

The Politics of Environmental Clean-ups in the Niger Delta: A Place Where Vultures Feast

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ABSTRACT

This study critically interrogates the politics of environmental clean-ups in the Niger Delta, using the Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP) and the UNEP Ogoniland report as focal points. Drawing on the frameworks of political ecology, environmental justice, and the resource curse theory, using a qualitative methodology, the research exposes how oil remediation efforts have been compromised by elite capture, rent-seeking, and governance failures. Rather than functioning as genuine ecological interventions, clean-up operations have become arenas of political patronage, marked by opaque procurement processes, institutional sabotage, and the marginalization of affected communities. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of government reports, leaked documents, and civil society data, the study reveals the systemic disempowerment of local stakeholders and the collapse of participatory environmental governance. It argues that remediation in the Niger Delta has become symbolic serving more to preserve political interests than to restore polluted ecosystems or protect human health. The findings underscore the urgent need for structural reforms: independent oversight, transparency in contract administration, and genuine grassroots inclusion. The paper concludes that without addressing the underlying political economy of oil pollution, clean-up efforts will remain performative. The Niger Delta, framed here as a carcass upon which the state and its allies feed, stands as both a metaphor and a reality of ecological injustice in resource-rich but politically broken contexts.

KEYWORDS

Environmental Clean-up, Politics, Elite Capture, Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP), Environmental Justice, Niger Delta

1. Introduction

The Niger Delta stands as one of the world's most ecologically diverse and economically strategic coastal regions. Home to approximately 30 million people, the region's vast wetlands and mangrove forests support livelihoods centered on fishing, agriculture, and forestry (Anwan et al., 2016). The discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri in 1956, and the commencement of commercial production by 1958 (Onuoha, 2008; Anifowose, 2008), signaled a dramatic shift in Nigeria's development trajectory. Today, the Niger Delta contributes over 90% of national oil production and accounts for nearly 80-90% of foreign exchange earnings solidifying Nigeria's status as a rentier petro-state (Ejiba, Onyia, & Adams,



2016; Nwanolue, Ezeamama, & Okeke, 2022; UNEP, 2011). Yet, paradoxically, the region that sustains the nation's wealth remains one of its most impoverished, polluted, and politically marginalized areas. Beneath the surface of petroleum wealth lies a multilayered crisis of ecological devastation, economic exclusion, and elite-driven manipulation of remediation efforts. Oil exploration has not only scarred the landscape but has also become entangled in political patronage, where clean-up operations serve as avenues for enrichment rather than environmental justice. The governance of environmental remediation is thus a contested political terrain shaped by rent-seeking, regulatory capture, and institutional inertia.

Oil dependency has incurred a steep ecological price. According to Amnesty International, an estimated 9 to 13 million barrels of oil have been spilled in the Niger Delta over the past five decades comparable to suffering an Exxon Valdez-scale disaster annually (Mathiason, 2009). Official figures grossly underrepresent this reality: while the Department of Petroleum Resources recorded 1.89 million barrels spilled between 1976 and 1996, the United Nations Development Programme (2006) documented over 6,800 spill incidents between 1976 and 2001, accounting for nearly 3 million barrels lost, with more than 70% unrecovered (Ejiba et al., 2016).

Recent geospatial data indicates that from 2006 to 2019, the region experienced 7,940 spill incidents 67% of which occurred onshore. Of these, 81% were attributed to sabotage, while corrosion and equipment failure accounted for 6% and 7%, respectively (Akinwumiju, Adelodun, & Ogundeji, 2020). Contributing factors include decaying infrastructure, illegal bunkering, poor maintenance practices, and human error (Obida, Blackburn, Whyatt, & Semple, 2020; Lindén & Pålsson, 2013). The ecological toll is staggering: Nigeria's mangrove forests which once covered over 7,400 km² have been severely degraded, with 5–10% lost to oil contamination and land-use change (Lindén & Pålsson, 2013). These disruptions reverberate across ecosystems, contaminating soil and groundwater, and eroding biodiversity.

The consequences extend beyond the environment. The Niger Delta faces acute public health and food security challenges. Oil pollution has led to a ~60% drop in household food security, a 36% decline in vitamin C in vegetables, a 40% reduction in cassava protein, and a 24% increase in childhood malnutrition (Ordinioha & Brisibe, 2013). In communities close to oil spill sites, neonatal mortality is nearly double the national rate, rising from 38 to 76 deaths per 1,000 live births (Bruederle & Hodler, 2019). Long-term exposure to hydrocarbons and heavy metals has also been linked with severe health conditions, including respiratory illnesses, cancers, organ damage, and birth defects (Obida et al., 2020; Ordinioha & Brisibe, 2013). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was alarmed by this findings, then released a landmark report on Ogoniland in 2011. It recommended an initial US\$1 billion investment for environmental restoration, that is stressing a 25–30 year clean-up process alongside urgent measures like bioremediation, safe drinking water, and community-driven environmental governance (UNEP, 2011). In response, the Nigerian government created the Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP) under the Ministry of Environment in 2012. While it was welcomed as a turning point, HYPREP soon came to reflect the wider failures of state institutions. Investigative reporting and UNEP audits between 2021 and 2024 revealed systemic corruption and negligence. Over half of the contractors lacked experience, remediation labs were under-equipped, and environmental audits were deliberately obstructed (Amnesty International, 2020; Chinedu, 2024). Former

Environment Minister Sharon Ikeazor's efforts to remove politically connected saboteurs were swiftly reversed. Cleanup contracts became vehicles for political patronage rather than public service. Thus, the Niger Delta became, in effect, a place where vultures feast where state-sanctioned remediation morphed into a lucrative racket for elites, while devastated communities remain mired in toxic stagnation.

The environmental crisis is equally a socioeconomic catastrophe. The collapse of farming and fisheries has triggered displacement, unemployment, and deepening rural poverty. In Bayelsa State, residents lament how once-fertile farmlands have become lifeless wastelands, decades after spill events (Ratcliffe, 2019). These patterns fuel rural–urban migration, overburden city infrastructure, and deepen the paradox of oil wealth amid community impoverishment.

The politicization of environmental cleanup perpetuates a cycle of distrust between affected communities, oil companies, and the Nigerian state. Numerous reports have documented how HYPREP contracts are consistently awarded to politically favored firms with little to no technical competence often in contravention of UNEP protocols (Chinedu, 2024). Audits are ignored, laboratory analysis is underfunded, and institutional bottlenecks abound. Environmental restoration has become another arena for elite capture and transactional politics, reinforcing the dynamics of the resource curse where resource-rich regions remain underdeveloped due to governance failure (University of St. Gallen, 2023).

2. Statement of the Problem

Environmental remediation in resource-rich settings succeeds where transparency, scientific rigour, strong institutions, and meaningful community participation align (e.g., UNEP and post-spill responses globally). Regardless of this landmark diagnostics such as UNEP's 2011 Ogoniland report and the creation of HYPREP, the Niger Delta in stark contrast has seen little substantive restoration: clean-ups remain patchy, slow, and frequently mismanaged. Crucially, the problem is less technical than political. Agencies that are charged with remediation (notably HYPREP and NOSDRA) are undermined by weak institutional autonomy, opaque procurement, political and corporate interference, and the sidelining of community voices; contracts are often awarded to firms lacking relevant capacity, while oversight and laboratory verification are compromised (Obida et al., 2020; UNEP, 2011). The result is a dual failure: persisting ecological and public-health harms on the one hand, and the politicization of remediation which corrodes legitimacy and diverts resources on the other. Existing scholarship has tended to emphasize contamination levels, technologies, and budgets, paying insufficient attention to the political ecosystem that shapes remediation outcomes. This study therefore interrogates remediation as a political act: why, despite resources and international support, has restoration failed in the Niger Delta, and how do elite interests and institutional weaknesses subvert environmental justice?

3. Conceptual Clarification

3.1 Historical Trajectory of Oil Exploration in Nigeria

The crude oil discovery and exploitation in Nigeria represent a turning point in the nation's economic and environmental history, most especially for the Niger Delta. Crude Oil exploration began in 1908 when the German-owned Nigerian Bitumen Corporation drilled at Araromi in present-day Ondo State, but operations were halted by World War I in 1914 (Udosen, Etok, & George, 2009; Ite et al., 2013). Activity resumed in 1937 under the Shell D'Arcy, which was granted exclusive exploration

rights, though progress was again interrupted by World War II before restarting fully in 1946 (Akanmidu, 2015; Afe, 2008).

After years of surveys and test drilling, Shell-BP (successor to Shell D'Arcy) struck oil in commercial quantities at Oloibiri in 1956, and launched Nigeria's petroleum industry (Kazeem, 2020; Nriagu, 2019). As at 1958, crude oil exports began at around 5,100 barrels per day, soon attracting other multinational companies such as Mobil, Gulf (Chevron), Agip, and Elf in the 1960s (Udosen et al., 2009; Ite et al., 2013).

This discovery of crude oil transformed Nigeria's political economy from largely agrarian to oil-dependent. The 1970s oil boom entrenched petroleum as the country's primary revenue source, contributing more than 80% of foreign exchange and over 90% of exports (Watts, 2004; Omeje, 2006). Membership in OPEC (1971) and creation of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) in 1977 strengthened state control, though they also complicated governance and fiscal relations (Ukeje, 2001; Aghalino & Eyinla, 2009).

Alongside the economic benefits, crude oil production devastated the Niger Delta. A region of rivers, estuaries, swamps, and mangroves was reshaped by pipelines and drilling sites, with frequent spills, gas flaring, and land degradation undermining farming and fishing livelihoods. By the 1980s, frustration grew as oil wealth has failed to improve local living conditions, leaving producing communities impoverished and marginalized (Anifowose et al., 2012; Ite et al., 2016).

This inequity sparked resistance movements, most notably the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), founded in the early 1990s under Ken Saro-Wiwa. MOSOP accused the state and Shell of "environmental genocide" in Ogoniland. Saro-Wiwa's execution in 1995 by the military regime provoked global condemnation and drew international focus to the Niger Delta crisis (Ikelegbe, 2005; Watts, 2004).

Democratic rule from 1999 raised hopes of reform, leading to institutions like the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs. However, corruption, weak oversight, and political interference curtailed their effectiveness (Osaghae, 1995; Omeje, 2006). Environmental remediation remained inadequate, with communities continuing to suffer without proper compensation.

In 2011, a major milestone came with the UNEP report on Ogoniland, which detailed severe ecological damage and proposed a 25–30 year clean-up framework. The Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP) was created to lead this effort. Yet, over a decade later, progress has been very slow. Reports highlighted poor implementation, politicized contracts, and limited community involvement, suggesting that clean-up projects often serve elite interests rather than genuine restoration (UNEP, 2011; Obida et al., 2020).

3.2 Environmental Justice

Environmental justice functions both as a theoretical lens and as a practical demand, emphasizing that no group should disproportionately carry the weight of environmental risks while being denied access to ecological and social benefits (USEPA, 2020). Its scope goes beyond protecting natural resources to include equity in health, housing, access to clean water, and participation in governance processes (Ejumudo, 2014). The global recognition of this idea intensified in the 1980s, following evidence that marginalized communities were more exposed to pollution and ecological harm,

which shifted debates about sustainability toward fairness and inclusion (Wayne et al., 2010). In the African context, however, the pursuit of environmental justice is intertwined with legacies of colonial extraction, persistent inequality, and struggles for accountability, where justice must also mean remediation, empowerment, and democratic voice (Bizuneh et al., 2019).

The urgency of this framework is most visible in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Despite fueling the national economy for decades, the region remains impoverished and ecologically devastated. Continuous oil spills, rampant gas flaring, and unchecked deforestation since the mid-20th century have eroded livelihoods and ecosystems (Aghalino & Eyinla, 2009; Anifowose et al., 2012). Politically marginalized ethnic communities face exclusion from decisions about extraction and remediation, enduring what Schlosberg describes as "recognition injustice"—the silencing of identity, agency, and participation. Regulatory bodies such as NOSDRA and interventions like HYPREP have been undermined by weak institutional capacity and elite capture, enabling multinational corporations to externalize damage while diverting rents away from local development (Obida et al., 2020). For the Niger Delta, therefore, environmental justice cannot be separated from social justice. It calls for restitution through cleanup, reparation, and fair distribution of benefits, alongside access to basic infrastructure, health services, potable water, and genuine participation in shaping the region's economic and ecological future (Ejumudo, 2014).

3.3 Political Ecology

Political ecology provides a critical framework for examining environmental problems as outcomes of unequal power relations, struggles over resources, and structural inequalities, rather than as neutral ecological phenomena. Since its emergence in the late twentieth century, particularly in the seminal work of Blaikie and Brookfield (1987), the approach has emphasized how political and economic systems shape patterns of environmental change and determine whose interests are served or silenced (Bryant, 1998). In the Niger Delta, this perspective is indispensable, as decades of oil extraction have generated enormous revenues for the state and multinational corporations while simultaneously deepening the poverty, ecological vulnerability, and political exclusion of local communities. The persistence of oil spills, gas flaring, and inadequate remediation is not coincidental but reflects deliberate choices that privilege profit and state revenue over environmental protection and community well-being (Okoli, 2013; Obida et al., 2020). By situating ecological decline within broader contexts of governance failure, corruption, and elite capture, political ecology redirects attention from the technical aspects of pollution to deeper questions of accountability, justice, and inequality. The experience of the Niger Delta illustrates this vividly, where marginalized fishing and farming communities bear the heaviest burdens, and grassroots mobilizations such as MOSOP connect demands for ecological survival with broader claims to recognition, equity, and justice. Even state-led interventions like HYPREP demonstrate the same dynamics, as remediation processes are often politicized and shaped by elite interests rather than responding to the urgent needs of affected populations.

3.4 Elite Capture and Clientelism

Elite capture occurs when powerful groups redirect public resources such as contracts, funding, and appointments for their own benefit rather than the wider population (Bassey & Edemidiong, 2021). It is a form of corruption in which influential actors manipulate allocations to secure disproportionate

gains. Patronage politics refers to rewarding loyal supporters party affiliates, ethnic groups, or personal allies with positions, contracts, or exemptions (Asabor, 2024). In Nigeria, this system reflects neopatrimonial governance, where leadership is sustained through the exchange of resources for loyalty (Elemo-Kaka, 2025). Rent-seeking, meanwhile, involves pursuing wealth through political manipulation rather than value creation, often manifesting as inflated contracts, non-competitive awards, or regulatory bottlenecks (Emerald Insight, 2020).

Nigeria's oil industry illustrates these dynamics vividly. The OPL 245 case saw an offshore oil block awarded to Malabu Oil & Gas, owned by then petroleum minister Dan Etete, through a non-competitive process. A \$1.1 billion payment meant for the treasury was diverted to private accounts, showing rent-seeking at scale (Doward, Faull, & Jeory, 2017). Similarly, the 2005 oil block allocation was riddled with irregularities: a House committee found that 38 companies, many without bids, received licenses, bypassing established procedures (Ezeamalu, 2018).

Patronage also shapes institutional behaviour. Ministries and agencies are staffed through loyal appointments, and now undermines regulatory autonomy and accountability (Ojo, 2025). Key agencies such as the EFCC and INEC has often seen leadership selections driven by political interests that weakens their objectivity (Ojo, 2025). A related example is HYPREP's procurement for oil spill remediation, where contracts have frequently gone to politically connected firms lacking technical capacity, inflating costs and hampering effectiveness (Obida et al., 2020). Such manipulation channels public funds into elite networks under the guise of reform.

4. Theoretical Underpinning

This study employs the Resource Curse theory, also referred to as the Paradox of Plenty, first developed by Richard Auty (1993). The central claim of this framework is that resource wealth does not automatically translate into prosperity; on the contrary, states that depend heavily on oil and minerals frequently experience slower economic growth, fragile institutions, and rising inequality. Resource rents often entrench a governance dilemma: they discourage economic diversification and weaken accountability while simultaneously nurturing corruption, patronage, and rent-seeking, particularly where institutional capacity is limited (Ross, 1999; Karl, 1997). Terry Lynn Karl's influential work *The Paradox of Plenty* (1997) demonstrated how reliance on oil rents erodes fiscal discipline by replacing broad-based taxation with revenue windfalls, thereby undermining the social contract between state and citizens. Similarly, Michael Ross (2001, 2012) highlighted how hydrocarbon dependence is strongly associated with authoritarianism, distributional inequality, and violent conflict across much of the Global South.

The theory is especially pertinent to Nigeria, where oil wealth has gone hand in hand with environmental decline, underdevelopment, and political exclusion in the Niger Delta. Despite decades of substantial revenue, the region remains ecologically degraded: oil spills, routine gas flaring, and biodiversity loss persist, while remediation has been minimal and inconsistent. Initiatives such as HYPREP, established to clean up Ogoniland, have frequently been criticized for elite capture, opaque contracting, and ineffective oversight (UNEP, 2011; Amnesty International, 2020). Nigeria's rentier federal system further entrenches these outcomes, as oil revenues bypass the productive economy and are channeled through networks controlled by political elites (Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian, 2003; Iledare & Suberu, 2010). In this sense, the Resource Curse helps explain why environmental

remediation is less a matter of technical failure than of entrenched political economy. Clean-up projects are deeply embedded in rentier logics where wealth, power, and pollution sustain one another. Unless these structural conditions are addressed, remediation efforts risk remaining largely symbolic, with outcomes vulnerable to manipulation and sabotage.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design that is anchored on critical interpretivism, given its concern with revealing the underlying political, economic, and social dynamics that shape environmental clean-ups in the Niger Delta. Data were drawn from a triangulation of sources, including official government documents, policy reports such as the UNEP Ogoniland Report and HYPREP progress assessments, civil society publications, leaked internal communications, and investigative media reports. This was complemented by secondary literature on political ecology, environmental justice, and the resource curse, which provided the conceptual lenses for analysis. Content and discourse analysis were employed to interrogate the narratives, contradictions, and silences embedded in policy documents and remediation discourses, while thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns of elite capture, rent-seeking, and community marginalization. Rather than relying on statistical generalization, the methodology prioritizes analytical depth, situating empirical findings within the broader political economy of oil governance in Nigeria. This interpretive framework makes it possible to foreground the voices and experiences of local communities, as recorded in civil society data and testimonies, while also exposing the opaque institutional practices that weaken remediation efforts. In this way, the methodology highlights not just the technical shortcomings of environmental clean-ups but also the deeper structural injustices and power asymmetries that sustain them.

6. The Political Economy of Environmental Clean-ups in the Niger Delta

Control over environmental remediation in the Niger Delta is deeply politicized. Despite the technical role of agencies like HYPREP and NOSDRA, ultimate authority frequently lies with political elites and federal institutions, creating a disconnect between operational mandates and local accountability. The Senate Committee on Environment, for instance, highlights that oversight mechanisms are weakened by chronic underfunding and political interference, rendering them ineffective in ensuring transparent practice.

HYPREP, established in 2012 under the Federal Ministry of Environment to act on the UNEP's 2011 Ogoniland report, was intended to spearhead large-scale, community-based remediation efforts. However, leaked UN documents revealed that HYPREP "selected unqualified contractors," operated under-equipped labs, and actively blocked auditors raising serious governance concerns. The scandal even forced the UN to sever its advisory role by mid-2023. NOSDRA, created by the 2006 Act, is Nigeria's statutory oil-spill regulator. Yet, it has been hamstrung by financial dependency on oil companies and lacks the logistical capacity to deploy independent investigations. Only 2% of reported spills were officially certified as cleaned in five years some 150 of 3,177 cases due to its reliance on the very firms it regulates.

NOSDRA's failure is rooted in structural under-resourcing. It lacks essential tools like helicopters and boats, forcing dependence on oil companies to visit spill sites (Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission, 2019). Though pleads for budgetary reform including a proposed trust

tied to oil profit were made in 2018, the Act remains unchanged, preserving weak regulatory capacity. Meanwhile, while HYPREP's Ogoniland fund reached US \$1 billion, limited amounts reached local communities. One early clean-up site near Port Harcourt turned into a "moonscape" rather than restored farmland, illustrating a dangerous divergence between allocated resources and actual remediation performance (Davey, 2024).

UNEP set strict remediation standards, including a 25–30-year timeline, rigorous baseline surveys, and community-based monitoring (Sam et al., 2024). In practice, HYPREP adopted petroleum hydrocarbon thresholds far higher than UNEP's recommendations, undermining ecological safety and community confidence (Sam et al., 2024). Independent auditors found soil tests conducted in unaccredited labs and oversight teams physically obstructed, violating both national regulations and UN guidelines (Davey, 2024).

Contract awards tell a story of political patronage. In 2021, a UN review found 21 of 41 HYPREP contractors had no relevant expertise a result of politically driven selection processes. The ousted Environment Minister, Sharon Ikeazor, accused a senior HYPREP official of conflict of interest, claiming that "the majority of cleanup companies are owned by politicians" a statement quickly reversed under political pressure (Davey, 2024).

7. The Role of Institutions and Governance Failure

The National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) was established by the NOSDRA Act (2006), under the Federal Ministry of Environment, to lead in oil spill detection and response in line with the International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness (OPRC, 1990). Despite this mandate, NOSDRA has become structurally incapacitated lacking essential logistics such as helicopters, boats, and funds forcing them to rely on oil companies for site inspections (Yafugborhi, 2018). In five years, out of 3,177 oil spill incidents, only 150 cleanups were certified complete just 2%. This chronic underperformance points to a regulatory collapse rooted in underfunding and institutional overdependence on industry.

NOSDRA sits under the Ministry of Environment but remains hindered by overlapping mandates, especially with DPR and the new regulatory agencies under the Petroleum Industry Act (2021), which blurred enforcement roles. Although attempts to amend and expand NOSDRA's legal powers began in 2017, including enhanced penalty systems, presidential assent was withheld, leaving the agency powerless to prosecute polluters. Structural bottlenecks within Nigeria's environmental governance framework have fostered a climate where regulatory independence is undermined by bureaucratic inertia, thereby enabling patterns of corporate impunity. Evidence from investigative journalism and leaked United Nations correspondence indicates that HYPREP itself has been deeply compromised, often obstructing oversight rather than facilitating it. Reports suggest that auditors were denied access, financial controls were weakened, and internal checks were perceived as hostile rather than supportive of transparency. Attempts at reform, most especially by former Environment Minister Sharon Ikeazor, who sought to strengthen accountability and leadership within HYPREP, were swiftly curtailed when she was removed from office, an episode that highlights how entrenched elite interests and institutional sabotage can derail genuine oversight efforts.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), through its 2011 Ogoniland report, had initially provided a robust framework for remediation. By 2021, UNEP cracked: it withdrew from active

oversight, citing corruption, technical failures, and a refusal to cooperate in remediation efforts. This illustrates the limits of international oversight: while UNEP can diagnose and recommend, it lacks enforceable power to ensure sustained compliance or accountability within a politically captured domestic context.

8. Elite Interests, Corruption, and the Vultures' Feast

Environmental clean-up initiatives in the Niger Delta a region referred to as a “place where vultures feast” have served as political feeding grounds. Multiple investigations, including leaked UN files and media reports, reveal that HYPREP has systematically awarded contracts to unqualified firms linked to political elites. In 2021, a confidential UN review found that of the 41 contractors hired, 21 had no relevant experience, yet were selected to manage highly polluted sites (Davey, 2024). Many of these firms are not even traceable in the Corporate Affairs Commission’s registry, pointing to deliberate evasion of due diligence .

The leadership of HYPREP has itself been a locus of political power dynamics. When former Environment Minister Sharon Ikeazor attempted to remove the then-leading coordinator, Philip Shekwolo, citing his close ties with politicians, she was swiftly ousted and Shekwolo was reinstated within two months (Davey, 2024). This episode reflects how clean-up governance is fought over by the elite, with bureaucratic positions leveraged for political gain rather than ecological renewal (Alabi, 2025).

Rather than serving as ecological interventions, clean-up initiatives have become rent-seeking opportunities. A leaked UN document described HYPREP-approved firms as entities that received a literal “blank check” to monitor their own subcontracted work, with auditors being barred from verifying outcomes (Davey, 2024). Independent labs found to be under-equipped or non-functional still signed off on remediation standards showing how deeply patronage compromised technical integrity. The metaphor of vultures aptly captures this political ecology. Like scavengers drawn to carrion, political actors, consultants, and opportunistic contractors swoop in on environmental catastrophe, not to restore, but to profit. The awarding of multi-million-dollar contracts without transparency or capacity checks represents not accidental oversight, but calculated exploitation. This is a form of systemic decay where ecological sacrifice zones fuel elite accumulation, sustaining a lucrative cycle of crisis and co-optation.

9. Environmental and Human Consequences

Local communities in the Niger Delta overwhelmingly view both government bodies and multinational oil firms with deep distrust. Reports such as “No Progress” (Friends of the Earth, Amnesty International, ERA) reveal that communities believe clean-up efforts especially by Shell are largely symbolic gestures that countless promises have lined but delivered scant results (Clark, 2014). Affected residents often observe polluted lands and contaminated water, with cleanup signage that masks real remediation only fueling their skepticism. Many allege the government falsely certifies sites as safe, despite ongoing pollution and health hazards .

This distrust has catalyzed community protests, notably during divestment negotiations with Shell. In March 2024, hundreds of women and youths demonstrated in Port Harcourt and Yenagoa demanding an environmental audit, compensation, and continued cleanup before any asset handover (Mazzi, 2024). In Goi, Rivers State, villagers highlight exclusion from environmental assessments,

forced relocations, and severe health crises linked to oil pollution (Edozie, 2019). Youth unrest has even targeted HYPREP assets; a sign of deep alienation when a HYPREP-branded bus was burned following lack of community engagement (Igwe, 2022).

Mechanisms intended for community participation such as Environmental Impact Assessments and local consultations have largely collapsed in practice. Women, who bear the brunt of ecological degradation, are often sidelined in decision-making processes (Sam & Zibima, 2024). NGOs like ERA/FoEN criticize selective engagement and excessive co-optation by HYPREP leadership, further weakening trust and undermining independent oversight (Abade, 2017).

Despite these systemic challenges, local civil society continues to resist co-optation. MOSOP remains a powerful force, drawing on its legacy of environmental activism and legal resistance (e.g., Ken Saro-Wiwa's movement) (Edozie, 2019). In recent years, environmental NGOs and youth climate groups have mobilized citizen-led pollution reporting via digital tools, created grassroots cleanup projects, and collaborated on school-based climate education (Alabi, 2025). In 2024, a coalition of community groups rallied in Port Harcourt demanding a halt to Shell's divestment until transparent audits and compensation were guaranteed (Mazzi,

The experiences of Niger Delta communities reveal a tension between systemic disempowerment and enduring resilience. Widespread alienation arises from exclusion, broken promises, and harmful impacts. Yet, grassroots actors women's associations, youth coalitions, NGOs, and environmental defenders continue to organize, advocate, and document environmental harm. Their efforts assert that effective cleanup cannot succeed without community inclusion, transparency, and genuine participation.

10. A Critical Appraisal of the UNEP Report and HYPREP

In August 2011, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) released a landmark environmental assessment of Ogoniland, proposing a 25–30 year remediation plan with an initial US\$1 billion fund for bioremediation, potable water, and community participation (UNEP, 2011). Yet implementation has fallen far short. By 2020, almost a decade later work had commenced on only 11% of the 67 contaminated sites, while emergency actions such as safe drinking water provision remained largely unfulfilled. In one case, a community well contained benzene levels nearly 900 times above WHO standards, but alternative supplies were still absent (EnviroNews Nigeria, 2015).

Financial management has been equally troubling. Although US\$540 million was pledged and US\$360 million reportedly deposited into the Ogoni Trust Fund, disbursements to real projects amounted to barely US\$80 million (Akintayo, 2022). HYPREP's own reports show that between 2018 and 2019, only US\$31 million was spent against nearly US\$200 million budgeted, pointing to mismanagement and inertia (Uwaegbulam, 2020).

Both international actors and civil society have voiced sharp criticism. UN officials labeled HYPREP a "total failure," citing poor contractor selection, weak laboratories, and auditor obstruction. Groups such as Amnesty International and Environmental Rights Action condemned the absence of transparency, potable water, and health interventions, while local communities described the project as little more than a bureaucratic façade.

The Ogoniland case offers wider lessons. First, technical plans falter without institutional strength: HYPREP lacked a legal mandate and clear budget framework, leaving it open to elite capture.

Second, UNEP could design but not enforce reforms, withdrawing in 2023 after years of frustration. Lastly, community trust dependent on clean water, credible information, and fair contracting was ignored, deepening skepticism rather than fostering stewardship. Ogoniland demonstrates how international expertise and funding, without domestic accountability or inclusivity, collapse into rent-seeking and disillusionment. The Niger Delta experience underscores that remediation must confront governance and power relations, not just environmental contamination.

11. Discussion

The findings of this study show that remediation in the Niger Delta is shaped less by technical shortcomings than by political economy, governance failures, and structural injustice. From the dysfunction of NOSDRA and HYPREP to the exclusion of affected communities, ecological degradation has been reproduced by the very institutions charged with addressing it. More than a decade after the UNEP Ogoniland report, only a fraction of sites have been remediated, while urgent recommendations such as clean water and health interventions remain unmet. Despite substantial funding, contracts were routinely awarded to politically connected firms with limited expertise, turning clean-up efforts into rent-seeking exercises. This affirms the central claim of this study: remediation has been captured by elites and repurposed into a theatre of extractive governance.

Institutions meant to safeguard communities reveal deeper structural crises. HYPREP's contract processes were compromised by political influence, while NOSDRA's dependence on oil firms undermined its regulatory independence. These failures reflect a neopatrimonial system where access to oil rents outweighs commitments to accountability or protection.

The Niger Delta illustrates how environmental harm follows patterns of exclusion. Those most affected poor, marginalized communities possess the least political leverage. This aligns with Schlosberg's idea of recognitional injustice, where communities are denied not just remediation but recognition, voice, and dignity. Testimonies reveal frustration that "clean-up" often amounts to symbolic gestures, while women, youth, and grassroots leaders remain excluded from decision-making. What should have been an exercise in restoration has instead become a site of predation. Contracts, reports, and oversight mechanisms are manipulated to serve political interests, reflecting a broader pattern of elite capture. The metaphor of vultures feeding on a carcass captures how institutions descend on the crisis not to heal but to harvest. As a result, billions in revenue have coincided with deepened poverty and ecological ruin. Unless remediation efforts confront the entrenched systems of patronage, technocratic clean-ups will remain ineffective. Real progress requires: democratizing governance through community oversight and gender inclusion; legislating institutional autonomy for HYPREP and NOSDRA; conditioning international support on measurable reform; and reframing clean-up as a justice issue involving compensation and political empowerment. Finally, accountability is essential: without legal consequences, elite actors will continue to profit from ecological disaster.

12 Conclusion

This study explored the politics of environmental remediation in the Niger Delta, situating the Ogoniland clean-up within broader debates on political economy, environmental justice, and elite capture. The analysis revealed that rather than addressing ecological devastation, clean-up programmes have frequently been diverted into networks of patronage, rent-seeking, and political reward. Institutions such as HYPREP and NOSDRA, weakened by opaque contracting, poor oversight, and elite

interference, have lost public trust and credibility. These failures reflect not isolated mistakes but a systemic political economy in which the interests of powerful actors consistently override the needs of affected communities. Consequently, pollution endures, livelihoods remain threatened, and faith in governance continues to decline.

The implications are both environmental and political. Persistent contamination aggravates health risks and damages ecosystems, while exclusion of local voices deepens social inequalities and disillusionment. What should represent a transformative moment of justice has too often been reduced to symbolic gestures of governance with little substantive impact. Reversing this trajectory requires structural change: transparency embedded in every stage of remediation, genuinely independent oversight, and meaningful community participation. Only by grounding clean-up efforts in accountability and inclusion can ecological repair translate into lasting recovery and renewed legitimacy in the Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta's problem is not the absence of technical solutions but the persistence of political predation. Its polluted landscapes symbolize systemic betrayal, where remediation serves spectacle rather than justice. Until governance prioritizes people over patronage, genuine environmental restoration will remain deferred.

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