NETWORKED CONFLICT: THE ENDURING ROLE OF ACTOR ALLIANCES IN SUSTAINING COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA REGION

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Abstract

This paper engages with the recurring communal violence in the Niger Delta and argues that a proper understanding of the dynamics of violence requires an interrogation of the shifting relationships among local elites, state actors, militant groups, and community members that induces the recurrence of conflict. Using the qualitative, exploratory approach, as well as drawing on secondary sources such as academic works, policy reports, and NGO documents published from 2000 to 2024, and guided by network theory and social conflict theory, the analysis frames patterns of alliances, resource capture, and shifting loyalties among the main actors. As such, the paper shows how the structure and evolution of these actor networks help sustain communal violence. The paper found that conflict and communal violence in the Niger Delta have evolved beyond grievances and competition for resources and is now essentially driven by dynamic networks that share risk, benefit, and legitimacy. These networks create incentives for violence and often weaken peacebuilding, even when external interventions take place. The paper concludes that peacebuilding interventions in the Niger Delta demands solutions that addresses the root causes of conflicts over symptoms. It calls for inclusive governance, targeted disruption of patronage networks, and participatory peacebuilding that recognises the interdependence of all actors.

Keywords: Alliances**,** Conflict Networks, Communal Violence, Competition, Conflict Recurrence, Peacebuilding

Introduction

The Niger Delta, home to vast reserves of petroleum resources, remains one of the most contested and conflict-prone regions in Nigeria (Ali, Aghdam & Bhuiyan 2025). The region has witnessed decades of violence and instability. However, academic debates around the social and political conundrums in the region vary from environmental degradation to economic disempowerment, to social contextualized positions on how communities in the region have borne the brunt of Nigeria's petroleum-dependent development model (Obi, 2023; Watts & Ibaba, 2011). Today, academic debates on conflict in the Niger Delta span disciplines from

political economy to environmental justice, yet the question of why communal violence persist continues to demand new intellectual approaches.

The dominant narrative in the literature presents conflict in the Niger Delta as primarily a response to state domination by the Nigerian state and multinational oil corporations (MNOCs) (Ayodele, 2025; Omoigberale, 2025; Umukoro, 2012). While state repression, corporate impunity, and exclusionary governance structures are consistently implicated in driving violent reactions, particularly from marginalised youth and disenfranchised communities (Idemudia & Osayande, 2018; Omeje, 2017). However, this external-facing framing of conflict and violence captures only part of the picture in the region.

Violence in the Niger Delta is not solely a confrontation between communities and outside forces. It has, over time, assumed complex internal dimensions. Internal conflicts such as intra-communal disputes over chieftaincy titles, land rights, access to oil rents, and surveillance contracts have grown more frequent. Inter-communal rivalries have emerged over disputed boundaries and the control of oil-bearing areas (Abiodun, 2023; Uzodike & Isike, 2009). These internal divisions complicate the idea that communities are uniformly aligned against the state and MNOCs.

As conflict deepens and diversifies, the line between perpetrator and victim becomes less clear. Local actors are not merely passive recipients of injustice. They participate in alliances, make strategic decisions, and pursue interests that shape the conflict landscape. Some community elites, for example, act as gatekeepers between oil companies and the wider population. Others use their access to patronage networks to marginalise rivals or enrich themselves. At the same time, militant groups that once presented themselves as liberators may become rent-seeking actors engaged in protection rackets. These dynamics reveal that the actors involved in conflict do not operate in isolation. They are embedded in shifting webs of relationships that evolve with changing political and economic contexts (Naanen & Nyiayaana, 2013; Joab-Peterside, Porter & Watts, 2012).

Despite the growing recognition of actor multiplicity, most analyses continue to focus narrowly on the role of the state or oil corporations. These studies do acknowledge the existence of inter- and intra-community tensions, but they often treat these dimensions as secondary or derivative. As a result, the underlying relational structures that bind the various actors together remain underexplored. The literature has identified many of the actors involved in the conflict, but it has done less to examine how their roles intersect or how their alliances shape outcomes over time. Too often, the analysis is static, isolating actors instead of tracing the links that connect them across institutional and community lines (Ukiwo, 2011; Joab-Peterside *et. al.,* 2012).

This paper argues that to understand the persistence of communal conflict in the Niger Delta, it is necessary to look beyond the identities of the actors and focus on the structure of their

relationships. A networked perspective offers a way to capture the fluidity, interdependence, and strategic repositioning that define conflict in the region. Network theory, which has been used in the social sciences to study power distribution and influence, provides a useful lens for unpacking how informal ties and formal partnerships shape behaviour (Castells, 2011). In the Niger Delta, these networks are composed of a number of actors such as MNOCs, government forces, local elites, militant groups, and community members, all of whom interact with one another in pursuit of distinct but often overlapping goals.

In such settings, alliances form and dissolve based on shifts in opportunity and risk. A local chief might work with a multinational company to secure compensation for his community while secretly backing a militant group to gain leverage in future negotiations. Similarly, a militant group might alternate between attacking and protecting oil installations, depending on the availability of contracts, political patronage, or external funding (Idemudia & Osayande, 2018). These actions are not isolated decisions but reflect broader patterns of interaction shaped by existing relationships. Over time, these networks institutionalise incentives that sustain conflict and undermine peace initiatives.

The material conditions of the Niger Delta are high unemployment, environmental collapse, political exclusion, and infrastructural neglect and they reinforce the appeal of informal networks (Obiam & Amadi, 2022; Alakwe, 2024). In the absence of reliable state institutions, access to resources and influence is often mediated through personal relationships and non-state actors. These networks are not inherently criminal or violent, but in the context of protracted conflict, they provide the organizational framework through which violence is planned, justified, and financed. Patronage ties, clan affiliations, and commercial interests all operate within these structures, helping to maintain a conflict equilibrium even during periods of apparent calm (Newson, 2011).

Despite their importance, the networked structures of conflict remain marginal in most analyses. Research continues to prioritise grievance-based or resource-based explanations, often treating violent events as isolated reactions to state failure or corporate exploitation. While these drivers are real, they do not fully explain the endurance and adaptability of conflict actors. Nor do they account for the ability of peace processes to fail even after the withdrawal of external forces or the signing of amnesty deals. Network theory adds value by highlighting how actors adapt to changing conditions, reposition themselves within shifting alliances, and exploit relational capital to pursue their goals (Gulati, 1998; Franke & Öztürk, 2015; König *et al.*, 2017).

This paper sets out to examine how the networked structure of relationships among MNOCs, local elites, government forces, and militant groups contribute to the persistence of communal conflict in the Niger Delta. Rather than focusing on static roles or binary antagonisms, it investigates how these actors relate to one another, how their alliances evolve, and how their mutual dependencies reproduce violence. Drawing on existing literature and thematic analysis, the paper traces these relationships across different levels of conflict engagement. It explores

how MNOCs partner with elites to secure access, how governments rely on local actors to implement security measures, and how militants navigate these relationships to maintain relevance and power.

Through this lens, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of why conflict persists in the Niger Delta. It argues that conflict is sustained not only by grievances and greed but by a structured system of relationships that distributes risk, benefit, and legitimacy across multiple actors. Dominant analyses consistently miss these structured networks that sustain the recurrent of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta. Therefore, understanding this system is essential for filling the literature gap and crafting peace strategies that go beyond surface-level interventions while targeting the underlying relational architecture. By making these structures visible, the paper offers insights into how conflict networks can be disrupted and replaced with more inclusive governance frameworks. In doing so, it seeks to advance both academic debates and practical efforts toward sustainable peace in one of Africa's most volatile oil regions.

Theoretical framework

This paper draws on Network Theory and Social Conflict Theory as complementary theoretical frames to examine the persistence and recurrence of communal violence and conflict in the Niger Delta. The utility draws from the understanding of how viable networks can frame the nature of social interactions and outcomes, especially in contexts of competitions for resources and access. Network Theory explains how relationships among actors, shape behaviour, decision-making, and outcomes (Larson, 2021; Metternich *et al.*, 2013). Originating in sociology and later adapted into political science and international relations, the theory sees social systems as webs of nodes (actors) connected through various types of ties (Castells, 2011; Uzodike & Isike, 2009). Actors in a network may include individuals, organizations, institutions, or even non-human elements, and the patterns of their interactions—formal or informal, strong or weak—determine the distribution of power, resources, and influence (Dorff, Gallop & Minhas, 2020).

In conflict studies, Network Theory shifts focus from isolated actors to the structure of relationships among them (Bankovskaya, 2022). It assumes that conflict is not always driven by ideology or grievance alone, but often by the strategic positioning of actors within a network. For example, actors with access to multiple networks or those who serve as brokers between disconnected groups often hold disproportionate power, a concept known as "structural holes" (Ukiwo, 2011). This insight is crucial for understanding how alliances and rivalries form and reconfigure within prolonged conflict environments.

In the Niger Delta, the relationships between MNOCs, political elites, state security actors, and militant groups reflect precisely this kind of networked interaction. MNOCs often work through community intermediaries to secure social license for oil extraction (Nzeadibe, Ajaero &

Nwoke, 2015). Elites, in turn, use their position to extract rents from both companies and communities. Militants move in and out of violent roles depending on their access to patronage and arms. These actors are not static; their positions and influence shift based on the structure and strength of their ties to others. Network Theory captures these dynamics by emphasising how relational patterns shape both the escalation and containment of conflict (Newson, 2011; Edo, 2010).

The second theoretical perspective, Social Conflict Theory, originates from the work of Karl Marx and has evolved through scholars like Coser, Dahrendorf, and more recently, Tilly and Collins. The theory sees society as a platform for unequal power relations, where conflict arises from competition over scarce resources such as land, capital, and political authority. In this framework, social structures are inherently unequal, and conflict is both a symptom and a mechanism of systemic inequality (Wievorka, 2013). The theory argues that dominant groups control access to resources through institutional and ideological tools, while subordinate groups resist exploitation through various forms of protest, negotiation, or violence. In resource-rich but impoverished regions, like the Niger Delta, the logic of social conflict becomes particularly salient. The concentration of oil wealth in the hands of a political and economic elite, coupled with environmental destruction and the collapse of traditional livelihoods, creates conditions ripe for contestation (Obi, 2010).

Social Conflict Theory helps explain the deep resentment that exists among Niger Delta communities, where poverty, underdevelopment, and ecological harm persist despite the region's oil wealth. It also provides a framework for understanding why demands for justice frequently escalate into violence. When legal or political avenues for redress are weak or compromised, aggrieved actors often resort to militancy, sabotage, or other disruptive tactics as tools for negotiation and visibility (Watts & Ibaba, 2011).

Used in isolation, Network Theory and Social Conflict Theory provide useful but incomplete pictures of the Niger Delta conflict. Network Theory is strong in explaining the structural patterns that sustain conflict, but it does not always account for the underlying socio-economic grievances that motivate actors (Wieviorka, 2013; Ukaga, Ukiwo & Ibaba, 2012) Social Conflict Theory explains those grievances but is less attentive to how actors navigate complex relational fields to advance their goals. Combined, the two theories offer a more complete explanation. Together, they allow us to see the Niger Delta conflict as both a product of structural inequality and a function of dynamic alliances among actors operating within a dense web of interdependence. Network Theory explains how MNOCs, government officials, community elites, and militants form shifting partnerships based on mutual benefit, access, or control. Social Conflict Theory reveals why these actors compete so fiercely because the material and political rewards at stake are immense, while the costs of exclusion are high.

For instance, the persistent failure of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects in the region cannot be understood by looking at MNOCs alone. Network Theory shows how these

projects are captured by local elites who use them to consolidate power, while Social Conflict Theory explains how exclusion from such benefits fuel grievances among youth and marginalised groups (Wievorka, 2013). Similarly, the pattern of militant violence against oil infrastructure can be seen as both a tactical move within a network (to gain leverage or signal strength) and a structural reaction to longstanding socio-economic marginalization. Applying these theories in tandem also helps clarify why many peacebuilding efforts have failed. Traditional approaches often target individual actors or isolated grievances without addressing the broader network in which these actors are embedded. As long as elites, corporations, militants, and state actors continue to benefit from the existing network structure where corruption, rent-seeking, and selective violence yield rewards, the incentives to sustain conflict remain strong (Idemudia & Osayande, 2018). Network Theory shows how these arrangements persist, while Social Conflict Theory explains why they are deeply entrenched in historical injustice and systemic inequality.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach anchored in thematic analysis. Given the complex and relational nature of conflict in the Niger Delta, a qualitative design is most suited to capture the depth and nuance of actor interactions and networked alliances. Data is drawn primarily from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, government reports, NGO documentation, and publications from international organizations covering conflict, governance, and oil politics in Nigeria between 2000 and 2024. These sources provide empirical and theoretical insight into the roles and relationships of multinational oil corporations (MNOCs), local elites, state actors, and militant groups. The method of analysis is thematic, guided by the principles of Braun and Clarke (2019).

Thematic analysis involves the systematic identification and analysis of qualitative data using recurring and identifiable themes (Ahmed *et al.*, 2025). Using Braun and Clarke identifies six steps that include familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report, the study draws out relevant themes from the literature. As such, themes were identified through iterative engagement with the literature, enabling the classification of key patterns such as strategic alliances, resource capture, shifting loyalties, and resistance narratives. These themes are then interpreted through the combined lenses of network theory and social conflict theory to uncover how structural inequality and relational interdependence shape the persistence of conflict.

Justifiably, this approach offers a broad and theoretically grounded understanding, it is not without limitations. Relying exclusively on secondary sources means the analysis is constrained by the availability, scope, and quality of existing literature. This may result in the omission of recent or localized developments not yet captured in published works. Furthermore, secondary data can reflect the biases or priorities of original authors, potentially shaping the interpretation of events and relationships. The absence of primary fieldwork also limits the ability to capture

first-hand perspectives, emerging dynamics, or the lived experiences of actors on the ground. These limitations are acknowledged as inherent trade-offs in favour of breadth and theoretical synthesis, and they underscore the need for future research that incorporates primary data and participatory methods to deepen and validate the findings presented here.

Mapping Communal Conflict in the Niger Delta through a Networked Lens

To understand the persistence of communal conflict in the Niger Delta, it is essential to look beyond linear explanations and focus on the constellation of relationships that connect actors across different levels of influence. Communal conflict in the region involves not only visible confrontations over oil but also the submerged, relational architecture through which power circulates and violence is negotiated (Barigbon, 2024; Habiba, 2018; Akintola, 2018). A networked approach reveals the complex and layered interdependence among actors such as multinational oil corporations (MNOCs), local elites, state forces, militant groups, and various segments of community society. These actors operate within a dense web of interactions that structure how conflict unfolds, is managed, and is often prolonged (Rexer & Hvinden, 2026; Akintola, 2018; Wieviorka, 2013).

A key actor in the network that have been identified to be a central player in communal conflict are MNOCs (Tamuno, 2022). Their operations require local consent, physical access to oil-bearing land, and protection for infrastructure. To navigate the terrain of local politics, companies often rely on intermediaries drawn from traditional institutions, local government councils, and youth groups (Ukiwo, 2011; Wodu, 2026). These intermediaries are expected to represent community interests while facilitating oil production. However, their authority is frequently contested. Access to oil-linked benefits, including compensation and employment, tends to be channelled through these individuals, creating enclaves of privilege and exclusion within communities (Idemudia & Osayande, 2018). Rather than resolve tensions, these arrangements often sharpen grievances, particularly among those left out of the distribution chain.

State institutions, especially security agencies and local political authorities, also play ambiguous roles. On paper, their mandate is to maintain law and order and mediate disputes. In practice, however, state forces are routinely implicated in deepening communal divisions (Adesanya, Jatula & Opeyeooluwa, 2023). Reports of selective enforcement, collusion with private oil interests, and involvement in the suppression of dissent are widespread (Watts & Ibaba, 2011). Political figures frequently use their positions to distribute oil contracts and patronage to loyalists, often along ethnic or clan lines. These actions embed the state within the same conflict networks that it is expected to regulate.

Militant groups in the region occupy yet another critical node in the conflict structure (Ebiede & Langer, 2023). Originally organised as resistance movements against environmental injustice and political marginalization, many of these groups have evolved into decentralised

formations involved in oil theft, protection rackets, and electoral violence. Their legitimacy depends on their ability to serve as defenders of local interests while simultaneously engaging in rent-seeking behaviour. Former militants, in particular, often straddle multiple roles such as beneficiaries of government amnesty programs, community influencers, and enforcers for politicians or corporate actors. This fluidity makes it difficult to distinguish between rebellion and collaboration, or between community defence and private enterprise (Watts & Ibaba, 2011).

Within communities themselves, conflict is not simply directed outward. Internal power struggles over access to oil-related benefits are common. Traditional rulers, youth leaders, women's associations, and other civic actors routinely clash over legitimacy and representation. Disputes over land ownership, chieftaincy titles, and compensation claims have led to prolonged internal crises, often escalating into open violence (Ebiede, 2017). These intra-communal rivalries are not accidental; they are linked to the external relationships that community factions forge with MNOCs, politicians, or security actors (Agboola & Kialee, 2024). In many cases, communal groups align with more powerful actors outside the community to gain advantage in local disputes (Osagie, Fred & Samuel, 2010). The table below summarises the role of actors and the nature of their relationship with others within the ‘network of conflict’ in the region.

Table 1: Networked Relationship Between Different Conflict Actors

Actor	Primary Relationships	Nature of Relationship	Key Motivations/Outcomes
Multinational Oil Corporations (MNOCs)	- Local Elites - Government security Forces - Militant Groups - Community Members	- Partner with elites for access and legitimacy - Rely on government for security - Negotiate/pay off militants for protection or to avoid sabotage - CSR projects to appease communities	- Secure oil extraction - Minimize operational disruptions - Maintain social license to operate
Local Elites (Chiefs, Politicians, Gatekeepers)	- MNOCs - Community Members - Militant Groups - Government Forces	- Act as intermediaries between MNOCs and communities - Broker deals, extract rents, distribute patronage - Sometimes covertly support militants for leverage	- Consolidate power - Access resources - Marginalize rivals
Government Forces (Military, Police, State Agencies)	- MNOCs - Local Elites - Militant Groups - Community Members	- Provide security for oil operations - Enforce state authority - Engage in patronage with elites - Sometimes complicit in illicit activities	- Maintain order - Secure state revenue - Personal enrichment
Militant Groups	- MNOCs - Local Elites - Government Forces - Community Members	- Attack/protect oil infrastructure (depending on incentives) - Engage in extortion, protection rackets - Shift alliances for survival and profit	- Gain leverage - Access patronage/contracts - Express grievances
Community Members (Youth, Women, General Populace)	- Local Elites - MNOCs - Militant Groups - Government Forces	- Often marginalized in decision-making - Sometimes mobilized by elites or militants - Recipients of (often inadequate) CSR projects	- Seek development - Redress grievances - Survival

These patterns in the relationship between actors tabulated above reveal that conflict in the Niger Delta cannot be reduced to a struggle between oppressed communities and external exploiters. It is instead a layered system of intersecting relationships in which actors reposition themselves based on shifting opportunities. The lines between ally and adversary, or between victim and perpetrator, are often blurred (Idemudia & Ite, 2006). A local elite may serve as a broker for a MNOC while simultaneously mobilising youth violence to strengthen his bargaining power. A militant may offer protection to a community during one cycle of conflict and attack it during another, depending on which alliances are most rewarding at the time (Umoh, Nkang & Akpan, 2024; Osagie, Fred & Samuel, 2010).

What sustains conflict in this setting is not simply grievance or greed but the networked structure of relationships that distributes power, influence, and material benefits. These relationships allow actors to shift strategies, forge and sever alliances, and maintain relevance within a fluid political economy (Umoh *et. al.,* 2024). Over time, these interactions shape not only the trajectory of violence but also the distribution of opportunities and exclusions that define communal life in oil-rich territories. To understand how these dynamics play out more concretely, it is important to consider the informal systems through which governance and elites are connected to conflicts.

Elite Alliances, Patronage and Communal Conflicts

In the Niger Delta, oil is not just a resource, it plays a role in determining who have access to political power and influence in decision-making. Elite alliance and communal conflicts are driven and sustained by access to oil rents, contracts, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) benefits. This dynamic is often mediated by a network of elite alliances linking multinational oil corporations (MNOCs), political actors, and community gatekeepers. Furthermore, these networks or relationships form the backbone of a patronage economy that sustains conflict. Rather than resolving tensions, these elite coalitions often reproduce exclusion, deepen local divisions, and institutionalise violence as a means of political and economic negotiation (Idemudia & Osayande, 2018; Joab-Peterside, Porter & Watts, 2012).

At the apex of this network are MNOCs such as Shell, Chevron, Eni/Agip, and Total Energies and their activities across communities in the Niger Delta. Their operations depend on access to land and community consent, both of which are often secured through opaque negotiations with local elites and state officials. As a practice, oil companies rarely engage entire communities; instead, they work through selected intermediaries such as traditional rulers, youth leaders, local politicians, who claim to represent community interests. These individuals or local elites function as brokers, using their proximity to MNOCs to channel contracts, compensation payments, and CSR benefits to themselves and their loyalists. This system of selective benefit distribution creates winners and losers within communities, fuelling resentment and, in many cases, open hostility (Joab-Peterside, Porter & Watts, 2012; Ebiede, 2017).

Another dimension where elite alliances and patronage system drives communal conflicts is the role of state institutions in the region. Government actors play a crucial role in legitimising and expanding these patronage networks. In states such as Bayelsa, Rivers, and Delta, political office often serves as a conduit for distributing oil wealth through contracts, job slots, and development initiatives. Many politicians, particularly at the local and state levels, maintain close relationships with oil companies, using their positions to influence the awarding of surveillance contracts and community interface jobs. These arrangements serve both economic and political ends. Politicians secure loyalty by redistributing benefits, while oil companies minimise operational disruptions by aligning with dominant local actors (Ebiede, 2017; Ikelegbe, 2006).

Evidence from Rivers State reveals how these dynamics unfold in practice. A 2021 report by the Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN) found that pipeline surveillance contracts awarded by the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPCL) and MNOCs were often funnelled to ex-militants and political loyalists, bypassing formal accountability processes. These contracts, sometimes worth millions of dollars annually, not only empowered former warlords but also entrenched their authority within communities, often at the expense of legitimate governance structures. In 2022, a high-profile surveillance contract was controversially awarded to Mr. Government Ekpomupolo, known as Tompolo, an ex-militant leader from Gbaramatu Kingdom. The deal, valued at ₦48 billion (approx. $111 million), sparked tensions across Delta and Bayelsa States, as rival groups and communities accused the federal government of empowering one faction at the expense of others (Nwokolo & Aghedo, 2018; Ivorgba & Director, 2024).

The problem lies not only in who receives the contracts, but in how these benefits are deployed. Surveillance contracts, oil spill clean-up jobs, and CSR projects are often used to reward loyalty rather than address community needs. For instance, CSR projects intended to deliver development such as health centres, boreholes, or skill acquisition programs are sometimes awarded to individuals without adequate consultation or oversight. As a result, projects are poorly executed, abandoned, or distributed unevenly, deepening perceptions of injustice (Habiba, 2018). In Ogoniland, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) flagged the failure of clean-up and remediation projects funded through the Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP), citing elite interference and patronage-based contracts as key obstacles to progress (UNEP, 2017).

These patterns reinforce communal fragmentation that deepens communal conflict. As access to oil-linked benefits becomes a function of personal networks rather than collective rights, communities are fractured along kinship, youth, and political lines. In many oil-producing communities, rival youth groups or families compete violently over the right to represent the community in dealings with oil firms. In Okordia-Zarama in Bayelsa State, for example, repeated disputes have occurred between factions vying for recognition from Shell and Agip as legitimate community representatives. These internal rifts often escalate into communal violence, sabotage,

or legal battles, none of which address the root cause: unequal access to oil rents mediated by elite alliances (Nwajiaku-Dahou, 2012).

The patronage economy also distorts traditional authority structures. Chiefs who resist elite capture risk being side-lined or dethroned, while those who align with political or corporate actors are rewarded with increased visibility and control. The erosion of traditional legitimacy has contributed to power vacuums and leadership tussles in places like Gbarain, Nembe, and Ekeremor, where chieftaincy disputes have triggered long-standing intra-community conflicts. These conflicts are rarely isolated events; they are symptoms of a system where access to power and resources is negotiated through allegiance to dominant networks rather than rooted in transparent governance or popular accountability (Watts, 2004b; Ebiede, 2017).

In this context, violence becomes both a symptom and a strategy. Excluded groups resort to sabotage, protests, and militancy to gain attention or force inclusion. For those within the patronage system, the threat of violence often becomes a bargaining tool. This dynamic helps explain the persistence of low-intensity, recurring conflict even in periods of relative calm. Peace, when it exists, is fragile because it rests on the continuous circulation of patronage and the maintenance of elite consensus. To ensure benefits, conflict actors, especially militants have evolved fluid roles that allows for optimal gains from the oil industry in the region.

Role Fluidity and the Networked Logic of Local Conflict Actors

One of the most enduring features of communal conflict in the Niger Delta is the fluidity of roles among local actors. Individuals and groups frequently shift identities, at times presenting as agitators, at other times as protectors, contractors, negotiators, or insurgents. These shifts are not arbitrary. They reflect calculated adaptations to evolving political, economic, and relational opportunities. Within this fluid landscape, violence is not merely a response to exclusion or oppression. It becomes embedded in structures that are socially accepted, economically incentivised, and politically instrumental (Adekola & Grainger, 2023; Ebiede & Nyiayaana, 2022).

Militant actors best exemplify this flexibility. The rise of armed groups in the early 2000s, notably the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), was initially rooted in demands for environmental justice, resource control, and local autonomy. These groups gained legitimacy through their defiance of the state and oil companies. However, over time, militancy evolved from an oppositional stance into a means of negotiation. Violence, or the threat of it, became a bargaining chip. Armed groups that attacked pipelines and kidnapped oil workers were later invited to the table as stakeholders. Some of their leaders were absorbed into amnesty programs, offered contracts, and assigned surveillance responsibilities over the very infrastructure they once targeted (Watts & Ibaba, 2011).

This transformation is not a withdrawal from militancy, but a strategic repositioning within a broader conflict economy. The case of Government Ekpomupolo (Tompolo) illustrates this shift.

Once declared wanted by the Nigerian government for his role in oil-related insurgency, he later secured a surveillance contract worth ₦48 billion to protect pipelines in the Niger Delta. His transition from fugitive to state partner was not a result of ideological change but a realignment with political and economic power centres (Ebiede & Nyiayaana, 2022). Such repositioning is common among ex-agitators who, after disarmament, operate as contractors, mediators, or political agents, while retaining the capacity to remobilise if their interests are threatened (Watts & Ibaba, 2011; Nwokolo & Aghedo, 2018).

Local politicians are equally adept at navigating this landscape. During elections, many seek alliances with youth groups and former militants who command street-level influence. These actors are mobilised to secure votes, intimidate rivals, or suppress dissent. Once in office, the same politicians often appoint their former foot soldiers into local security outfits or award them development contracts. This co-optation does not dissolve their capacity for violence; rather, it integrates that capacity into formal governance structures (Joab-Peterside *et al.*, 2012; Nwajiaku-Dahou, 2012). In some communities, it is difficult to distinguish between state-sanctioned security actors and informal militias, as individuals switch roles depending on their access to patronage and protection (Ikelegbe, 2006; Ebiede, 2017).

Traditional leaders and community elites also participate in this dynamic. When CSR benefits, compensation, or political recognition are at stake, some chiefs align with militants, posing as defenders of communal rights. At other times, they act as intermediaries, brokering peace between oil firms and aggrieved factions. Their legitimacy fluctuates with their ability to secure tangible outcomes. In places like Gbarain, Egbema, and Nembe, chiefs have been known to support protests at one moment and later serve as negotiators for peace deals that channel resources through their offices. These actions blur the line between representation and self-interest, weakening community trust and institutionalising conflict as a pathway to relevance (Idemudia & Osayande, 2018; Abiodun, 2023).

Youth leaders and vigilante groups, once seen as defenders of communal integrity, have similarly adapted to the demands of the conflict economy. In some communities, they serve as spokespersons in negotiations with MNOCs. In others, they guard oil installations under contract. These roles offer both income and recognition, making them attractive alternatives to unemployment. However, when excluded from benefits or side-lined in decision-making, the same actors may return to protest or sabotage, using violence as leverage to regain visibility (Ikelegbe, 2006; Omeje, 2017). Their capacity to move between confrontation and cooperation ensures their continued relevance in a system where formal institutions are weak and rewards are often distributed through informal channels (Naanen & Nyiayaana, 2013; Obi, 2023).

This role fluidity sustains conflict in two ways. First, it institutionalises violence within structures that appear legitimate. When ex-militants guard pipelines or community youth monitor development projects, their positions are framed as contributions to peace. However, these arrangements rarely include accountability or transparency mechanisms. Without oversight, they

replicate the same exclusionary logics that fuelled violence in the first place (Watts, 2004; Adekola & Grainger, 2023). Second, role fluidity creates a revolving door between conflict and peace. Actors learn that visibility and power come not through sustained governance, but through strategic disruption followed by negotiated inclusion (Joab-Peterside *et al.*, 2012; Ukiwo, 2011).

Over time, this cycle weakens the incentives for stable, rule-based conflict resolution. Peace becomes episodic and transactional, achieved not through structural reform but through temporary alignments of interest. In this environment, violence is not an aberration. A conflict system with mutable identities, transient alliances, and legitimacy contingent on access to power is created. This networked logic explains why actors who once demanded justice through insurgency now manage peace through contracts, and why those who implement state security programs often operate parallel systems of coercion. It also underscores the futility of interventions that target roles without addressing the relational structures in which those roles are embedded (Watts, 2004b; Obi, 2010; Castells, 2011).

Implications for Conflict and Peacebuilding

The implications of conflict networks, actors, and their interconnected, ever-changing roles have been tacitly addressed in preceding sections. However, given the entrenched nature of these dynamics in the Niger Delta, they warrant direct and focused attention. Understanding the networked character of conflict actors and the fluidity with which they operate offers critical insights into why conventional peacebuilding frameworks have delivered only limited results. It also reveals the deeper institutional and relational reforms necessary for sustainable peace.

First, peacebuilding interventions that target individuals or groups without addressing the broader systems of patronage and relational interdependence are unlikely to succeed. Many interventions assume that ex-militants, once demobilised, can be reintegrated as neutral actors within a reformed political economy. As the analysis has shown, many of these individuals remain embedded in networks that reward tactical violence and strategic realignment. The logic of the network is more than just the disposition of individual actors but the relationship that sustains it and must therefore be the target of reform (Castells, 2011; Watts, 2004b).

Second, the pervasive role fluidity among local actors undermines linear models of peacebuilding. Programs that assume clear boundaries between victims, perpetrators, mediators, and community representatives often misread the conflict landscape. In practice, these roles overlap. A youth leader may be a community defender today and an oil vandal tomorrow, depending on shifts in access to contracts or political protection. This complicates external efforts to identify “legitimate” stakeholders or credible peace partners. Without acknowledging the fluid identities shaped by informal power networks, interventions risk empowering the very actors who sustain conflict through alternative means (Ebiede & Nyiayaana, 2022; Nwajiaku-Dahou, 2012).

Third, the commodification of peace where relative peace is exchanged for contracts, surveillance deals, or political patronage and has created a peace-as-rent situation or logic. In this logic, conflict is not solved but managed for economic and political returns. Actors learn that the pathway to inclusion lies in disruption followed by negotiation, not in law-based engagement. This model does not incentivise genuine disarmament or reconciliation; it rewards strategic violence followed by elite co-optation (Watts & Ibaba, 2011; Nwokolo & Aghedo, 2018).

Fourth, community cohesion is routinely sacrificed to elite consensus. Peacebuilding efforts that partner with traditional rulers or local elites without ensuring broad-based community participation often deepen existing fault lines. CSR projects, conflict mediation teams, and stakeholder dialogues frequently replicate exclusionary patterns when benefits are captured by those with access to external actors. In places like Ogulagha, Egbema, and Southern Ijaw, this exclusion has triggered intra-community disputes that reignited wider conflicts (Idemudia & Osayande, 2018; Abiodun, 2023).

Fifth, and more broadly, the Niger Delta case highlights the limits of technocratic peacebuilding. While the provision of infrastructural projects, skill acquisition programs, and surveillance jobs are useful, they cannot substitute for political restructuring and distributive justice. Addressing environmental degradation, restoring trust in public institutions, and reforming how oil revenues are shared are not peripheral issues. They are central to transforming the conflict system from one based on violent brokerage to one governed by transparent institutions and legitimate authority (Obi, 2023; Adekola & Grainger, 2023; UNEP, 2017).

The evidence presented in this paper points to one central lesson: sustainable peace in the Niger Delta cannot be achieved by working around conflict networks. It must confront them. This means disrupting the relational incentives that make violence profitable, dismantling the patronage structures that reward exclusion, and designing interventions that reflect the dynamic, embedded nature of actors in this conflict ecosystem. Anything less will only reproduce the cycles of temporary calm and recurring instability that have characterised the region for decades (Joab-Peterside *et al.,* 2012; Omeje, 2017).

Conclusion

The discussion in this paper indicates that the conflict in the Niger Delta cannot be reduced to mere response to grievance or inequality, or to hostility between marginalised people and foreign forces. Rather, it is created and maintained through the intricate system of relations between MNOCs, governmental power, local elites, militants, and the actors of local communities. Such relationships are not predetermined. They change according to political incentives, economic opportunities and changes in power structure and result in a networked, fluid conflict system.

The core of this system is a patronage economy in which the control of oil rents, contracts, and development benefits is arbitrated by alliances of elites. The networks direct resources to a

small group of people, frequently by circumventing institutions and further dividing communities within and between. On the contrary, this distributional architecture encourages exclusion, breeds resentment and recreates instability. The article revealed the ways in which strategic alliances between MNOCs and local elites, supported by government collusiveness, generate the construction of profitable and polarising power structures.

More importantly, the discussion has identified the importance of fluidity of local actors, such as militants, youth leaders and political agents. These actors are not standing still. They alternate positions - agitator, protector, contractor, insurgent - not through ideological conversion, but depending on the opportunities in the conflict network. This repositioning puts violence into place in socially recognised and economically rewarding structures, blurring the line between peace and conflict, legality and coercion, development and dispossession.

The peacebuilding implications are far-reaching. Isolated interventions that concentrate on the individual actors or individual grievances will not have long-term effects in a system where relationships are the source of behaviour and where violence has become normalised as a form of negotiation. The relational architecture of conflict in the Niger Delta should be addressed through peacebuilding. It should break the patronage channels that reward exclusion, do not legitimise those players who make their livelihoods through strategic instability as well as come up with governance structures that are participatory, accountable and founded on distributive justice. Niger Delta sustainable peace cannot be designed using short-term appeasement or elite bargains. It should be constructed based on a new reconfiguration of the circulation of power, resources, and legitimacy in the region over the long term.

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