passes, we feel obliged to tell the stories of the Niger Delta people in entirely new ways that reflect the current realities of its people. The everyday life of the people is not static but a dynamic outcome that is reflective of shifting ecological uncertainties, political economies, and new forms of resistance, adaptation, and resilience. The region's ecological challenges and expansive stories are difficult to exhaust in a single academic work. Every period of rewriting the existing realities of the people responds to new forms of survival, exclusion, and adaptation. It is this enduring sense of change that makes it increasingly imperative to retell the Niger Delta's stories, not only in novel ways but also through critical perspectives that portray the region as a geography of ongoing transformation. We believe that the value of the papers in this *Special Issue* is a reflection of the dynamism associated with the Niger Delta region.

Environmental Humanities of Oil and the Niger Delta

Ever since the first commercial oil well was struck in the village of Otuabagi in 1956, the Niger Delta has been the most significant oil-producing region in Africa. While some of the region's environmental transformations and personal narratives are exceptional, the Niger Delta's story also fits into broader global patterns. It is worthwhile to place it within debates on the Anthropocene, environmental humanities, political ecology, and petrocultures.

The extraction of fossil fuels, and oil in particular, is a marker of the Anthropocene. The current geological epoch in which human impacts on the climate and environment have become a decisive factor (Malm, 2016). Crude oil extraction, processing, and transportation have profound environmental and social consequences, ranging from severe pollution to changes in systems of capitalism, democracy, and popular culture (Mitchell, 2013). In the Niger Delta, the activities of the oil industry can best be characterised as 'extractive violence' against the environment and local communities (Karmakar, 2024). Alarming figures estimate that between 9 and 13 million tons of oil have spilled into the Delta's environment during the last six decades, devastating the region's mangroves, fields, and aquatic life while causing serious health issues for human and more-than-human life (Kadafa, 2012). The environmental violence of the oil industries has been meticulously documented by a range of Niger Delta scholars. Yet, perspectives from the environmental humanities and a focus on real-life experience remain nascent. 'Environmental humanities approaches hone in on questions of meaning, value, and ethics when studying environmental change' (O'Gorman et al. 2019, p. 427).

This *Special Issue* pays attention to the everyday experiences of living with oil in the Niger Delta, highlighting how fishing and farming communities navigate oil spills, how artisanal refiners interpret their activities, and how women traverse environmental pollution. The authors connect these experiences to environmental activism in the political sphere, posing key questions such as: What drives the frequent protests against oil industries in the Niger Delta? Is there a direct correlation between the severity of pollution and the rise of militant groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta? Despite the challenges and setbacks, journalist Naomi Klein (2015, p. 306) still argues that 'the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People's success in forcing Shell out of Ogoniland in 1993 remains one of the most significant achievements of grassroots environmental activism anywhere in the world.

Globally, oil exploration has engendered far-reaching environmental consequences, which continue to deepen asymmetrical power relations, despite efforts towards sustainable mining practices. Across major oil frontiers, from the Amazon to the Middle East, oil drilling continues to affect frontline communities. As illustrated by Marcel Llaverro-Pasquina, the power relations of oil production remain highly skewed. International mining companies and former colonial powers still perpetuate historical legacies of inequality and consequently determine the opaque terms of oil trade (Llaverro-Pasquina et al., 2024). Because oil production is intrinsically embedded within socio-economic, cultural, and political imaginaries and infrastructures of development, its

everyday flow shapes the lives and livelihoods of resource-dependent communities. What often emerges within conventional scholarly discussions is the shifting conundrum(s) of economic interests versus environmental imperatives. What happens if one supersedes the other? Taking Bolivia, for instance, Maita and Schorr (2024) bring to light the crude realities of how, although ecological crises deepen with the continuation of rapacious capitalist neo-extractivism, economic interests often override environmental concerns. While this is true for Bolivia, can the same be said for other countries in the Global South, whose biodiversity and pristine landscapes, which provide their food pathways, are equally irreversibly degraded? Can we homogenise that this could be the overall reality for oil-producing countries in the Global South? By focusing on the Niger Delta, the most expansive oil territory in Africa, we can rethink the notions of environmental change and environmental justice within the global geopolitical and environmental landscapes of oil economies.

Crude oil, dark in colour, presents a sinister tapestry that has upturned pristine ecological landscapes as well as human, physical, and spiritual structures across the world. From land-based to offshore rigs, continuous ultradeep drilling presents a fallacy of modernity. Stephanie LeMenager, through a cultural environmental study, explores the transformative impact of oil in American society together with its unending visceral carcinogenic consequences (LeMenager, 2014). LeMenager recounts how urban life, industrial growth, and energy systems were built on oil, as modern Americans live, breathe, and register oil in their senses. Undoubtedly, continued oil exploration in North America has triggered wide-ranging protests and environmental justice campaigns. As demonstrated by Kai Bosworth in his book *Pipeline Populism*, grassroots environmentalism often emerges as a response to the endemic shockwaves of oil drilling (Bosworth, 2022). When life-bearing environments are threatened, communities unite and form alliances to resist the exploitative practices of capitalist-driven multinational oil companies. Bosworth's analytic prose of grassroots environmentalism in the United States resonates with the everyday stories of oil drilling in expansive regions like the Niger Delta, where repeated oil spills choke and pause the economic, cultural, and human life systems. While Rob Nixon's (2013) theory of 'slow violence' is often invoked to show how people endure environmental damage that is often out of sight, the papers in this *Special Issue* provide a contrary perspective, one that highlights the vividness and the emergent crisis wrought by oil drilling. Due to the attritional lethality of oil pollution in the Niger Delta, there have been diverse forms of responses, from cultural and spiritual protests to formal non-violent institutional/organisational advocacy and even to radical, often military forms of environmentalism. This plurality not only highlights the diverse contexts of environmentalism(s) in the Niger Delta but also reshapes the global imaginaries and the discourses of environmental politics centred around oil. By bringing this to the fore, this edition joins global scholarly conversations on oil, the environment, and the shifting human experience of extraction in the Niger Delta.

Oil, Environment, and Lifeworlds: Contributions to the Special Issue

While the link between oil extraction and environmental transformations is well established, especially in scholarship on the Niger Delta, less attention has been paid to the diverse ways oil-bearing communities have responded to the resulting environmental and livelihood challenges. Efforts at researching the localised responses to longstanding extractive violence against the Niger Delta environment have merely focused on macro-level social and political mobilisations (Jack, 2025). Notably, some of these studies view environmental protests as a defining modality of environmentalism in the Niger Delta (Zibima and Jack, 2020; Obi and Oriola, 2018; Mai-Bornu, 2019; Obi, 2010). This body of literature significantly highlights the emergence and evolution of environmental protests in the Niger Delta during the 1990s, famed as the era of non-violent environmental movements, spearheaded by socio-ethnic groups such as the Ken Saro-Wiwa-led Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC). A subsequent strand of scholarship shifted focus on petro-insurgency and armed resistance, which came to define a more militant phase of what is now popularly known as the ‘Niger Delta Struggle’ (Adunbi, 2020; Watts, 2013; Raimi, 2017). Hence, the early 2000s witnessed the emergence of ethnic-militia groups, such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which engaged in strategic economic sabotage targeting oil infrastructure as a form of protest against widespread environmental degradation and poverty. More recently, scholars have shifted attention to the proliferation of crude oil theft and artisanal refining in the Niger Delta, interpreting it as a new phase of the resistance that reflects broader political mobilisations targeted at asserting local agency and participation within the ‘petro-economy’ (Naanen, 2019; Raimi, 2023). Lastly, a growing body of literature by legal scholars, such as Worika and Amechi (2023) and Ochei, Ezeani and Anderson (2023), has highlighted community litigations against international oil companies as a dominant form of environmental resistance. This emerging strand shows how impacted communities are increasingly seeking redress from both domestic and international judicial jurisdictions, where they advocate environmental remediation, corporate accountability, and compensation.

While these macro-level analyses of the socio-political responses provide valuable insights into the shifting dynamics of localised forms of environmentalism in the Niger Delta, they give limited insights into the quotidian forms of living with, and responding to, oil and environmental transformations. It is precisely these underexplored areas that the AFREXTRACT conference, which birthed this *Special Issue*, sought to address, under the thematic focus: *Oil, Environment, and Lifeworlds in the Niger Delta*. Apart from the discussions within the panels, the AFREXTRACT conference captured a wide range of perspectives under eight sessions that reflected not just the structural but also the historical realities that underpin how communities respond to oil and environmental change in the Niger Delta. The theme of the first session, *Oil and Resource Governance in the Niger Delta*, focused on how indigenous authority structures and contestations reshape the meanings of ownership, control, and legitimacy within oil-bearing communities. It further explored the political and administrative entanglements that underpin oil

wealth management, while showcasing the tensions that arise in communities in a system of centralised control. Session two addressed *Environmental Protests and Activism in the Niger Delta*, conveying knowledge on the dynamics of communities' engagement with oil multinationals and the state. It also showcased how environmental remediation campaigns have led to asset divestment by oil multinationals. The third session paid attention to the issue of *Oil, Livelihoods, and Socio-ecological Adaptation*. Presenters addressed the different ways that oil extraction has disarticulated traditional livelihood systems while forcing communities to live within a cycle of precarious survival and adaptation. It also highlighted the entry of new socio-economic actors and an emergent power configuration that is shaped by access to a skewed system of oil rent. In the fourth session, *Artisanal Refining and Localised Extractive Practices* were discussed, noting that illegal oil theft and refining are not just criminal reactions to a system of economic marginalisation and exclusion but rather a network of survival and resistance that deeply reflects the diseased side of the oil economy in the region. The session also captured the cultural aspects of this illicit economy, emphasising how communities conceive of, narrate, and contest their involvement with artisanal refining. Session five focused on *Environmental Communication and Climate Change Impacts*, with emphasis on how communities come to understand, produce, and communicate environmental knowledge. It also addressed more complex issues, such as environmental justice and climate reparations, while highlighting the entrepreneurial aspects of climate change adaptation. The sixth session, themed *Environmental Worldviews, Oil, and Vulnerabilities in the Niger Delta*, was marked by compelling engagements with poetry, literary texts, and performative traditions that captured how host communities experience and conceive of the trauma of ecological degradation. Drawing on both traditional and contemporary fiction, presenters showed how the complex realities of ecological degradation and (in)justice permeate the everyday lives of community members.

Following the presentation of all papers at the conference and subsequent in-house and external peer review, seventeen papers were accepted for publication in two separate Special Issues. Based on the disciplinary foci, nine of the selected papers, focusing on environmental humanities, were published in the *Kiabara – University of Port Harcourt Journal of the Humanities*. Eight others, focusing on the political ecology of oil extraction are contained in this *Special Issue*. The papers reflect the diverse perspectives of researchers and development practitioners on *Oil, Environment, and Lifeworlds in the Niger Delta*. Collectively, these contributions affirm our belief that the Niger Delta is indeed a place of new entanglements amid enduring existential realities.

The first article, by Lawrence Barinem B. Dube, titled *Oil Spills and Community Compensation Claims in Nigeria: The Bodo Community Experience (2008-2015)*, sets the stage for understanding the entanglements associated with oil, environment, and grassroots experience in the Niger Delta. The author presents a compelling insight into the Bodo community's success with litigation against Shell Petroleum Development Company in a United Kingdom court, while also critiquing the shortcomings of the monetary compensation that followed. The article argues for a broader and more just framework that includes livelihood restoration, restitution, and sustained ecological

remediation. It strongly demonstrates how oil-host communities can engage international legal spaces to seek environmental justice as a critical component of community resistance, thereby contributing to scholarly debates on environmental justice and litigation.

The next article, by Clinton Areprekumor and Iti Orugbani, titled *Artisanal Refining and Social Dynamics: Implications for Environmental Sustainability*, addresses the social and environmental changes brought about by artisanal crude oil refining in the Niger Delta. Adopting a Marxist dialectical approach, the authors expose the reshaping of social hierarchies, weakening of local authorities, and complication of collective environmental conscience resulting from artisanal crude oil refining. The article further reveals how the emergence of new economic elites from the artisanal oil economy perpetuates environmental pollution and undermines sustainability efforts. On this basis, the authors recommend the involvement of these new economic actors in subsequent environmental advocacy campaigns that promote green alternatives. Through its depth of theoretical and ethnographic engagement, this article convincingly demonstrates how artisanal extractive oil activities are shaping social structures.

Extending the discussion, the third article, by Joseph Ekong, titled *Livelihood Crises and Emerging Adaptation Strategies in Nigeria's Niger Delta Region*, examines the social, economic, and environmental consequences of crude oil extraction, with particular emphasis on the loss of traditional livelihood systems and the ensuing escalation of insecurity and multidimensional poverty. Framed within the sustainable livelihoods perspective, the article establishes a link between ecosystem destruction, (in)security, and humanitarian crises. It recommends the development of blue, green, and digital economies, alongside the effective implementation of the Petroleum Industry Act. This article provides a rigorous framing of livelihood resilience within a system of increasing ecological deficits in the Niger Delta, thereby contributing to scholarship on livelihood adaptations.

In the fourth article, Elliot A. Sibiri, Benjamin Joffa and Endurance Uzobo examine *Ecological Changes and Emerging Patterns of Consumption in Oil-bearing Communities in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State*. Framing their argument using ecological modernisation and socio-ecological systems perspectives, the authors reveal how environmental degradation has triggered new forms of survival and consumption in oil-bearing communities. They further document how prolonged exposure to pollution has compelled local communities to shift from their traditional livelihoods and food sources to increased reliance on imported goods. The article's robust analysis of how consumption patterns have evolved in reaction to ecological degradation contributes towards the understanding of how oil and environmental alterations shape nutritional preferences and everyday food habits.

The fifth article, by Amaechi Kelechi Justin, titled *Oil and Emerging Ruling Class in Nigeria's Niger Delta Region*, examines the rise of a new class of elites tied to crude oil wealth. Using the cyclical theory of social change, the author notes that the neo-ruling elites comprise stakeholders from traditional institutions, the political class, and industries. He argues that in their historical

relationship, this set of elites differs from the previous ones who relied on palm oil for their wealth. Despite this shift in the economic base, the new elites are not removed from the ongoing processes of underdevelopment and inequality in the region. This article deepens our understanding of how control over oil shapes governance and resistance, particularly in relation to the shifting political economy of power in relation to oil extraction in the Niger Delta.

Introducing a gendered and vulnerability perspective to the discourse, the sixth article, by Emmanuel Nwakanma, addresses the issue of *Oil Politics, Economic Violence, and Livelihood Challenges of Women Living with Disabilities in the Niger Delta Region*. Based on qualitative data drawn from women with disabilities in Bayelsa, Edo, and Rivers states, the author's findings show that oil-induced ecological degradation has disproportionate effects on this vulnerable population. It further highlights the limited support systems, livelihood erosion, and the widespread marginalisation of women with disabilities. The article provides a unique focus on vulnerability by exploring the lived experiences of women with disabilities within the context of the Niger Delta's oil economy.

The seventh article, by Weni Kokinobo Igirigi and Elliot A. Sibiri, titled *Ending Artisanal Refining of Crude Oil, Human Security, and Alternative Livelihood Outcomes in Obhan-Emeyal (Kolo Creek) Area of Ogbia in Bayelsa State*, presents a sobering account of efforts to end artisanal crude oil refining through military force and the resulting implications for human security. Like the previous article, the authors rely on qualitative data, which shows that while military interventions have disrupted artisanal crude oil refining, their operations have equally triggered latent consequences, including increased violence, displacement, and theft. The authors recommend community-driven approaches that prioritise livelihood-based interventions within the aquaculture and agricultural value chains in the area. The article particularly clarifies how a militarised response to artisanal crude oil refining can expand the scope of human insecurity in oil-bearing communities.

The last article, authored by Anderson Samasi, is titled *The Niger Delta Environmental Advocacy Strategy in the Drive for International Oil Companies' Divestment: An Empirical Review*. The paper explores how a sustained system of environmental advocacy helped to shape the current wave of asset divestment by International Oil Corporations (IOCs) in the Niger Delta. Drawing on publications from governmental and non-governmental sources, as well as scholarly works, the article argues that protracted environmental advocacy imposed reputational and economic costs on the IOCs, prompting strategic adjustments, most notably, withdrawal from onshore operations. The article offers a cautionary perspective against assuming that divestment would necessarily benefit impacted communities and urges advocacy groups to remain focused on their objectives. The article contributes pertinent insights into the dynamic nature of environmental advocacy and resistance in the Niger Delta.

As editors, reviewers, and organisers of the conference, it has been a privilege and a pleasure to have to assemble this diverse, thoughtful, and insightful collection of papers. We sincerely hope

that readers find the articles in this *Special Issue* on the Niger Delta as insightful and enjoyable as we do.

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