



Economic History and Environmental Degradation of the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's Niger Delta region has abundant natural and human resources, including natural gas and crude oil, as well as diverse ecosystems and a stable population. Due to its harbors, which promote the berthing of commerce vessels, the area has the ability to boost international trade. Due to poverty and underdevelopment wreaking havoc on the environment and its people, the Niger Delta region, despite its tremendous resources, has become excessively unstable and insecure. Environmental issues that include heightened soil erosion, floods, salinization or alkalization, desertification, gas flaring, pipeline vandalism, bush burning, and pollution of water, air, and land as a result of improper land-use planning and management from the disposal of household and industrial wastes, as well as oil spills, noise pollution, the growth of informal settlements in urban areas, unsafe and unhygienic housing, and traffic congestion. With its wealth of resources, the region has been blessed and cursed, and this article explores these issues from an economic historical standpoint. For the area to experience sustainable growth and a high-quality environment, current environmental planning and management laws, rules, and standards must be upheld.

Keywords: Economic History, Environmental Degradation, Niger Delta, Nigeria

Introduction

Cities and towns situated between the Atlantic Ocean and the River Niger's coast make up Nigeria's Niger Delta area (Francis, Agomuo, & Chukwulet, 2021). Certain upland settlements have been added to these central Delta regions due to administrative and political conveniences. It is impossible to overstate how crucial the Niger Delta has been to Nigeria's socioeconomic and political development since the era of the slave trade. Aside from the fact that the residents in this area can immediately engage in their primary professions of fishing and subsistence farming due to the proximity of the River Niger and the Atlantic Ocean (Dike, 1956). For many people in the region and beyond, including Europeans, the area has served as a bustling hub for trade and economic activity (Alagosa, 1970).

European explorers and missionaries revealed the Niger Delta coast to be a bustling hub of trade. Mutual traders from Portugal were the first to settle in the region, bringing with them the European capitalism system and its economy (Dike, 1956). Beyond exchanging their European commodities for the people's raw resources at the coast, where they were confined, the Portuguese did not interfere with the trade rights of the Delta intermediaries (Ofonagoro, 1979). When the nature of the goods trade changed, the Europeans who provided the middlemen traders in the Niger Delta with weapons and material gifts encouraged widespread slave raids to meet the Europeans' demand for labor for their plantations in Sao Tome and Fernando Po (Ejinwa, 2002). This led to the middlemen traders becoming extremely corrupt. The Niger Delta developed become a haven for the harvest of slaves as the plantation economy grew throughout the New World and slave services were necessary in Europe. The area was a key supplier of African slaves to the Americas and Europe for over four centuries (Imbua, 2012).

Slave labor helped Europe and the Americas become industrialized economies as the slave trade and its slave entrepreneurs prospered. As the steady flow of slaves into the Western world proved unsustainable economically, Europe outlawed the slave trade as a criminal operation. From that point on, the trade was outlawed in the Americas as well, which were still under European dominion. Trade in palm goods, used to make soap and lubricate the machinery of the European industrial revolution, took the place of the trade in slaves. The chiefs of the area received sponsorship and encouragement to bring oil for the Europeans from their settlements in the hinterland.

Therefore, the state of the economy in Europe and the Americas dictated how well-off the people were in the Niger Delta. In order to keep the suppliers in the hinterlands submissive and loyal in their commercial dealings with the Delta intermediaries, the European traders in the area armed the native dealers as they fought for larger percentages of the legal trade (Dime, 1968). The scenario persisted until the middle of the 20th century, when the

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