

BETWEEN PULPIT AND POLICY: MEDIATING CITIZENS EXCLUSION, ACCOUNTABILITY GAPS, AND STALLED DEVELOPMENT IN THE NIGER DELTA

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the relationship between religious institutions and the Niger Delta, Nigeria, emphasizing the dual function of these institutions as political intermediaries. Although the region produces over 75% of national GDP and operates under democratic administration, inhabitants are predominantly marginalized from resource benefits and face significant accountability deficiencies. The current study emphasizes militancy and corruption, neglecting the mediation roles of religious institutions. The study utilizes qualitative documentary analysis, drawing on forensic audit reports, ethnographic investigations, and official publications, framed by the notions of articulated sovereignty and mediated citizenship in resource-dependent environments. The research demonstrates that religious (Pentecostal) mediation has led to disarmed of militants resulting to the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) by redefining governmental authority as a spiritual obligation, thereby reducing demands for citizen accountability. This theological rationale also emphasizes developing institutional innovations that may provide substitutes to further religious mediation, while their future viability remains dubious. The study concludes by emphasizing that although religious mediation mitigates acute conflict, it sustains long-term citizen exclusion and undermines governance mechanisms. It

proposes the dissemination of forensic audit reports, the augmentation of advocacy functions of religious organizations, and the formalization of collaborations between development commissions and anti-corruption agencies to guarantee accountability devoid of political involvement. Thus, this research enhances the political sociology of religion by demonstrating how spiritual legitimation can supplant democratic accountability in resource-abundant, conflict-impacted governments, while offering a longitudinal perspective on the interplay between religion and governance in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Pulpit, Policy, Accountability, Development, Mediation, Citizenship, Governance, Nigeria

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has remained a profound conundrum for more than twenty-five years of continuous democratic rule in Nigeria since 1999 to date. The area responsible for the vast majority of the nation's foreign exchange revenues persists in displaying some of the most severe human development indices in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2023). The infrastructure deficiencies, environmental deterioration, and economic marginalization that catalyzed the emergence of militant insurgencies in the 1990s and 2000s endure, despite the creation of specialized interventionist agencies and the execution of disarmament initiatives (United Nations Development Programme, 2022; Niger Delta Development Commission, 2025; Joab-Peterside, Porter & Watts, 2011). Concurrently with the narrative of state failure, an alternative account has emerged, one that has garnered less academic scrutiny. Throughout the creeks and urban areas of the Niger Delta, Pentecostal Christianity, for instance, has thrived, with its leaders increasingly taking on significant roles as intermediaries among discontented communities, militant groups, and the Nigerian government.

The Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP), which effectively demobilized thousands of insurgents' post-2009, did not transpire in a religious vacuum. Casciano's (2023; cf. Olumide & Ekanade, 2011) ethnographic research in Port Harcourt illustrates that previously militant adolescents who experienced "born-again" transformations became fervent advocates of the amnesty process, employing Christian terminology and concepts to articulate their acceptance of state authority. This paper presents a fundamental inquiry: What influence have

religious institutions exerted on the dynamics between residents and the state in the Niger Delta from 1999 to 2025? We contend that religious institutions (Pentecostal) mediation serves as an ambiguous political tool, both pacifying armed conflict and depoliticizing the fundamental grievances that instigated it (Onimhawo & Ottuh, 2007). According to Marshall (2009; cf. Niger Delta Development Commission, 2025), by shifting citizen expectations towards supernatural authority and spiritual remedies, religious intermediaries have unintentionally addressed accountability voids that ought to be managed by democratic institutions.

The paper comprises five sections. Initially, we construct the theoretical framework, utilizing the concepts of mediated citizenship and articulated sovereignty. Secondly, we record the magnitude of the accountability dilemma, encompassing the N6 trillion forensic audit that remains hidden from public examination. Third, we examine the developmental effects of twenty-five years of interventionist policy, revealing stagnated progress despite significant resource investment. Fourth, we analyze the mediating function of religious institutions (Pentecostal) by utilizing ethnographic evidence. Fifth, we examine emergent institutional innovations, specifically the collaboration between the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), questioning whether collaborative governance models can overcome the constraints of religious mediation.

Defined Sovereignty and Facilitated Citizenship

Traditional political science methodologies of governance presuppose a relatively uncomplicated relationship between governments and citizens: the state delivers public goods and security; citizens remit taxes and provide legitimacy (Okonta & Douglas, 2001). In resource-abundant, conflict-impacted areas such as the Niger Delta, this connection is influenced by a multifaceted network of non-state players, including traditional leaders, militant chiefs, and religious authorities. Casciano's (2023) notion of articulated sovereignty serves as a valuable foundation for comprehending this configuration. Casciano's (2023) ethnographic investigation in Port Harcourt in 2016 illustrates that sovereignty in the Niger Delta is not just held by the state but is expressed through many authorities. Pentecostal churches have emerged as venues where state authority is recognized, contested, and examined. For Marshall (2009), former militants who join these congregations do not relinquish their political power; instead,

they recontextualize it exchanging reliance on governmental institutions for confidence in divine providence.

If citizenship denotes membership in a political community with associated rights and responsibilities, then the Niger Delta exemplifies mediated citizenship, a situation where access to the state is facilitated by intermediaries who delineate, filter, and interpret citizen requests (Obi & Oriola, 2018; Marshall, 2009). This mediation becomes essential when direct interactions between citizens and the state deteriorate. The historical progression of the Niger Delta exemplifies this disintegration with stark clarity. Since the Ogoni protests of the 1990s, through the armed insurgencies of the 2000s, to the present period of tenuous calm, people have persistently endeavored to ensure their views are acknowledged in Abuja (Kpagih & Tambudzai, 2016). When direct petitions are unsuccessful, communities resort to intermediaries. In the absence of accountable political structures, religious leaders have filled the resulting void. Nevertheless, religious mediation entails intrinsic hazards.

By endorsing amnesty conditions and advocating for state-driven development efforts, Pentecostal leaders validate a political system that is inherently extractive. One of Casciano's (2023) interlocutors articulated the rationale behind former militants' support for the government: "We believe that it is God who has allowed the government to exist... we cannot criticize them because they have been divinely appointed" (p.637). According to Smith (2021), this theological framework converts political contingency into divine necessity, precluding the potential for asserting accountability as a right instead of a concession.

Accountability Deficiencies: The N6 Trillion Forensic Audit and the Transparency Crisis

In 2019, after years of escalating accusations of financial misconduct within the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), former President Muhammadu Buhari mandated a thorough forensic audit of the commission's activities from its establishment in 2000 until 2019 (Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project, 2019). The decision was prompted by whistleblower testimonies and legislative inquiries revealing the widespread misappropriation of cash designated for regional development. The audit has been finalized and submitted to the government. The findings, as published by various media, allegedly implicated "high-ranking officials and politicians in the disappearance

of N6 trillion from the commission between 2001 and 2019” (Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project, 2025a). N6 trillion surpasses the cumulative annual budgets of numerous Nigerian states and signifies several years' worth of total federal allocations to the region. Notwithstanding the significant public interest in the audit's conclusions, the Nigerian government has declined to release the report.

In July 2025, the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) and four concerned people from the Niger Delta namely: Taiwo Aiyedatiwa, Jude Igbogifurotogu Pulemote, Ben Omietimi Tariye, and Elizabeth Egbe initiated legal proceedings at the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice in Abuja (Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project. (2025b). The lawsuit, designated ECW/CCJ/APP/35/25, requests declaratory and injunctive remedies mandating the government to disclose the report. The plaintiffs present a persuasive argument: "The suppression of the report's publication is perpetuating impunity and concealing the documented allegations" (Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project. (2025b, para. 12). They reference Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both adopted by Nigeria, which affirm access to information as a fundamental human right (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 1981; United Nations, 1967). The accountability crisis transcends the NDDC.

Table 1: Documented Financial Irregularities in Niger Delta Development Initiatives, 2001-2025

Period	Agency/Program		Alleged Irregularity	Amount (N)	Status of Investigation
2001–2019	NDDC		Unaccounted funds (forensic audit)	6 trillion	Report concealed; litigation pending
2023–2024	Niger Ministry	Delta	Unspecified diversion	Under investigation	Ongoing
2024	Presidential Amnesty Programme		Alleged contract inflation	N/A	Parliamentary inquiry

Period	Agency/Program	Alleged Irregularity	Amount (N)	Status of Investigation
2024	NDDC training contract	Alleged payment to former minister's wife	48 billion	Public allegation; unsubstantiated

Source: SERAP filings (2) (6); New Telegraph, 10

Table 1 delineates a temporal and institutional framework of recorded financial discrepancies across four principal agencies and programmes instituted for the development of the Niger Delta region. The table fulfills various analytical functions: it showcases the magnitude of resource misallocation (from billions to trillions of Naira), highlights the enduring nature of these irregularities (covering the entire democratic period from 2001 to 2025), exposes the variety of institutional settings where misconduct transpires, and records the persistent inadequacy of accountability measures (as indicated by the "Status of Investigation" column). Each row is elucidated in full below, along with a concise examination of trends throughout the table. Table 1 records purported abnormalities, not established offenses. The differentiation between allegation and conviction is essential to the rule of law. The article does not claim that any identified individual is culpable of corruption; it states that particular allegations have been made and that certain investigative procedures have been commenced (or, in some instances, stifled).

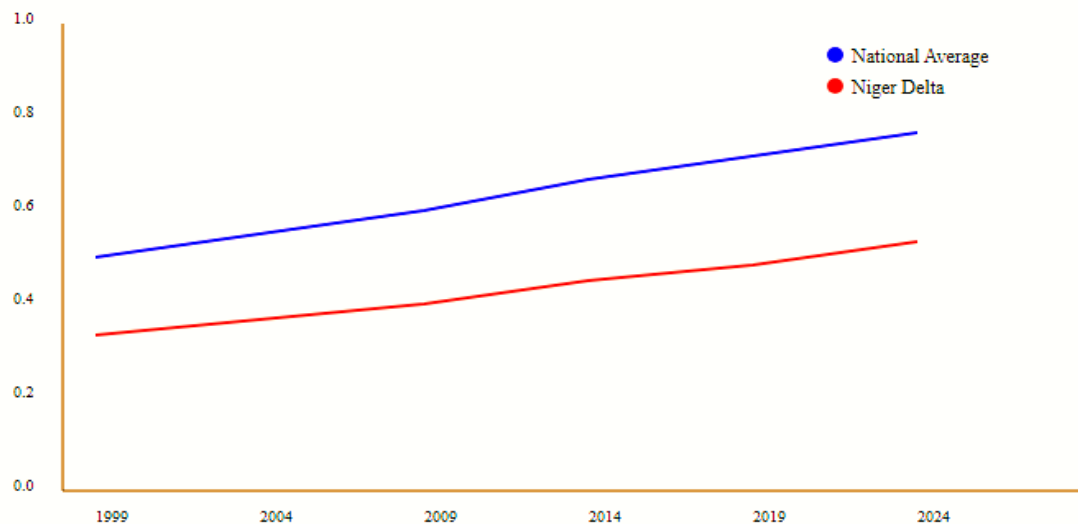
The "Status of Investigation" column is specifically intended to differentiate across various phases of the accountability process. Furthermore, the table is inherently incomplete. It encompasses solely those irregularities that have emerged in the public domain via lawsuit, parliamentary documents, or significant media coverage (Niger Delta Development Commission, 2025). It is quite probable that there are further occurrences of financial misconduct within Niger Delta development institutions that remain undocumented, uninvestigated, or publicly claimed. The table delineates the minimal recognized scope of the issue, rather than its complete magnitude (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Stagnant Progress: A Quarter-Century of Interventionist Policy

July 2025 signified the twenty-fifth anniversary of the NDDC's formation, succeeding the Oil Minerals Development Commission (OMPADEC). The Commission commemorated the event with a week-long celebration, with a thanksgiving ceremony in Akure, Ondo State, on July 6, 2025, and a global news conference in Asaba, Delta State. Samuel Ogbuku, the managing director and chief executive officer of the NDDC, utilized the event to highlight the commission's accomplishments. The construction of a "45-km double-circuit 33KV feeder line from Omotosho Power Station to Okitipupa in Ondo State" was particularly significant, since it reinstated energy to 25 local governments after a fifteen-year absence of power (*The Tide News Online*, 2025 p.3). Ogbuku emphasized the Commission's shift from a "transactional mindset to one of transformation," which includes the digitization of procurement processes to improve transparency.

Ogbuku (2026) was forthright regarding the obstacles that have impeded the Commission's efficacy: "Frequent changes in management and boards have hindered our progress," he acknowledged, noting that the Commission had restructured its administrative framework into "13 statutory directorates" and implemented "robust corporate governance protocols" (p.1). Despite official jubilation, the developmental progress of the Niger Delta since 1999 is profoundly concerning. A study presented at the Peace and War interdisciplinary conference at Coventry University in 2012 analyzed the correlation between war costs and economic growth in the region, utilizing the Human Development Index (HDI) and Gini coefficient metrics (Kpagih & Tambudzai, 2016; Onuoha, 2016). The data indicated a significant disparity: although per capita expenditure rose from 1996 to 2004, signifying economic progress, this expansion did not result in human development. Edih, Faghawari and Azuka (2022), argue that income distribution continued to be markedly unequal, and the diverse costs of conflict: physical, human, social, ecological, and environmental adversely impacted living standards.

Figure 1: Human Development Indicators of the Niger Delta Compared to National Average (1999–2025)



Niger Delta HDI remains below national average despite high GDP contribution (Kpagih & Tambudzai, 2016; UNDP, 2022).

Figure 1 is a conceptual line graph depicting the comparative progression of Human Development Index (HDI) scores for the Niger Delta region in relation to the Nigerian national average during a twenty-six-year span (1999-2025). The graphic is clearly designated as a "conceptual illustration not an actual figure," serving as a significant methodological disclaimer. This indicates that although the picture accurately depicts the trajectory and durability of the development disparity between the Niger Delta and the remainder of Nigeria, the specific numerical values at each data point are illustrative rather than sourced from a singular, authoritative longitudinal dataset. The disclaimer indicates a legitimate constraint in the available data: although cross-sectional HDI studies for the Niger Delta are present for certain years (particularly the 2012 Peace and Conflict conference study referenced in the article), there is no public access to continuous annual HDI tracking for the region from 1999 to 2025 (Kpagih & Tambudzai, 2016; United Nations Development Programme, 2022). The graphic synthesizes existing facts into a visual representation of the primary argument: the Niger Delta regularly underperforms relative to the national average, despite contributing the majority of national revenue.

The continued existence of this development gap, despite the presence of various interventionist agencies (NDDC, Niger Delta Ministry, Presidential Amnesty Programme, and Niger Delta Development Commission), indicates a

structural issue rather than a purely administrative one (Ogege, 2011). Resources designated for development have been routinely misappropriated; accountability measures have been intentionally obstructed; and the marginalization of citizens in decision-making processes has largely gone unopposed (Human Rights Watch, 2014). An evaluation of the halted progress in the Niger Delta must include recognition of the environmental repercussions of oil extraction. Prolonged gas flaring, pipeline breaks, and oil spills have rendered extensive regions of agricultural land and fishing waterways unfit for use. The previously mentioned conflict costs paradigm delineates natural costs and environmental costs as separate forms of damage, which have proved disastrous in the Niger Delta (Edih, Faghawari & Azuka, 2022). For Watts (2008), development is impeded when the ecological foundation of sustenance is obliterated and when the entities tasked with restoration are also those involved in financial misconduct, leading to a cycle of degradation that further hinders economic growth and community resilience.

Pentecostalism and Political Justification: The Mediating Pulpit

The era of democratic rule (1999-2025) has coincided with significant expansion of Pentecostal Christianity throughout the Niger Delta. Prominent denominations, such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Winners Chapel, and many independent charismatic congregations, have developed large networks across the region (Ukah, 2008). This theological shift carries significant political ramifications. Casciano's (2023) research concentrated on a Pentecostal congregation in Port Harcourt, comprising former militants who had engaged in the Presidential Amnesty Programme. These individuals, having disarmed and adopted "born-again" identities, became eloquent advocates of the peace movement. They employed Christian terminology to elucidate their acceptance of the amnesty conditions: their metamorphosis was perceived not as a political concession but as a spiritual renaissance, and their collaboration with the state was characterized as adherence to divine mandate (Marshall, 2009; Onimhawo & Ottuh, 2007). The notion of articulated sovereignty encapsulates the unique political arrangement that has arisen in the post-amnesty Niger Delta. Instead of a direct transfer of power from militants to the state, there was a reconfiguration of authority across many locations.

According to Casciano (2023), the state maintained nominal sovereignty; militant leaders preserved local authority; and Pentecostal pastors assumed a new function as intermediaries, interpreting the state to the populace and the

populace to the state. This mediation is fundamentally not only instrumental. Casciano (2023) observes that the former militants he interviewed sincerely believed that the amnesty process embodied God's design for their life. Their acceptance of official power was neither coerced nor calculated but rather perceived as spiritually genuine. This is what renders Pentecostal mediation highly effective and politically significant. When citizens perceive state authority as divine will, the capacity to demand responsibility as a right diminishes (Smith, 2021). Pentecostal mediation cannot be reduced to legitimizing state authority. Casciano's (2023) research also documents instances where religious leaders utilize Christian rhetoric to critique governmental actions.

The same theology that promotes acceptance of authority can also produce prophetic critique when the state exceeds its limits or neglects its responsibilities (Ottuh & Jemegbe, 2021). According to Obi and [Oriola](#) (2018), the difficulty lies in the sporadic and unpredictable nature of prophetic critique. The determination relies on the bravery and disposition of individual pastors rather than on established accountability systems, which can lead to inconsistent and potentially ineffective prophetic critiques of the state's actions (Ottuh & Jemegbe, 2021). Furthermore, critiques articulated in spiritual language the government has transgressed against the populace are less likely to yield tangible policy alterations compared to requests expressed in legal or constitutional language.

Table 2: Pentecostal Mediation's Role in the Niger Delta

Function	Mechanism	Political Consequence
Pacification	Spiritual reframing of amnesty acceptance	Reduced armed conflict
Legitimation	Theological validation of state authority	Reduced pressure for accountability
Critique	Prophetic denunciation of specific abuses	Intermittent, personality-dependent oversight
Service provision	Church-based social welfare programs	Partial filling of state gaps; depoliticization of needs

Source: Developed from Casciano, 2023; Marshall, 2009.

Table 2 delineates a typological study of four unique duties that Pentecostal religious institutions fulfill as political intermediaries between citizens and the state in the Niger Delta. Each function is examined in three dimensions: its definition (function), its practical operation (mechanism), and its subsequent impacts on governance and political conduct (political consequence). The table is based on Casciano's (2023) ethnographic study of former militants who have become Pentecostal worshipers in Port Harcourt, together with wider observations of the religious-political dynamics in the region from 1999 to 2025. The four rows of Table 2 collectively illustrate a cruel irony: the Pentecostal mediation that alleviates armed conflict and delivers needed services simultaneously legitimizes an unaccountable state and depoliticizes civilian needs.

The table does not imply that Pentecostal leaders are corrupt or wicked; rather, many are genuinely dedicated to peace and human flourishing (Ukah, 2008). Nonetheless, the structural consequences of their mediation whether deliberate or inadvertent entail diminished impetus for democratic accountability. The table serves as an analytical instrument for comprehending the reasons behind the enduring accountability gap in the Niger Delta, despite prevalent awareness of corruption and developmental shortcomings. Smith (2021) submits that Pentecostal mediation elucidates the conundrum: citizens have refrained from insurrection against the state not solely due to apprehension of repression but also because their religious paradigms have conditioned them to perceive the state as divinely sanctioned, to await divine intervention rather than assert justice, and to regard charity as a replacement for entitlements.

New Institutional Innovations: Partnership between NDDC and EFCC

In June 2025, the NDDC and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) collaboratively inaugurated the "Renewed Hope Multi-Purpose Training Centre" in the Otuokpoti Community, Ogbia Local Government Area, Bayelsa State (Agbu, 2025). The facility, capable of housing 1,000 individuals, was financed with funds confiscated by the EFCC for the commission. Ogbuku stated that analogous facilities are being constructed in Delta State (Patani and Ozorro) and in two places inside Rivers State (Ketebu, 2026). This alliance signifies a substantial institutional innovation. The NDDC has traditionally disbursed funds, while the EFCC has investigated financial

crimes. Their partnership on a development initiative utilizing reclaimed resources for direct community advantage that indicates a possible framework for disrupting the cycle of appropriation and impunity. Ogbuku (2026) has underscored that the NDDC is shifting from a "transactional" to a "transformational" paradigm, with the digitization of procurement procedures as a fundamental element (cf. Ketebu, 2026; Niger Delta Development Commission, 2025 p.4)). The implementation of robust corporate governance protocols aims to establish "a value-driven institutional culture grounded in ethics and performance.

The durability of these measures during forthcoming leadership transitions is uncertain. Ogbuku himself admitted that "frequent alterations in management and boards have impeded our advancement. The Commission's structural instability, characterized by the frequent appointment and dissolution of governing boards over the past twenty-five years, hinders enduring institutional transformation. A significant NDDC programme is the "Light Up the Niger Delta" project, which has installed solar-powered streetlights around the region (Ketebu, 2026; Ogbuku, 2026). The project paperwork indicates that this approach has diminished criminality, enhanced economic activity, and fostered peace. The study illustrates a transition towards tangible, community-based solutions that individuals can immediately encounter.

Conclusion

This article has examined the intricate relationship between religious mediation and government in the Niger Delta from 1999 to 2025. The evidence indicates a concerning conclusion: Pentecostal institutions have greatly aided in the pacification of armed conflict while accidentally legitimizing a political regime marked by substantial accountability inadequacies (Casciano, 2023; Marshall, 2009). By shifting citizen expectations towards divine authority and spiritual remedies, religious intermediaries have alleviated the state's need to tackle the structural factors that generate exclusion and underdevelopment, thereby contributing to a cycle of dependency that undermines true progress and accountability in governance. The suppression of the N6 trillion forensic audit report illustrates the accountability dilemma central to governance in the Niger Delta. The government's refusal to publish the document underscores the inadequacy of democratic accountability mechanisms in Nigeria, leading to litigation before the ECOWAS Court instead of immediate political repercussions. Nevertheless, nascent institutional reforms provide reasons for

measured hope. The relationship between NDDC and EFCC illustrates that recovered cash can be allocated for community advantage. The digitization of procurement processes and the implementation of corporate governance rules indicate that administrative reform is feasible. The determination of whether these improvements signify authentic transformation or merely transient enhancement hinges on their entrenchment and resilience during leadership transitions.

The inhabitants of the Niger Delta, are observing with optimism that the forthcoming 25 years will be characterized not by mere promises, but by enduring progress that transforms lives and communities, genuinely effecting change. To actualize that hope, two requirements must be fulfilled. The accountability gap must be addressed by initiating the publishing of the forensic audit and prosecuting those involved. Secondly, religious organizations should be urged to enhance their pacifying function by adopting a prophetic role, ensuring the state is held accountable in both spiritual and political-legal dimensions. The pulpit can facilitate communication between citizens and the state, but it cannot replace effective democratic institutions. The contradiction of poverty amidst abundance will persist until the residents of the Niger Delta can hold their government accountable through transparent, institutionalized mechanisms, rather than relying on pastors to convey their issues in a manner understandable to the state.

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