
SEA PIRACY IN THE NIGER DELTA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

In recent decades, the Niger Delta has become a hotbed for one of the most daunting challenges plaguing the maritime industry—sea piracy. Nestled in the heart of West Africa, the Niger Delta stands as an economic and ecological powerhouse, recognized for its abundant oil and gas reserves, biodiversity, and vital position as a gateway for international maritime trade. This study explored problems and prospects associated with sea piracy in the Niger Delta Region. This exploration aims to delve into the intricate layers of the sea piracy phenomenon in the Niger Delta, dissecting the multifaceted problems it engenders, while also shedding light on the prospects that might pave the way towards a more secure and prosperous maritime environment. By scrutinizing the interplay of political instability, economic disparities, and the impact of international interventions, this study provided a comprehensive analysis of the intricacies of sea piracy in the Niger Delta, envisioning a roadmap towards sustainable solutions and future prospects for the region's maritime security and development.

Keywords: Problems, Prospects, Sea Piracy, Niger Delta Region

Introduction

In recent decades, the Niger Delta has become a hotbed for one of the most daunting challenges plaguing the maritime industry—sea piracy. Nestled in the heart of West Africa, the Niger Delta stands as an economic and ecological powerhouse, recognized for its abundant oil and gas reserves, biodiversity, and vital position as a gateway for international maritime trade (UN, 2018). However, despite its strategic significance, the region has been marred by a persistent surge in maritime criminal activities, giving rise to a complex web of security, economic, and humanitarian concerns (Okaba, 2018).

Sea piracy in the Niger Delta is not merely a local predicament; it has developed into a multifaceted issue with far-reaching consequences, posing a threat to global trade routes, regional stability, and the well-being of local communities. Kemdi (2018) submitted that sea piracy is characterized by brazen attacks on vessels, hijackings, and kidnapping for ransom, piracy has not only endangered the safety of seafarers and the security of maritime infrastructure but has also created a formidable barrier to the region's sustainable development.

The implications of this surge in piracy extend beyond immediate security challenges, delving into the intricate nexus of socio-political, economic, and environmental complexities ingrained in the region's fabric. Consequently, a nuanced understanding of the root causes and underlying dynamics of piracy in the Niger Delta is imperative to decipher both the challenges that beset the region and the prospects that may hold the key to a sustainable resolution.

This exploration aims to delve into the intricate layers of the sea piracy phenomenon in the Niger Delta, dissecting the multifaceted problems it engenders, while also shedding light on the prospects that might pave the way towards a more secure and prosperous maritime environment. By scrutinizing the interplay of political instability, economic disparities, and the impact of international interventions, this study endeavors to provide a comprehensive analysis of the intricacies of sea piracy in the Niger Delta, envisioning a roadmap towards sustainable solutions and future prospects for the region's maritime security and development.

Socio-Political Factors Encouraging Sea Piracy in the Niger Delta

The prevalence of sea piracy in the Niger Delta is closely intertwined with various socio-political factors that have fostered an environment conducive to criminal activities. Understanding these factors is crucial to comprehending the complex dynamics underlying the persistence of piracy in the region. Udensi (2014), Onuoha and Hssan (2019) and Neething (2020) submitted that some of the key socio-political factors encouraging sea piracy in the Niger Delta include:

- i. Weak governance structures:** Persistent governance challenges, characterized by corruption, inefficiency, and institutional weaknesses, have created a fertile ground for criminal elements to operate with relative impunity, exploiting the loopholes within the legal and regulatory framework.
- ii. Political instability:** Historical volatility in the political landscape of the Niger Delta, marked by frequent power struggles, ethnic tensions, and contestations over resource control, has exacerbated social unrest and contributed to the proliferation of illegal activities, including piracy.
- iii. Economic marginalization:** Widespread economic disparities, with a significant portion of the local population facing poverty and lack of basic amenities, have fueled a sense of disillusionment and disenfranchisement, compelling some individuals to turn to piracy as a means of economic survival.

- iv. Unequal distribution of wealth: Despite the region's vast oil and gas resources, the benefits of these natural endowments have not been equitably distributed among the local communities, leading to heightened feelings of injustice and resentment, which in turn contribute to the perpetuation of criminal activities.
- v. Militant groups' involvement: Former armed militant groups, originally formed to advocate for the rights of local communities in the Niger Delta, have gradually transformed into criminal syndicates engaging in diverse illegal activities, including piracy, extortion, and kidnapping for ransom.
- vi. Nexus with criminal networks: The nexus between local criminal networks and regional militant groups has facilitated the perpetuation of piracy, with these groups often colluding to carry out coordinated attacks on vessels and exploit the region's maritime resources for financial gain.
- vii. Contestations over resource control: Disputes over territorial boundaries and resource control have fostered a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity, leading to conflicts over maritime jurisdiction and resource exploitation, thereby providing an opportunity for pirate groups to exploit regulatory loopholes and evade legal repercussions.
- viii. Lack of coordinated law enforcement: Inadequate coordination among various law enforcement agencies and regulatory bodies responsible for maritime security has created a fragmented approach to combating piracy, allowing criminal elements to exploit the gaps in enforcement and perpetuate their illicit activities with relative ease.

Udensi (2014), Onuoha and Hssan (2019) and Neething (2020) reported that addressing the socio-political underpinnings of sea piracy in the Niger Delta necessitates the implementation of holistic strategies that focus on promoting good governance, fostering socio-economic inclusivity, and strengthening law enforcement mechanisms to ensure a secure and stable environment for sustainable development in the region.

Efforts to Combat Sea Piracy

Efforts to combat sea piracy in the Niger Delta have involved a combination of domestic and international interventions aimed at enhancing maritime security, fostering regional stability, and promoting sustainable development. These efforts encompass a range of strategies and initiatives implemented by various stakeholders, including the Nigerian government, regional bodies, international organizations, and private security firms. IBM (2014), Mbekeana and Ncube (2021), Morrow (2015) and Igbo (2018) summarised the key efforts to combat sea piracy in the Niger Delta to include:

- i. Deployment of naval forces: The Nigerian government has increased the deployment of naval assets and personnel in the Gulf of Guinea to enhance maritime surveillance, patrol critical waterways, and deter pirate activities.
- ii. Legislative reforms: Implementation of robust legal frameworks and policy measures aimed at strengthening maritime security, including the enactment of anti-piracy laws and the establishment of specialized maritime security agencies.
- iii. Regional cooperation: Engaging in collaborative efforts with neighboring countries and regional bodies, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Gulf of Guinea Commission, to facilitate information sharing, joint patrols, and coordinated responses to piracy threats.
- iv. Partnerships with international organizations: Collaborating with international organizations, including the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), to access technical expertise, capacity-building programs, and financial assistance for bolstering maritime security capabilities in the region.

- v. Enhanced surveillance and intelligence gathering: Utilizing advanced surveillance technologies, such as radar systems and satellite monitoring, to improve situational awareness and preemptive response to potential pirate threats in the maritime domain.
- vi. Development of maritime security protocols: Establishing comprehensive security protocols, including standardized operating procedures, emergency response plans, and crisis management frameworks, to facilitate prompt and effective responses to piracy incidents and ensure the safety of maritime assets and personnel.
- vii. Private maritime security companies: Engagement of private security firms to provide armed escorts for vessels navigating through high-risk areas, conducting risk assessments, and implementing tailored security solutions to mitigate the threats posed by piracy and safeguard the interests of maritime stakeholders.
- viii. Capacity-building initiatives: Implementation of capacity-building programs and training workshops facilitated by international organizations to enhance the technical capabilities and skill sets of local maritime security personnel, enabling them to effectively respond to piracy incidents and enforce maritime law within the region.

IMO (2014) and Taylor et al., (2019) reported that by adopting a multifaceted approach that combines effective law enforcement, regional collaboration, policy reforms, and private sector engagement, stakeholders can work towards mitigating the prevalence of sea piracy in the Niger Delta, fostering a secure and conducive maritime environment for sustainable economic development and regional prosperity.

Prospects for Resolving Issues of Sea Piracy

Resolving the issue of sea piracy in the Niger Delta requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach that addresses the root causes of piracy, fosters sustainable development, and promotes regional stability. Several prospects hold the potential for effectively mitigating the prevalence of sea piracy in the region. Mbekeana and Ncube (2021), Igbo (2018), Onuoha and Hssan (2019) and Neething (2020) identified prospects to include:

- i. Strengthened institutional frameworks: Implementing comprehensive reforms to enhance governance structures, promote transparency, and combat corruption, thereby fostering a conducive environment for sustainable development and curbing the activities of criminal elements in the maritime domain.
- ii. Socio-economic empowerment: Investing in education, skill development, and job creation programs to empower local communities, alleviate poverty, and provide alternative livelihood opportunities, reducing the susceptibility of individuals to engage in piracy and other illicit activities.
- iii. Public-private partnerships: Establishing collaborative initiatives between the government, private sector entities, and local communities to promote sustainable economic development, ensure the equitable distribution of resources, and foster a sense of ownership and responsibility among stakeholders for safeguarding the maritime environment.
- iv. Community engagement and participation: Involving local communities in decision-making processes, resource management, and maritime security initiatives to cultivate a sense of ownership, enhance community resilience, and foster a collective commitment to combat piracy and promote sustainable development.
- v. Strengthened international partnerships: Collaborating with international partners, including neighboring countries, regional organizations, and international maritime security agencies, to facilitate information sharing, capacity building, and coordinated

responses to piracy threats, thereby fostering a collective approach to addressing transnational security challenges in the maritime domain.

- vi. Foreign investment and aid: Attracting foreign investment and aid to support infrastructure development, capacity-building programs, and sustainable economic projects, thereby promoting regional stability, enhancing maritime security capabilities, and fostering socio-economic growth in the Niger Delta region.
- vii. Comprehensive security measures: Implementing long-term security strategies, including the establishment of robust maritime surveillance systems, the deployment of well-equipped naval assets, and the integration of modern technologies, to deter pirate activities, ensure the safety of maritime assets, and promote a secure and stable maritime environment.
- viii. Sustainable economic diversification: Promoting economic diversification beyond oil and gas through investments in sectors such as agriculture, tourism, and renewable energy, thereby reducing the region's reliance on a single resource and fostering a more resilient and sustainable economy.

Case Studies of Successful Initiatives

Randrianantenaina (2013) disclosed that case studies of successful initiatives implemented in regions facing similar challenges can provide valuable insights and potential strategies for addressing sea piracy in the Niger Delta. Several successful initiatives have demonstrated effective approaches to combating piracy and fostering maritime security in various parts of the world. Mbekeana and Ncube (2021), Morrow (2015) and Igbo (2018), Udensi (2014), Onuoha and Hssan (2019) and Neething (2020) outlined some notable case studies to include:

- i. The Malacca Strait, Southeast Asia: Cooperative regional agreements: The Malacca Strait has seen successful initiatives through the Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP) conducted by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. These coordinated efforts have significantly reduced piracy incidents through joint patrols, information sharing, and the establishment of a shared intelligence network.
- ii. Maritime capacity-building: The littoral states in the Malacca Strait region have invested in the development of maritime capabilities, including the enhancement of maritime surveillance, the deployment of advanced technology for vessel tracking, and the establishment of joint operation centers, contributing to improved maritime security and safety.
- iii. The Gulf of Aden, East Africa: International naval task forces: The successful initiatives in the Gulf of Aden have been primarily driven by the deployment of international naval task forces, including the Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150) and the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR), which have effectively deterred pirate activities through coordinated patrols, escort operations, and interdiction efforts.
- iv. Maritime industry best practices: The implementation of industry best practices, such as the use of safe maritime routes, the adoption of self-protection measures by vessels, and the establishment of designated transit corridors, has contributed to the reduction of piracy incidents and the safeguarding of maritime trade in the Gulf of Aden.
- v. The Caribbean Sea and Latin America: Regional information sharing: Successful initiatives in the Caribbean Sea and Latin America have emphasized the importance of regional cooperation and information sharing among neighboring countries, facilitated through platforms such as the Regional Security System (RSS) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), contributing to improved maritime domain awareness and coordinated responses to security threats.

- vi. Public-private partnerships: Collaboration between the government and private maritime security companies has played a crucial role in enhancing maritime security in the Caribbean, with initiatives focusing on the provision of armed security escorts for vessels, the implementation of risk assessment measures, and the establishment of effective crisis management protocols.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the pervasive issue of sea piracy in the Niger Delta presents a complex and multifaceted challenge, impacting not only the region's maritime security but also its economic stability, social well-being, and international trade relations. Throughout this study, we have explored the historical context, underlying factors, and the profound implications of sea piracy in the Niger Delta, shedding light on the critical need for comprehensive and collaborative efforts to address this persistent threat.

The region's socio-political landscape, characterized by governance challenges, socio-economic disparities, and the influence of armed groups, has created an environment conducive to criminal activities, fostering a cycle of instability and insecurity. The impact of piracy on the local economy, international trade, and the safety of maritime routes has further exacerbated the challenges, perpetuating a cycle of economic losses, investor hesitance, and humanitarian crises.

Despite the daunting challenges posed by sea piracy, there are promising prospects for resolving this pressing issue. Enhanced governance and development initiatives, collaboration between government and stakeholders, international support and cooperation, and long-term strategies for sustainable maritime security and economic development all hold the potential to mitigate the prevalence of piracy and foster a secure and prosperous maritime environment in the Niger Delta.

By drawing insights from successful case studies in other regions, stakeholders can leverage valuable lessons and best practices to inform the design and implementation of tailored strategies, fostering a holistic approach that integrates effective governance, community engagement, international cooperation, and sustainable development efforts.

Addressing the issue of sea piracy in the Niger Delta demands a collective commitment from all stakeholders, including the Nigerian government, regional bodies, international organizations, and local communities. By fostering a shared vision of security, stability, and sustainable development, the region can chart a course toward a future characterized by a thriving maritime economy, enhanced livelihoods for local communities, and strengthened partnerships within the global maritime community. Only through these concerted efforts can the Niger Delta realize its full potential as a secure and prosperous maritime hub in the Gulf of Guinea.

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