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The Distribution of Public Infrastructure and Incidence of Violence and Protests in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria exemplified the paradox of resource abundance coexisting with chronic underdevelopment, environmental degradation, and recurrent social unrest. This study examined the extent to which disparities in the distribution of public infrastructure predict the frequency of protests in oil-producing communities within the Niger Delta. Drawing on Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) as its conceptual framework, the study employed a descriptive survey design covering five oil-producing Local Government Areas across Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, and Edo States. Using a sample size of 385 respondents derived through Yamane's formula, data were collected with a structured questionnaire designed to capture perceptions on infrastructure distribution, community participation, and protest dynamics. Data analysis using Simple Linear Regression in SPSS version 27 revealed that disparities in public infrastructure distribution significantly predict the frequency of protests ($p < 0.05$). These findings align with existing scholarship (e.g., Akinwale, 2021; Collier et al., 2023) which identifies infrastructural neglect, environmental degradation, and exclusion as key drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta. The study concluded that equitable, transparent, and participatory infrastructure planning—supported by the provisions of the Petroleum Industry Act (2021) is critical to reducing social unrest and fostering sustainable development. It recommend that government agencies and multinational oil companies, particularly the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), prioritise inclusive development strategies that address local grievances and rebuild trust with host communities.

Keywords: *Niger Delta, Public infrastructure, Protests, Petroleum Industry Act, Oil-producing communities, SPDC, Sustainable development*

Introduction

The Niger Delta, rich in oil and gas resources, paradoxically remains one of Nigeria's most underdeveloped and restive regions. Despite the presence of immense natural wealth, the distribution of public infrastructure in the region has historically been uneven and widely perceived as inadequate (Ekpo & Agwu, 2021). Public infrastructure, including roads, hospitals, schools, electricity, and water supply, is vital for economic growth and social stability; however, communities in the Niger Delta often experience infrastructural neglect, which contributes to feelings of marginalization and discontent (Amadi et al., 2023). The persistence of this paradox raises questions about the extent to which disparities in infrastructural distribution may be linked to patterns of violence and frequent protests across the region.

Historically, scholars have pointed out that infrastructural inequality in the Niger Delta fuels socio-political grievances and deepens perceptions of injustice (Olukoju & Osaretin, 2022). Many communities argue that oil-producing areas suffer environmental degradation without corresponding infrastructural compensation, intensifying frustration (Darah, 2024). Moreover, the inadequate provision of public goods often limits economic opportunities, perpetuates poverty, and creates fertile ground for militant activities and violent protests. These dynamics suggest that the distribution of public

infrastructure is more than a development issue; it may also serve as a catalyst for recurrent conflict and agitation in the region (Edeh & Nwachukwu, 2020).

Recent empirical studies have highlighted an alarming connection between infrastructural disparities and the escalation of violent protests in oil-rich communities (Okoye et al., 2021). For instance, rural communities lacking basic services have been more likely to resort to disruptive demonstrations to draw attention to their plight. Conversely, areas with relatively better infrastructure have reported fewer instances of unrest (Agbakwuru & Adedeji, 2023). Such patterns underscore the importance of equitable infrastructure distribution not just for development but for peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

The consequences of infrastructural inequality extend beyond local communities, affecting national economic stability and investor confidence. Frequent protests often result in pipeline vandalism, shutdowns of oil facilities, and costly repairs, which negatively impact government revenue and Nigeria's reputation in global energy markets (Ishaka & Jaja, 2022). This cyclical relationship between infrastructural neglect, protests, and violence underscores the urgency of empirical investigations into the underlying drivers of these conflicts in the Niger Delta.

Despite policy efforts such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and various interventionist projects, widespread dissatisfaction remains (Abada et al., 2021). Critics argue that these interventions have not significantly narrowed infrastructural gaps, partly due to governance challenges, corruption, and politicization of project siting. Consequently, community protests continue to emerge as a direct response to perceived exclusion and state neglect (Ogbodo & Ugwuanyi, 2024).

The statement of the problem thus centres on a critical question: To what extent does the distribution of public infrastructure influence the incidence of violence and protests in the Niger Delta? While previous research has described the socio-economic conditions of the region, there remains a gap in systematically linking infrastructural distribution patterns to specific episodes of violence and protest. Understanding this relationship is essential for designing targeted policies that address root causes rather than symptoms of conflict. Against this backdrop, the study seeks to empirically examine how variations in the distribution of public infrastructure affect the frequency and intensity of violence and protests in the Niger Delta. The findings are expected to inform policymakers and development agencies on the importance of equitable infrastructure planning as a strategy for conflict mitigation.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to examine the distribution of public infrastructure and incidence of violence and protests in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. To achieve this, the study intends to:

1. assess the extent to which disparities in the distribution of public infrastructure predict the frequency of protests in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta.

Hypothesis

1. H_0 : Disparities in the distribution of public infrastructure do not significantly predict the frequency of protests in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta.

Review of Related Literature

Concept of Resources Distribution

Resources distribution refers broadly to the way economic, social, and physical assets are allocated within and among societies. According to Adegboye and Olanrewaju (2021), it encompasses the spatial, sectoral, and demographic patterns through which resources such as infrastructure, public services, and economic opportunities reach different groups or regions. The distribution process reflects not only economic priorities but also political choices, institutional arrangements, and historical inequalities. Scholars emphasize that resource distribution is a central mechanism through which states seek

to promote equity, stimulate development, and reduce conflict, yet it can equally become a source of grievance when perceived as unjust (Okoro et al., 2023).

The concept also involves both tangible and intangible assets, including education, healthcare, roads, power supply, and financial resources allocated through national or regional budgets. Recent studies underline that how resources are distributed significantly affects human development outcomes, poverty levels, and social stability (Ekhatior & Odubela, 2023). For instance, when critical infrastructure and services concentrate disproportionately in urban centres while rural or marginalized areas remain underserved, it often exacerbates poverty and fuels perceptions of systemic neglect (Ogbodo, 2022). This perspective highlights that distribution is not merely an administrative exercise but a deeply political and social process tied to notions of justice and citizenship.

Moreover, scholars like Chukwu and Nwachukwu (2022) argue that resource distribution must be assessed not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of fairness, inclusivity, and responsiveness to local needs. They propose that equitable distribution considers historical disadvantages and actively corrects imbalances rather than simply providing equal shares. This normative approach moves beyond numbers and examines whether resource allocation contributes to reducing inequality, empowering disadvantaged communities, and fostering peace (Amadi et al., 2023). Unequal distribution, on the other hand, often reinforces structural inequalities and can lead to grievances manifesting as protests or conflict.

In the context of resource-rich regions like Nigeria's Niger Delta, the study of resource distribution takes on heightened importance. Ebitari and Wilson (2023) note that despite contributing significantly to national revenue through oil production, many communities in the Niger Delta experience inadequate infrastructure and social services. This disparity highlights how resource distribution intersects with environmental justice, governance, and identity politics. Ultimately, the scholarly consensus from recent literature suggests that equitable and transparent distribution of resources is essential not only for economic development but also for social harmony and conflict prevention (PIND Foundation, 2023; Fund for Peace, 2023).

Overview of the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta, located in southern Nigeria, is one of the world's most complex and resource-rich wetland regions. Covering about 70,000 square kilometers, it includes nine oil-producing states: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers (Okoro et al., 2023). Geographically, it is characterized by an intricate network of creeks, rivers, and mangrove swamps that sustain unique biodiversity and support millions of livelihoods, especially in fishing and agriculture (PIND Foundation, 2023). The discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri in 1956 transformed the Niger Delta into Nigeria's economic backbone, making it central to national revenue generation (Amadi et al., 2023).

Despite its wealth, the region faces persistent underdevelopment and infrastructural deficits. Scholars observe that while the oil sector contributes over 80% of Nigeria's export earnings, local communities experience limited reinvestment in critical infrastructure such as healthcare, roads, and education (Ekhatior & Odubela, 2023). This uneven development has widened socio-economic inequalities within the region, fueling grievances among local populations. Many residents perceive this neglect as both a legacy of colonial economic patterns and a consequence of post-independence governance failures (Ogbodo, 2022).

Environmental degradation further compounds these challenges. Oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation have significantly damaged farmland and water bodies, threatening livelihoods and public health (Udo, 2023). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has highlighted the severity of ecological destruction in Ogoniland and other parts of the Delta, noting that clean-up and restoration will require decades (PIND Foundation, 2023). This environmental crisis has deepened the sense of injustice among affected communities, who often feel that the benefits of resource extraction bypass them entirely (Okeke, 2023).

The Niger Delta's social landscape is equally complex, shaped by ethnic diversity and historical struggles for self-determination. Over 40 ethnic groups live in the region, including the Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ogoni, and Ibibio, each with distinct identities and political interests (Nwankwo, 2022). Tensions over resource control, ethnic representation, and uneven development have at times escalated into conflict and militancy, most notably through groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) (Ebitari & Wilson, 2023). These groups have used protests, sabotage, and armed resistance to press demands for greater autonomy and development.

In response, various state and non-state actors have launched interventions to stabilize and develop the region. These include the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, and the Presidential Amnesty Programme (Ige, 2022). However, scholars argue that these initiatives have often been undermined by corruption, inadequate community participation, and poor implementation (Fund for Peace, 2023). As the literature suggests, addressing the Niger Delta's challenges requires inclusive governance, environmental justice, and equitable distribution of oil wealth to transform the region's potential into sustainable development and peace (Amadi et al., 2023; PIND Foundation, 2023).

Distribution of Public Infrastructure and the Incidence of Violence and Protests in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

The Niger Delta region stands as a paradox: it is Nigeria's most resource-rich zone, yet remains one of its most underdeveloped areas. This gap between resource wealth and development has fuelled decades of frustration, resentment, and instability. Scholars such as Akinwale (2021) observe that despite being central to Nigeria's economic prosperity through oil production, the region continues to suffer from limited and unevenly distributed public infrastructure. Basic amenities like roads, healthcare centres, schools, and electricity remain inadequate in many oil-producing communities, leading to persistent grievances against both the state and multinational corporations operating in the area.

The skewed allocation of infrastructure creates sharp contrasts between urban centres and rural oil-producing communities, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion and neglect. According to Nwachukwu (2020), this pattern deepens socio-economic divides and contributes to the frequent eruptions of protests and violent actions by affected communities. These protests are not merely spontaneous reactions but are often the product of longstanding dissatisfaction over unfulfilled promises and chronic infrastructural deficits. The underinvestment in essential public services has thus become both a symptom and a cause of recurring unrest in the Niger Delta.

Violent conflicts in the region have been examined from various perspectives, with scholars identifying both economic and grievance-driven triggers. Collier et al. (2023) highlight poverty, underdevelopment, and unequal access to economic opportunities as key contributors to unrest in resource-rich regions like the Niger Delta. Others, like Nafziger and Auvinen (2003), stress that social exclusion and inequality can transform economic deprivation into open conflict. Drawing on political economy frameworks, Fox and Hoelscher (2010) argue that factors such as political instability, poverty, and institutional weaknesses collectively escalate social violence, particularly in contexts where natural resource wealth is poorly managed and unevenly distributed.

The Niger Delta has remained a focal point for these dynamics, as oil discoveries since the 1950s have generated substantial national revenue but minimal direct benefit for local communities (Joab-Peterside et al., 2021). Decades of oil exploration have led to environmental degradation, economic marginalization, and inadequate infrastructural investment, often resulting in loss of livelihoods and deep-seated resentment. Interventions by government agencies like the NDDC and programmes such as the Presidential Amnesty Programme have attempted to address these challenges, yet violence and protests continue, suggesting that these measures may have fallen short due to governance failures, corruption, and a lack of local engagement (Ige, 2022).

Recent analyses show that protests in the Niger Delta are frequently triggered by immediate and visible failures in infrastructure provision, such as the poor state of roads, unreliable power supply, and uncompleted development projects. Okoro (2023) documents protests in Delta State during 2023, where youths blocked transport routes to demand urgent infrastructural improvements. Similarly, Ekhatior and Odubela (2023) report that neglected rural communities, particularly

those producing oil, feel especially aggrieved, as they bear the brunt of oil-related environmental degradation without corresponding infrastructural compensation.

Environmental damage compounds these challenges. Oil spills, gas flaring, and contamination have devastated farmland and water bodies, increasing dependence on government-provided infrastructure that is either lacking or inadequate. Udo (2023) notes that without effective investment in infrastructure to mitigate environmental harm, affected communities become more likely to engage in protests and sabotage of oil installations as a form of resistance and demand for justice.

Furthermore, demographic dynamics such as youth unemployment amplify the potential for unrest. Nwankwo (2022) explains that young people in the Niger Delta, who experience both high unemployment and limited access to education and skills infrastructure, often see protests and militancy as channels to voice their grievances and demand change. This aligns with broader evidence that inadequate and unequal infrastructure distribution fosters perceptions of marginalization, fuelling cycles of protests and violence (Fund for Peace, 2023; PIND Foundation, 2023). Addressing these issues requires not only increased investment but also equitable and participatory infrastructure planning to rebuild trust and reduce conflict.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Relative Deprivation Theory as refined by Gurr (1970) and advanced by recent scholars such as Agbiboa (2021) and Alao and Ogundiya (2022). Originally introduced by Ted Robert Gurr in his work *Why Men Rebel* (1970), the theory has been updated to explain contemporary resource-driven conflicts, particularly in contexts like the Niger Delta, where perceived disparities between expected and actual resource distribution shape collective grievances (Agbiboa, 2021).

At its core, Relative Deprivation Theory posits that individuals or groups experience feelings of frustration and anger when there is a gap between their legitimate expectations and the actual conditions they perceive (Alao & Ogundiya, 2022). This psychological sense of deprivation is not always based on absolute poverty; rather, it emerges when communities feel unfairly treated compared to others with similar or fewer contributions to national wealth. Recent studies emphasize that such perceived injustices become stronger drivers of protest and violence when they persist over time, are linked to visible inequalities, or are reinforced by political exclusion (Bamidele & Abisoye, 2023).

Moreover, the theory highlights that structural factors—such as governance failures, corruption, and skewed policy decisions—often intensify perceptions of deprivation (Okoli & Orinya, 2021). For instance, when local populations see resource revenues being invested disproportionately in urban centres or non-oil-producing regions, their sense of marginalization deepens. This feeling is compounded when government-led interventions or corporate social responsibility projects fail to meet promised development goals, creating a credibility gap that can spark protests and escalate into violence (Yakubu & Isa, 2024).

Recent scholarship also argues that the emotional force of relative deprivation—expressed as collective resentment—can transform peaceful demands into organized resistance or militancy, especially in contexts where state responses are repressive rather than inclusive (Danladi, 2023). This dynamic explains why resource-rich but underdeveloped regions often witness more intense and prolonged unrest compared to poorer regions with less economic significance (Oyetade, 2022). The role of shared group identity, particularly ethnic or community ties, strengthens this mobilization by framing grievances in terms of communal injustice.

Applied to the Niger Delta, Relative Deprivation Theory helps explain why communities that produce Nigeria's oil—yet remain underdeveloped—mobilize protests and sometimes engage in violent resistance. Despite contributing significantly to national revenue, these communities perceive a persistent gap between what they expect in terms of roads, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, and what is actually delivered (Alao & Ogundiya, 2022). This sense of deprivation, deepened by environmental degradation and weak governance accountability, drives cycles of protest,

vandalism of oil infrastructure, and, in some cases, militant action aimed at drawing national and global attention to their plight (Yakubu & Isa, 2024).

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate the relationship between the distribution of public infrastructure and the incidence of violence and protests in the Niger Delta. The target population comprises an estimated 1,200,000 residents living in oil-producing communities across Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa States, selected due to their recurrent history of infrastructure-related protests and conflict (Ebitari & Wilson, 2023). Using stratified random sampling, communities were categorized based on proximity to oil facilities and levels of infrastructural development to ensure balanced representation of both urban and rural oil-bearing areas. To determine an adequate sample size, Cochran’s formula was applied with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, yielding a sample size of 384 respondents, which was increased to 400 to account for potential non-responses. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire adapted from validated instruments measuring perceived infrastructure adequacy and protest behaviour (Yakubu & Isa, 2024). Reliability testing through a pilot study produced a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.82, confirming internal consistency. Descriptive statistics (means and frequencies) and inferential statistics, specifically multiple regression analysis, were conducted to test the hypothesis that disparities in infrastructure distribution significantly predict protest frequency. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 27. The study obtained ethical clearance from a local university research ethics committee, and written informed consent was secured from all participants in line with recent ethical recommendations for research in conflict-prone regions (Danladi, 2023; Oyetade, 2022).

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

| Variable | Category | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------|---------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender | Male | 228 | 59.2% |
| | Female | 157 | 40.8% |
| Age | 18–25 years | 92 | 23.9% |
| | 26–35 years | 144 | 37.4% |
| | 36–45 years | 96 | 24.9% |
| | 46 years and above | 53 | 13.8% |
| Education | No formal education | 22 | 5.7% |
| | Secondary school | 113 | 29.4% |
| | Diploma/NCE | 97 | 25.2% |
| | Bachelor’s degree | 125 | 32.5% |
| | Postgraduate | 28 | 7.3% |
| Marital Status | Single | 159 | 41.3% |

| Variable | Category | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|----------|--------------------|---------------|----------------|
| | Married | 191 | 49.6% |
| | Divorced/Separated | 24 | 6.2% |
| | Widowed | 11 | 2.9% |

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

As shown in Table 1, the study sample had more male respondents (59.2%) than females (40.8%). The largest age group was between 26–35 years (37.4%), suggesting the sample was relatively youthful. Regarding education, most respondents had at least secondary education, with 32.5% holding a bachelor's degree, while only 5.7% had no formal education. Marital status distribution shows that nearly half of respondents were married (49.6%), while 41.3% were single. These findings reflect a sample that is young, moderately educated, and predominantly married, which may influence perceptions of infrastructure needs and engagement in protests.

Hypothesis

H_{01} : Disparities in the distribution of public infrastructure do not significantly predict the frequency of protests in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta.

a) Model Summary

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|-------|-------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | 0.450 | 0.203 | 0.201 | 0.768 |

b) ANOVA Table

| Model | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. (p) |
|------------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|----------|
| Regression | 55.23 | 1 | 55.23 | 94.09 | 0.000 |
| Residual | 224.89 | 383 | 0.587 | | |
| Total | 280.12 | 384 | | | |

c) Coefficients Table

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. (p) |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|------|----------|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | |
| (Constant) | 0.93 | 0.16 | | 5.90 |
| Disparities in infrastructure | 0.55 | 0.056 | 0.45 | 9.70 |

The model summary table shows that $R^2=0.203 \rightarrow$ about 20.3% of the variance in protests frequency is explained by disparities in infrastructure. From the ANOVA table we see that $F(1, 383)=94.09, p<0.001$, and this shows that the model

is statistically significant. The regression coefficient table indicates that regression equation: $\text{Protests} = 0.93 + 0.55 \times \text{Disparities}$. The coefficient ($B=0.55$) is significant ($p<0.001$), meaning that for every unit increase in perceived disparities, protest frequency increases by 0.55.

Since $p<0.05$, we reject H_0 . Disparities in the distribution of public infrastructure significantly predict the frequency of protests. Results showed that disparities significantly predicted protests, $F(1, 383)=94.09$, $p<0.001$, explaining about 20.3% of the variance ($R^2=0.203$). The regression coefficient ($B=0.55$, $p<0.001$) indicates that higher perceived disparities are associated with more frequent protests.

Discussion of Finding

The findings of this study, which revealed that disparities in the distribution of public infrastructure significantly predict the frequency of protests in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta, strongly align with the extensive literature documenting the paradox of wealth and underdevelopment in the region. Scholars such as Akinwale (2021) and Nwachukwu (2020) have emphasized how the skewed allocation of infrastructure between urban and rural oil-producing communities deepens feelings of exclusion and fuels repeated cycles of grievance and unrest. This study supports these observations by empirically demonstrating that inadequate and unevenly distributed roads, schools, healthcare centres, and electricity directly contribute to protests, reflecting local frustration over persistent marginalisation despite the region's contribution to Nigeria's economic prosperity.

Moreover, the study's findings echo arguments by scholars like Collier et al. (2023) and Fox and Hoelscher (2010), who link poor resource governance, political instability, and infrastructural neglect with the escalation of social violence in resource-rich contexts. The Niger Delta experience, as documented by Okoro (2023) and Ekhator and Odubela (2023), shows how immediate, visible failures in infrastructure—exacerbated by environmental degradation and high youth unemployment (Nwankwo, 2022)—often trigger protests as communities seek compensation and justice. By confirming that disparities in infrastructure distribution significantly predict protest frequency, this study underscores the importance of addressing structural inequalities and involving local stakeholders in equitable and participatory planning as a pathway to sustainable peace and development in the Niger Delta.

Conclusion

The results revealed a significant positive relationship between infrastructural disparities and protest frequency ($\beta = 0.451$, $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that perceived and actual inequalities in development allocation contribute meaningfully to social unrest and community agitation. The study therefore concludes that uneven distribution of public infrastructure remains a major underlying driver of protest and conflict in the region.

Recommendation

Policymakers and oil multinationals, especially SPDC, should ensure that infrastructural projects are fairly allocated across communities. Transparent criteria for project selection and implementation should be established to reduce perceptions of marginalisation that often trigger protests.

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