# The Niger Delta Environmental Advocacy Strategy in the Drive for International Oil Companies Divestment: An Empirical Review

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## Abstract

The importance of the oil and gas industry to the Nigerian economy cannot be overemphasised, even though ethical and environmentally friendly practices were exchanged for financial gain. Massive oil spills are among the most significant impacts on the ecology and living conditions of the people in the Niger Delta, where the Nigerian oil industry operates. This article aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by examining the current state of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta caused by oil exploration and production, assessing the environmental litigation records of international oil companies (IOCs) operating in the region, and highlighting the successful case studies of environmental advocacy that have engendered corporate divestment or significant policy changes. Relying on secondary data, the study concludes that the Niger Delta has suffered decades of environmental degradation, primarily due to recurrent and large-scale oil spills, while remediation efforts have remained relatively slow and inadequate in terms of implementation. The litigation history of IOCs, resulting from the massive degradation of the environment linked to their operations in the region, is known to be a major contributor to the current wave of asset divestment. Ogoni, in Rivers State, stands out as a major example where successful environmental advocacy has led to both asset divestment and meaningful policy changes.

**Keywords:** Environmental Advocacy, IOCs, Asset Divestment, Niger Delta.

## Introduction

Oil was discovered in Nigeria in 1956, with the first commercial exchange occurring in 1958 (Ministry of Petroleum Resources, 2024). From the period that oil was discovered in commercial quantity, foreign corporations were allowed to explore for oil during the next ten years, and within this time, the oil industry expanded steadily to become a major global force, with a few exceptions owing to economic conditions. The Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) was established in 1977 and operated for over 34 years before its name was changed to Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPC-L) in 2021, with the introduction of the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) (The Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021). The oil industry continues to play a significant role as the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, contributing significantly to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and government revenue, even though it is believed that the non-oil sector, with an income of N1.5 trillion naira, outpaced the oil sector in 2023 (Oladipo, 2023).

Despite its importance to the Nigerian economy, the government placed more emphasis on financial gains over ethical and environmentally friendly practices. Massive oil spills became a major negative impact on the ecology and livelihoods of the people in the region. This naturally spurred activism in the region, with the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), founded in 1990 by Ken Saro-Wiwa, standing out as a prime example (Eronmhonsele et al., 2017). Since the beginning of environmental activism, campaigns have resulted in legal actions in Nigeria and Europe, and International Oil Corporations (IOCs) operating in the area have been subject to fines and financial obligations resulting from their contamination of the region's environment.

This study, therefore, contributes to existing knowledge on the Niger Delta region and the Nigerian oil industry by focusing on three key objectives; to examine the current state of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta due to oil exploration and production, to identify the key international oil companies (IOCs) that have operated or are currently operating in the region and their environmental litigation records, and to identify successful instances of environmental advocacy that have led to corporate asset divestment or significant policy changes.

## An Overview of the Niger Delta

Nigeria's oil-rich southern region, known as the Niger Delta, is centered on the Niger River's natural delta. Nigeria currently produces all of its oil on the country's landmass or in its waterways. It is extremely challenging to navigate and construct sizable communities in the Niger Delta since more than half of the area is composed of a network of waterways and small islands (Paul, Deirdre, and Paula, 2011). It is the largest wetland in Africa and one of the three largest in the world, covering an area of more than 20,000 square kilometers (CLO, 2002 cited in Kadafa, 2012). Rivers, streams, and estuaries make up around 2,370 square kilometers of the Niger Delta region, while stagnant swamps make up roughly 8,600 square kilometers (Amangabara, Gordon, and Obenede, 2015).

The Niger Delta's rural population is incredibly diverse, comprising roughly 40 distinct ethnic groups speaking 120 mutually incomprehensible languages and dialects. These groups typically reside in small, dispersed hamlets of 50 to 500 people, with some maintaining connections to larger towns like Port Harcourt and Warri. Notably, 62% of the region's population is under thirty years old (Paul, Deirdre and Paula, 2011). The largest ethnic group among these is the Ijaw, who speak four different dialects. Other communities inhabiting the western and eastern delta include the Ibibio-Efik, Urhobo, Isoko, Itsekiri, and Igbo subgroups.

Historically, the Niger Delta's primary vocations, especially in its rural areas, have been fishing and agriculture, still accounting for about half of all jobs. Urban areas, conversely, are dominated by the informal sector, including trade (20% of total employment) and services (9%) (NDDC, 2005 p. 20, cited in Paul, Deirdre, and Paula, 2011). Young people are less likely to work in agriculture and are more prone to migrate to cities in pursuit of employment. The Niger Delta is a petroleum-

rich region and has been the center of international concern over extensive pollution (Raimi, 2023; Jack, 2025).

Politically, the region comprises nine states in southern Nigeria: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers States. However, the central Niger Delta States are Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa. The region is home to many private and public primary and secondary schools, as well as tertiary institutions. The Niger Delta Master Plan Baseline sample study, completed in 2003, shows that the average yearly rate of population growth in most communities, based on household fertility and death statistics, is roughly 3.1%. This would suggest that in 2004, the population of the Niger Delta Region amounted to roughly 30 million. According to projections made in 2015, the population is expected to expand to between 41.5 and 48 million, depending on the growth rates used (three percent for a high growth rate or two and a half percent for a low growth rate). Table 1 below shows the estimated population of the region by state and the number of local government areas.

***Table 1:*** *Estimated Population and Number of LGAs by States in the Niger Delta*

| *State* | *Estimated Population* | *No. of LGAs* |
|---|---|---|
| *Akwa Ibom* | 7,200,000 | 31 |
| *Abia* | 3,628,055 | 17 |
| *Bayelsa* | 2,394,725 | 8 |
| *Cross River* | 3,800,000 | 18 |
| *Delta* | 6,037,667 | 25 |
| *Edo* | 8,000,000 | 18 |
| *Imo* | 5,238,416 | 27 |
| *Ondo* | 5,300,000 | 18 |
| *Rivers* | 7,303,924 | 23 |
| *Total* | 48,902,787 | 185 |

**Sources:** (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Ondo State Investment and Development Promotion Agency, 2023; Wikipedia, 2024; Akwa Ibom State Government, 2024; Delta State Government, 2024; Government of Cross River, 2024; Edo State Government, 2024)

## Current State of Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta

A report on the effects of oil pollution by the Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission, primarily tasked with investigating the impact of oil spills, revealed that cleaning up the damage in Bayelsa State, particularly in the Southern Ijaw Local Government Area, would cost $12 billion (Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission, 2023). The same report attributes a large part of the contamination to the activities of the Shell Petroleum Development Company and the Nigerian Agip Oil Company. This is consistent with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2011), which recommended a comprehensive cleanup of Ogoniland in Rivers State and

the establishment of the Ogoniland Environmental Restoration Authority and Fund, with an initial capital of US$1 billion for a cleaning process estimated to take 30 years. One study on the cleanup debate in the Niger delta paints a broader picture by noting that:

> A deep analysis should show that it would cost more than US$50 billion to clean up more than 2,500 sites in the entire Niger Delta, of which it would cost about US$6 billion for Ogoniland alone, taking about 50 years to clean the entire Niger Delta region (Akpan, Ejoh and Okafor, 2017, p. 42).

The foregoing claims by organisations and individuals highlight the level of environmental degradation the region has endured over the years. Tables 2 and 3 below shows the historical records of the volume of crude oil spills in Ogoniland from 2011 to 2021 and oil spills by states in the Niger Delta from 2022 to 2024, respectively.

***Table 2:*** *Historic Overview of Oil Spills in Ogoniland (2011-2021)*

| ***Year*** | ***Frequency of Spills*** |
|---|---|
| *2011* | 1,059 |
| *2012* | 1,135 |
| *2013* | 1,666 |
| *2014* | 1,521 |
| *2015* | 920 |
| *2016* | 684 |
| *2017* | 599 |
| *2018* | 699 |
| *2019* | 723 |
| *2020* | 440 |
| *2021* | 382 |

**Sources:** Timeline: Half a century of oil spills in Nigeria's Ogoniland (Saint, 2022); Nigerian Oil Spill Monitor (NOSDRA, 2024).

***Table 3:*** *Oil Spills in the Niger Delta (2022-2024)*

| *State* | *Incident Frequency* | *Reported Barrels of Oil Spilled* |
|---|---|---|
| *Abia* | 16 | 245.30 |
| *Akwa Ibom* | 53 | 39.74 |
| *Bayelsa* | 167 | 9,350.25 |
| *Bayelsa/Rivers* | 1 | 7 |
| *Delta* | 435 | 5,435.57 |
| *Edo* | 30 | 1,237.09 |
| *Imo* | 40 | 511.66 |
| *Ondo* | 15 | 0.67 |
| *Rivers* | 1,114 | 50,747.36 |

**Source**: Nigerian Oil Spill Monitor (NOSDRA, 2024).

## IOC Operations in the Niger Delta and Their Environmental Litigation Record

In light of oil spills in the region, local and international non-governmental organiations and people are advocating for financial compensation from International Oil Companies (IOCs) in the Niger Delta. Twenty-four (24) compensation lawsuits against Shell were heard in Nigerian courts between 1981 and 1986. According to reports, Shell had more than 500 pending court cases in Nigeria as of early 1998, with 70% (350 cases) pertaining to oil spills and the remaining 30% (150 cases) primarily dealing with other forms of damage from oil operations, contracts, employment, and taxes. Chevron reportedly had 50 court cases in Nigeria during the entire 1980s (Frynas, 2009). Chevron was involved in over 200 cases in 1998, of which about 80–90 percent (160–180 cases) dealt with oil spills, other types of damage from oil operations, or land acquisition for oil operations. In the 1990s, several high-profile cases were won by the local people and communities in the oil-producing areas, notably *Shell v. Farah*, in which 4.6 million Naira (US$210,000, according to the official exchange rate then) was awarded as damages to the plaintiffs (Frynas, 2009). In 2012, a group of 11,000 Nigerians from Bodo, Ogoniland, launched a suit against Shell at the London High Court, seeking tens of millions of dollars in compensation for the 2008 oil spills. In 2015, Shell accepted liability for the Bodo spills, agreeing to pay 55 million pounds ($83 million at the time) to Bodo villagers and to clean up their lands and waterways (Reuters, 2024).

In 2013, a Dutch court ruled that Shell could be held partially responsible for pollution in the Niger Delta, saying the company should have prevented sabotage at one of its facilities. Four Nigerians and Friends of the Earth (FoE) originally filed the suit in 2008 in the Netherlands. In 2021, Shell agreed to pay a Nigerian community 45.9 billion naira ($111.68 million) to settle a case over an oil spill with the Ejama-Ebubu community in Nigeria's Ogoniland (Reuters, 2024). The Bodo case was one of the first major success stories involving lawsuits as an instrument of resistance against the oil giant Shell in the Niger Delta region. The success of this suit encouraged other communities to follow the same path (Ogbonna, 2023).

Due in large part to the aforementioned, ExxonMobil announced in February 2022 that it would sell Mobil Producing Nigeria Unlimited (MPNU) to Seplat Energy Offshore Limited for $1.28 billion, including all of its onshore and shallow water facilities and business in Akwa Ibom State. In September 2023, Eni announced that it had signed an agreement with Oando PLC to sell Nigerian Agip Oil Company Ltd (NAOC Ltd), a wholly Eni-owned subsidiary that focused on onshore oil and gas exploration and production in Nigeria, as well as power generation. However, it continues to operate in Nigeria, concentrating on offshore activities (Eni, 2024). Equinor announced the signing of an agreement with Chappal Energies to sell Equinor Nigeria Energy Company (ENEC), which holds a 53.85% ownership in oil and gas lease OML 128 and also includes the unitized 20.21% holding in the Agbami oil field, operated by Chevron (NS Energy, 2023), in December 2023. Likewise, in January 2024, Shell announced an agreement to sell its Nigerian onshore subsidiary, the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited (SPDC), for $2.4 billion to Renaissance, a consortium of five companies comprising four

exploration and production companies based in Nigeria and an international energy group (Shell Plc, 2024).

According to the Chief Executive of the Nigeria Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC), who provided information in May 2024, a total of 26 blocks were proposed for divestment by IOCs. The estimated total reserves of these blocks are 8.211 million barrels of oil, 2,699 million barrels of condensate, 44,110 billion cubic feet of associated gas, and 46,604 billion cubic feet of non-associated gas. The estimated P3 reserves in these blocks are also 13,518 billion cubic feet of non-related gas, 14,296 billion cubic feet of associated gas, 1,221 million barrels of condensate, and 5,557 million barrels of oil. He further stated that the current average production from these blocks was 346,290 barrels per day: NAOC was 28,018 bpd; MPNU, 159,378 bpd; Equinor, 36,155 bpd; and SPDC, 122,739 bpd. But these blocks have higher production potential amounting to 643,054 barrels (NAOC - 147,481 bpd, MPNU – 244,268 bpd, Equinor – 39,203 bpd, and SPDC - 212,102 bpd) (Nnodim, 2024).

Furthermore, the Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN) (2022) believes IOCs are divesting for a range of reasons, including insecurity, oil theft, and entrenched hostilities in host communities, which ultimately contribute to the high costs and risks of continued operations; they publicly disclose that these issues are making their Nigerian assets a divestment priority. Also, Bousso (2024) notes that Shell struggled for years with hundreds of onshore oil spills as a result of theft, sabotage, and operational issues that led to costly repairs and high-profile lawsuits.

**Case Studies of Environmental Advocacy Leading to Policy Changes**

Sam et al. (2024) conducted a study between July 2018 and March 2019, before the commencement of the Ogoni clean-up and restoration project. Results indicated that almost all respondents (99.6%) agreed that the smell of petroleum products or crude oil was evident in the air they breathe, and that there were visible black particles (soot) in the respondents' nostrils, on their clothes, and in the water. The respondents described the ambient air as smoky and choked with an offensive smell. The household water was smelly, brownish, or oily, and most respondents (76%) could not afford to treat their water. Forty-two percent (42%) of the respondents who relied on fishing and farming for a living sought alternative means of subsistence and acknowledged that oil pollution caused stunted growth and low crop yield. The majority of respondents (91%) reported dwindling fish catches, while the fish caught smelled and tasted of oil, lowering their market value and posing a potential health risk to consumers.

The Ogoniland area of Rivers State, Nigeria, is one of the most polluted places on earth. The crops are burnt to a cinder, ash and tar smother the land, and the wells are polluted with oil, making the water undrinkable. The adverse effects of the petroleum industry, particularly the destruction of the natural environment, have caused entire communities in Ogoniland to suffer, with their way of life altered significantly (France24, 2021). According to Friends of the Earth International (FOEI),

between 1976 and 1991, over two million barrels of oil polluted Ogoniland in 2,976 separate oil spills, resulting from equipment failure and sabotage (Saint, 2022; Friends of the Earth International, 2019). Michael Karikpo of Environmental Rights Action buttressed that the Ogoniland pollution is a painful example of corporate impunity, where even when the tireless work of communities, individuals, and campaigners achieves some semblance of justice, it is rarely seen through (Friends of Earth International, 2019).The foregoing is believed to have engineered the emergence of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), which consistently protested against the exploration of petroleum resources in the region. Their efforts led to the cessation of oil and gas exploration in Ogoniland in 1993.

In 2011, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) released an environmental assessment report on Ogoniland, exposing extensive oil pollution and severe health risks, including polluted drinking water. The report prescribed a comprehensive cleanup of Ogoniland. The United Nations posited that it would take 30 years of effort to clean up the mess. As the FOEI (2019) notes, 'the horror of the vast stretch of black, lifeless landscape stretching out in front of us is something that has to be seen to be believed.' Amnesty International accuses multinational oil corporations of turning a blind eye to or even helping the military's use of rape, torture, and unlawful killings amid protests against pollution and poverty back in the 1990s. The Chairman of the Bayelsa State Traditional Rulers Council, King Bubaraye Dakolo, also noted that 'the principal cause of major spills is multinational corporations operating within the petroleum industry' (Dakolo, 2021).

## Conclusion

This study has contributed to the existing body of knowledge on the Niger Delta region and the Nigerian oil industry through a review of relevant literature. Based on secondary data, it concludes that the Niger Delta environment has suffered decades of disarticulation, destruction, and degradation due to massive oil spills, amidst slow remediation attempts by the Nigerian government and the IOCs responsible for these heinous acts. It also submits that there is a history of litigation against these IOCs owing to the degradation of the environment from their operations in the region, and these lawsuits are significantly contributing to their current drive for divestment. It further concludes that the Ogoni case is a strong reference point, exemplifying success stories where advocacy has led to IOCs divestment strategy and policy change. Ultimately, the advocacy and the litigation approaches have dovetailed to facilitate the cessation of oil exploration in Ogoniland.

## Recommendations

In light of the conclusion of this study, the following are recommended:

i. The introduction of ethical and sustainable rules in the regulatory frameworks for the oil and gas industry is crucial: Nigeria's current regulatory framework, the Petroleum Industry Act, 2021 (PIA), lacks clear elements of sustainability and ethical practices, such as transparency and corporate governance, thereby prioritising profit. This weak ethical framework for community participation is likely to cause unsustainability and ethical confusion in the industry. One key example is the clause that forces local communities to cover repair costs for damages to oil facilities or production interruptions caused by vandalism, sabotage, or civil unrest. This is a direct prioritization of profit over democratic, ethical, and sustainable practices. It restricts the civil rights of communities, especially when companies are acting against them, and is potentially backed by government threats to promote uninterrupted oil production activities.

ii. Direct federal government intervention benefitting local communities through climate and ecological schemes: Intervention programmes such as the Ecological Fund and Climate Fund, established by the Climate Change Act (CCA) of 2021 and other related bills, are federal initiatives that should bypass state and local governments to directly target affected communities. They should be communicated to community leaders because they feel the adverse effects the most. Therefore, projects that are more meaningful to communities should be implemented to adapt to or mitigate the adverse effects of climate and environmental change.

iii. Advocacy should be directed towards sustainable practices: The goal of non-governmental organisations' and individuals' campaigning should not be to completely stop the oil and gas industry's operations, but rather to ensure they continue within environmentally sound parameters. Halting industry operations is detrimental to the social and economic well-being of the host communities. Operations in the oil and gas sector provide job and migration opportunities, as the sector provides job, business opportunities, and an overall boost to the local economy.

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