
RELIGIOUS EVALUATION OF THE IMPACT OF OIL EXPLORATION ON NIGER DELTA DEVELOPMENT: AN ECO-THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Anthony A. Uviekovo

Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy,
Delta State University,
Abraka, Nigeria

anthonyuviekovo@delsu.edu.ng

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0969-6617>

Abstract: *The discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta transformed Nigeria into one of Africa's leading petroleum-producing nations. Despite generating enormous revenues for the national economy, oil exploration has been accompanied by severe environmental degradation, socio-economic dislocation, political unrest, and developmental challenges within the host communities. This study provides an evaluation of the impact of oil exploration on Niger Delta development through an eco-theological and socio-religious lens, by examining the intersection between environmental ethics, religion, and sustainable development. The paper employs a descriptive and analytical methods, utilizing secondary sources from religious studies, environmental studies, development studies, and Niger Delta scholarship to achieve its aim. Findings indicate that environmental degradation, socio-economic marginalization, and the erosion of indigenous ecological values, have significantly hindered development in the region. The paper concludes that oil exploration has generated a paradox of wealth and deprivation, where the economic benefits of petroleum extraction have not translated into sustainable development for host communities. The study recommends that eco-theological perspectives can provide an ethical framework for addressing environmental injustice and promoting sustainable development in the Niger Delta.*

Keywords: *Oil Exploration, Niger Delta, Development, Eco-theological, Socio-Religious*

Introduction

The discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri, Bayelsa State, in 1956 marked a turning point in Nigeria's economic history (Ako, 2011). Since then, petroleum resources have become the cornerstone of national revenue generation and foreign exchange earnings. The Niger Delta, comprising nine oil-producing states, remains one of the most resource-rich regions in Africa. Ironically, the communities that host these resources

continue to grapple with poverty, unemployment, environmental degradation, and social instability (Conradie, 2011). The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is one of the most ecologically significant and economically strategic regions in Africa. Situated in the southern part of the country and covering approximately 70,000 square kilometers (Edobor, 2025), the region is endowed with abundant crude oil and natural gas resources that have served as the backbone of Nigeria's economy for over six decades (Watts, 2008).

However, despite the enormous wealth derived from the region, the Niger Delta continues to experience persistent poverty, environmental degradation, social inequality, and underdevelopment, thereby presenting a paradox that has attracted considerable scholarly attention. One of the most visible consequences of oil exploration in the Niger Delta is environmental degradation. Decades of oil spills, gas flaring, pipeline leakages, and industrial waste disposal have severely impacted the region's ecosystems, including mangrove forests, freshwater systems, agricultural lands, and biodiversity (Amnesty International, 2018). The contamination of land and water resources has disrupted traditional occupations such as farming and fishing, thereby exacerbating poverty and food insecurity among local populations (UNEP, 2011). Beyond the ecological implications, environmental degradation has also generated profound social and cultural consequences, affecting community identities, traditional institutions, and patterns of social interaction.

This contradiction between resource abundance and underdevelopment has been viewed from several perspectives. Consequently, the region has become a prominent example of the "resource curse," a phenomenon in which resource-rich areas experience developmental challenges despite generating substantial economic wealth (Karl, 1997). While Economists have explained the phenomenon through the "resource curse" thesis, political scientists have emphasized governance failures and resource control conflicts. Religious scholars, however, have increasingly argued that the Niger Delta crisis also reflects an ethical and spiritual crisis involving humanity's relationship with creation (Ako, 2011)

Although numerous studies have examined the environmental, political, and economic dimensions of oil exploration in the Niger Delta, relatively fewer studies have explored the phenomenon from a religious and eco-theological perspective. This gap is significant because religion remains a fundamental aspect of life in the Niger Delta, shaping people's values, perceptions of nature, and responses to environmental crises. Both Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR), which are widely practiced in the region, contain ethical principles that emphasize respect for creation, communal responsibility, justice, and the preservation of life (Conradie, 2011; Ejizu,

2013). Consequently, religious perspectives offer important analytical tools for understanding the moral implications of environmental degradation and developmental challenges in oil-producing communities.

Eco-theology has emerged as an important field of inquiry that seeks to examine the relationship between faith, humanity, and the environment. Rooted in theological reflections on creation, stewardship, and environmental justice, eco-theology argues that human beings have a moral obligation to protect and preserve the natural world as part of God's creation (Horrell et al., 2010). From this perspective, environmental destruction is not merely an ecological issue but also an ethical and spiritual concern that undermines the integrity of creation and the well-being of communities. Similarly, African Traditional Religious worldviews emphasize the sacredness of nature and the interconnectedness of humans, spirits, ancestors, and the environment, thereby providing indigenous frameworks for ecological responsibility and sustainability (Mbiti, 1990).

The socio-religious implications of oil exploration in the Niger Delta extend beyond environmental concerns to encompass issues of justice, peace, and human dignity. The unequal distribution of oil wealth, coupled with the environmental burdens borne by local communities, has contributed to feelings of marginalization and exclusion, leading to social conflicts, youth militancy, and demands for resource control (Ako, 2011). Religious institutions, including churches, faith-based organizations, and traditional religious authorities, have increasingly become involved in advocacy for environmental justice, conflict resolution, and community development. Their engagement reflects a growing recognition that sustainable development requires not only economic and technological interventions but also ethical and moral transformation. Against this backdrop, this study examines the impact of oil exploration on Niger Delta development through an eco-theological and socio-religious lens.

The Concept of Eco-Theology

Eco-theology has emerged as one of the most significant theological responses to contemporary environmental challenges. The field developed from growing concerns regarding climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, deforestation, and unsustainable patterns of resource exploitation. Rather than treating environmental degradation solely as a scientific or political issue, eco-theology situates ecological concerns within broader theological and ethical discussions about creation, stewardship, justice, and human responsibility. The modern development of eco-theology is frequently traced to the influential work of White (1967), whose critique of Western Christianity generated extensive scholarly debate. White argued that certain

interpretations of the biblical command granting humanity dominion over nature contributed to ecological exploitation by legitimizing human superiority over the natural world. His argument stimulated theological reflection across various Christian traditions and led scholars to reconsider the relationship between religion and environmental degradation. While some scholars accepted White's critique as a valuable challenge to anthropocentric theology, others contended that his interpretation oversimplified the Christian tradition and neglected biblical teachings emphasizing stewardship and care for creation (Conradie, 2006; Horrell et al., 2010). The debate remains foundational to contemporary eco-theological discourse because it highlights the tension between dominion-oriented and stewardship-oriented interpretations of scripture.

A significant strand of eco-theological literature focuses on the doctrine of creation as the basis for environmental ethics. Scholars within this tradition argue that creation possesses intrinsic worth because it originates from God and therefore deserves protection and respect. McFague (2008) contends that ecological destruction represents a theological problem because it undermines the integrity of the created order. Similarly, Conradie (2011) maintains that environmental stewardship is not merely an optional ethical responsibility but an essential aspect of Christian discipleship. These perspectives challenge exploitative approaches to nature by emphasizing humanity's role as caretaker rather than owner of creation. Such interpretations have become particularly relevant in contexts where economic activities threaten ecological sustainability.

Another important area of eco-theological scholarship concerns the concept of stewardship. Stewardship has been widely adopted as a theological framework for environmental responsibility. According to this perspective, humans are entrusted with the management of natural resources on behalf of God and future generations. However, stewardship has also attracted criticism from some scholars who argue that it may inadvertently reinforce human-centered approaches to environmental management. Northcott (2013) suggests that stewardship models often maintain hierarchical distinctions between humans and nature, thereby limiting the transformative potential of ecological ethics. In response, newer eco-theological approaches advocate relational and ecological models that emphasize interconnectedness and mutual dependence among all forms of life. These developments indicate an ongoing evolution within eco-theological thought from managerial stewardship toward ecological partnership.

Environmental justice scholars have highlighted how environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly in

developing countries. Schlosberg (2007) argues that environmental justice extends beyond the equitable distribution of environmental resources to include recognition, participation, and social inclusion. Eco-theologians have adopted these concerns by linking ecological degradation with broader questions of poverty, inequality, and human rights. Within this framework, environmental destruction is interpreted not only as an ecological crisis but also as a moral failure that perpetuates social injustice. This perspective is particularly relevant to regions such as the Niger Delta, where communities experience severe environmental consequences despite contributing significantly to national economic prosperity (Abba, & Onyemachi, 2020).

It is interesting to note that recent scholarship has further expanded eco-theological discourse through engagement with indigenous knowledge systems and non-Western religious traditions. African scholars have argued that indigenous religious worldviews offer valuable ecological insights that can enrich contemporary environmental ethics. Mbiti (1990) observes that African cosmologies generally emphasize interconnected relationships among humans, nature, ancestors, and spiritual realities. Likewise, Bujo (2001) contends that African ethical systems promote communal responsibility and ecological balance, values that resonate strongly with contemporary sustainability principles. These perspectives challenge the dominance of Western theological paradigms and demonstrate the importance of contextual approaches to ecological theology.

Within African eco-theological scholarship, considerable attention has been given to environmental degradation resulting from extractive industries. Scholars examining resource-rich regions often emphasize the ethical implications of environmental exploitation and the responsibility of religious institutions to address ecological injustice. Kalu (2008) notes that African Christianity has increasingly incorporated social and environmental concerns into its theological agenda, reflecting growing awareness of the interconnectedness between ecological sustainability and human well-being. This shift has encouraged faith communities to move beyond purely spiritual concerns toward active engagement with environmental advocacy and community development. Despite significant advances in eco-theological scholarship, several gaps remain. Much of the existing literature has focused on global environmental issues such as climate change and biodiversity conservation, with comparatively less attention devoted to localized ecological crises in developing regions. Furthermore, while scholars have examined the theological dimensions of environmental stewardship, fewer studies have systematically explored how eco-theological principles can inform practical development strategies in resource-dependent communities. In the context of the Niger Delta, existing research has largely

concentrated on political economy, environmental science, and conflict studies, leaving the religious and theological dimensions relatively underexplored.

Historical Background of Oil Exploration in the Niger Delta

Commercial oil production commenced in Oloibiri under the operations of Shell-BP. Following independence in 1960, petroleum revenues became the primary source of Nigeria's economic growth. However, historical accounts indicate that the search for petroleum resources in Nigeria began during the colonial era. Early exploration activities were undertaken by the German company Nigeria Bitumen Corporation in 1908 within the Araromi area of present-day Ondo State. However, these efforts were interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War, resulting in the suspension of exploration activities (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Systematic petroleum exploration resumed in the 1930s when Shell D'Arcy, later known as Shell-BP, received exclusive rights to explore for oil throughout Nigeria. Despite several setbacks caused by the Second World War and technological limitations, exploration efforts intensified after the war, particularly within the Niger Delta basin, which geological surveys identified as highly prospective for hydrocarbon deposits.

The discovery of crude oil in commercial quantities at Oloibiri in present-day Bayelsa State in 1956 marked a watershed moment in Nigeria's economic history. Production commenced in 1958 at an estimated rate of approximately 5,100 barrels per day, signaling the beginning of Nigeria's transition into an oil-producing nation (Soremekun & Obi, 1995). Scholars generally regard this discovery as a turning point that altered the structure of the Nigerian economy, shifting emphasis from agriculture to petroleum production as the primary source of national revenue (Watts, 2008). During the early years of production, multinational oil corporations played a dominant role in the exploration, extraction, and exportation of crude oil, operating largely under agreements negotiated with colonial and later postcolonial governments.

The period following Nigeria's independence in 1960 witnessed rapid expansion in oil exploration and production activities. The entry of multinational corporations such as Mobil, Chevron, Agip, Gulf Oil, Elf, and Texaco intensified competition and accelerated the development of oil infrastructure across the Niger Delta (Omotola, 2006). By the early 1970s, Nigeria had emerged as one of the world's leading oil-producing countries and became a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1971. The global oil boom of the 1970s further strengthened the strategic importance of the petroleum sector, resulting in unprecedented increases in government revenue and public expenditure.

The promulgation of the Petroleum Act of 1969 and subsequent legislation centralized ownership and control of petroleum resources under the federal government (Suberu, 2001). While these policies were designed to facilitate national development and ensure centralized management of strategic resources, critics argue that they simultaneously reduced the control of local communities over their natural resources. Consequently, tensions emerged between oil-producing communities and the state concerning issues of resource ownership, compensation, and environmental responsibility.

Furthermore, historical analyses further demonstrate that environmental concerns became increasingly visible as oil exploration intensified. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, reports of oil spills, gas flaring, and ecological degradation became more frequent across the Niger Delta (UNDP, 2006). The expansion of pipelines, flow stations, export terminals, and drilling operations contributed to widespread environmental disturbances that affected agricultural lands, fishing grounds, and freshwater ecosystems. Environmental scholars argue that these developments marked the beginning of a complex relationship between oil extraction and underdevelopment, in which economic prosperity at the national level coexisted with ecological deterioration and social hardship at the local level (Okaba, 2005).

The emergence of environmental activism in the Niger Delta during the late twentieth century further shaped the historical trajectory of oil exploration in the region. The activities of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) under the leadership of Ken Saro-Wiwa brought international attention to issues of environmental degradation, corporate accountability, and human rights abuses associated with oil production (Boele et al., 2001). The Ogoni struggle represented a significant turning point in the history of resource governance in Nigeria because it transformed local grievances into global debates concerning environmental justice and sustainable development.

The return to democratic governance in 1999 introduced new policy initiatives aimed at addressing developmental challenges in the Niger Delta. Institutions such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and later the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs were established to promote infrastructural development and improve living conditions within oil-producing communities (Ibaba, 2011). Despite these interventions, scholars remain divided regarding their effectiveness. While some studies acknowledge improvements in infrastructure and social services, others contend that corruption, inadequate implementation, and persistent environmental degradation have limited their developmental impact.

Overall, the historical evolution of oil exploration in the Niger Delta reveals a complex interplay between economic development, environmental change, political governance, and community well-being. While petroleum resources have contributed significantly to Nigeria's national development, the historical record also demonstrates that the benefits of oil production have been unevenly distributed. Understanding this historical context is essential for evaluating the contemporary developmental challenges facing the region and for assessing the relevance of eco-theological perspectives in addressing issues of environmental sustainability and social justice.

Impacts of Oil Exploration in the Niger Delta

The exploration of oil in the Niger Delta has produced both positive and negative outcomes, although most people generally agree that the adverse environmental, social, and developmental consequences have disproportionately affected local populations (Watts, 2008; UNDP, 2006). Consequently, understanding the impacts of oil exploration requires a multidimensional analysis that considers economic, environmental, socio-political, cultural, and religious dimensions. The following are some of the impacts of oil exploration in the Niger Delta:

Environmental Impacts

Environmental degradation remains one of the most extensively documented consequence of oil exploration in the Niger Delta. Stakeholders identify oil spills, gas flaring, pipeline leakages, and industrial waste disposal as major sources of ecological damage (UNEP, 2011). These activities have significantly affected soil quality, water resources, biodiversity, and ecosystem sustainability. Oil spills have contaminated farmlands, rivers, and wetlands, rendering many ecosystems unsuitable for agriculture and fishing. Environmental experts emphasize that repeated spill incidents have resulted in long-term ecological damage, some of which may require decades of remediation (Amnesty International, 2018). The destruction of mangrove forests is particularly significant because mangroves serve as critical breeding grounds for fish and other aquatic species.

Gas flaring represents another major environmental challenge. Despite global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, gas flaring has remained a persistent feature of oil production in the Niger Delta. Studies have linked gas flaring to air pollution, acid rain, climate change, and adverse health outcomes among local populations (Aghalino, 2009). Environmental researchers argue that the cumulative effects of these practices have contributed to ecological instability and declining

environmental quality across the region. From an eco-theological perspective, such environmental degradation represents a violation of stewardship ethics and undermines the integrity of creation. The destruction of ecosystems not only threatens biodiversity but also disrupts the relationship between communities and their natural environment.

Social Impacts

One of the most significant impacts of oil exploration in the Niger Delta has been the disruption of traditional livelihoods and social structures. As agricultural lands and fishing waters became polluted, many households experienced declining incomes and increased economic insecurity (UNDP, 2006). Fundamentally, there is the emergence of social inequalities within oil-producing communities. While a small segment of the population has benefited from employment opportunities and compensation arrangements associated with the petroleum industry, many residents remain excluded from the economic benefits of oil production. This disparity has contributed to feelings of marginalization and frustration among local populations (Sam, & Zibima, 2024).

Political and Security Impacts

The political implications of oil exploration have been profound. Resource control and revenue allocation have become central issues in Nigeria's federal system, generating tensions between the federal government, multinational corporations, and host communities (Suberu, 2001). The rise of militancy in the Niger Delta during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is frequently linked to dissatisfaction with environmental degradation and developmental neglect. Groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) emerged in response to perceived injustices associated with resource governance (Omotola, 2006). The resulting conflicts disrupted oil production, threatened national security, and attracted international attention.

The militarization of oil-producing communities further complicated development efforts by creating an atmosphere of insecurity and distrust. Consequently, the relationship between oil exploration and political stability remains a critical concern within Niger Delta scholarship.

Cultural and Religious Impacts

The literature increasingly recognizes that oil exploration has affected not only the physical environment but also the cultural and spiritual life of local communities. Many indigenous communities in the Niger Delta maintain strong cultural and

religious connections to land, rivers, forests, and other natural features (Mbiti, 1990). Environmental degradation therefore has implications that extend beyond material losses.

The destruction of sacred groves, ancestral lands, and culturally significant ecosystems has contributed to the erosion of traditional values and indigenous ecological knowledge. Scholars argue that these losses weaken community identity and undermine cultural continuity (Ejizu, 2013). In addition, the displacement of communities due to oil infrastructure projects has disrupted social networks and traditional systems of authority.

Religious institutions have increasingly responded to these challenges through environmental advocacy, peacebuilding initiatives, and community development programs. Christian churches and faith-based organizations have played important roles in promoting environmental justice and raising awareness about the ethical dimensions of ecological degradation (Conradie, 2011). These interventions highlight the growing intersection between religion, environmental sustainability, and development in the Niger Delta.

Religious Evaluation of the Impact of Oil Exploration on Niger Delta Development

Analysis of different perspectives indicates that decades of petroleum exploitation have generated profound environmental degradation, socio-economic marginalization, cultural dislocation, and developmental inequalities. These outcomes raise important ethical and theological concerns regarding stewardship, environmental justice, human dignity, and the responsible use of natural resources. Looking at the issue with the lens of Religion and Eco-theology, the following are some of the findings and discussions:

i. Environmental Degradation as a Violation of Divine Stewardship

One of the major findings of this study is that oil exploration has resulted in extensive environmental degradation across the Niger Delta. Oil spills, gas flaring, deforestation, water pollution, and biodiversity loss have significantly altered the ecological landscape of the region (UNEP, 2011; UNDP, 2006). The findings indicate that many communities have experienced the destruction of farmlands, fishing waters, and forests upon which their livelihoods traditionally depended.

From an eco-theological perspective, these developments represent a fundamental violation of the principle of stewardship. Christian theology teaches that the earth belongs ultimately to God and that human beings function as caretakers rather than owners of creation (Genesis 2:15). The exploitation of natural resources in

ways that produce ecological destruction contradicts the divine mandate to preserve and nurture creation. Rather than reflecting responsible stewardship, many oil exploration activities in the Niger Delta have prioritized economic gains over ecological sustainability.

Similarly, African Traditional Religious worldviews regard nature as sacred and interconnected with spiritual realities. Rivers, forests, and land are often viewed as dwelling places of ancestral and spiritual forces that sustain communal life (Mbiti, 1990). Consequently, environmental degradation constitutes not only ecological damage but also spiritual disruption. The destruction of natural ecosystems therefore undermines the sacred relationship between humanity and the environment that is central to indigenous religious consciousness.

ii. Environmental Injustice and the Ethical Crisis of Resource Distribution

A second major finding concerns the unequal distribution of the benefits and burdens associated with oil exploration. The literature consistently demonstrates that while petroleum revenues have contributed substantially to national development, the host communities continue to experience poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental degradation (Okaba, 2005; Watts, 2008). This disparity reflects a pattern of environmental injustice in which local populations bear the environmental costs of oil production while receiving limited developmental benefits. From a religious standpoint, such inequality raises serious ethical concerns. Both Christian ethics and African communal philosophies emphasize justice, fairness, and the protection of vulnerable populations. The prophetic tradition within Christianity consistently condemns systems that enrich a privileged few while marginalizing the poor and powerless.

The findings therefore suggest that the developmental challenges of the Niger Delta are not merely technical or administrative problems but also manifestations of moral failure. The concentration of economic benefits at the national level alongside local deprivation contradicts religious principles of distributive justice and social responsibility. Consequently, oil exploration in the Niger Delta may be interpreted as an example of structural injustice that requires ethical transformation as much as policy reform.

iii. Poverty Amidst Abundance and the Question of Human Dignity

Another significant finding is the persistence of poverty despite the enormous wealth generated from petroleum resources. The study found that many oil-producing communities continue to lack access to quality healthcare, education, potable water,

and basic infrastructure. Unemployment remains widespread, particularly among youths whose traditional livelihoods have been undermined by environmental degradation. From a religious perspective, development should enhance human dignity and promote the flourishing of individuals and communities. Christian social ethics emphasizes that every human being possesses inherent worth because humanity is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27). Likewise, African religious traditions uphold the value of communal well-being and mutual responsibility.

The persistence of poverty in resource-rich communities therefore represents a contradiction of the fundamental purpose of development. Development that generates wealth without improving the quality of life of local populations cannot be regarded as authentic development. The findings indicate that economic growth associated with oil production has not translated into meaningful human development for many residents of the Niger Delta. Such outcomes challenge the moral legitimacy of existing development models and call for more people-centered approaches to resource governance.

vi. Social Conflict and the Breakdown of Communal Harmony

The study also found a strong relationship between oil exploration and social conflict within the Niger Delta. Environmental degradation, unemployment, resource control disputes, and perceptions of marginalization have contributed to youth restiveness, militancy, kidnapping, and violence in various communities (Omotola, 2006). Religious traditions generally view peace as a necessary condition for human flourishing and social development. Christianity emphasizes reconciliation, justice, and peaceful coexistence, while African Traditional Religion stresses communal harmony and collective well-being. The findings suggest that the social unrest experienced in the Niger Delta is partly rooted in unresolved injustices associated with resource extraction (Olukunle, & Adegoke, 2025).

From an eco-theological perspective, violence and conflict may be understood as consequences of broken relationships between humanity and nature, between communities and institutions, and among members of society. When environmental destruction undermines livelihoods and social structures, it creates conditions that foster resentment and instability. Thus, the conflicts associated with oil exploration reveal the broader social consequences of ecological injustice.

v. Erosion of Indigenous Ecological Values

The findings further indicate that oil exploration has contributed to the weakening of traditional ecological knowledge and indigenous environmental ethics.

The destruction of sacred forests, rivers, and culturally significant landscapes has disrupted longstanding cultural practices and belief systems. African Traditional Religious thought traditionally promotes respect for nature through taboos, rituals, and communal norms that regulate human interaction with the environment. These indigenous conservation mechanisms historically contributed to ecological sustainability. However, modernization and industrial extraction have often marginalized such traditional values.

The erosion of indigenous ecological ethics represents a significant developmental concern because it removes culturally grounded mechanisms for environmental protection. Religious evaluation therefore highlights the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge systems into contemporary environmental management strategies.

vi. Religious Institutions as Agents of Environmental Justice

An important positive finding of this study is the growing involvement of religious institutions in addressing environmental and developmental challenges in the Niger Delta. Churches, faith-based organizations, and religious leaders have increasingly engaged in environmental advocacy, community development, peacebuilding, and humanitarian interventions. These efforts demonstrate the potential of religion to serve as a transformative force for sustainable development. Religious institutions possess moral authority, social legitimacy, and grassroots networks that can facilitate environmental awareness and community mobilization. Through advocacy for justice, stewardship, and accountability, faith communities contribute to addressing some of the ethical deficits associated with oil exploration.

The findings suggest that eco-theological approaches can provide valuable frameworks for promoting environmental responsibility and sustainable development. Religious teachings on stewardship, justice, compassion, and communal responsibility offer ethical resources for addressing the developmental challenges confronting the Niger Delta.

Implications for Sustainable Development

The overall findings indicate that the developmental impacts of oil exploration in the Niger Delta extend beyond economic indicators to encompass environmental, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions (Jack, 2025). From a religious perspective, development must be holistic, integrating material prosperity with ecological sustainability, social justice, and human well-being.

The study therefore argues that sustainable development in the Niger Delta requires a shift from extractive and profit-driven models toward approaches grounded in stewardship, environmental justice, and community participation. Religious values can play a critical role in shaping such a transformation by encouraging ethical accountability among governments, multinational corporations, and local communities. Ultimately, the findings reveal that oil exploration has generated significant developmental challenges that undermine both environmental integrity and human flourishing. A religious evaluation demonstrates that these challenges are fundamentally ethical issues requiring not only technological and political solutions but also moral and spiritual renewal. The principles of eco-theology and African religious environmental ethics provide important foundations for fostering a more just, sustainable, and human-centered model of development in the Niger Delta.

Toward an Eco-Theological Framework for Sustainable Development

The environmental and developmental challenges confronting the Niger Delta have demonstrated the limitations of conventional development approaches that prioritize economic growth without adequate consideration for ecological sustainability, social justice, and human well-being. Despite decades of oil exploration and the enormous revenues generated from petroleum resources, the region continues to experience environmental degradation, poverty, social conflict, and infrastructural deficits. These realities underscore the need for an alternative framework that integrates ethical, ecological, and developmental concerns. Eco-theology provides such a framework by emphasizing humanity's moral responsibility toward creation, environmental justice, and the pursuit of sustainable development (Jähnichen, 2022).

Eco-theology is founded on the conviction that the natural environment is not merely an economic asset but an integral part of God's creation deserving protection, respect, and responsible management (Conradie, 2011). This perspective challenges dominant extractive development models that view nature primarily as a source of economic profit. Instead, eco-theology advocates a holistic understanding of development in which economic activities are balanced with environmental conservation, social equity, and the well-being of future generations. In the context of the Niger Delta, such a framework provides important ethical guidance for addressing the ecological and developmental consequences of oil exploration.

A central component of an eco-theological framework for sustainable development is stewardship. Stewardship emphasizes that human beings are custodians rather than owners of creation and are therefore accountable for the

responsible use of natural resources. The environmental degradation associated with oil exploration—including oil spills, gas flaring, biodiversity loss, and water pollution—reflects a departure from this principle. Sustainable development requires a renewed commitment to stewardship that promotes ecological responsibility, environmental protection, and sustainable resource management. Such an approach recognizes that the exploitation of natural resources must not compromise the integrity of ecosystems or the welfare of future generations.

Environmental justice constitutes another important pillar of an eco-theological framework. The findings of this study reveal that the burdens of oil exploration have been disproportionately borne by host communities, while many of the economic benefits have accrued elsewhere (Miapyen, 2020). This imbalance raises fundamental ethical questions concerning fairness, equity, and human dignity. Eco-theology insists that development must be guided by principles of justice that ensure the equitable distribution of both benefits and responsibilities. Sustainable development therefore requires policies that address historical inequalities, promote community participation, and guarantee that local populations benefit meaningfully from the resources extracted from their environment.

An eco-theological framework also emphasizes the intrinsic value of creation. Traditional development paradigms often evaluate natural resources primarily in terms of their economic utility. Eco-theology challenges this assumption by asserting that nature possesses inherent worth because it is part of God's creation. Forests, rivers, wetlands, and biodiversity should therefore be protected not only because they provide economic benefits but also because they possess ecological, cultural, and spiritual significance. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Niger Delta, where environmental degradation has disrupted both ecological systems and cultural relationships with the natural environment.

Furthermore, sustainable development within an eco-theological framework requires the integration of indigenous environmental knowledge. African Traditional Religious worldviews generally promote harmonious relationships between humans and nature and recognize the sacredness of the natural environment (Mbiti, 1990). Traditional conservation practices, communal resource management systems, and cultural respect for sacred ecosystems provide valuable lessons for contemporary environmental governance. Incorporating indigenous ecological knowledge into development planning can enhance environmental sustainability while preserving cultural heritage and community identity.

Community participation is another critical element of an eco-theological approach to sustainable development. Development initiatives imposed without the

meaningful involvement of local populations often fail to address community needs and priorities. Eco-theology emphasizes the dignity and agency of all people and supports participatory approaches that empower communities to contribute to decisions affecting their environment and livelihoods. In the Niger Delta, greater community involvement in resource governance, environmental monitoring, and development planning can enhance accountability and improve developmental outcomes.

The role of religious institutions is equally significant within an eco-theological framework. Churches, faith-based organizations, and traditional religious institutions possess moral authority and extensive grassroots networks capable of promoting environmental awareness and social transformation. Religious leaders can contribute to sustainable development by advocating environmental justice, educating communities about ecological responsibility, and encouraging ethical behavior among governments, corporations, and citizens. Through sermons, educational programs, advocacy campaigns, and community development initiatives, religious institutions can help cultivate a culture of environmental stewardship and social responsibility.

Additionally, eco-theology promotes ecological restoration as an essential dimension of sustainable development. Given the extensive environmental damage caused by decades of oil exploration, sustainable development in the Niger Delta cannot focus solely on preventing future degradation. It must also include deliberate efforts to restore polluted ecosystems, rehabilitate damaged communities, and revive traditional livelihoods. Environmental remediation programs, reforestation initiatives, clean water projects, and sustainable agricultural practices are practical expressions of ecological restoration that align with eco-theological principles.

Ultimately, an eco-theological framework for sustainable development offers a holistic approach to addressing the complex challenges facing the Niger Delta. By integrating stewardship, environmental justice, ecological sustainability, indigenous knowledge, community participation, and moral responsibility, eco-theology provides a comprehensive ethical foundation for development. Such a framework recognizes that genuine development cannot be measured solely by economic indicators but must also promote environmental integrity, social equity, cultural preservation, and human flourishing. In this regard, eco-theology offers a transformative vision capable of guiding the Niger Delta toward a more sustainable, just, and environmentally responsible future.

Conclusion

Oil exploration and Niger Delta development can be viewed through an eco-theological and socio-religious lens. The sustainable development in the Niger Delta cannot be achieved through economic growth alone. Rather, it requires an integrated approach that combines environmental sustainability, social justice, community participation, ethical governance, and respect for human dignity. Eco-theology provides a valuable framework for achieving this objective by emphasizing stewardship, ecological responsibility, environmental justice, and the interconnectedness of humanity and creation. The future development of the Niger Delta depends not only on policy reforms and technological interventions but also on a moral transformation that places environmental integrity and human well-being at the center of development planning.

Recommendations

The paper makes the following recommendations as a way forward:

1. **Adoption of Stewardship-Based Resource Management.** Oil exploration policies should incorporate eco-theological principles of stewardship and sustainability. Resource extraction should be guided by ethical considerations that prioritize environmental protection, biodiversity conservation, and intergenerational responsibility.
2. **Promotion of Environmental Justice and Equity.** Mechanisms should be established to ensure a more equitable distribution of the benefits derived from petroleum resources. Host communities should receive adequate compensation for environmental damages and greater access to developmental opportunities. Revenue allocation policies should be reviewed to promote fairness, reduce inequalities, and enhance local participation in resource governance.
3. **Integration of Indigenous Environmental Knowledge.** Policymakers and environmental practitioners should incorporate indigenous ecological knowledge into environmental management and sustainable development strategies. African Traditional Religious perspectives on environmental conservation, communal responsibility, and ecological harmony provide valuable insights for addressing contemporary environmental challenges in the Niger Delta.
4. **Increased Role of Religious Institutions in Environmental Advocacy.** Religious institutions should intensify efforts to promote environmental awareness, ecological

ethics, and sustainable development. Churches, faith-based organizations, and traditional religious leaders should incorporate environmental stewardship into their teachings and engage in advocacy for environmental justice and responsible resource governance.

5. The Federal Government of Nigeria should strengthen environmental regulations governing oil exploration and ensure strict enforcement of environmental protection laws.

References

- Abba, A. A., & Onyemachi, N. D. (2020). Weeping in the face of fortune: Eco-alienation in the Niger-Delta ecopoetics. *Humanities*, 9(3), 54. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h9030054>
- Ako, R. T. (2011). The struggle for resource control and violence in the Niger Delta. *Journal of Sustainable Development Law and Policy*, 1(1), 46-59.
- Amnesty International. (2018). *Nigeria: Negligence in the Niger Delta*. Amnesty International Ltd.
- Boele, R., Fabig, H., & Wheeler, D. (2001). Shell, Nigeria and the Ogoni. *Sustainable Development*, 9(2), 74-86.
- Bujo, B. (2001). *Foundations of an African ethic: Beyond the universal claims of Western morality*. Crossroad Publishing.
- Conradie, E. M. (2006). *Christianity and ecological theology: Resources for further research*. Sun Press.
- Conradie, E. M. (2011). *The church and climate change*. Sun Press.
- Edobor, O. S., & Baffoe, G. (2025). The paradox of poverty and resource wealth: Stakeholder perspectives on environmental degradation in Nigeria's Niger Delta. *Human Organization*, 84(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X251371352>
- Ejizu, C. I. (2013). African traditional religions and environmental ethics. *African Research Review*, 7(2), 1-15.
- Falola, T., & Heaton, M. M. (2008). *A history of Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press.
- Horrell, D. G., Hunt, C., Southgate, C., & Stavrakopoulou, F. (2010). *Greening Paul: Rereading the apostle in a time of ecological crisis*. Baylor University Press.
- Ibaba, S. I. (2011). *Understanding the Niger Delta crisis*. Amethyst and Colleagues Publishers.
- Jack, J. T. (2025). *(Mal)adaptation to environmental pollution: Oil and the livelihood dysfunction trap in Nigeria's Niger Delta*. Africa. Cambridge University Press.
- Jähnichen, T. (2022). Ecological justice: Towards an integrative concept of the protection of creation. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 78(2). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7738>
- Kalu, O. (2008). *African Pentecostalism: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Karl, T. L. (1997). *The paradox of plenty: Oil booms and petro-states*. University of California Press.

- Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.
- McFague, S. (2008). *A new climate for theology: God, the world, and global warming*. Fortress Press.
- Miapyen, B. S., & Bozkurt, U. (2020). Capital, the state, and environmental pollution in Nigeria. *SAGE Open*, 10(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020975018>
- Northcott, M. S. (2013). *A moral climate: The ethics of global warming*. Orbis Books.
- Okaba, B. (2005). *Petroleum industry and the paradox of rural poverty in the Niger Delta*. Ethiopie Publishing.
- Olukunle, C. K., & Adegoke, O. A. (2025). Oil exploitation in Nigeria Delta region: A curse or blessing? A theological perspective. *SustainE*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.55366/suse.v3i2.26>
- Omotola, J. S. (2006). *The next Gulf? Oil politics, environmental apocalypse and rising tension in the Niger Delta* (Occasional Paper No. 61). Institute of Security Studies.
- Sam, K., & Zibima, T. (2024). Inclusive environmental decision-making in a developing nation: Insights from the Ogoni remediation project, Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Environmental Management*, 73, 323–337.
- Schlosberg, D. (2007). *Defining environmental justice: Theories, movements, and nature*. Oxford University Press.
- Soremekun, K., & Obi, C. (1995). *Oil and the politics of marginalization in Nigeria*. Africa World Press.
- Suberu, R. T. (2001). *Federalism and ethnic conflict in Nigeria*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2006). *Niger Delta human development report*. UNDP.
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2011). *Environmental assessment of Ogoniland*. UNEP.
- Watts, M. (2008). *Curse of the black gold: 50 years of oil in the Niger Delta*. PowerHouse Books.
- White, L., Jr. (1967). The historical roots of our ecological crisis. *Science*, 155(3767), 1203–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>