

The Presidential Amnesty Program: Subsisting Violence and Sustainable Peace in the Niger Delta

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Abstract

This study critically examines the PAP's effectiveness, arguing that while it initially reduced large-scale violence and restored oil output, it ultimately evolved into a mechanism of elite patronage and rentier appeasement rather than a transformative peacebuilding initiative. Drawing on the greed versus grievance thesis and political settlements theory, the paper finds that the PAP's transactional approach—characterized by stipends, contracts, and political appointments for ex-militant leaders—failed to address the structural drivers of conflict such as political exclusion, unemployment, and environmental injustice. Instead, the programme entrenched a fragile peace dependent on continuous financial inducements, incentivizing ex-militants and political actors to strategically threaten renewed violence whenever the programme's termination was proposed. The analysis concludes that the PAP's containment strategy has institutionalized a cycle of dependency and performative peace, undermining prospects for genuine reconciliation and sustainable development in the region. The implications are significant for policymakers and peacebuilding practitioners: without addressing the underlying causes of discontent and shifting from rent-based appeasement to inclusive, structural reform, amnesty interventions risk perpetuating rather than resolving the dynamics of subsisting violence in resource-rich, conflict-prone societies.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Presidential Amnesty Programme, Violence, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has long been characterised by a complex matrix of underdevelopment, environmental degradation, and resource-based conflict. Rich in petroleum resources yet mired in poverty and ecological devastation, the region has witnessed several waves of militancy, particularly from the late 1990s into the 2000s (Onoyemeakpo, 2023). Armed groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) emerged in response to what they perceived as systemic exploitation, environmental injustice, and the political marginalisation of local communities. Their campaign of sabotage against oil infrastructure, kidnapping of oil workers, and confrontation with the Nigerian military escalated tensions in the region and disrupted national oil production (Kalu & Okonkwo, 2022). In a bid to restore relative calm and protect economic interests, the Federal Government of Nigeria launched the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) in 2009. The initiative promised unconditional amnesty to militants who agreed to disarm, coupled with demobilisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration into society through training, education, and monthly stipends (Ebo & George, 2022; Ebimiebo, Aminu & Adegoke, 2024).

Initially hailed as a pragmatic intervention, the PAP was successful in reducing large-scale attacks on oil installations and lowering the tempo of armed militancy. However, it soon became apparent that the programme functioned more as a containment strategy than a transformative peacebuilding mechanism (Ebimiebo et. al., 2024). Although some beneficiaries acquired vocational training and academic qualifications, the structural causes of discontent—political exclusion, unemployment, lack of infrastructure, and environmental pollution—remained largely unaddressed (Attah, 2025). As the years progressed, the programme evolved into a fragile system of patronage, susceptible to corruption, elite capture, and internal mismanagement. Instead of phasing out as planned, its terminal date has been repeatedly postponed due to rising insecurity or threats of renewed violence each time the government announces an intention to conclude it (Ebo & George, 2022).

This paper engages with the paradox at the heart of the PAP's prolonged existence: every attempt to wind it down is met with threats of violence, often from the same actors who were previously demobilised or their proxies. These threats are not idle; they frequently coincide with resurgences of oil theft, sabotage, or inflammatory public statements by ex-militants and political stakeholders (Attah, 2025; Ebimiebo et. al., 2024). Such dynamics expose a critical weakness in the architecture of the programme—it has created a dependency loop, where peace is maintained not through justice or development but through rentier appeasement. The cycle of threatening instability to extract continued benefits has become a recurring feature of the region's post-amnesty reality (Ebimiebo et. al., 2024; Omoshola, Ismail & Zakuan, 2021). In this context, peace is no longer conceptualised as the absence of violence but rather as a transactional outcome contingent upon continuous governmental concessions.

The central objective of this paper is to critically assess the limitations of the Presidential Amnesty Programme in delivering sustainable peace in the Niger Delta. It seeks to explore the underlying reasons why the region continues to experience subsisting violence despite more than a decade of amnesty interventions. Furthermore, the paper investigates how threats of violence are strategically deployed by ex-militants and complicit political actors to prolong the life of the programme. It questions the assumption that the mere cessation of overt violence equates to peace and interrogates the extent to which the Nigerian state has mistaken temporary stability for long-term resolution. Accordingly, the following research questions guide the analysis:

- i. Why has the Presidential Amnesty Programme failed to engender sustainable peace in the Niger Delta?
- ii. How have ex-militants and political actors instrumentalised the threat of renewed violence to influence the continuation of the PAP?

These questions are pertinent because they not only reveal the inadequacies of the programme itself but also illuminate the broader governance challenges and political economy of peacebuilding in Nigeria. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to policy discourse on post-conflict interventions in resource-rich but conflict-prone regions. It moves beyond the surface narrative of “peace through amnesty” to uncover the latent dynamics that continue to frustrate genuine reconciliation and development in the Niger Delta. The findings are relevant for policymakers, peacebuilding practitioners, and scholars interested in the intersection of conflict resolution, political settlements, and sustainable development. It also provides a critical lens for evaluating how state responses to insurgency can unintentionally incentivise future threats if not anchored in structural reform and community engagement. Importantly, the paper positions the Niger Delta as a case study with broader implications for understanding how rent-based peace mechanisms can entrench rather than dismantle cycles of violence.

Following this introduction, the paper proceeds to provide relevant theories including the greed versus grievance thesis and political settlements theory, an overview of the PAP, detailing its objectives, implementation strategies, and recorded successes, and an analysis of recurrent threats accompanying any effort to terminate the programme. Subsequent sections include an examination of the persistence of insecurity despite the programme existence, a critique of PAP as a symptomatic treatment rather than a substantive solution, proposed roadmap for sustainable peace that transcends stipend-based appeasement, and a conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

To illuminate the limitations of the PAP and the recurrent threats of violence that accompany its proposed termination, the greed versus grievance theory provides a useful analytical lens. Popularised by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, this theory posits that actors engage in violent conflict either due to grievances—such as political marginalisation, inequality, or historical injustice—or because of greed, where the motivation is the economic benefit derived from conflict, including access to natural resources and opportunities for rent-seeking (Atsriku & Darkwa, 2022). While early literature often attempted to categorise conflicts as either greed- or grievance-driven, later scholarship recognised the overlapping nature of these motivations (Sanchez Hidalgo, 2020). In the Niger Delta, grievance narratives are compelling—years of environmental devastation, poverty amid oil wealth, and political exclusion have fuelled popular discontent (Popesou, 2024). However, the operationalisation of violence and the strategic behaviour of ex-militants and elites reveal a strong element of greed (Popesou, 2024). Militancy, in this context, has evolved into an avenue for accessing rents, political appointments, and contracts. The threat of renewed violence whenever the PAP is threatened with closure underscores the instrumentalisation of insecurity for economic gain. Actors exploit the fear of instability to extract continued patronage from the state, transforming what began as a grievance-based movement into a rent-seeking enterprise (Georgewill, 2021).

This convergence of greed and grievance is best understood within the broader framework of political settlements theory, which shifts the focus from normative peacebuilding to the actual configuration of power and interests that underpin state stability (Dodge, 2021; Kelsall, Schulz, Ferguson, Vom Hau, Hickey & Levy, 2022). Political settlements are defined as the informal and formal agreements among elites that determine how power and resources are distributed. They are shaped by bargaining processes and are inherently dynamic and contingent (Kelsall et. al., 2022). From this perspective, the PAP can be seen not as a peacebuilding initiative in the traditional sense but as a political settlement—a negotiated truce between the federal government and militant elites in which violence is exchanged for rents, appointments, and inclusion in the spoils of state power (Popesou, 2024). The recurring threats of violence are part of the renegotiation of that settlement, particularly as newer actors seek inclusion or as previously integrated actors feel threatened by the programme's proposed termination (Magill, 2023).

Political settlements theory further explains why structural transformation is often absent in post-conflict settings like the Niger Delta. When peace is maintained through elite bargaining rather than institutional reform, the result is stability without justice. The interests of powerful actors are prioritised over those of ordinary citizens, and state institutions are reconfigured to serve the distribution of rents rather than the provision of public goods (Kelsall et. al., 2022). This creates a peace that is exclusionary and fragile, easily disrupted when expectations are unmet or when elite coalitions shift. The PAP exemplifies this pattern. Its benefits are disproportionately captured by former militant commanders and their networks, while many in the region remain excluded and

disillusioned (Dodge, 2021). As a result, peace is not consolidated from the grassroots but managed from above, making it vulnerable to disruption and manipulation.

Combining the insights of greed versus grievance theory and political settlements theory reveals the limitations of treating peace as a technical problem of disarmament and reintegration, rather than a political and structural challenge. The PAP, while effective in the short term, has entrenched a model of peace that is transactional, elite-focused, and dependent on continuous financial inducements. Its failure to address the foundational causes of violence—inequity, environmental degradation, governance failure—renders it insufficient as a long-term solution. Moreover, by institutionalising a rentier approach to peace, the programme has created perverse incentives for the reproduction of conflict threats. The theoretical frameworks adopted here enable a deeper understanding of the PAP not merely as a flawed policy but as a reflection of the Nigerian state's broader crisis of governance and conflict management.

The Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP): From Disarmament to Dependence

The Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP), launched in 2009, was framed within the global model of Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR), a conflict resolution framework that has gained currency in post-conflict peacebuilding contexts. The DDR framework rests on the assumption that violent actors, once disarmed and reintegrated into society with viable economic alternatives, would relinquish arms and embrace peaceful livelihoods (Magill, 2023; Kayode & Kayode, 2023). In its original conception, the PAP adopted this logic to address the spiralling militancy in the Niger Delta by offering a pathway for ex-combatants to exit violence in exchange for material incentives and state-sponsored rehabilitation. The programme sought to disarm and demobilise thousands of militants, provide them with vocational training and education, and facilitate their reintegration into civilian life (Kayode & Kayode, 2023).

The early implementation phases of the PAP yielded measurable successes, particularly in reducing the frequency of violent attacks on oil infrastructure. Between 2009 and 2011, the disarmament of over 30,000 ex-militants significantly curtailed pipeline bombings, oil bunkering, and hostage-taking, leading to a notable resurgence in crude oil output and federal revenues (Magill, 2023). The government interpreted this outcome as validation of the programme's efficacy, and the international community hailed it as a pragmatic approach to managing insurgency in resource-rich, conflict-prone regions. Several beneficiaries were sent abroad for vocational and university training, while others were absorbed into private and public sector roles. On the surface, the PAP appeared to transform former combatants into productive citizens and to offer a non-violent resolution to what had become a protracted crisis (Okocha, Attah, Emmanuel & Nwanze, 2024).

However, beneath the initial achievements lay a more complex reality—one in which the programme shifted away from reintegration and peacebuilding towards the creation of a parallel economy that entrenched dependence and distorted local power relations (Magill, 2023). As the PAP evolved, it became increasingly less about comprehensive reintegration and more about the strategic management of violence through rentier arrangements. Monthly stipends and contract awards to former militant leaders substituted for genuine economic empowerment or institutional reform. The provision of benefits became a form of pacification, aimed less at transforming the conditions that produced conflict and more at containing its most disruptive elements (Magill, 2023; Kayode & Kayode, 2023; Okocha et. al., 2024).

This approach birthed a new elite class of ex-militant leaders who consolidated their power through access to amnesty largesse and proximity to political officeholders. These actors, having

demonstrated their capacity for violence, were now repurposed as intermediaries between the state and their communities, effectively monopolising the flow of benefits from the PAP (Ebimiebo et. al., 2024). The demobilised, far from being fully reintegrated into the civilian economy, remained tethered to the state through a regime of conditional patronage. Rather than fostering autonomy and social reintegration, the PAP reconfigured clientelism in the region by institutionalising the selective distribution of state resources as a reward for past militancy (Kayode & Kayode, 2023). Over time, the boundaries between peacebuilding and containment became increasingly blurred. What emerged was a ‘peace economy’ sustained not by inclusive development or equitable resource governance, but by the strategic co-option of those deemed capable of disrupting oil production. The logic underpinning this arrangement was transactional: as long as ex-militants remained peaceful, they would continue to receive stipends and political protection. This dynamic encouraged a performative commitment to peace, while simultaneously cultivating the latent threat of violence should benefits be withdrawn (Brown & Ogele, 2025). In effect, the amnesty programme became a mechanism of rent transfer rather than a sustainable peacebuilding intervention.

Moreover, the PAP did little to alter the structural and institutional deficits that originally fuelled the insurgency. Environmental degradation, youth unemployment, infrastructural decay, and exclusion from decision-making persisted across much of the Niger Delta (Ebimiebo et. al., 2024). The narrow focus on ex-militants overlooked the broader community grievances and thereby sowed seeds of resentment among those who did not benefit from the amnesty package. In many cases, the privileging of violent actors sent a perverse message that only disruption attracted government attention and resources (Brown & Ogele, 2025). This further entrenched the instrumentalisation of violence as a rational strategy for political and economic gain.

The extension of the PAP’s timeline beyond its original 2015 terminal date underscores its entrenchment as a political and economic fixture rather than a temporary peace building measure. Each announcement of the programme’s potential winding down has triggered threats of renewed violence, often articulated by former militants or their proxies (Magill, 2023; Kayode & Kayode, 2023). These threats are not idle; they reflect the transactional nature of the relationship between the state and armed actors. The government’s repeated capitulations—through extensions, restructuring, or expanded funding—signal an implicit acknowledgement that peace in the Niger Delta is not underpinned by justice or institutional reform but by negotiated appeasement (Brown & Ogele, 2025).

Thus, the PAP has evolved into a form of crisis management that rewards violence while failing to address its root causes. It has institutionalised a dependence that stifles self-reliance, reinforces patronage networks, and sidelines structural development. The absence of robust exit strategies or complementary reforms in environmental governance, inclusive policymaking, and community empowerment means that the programme continues to function as a mechanism of containment rather than a foundation for sustainable peace. Far from ending the cycle of violence, the PAP has embedded it into the fabric of political negotiation in the Niger Delta, ensuring that the threat of disruption remains a constant feature of the region’s relationship with the state.

Recurrent Threats of Violence: The Politics of PAP Termination

The Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) was conceived as a time-bound intervention aimed at addressing the immediate threat of violence posed by militants in the Niger Delta. It was not intended to be a permanent fixture in Nigeria’s national budgetary framework. However, despite its original terminal date of 2015, the programme has continued to operate, with successive

extensions justified on the grounds of maintaining stability in the region. The persistent deferment of PAP's termination is not merely a function of bureaucratic inertia or administrative indecision but a reflection of a deeper political dynamic in which the threat of renewed violence is used as leverage by various actors to sustain the flow of state resources (Eze, 2021).

From its inception, the PAP was supposed to run for five years, culminating in 2015. By that time, it was expected that the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of ex-militants would have been completed, allowing for a phased withdrawal of the programme. However, the federal government, faced with growing anxieties about renewed restiveness, extended the programme (Ebimiebo et. al., 2024). Subsequent efforts to terminate or reduce the scale of the PAP in 2018 and again in 2020 were met with immediate backlash from ex-militant leaders and influential political actors from the Niger Delta (Ikelegbe & Umukoro, 2016; Magill, 2023). These planned terminations triggered waves of open threats, public warnings, and in some cases, limited acts of sabotage or mobilisation, forcing the government to reverse its decisions (Kayode & Kayode, 2023).

Each of these episodes reveals a recurring pattern. Whenever the federal government signals an intention to terminate or downscale the PAP, ex-militant leaders publicly threaten to resume hostilities if their monthly stipends or associated privileges are withdrawn (Okocha et. al., 2024; Magill, 2023). In 2018, for instance, when the Buhari administration proposed winding down the programme in line with its anti-corruption and fiscal consolidation agenda, prominent militant figures such as Government Ekpemupolo (Tompolo) issued veiled warnings. Others, including the leadership of the Niger Delta Avengers, threatened to “cripple oil production” if the programme was not sustained (Magill, 2023; Eze, 2021). These statements were often reinforced by coordinated actions such as the issuing of communiqués, mobilisation of local youth groups, and the staging of protests in oil-producing communities (Eze, 2021).

In 2020, the federal government again floated the idea of ending the PAP. The ensuing reaction was swift and organised. Ex-militants and political elites from the Niger Delta, including members of the Pan Niger Delta Forum (PANDEF), mounted a vigorous campaign against the proposal (Ebo & George, 2022). They warned that the region was on the brink of another wave of armed agitation, citing the unresolved grievances of marginalisation, environmental degradation, and underdevelopment. The leadership of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) went as far as accusing the government of attempting to destabilise the region and reignite conflict (Eze, 2021). Under this pressure, the government not only retracted its termination plans but appointed a new Interim Administrator and increased budgetary allocations to the programme, citing the need for “consolidation and final reintegration” (Attah, 2025).

These reversals demonstrate how the threat of violence has become a potent tool of negotiation. Ex-militants, now organised into groups with defined leadership structures and access to media platforms, have developed the capacity to influence federal decision-making. Their leverage lies not just in their past actions but in the persistent volatility of the Niger Delta's political economy, where oil production remains vulnerable to sabotage (Eze, 2021). By invoking the spectre of renewed attacks on oil infrastructure—a tactic with a proven record of forcing state response—these actors are able to extract concessions without actual recourse to violence. The state, faced with the high economic cost of disrupted oil flows and global investor jitters, often capitulates (Eze, 2021; Attah, 2025).

The political elites of the region have also played a significant role in these dynamics. Governors, federal legislators, and traditional rulers from the Niger Delta frequently align themselves with ex-militants when the continuation of the PAP is threatened (Ebimiebo et. al., 2024; Omoshola et. al.,

2021). Their advocacy is couched in the language of peace and stability, yet it often coincides with vested interests in the maintenance of amnesty-linked contracts, security roles, and development projects (Omoshola et. al., 2021). For instance, during the 2020 debates around PAP's closure, several governors and National Assembly members from the region lobbied the presidency and publicly called for the institutionalisation of the programme as a permanent agency. These interventions underscore the extent to which the PAP has become embedded in regional power relations and patronage networks (Eze, 2021).

This form of strategic blackmail has profound implications for peacebuilding and the credibility of state institutions. It transforms the amnesty programme from a peace mechanism into a contested political resource, subject to the ebbs and flows of elite bargaining. The recurrent threats of violence are not idle expressions of dissatisfaction; they are calculated moves within a broader political economy of conflict management, where the capacity for disruption is commodified and traded for continued patronage. As such, violence is never truly removed from the equation—it is merely suspended under certain terms, ready to be reactivated if those terms are violated or renegotiated unfavourably (Omoshola et. al., 2021).

The federal government's response to these threats has largely been reactive and securitised. Rather than engaging in a broader restructuring of the PAP towards sustainable development, or integrating it into national development frameworks, the state has often opted for stopgap measures. These include the appointment of new coordinators, marginal increases in budgetary allocations, and ad hoc disbursement of benefits to ex-militants. In some cases, security deployments to sensitive oil installations have been increased, and military patrols in the creeks intensified (Eze, 2021). These measures, however, do not address the fundamental issues of economic exclusion, youth unemployment, and community-level grievances that persist across the region. Instead, they reinforce a cycle of fear, co-optation, and dependency (Ebimiebo et. al., 2024).

Notably, the 2022 budget of the PAP amounted to over ₦65 billion, a significant portion of which went towards stipends and operational costs. This recurrent expenditure reflects the state's reliance on fiscal appeasement rather than structural transformation (Kayode & Kayode, 2023; Magill, 2023). Despite these allocations, complaints of unpaid stipends, ghost beneficiaries, and mismanagement abound. In 2021, the interim administrator, Colonel Milland Dixon Dikio (rtd), openly acknowledged that the programme was riddled with inefficiencies and in urgent need of reform. Yet, such reforms have remained largely rhetorical due to the political risks associated with antagonising powerful ex-militant constituencies (Magill, 2023).

The threat of violence, therefore, persists not only as a tactic of ex-combatants but as a reflection of the government's unwillingness or inability to undertake the hard work of peacebuilding. Without a credible exit strategy, institutional oversight, and inclusive economic development, the PAP continues to operate in a liminal space—neither fully integrated into national policy nor sufficiently insulated from elite manipulation. Its fate remains tied to a fragile balance of interests, in which peace is sustained not through justice or reconciliation but through the strategic management of risk.

Subsisting Violence and the Fragile Peace Narrative

The Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) has often been lauded for bringing a measure of calm to the Niger Delta since its inception in 2009. Yet, the narrative of peace it upholds remains deeply fragile. Beneath the surface of relative stability lies a persistent undercurrent of violence, insecurity, and systemic grievances (Magill, 2023; Okocha et. al., 2024). Far from extinguishing

the embers of conflict, the PAP has merely masked ongoing structural crises and deferred confrontations that continue to manifest in various forms across the oil-producing region. This reality challenges the dominant discourse that portrays the Niger Delta as pacified, revealing instead a region still grappling with endemic violence and unresolved tensions (Nwokolo & Aghedo, 2018).

One of the most visible indicators of subsisting violence in the Niger Delta is the continued prevalence of pipeline vandalism and oil theft. According to the Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI), Nigeria lost over 619.7 million barrels of crude oil worth \$46.16 billion between 2009 and 2020 due to theft and sabotage (Magill, 2023). These losses, far from declining in the aftermath of the PAP, have persisted as criminal cartels, disillusioned ex-militants, and politically protected actors have entrenched themselves within the informal oil economy. The theft of oil, often referred to locally as "bunkering," remains a lucrative enterprise that thrives on state neglect, security complicity, and the absence of viable economic alternatives. Despite the billions of naira spent on the PAP, the region continues to experience frequent disruptions to oil production, raising critical questions about the efficacy of the programme in addressing the economic roots of violence (Adiatu, 2024; Nwachukwu, 2017).

Compounding this situation is the emergence of new militant groups that were not part of the original amnesty framework. Groups such as the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), which came to prominence in 2016, have demonstrated the capacity to cripple oil production, as seen in the coordinated attacks that year which reduced Nigeria's output by over 700,000 barrels per day (Eze, 2021; Nwokolo & Aghedo, 2018). Similarly, factions like the Reformed Niger Delta Avengers (RNDA), the Niger Delta Greenland Justice Mandate, and other lesser-known cells have periodically issued threats or carried out attacks to assert relevance or press for inclusion in the rent-distribution mechanisms linked to the PAP (Okocha et. al., 2024). These groups represent a generational shift and a spatial expansion of discontent, often drawing support from marginalised communities and youths who feel excluded from the benefits of the amnesty programme. Their emergence underscores the limitations of a peace model that prioritised transactional engagement with an initial cohort of agitators without establishing a sustainable, region-wide strategy for inclusion and development (Magill, 2023).

The internal dynamics among the beneficiaries of the PAP have also proven to be a source of friction and instability. Reports of factional disputes, leadership struggles, and allegations of unequal access to training opportunities and stipends are commonplace (Eze, 2021). In many cases, ex-agitators who command larger followings or enjoy closer ties with political patrons receive preferential treatment, creating resentment among their peers. The absence of a clear grievance mechanism within the PAP has only exacerbated these tensions, occasionally leading to protests, road blockades, and threats of renewed violence by disgruntled beneficiaries (Magill, 2023). Furthermore, the growing population of educated but unemployed youths in the region—many of whom did not bear arms during the peak of militancy—view the PAP as a reward system for violence, thereby fueling frustration and social fragmentation (Magill, 2023; Yavala & Abdullahi, 2021).

The militarised posture of the Nigerian state in the Niger Delta adds another layer of complexity to the fragile peace. Despite the supposed success of the amnesty initiative, the region remains heavily securitised, with Joint Task Forces (JTF) and other special military units maintaining a strong presence. These forces are tasked with protecting oil infrastructure and curbing criminal activities but have often been accused of extrajudicial killings, harassment, and other human rights abuses (Okocha et. al., 2024; Magill, 2023). Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have

documented numerous incidents in which military operations in communities suspected of harbouring militants or oil thieves resulted in civilian casualties, forced evictions, and the destruction of property (Eze, 2021). Such actions not only violate basic human rights but also deepen the mistrust between local populations and the state, undermining the legitimacy of peacebuilding efforts.

The PAP's inability to address the structural and institutional drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta lies at the heart of the continued unrest. At its core, the crisis in the region is rooted in decades of environmental degradation, poverty, unemployment, and political exclusion (Eze, 2021). The extraction of oil has caused widespread ecological damage, destroying farmlands, rivers, and fishing grounds that traditionally sustained local livelihoods. Yet, remediation efforts have been minimal, and the benefits of oil wealth have largely bypassed the communities from which it is derived. Instead of initiating a comprehensive development agenda anchored in justice, infrastructure, and local empowerment, the PAP has functioned largely as a pacification mechanism—dispensing stipends and training in a context where broader economic opportunities remain scarce (Magill, 2023; Brown & Ogele, 2025).

Additionally, the programme has failed to institute lasting institutional reforms or promote the kind of governance transformation required for sustainable peace. There has been little investment in building inclusive political institutions, strengthening local governance, or enhancing community participation in decision-making processes (Ejiez, Osai & Egobueze, 2020). Rather than catalysing systemic change, the PAP has entrenched a culture of dependency and elite capture, whereby access to benefits is mediated through informal networks and political patronage (Magill, 2023). This has further alienated non-militant youth and civil society actors, many of whom see the programme as a closed system benefiting a privileged few (Eze, 2021).

Moreover, there are significant gendered dimensions to the fragility of peace in the Niger Delta that the PAP has largely ignored. Women, who have borne the brunt of both environmental degradation and militarised violence, were marginalised in the design and implementation of the programme (Ikelegbe & Umokoro, 2016). Their exclusion from reintegration processes and economic empowerment initiatives has limited the scope of post-conflict recovery and hindered the creation of inclusive, community-driven peacebuilding frameworks. In many oil-producing communities, women remain at the forefront of local resistance against environmental injustice, yet they receive little recognition or support from formal peace mechanisms (Okonofua, 2016).

In totality, the continuing violence in the Niger Delta—whether in the form of sabotage, inter-communal conflict, criminality, or state repression—reveals the inadequacy of a peace model focused on the containment of threats rather than their resolution. The fragile stability sustained by the PAP is, therefore, more illusory than real. It reflects a precarious balancing act where peace is upheld through financial inducements, securitised interventions, and elite negotiation, while the root causes of conflict remain unaddressed. The region's volatility persists, waiting to resurface with greater intensity should the fragile consensus underpinning the PAP unravel. Without a paradigm shift towards holistic, rights-based development, and inclusive governance, the spectre of violence will continue to haunt the Niger Delta, undermining national security and sustainable development.

PAP as a Symptom, not a Solution: Rethinking Sustainable Peace

The Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) has been portrayed by the Nigerian government as a pivotal mechanism for restoring peace to the Niger Delta. However, despite its successes in

reducing violent conflict and providing temporary relief to ex-militants, the programme has failed to deliver sustainable peace or address the structural causes of violence in the region. The PAP, in its current form, is symptomatic of a broader failure in Nigerian peacebuilding efforts—a strategy of short-term appeasement that lacks the transformative power required to resolve deep-rooted socio-political issues. The provision of stipends, while offering temporary economic respite to ex-militants, cannot substitute for the justice, equity, and institutional reform necessary to create lasting peace in the Niger Delta.

One of the primary criticisms of the PAP is that it has failed to address the socio-economic vacuum that underpins much of the conflict in the region (Eze, 2021). While the programme has provided stipends, vocational training, and education to former militants, these interventions are largely superficial and do not engage with the deeper structural issues of poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation that fuel unrest. The Niger Delta remains one of Nigeria's most impoverished regions, with a largely youth population that is still excluded from meaningful economic opportunities (Ikelegbe & Umokoro, 2016; Dudu & Odalonu, 2016). According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2024), youth unemployment in the region remains significantly high, and the absence of an integrated development strategy means that many ex-militants, after their reintegration into society, find themselves with few prospects beyond returning to their militant past. The PAP's reliance on financial handouts creates a cycle of dependency rather than fostering real economic empowerment or sustainability.

This failure to tackle underlying economic and social problems has led to the political manipulation of the PAP, turning it into a tool for patronage rather than genuine peacebuilding (Yavala & Abdullahi, 2021). Political elites in the region have used the programme to secure political power, influence, and resources, further entrenching the patronage networks that have perpetuated the conflict. The distribution of PAP benefits has often been subject to political interference, with ex-militants and their leaders being co-opted into political support systems, while critical development needs in the region are neglected (Eze, 2021). This political manipulation undermines the programme's credibility and raises questions about the long-term viability of a peace process that is so heavily reliant on political manipulation. For instance, when announcements are made about the possible termination of the programme, they are met with coordinated threats of violence from militant groups and political elites who see the continuation of the programme as essential to maintaining their power and access to resources. These dynamics illustrate how the PAP has become less about peacebuilding and more about resource control and electoral advantage.

The PAP's approach, which essentially treats peace as a form of rent, has further exacerbated the situation by entrenching a culture of "peace-as-rent." In this model, peace is seen as a commodity to be negotiated, with violence being used as a tool to extract rents from the government. Ex-militants and local elites who benefit from the programme have little incentive to allow for long-term peace when their access to financial rewards is tied to the continuation of instability (Ebimiebo et. al., 2024). This dynamic creates a dangerous precedent, where peace is no longer a shared goal but a mechanism through which certain groups leverage power and influence. The notion of peace as a rent-seeking enterprise creates a vicious cycle in which threats of violence are used to negotiate for continued payments, rather than addressing the root causes of violence or achieving a broader, more inclusive form of peace.

Moreover, the entrenchment of a "peace-as-rent" culture discourages the necessary transformation that is crucial for the region's development. Sustainable peace in the Niger Delta requires more

than just the cessation of violence; it demands structural reforms that address the region's historical grievances (Eze, 2021). These include the restoration of environmental justice, a restructured governance system that is more responsive to the needs of local communities, and the creation of an economy that can offer opportunities to all residents, including ex-militants (Eze, 2021; Popesou, 2024). The reliance on the PAP and its associated rent-based peace model has diverted attention away from these transformative changes. The result is that, despite the cessation of some forms of overt violence, the deeper issues of injustice, corruption, and underdevelopment persist, rendering the peace achieved through the PAP inherently fragile and unsustainable.

The political manipulation of the PAP has also extended beyond the region, becoming a tool of national politics. In an election year, for instance, the amnesty programme is often used as a political bargaining chip, with politicians offering extensions to the programme or increasing payments to gain the support of key constituencies in the Niger Delta (Eze, 2021). This underscores how the PAP has been instrumentalised for electoral gain rather than for the genuine peace and development of the region. This politicisation of the peace process diminishes its credibility and risks perpetuating the cycle of violence and conflict. It also fuels cynicism among local communities, who view the programme not as a step toward justice, but as a temporary political expedient.

The failure to restructure the Niger Delta's political economy, in line with the demands for justice and equity, is perhaps the most significant shortcoming of the PAP (Eze, 2021). The programme has been a convenient tool for managing the symptoms of violence without addressing its structural causes. The Niger Delta's political economy has been shaped by the control and exploitation of oil resources, with the wealth generated from oil extraction benefiting a narrow elite while leaving local communities impoverished. The PAP, by offering stipends and vocational training to a select group of ex-militants, has done little to challenge the underlying power dynamics that have perpetuated resource extraction and environmental destruction (Magill, 2023; Kayode & Kayode, 2023). The continuing alienation of local communities from the benefits of oil wealth ensures that violence remains a viable option for those who feel excluded from the region's economic opportunities.

Charting a Path to Sustainable Peace in the Niger Delta

The path to sustainable peace in the Niger Delta requires a carefully considered, phased exit strategy from the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP), one that is linked directly to measurable community development outcomes. A firm but gradual exit strategy is necessary to ensure that the gains made under the programme are not lost, and that communities in the Niger Delta are prepared for life beyond the stipends and benefits currently provided by the PAP. The termination of the programme must be conditional on clear, community-driven development metrics, such as improvements in education, employment, and infrastructure. These metrics should be co-designed with local stakeholders to ensure that they address the specific needs of communities. This approach will ensure that the process is not abrupt, and that there is adequate support for vulnerable groups, particularly ex-militants, to transition to productive, sustainable livelihoods. By making the exit contingent on developmental progress, it also ensures that local communities feel ownership over the peace process, which is essential for long-term stability.

To ensure the sustainability of peace, regional development must be driven by local participation, transparency, and accountability. The history of marginalisation in the Niger Delta has been exacerbated by a top-down approach to governance and development, where decisions about the

region's future have been made without adequate input from the local population. A new development model must prioritise local participation, ensuring that communities have a say in how resources are allocated and development projects are implemented. Transparency and accountability in the management of funds, as well as in the execution of projects, are key to preventing the continuation of corruption and mismanagement that have plagued previous interventions. Regional development should focus on long-term, sustainable solutions rather than temporary fixes, and should be guided by the principles of fairness and equity. This approach will empower local communities, give them a stake in their own development, and build trust between the government and the people.

A central aspect of the long-term peace strategy for the Niger Delta must be an extensive environmental clean-up, combined with a concerted effort towards inclusive economic diversification. The environmental degradation caused by oil extraction has been one of the main drivers of conflict in the region, and addressing this issue is crucial to any effort to build lasting peace. The Nigerian government, along with international partners, must invest in large-scale environmental remediation efforts, particularly in areas affected by oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation. The clean-up process should involve local communities in both the planning and execution stages, to ensure that the people who have suffered most from environmental degradation are the ones who benefit most from its restoration. In parallel, the region must be supported in diversifying its economy away from oil dependency. This could involve the development of sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and renewable energy, all of which have significant potential in the Niger Delta. By creating new economic opportunities, the region can begin to shift away from a reliance on oil revenues, reducing the incentive for violent competition over these resources.

Equally important is reinvestment in education, youth empowerment, and civic engagement. The Niger Delta's youth, particularly those who have been involved in militancy, require access to quality education, vocational training, and entrepreneurship opportunities to reintegrate into society and become active participants in the region's economic and social life. Education is a long-term solution to poverty and unemployment, two of the most significant drivers of violence in the Niger Delta. Programs that focus on skills development, entrepreneurship, and technical education will provide youth with the tools they need to contribute to the region's growth in a peaceful manner. In addition, civic engagement initiatives should be introduced to strengthen democratic processes and encourage the active participation of citizens in governance. Local communities must be encouraged to take part in decision-making processes and to hold their leaders accountable. These initiatives will help build a culture of peace, civic responsibility, and social cohesion, fostering a sense of shared ownership in the region's future.

Reforming state institutions such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs is crucial for ensuring that development efforts in the region are effective, transparent, and sustainable. The NDDC, in particular, has faced significant challenges in fulfilling its mandate, with corruption and mismanagement of funds undermining its potential to drive positive change in the region. The government must undertake comprehensive reforms to make these institutions more accountable and responsive to the needs of the people they are meant to serve. This includes strengthening oversight mechanisms, ensuring greater transparency in the allocation and use of funds, and improving coordination between the federal, state, and local governments. By reforming these institutions, the Nigerian government can ensure that the Niger

Delta receives the resources and attention it needs to thrive, and that development is not held back by bureaucratic inefficiencies or corruption.

Finally, the long-term vision for the Niger Delta must shift from containment to transformation. The PAP, while successful in some respects, has been largely a programme of containment—aimed at pacifying militant groups and preventing further violence. It has not addressed the deeper structural issues of the region, nor has it provided a pathway to lasting peace. To build sustainable peace in the Niger Delta, there must be a fundamental shift in approach. The focus should be on transformative development that addresses the region's historical grievances, promotes social and economic justice, and creates an inclusive political system that involves all stakeholders. The government must work with local communities, civil society organisations, and private sector actors to implement long-term solutions that promote economic development, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion. The transformation of the Niger Delta will require a commitment to structural change, not only in terms of policy and development but also in the mindset of both the Nigerian government and the people of the Niger Delta. By working together, and with a long-term vision for peace, the region can overcome its history of violence and marginalisation and build a future of stability, justice, and prosperity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) has undeniably played a significant role in stabilising the Niger Delta to some extent, providing a temporary reprieve from the violence that has plagued the region for decades. However, while the programme has helped curb some of the immediate violent activities, such as pipeline bombings and oil theft, it has failed to resolve the deeper, structural issues driving the conflict. The reliance on stipends and other forms of compensation has only addressed the symptoms of the crisis, not the root causes. The ongoing cycle of violence, particularly in response to attempts to wind down the programme, reveals the fragile and manipulated nature of the peace that has been established. Far from being a sustainable solution, the PAP has been weaponised by various political actors and ex-militants to secure continued benefits, showing that peace in the region is far from guaranteed.

The recurrent threats of violence in response to any plan to end the PAP highlight a broader issue: the lack of a comprehensive peace strategy that addresses the underlying socio-economic, political, and environmental challenges in the Niger Delta. The programme's continuation is often framed as essential for maintaining peace, but these threats expose the fragility of the situation and the extent to which peace has been manufactured through financial incentives rather than through lasting transformation. The region remains in a precarious state, where the threat of renewed violence can be used as leverage for political and economic gain. This creates a dangerous precedent, where peace is sustained not through genuine reconciliation or structural reform, but through the perpetuation of a rent-seeking, patronage-based system.

Ending the PAP must therefore be part of a much broader reconfiguration of the political and developmental landscape in the Niger Delta. The transition away from the programme needs to be carefully managed, tied to measurable, community-driven development progress. More importantly, it should coincide with a comprehensive strategy that addresses the systemic neglect and environmental degradation that have fuelled conflict in the region. A responsible exit strategy cannot be disconnected from these broader political and economic reforms. A failure to address the root causes of the crisis will only ensure that the same dynamics of violence and manipulation continue to shape the region's future, even after the programme formally concludes.

Finally, sustainable peace in the Niger Delta demands far more than the containment mechanisms offered by the PAP. True peace will only be achieved when the structural and institutional factors that perpetuate inequality, environmental degradation, and political marginalisation are confronted. This will require an inclusive, long-term development vision that prioritises education, economic diversification, environmental remediation, and good governance. Only through such transformative changes—backed by political will and community involvement—can the Niger Delta move beyond its violent past and embrace a future of stability, justice, and prosperity for all its people.

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