



JOURNAL OF LEADERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT

Volume 1, Number 3 (December, 2025)

ISSN: 1595-9457 (online); 3093-0618 (print)

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Received: December 15, 2025 Accepted: December 30, 2025 Published: December 31, 2025

Citation: Ukata, Emmanuel E. (2025). "Culture and Identity: An Anthropological Perspective." *Journal of Leadership and Development*, 1 (3): 116-124.

Article

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RESOURCE CONTROL, EXTRACTIVES, AND ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY ISSUES IN THE SOUTH-SOUTH REGION OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The South-South region of Nigeria, which houses a fair measure of the country's petroleum reserves, remains at the heart of consistent and persistent wrangles over resource control, extractive industrial activities, together with endemic environmental insecurity. Despite its economic primacy to Nigeria, the region suffers from years of ecological degradation, negligence, exploitation, underdevelopment, and socio-political marginalization. This work explored how centralized resource governance systems contribute to environmental insecurity and degradation in the Niger Region of Nigeria. It is Premised on the Resource Curse Theory and the Environmental Security Framework. The findings shows that the combination of oil dependency, elite rent-seeking, and environmental damage has precipitated poverty, catalyzed conflict, and exacerbated regional ambivalences. The article concludes with a set of policy options emphasizing participatory resource governance, stronger environmental accountability, a dignified community engagement, and sustainable development strategies aimed at stabilizing the South-South region of Nigeria.

Keywords: Resource control, Extractive Industries, Environmental Security, South-South Nigeria, Niger Delta, Resource Curse Theory, Ecological Degradation, Negligence.

Introduction

The region referred to as the South-South of Nigeria, consists largely of the Niger Delta, remains one of the most resource-endowed yet environmentally affected regions in West Africa. This region accounts for over 80% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and a significant proportion of federal revenue. It occupies a central position in national economic stability. But, the exploitation of petroleum resources has precipitated a complex interplay of environmental degradation, existential negligence, political agitation, security threats, and

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developmental challenges. Issues surrounding resource control, environmental justice, and the activities of multinational oil corporations have shaped regional politics for decades. Irrespective of the varied regulatory frameworks, intervention agencies, and environmental management policies, the South-South region continues to experience oil spills, gas flaring, land degradation, biodiversity loss, and livelihood disruptions. Such challenges, compounded by centralized control of natural resources, have created fertile ground for militancy, socio-political movements, and persistent demands for restructuring. Understanding these dynamics requires a theoretical grounding that links natural resource exploitation with governance, conflict, and environmental security.

Theoretical Framework

Resource Curse Theory: The Resource Curse Theory posits that countries endowed with abundant natural resources often experience poor governance, economic stagnation, corruption, and conflict.¹ The Resource Curse Theory is often called the paradox of plenty. It describes the tendency of resource-rich nations to perform worse in economic development, institutional quality, and political stability than nations with few natural resources.

The theory argues that abundant natural wealth can distort economic incentives, weaken non-resource sectors, inflate currencies, and make governments dependent on easy revenues rather than productive taxation. Politically, resource rents can foster corruption, rent-seeking, elite competition, and violent conflict as groups struggle to control lucrative assets. Rather than becoming a catalyst for prosperity, natural wealth may instead entrench underdevelopment when institutions are weak. This concept was first systematically developed by the economist Richard M Auty, who coined the term “resource curse” in his seminar work, *Sustaining Development in Mineral Economies: The Resource Curse Thesis* (1993). Auty’s framework demonstrates how mineral-dependent economies often stagnate due to poor governance, volatile revenues, and policy distortions. His contributions laid the foundation for later empirical studies, especially the macroeconomic analyses of Jeffrey Sacks and Andrew Warner. There is no doubting the fact that Nigeria embodies this paradox. Oil wealth has created high levels of dependency on petroleum rents while weakening other productive sectors of the economy. Relevant propositions of the theory include:

- i. **Rentier Dynamics:** Oil revenues enable central actors to accumulate wealth without broad-based economic productivity. Nigeria represents a classic case of rentier-stage dynamics within the Resource Curse framework. Since the 1970s, the country has relied overwhelmingly on oil rents for export earnings and government revenue. This dependence means that the state earns more from selling crude oil to international markets than from taxing its own citizens or stimulating productive sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing. As a result, political elites prioritize the control and distribution of oil revenues rather than the development of a broad-based economy. In this structure, loyalty networks, patronage, and rent-seeking becomes more profitable than innovations or diversification. This has heavily affected the Nigerian economic organogram to the point that the country now appears irredeemable.
- ii. **Weak Institutions:** Resource rents undermine accountability and incentives for good governance. Rentier configuration has contributed significantly to weak institutional development. Since the Nigerian state can finance itself without extensive domestic taxation, the incentive to build strong, transparent, and accountable institutions has been historically low. Weak oversight allows corruption to thrive, bureaucracies to

remain underperforming, and public financial management to reel between oil booms and busts.

- iii. **Conflict Inducement:** Struggles over access to petroleum wealth escalate group tensions and violence. Most mineral-dependent structures also increase the risk of conflict inducement, a well-organized pattern in the Resource Curse literature. The intense competition over oil revenues has fueled inter-elite struggles, electoral violence, and regional tensions. The Niger Delta conflict is a clear example: communities that bear the environmental costs of extraction but receive limited benefits developed grievances that escalated into militancy. Applying this theory helps explain why the Niger Delta remains underdeveloped despite being the main source of national wealth.

Environmental Security Framework

The Environmental Security Framework emphasizes how environmental degradation, scarcity, and ecological risks threaten human wellbeing and national stability. Extractive activities in the Niger Delta generate severe environmental insecurity - manifesting in loss of arable land, polluted water bodies, declining fishery resources, health hazards, and disrupted livelihoods. The framework argues that environmental stress can undermine livelihoods, intensify competition over resources, and ultimately contribute to social instability or conflict. It is widely used today in security studies, environmental policy, and conflict-prevention research. Lester Brown is often credited as an early pioneer for framing environmental degradation as a security threat in the late 1970s and early 1980s. His work helped popularize the notion that ecological stress could destabilize states just as serious as military threat. This framework was later significantly formalized by Richard Ullman in his influential 1983 article "Redefining Security," where he argued that environmental degradation should be considered a national security threat because it can undermine political and economic stability. Jessica Tuchman Mathews further advanced the framework in her 1989 Foreign Affairs article "Redefining Security," which elevated environmental concerns into mainstream global security discourse. Together, these scholars helped redefine security studies, giving birth to what is now known as the Environmental Security Framework.

Consequences of Environmental Insecurity

Competition over Shrinking Resources: Environmental insecurity reduces the availability and quality of essential natural resources such as water, arable land, forests, and fisheries. As these resources shrink, communities, regions, and even nations compete for what is left. Similarly, farmers compete for fertile land as soil quality declines and desertification spreads. Herdsmen and farmers clash over dwindling grazing routes and water points. In the same vein, the government might tighten control over resources, leading to tensions with local populations.

Increased Migration and Urban Pressure

When rural livelihood collapse due to environmental decline – crop failure, flooding, droughts, or coastal erosion – people are forced to move. They can internally migrate, moving to cities and increasing over-crowding. At times they cross-borders, fleeing to neighbouring countries seeking safety and stability. This leads to the emergence of environmental refugees who are often not officially recognized under international law.

Youth Restiveness and Militancy

Environmental degradation undermines economic opportunities – especially in agricultural, fishing, and local industries that young people rely on. With rising unemployment and frustration. This unfortunate reality makes youths to become restive, expressing anger through protests and disruption of social activities. In this same light, militant groups may exploit this frustration, offering financial incentives or a sense of purpose. More so, in resource-rich but environmentally degraded regions such as the oil-producing areas, youth may turn to militancy to protest pollution, marginalization, or exploitation. The reason of most of these challenges is that environmental insecurity breaks traditional livelihoods, creates a pool of economically idle youth, and fuels resentment against the government and corporations perceived as neglectful or exploitative.

Health Crises and Reduced Life Expectancy

There are enough evidences to prove that environmental degradation overtly harms public health and reduces life expectancy in various ways. This degradation may lead to the pollution of water which can be responsible for cholera typhoid, and other water-borne diseases. Air pollution cause respiration infections, asthma, lung cancer, and cardiovascular diseases. The same environmental degradation can lead to heatwaves and extreme temperatures that are capable of increasing heat-related deaths. In the same light, malnutrition rises due to declining agricultural productivity caused by environmental degradation. Vector-borne diseases, such as malaria and dengue, spread as climate conditions change. Toxic waste and chemical spills contaminate land and water, causing long-term illnesses.

Resource Control Dynamics in the South-South Region

Resource control remains one of the most politically charged issues in Nigeria's federal system. Historically, the derivation principle granted regions 50% of revenues from resources produced within their territories. However, with the rise of oil, constitutional amendments reduced this to a meager 1.5% before it was later increased to 13%. The South-South region – comprising Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers States – is the hearts of Nigeria's oil and gas industry. Despite producing the bulk of the nation's revenue, the region has long experienced environmental degradation, underdevelopment, and contestations over ownership and management of natural resources. This situation has shaped complex dynamics involving the federal government, regional elites, militant groups, and broader socio-political movements.

Key issues include:

- i. **Federal Dominance of Resource Governance:** The 1999 Constitution vests full control of mineral resources in the federal government. This centralization fuels perceptions of injustice among oil-producing communities who bear the ecological burden without equivalent benefits. The structure of resource ownership and revenue sharing has historically favored centralized control. The federal government retains ownerships of all national resources, including oil and gas, under the Constitution and the Petroleum Act. Revenues allocation formulas heavily prioritize national distribution, with the deprivation principle reduced drastically. Federal agencies such as the NNPC (now NNPL Ltd), the Ministry of Petroleum Resources, and regulatory bodies dominate licensing, exploration and profit-sharing. State and host communities have limited authority, resulting in feeling of alienation and dispossession.

- ii. **Elite Capture and Rent-Seeking:** Both federal and local elites benefit from oil rents at the expense of community welfare. This reproduces underdevelopment and hinders democratic accountability.ⁱⁱ Within the region itself, resource control conflict are further complicated by elite capture. Local political elites, contractors, and traditional leaders often benefit disproportionately from oil-related rents, patronages, newels and compensations. Oil companies negotiate with powerful intermediaries, who may divert benefits from local communities. Development agencies created to channel resources into the region - such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and various state-level intervention bodies - have faced allegations of corruption, project abandonment and mismanagement. This internal inequality undermines trust within the region and fuel the perception that not only the federal government, but also local elites, profit at the expense of ordinary people. Elite capture therefore creates a double layer of marginalization – from the federal center and from the local leaders.
- iii. **Militancy and Regional Agitations:** By the early 2000s, frustration over environmental degradation, employment, and perceived exploitation led to the rise of militant movements. Groups such as MEND and the Niger Delta Avengers emerged as violent responses to environmental degradation and economic exclusion. Though the 2009 Amnesty Programme reduced armed conflict, it did not resolve structural grievances.ⁱⁱⁱ Militancy was framed as a struggle for resource justice, demanding greater control of oil wealth, compensation for pollution, and development of host communities. The Nigerian government responded with a combination of military force and negotiation, culminating in the 2009 Amnesty Programme, which reduced violence but did not eliminate underlying grievances. Illegal bunkering, pipeline vandalism, and artisanal refining continue, often involving networks of militants, community actors, and criminal syndicates. Militancy remains both a symptom of deeper structural issues and a bargaining tool in the politics of resource control.
- iv. **Persistent Calls for Restructuring:** The push for true federalism and greater regional autonomy continues, driven largely by demands for environmental justice and equitable distribution of resource revenues. These demands have dove-tailed, within the South-South, into a debate over restructuring. The proponents of this idea request for a greater derivation – often up to 25% or even 50% of the oil revenue retained by producing states. Such states demand for true federalism, in order that states could be allowed to control their resources and remit an agreed-upon portion to the center. They call for an enhanced autonomy and recognition of regional security, within the aim of protecting oil installations and communities. The persistence of these calls reflects widespread belief that Nigeria’s centralized system is inequitable and unsustainable, especially given the environmental and economic burdens borne by the oil-producing states. Resources control dynamics in the South-South region of Nigeria are shaped by a long history of centralized federal authority, internal elite manipulation, militancy resistance, and persistent demands for restructuring. These dynamics reveal deeper tensions within Nigeria’s federal system - particularly, the struggle to balance national unity with local justice, environmental sustainability, and equitable development.

Extractive Activities and Environmental Degradation

Oil extraction in the Niger Delta has produced some of the worst ecological outcomes in the world.

- i. **Oil Spills:** Thousands of oil spills have contaminated rivers, farmlands, and mangrove forests. Communities dependent on fishing and farming suffer significant livelihood losses.^{iv} Oil spills release hydrocarbons and toxic substances into soil and water systems, causing long-term contamination. These spills smother vegetation, disrupt soil chemistry, and reduce agricultural productivity. Aquatic ecosystems are particularly vulnerable – oil films block sunlight, reduce photosynthesis, and impair fish production. Persistent pollution such as PAHs (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons) bioaccumulate, posing long-term ecological risks.^v
- ii. **Gas Flaring:** Despite legal provisions for its reduction, gas flaring persists at high levels. It releases toxic chemicals linked to cancer, respiratory diseases, acid rain, and climate change.^{vi} Gas flaring emits greenhouse gases and harmful substances such as nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide, contributing to air pollution and acid rain. Continuous heating from flare stacks alters local microclimates, reducing soil moisture and increasing evapotranspiration. These environmental changes diminish crop yield and degrade nearby vegetation. Exposure to soot and particulate matter also affects wildlife health.^{vii}
- iii. **Loss of Biodiversity:** Continuous pollution damages delicate ecosystems such as mangroves and freshwater swamps. Biodiversity loss undermines food security and traditional livelihoods. Oil exploration and associated industrial activities fragment habitats, decrease species richness, and alter ecological community structures. Pollution can cause mass mortality events among fish, invertebrates, and birds. Over time, sensitive species decline while more tolerant species dominate, reducing overall ecosystem resilience. This loss of biodiversity undermines essential ecological services such as nutrient cycling and water purification.^{viii}
- iv. **Socioeconomic Impacts:** Environmental degradation from oil spill and gas flaring affects human livelihood – especially communities dependent on fishing, farming and forest resources. Declining soil fertility and contaminated water sources increase poverty levels and food insecurity. Health impacts such as respiratory illnesses and skin disorders further burden local economies. Conflicts and social unrest often emerge when communities perceive inequitable resource management or compensation.^{ix}

Security Issues in the South-South

- i. **Livelihood Insecurity:** Disruptions to agriculture and fisheries have deepened poverty, forcing many youths into criminal activities or migration.^x The South-South region, dominated by fishing, farming, and forest-based livelihoods, faces severe disruptions due to oil pollution, gas flaring, and land degradation. Frequent oil spills contaminate farmlands and rivers, reducing group yields and fish stocks. Coastal erosion and loss of mangroves further undermine community resilience. As natural resources decline, households experience reduced incomes, food insecurity, and forced migration.
- ii. **Health Risks:** Oil spills and air pollution contribute to skin diseases, respiratory problems, and other chronic conditions. Exposure to benzene and other toxins is a known cancer risk.^{xi} Environmental contamination exposes communities to significant health threats. Gas flaring generate toxic compounds, contributing to respiratory diseases, eye irritation, and skin disorder. Oil contaminated water sources heighten risks of gastrointestinal infections, heavy-metal poisoning, and long-term carcinogenic effects.
- iii. **Conflict and Militancy:** Environmental damage intensifies grievances, feeding into cycles of activism, protest, sabotage, and militancy. Some communities see illegal bunkering as an economic alternative. The degradation of the environment, combined with perceived

exploitation and unequal distribution of oil wealth - creates fertile ground for grievances. Loss of livelihoods and frustration over pollution drive community unrest, protests, and in extreme cases, militancy.

- iv. **Governance Challenges:** Regulatory agencies such as NOSDRA face constraints including limited funding, political interference, and inadequate enforcement powers. Weak regulatory frameworks, poor enforcement of environmental laws, and corruption undermine effective resource management. Regulatory agencies often lack the capacity or political backing to hold oil companies accountable. Inadequate compensations for environmental damage fuels distrust between communities, government, and corporations. Fragmented institutional coordination and slow implementation of remediation afforests, such as the Ogoniland clean-up, further erode public confidence and perpetuate insecurity.

Policy and Governance Responses

- i. **Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC):** Created to address development deficits but hampered by corruption, duplication of roles, and inadequate coordination.^{xii} The NDDC was established in 2000 to address the developmental deficits and environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. Its mandate includes infrastructure development, environmental remediation, economic empowerment, and poverty reduction. The commission has executed projects such as road construction, water supply systems, and skill acquisition programs. However, its performance has been frequently critiqued due to issues of corruption, projects abandonment, and weak oversight, which have limited its overall impact in improving living conditions.
- ii. **Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs:** This was created in 2008, the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs oversees policies and programs aimed at addressing the root cause of underdevelopment and environmental insecurities. It supervises the NDDC and coordinates key regional interventions, including infrastructural projects (e.g., the East-West Road) and community development initiatives. The ministry also engages with stakeholders to reduce tensions and promote sustainable development. Despite its mandate, bureaucratic delays and funding constraints have undermined its effectiveness.
- iii. **Amnesty Programme (2009):** Focused on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. Though it reduced violence, it did not address long-term environmental rehabilitation.^{xiii} This programme was launched in 2009. The Amnesty Programme was designed to end militant activities disrupting oil production, it granted amnesty to ex-militants in exchange for disarmament, demobilization, and participation in rehabilitation and training. The program significantly reduced violence and improved oil output in the early years. It also provided vocational training, scholarships, and spends to participants. However, dependency on stipends, political interference, and irregular payments have weakened long-term reintegration and created new grievance in some communities.
- iv. **Petroleum Industry Act (PIA, 2021):** Enacted in 2001, the PIA represents a major reform of Nigeria's oil and gas governance. It aims to improve transparency, attract investment, and ensure better community benefits. A key provision is the creation of Host Communities Development Trusts, which allocate a percentage of oil company operating expenses to local communities for development projects. This Act also establishes stricter environmental standards and clearer regulatory structures. While

the PIA is seen as a step forward, critics argue that the percentage allocated to host communities is inadequate, and successful implementation will depend heavily on transparent management and enforcement.

Conclusion

The nexus of resource control, extractive industry practices, and environmental insecurity in Nigeria's South-South region represents a profound developmental paradox. While the region generates enormous wealth for the Nigerian state, it remains ecologically threatened and politically marginalized. The Resource Curse Theory and Environmental Security Framework jointly illustrate how oil dependency, weak institutions, and governance deficits have exacerbated insecurity. To mitigate these issues, Nigeria must pursue decentralized and participatory resource governance that is strong in the enforcement of environmental regulations, and prioritizing large-scale ecological remediation. Community-driven development frameworks have to be put in place and be effectively executed to foster a transparent management of oil revenues, and diversification of regional economies. This will best be realized if Nigeria succeeds in strengthening institutions responsible for oversight. Without a doubt, it is only through systemic governance reforms and sustained environmental accountability can the South-South region achieve lasting peace, sustainability, and socioeconomic justice.

Endnotes

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