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## **Nigeria: A Prime Example of the Resource Curse? Revisiting the Oil-Violence Link in the Niger Delta**

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## **Nigeria: A Prime Example of the Resource Curse? Revisiting the Oil-Violence Link in the Niger Delta**

### **Abstract**

This paper studies the oil-violence link in the Niger Delta, systematically taking into consideration domestic and international contextual factors. The case study, which focuses on explaining the increase in violence since the second half of the 1990s, confirms the differentiated interplay of resource-specific and non-resource-specific causal factors. With regard to the key contextual conditions responsible for violence, the results underline the basic relevance of cultural cleavages and political-institutional and socioeconomic weakness that existed even before the beginning of the “oil era.” Oil has indirectly boosted the risk of violent conflicts through a further distortion of the national economy. Moreover, the transition to democratic rule in 1999 decisively increased the opportunities for violent struggle, in a twofold manner: firstly, through the easing of political repression and, secondly, through the spread of armed youth groups, which have been fostered by corrupt politicians. These incidents imply that violence in the Niger Delta is increasingly driven by the autonomous dynamics of an economy of violence: the involvement of security forces, politicians and (international) businessmen in illegal oil theft helps to explain the perpetuation of the violent conflicts at a low level of intensity.

Keywords: Nigeria, natural resources, oil, political economy, violence, context sensitivity

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## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Nigeria: ein „Musterbeispiel“ des Ressourcenfluchs?**

#### **Eine kritische Evaluation des Zusammenhangs von Erdöl und Gewalt im Nigerdelta**

Dieser Beitrag analysiert den Zusammenhang von Erdöl und Gewalt im Niger Delta unter systematischer Berücksichtigung von innerstaatlichen und internationalen Kontextfaktoren. Durch die Fallstudie, deren Schwerpunkt auf der Erklärung des Anstiegs der Gewalt seit der zweiten Hälfte der 1990er Jahre liegt, wird ein differenziertes Zusammenspiel von ressourcenspezifischen und nicht-ressourcenspezifischen Erklärungsvariablen untermauert. Die Befunde ergeben erstens, dass zentrale Kontextbedingungen, die zur Gewalt geführt haben – kulturelle Cleavages politisch-institutionelle sowie sozioökonomische Defizite –, bereits vor Beginn der Erdölförderung in Nigeria virulent waren. Erdöl hat das Risiko gewaltsamer Konflikte zweitens durch eine tiefgreifende Verzerrung der Wirtschaftsstruktur indirekt weiter erhöht. Darüber hinaus hat drittens der Übergang zur Demokratie (1999) die Gewaltmöglichkeiten in zweifacher Hinsicht erhöht: auf der einen Seite durch ein Nachlassen politischer Repression, auf der anderen Seite durch die Ausbreitung bewaffneter Gruppierungen, die zunächst von korrupten Politikern herangezogen worden sind. Letzteres hat zur Folge, dass die Gewalt im Nigerdelta verstärkt den Dynamiken einer Ökonomie der Gewalt gehorcht: Dabei trägt die Beteiligung von Sicherheitskräften, Politikern und (internationalen) Geschäftsleuten an illegalem Ölhandel dazu bei die Perpetuierung gewaltsamer Konflikte auf niedrigem Gewaltniveau zu erklären.

# **Nigeria: A Prime Example of the Resource Curse? Revisiting the Oil-Violence Link in the Niger Delta**

**Annegret Mähler**

## **Article Outline**

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Theoretical Framework
- 3 Case Study of the Oil-state Nigeria
- 4 The Interplay of Resource-specific and Non-resource-specific Contextual Conditions and Its Historical Dynamics
- 5 Conclusions

## **1 Introduction**

As has frequently been underlined by pivotal studies of the so-called resource curse thesis, Nigeria seems to be a prime example of the curse that natural resources can bring (Collier/Hoeffler 2001; Le Billon 2001; Auty 1993; Sachs/Warner 2001). Indeed, 50 years of substantial oil production have not resulted in sustainable socioeconomic development in the country. The poverty rate today is extremely high, with 50 percent of the population living on less than US\$1 per day; in fact, the current poverty rate exceeds that of the period before the first oil boom in the 1970s, which was 35 percent. The national social and transport infrastructure is in a desolate condition, and the country is marked by chronic internal instability and periodic flare-ups of violent conflict.

Focusing on the aspect of violence, this paper investigates the extent to which the factor oil influences the occurrence of violence as well as what other causal factors are also contributing to its occurrence. Moreover, the relative significance of the particular factors triggering violence and their specific interplay is analyzed. This approach does not imply a general denial of the oil-violence link in Nigeria, but it does demonstrate the necessity of undertaking a comprehensive analysis of this assumed link in a way that systematically takes into account domestic and international contextual factors, which are indispensable in explaining the historical dynamics of violence in Nigeria.

The study puts particular emphasis on the increase in violence within the Niger Delta since the second half of the 1990s. The central question is as follows: What are the reasons for this increase in violent conflict? This leads to the additional question of why this increase in violence did not occur until the second half of the 1990s, even though the severely negative impacts of oil exploitation existed long before that point—a question that has been rather neglected in the debate on the resource curse in Nigeria to date.

This paper proceeds as follows: Before entering into the in-depth case study, a critical overview of the academic debate on natural resources and their impact on violence is given; it presents the latest findings as well as existing explanatory deficiencies. Subsequently, the comprehensive “context approach”—the analytical framework for this exploratory study—is introduced (Section 2). Hereafter follow the classification and operationalization of the level and dimensions of violence in Nigeria (Section 3.1)—as already indicated, with a particular emphasis on the increase in violence in the Niger Delta since the second half of the 1990s. This means that other incidences of violence are not included in the study, even if they are also (more or less directly) linked to the factor oil.<sup>1</sup> Following a structural analysis of the relevant resource-specific and non-resource-specific contextual conditions and causal mechanisms explaining the onset and dynamics of internal violence (Section 3.2), the results of the case study are summarized (Section 4). This concluding section also includes a critique of the findings of the academic debate on the general linkage between natural resources and

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<sup>1</sup> The secessionist Biafra war between 1967 and 1970 was strongly motivated by the fight over the distribution of oil rents, in addition to the struggle for political power and ethnic dominance. However, as there have already been numerous in-depth analyses of this topic, this paper shall refer simply to these studies: Harneit-Sievers 1992; Brunner 2002; Zinn 2005. Another important dimension of violence, the widespread violent repression under autocratic rule in Nigeria, cannot be covered exhaustively in this paper either, and—taking into consideration its multicausal conditionality—will only be observed when there is a concrete connection to the central focus of this paper, the recent trends of violence in the Niger Delta. Finally the sporadic violent conflicts in the middle belt and the north of the country will not be examined either. Obviously, these conflicts are not completely independent from the factor oil. However, oil plays a rather subordinated role in comparison to other causal factors such as religious-ethnic polarization (Christians versus Muslims), land struggle, and (local) political power. Analyzing these dimensions of violence and their direct and indirect connection to the factor oil would exceed the scope of this paper.

violence. The principal aim thereby is to contribute to the further differentiation of the theoretical debate on the *resource curse*.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

In recent years there has been renewed and increasing interest in the study of natural resources and their diverse international and domestic impacts. Although partly divergent in their main assumptions, the two central theoretical approaches focusing on the topic of resource abundance—the rentier state theory and the resource curse thesis—both argue that resource-exporting countries are negatively affected by political, economic, and social distortions.

### 2.1 The Rentier State Theory and the Resource Curse Thesis

The concept of the rentier state goes back to Hossein Mahdavy's study of pre-revolutionary Iran (1971). It was particularly expanded upon by Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani (1987), who classified a rentier state as a state in which at least 40 percent of the total government revenue consists of economic rents. These rents can be defined as "the excess over the return to capital, land, and labor when these factors of production are put to their next best use" (Dunning 2008: 39). According to the rentier state theory, the two central effects of dependence on economic rents are economic inefficiency and, as a consequence, the obstruction of socioeconomic development (Beck 2007: 46). With regard to the political effects, the rentier state theory proposes that (oil) rents have a stabilizing effect on authoritarian rule (Mahdavy 1971; Beblawi/Luciani 1987; Ross 2001). Initially based on empirical findings in the Middle East, the rentier state theory is claimed by its proponents to be universally valid (Beck 2007: 44). It attributes the linkage between oil rents and authoritarianism to the following causal mechanisms: Firstly, it is presumed that oil rents foster the formation of stabilizing patronage networks, widespread clientelism, and assistentialistic distribution policies, all of which lessen the pressure from the population to democratize and may additionally result in the depoliticization of the society. Secondly, the abundance of revenues generated by the oil sector means that national rulers do not need to tax the population. This again may disburden the political elite of demands from the population for political participation and accountability on the part of the elites. The rentier state theory does not focus primarily on violence, but rather on the stability of authoritarian rule. However, as Ross and others illustrate, it can be assumed that resource wealth makes it easier for authoritarian rulers to use violence in the form of political repression, for example, because it enables the financing of a massive security apparatus (Ross 2001; Karl 2007).

Over the last decade, another theoretical approach—the *resource curse thesis*—has gained importance within the theoretical debate on natural resources. Some authors place special em-

phasis on the economic characteristics of resource-rich countries. Building upon the basic assumptions of rentier state theory, they claim that resource wealth is linked to poor economic growth (Auty 1993; Sachs/Warner 2001) and other economic problems such as Dutch disease effects and poor performance of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors accompanied by an insufficient degree of diversification and extreme vulnerability towards external shocks. A further branch of the resource curse thesis focuses on the link between natural resources and violent conflicts (Collier/Hoeffler 2001; Le Billon 2001; de Soysa 2000). The central hypothesis—partly contradictory to the rentier state theory's assumptions—is that resource-dependent countries are more likely to experience internal instability and violent conflict than non-resource countries.

The causal mechanisms assumed to be responsible for this link include, on the one hand, the fact that natural resources can be the  *motive*  for violent conflicts. This means that parts of the population might feel that they are deprived of the financial benefits of the resource revenues—while possibly also suffering from the ecological and social impacts of production ( *motive of grievance* )—or that resource wealth can be the target of avaricious rebels who wish to take possession of the resource revenues ( *motive of greed* ) (Collier/Hoeffler 2001). On the other hand, resource revenues can serve as a catalyst for violent conflict by financing the rebel groups and other actors involved ( *opportunity, feasibility* ) and thus prolonging the conflict (Collier/Hoeffler 2004). Finally, resources, and especially oil, can indirectly increase the likelihood of violent conflict by weakening political institutions and/or by triggering socio-economic decline. Authors such as Fearon and Latin argue that “oil producers tend to have weaker state apparatuses than one would expect given their level of income because the rulers have less need of a socially intrusive and elaborate bureaucratic system to raise revenues” (Fearon/Laitin 2003: 81).

## 2.2 Developing a Differentiated “Context Approach” through the Inclusion of Contextual Conditions

Referring to the contradictory empirical results of econometric studies, deficient databases, and the existence of various outliers—resource countries such as Botswana, Chile, or Norway, which are stable and economically prosperous democracies—more recent literature on the resource curse has partly questioned the alleged resources-violence link (Hegre/Sambanis 2006; Bulte/Brunnschweiler 2006; Di John 2007). Several authors have demanded a further theoretical differentiation of the debate and have suggested that the impact of certain contextual conditions is pivotal for the presence or absence of the so-called resource curse (Snyder/Bhavnani 2004; Boschini et al. 2004; Basedau 2005; Basedau/Lay 2009). Some authors, such as Di John (2007) and Rosser (2006), have underlined the potential relevance of external factors, “social forces,” and historical aspects, without testing them, so far, in in-depth empirical studies. Consequently, there is still a lack of systematic comparative



studies analyzing the effects of a broader set of contextual factors on the predicted resource-violence link.

This paper, which is part of a larger research project with a comparative research design<sup>2</sup>, aims to respond to this research gap. To this end, it uses a newly elaborated comprehensive matrix of central contextual factors concerning the potential relationship between resources and violence. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned assumptions of the recent and more differentiated branches of the resource curse theory as well as the general theoretical approaches of peace and conflict research (Imbusch 2005; Senghaas 2004) and the debate regarding the “political economy of war” (Ruf 2003), this matrix consists of the set of contextual factors presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Matrix of Central Resource-specific and Non-resource-specific Contextual Conditions**

|                      | Resource-specific Contextual Conditions   | Non-resource-specific Contextual Conditions  |
|----------------------|---|--|
| <b>Domestic</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Type(s) of resource(s)</li> <li>• Degree of dependence</li> <li>• Degree of abundance</li> <li>• Location of resources within the country</li> <li>• Technical modes of extraction</li> <li>• Resource-sector management (production, distribution, use)</li> <li>• Actors involved in the resource sector</li> <li>• Economic distortions in oil economies</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level and dynamics of socioeconomic factors</li> <li>• Demographic factors</li> <li>• Geographic factors</li> <li>• Relations between identity groups (social, ethnic or religious)</li> <li>• Efficiency and legitimacy of institutions (including security sector)</li> <li>• Substate actors (parties, civil society)</li> <li>• Behavioral patterns of the elites</li> <li>• Political culture</li> <li>• Political ideologies</li> </ul> |
| <b>International</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geographical dispersion of resources (across borders, regionally, globally)</li> <li>• International governance of the resource sector (actors involved, existing regimes)</li> <li>• Dynamics and actors in international demand (price development, customer structure, multinational corporations)</li> <li>• External use of resource rents</li> </ul>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relations with neighboring countries, regional and great powers</li> <li>• Interdependence of the country (economic/political)</li> <li>• Importance of regional and international governance/organizations</li> <li>• Level of violence in the region (spill-over effects)</li> </ul>  |

Source: Author’s own compilation based on Basedau 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The research project “Is Resource Wealth a Risk Factor? On the Importance of Contextual Conditions for the Connection Between Natural Resources and Violence in Non-OECD States,” supervised by Dr. Matthias Basedau from the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) and funded by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft/German Research Foundation. Within this research project, and in addition to the study of the petrostate Nigeria, case studies of Algeria, Iran and Venezuela have also been completed. These papers will form a comparative study and be used to generalize the respective findings.

Domestic resource-specific contextual conditions of potentially decisive impact are the *type of resources* (oil, diamonds, wood, etc.) as well as the *location and technical mode of extraction*, which can make a difference because of the varying absolute value of the resources and because of the particular requirements for extraction, processing, and distribution (Le Billon 2003; Ross 2003, 2004). Furthermore, the *degree of dependence and abundance*—which are not identical phenomena, as is implied in many empirical studies—are also of importance (Base-dau/Lay 2009). As the following discussion will illustrate more precisely with reference to the case of Nigeria, a country can depend heavily on oil exports whilst abundance—measured as per capita resource income—is quite low. *Resource-sector management* also seems to be highly relevant; the particular mode of spending and distributing of resource wealth (for example, broad redistribution versus distribution through quite restricted clientelistic canals) may avoid or trigger violence. This aspect furthermore includes the question of the transparency and effectiveness of the respective resource-management process (Fjelde 2006; Luong/Weinthal 2006).

International resource-specific conditions, which should also be taken into consideration, include the *international governance of the resource sector*. This means the actors involved, especially multinational companies and their interests, as well as the international regimes which represent the legal basis of transnational resource trading (Bannon/Collier 2003). Another aspect consists of the *international demand and customer structures*. This element includes not only the dynamics of the international oil price (boom and bust cycles) but also the potential international rivalry for control of the resources (Giordano et al. 2005; Humphreys 2005).

A key domestic non-resource-specific contextual condition is certainly the *level and the dynamics of socioeconomic development*. This implies the situation before the beginning of the resource extraction, which, independently of the resources factor, determines the internal conflictivity of a country (Imbusch 2005) and may also inform the subsequent handling of the resources and the resource rents (Soares de Oliveira 2005). In addition, the *performance and quality of political institutions* (efficiency and legitimacy) as well as *ethnic or religious cleavages* (Fearon/Laitin 2003) and the *behavioral patterns of the elite* are of basic importance to the political stability of any given country. Hence, it seems logical that this fact also applies to the question of conflictivity in resource-abundant countries as well. Moreover, the general performance of the political and economic institutions moulds the specific manner of resource management and thereby influences the level of violence and conflict (Boschini et al. 2004). Key international non-resource-specific conditions possibly determining the level of violence are, for example, the *economic and political interdependence* of the respective country. It can be assumed that countries with a low level of international economic integration can be considered to be more prone to violence than those which demonstrate strong and diversified economic interdependence. Furthermore, *regional and international organizations* can play an important role in increasing or decreasing the likelihood of international and internal violence

(Zangl/Zürn 2004). Finally, the *level of violence in the region* should be observed because of potential spillover effects (e.g., Hegre/Sambanis 2006).

In sum, the main assumptions of the context approach are that the influence of resource wealth on violence is limited and that its impact depends decisively on further resource-specific and non-resource-specific contextual conditions. Secondly, it is hypothesized that violence is more probable the more the negative influences of the above-mentioned resource-specific and non-resource-specific contextual conditions are at work (and vice versa). Even so, it is not expected that the contextual conditions operate according to a simple linear interplay.

The particular impact of the contextual conditions and their interplay in the case of Nigeria will be analyzed using an inductive-explorative approach and from a comparative historical perspective in the following section. The underlying country-specific hypothesis is that the increase in violence since the second half of the 1990s—although linked to the factor oil—cannot be explained without considering the crucial impact of various non-resource-specific factors and the inherent dynamism of certain causal mechanisms.

### 3 Case Study of the Oil-state Nigeria

#### 3.1 Dynamics of Violence in the Niger Delta

The dependent variable of the present analysis is defined as any form of physical violence. Physical violence includes violent internal conflicts and revolts as well as violent state repression and human rights violation. As already mentioned above, the analysis focuses on violence in the main oil-producing area of Nigeria, the Niger Delta, since the second half of the 1990s. Before the dynamics of violence in the delta are described, it should be emphasized that there is a general lack of data concerning incidences of violence in Nigeria, particularly with respect to the subnational level. The precise number of fatalities is therefore highly contested (Engel 2005: 194; Bergstresser 2008). To address this problem, several data sources have been checked and critically compared: where existent, data from the UCDP-PRIO dataset,<sup>3</sup> the Conflict Barometer of the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIK), and the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Kriegsursachenforschung (AKUF) dataset of the University of Hamburg. As these sources do not consistently provide comprehensive information about the dynamics of violence in the Niger Delta, information has also been gathered through the evaluation of various qualitative analyses, such as reports by Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group, and Amnesty International.

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<sup>3</sup> The UCDP-PRIO considers armed conflicts with at least 25 battle-related deaths per year. Unfortunately, the violent conflict in the Niger Delta is only mentioned in the PRIO dataset from 2004 (as a conflict of minor intensity with 535 deaths), although it apparently belongs to this category in other years as well.

Already in the 1970s there were spontaneous protests and local conflicts in the Niger Delta. In contrast to the current situation, these “uprisings” were mostly nonviolent (Danler/Brunner 1996: 34) and, furthermore, their intensity was distinctly lower. The protests became more extensive and better publicized with the foundation of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1990, particularly because of its charismatic leader Ken Saro-Wiwa. Following the public presentation of the Ogoni Bill of Rights (adopted in 1990), in which MOSOP demanded more political autonomy and a more equitable distribution of the oil rents to the government, the first large mass demonstration took place in 1993. Although the Ogoni representatives’ approach was generally peaceful, the protests gave rise to a wave of state repression against the Ogoni leaders and led to the detention of several hundreds of activists (Ibeanu/Mohammed 2005: 44) and the destruction of houses and villages, with numerous deaths as a result (Danler/Brunner 1996: 35).<sup>4</sup> The military regime is also said to have actively triggered violent boundary conflicts between the Ogoni people and other ethnic groups (Andoni, Okrika and Ndoki) (Ibeanu/Mohammed 2005: 44). The brutal repression of the Ogoni people and the elimination of their leaders by the Abacha military regime meant that the movement was practically annihilated and the degree of violent conflict in the Niger Delta temporarily reduced. In 1997 violent conflict again increased, reaching an unprecedented intensity. Since then, violent struggle—comprising intercommunal violence, increasing clashes between armed militant groups and the security forces, and attacks against transnational oil companies—has continued. The central occurrences included the “Warri crisis”: violent struggles—including actions against oil companies—between the Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic groups and the military after the relocation of a local government which cost the lives of hundreds of people (Bergstresser 1998: 144/145).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in winter 1998/99 at least 100 people died in clashes and raids after security forces had shot unarmed protesters (Zinn 2005: 110). At the end of 1999, following the kidnapping and killing of twelve police officers in Bayelsa state, security forces destroyed the town in which the murderers were suspected to live and killed many people.<sup>6</sup> Violence appears to have further increased since 2003 (see Hazen/Horner 2007: 15; HIIK). For the years 2003 and 2004 various sources agree on death tolls of more than 500 people;<sup>7</sup> for 2008 the number of people killed in violent conflict seems to have increased to approximately 1,000 (IRIN 2009).

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his combatants were sentenced to death.

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch 2003: 4: “in which hundreds of people died on each side.”

<sup>6</sup> According to a Crisis Group Report, “Estimates have ranged from the government’s 23 dead to a list of 2,483 dead and missing reportedly compiled by local activist groups. Most independent observers agree that at least hundreds were killed” (ICG 2006: 6).

<sup>7</sup> Data from Amnesty International: 2003: 680 deaths in the whole Niger Delta because of violent conflicts; data from PRIO (only existent for 2004): 535 people killed. Banjo (2008) reports that in clashes between Itsekiri and Urhobos in February 2003 alone “an estimated 400 people” were killed (Banjo 2008: 57).

There are hardly any indicators, which quantify the total death toll due to violent conflict in the Niger Delta since 1997. The only data available to the author come from the Major Episodes of Political Violence database, which indicates 1,500 casualties.<sup>8</sup> In view of the figures mentioned above, this number seems rather low. Nevertheless, that the level of violent conflict in Nigeria can still be classified as “low intensity” according to the prevalent classifications of UCDP-PRIO and others is incontestable.

Alongside the intercommunal violence and the violent clashes between armed groups and the security forces, there is another dimension of violence in the Niger Delta. This is violent crime, notably kidnapping and blackmailing. The phenomenon of hostage taking, which first emerged in the 1990s, has increased significantly in recent years (Hazen/Horner 2007: 69; ICG 2006: 1). According to International Crisis Group, 167 people were kidnapped in 2007 (ICG 2009: 5). Kidnapping victims have mainly been foreign oil workers and more recently—at an increasing rate—wealthy Nigerians; the majority of the captives are released uninjured. In an effort not only to harm the oil companies and the Nigerian government but also to gain more public attention, various groups of actors have furthermore sabotaged oil pipelines and other oil installations. The exact number of acts of sabotage is contested. Oil companies used to indicate quite high numbers, while local representatives have pointed out that not all of the broken oil installations were the consequence of sabotage but rather of badly maintained and rotten facilities. According to the information available, acts of sabotage against oil facilities has increased distinctly since 1998 (Zinn 2005: 106; TCND 2008: 114).<sup>9</sup>

Building upon the overview of the level of violence in the Niger Delta provided in this section, the following section will analyze how the illustrated increase in violence, as well as its changing dimensions, can be explained. It will focus especially on identifying those mechanisms via which the factor oil has a decisive influence on the dynamics of violence, but also other relevant contextual conditions and causal mechanisms which have to be taken into consideration.

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<sup>8</sup> Data for 1997–2008; in: Major Episodes of Political Violence 1946–2008 – Center for Systemic Peace/Georg Mason University (Fairfax), at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/warlist.htm> (accessed 18.4.2009).

<sup>9</sup> It should be added that the dynamics of violence have recently been at least temporarily interrupted due to the declaration of a 60-day amnesty offer, which the Nigerian government proposed at the beginning of August 2009 for all militants who hand over their arms. As part of the amnesty program, those ex-militants renouncing violence are to receive financial compensation and shall participate in special rehabilitation schemes as well. While some militant groups initially resisted involvement, ultimately more than 8,000 militants are said to have joined the amnesty program and thousands of guns have been collected so far (Vanguard 2009). Thus, the amnesty scheme can be considered a first successful step towards ending violence—though it is only a short-term measure and the momentary peace in the Niger Delta is very fragile. The failure of similar amnesty programs in the past makes some observers rather skeptical about the long-term success of these measures (BBC 2009; Duffield 2009).

### 3.2 Contextual Factors and Mechanisms Explaining the Dynamics of Violence

#### *Resource-specific Contextual Conditions*

##### *Oil Dependence and Abundance*

Commercial oil production in Nigeria began in 1956 and has been of predominant importance for the national economy since the 1970s. During that decade the absolute oil production as well as the dependence of the country on the oil exports increased significantly.

**Table 2: Petroleum Exports as Percentage of Total National Exports**

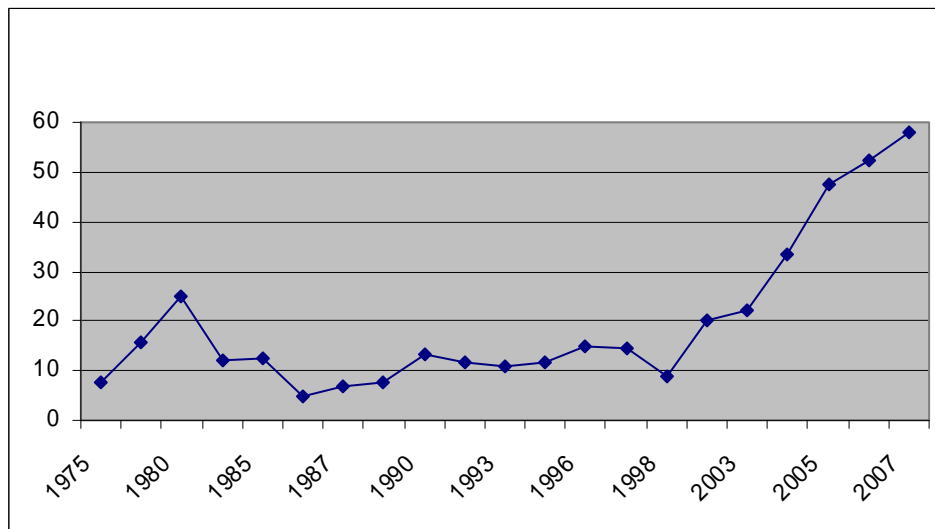
| 1963 | 1965 | 1970 | 1975 | 1981 | 1991 | 2000 | 2006 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 11%  | 26%  | 58%  | 93%  | 97%  | 97%  | 99%  | 98%  |

Source: UN Comtrade Database.

Nigeria's dependence on oil, measured by oil exports as a percentage of total national exports or by oil rents as a percentage of overall government revenue, has been extremely high since the middle of the seventies and even higher than, for example, that of petrostate Venezuela.<sup>10</sup> The consequence has been an intensified vulnerability to the volatility of the global oil price. Simultaneous to the increase in oil production, the export of agricultural products began to decline. While agricultural products constituted approximately 80 percent of total national exports in 1960, already in 1976 they accounted for only 4 percent (Mogues/Morris et al. 2008: 9). This development was accompanied by a surge in food imports.

Nigeria's oil abundance in terms of national revenues deriving from oil exports is highly volatile and depends on the global oil price. Measured in absolute numbers it is, nevertheless, quite substantial; in recent years in particular, oil exports have generated significant revenue for the Nigerian government. Today Nigeria is the eleventh-largest oil producer in the world and, due to its low internal consumption, the eighth-largest oil exporter (bfai 2008).

<sup>10</sup> The percentage of oil revenues as a share of total government revenues in 1975 was already as high as 79 percent and has remained at approximately the same level until today (data from Ebeku 2006; Lubeck/Watts/Lipschutz 2007: 5).

**Figure 1: Net Petroleum Export Revenues in US\$ Billion**

Source: OPEC data at <http://www.opec.org/library/Annual%20Statistical%20Bulletin/interactive/FileZ/sumtbl.htm> (accessed 13.09.2009).

Considering the rapidly growing population of Nigeria, which in 2005 exceeded 140 million, the fuel revenues per capita are remarkably low. Seen from a historical perspective, they decreased even more during the 1980s; however, even in 2007, when the oil price was very high, they accounted for only US\$391 per capita, whereas in Saudi Arabia, for example, oil revenues per capita accounted for US\$8569.

**Table 3: Net Petroleum Export Revenues per Capita (current US\$)**

| 1975 | 1979 | 1980 | 1985 | 1989 | 1993 | 1996 | 2000 | 2003 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 127  | 226  | 351  | 154  | 81   | 105  | 133  | 161  | 165  | 337  | 363  | 391  |

Source: Author's own calculation based on data from World Development Indicators and OPEC data at <http://www.opec.org/library/Annual%20Statistical%20Bulletin/interactive/FileZ/sumtbl.htm> (accessed 16.09.2009).

This low per capita oil wealth can be considered to be one of the factors explaining why oil in Nigeria cannot have a stabilizing or conflict-reducing effect comparable to that in oil-exporting countries such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait. Moreover, the substantial decline in oil revenues in the 1980s and 1990s can also be viewed as having contributed to an increase in the potential for conflict (Danler/Brunner 1996: 34). However, it was not only the shrinking abundance of oil but also its interplay with the weak resource management performance in the country that caused further socioeconomic problems.

*Resource Management and Economic Distortions*

Resource management in Nigeria generally has to be considered as being of limited effectiveness and lacking sustainability (Sala-i-Martin 2003). This triggers conflicts in several ways:

Firstly, due to the lack of sustainable management on the part of the multinational oil companies on the one hand and the Nigerian state on the other, oil production is causing severe environmental damage in the Niger Delta. Oil spills have led to the contamination of water resources, the destruction of farmland, and the dispersion of toxic materials. Investigations by the UNDP assume that between 1976 and 2001 approximately three million barrels of oil were spilled, and most of this oil was not recovered (UNDP 2006: 76).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Nigeria is still de facto one of the biggest gas flarers in the world (Lubeck/Watts/Lipschutz 2007: 9). This gas flaring harms wildlife, farmland, and human beings through air pollution, acid rain, noise, and the elevation of temperature (UNDP 2006: 78-79). These environmental damages already existed in the 1970s and 1980s, and there has not been a substantial worsening since the 1990s that could explain the respective *increase* in violence. Nevertheless, the associated grievances represent a permanent source of general discontent and mistrust on the part of the Niger Delta's population towards the government; this discontent is most likely continuing to grow due to unfulfilled, yet longstanding, promises of compensation.

Secondly, the distribution and spending of oil revenues plays an important role in understanding the development of violence in the Delta. The percentage of oil revenues refunded to the producing regions<sup>12</sup> was progressively reduced from 50 percent in 1970 to 20 percent between 1975 and 1979 and down to only 3 percent between 1992 and 1999 (UNDP 2006: 15). As a result, the Delta states were deprived off substantial income and the—already existent—resentment of the southern regions towards the central government was fueled (see also "Political system" and "Relations between Identity Groups"). Under the constitution of 1999 the share of the oil revenues refunded to the oil-producing Niger Delta states was raised to 13 percent. Although Nigeria's oil rent per capita is relatively low in comparison to other oil states, this increased share is not at all marginal, especially in view of the much higher oil price in recent years. In practice, however, these revenues have not reached the majority of the people because large amounts have "disappeared" within the states' and local governments' budgets, which are totally lacking in transparency (Human Rights Watch 2007: 32-

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<sup>11</sup> The oil spills are the result not only of obsolete and rotten pipelines but also partly of acts of sabotages on the pipelines by various actors, who want to offset oil illegally, to receive compensation money from the oil companies, or to undertake sabotage as an act of protest (Zinn 2005: 106; ICG 2006a: i).

<sup>12</sup> Delta, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa (these four states get the majority of the revenue), Ondo Edo and Cross Rivers.



33).<sup>13</sup> Corruption, patrimonialism, and other forms of personal enrichment have been omnipresent for decades, and while there has been a slight improvement in recent years at the federal level (HRW 2007: 96; Corruption Perception Index), such improvements are not evident at the local level.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1970s the increasing oil revenues were at least partly used for industrialization projects and the expansion of the health and education systems (Bergstresser 1993: 355). However, as the industrialization projects were rather capital intensive and poorly designed, they hardly had any sustainable development effects and did not lead to the successful diversification of the national economy (Bergstresser 1993: 351). Large amounts of oil revenues were squandered for unproductive projects, or projects were simply designed to dispense large amounts of money to certain privileged groups. The increasingly inefficient squandering of government resources was accompanied by growing indebtedness, which became a serious problem in the context of the increase in the international interest rate and the severe drop in global oil prices in the 1980s. Nigeria experienced a severe economic crisis. To respond to this crisis, structural policy reforms were introduced in 1986. The sharp devaluation of the national currency, which in turn caused a rapid increase in the cost of living, hit the lower and middle classes especially severely (Bergstresser 1993: 356). At the same time, a gradual deterioration of the country's social infrastructure began, with public amenities becoming increasingly underequipped; furthermore, the health and education sectors suffered a harsh cut in expenditures.<sup>15</sup> Poverty had been prevalent in Nigeria before the "oil era," but it increased drastically in the context of the declining oil revenues in the second half of the 1980s, the economic crisis, and the structural policy reforms, all of which were related to the ineffective and unsustainable resource management. The percentage of the population living in extreme poverty rose from approximately 35 percent in 1970 to 70 percent in the middle of the 1990s (Sala-i-Martin 2003: 35).

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<sup>13</sup> The authors especially accentuate the so-called "security vote," a voluminous pool of state funds at the local, state, and federal levels (which in some cases exceeds the budget for health or education) meant for the nebulous purpose of *maintaining peace and security*. In practice the allocation of these funds is not at all controlled, and it is reported that in Port Harcourt "many local government chairs [...] will give half of the [security vote] money in the name of 'empowerment' to youth they use as thugs and the rest goes into their own bank accounts" (HRW 2007: 33).

<sup>14</sup> An analyst from the International Crisis Group emphasized in an interview with the author that especially at the local level there are no oversight mechanisms concerning the spending of money at all. To give an illustration of the amounts that "disappeared" through corruption, according to a report of the Institute for Security Studies of 2007 it can be estimated that government actors have stolen "at least US\$50 billion from oil revenues since the mid 1960s" (Standing 2007: 4).

<sup>15</sup> Health expenditure as a percentage of total central government expenditure in 1972 was 3.6 percent (education: 45 percent); in 1989 it dwindled to 0.8 percent (education: 2.8 percent) (WDR 1991: 224).

**Table 4: Percentage of Population Living on Less than One Dollar per Day**

| 1970 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 35%  | 27%  | 38%  | 54%  | 70%  | 67%  | 54%  |

Source: Data for 1970–2000: Sala-i-Martin 2003: 35; data for 2005: IMF 2007: 34.

To the extent that specific data for the Niger Delta is available, the tendency of sharply growing poverty can also be confirmed for this region (UNDP 2006: 35), so that apart from the impact of the dynamics of oil abundance, an indirect link between resource mismanagement and the higher conflict potential in the Niger Delta of the 1990s can be assumed. The lack of sustainable resource management also contributed to the fact that more recent years, which were marked by sharply rising oil revenues, did not show a decrease in conflict. Although the poverty rate has declined recently (in the Niger Delta as well as countrywide; see UNDP 2006: 35), poverty continues to be prevalent. According to the latest surveys, more than 50 percent of the population still lives on less than one dollar a day and more than 80 percent on less than two dollars a day (UNDP 2008: 35). Furthermore, the increased oil revenues have not been used to substantially expand social and infrastructure expenditures. The Niger Delta is still characterized by completely insufficient access to health care, (drinking) water, and electric power; moreover, the housing situation has still not notably improved and is generally worse than that in the rest of the country (UNDP 2001: 116; IDEA 2001: 254). All these aspects continue to be central factors in the dissatisfaction of the Niger Delta population and contribute to an enhanced potential for conflict.

A final factor that should be mentioned in the context of insufficient resource management, but which is also a general problem resulting from economic distortions in oil economies, is widespread unemployment. The oil industry is generally very capital intensive but not labor intensive. In Nigeria this structural problem is particularly pronounced, as oil is hardly processed within the country but rather immediately exported.<sup>16</sup> The entire oil industry in the country is said to employ only about 35,000 people, directly and indirectly (AI 2005: 35). In the Niger Delta the oil industry has destroyed jobs in the agricultural sector, and there have been no countermeasures from the government (Kappel 1991). As a result, unemployment—particularly youth unemployment—is extremely high in the Niger Delta, markedly higher than in the rest of the country (IDEA 2001: 254; UNDP 2006: 131; Aigbokhan 2007: 195). A survey of the members of armed groups in three Niger Delta states underscores the link between unemployment and violent agitation by concluding that “at least 50 per cent of the armed group members who responded to the AAPW [Academic Associates PeaceWorks]

<sup>16</sup> Nigeria currently imports almost 85 percent of the refined oil products it uses (EIA 2009: 4). While the capacity of the four existing state-owned refineries is completely insufficient, so far no private refinery exists in Nigeria.

questionnaire claimed that they were unemployed, had no profession, or worked in unpaid jobs" (Hazen/Horner 2007: 83; similar results: Sesay/Ukeje 2003).

Considered together, the factors *resource management* and *economic distortions*, which are inextricably linked, constitute central contextual conditions explaining the increase in violence in the Niger Delta.

#### *Geographic Location of Resources within the Country*

The geographical definition of the Niger Delta region used in this paper includes the nine states Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers, where most of the national oil production is concentrated. The Niger Delta is located in the southeastern part of Nigeria and is largely covered with marshes, forests and creeks. It is—especially for nonlocals—a difficult-to-access territory and was hence an excellent area for militant groups to retreat to once the violent conflict had started (Ukeje 2008: 10). While probably not of superior importance, this aspect can nevertheless be considered one of the reasons for the prolongation of existing conflicts between militant groups and governmental actors. Further, the geographical characteristics of the Niger Delta make the area extremely vulnerable to oil spills and other collateral damage resulting from oil exploitation (as elaborated in the "Resource management" section). For example, spilled oil is often caught up in the stagnant water of the marshland and contaminates the drinking water.

Deep offshore oil production in the Gulf of Guinea has only recently become more relevant. Today this offshore production represents about 15 percent of Nigeria's total oil production. Offshore exploitation is far more expensive; nevertheless, it has become more attractive to multinational oil companies in the context of the increased attacks on oil facilities in the Niger Delta. Although the attacks on offshore oil platforms by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in June 2008 showed that offshore oil production is not beyond the reach of militant aggression, offshore operations are still markedly less vulnerable than operations in the Delta. A further shift of oil production into the Gulf of Guinea could moreover at least somewhat reduce the grievance-related conflict potential, as the people in the Delta would be less affected by air, land, and drinking water pollution.

#### *Domestic and International Actors Involved in the Resource Sector*

Since the foundation of the national oil company Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) in 1977, the Nigerian oil sector has been characterized by joint-venture contracts between NNPC and private, mostly multinational oil companies. On average, NNPC owns 57 percent of the joint ventures. NNPC has traditionally been considered to be inefficient, and especially since the economic crisis at the end of the 1980s and the 1990s, it has suffered from a lack of financial funding from the government (EIU 2009: 22). In contrast to many other state oil companies, NNPC is hardly involved in oil exploration and exploitation and operates mainly in a supervisory capacity. This fact clearly undermines capacity building within

the NNPC, and it is deepening the dependence of the Nigerian oil sector on private, mostly foreign oil companies. The Nigerian oil sector has for a long time been dominated by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPCD), which had already acquired exploration licenses in the country in 1938 (IDEA 2001: 241). Additionally, Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Total (Elf) and Eni/Agip have become increasingly important operators in recent decades. By contrast, private Nigerian oil companies only produce a small amount of oil (Ukiwo 2008: 76).

Because of their economic importance (for example, technical know-how), the multinationals and especially Shell have influenced the dynamics of the violent conflicts, mainly through three causal channels: Firstly, they obviously carry at least part of the blame for the environmental pollution caused by oil production in the Delta.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, they have indirectly contributed to the increased militarization of the conflicts, for example, by demanding that the Nigerian state provide official security services (Omotola 2006: 16), even when the civil protests were still mainly peaceful, as in the mid-1990s (Engel 2005: 196). The oil companies also make use of private security services, some of which are extremely brutal. Some oil companies have also provided financial assistance to potential militant actors in order to “pacify” them (ICG 2006: 24-25). While this might reduce violence in the short term, the risks of further empowerment of militant groups in the long run are obvious (Hazen/Horner 2007: 38).

Finally, foreign oil companies provide financial support and different types of “development projects” to their so-called host communities. This engagement was increased after the Ogoni protests, and while it—in the absence of responsible state actors—brings about some short-term mitigation of daily burdens for the local people, it also has conflict-triggering impacts. The donations for example generate resentment between the people of the host communities and other (ethnic) communities which do not benefit from such financial support (Human Rights Watch 1999a: 102).

#### *The Transnational Oil-theft Network*

Another resource-specific contextual condition resulting from various national and international actors and clearly contributing to the increase in and especially the continuation of violent conflict in the Niger Delta in recent years is the illegal oil trade, which has increased drastically since 2000 (HRW 2005: 9). The International Crisis Group reports that various industry experts have estimated “that Nigeria loses anywhere from 70,000 to 300,000 barrels per day to illegal bunkering” (ICG 2006: 8). This means between 3 and 12 percent of the country’s total oil production.<sup>18</sup> The illegally bunkered oil is shipped to refineries in Ivory

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<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the Nigerian state is also to blame for not ensuring compliance to indispensable standards to protect nature and human beings. Furthermore, damage is also caused by the intentional sabotage of oil facilities. The percentage of acts of sabotage in relation to the total oil spills is obviously highly contested between the oil companies and the local population and there is a significant lack of data.

<sup>18</sup> Some sources even indicate higher numbers of up to 15 percent of national oil production (Ikelegbe 2005: 222).

Coast, Senegal and Benin or directly sold to the broader international market, mostly to Eastern Europe.<sup>19</sup> The actors involved in this oil theft (often called “oil bunkering”) include some of the militant groups, thus receiving rising financial resources or directly weapons. Other actors include the security forces,<sup>20</sup> especially the Nigerian navy (AI 2005: 35; ICG 2006: 9);<sup>21</sup> local and regional politicians; and other powerful actors such as godfathers and international business people. Some analysts also claim that the involvement reaches to the “highest levels of government” (Lubeck/Watts/Lipschutz 2007: 9). Because of the broad involvement of influential persons in illegal oil theft, the state approach to solving the Niger Delta crisis is marked by significant inconsistency and, despite growing militarization, persistent reluctance and a lack of engagement.

#### *International Demand and Customer Structure*

Nigeria currently exports the majority of its oil, approximately 50 percent, to the United States (EIU 2009).<sup>22</sup> The United States, in turn, imports approximately 10 percent of its oil from Nigeria, and intends to increase this share (Lubeck/Watts 2007: 4). The relationship between the two countries since Nigeria’s transition to democracy in 1999 has been harmonious and has been marked by a very benevolent attitude towards Nigeria on the part of the United States (Bergstresser/Tull 2008: 19). In parallel with the expansion of oil imports from Nigeria, the United States has increased its supplying of weapons to the country and has expanded its military presence in the Gulf of Guinea, for example, via naval patrols (Tull 2007: 123; Hazen/Horner 2007: 101). Moreover, in December 2005 the two countries announced coordinated actions to counter small arms trafficking, to bolster maritime and coastal security, to promote community development and combat poverty, and to fight money laundering and other financial crimes (Lubeck/Watts/Lipschutz 2007: 19).

Primarily because of its own economic interests (oil supply), and also because of strategic considerations with respect to the role of Nigeria as a regional power in West Africa, the United States is generally interested in reducing the internal instability in the country. Nevertheless, the United States’ efforts to exert its influence on the violent conflict in the Niger Delta have, at least to date, been of low intensity (Lubeck/Watts 2007: 20).

As already indicated, oil has not been the only causal factor influencing the increase and changes in violence in the Niger Delta. Moreover, it is at times part of a complex interaction

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Dr. Charles Ukeje, Department of International Relations, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, October 7, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> A survey conducted among armed groups in Bayelsa state in 2006 concluded that “the majority of respondents received assistance from the police (30.4 per cent), the mobile police (14.7 per cent), and the military (24.5 per cent) in obtaining small arms” (Hazen/Horner 2007: 37).

<sup>21</sup> Actively involved or taking bribes for not hindering the smaller vessels with stolen oil which provide larger tankers waiting offshore.

<sup>22</sup> While China has in recent years become a major consumer of oil or other natural resources for other resource-exporting countries in Africa, Nigeria exports only minor quantities of oil to China.

with multiple non-resource-specific contextual conditions. These contextual conditions will therefore be analyzed more closely in the following section.

### *Non-resource-specific Contextual Conditions*

#### *Relations between Identity Groups*

Nigeria is an extremely heterogeneous country, marked by diverse and sometimes overlapping ethnic, religious, and regional cleavages. The country is home to approximately 250 different ethnic groups (Brunner 2002: 123). The mainly Muslim Hausa-Fulani, primarily concentrated in the north of the country, represent the largest ethnic group, with approximately 30 percent of the national population, followed by the Yoruba (main residential region in the southwest), and the predominantly Christian Igbo (main residential region in the southeast), which represent approximately 20 percent and 16 percent of the population, respectively. The Niger Delta, in turn, is marked by an amalgam of smaller ethnic groups, with the largest group constituted by the Ijaw, who represent approximately 8 percent of the national population.<sup>23</sup>

Two key cleavages between ethnic and religious identity groups are most notably triggering violence in the Delta. The first is a cleavage at the national level between north and south: The existing ethnic and religious differences between the economically less developed north, dominated by the Muslim Hausa-Fulani people, and the mainly Christian, ethnically heterogeneous south were exacerbated and politicized by the different forms of colonial rule (for details see Brunner 2002: 132ff.). Thus, even before oil production began to dominate the country, this split had created a sharp internal division in the country. The majority of the southern population, especially the minorities, general mistrusted the political domination of the northern elites and their overwhelming influence on the central government. This mistrust and the lack of nationhood has endangered the internal stability of the country independently from the factor oil up to today.

The second cleavage, localized within the Niger Delta, is provoking violence in the region even more directly: interethnic and intercommunity conflicts. A central dimension of these conflicts has been minority ethnic groups' concern about the dominance of the major groups. An example would be the Ogoni people's fear of Igbo dominance, an anxiety which goes back to colonial times (Brunner 2002: 252). The other central dimension of these conflicts is the struggle between the major ethnic group, the Ijaw, and other ethnic groups, especially the Itsekiri, Urhobo and Andoni, mostly regarding the ownership of land and local power (Ngomba-Roth 2007: 145). While the ethnic cleavages in the Niger Delta are contributing considerably to violent conflict at the local level, it can on the other hand be assumed that these cleavages are one of the reasons for the absence of a broader escalation of a more ho-

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<sup>23</sup> Estimates according to indications in HRW 2003: 3.

mogenous violent struggle against government actors and the oil companies (Zinn 2005: 107).

#### *Demographic Factors and Social Structures*

While the population density in Nigeria is generally quite high, the population density in the habitable parts of the Niger Delta is even above the national average (UNDP 2006: 24), and it is persistently increasing. This high population density is causing land scarcity and can therefore be considered another factor fueling the internal conflictivity—in interplay with the above-presented fact that the region is very fragmented ethnically.<sup>24</sup>

A further aspect that may have contributed to the increase in violence in the Niger Delta is the loss of influence of family clans and traditional societal structures. Within recent decades the social and political authority of local traditional rulers (such as chiefs and kings) has significantly declined, partly because of changing patterns of society worldwide in the course of modernization and globalization and partly also because of the fact that these traditional rulers had collaborated with oil companies and the political elite for their own personal benefit (UNDP 2006: 42). The consequence has been a change in the principal actors of resistance and struggle in the Niger Delta, who are now younger, mostly male actors (Obi 2006: 41-42). They are generally more prone to violence, especially given the high level of unemployment in the Delta and the fact that without the social support of traditional family structures the young people are hit even harder by this endemic unemployment.

#### *Efficiency and Legitimacy of Political Institutions*

Nigeria is not only ethnically and religiously fragmented but is also marked by the fragmentation of its political structure, something which results in the persistent weakness of the political institutions and a lack of central coordination (Lewis 2007: 282). Reinforced by the regional tripartition of colonial rule (Brunner 2002: 132ff.) and the existing cultural fragmentation, the weakness of the political system was not at all remedied when Nigeria became independent in 1960. The historically weak political institutions, which undermined the effectiveness of the political output and reduced the state's capacity to provide internal stability, were never sustainably consolidated. Moreover, the rudimentary political institutions were further destroyed and delegitimized by the successive military regimes, which reinforced paternalistic patterns of political rule. The military dictators, especially Babangida and Abacha, used the oil rents to co-opt the traditional rulers (for example, chiefs or, in the north, emirs) of the country in order to bolster their political legitimacy, thereby fostering a culture of rent seeking and endemic corruption.

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<sup>24</sup> Taking into account the almost uninterrupted high rate of population growth in the country (2.38 percent in 2007), this impact on conflictivity could even intensify in future (Bfai 2008: 1).

Despite the institutional weakness, violent state repression under military rule was obviously one of the factors limiting the occurrence of more violent protests and broader social conflicts in the Niger Delta until the end of the 1990s (Hazen/Horner 2007: 72). Brutal repression also helps to explain the relatively rapid abatement of the Ogoni protests in the middle of the 1990s. Consequently, many studies emphasize that the increase in violence in the Niger Delta occurred parallel to the process of democratization (Hazem/Horner 2007: 10; World Bank 2003: 2<sup>25</sup>). Indeed, there have been two main mechanisms through which democratization has invoked an increase in violence in the Delta. First, since 1999 there has generally been less governmental repression, increasing the *opportunity* for the mobilization of (violent) protests and other kinds of struggle. Although violent, and sometimes excessively violent, repression by security forces still occurs in the Niger Delta,<sup>26</sup> this repression is more selective and inconsistent—for example, because of the collaboration of security forces with some of the violent actors, because of the security forces' participation in the illegal oil and weapons trade, and because the security forces lack financial resources and qualification (for details see “Behavioral Patterns of Political Actors and Political Culture”). As a result, governmental repression is today fostering counter-violence activities rather than curbing violence.

Second, with the return to democracy, especially in the context of elections, politicians began, on a large scale, to recruit mostly unemployed young men in the Niger Delta. They provided them with weapons to protect themselves, to fight political opponents, and to intimidate potential voters to vote for the “right” candidate. The weapons allocated have for the most part never been re-collected (Hazem/Horner 2007: 13/14; Human Rights Watch 2004a: 2), meaning that there are a considerable number of well-armed, disillusioned young people, many of whom were “dismissed” after the elections as the politicians no longer had any use for them. For example, the powerful militant leaders Ateke Tom (head of the Niger Delta Vigilante) and Alhaji Asari Dokubo (head of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force) were “actively deployed (and paid) by high ranking politicians to be political thugs during elections” (Lubeck/Watts/Lippschutz 2007: 8).

In sum, the failure of the democratic political institutions can be considered one of the basic contextual conditions providing the opportunity for the increase in and especially the enduring continuity of violence in the Niger Delta.

### *Substate Actors*

Due at least partly to the weakness of the official political institutions, informal arrangements and particular substate actors have always been of high importance in Nigerian politics. Spe-

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<sup>25</sup> Hazem and Horner refer in their statements to this World Bank report.

<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, military expenditure has risen significantly since 1996. The expenditure in 2007 was approximately eight times that in 1996 and totaled US\$825 million (SIPRI Military Expenditure Database). Furthermore, in 2007 an additional “paramilitary” force was established (IISS 2008: 309), the police staff grew to to 300,000, and national weapons production was reinforced (Hazen/Horner 2007: 29-31).



cial attention in the context of the increase in violence since 1999 should therefore be paid to the so-called “godfathers.” Godfathers are not democratically legitimate, but in practice they exercise crucial political influence in Nigeria because they are wealthy and socially powerful individuals. They support political candidates, frequently making use of violence,<sup>27</sup> and in return demand to have control over political decisions and to receive personal benefits or political protection for their illegal activities, amongst other things oil theft (Walker 2008). Godfatherism can be considered to be “both a symptom and a cause of the violence and corruption that together permeate the political process in Nigeria” and particularly in the Niger Delta (HRW 2007: 34). Within this vicious circle, godfatherism further reduces the legitimacy of government and perpetuates the political culture of irresponsible leadership.

Another symptom of the failure of the democratic political institutions is the absence of a viable system of political parties. The unambiguously dominant political party is the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP),<sup>28</sup> which hardly has a clear ideological concept (Nwankwo 2003: 138) but rather serves to facilitate corruption and patronage networks. As the PDP controls the machinery of the state, it has access to large state funds, which are used to “buy” political loyalty and to mobilize violence to enforce loyalty (HRW 2007: 36). This is not only further undermining the democratic legitimacy of the political actors but also directly contributing to the increase in violence in the Delta. According to a Human Rights Watch report, armed groups in Rivers state, for example, “openly acknowledge that they were sponsored by the PDP to rig the 2003 elections” (HRW 2007: 23).

#### *Behavioral Patterns of Elites and Political Culture*

The decades of (repressive) military rule have obviously influenced the political culture of the country. Consequently, Nigeria is marked not only by weak political institutions but also, in interaction with the latter, by a lack of democratic leadership, especially at the level of the state governors and the local political elites (Ologbenla 2007). This is evident, firstly, in the widespread tendency of elites to use the public offices and political power to pursue private interests (IDEA 2001: 243). With the transition to democracy this cupidity has become more publicly evident, and it is therefore increasingly causing anger within the population. Although this aspect does not appear to be of primary relevance, it can be regarded as one of the factors indirectly accounting for the increased potential for conflict in recent years.

Secondly, this political culture is evident in the Niger Delta policy, which can to a large extent be classified as a “carrot-stick strategy” (Hazen/Horner 2007: 96). A few, insufficient, incentives for the reduction of militancy on the part of the armed groups are accompanied by “heavy-handed military tactics” (Hazen/Horner 2007: 96). The same persistent military cul-

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<sup>27</sup> For example, they manipulate elections by contracting armed gangs to rig the election in favor of “their” candidate.

<sup>28</sup> Out of 36 state governors, 26 currently belong to the PDP, as does President Yar Adua and his predecessor Obasanjo.

ture can also be identified within the security forces and within the police, both of which were for decades educated in authoritarian practices and therefore remain highly militarized (Hazen/Horner 2007: 102). It is also evident within the Joint Task Force (composed of the army and police forces), which has been posted in the Niger Delta since 2003 and is notorious for its human rights violations and its immoderate use of force, for instance, extrajudicial killings and looting (see Human Rights Watch reports 1999; 2002; 2006).<sup>29</sup>

Among the militant groups as well as the population of the Niger Delta in the course of recent years, a generally growing frustration with the absence of any improvement can be asserted. Especially for the younger generations, the “lesson” of the Ogoni protests in the middle of the 1990s is that peaceful protest does not produce any positive results. As the transition to democracy, which was associated with a lot of expectations and hope for improvement of the socioeconomic situation, has been largely disappointing, the people’s willingness to use violence has been further strengthened.

*(Informal) International Interdependence and Spillover Effects: Weapon Trade*

The increased supply of potentially militant actors with weapons, who have already been mentioned, is one of the crucial aspects explaining the increased opportunities for violent struggle since the end of the 1990s. The circulation of weapons is not just caused by the corrupt and greedy intentions of national politicians and security forces; it also has international dimensions. Estimates regarding the proliferation of weapons in Nigeria assume the presence of one to three million small arms—the majority of them unlicensed and therefore illegal (Hazen/Horner 2007: 25). Community armories now appear to be a “common phenomenon” in the Delta (Hazen/Horner 2007: 91).

In part, the presence of these weapons can be traced back to the Biafra War; others have been “imported” more recently. The main external sources are said to be the neighboring countries, many of which have experienced violent conflicts (Human Rights Watch 2003: 25). The weapons are brought to Nigeria by Nigerian or foreign arms dealers through the country’s very porous frontiers. Particularly important entry points appear to be the borders with Togo and Benin (Hazen/Horner 2007: 34). In Nigeria the weapons are sold directly to the militant groups, the security forces, other governmental actors, and business people who are “passing them on.” Weapons also enter the country, albeit to a lesser extent, with Nigerian soldiers returning from ECOWAS missions in Sierra Leone and Liberia (AI 2005: 36).

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<sup>29</sup> For example, in February 2005 the Joint Task Force attacked an Odioma community. They killed at least 17 people and destroyed the majority of the village (Amnesty International 2005a: 19).

#### 4 The Interplay of Resource-specific and Non-resource-specific Contextual Conditions and Its Historical Dynamics

In summarizing the analysis of the particular contextual conditions, it can be concluded that several central contextual conditions and associated mechanisms have been detected that can be considered root causes of conflict and other forms of violence, *independently* of the effect of oil. Yet the “pre-oil era” of Nigeria and the Niger Delta were marked by a high potential for conflict: Firstly, because of ethnic cleavages, which manifested as a national polarization between south and north and as various other cleavages within the Niger Delta. Secondly, because of the general weakness and instability of political institutions, something which also has to be taken into consideration. Nigeria did not gain independence until 1960 and its political structures had been fragmented by the influence of colonial rule. Hence, when massive oil exploitation began, the country did not have consolidated political institutions, nor was it in an advanced process of nation building. Finally, even before oil production started, the Niger Delta had been marked by poverty and a lack of modernization.

While these non-resource-specific factors had already reacted with each other before the beginning of the oil production and had thus reinforced the probability of violent conflict, they have since interacted with the factor oil in such a way that oil has explicitly served as an additional conflict-triggering factor. This is especially true of the link between oil and the existing ethnic cleavages: On the one hand, because of the high concentration of oil reserves in the southeast, the issue of the distribution of oil rents has further exacerbated the existing mistrust between the northern Hausa-Fulani elites and the southern ethnic minorities. In this sense oil has fostered the Niger Delta states’ struggles, and those of particular ethnic groups within the Delta, for more autonomy. The call for increased autonomy is still a central feature of the discourses of militant groups such as the NDPVF and MEND.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, and even more relevant in the context of this paper, the factor oil has—in tandem with demographic aspects (growing population density) and the resource-management approach—intensified the violent intercommunal clashes in the Delta. As land tenure arrangements in the oil-exploiting regions result in oil revenues and other selective (financial) benefits being distributed by the oil companies to their host communities, boundary conflicts between different ethnic communities, which compete for financial support, have been exacerbated.

The combination of the rising importance of the oil production with the weak political institutions and the—still unfinished—state-building process (Brunner 2002: 292ff.) in Nigeria has moreover fueled corruption and widespread patronage networks. This has fostered mismanagement and the formation of informal political arrangements based on the private

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<sup>30</sup> In contrast, those with more radical secessionist aspirations, which provoked, for example, the Biafra war, have today become almost silent.

personal profits of the actors involved, who often approve or even actively foment violence, most notably in the case of the so-called godfathers.

Finally, the oil industry has also caused the deepening of socioeconomic distortions in the national economy, mainly due to Nigeria's extremely high dependence on the resource sector and the decline of the agricultural sector, which has paralleled the growth of the oil industry. While the oil industry is generally very capital intensive, it is not labor intensive (Karl 2007: 6). In Nigeria this limited employment capacity, a structural problem in all petrostates, is particularly pronounced because of the low capacity of the national oil company and the insufficient infrastructure. Oil is rarely processed within the country, so the oil industry provides very few jobs for the people. The resulting extremely high level of unemployment in the Niger Delta can be considered an important conflict-generating aspect.

Whereas these violence-triggering mechanisms as well as the directly negative impact of oil exploitation through pollution and the destruction of the environment and (farm)land have existed since the beginning of oil exploitation, there are some further contextual conditions which specifically explain the increase in and the changing type of violence in the Niger Delta since the second half of the 1990s. These are, first, socioeconomic factors in the context of the country's deep economic crisis in the 1980s and 1990s (central conflict-triggering aspects: rising poverty and unemployment). This crisis—closely linked to the impact of oil—was mainly caused by the interplay of unsustainable resource management, falling global oil prices, and, consequently, a profound decrease in oil abundance.

Second, and of even greater importance, was the transition to democracy in 1999. The main direct consequence, which has influenced the dynamics of violence, has been the easing of the political repression of oppositional groups and protests (an impact which is not related to the factor oil). The main indirect consequence has been the widespread recruitment by corrupt politicians of mostly unemployed young men, who were given an abundant supply of arms and who have today become the main violent actors in the Delta. Initially there was only an indirect and diffuse link to the factor oil, as the young men were first of all engaged by the politicians in order to fight their political opponents, intimidate potential voters in the context of elections, or just to protect them. As most of the weapons distributed in the process have not been returned and many of the young men were dropped after the elections because the politicians no longer had any use for them, these young men's agitation has nevertheless developed its own dynamics of violence; thus, today the agitation is closely linked to oil, mainly through complex oil-theft and arms-trade networks, which in addition to parts of the militant groups also involve Nigerian politicians, security forces, and other substate and international actors. This broad involvement of different actors in illegal actions is impeding comprehensive government initiatives to dry up the militant actors' sources of income and thus—in interaction with the persistent, severe grievances—helps to explain the perpetuation of the violent conflicts.

## 5 Conclusions

The paper has studied the specific influence of oil abundance and other resource-specific and non-resource-specific contextual factors on violence in the Niger Delta, which has been on the rise since the second half of the 1990s. The findings confirm the underlying hypothesis that oil has indeed had a substantial influence on the occurrence and dynamics of the violent conflict, but that it is by no means sufficient to exhaustively explain the violence. This seems to highlight the necessity of revising the assumptions of the existing approaches of the resource curse thesis. Further contextual factors, which have to date been neglected by the established theoretical approaches, have been proven to be of crucial importance. These include contextual conditions which, initially independently of the factor oil, have constituted central root causes of violent conflicts and stem from the “pre-oil era”: the low level of socio-economic development, interwoven cultural and political cleavages, weak political institutions, and unconsolidated statehood.

On the other hand, oil and oil rents have explicitly served as an additional conflict-triggering factor, but only in a complex interplay with a broader set of resource-specific as well as non-resource-specific contextual factors. Oil has been a *motive* for (initially mostly nonviolent) grievance-related conflicts, as the resident population in the Delta has felt that it is deprived of the financial benefits of the resource revenues while it also suffers the disastrous ecological and social impacts of oil production. These grievances were further aggravated in the context of the deep economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, which was linked to the factor oil through the causal chain of mismanagement, indebtedness, and falling global oil prices. In this respect, the assumptions of the rentier state theory concerning the typical socioeconomic distortions in petrostates due to the self-privileging of the elites instead of productive reinvestment (Beck 2007: 46) apply strongly to the case of Nigeria.

However, oil has also increased the *opportunity* for violent conflicts, principally by financing the militant groups involved. The establishment of this mechanism was only possible because of oil’s impact on the already weak political institutions: oil rents promoted endemic corruption and patronage networks, both of which provide the structural basis for the broad involvement of various actors in illegal oil bunkering. The widespread oil theft and trade in weapons are additionally triggered by the contributions of international actors, who are earning significant profits and are therefore not interested in ending the violence. Consequently, while grievances as a motive for conflict remain widely unchanged for the majority of Niger Delta residents (and entail active or at least passive support of the militant groups by parts of the population), this motive has recently been increasingly overtaken by the partly autonomous dynamics of an economy of violence which is fueled by, first, the illegal oil trade and, second, by kidnapping.

The results presented here contribute to the further differentiation of the current academic debate on oil and violence. The findings shall, in a further step, be integrated with the insights of other case studies analyzed in the above-mentioned research project. Through com-

parative analysis, systematizations and—as far as possible—generalizations of the findings will be produced. The following questions are of particular interest: Do other cases confirm the high importance of the “pre-oil” context? Can the ambivalent impact of oil-fueled corruption and patronage networks, which are triggering low-intensity conflicts but which are also contributing to the prevention of conflict escalation, be confirmed by the cases in other countries? And furthermore, can the importance of unemployment—especially in combination with the disintegration of societal and family structures—be confirmed by other cases?

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