

Colonial Interference and Sustainable Development in Bonny Local Government Area, Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Colonial interference has historically shaped development trajectories across Africa, often leaving behind economic, political, and socio-cultural structures that continue to influence present-day sustainability. This paper empirically examined the lingering effects of colonial interference on sustainable development in Bonny Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria, assessing how historical exploitation, institutional restrictions and socio-economic disparities impede or influence present-day development strategies. Using a secondary, qualitative approach, data were collected from archival records to assess how colonial exploitation, land tenure systems, and governance frameworks affect local sustainable development in Bonny Local Government Area. The findings revealed that colonial extractive systems disrupted indigenous development structures and created dependency patterns that still undermine inclusive growth. Recommendations highlighted the need for community-driven development and participatory policy restructuring, and historical redress, educative and capacity training programs that focus on knowledge in sustainable development, heritage preservation and promotion, local economic empowerment and environmental conservation, fair trade practice and equitable resource-sharing agreements to ensure local communities benefits from their resources, promote economic diversification beyond oil extraction to reduce dependence for sustainable economic growth.

Keywords: Sustainable development, colonial interference, sustainability, governance, slave trade, palm oil, crude oil.

Introduction

Sustainable development in Africa has been significantly affected by colonial legacies that disrupted indigenous political and economic systems. Bonny, a coastal community in Rivers State, was a strategic location during the transatlantic slave trade and later under British colonial rule, particularly in the palm oil and crude oil trade. The region's resources were harnessed for external interests, leaving local communities underdeveloped. Bonny local government has been the subject of interdisciplinary research interest because its pre-colonial institutions, colonial encounters, and post-colonial oil-led development intersect in ways that shaped present-day sustainable outcomes. Bonny is a Local Government Area made up of Bonny Island town and sister towns, villages and fishing ports. It was also the capital of the Kingdom of Bonny. Traditionally (especially between the 15th and 19th Centuries), it was a major trading post in the Eastern Delta. Bonny Island is a major oil and gas export hub. It has a large SPDC export terminal, NLNG's six trains' gas plants, with the seventh and eighth ongoing. There also exist ExxonMobil natural gas liquid plants, export

terminals, and Chevron mega stations, as well as other beehives of high technology and associated companies.

In Nigeria, and especially in the Niger Delta Region, sustainable development has become a critical concern due to the paradox of immense natural resource wealth and persistent underdevelopment. Bonny Local Government Area, located in Rivers State, is a striking example of this paradox - rich in crude oil, natural gas, fisheries, and arable land, Bonny remains underdeveloped, with its population grappling with poverty, environmental degradation, poor infrastructure, and limited access to basic services (NDDC, 2022). This underdevelopment, social inequality, and dependency cannot be divorced from the historical trajectory of colonial interference in the region. Bonny was a strategic port during the transatlantic slave trade and later became an important hub in the palm oil and crude oil trade during the colonial period. Bonny local government area, a resource-rich area with strategic maritime importance, the historical imprint of colonial economic structures, land ownership system and political arrangements continue to shape developmental outcomes.

However, the colonial economic framework in Bonny was primarily extractive, designed to facilitate the export of raw materials to Britain while discouraging local industrialisation and self-sustained development, which has resulted in a lack of diversification and vulnerability to external market fluctuations. (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). This has continued in the post-colonial period, and many of these colonial legacies have persisted, particularly through the operations of multinational oil companies and the Nigerian state. Environmental and soil degradation from oil exploration, socio-economic, biodiversity loss, vulnerability to climate change inequality, and governance deficits in Bonny are direct reflections of the structural foundations laid during colonial rule. Sustainable development initiatives in the area are therefore often hindered by historical and structural constraints that prioritise resource extraction over local welfare and ecological balance.

Thus, understanding the colonial roots of contemporary underdevelopment in Bonny is critical to addressing its present challenges. By examining the nature of colonial interference and its long-term implications, this study seeks to highlight the enduring influence of colonial legacies on sustainable development and to propose pathways for decolonising development planning in Bonny Local Government Area by supporting African-led development initiatives and local ownership, incorporating indigenous cultures into the education system, and encouraging cooperation and economic integration among African societies. Furthermore, it examines how colonial interference continues to shape Bonny's development trajectory, with implications for contemporary sustainable development initiatives. In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, particularly the Bonny Local Government Area, Colonial rule established economic exploitation through resource extraction, disrupted indigenous governance systems, and restructured societal norms to align with foreign interests.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of the study is hinged on the fact that despite the resource endowment of Bonny, natural gas, crude oil, fisheries, and fertile land, development indicators such as healthcare, quality education, and infrastructure remain below national averages (NDDC Report, 2022). The paradox of wealth amidst poverty is linked to colonial extractive institutions, which prioritised export-oriented economies over community welfare. Colonial governance created structures of elite dominance, land alienation, and environmental exploitation, which hinder contemporary sustainable development (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

This historical dependency has persisted in postcolonial times, leaving Bonny's development tied to multinational corporations and external forces rather than local participation. Bonny Local Government Area struggles with environmental degradation resulting from oil exploration activities, deforestation, oil spills, pollution, and poor waste management. This degradation threatens the area's biodiversity, contaminates water resources, and exacerbates climate change. The population of Bonny faces socio-economic challenges, including poverty, inequality, marginalisation and exclusion from decision-making processes. The area's dependence on oil extraction and its lack of economic diversification hinder sustainable development. Unsustainable practices, such as gas flaring and oil spills, further exacerbate environmental issues. The cumulative effects of these challenges are a decreased quality of life, an increase in vulnerability to climate change, loss of traditional livelihood and loss of cultural identity in Bonny Local Government Area.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical patterns of colonial interference in Bonny Local Government Area.
2. To identify and investigate the challenges Bonny faces in achieving sustainable development, such as environmental degradation, poverty and social inequality.
3. To investigate the impact of colonial policies on current sustainable development challenges in Bonny.
4. To identify indigenous structures of governance and development disrupted by colonialism.
5. To analyse the long-term socio-economic and political impacts of colonial rule on the Bonny development trajectory.
6. To assess the relationship between colonial legacies and current sustainable development challenges in Bonny LGA.
7. To recommend potential solutions and strategies for promoting sustainable development in Bonny, including community initiatives and cultural preservation.

Conceptual Framework: Conceptual/Literature Review

Concept of Colonial Interference

This is the deliberate involvement of colonial powers in the social, political, economic and cultural systems of territories they controlled, and this disrupts indigenous governance and local development. It also creates long-term challenges such as ethnic rivalries, weak institutions, uneven development and dependence. Colonial interference in Bonny local government area reflect the broader Nigerian experience, cultural erosion, economic exploitation, environmental degradation, and political disruption which all continue to affect sustainable development in the area, while sustainable development focuses on meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs, it encompasses environmental, economic, political and social dimensions. Sustainable development is also regarded as a continuous process of positive changes in the qualities and span of life of the person or groups of persons. Amarta Sen sees sustainable development as a capability approach which enables people to reach the highest level of their abilities through granting freedom of action: Human Development Index (HDI) (UNDP, 1990). This also considers the role of culture in shaping development outcomes in Bonny local government area, which can help identify ways to promote sustainable development that respect local traditions and values. The decolonial

framework in Bonny local government area remains emergent; the broader academic conversation (2023-2025) offers a conceptual toolkit for Bonny planning a corporate and corporate engagement practice for more sustainable development.

Colonial interference refers to the imposition of foreign political, economic, social and cultural systems that disrupt indigenous institutions in Bonny. Colonial interference began when one powerful nation established and maintained political and economic domination over a geographically distinct area inhabited by people of any race at any stage of cultural, political, social and economic development. It is obvious that the mission of the colonialist to Africa, particularly Nigeria, was basically exploitative. This implies that the arrival of the British Colonies in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, was for an exploitative mission. However, one such critic of the colonial administration is Rodney (1975), who proposed that, faced with the evidence of European exploitation of Africa, many bourgeois writers would at least partially concede that colonialism was a system that functioned effectively in the interest of the metropole.

British colonialism was marked by treaties of protection, which eroded indigenous sovereignty and centralised power in colonial administrative structures (Hopkins, 1973). Colonial interference in the Bonny Local Government Area was characterised by the disruption of indigenous governance, trade systems, and socio-economic structures to serve British imperial interests (Rodney, 1975). Before colonial penetration, Bonny was a powerful trading state in the Niger Delta Region, thriving on commerce in slaves, palm oil, and later, other agricultural products, under the leadership of traditional rulers and merchant houses (Lovejoy, 1983). However, the imposition of treaties of protection in the late 19th century gradually eroded local autonomy and brought the community under British control. Colonial authorities centralised political power in selected chiefs, thereby weakening traditional systems of collective governance and promoting elite dominance.

Economically, colonial policies prioritised resource extraction, particularly palm oil, for export to Europe while undermining local industries and self-sustaining development (Alagoa & Fombo, 2001). Land tenure policies further alienated indigenous communities from their ancestral lands, laying the foundation for exploitative oil exploration in the post-colonial era (Omeje, 2018). The cumulative effect of these colonial structures was the entrenchment of dependency, inequality, and environmental exploitation, all of which continue to hinder sustainable development in Bonny today.

Historically, Bonny Local Government Area has a complex history reflecting a blend of indigenous and migrating influences, and colonial interference has had lasting impacts on Bonny's development, including governance. The legacy of colonialism continues to influence governance structures and community development in Bonny Local Government Area. Cultural disruption, the imposition of foreign cultural practices and values, has disrupted traditional structures and identities.

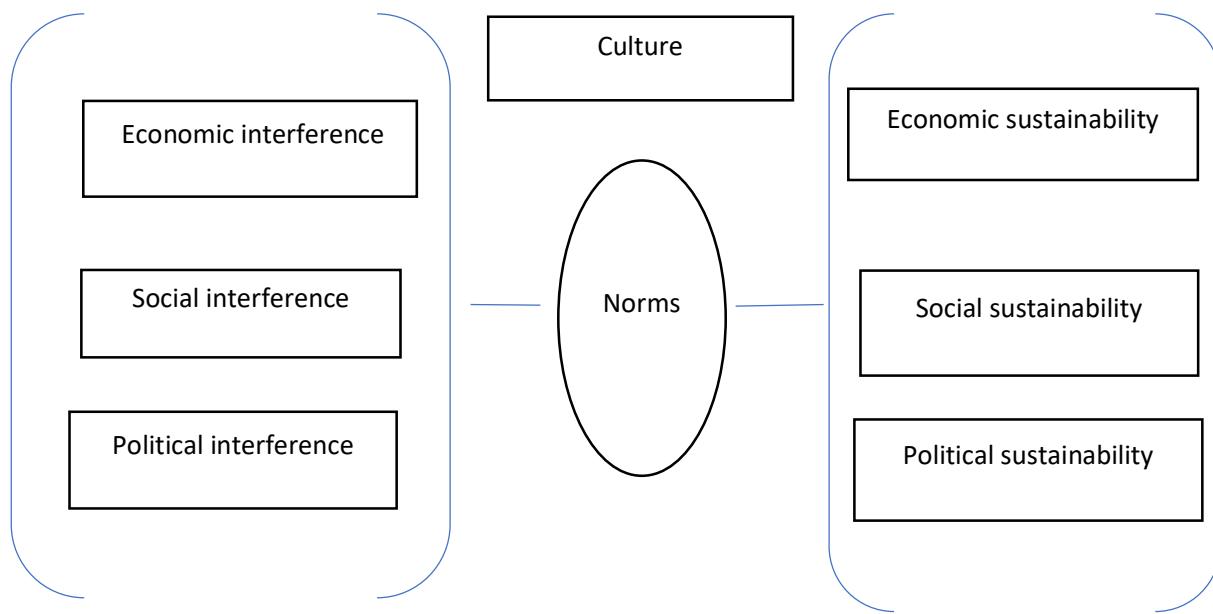
The exploitation of natural resources, particularly in Bonny Local Government Area and the Niger Delta region at large, has contributed to underdevelopment and dependency on external powers (Rodney 1972; Ake 1981). Colonial interference, understood as a set of institutional economic and social transformations, including the restructuring of indigenous authorities, the opening of local economies to global trade, and the formalisation of land tenure and legal arrangements, continues to influence governance, equity, and environmental management in Bonny and the wider Niger Delta (Falola 1999; Watts 2004). Consequently, colonial social, economic, political, environmental, and cultural interventions negatively shaped Bonny's development by weakening indigenous governance structures, fostering economic dependency,

eroding cultural identity, and generating long-term ecological imbalance (Ake 1981: 36–40; Watts 2004).

Sustainable development can only be achieved by addressing historical imbalances through policy reforms, inclusive governance, and cultural revitalisation (Ake 1996; Rodney 1972). Colonialism refers to the domination and exploitation of one nation by another for economic, political, social, and cultural gain, involving resource extraction and the restructuring of indigenous governance systems (Loomba 2015; Young 2001). In Nigeria, colonialism constituted a significant historical period that profoundly shaped the country's social, political, economic, and cultural development (Falola & Heaton 2008). Scholarly engagement with colonialism in Nigeria has evolved from descriptive colonial-administrative narratives to multidisciplinary analyses that treat colonialism as a foundational force shaping Nigeria's political boundaries, institutions, economy, social relations, and cultural life (Afigbo, 1981; Cooper, 2005). Consequently, historians, political scientists, economists, and anthropologists examine both macro-level colonial policies, such as amalgamation, indirect rule, taxation, and cash-crop production, and micro-level responses, including local resistance, women's protests, and legal pluralism (Falola 2009; Van Allen 1972). British colonial rule in Nigeria formally began in the late nineteenth century and lasted until independence in 1960, leaving enduring political, economic, social, and cultural legacies that continue to shape the Nigerian state (Crowder 1968; Falola & Heaton 2008).

Nigeria is usually dated to the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates under Lord Frederick Lugard, a decision scholars link to administrative convenience, fiscal considerations and imperial wartime exigencies. It is often treated as a central turning point for later political problems of unity and regional mistrust. European contact with Nigeria began with the Portuguese in the 15th century through trade, especially in slaves. By the 19th century, Britain had become the dominant European power in the region, establishing influence through trade and missionary activities. Through treaties, force, and the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 (which partitioned Africa), Britain consolidated its control over different Nigerian ethnic groups (Crowder, 1968).

Figure 1: Conceptual framework showing colonial interference and sustainable development



Source: Adapted from NDDC Report (2022) and World Economic Forum (2021).

History of Nigeria: Colonial Conquest

Formation of Colonial Nigeria Protectorates

Colonialism in Nigeria is considered to have begun in 1807, when Great Britain abolished the slave trade. Generally, historians trace Britain's increasing involvement through the later signing of treaties and arrangements with Nigerian rulers. In 1865, Britain took a more active role in Nigeria and eventually occupied the Niger area. Northern Nigeria Protectorate (1900), Southern Nigeria Protectorate (1900), Lagos Colony (earlier, 1861). Amalgamation (1914). Lord Frederick Lugard unified the Northern and Southern protectorates and Lagos Colony into one entity called Nigeria. The British governed largely through traditional rulers, especially in the North, using the system of indirect rule. The colonial government imposed foreign legal systems, taxation, and Western education. Economic impact focused on resource extraction: cash crops (groundnuts, cocoa, and palm oil) and minerals (tin, coal). The development of infrastructure (railways, ports, roads) was mainly to serve colonial economic interests.

Daniel (1980) states that the phenomena associated with colonialism included monopolistic control, seizure of territory, enslavement of the indigenous population, racism and militarism. Advocates of colonialism thought that it was meant to promote the welfare of the colonised nations, for example, Ronald (1971) stated that:

In many of the new states, we performed the tasks of an imperialist power without enjoying the economic or territorial advantages of empire; we instructed the new nations in the proper principles of foreign policy. We did things with good intentions because we really did believe in self-determination for everybody as a guiding moral principle, and because we thought it was our obligation to help the less fortunate "modernise" their societies by making them more like ours.

In spite the claim of the colonialists, it was observed that the colonising nations generally dominated the resources, labour & market, of the colonies and may imposed socio-cultural, religious and linguistic structure on the indigenous population, common example in Africa was the period of the scramble for and partition of Africa by the super powers who divided Africa into regions that they could colonize. That is why Lenin (1971) opined that it was the highest stage of capitalism.

Brief History of Bonny Kingdom

The Ancient Grand Bonny Kingdom, traditionally known as *Ibanise*, corresponds geographically to the present-day Bonny Local Government Area of Rivers State and is situated in the Eastern Niger Delta along the Atlantic coast, specifically the Bonny Estuary or Bight of Bonny (Alagoa 1972; Falola 1999). As part of Rivers State, Bonny constitutes one of the twenty-three Local Government Areas within the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria, historically classified among the Southern Minority ethnic groups (Tamuno 1972). The Bonny Kingdom originated at Orupiri (Old Bonny Town), where the first two monarchs, Ndoli-Okpara and Opuamakuba, reigned, and where the foundational institutions of the Kingdom's indigenous sovereignty and political organisation were established (Alagoa 1972; Horton 1979).

Theoretical Review

Dependency theory provides a robust framework for understanding the interplay between colonial interference and sustainable development in Bonny LGA. Developed in the mid-20th century by scholars like Raúl Prebisch and André Gunder Frank, it critiques how global economic structures perpetuate inequality. The theory posits that underdeveloped nations (the "periphery") are locked into a subordinate role within the world system, supplying raw materials and cheap labour to developed nations (the "core"), while receiving little in return. This creates a cycle of dependency, where peripheral economies remain extractive and vulnerable, hindering self-sustained growth. Unlike modernisation theory, which assumes linear progress through Western-style development, dependency theory highlights exploitation and unequal exchange as root causes of underdevelopment.

In the context of colonialism, the theory explains how European powers restructured local economies to serve imperial interests, creating long-term dependencies that extend into the neo-colonial era through multinational corporations and global trade imbalances. For Nigeria, this manifests in the Niger Delta's oil-dependent economy, where colonial legacies of resource extraction continue to undermine sustainable development goals like environmental protection, equitable wealth distribution, and community resilience.

Colonial interference in Bonny began in the 19th century when the kingdom emerged as a key slave trading port in the Bight of Biafra, facilitating the export of enslaved people to European colonies. British involvement intensified through treaties and political meddling, such as the deposition of King William Dappa Pepple in 1854 due to factional disputes and resistance to

British anti-slave trade policies, which shifted control toward the palm oil trade. These interventions, including the 1886 treaty that placed Bonny under British protection, integrated the area into the global capitalist system as a peripheral supplier of commodities, eroding local autonomy and traditional economic systems.

Under dependency theory, this colonial restructuring created enduring vulnerabilities. Pre-colonial Bonny societies maintained environmental sustainability through practices like community-led sanitation, forest protection for cultural and medicinal uses, and sustainable agriculture via shifting cultivation. However, British colonialism prioritised resource extraction without environmental safeguards, exploiting vast lands for trade while neglecting local welfare. This laid the groundwork for post-colonial dependency, where Bonny's role evolved into an oil export hub, with companies like Shell operating pipelines and terminals.

Applying dependency theory reveals how these historical dynamics impede sustainable development in the Bonny Local Government Area today. The region's oil dependency perpetuates environmental degradation, including spills that contaminate land and water, rendering areas unfit for agriculture and fishing, the traditional livelihoods of local communities. For instance, oil pollution has contributed to shoreline erosion and coastal changes, exacerbating food insecurity and limiting agricultural productivity amid traditional farming constraints and financial limitations. Population growth further strains resources, with inadequate infrastructure and weak enforcement of environmental laws like the NESREA Act 2007 failing to mitigate impacts.

Economically, benefits from oil largely flow to core nations and elites, leaving Bonny with underdevelopment, evident in challenges like insufficient renewable energy policies, investor attraction, and technology access. Socially, this fosters inequality, including for female-headed households facing barriers to sustainable tenets. Initiatives like the Bonny Master Plan aim to promote orderly development and eco-friendly projects, but dependency structures hinder their effectiveness, as global markets dictate resource use over local needs.

This dependency theory is supported by the modernisation theory, pioneered by scholars like Walt Rostow and Talcott Parsons in the mid-20th century, which posits that all societies progress through universal, linear stages toward modernity, modelled after Western industrialisation. It views underdevelopment as a temporary phase due to traditional structures (e.g., subsistence economies, kinship-based systems) that must be dismantled through technology transfer, market integration, urbanisation, and cultural shifts toward individualism and rationality. Colonialism is often framed as a "civilising" force that introduces these modernising elements, accelerating progress by connecting peripheral areas to global capitalism. Critics, however, argue that it overlooks the exploitation and cultural erasure inherent in this process. Ake's (1981) work offers a post-colonial critique of Western development theories, arguing that modernisation perspectives such as Rostow's are Eurocentric and ignore how colonial relations shaped African political economy and underdevelopment. However, the British justified their interference in Bonny by introducing Western education, Christianity, and a new governance system. Yet, instead of fostering genuine development, these interventions dismantled the indigenous monarchy and chieftaincy structures, replacing them with indirect rule, which often generated political rivalry and weakened local governance.

While independent theory, and not a unified "Independent Theory", this perspective draws from post-colonial and dependency critiques, emphasising endogenous (internally generated) development to achieve true independence from neo-colonial influences. Influenced by Fanon's "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961) and Nyerere's self-reliance principles, it advocates decolonising economies through local resource control, cultural revival, and community-led initiatives, rejecting both exploitative globalisation and imposed Western models. Development is

seen as holistic, integrating social justice, environmental harmony, and political sovereignty to break cycles of external dependency. This framework views colonial interference in Bonny—from slave trade treaties to oil concessions—as deliberate assaults on sovereignty, fragmenting traditional governance and economies to enforce external control. The 1886 protectorate treaty, for example, symbolised the loss of Bonny's independent kingdom status, replacing self-governed trade with extractive dependencies that persist in modern oil contracts, favouring multinationals.

Dependency Theory illuminates how colonial interference in Bonny LGA established a peripheral economic role that continues to thwart sustainable development. Breaking this cycle requires decolonising economic structures through diversified investments, stronger local governance, and indigenous-led policies to foster self-reliance and environmental stewardship. This framework not only explains historical patterns but also offers pathways for equitable progress in the Niger Delta.

Empirical Review

Several scholars have empirically examined the link between colonialism, political interference, and sustainable development in Nigeria. However, this study focused on Bonny Local Government Area, as recent empirical work on Bonny shows that historical and contemporary external interference (colonial-era institution changes, and later multinational oil/IOC presence) shaped local governance, resource-control arrangements, and development outcomes, producing uneven infrastructure, environmental degradation, and contested benefit-sharing. The studies also focused on Bonny, emphasising the role of traditional institutions adapting and negotiating with multinational corporations to obtain community projects and services, producing mixed results for long-term sustainable development. Contemporary evidence also documents breakdowns in agreements between communities and oil companies, periodic community shutdowns, and public grievances that directly affect local development and service delivery.

Omeje (2018) conducted empirical fieldwork across the Niger Delta communities and reported that colonial administrative structures prioritised resource extraction over human capital development, a trend that still undermines socio-economic sustainability in Bonny. Etemike (2015) used a mixed-method approach to examine post-colonial governance in the Niger Delta. The study revealed that colonial interference entrenched inequality and marginalisation, making sustainable development difficult to achieve. Naanen (2013) employed qualitative interviews in Rivers State to investigate the persistence of colonial legacies. The study found that colonial-era systems of centralised authority replaced participatory governance, which explains current leadership challenges in Bonny. Alagoa & Fombo (2001) carried out a case study on the Niger Delta, relying on oral history and documentary records. Their findings revealed that colonial economic exploitation, particularly in the oil trade, created dependency structures that continue to hinder sustainable local development. Afigbo (1981) conducted a historical analysis of Eastern Nigeria using archival data and oral traditions. He found that colonial administrators disrupted indigenous governance systems, which weakened community-led development structures. This empirical evidence highlights the foundation of underdevelopment in areas such as the Bonny local government area.

Owei's (2012) case study examined the urban and sustainable development challenges faced by Bonny amid industrialisation, empirically assessing partnerships among the community, government, and industry (e.g., NLNG). For him, Bonny's historical significance as a colonial trading port (from slave trade to palm oil) led to its designation as a township in 1917, integrating it into British administrative structures. Post-colonial oil/gas boom caused rapid in-migration, population strain, and infrastructure gaps. Empirical data from consultations and planning

documents show failed top-down approaches, with successes in community-led initiatives like the Bonny Kingdom Development Committee (BKDC) for electricity and master planning. However, environmental issues (e.g., pollution from facilities) and unequal benefits persist, with initial free electricity proving unsustainable. Thus, the "Bonny Experiment" highlights colonial legacies in land use and governance—indirect rule eroded traditional systems without building resilient modern ones. Current challenges include housing shortages, poor urban quality, and ecological strain from oil infrastructure. Owei utilises demographic data (e.g., industrialisation-induced migration) to demonstrate how colonial economic prioritisation hindered sustainable planning, advocating for participatory frameworks that foster eco-friendly growth.

England (2004), in this master's thesis, traced environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, including Bonny, to British colonial economic institutions that prioritised resource extraction without safeguards. For him, Colonial policies established dependency on raw material exports (initially, palm oil from Bonny and surrounding areas), fostering a pattern of unequal exchange and weak regulatory frameworks. Post-independence, this evolved into oil extraction dominance, with multinationals like Shell inheriting lax oversight. Evidence includes historical data on Bonny's role in the 19th-century palm oil trade, where British interference (e.g., treaties and consuls) reoriented local economies toward export monoculture. This legacy contributes to modern issues: over 9,000 oil spills recorded in the Delta since the 1970s, mangrove loss, and soil/water contamination, costing an estimated US\$758 million annually in environmental damage.

Thus, Bonny, as a key oil terminal (hosting NLNG and export facilities), exemplifies this continuity—colonial-era extraction without reinvestment persists, leading to shoreline erosion, polluted fisheries, and barriers to diversified livelihoods (e.g., agriculture, tourism). England's analysis uses archival records and spill data to argue that non-implementation of regulations stems from colonial-era collusion between state and foreign interests.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that colonial interference in the Bonny Local Government Area was primarily economic, centred on the extraction of palm oil and later petroleum resources. Colonial interference has had a profound and lasting impact on sustainable development in Bonny Local Government Area, which also dismantled traditional governance structures, replacing them with a system aligned with imperial economic goals. Land tenure systems introduced during colonial rule marginalised indigenous rights, leading to disputes that persist today. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that colonial institutions disrupted indigenous systems of governance, land tenure, and economic self-sufficiency. This aligns with the arguments that emphasised colonialism in Africa was primarily extractive and exploitative, laying a foundation for dependency that persists in postcolonial states. In Bonny, treaties of protection and the centralisation of authority in colonial-appointed chiefs eroded indigenous participatory structures, thereby institutionalising elite dominance. This finding resonates with, who observed that the colonial reconfiguration of Niger Delta polities created long-term governance challenges that weakened community-led development.

Economically, the study shows that colonial policies fostered a dependency economy focused on export commodities, initially palm oil and later crude oil, at the expense of local industrialisation. This economic orientation discouraged diversification and left Bonny vulnerable to external shocks, a trend that is still evident in its reliance on multinational oil companies for development projects. Acemoglu & Robinson's (2012) theory of extractive institutions helps to explain this outcome, as colonial governance deliberately prioritised external markets over local welfare. The emphasis on land alienation and environmental degradation as enduring legacies

further reinforces the argument that colonialism laid the structural basis for resource conflicts and ecological crises in the Niger Delta Region.

The study also highlights that sustainable development challenges in Bonny today, including inadequate infrastructure, unemployment, and limited access to healthcare and education, cannot be separated from these colonial legacies. The paradox of resource wealth amidst widespread poverty, which has been consistently identified, mirrors the “resource curse” and dependency theory. Importantly, evidence from the community emphasises that externally driven models of development, often framed by government agencies and multinational corporations, continue to perpetuate colonial patterns by sidelining indigenous knowledge and community participation. Economically, resource wealth has not translated into equitable development due to structural dependency established in the colonial period, and centralised decision-making has eroded community autonomy. Socially, disparities in education and infrastructure between urban and rural areas reflect colonial patterns of selective development challenges, including environmental degradation, resource control disputes, and inadequate infrastructure.

The findings underscore that the barriers to sustainable development in Bonny are not merely contemporary governance failures but deeply entrenched historical legacies. This suggests that addressing sustainable development in Bonny local government area requires not only policy reforms but also a conscious effort to decolonise development planning by integrating indigenous governance systems, promoting community-driven initiatives, and rectifying the historical injustices of land alienation and environmental exploitation.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that colonial interference has had a lasting and profound impact on sustainable development in the Bonny Local Government Area of Rivers State. This also left deep-rooted economic, social, and political imprints that still shape the community’s development trajectory. While independence ended formal colonial control, the findings show that the foundations of underdevelopment in the area were laid during colonial rule, when extractive institutions disrupted indigenous governance systems, centralised political authority in colonial-appointed chiefs, and reoriented the economy toward external markets rather than local development. These historical disruptions not only entrenched a pattern of dependency and inadequacy but also fostered environmental degradation and land alienation that still affect the community today. The persistence of these colonial legacies into the post-colonial period is evident in the reliance of the Bonny multinational oil corporation, the prevalence of governance deficits, and the paradox of resource wealth amidst poverty. Despite its rich natural resources endowment, Bonny continues to struggle with poor infrastructure, limited access to basic services, unemployment and environmental crises, conditions that mirror the structural distortions inherited from colonialism.

This study affirms the relevance of dependency theory in explaining these realities, as Bonny development remains externally oriented and heavily influenced by historical and contemporary forms of exploitation. It is concluded that achieving sustainable development in Bonny requires more than surface-level interventions. It demands a deliberate decolonisation of development planning by restoring indigenous governance systems, empowering local communities, promoting environmental justice, and addressing the historical injustices of land and resource alienation. Only through such structural transformation can Bonny overcome the burdens of its colonial past and move toward inclusive, equitable, and sustainable growth. The study consistently portrays colonial interferences as a formative influence on Bonny’s institutional landscape and its vulnerability to extractive development. Finally, it is research that bridges

history, planning, and empirical evaluation and centres local definition of sustainability, which will be necessary to inform policies that genuinely advance equitable and long-term sustainable development in the Bonny local government area.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following policy recommendations are made:

1. Government policies should address historical injustices by strengthening indigenous participation in resource management.
2. Development initiatives should prioritise local agency, including women and youth groups, ensuring that initiatives align with their needs and values, in planning and implementation.
3. Stronger environmental regulations must be enforced to reverse degradation initiated during colonial extractive practices.
4. Inclusive Governance structures should be reformed to reduce elite capture and promote accountability.
5. Incorporating indigenous governance models into development planning can ensure culturally rooted sustainability.
6. Foster partnership between government agencies, the private sector, civil organizations, and local communities to leverage resources and expertise.
7. Strengthen traditional institutions by promoting transparency, fairness in decision-making processes.

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