

Oil Exploitation in Niger-Delta Region: A Curse or Blessing – A Theological Perspective

RESEARCH ARTICLE

***Coker, Kehinde Olukunle**

Department of Theology, College of Arts, Wesley University, Ondo, Nigeria
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 kehinde.coker@wesleyuni.edu.ng

Adegoke, Olukayode A.

Department of Theology, College of Arts, Wesley University, Ondo, Nigeria

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Sustain

ABSTRACT

The Niger-Delta region of Nigeria is a vital part of the country's economy, particularly due to its vast oil reserves, and it is the third largest wetland in the world. However, despite generating significant revenue for the country's GDP, the region remains underdeveloped and equally faces numerous challenges, orchestrated by environmental degradation, a high level of poverty, and a low level of human development, among other social and infrastructural problems. The incessant exploration of oil in this region without corresponding sustainable development has, over the years, plunged the region into a crisis-ridden, resulting in the formation of indigenous sects known as "ethnic militia groups." This study seeks to critically evaluate the substantial economic and developmental advantages derived from oil exploration in Nigeria, while acknowledging the significant socio-economic and environmental costs borne by the communities in the Niger Delta region. The research work is qualitative, analytical and descriptive. It adopts a design model, using oral and empirical works to gather data and an observational method. The research reveals that in the midst of plenty, the people of the Niger-Delta suffer huge negligence from the federal authority. The paper, therefore, concludes within the context of justice, fairness and equity that oil exploration in the Niger-Delta is more of a curse than a blessing. To ameliorate these abnormalities, research therefore recommends a theological approach, knowing fully well the role of the church as an agent of social change.

Methodology

Qualitative, analytical and descriptive research using oral and empirical works with observational methods

Key Focus

Economic advantages versus socio-economic and environmental costs in Niger Delta communities

Main Finding

Oil exploration in Niger-Delta is more of a curse than a blessing, requiring theological intervention

Keywords: Oil, exploration, Niger-Delta, curse, blessing, theological perspective

INTRODUCTION

The 1956 discovery of oil in Nigeria's Niger Delta transformed the nation's destiny (Campbell, 2023). Yet, this oil is increasingly seen as a double-edged sword; critics, citing resource curse literature (e.g., Sachs & Warner, 2001; Collier & Hoeffler, 2005), point to corruption, conflict, and economic instability as evidence that oil wealth has been more a curse than a blessing.

Biblically, a "blessing" signifies a divine endowment for flourishing, prosperity, and shared well-being, fostering justice and righteousness. A "curse," conversely, emerges when these endowments are misused, resulting in suffering, injustice, oppression, and environmental degradation, alienating humanity from God, one another, and creation.

Despite its benefits to Nigeria, the oil sector has significantly harmed the Niger Delta. Challenges like negligence, corruption, and environmental degradation result from human mismanagement by both the federal government and multinational companies, not the resource itself. With responsible governance and effective reforms, oil can continue to bless Nigeria for generations.

01

1956 Discovery

Shell-BP discovered commercial quantities of oil in Oloibiri in 1956, changing Nigeria's economic landscape and global significance (Campbell, 2023).

02

Economic Transformation

Oil revenues eclipsed agriculture as primary contributor to Nigeria's economy, enabling massive infrastructure investments.

03

Current Paradox

Despite vast oil wealth, Niger Delta communities face environmental degradation, poverty, and social unrest (Sachs & Warner, 2001; Collier & Hoeffler, 2005).

More importantly, the inadequate compensation for the Niger Delta reflects a profound moral and theological injustice. Biblical stewardship, rooted in Genesis 1:28's dominion mandate and affirmed by Psalm 24:1 ("The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it," English Standard Version), mandates managing God's creation justly and sustainably. This responsibility extends to ensuring creation's blessings benefit all, especially those most affected by resource extraction. Failure to fairly compensate Niger Delta communities, who disproportionately bear environmental and social costs, violates this divine covenant. It mirrors Leviticus 19:13: "*You shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning*" (English Standard Version). Neglecting this moral imperative transforms potential blessings into a curse, inviting societal unrest and spiritual consequences. Thus, this paper will evaluate the Nigerian oil industry through theological criteria: adherence to biblical stewardship, equitable distribution of blessings, and fulfillment of covenant responsibilities to creation and neighbor.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Nigeria's oil saga began with Shell-BP's discovery of commercial quantities of oil in Oloibiri on January 15, 1956 (World Bank, 2019). Exports commenced in 1958, and by the 1970s, oil revenues had eclipsed agriculture as the primary contributor to Nigeria's economy. The oil boom of the 1970s led to an economic transformation, ushering in massive government expenditure on infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Nigeria's admission into the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1971 further entrenched its place as a significant oil producer on the world stage (OPEC, 1971).

In 1977, NNOC merged with the Ministry's Petroleum Inspectorate to form the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), marking a key move to centralise control over the oil industry (Ministry of Petroleum Resources, n.d.). During the 1970s and 1980s, Nigeria pursued indigenisation policies to increase local participation in the oil sector. The Ministry worked closely with NNPC and oversaw a major oil boom, though challenges such as economic overdependence and environmental degradation emerged, especially in the Niger Delta (Ministry of Petroleum Resources, n.d.).

1970s-1980s Oil Boom

- **Formation** of NNPC in 1977
- Indigenisation policies implemented
- Massive infrastructure investments
- Economic overdependence on oil began

Recent Developments

- Nigerian Oil and Gas Industry Content Development Act (2010)
- Gas Master Plan implementation
- Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas initiative
- **Diversification** efforts

In 2010, the Ministry led the enactment of the Nigerian Oil and Gas Industry Content Development (NOGICD) Act, promoting local content and establishing the Nigerian Content Development and Monitoring Board (NCDMB) (Ministry of Petroleum Resources, n.d.). More recently, the Ministry has also promoted gas development through the Gas Master Plan and supported projects like the Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) initiative, aiming to diversify Nigeria's energy resources and boost industrialisation (Ministry of Petroleum Resources, n.d.).

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF NIGERIA'S OIL

Oil wealth has significantly boosted Nigeria's GDP. In 2022, petroleum exports comprised 80.6% of total exports, and oil & gas revenues accounted for 36.9% of government revenue (EITI Nigeria, 2022; World Bank, 2025). The World Bank (2025) notes that despite the oil sector's relatively small share of GDP, it remains a dominant source of fiscal receipts and foreign-exchange earnings. Nigeria's external position has strengthened, with foreign reserves exceeding \$42 billion and a current account surplus rising to 6.1% of GDP (World Bank, 2025).

This income funded infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, schools, airports, and major urban **centres** like Abuja (World Bank, 2019, p. 12; National Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). The oil sector also attracted significant foreign direct investment (FDI), bolstering financial services and telecommunications (World Bank, 2019, p. 15). Oil revenues enabled Nigeria's active participation in international diplomacy, African leadership initiatives, and peacekeeping missions (World Bank, 2019, p. 15).



Export Dominance

80.6% of total exports, 36.9% of government revenue from petroleum (EITI Nigeria, 2022; World Bank, 2025)

Infrastructure Development

Funded roads, hospitals, schools, airports, and urban **centres** like Abuja (World Bank, 2019; National Bureau of Statistics, n.d.)

Global Influence

Enabled participation in international diplomacy and African leadership initiatives (World Bank, 2019)

A practical example of oil's benefits is the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) project. Since its 1989 inception, it generated over US\$108 billion in revenue, reduced gas flaring from ~65% to <20%, and boosted national income (Nigeria LNG Limited, 2020). Industrial zones in Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Calabar also owe growth to oil-driven investments (Nigeria LNG Limited, n.d.).

In summary, major capital projects were undertaken nationwide at the expense of the Niger Delta. Between 1970 and 1999, oil revenues funded extensive infrastructure projects; yet, despite contributing over 80% of Nigeria's export earnings, the Niger Delta remained underdeveloped and environmentally degraded (Watts, 2008). EITI Nigeria's 2022 Report shows that in 2022, the federal government received 36.9% of its total revenues from the oil and gas sector, while Niger Delta states continued to suffer high poverty and unemployment rates despite a statutory 13% derivation allocation (EITI Nigeria, 2022).

HOW NIGERIA'S OIL BECAME A CURSE RATHER THAN A BLESSING

Nigerian oil, one of the country's key resources, has become a resource curse, reflecting the paradox described in the literature whereby resource-rich countries often experience slower economic growth and weaker development outcomes due to mismanagement and corruption (Collier & Hoeffler, 2005; Sachs & Warner, 2001). Despite substantial oil revenues, challenges such as corruption, political instability, and inadequate infrastructure persist in Nigeria.

Ideally, oil as a natural resource should be a catalyst for rapid national reformation and development, technological advancement, and improved living standards for citizens. However, in Nigeria's case, oil has become synonymous with corruption, conflict, environmental degradation, and economic instability, a phenomenon widely known as the "resource curse" or "paradox of plenty" (Auty, 2001; Karl, 1997). This also includes the "Dutch disease" phenomenon, where a boom in one sector leads to the decline of others due to currency appreciation and shifting resources (Corden, 1984; Olaniyan, 2011). These factors collectively describe the dire state of the Niger Delta region and the broader Nigerian economy.

Resource Curse Manifestations

Corruption, conflict, environmental degradation, and economic instability despite vast oil wealth (Obi, 2001; Watts, 2008)

Institutional Weakness

Inappropriate institutions not strong enough to efficiently manage oil revenue for meaningful impact (Collier, 2000)

Elite Capture

Benefits disproportionately captured by narrow elite, excluding broader society from shared national resource (Karl, 1997)

Evidence abounds that oil has been more of a curse in Nigeria because the appropriate institutions have not been strong enough to efficiently manage the vast oil revenue to effect a meaningful and positive impact on the economy and for the benefit of its people (Nairametrics, 2020; Shaxson, 2007). For developing countries in general, good governance, accountability, high government effectiveness, appropriate regulations, and anti-corruption policies have helped link natural resources with sustained economic growth, turning the resource from a curse into a blessing.

For instance, Botswana's prudent management of diamond revenues, which is characterised by strong institutions, fiscal discipline, and low corruption, has enabled it to achieve one of the highest and most sustained economic growth rates in Africa, in sharp contrast to Nigeria's experience with oil (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2003; Sarraf & Jiwanji, 2001). In the case of Nigeria, the benefits of oil wealth have been disproportionately captured by a narrow elite, to the exclusion of the broader society, representing a profound ethical breach in the management of a shared national resource (Karl, 1997; Watts, 2008).

THE RESOURCE CURSE AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS IN NIGERIA

Corruption and Elite Mismanagement Of Revenues In Nigeria

Nigeria's vast oil wealth has fueled corruption and elite mismanagement, hindering national development and perpetuating poverty. Theologically, this reflects a failure of moral accountability: leaders, entrusted with national resources, have succumbed to greed, contradicting principles of justice, stewardship, and equitable distribution (Amadiume, 1997; Vatican Council II, 1965). The biblical mandate to "tend and keep" the garden (Genesis 2:15) implies responsible governance, a principle egregiously violated, as Ezekiel 34:2-4 warns: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed only themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat animals, but you do not feed the flock." This prioritization of personal gain over public welfare aligns with "mammon," where wealth becomes an idol, as Jesus taught: "No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). Pervasive corruption signifies a profound spiritual misdirection, replacing divine principles with material worship.

Nigeria consistently ranks among the most corrupt nations. In 2022, Transparency International ranked Nigeria 150th out of 180 countries in its Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2023). This reflects entrenched bribery, public fund diversion, and lack of accountability. Mismanagement of oil revenues severely impacts public services and infrastructure; despite substantial earnings, Nigeria struggles to provide basic amenities like electricity, clean water, and quality healthcare.

Neglect of Other Economic Sectors

Nigeria's heavy reliance on oil revenues has systematically neglected other vital economic sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, and solid minerals. This "Dutch Disease" phenomenon profoundly impacts economic diversification. Before the oil boom, agriculture was Nigeria's economic cornerstone, significantly contributing to GDP and employment. In the 1960s, it accounted for over 60% of GDP and was the primary source of foreign exchange.

However, oil exploitation in the 1970s caused a sharp agricultural decline. By 1981, its GDP share fell to 35%, and key cash crops like cocoa, oil palm, and rubber declined by about 75% between 1970 and 1981 (International Monetary Fund, 2003b, p. 25). The "Dutch Disease" highlights the negative impact of a resource boom on other sectors; Nigeria's oil boom led to an overvalued currency, reducing non-oil export competitiveness. This failure to foster diverse economic sectors, despite rich natural resources, represents a dereliction of comprehensive stewardship, prioritizing immediate gains over sustainable development and societal well-being—a departure from an economy serving human flourishing rather than mere wealth accumulation.

Environmental Degradation

The Nigerian state's complicity and methods of surplus extraction have aggravated problems in Niger Delta host communities, allowing oil corporations to operate with limited oversight. During the military era, the Niger Delta experienced severe repression, including extra-judicial killings, torture, and incarceration. As Albert Isaac succinctly puts it, *"in the Ogoni district, for example, it is estimated that between 1994 and the beginning of 1995 at least fifty Ogonis were summarily executed by security forces, prominent among them was Ken Saro-Wiwa of blessed memory. Surprisingly too, the Obasanjo regime carried out massive military repression in towns of Choba and Odi in 1999."*



Figure 1: Illustration depicting environmental damage from oil spills in the Niger Delta.

The Obasanjo civilian government's military approach, inaugurated in May 1999, further militarized the Niger Delta, heightening anxiety and tension. The environmental devastation, which peaked during military rule, has scarcely abated (Amnesty International, 2009, "Nigeria: Petroleum, Pollution and Poverty in the Niger Delta") (see Figure 1). Theologically, this destruction reflects humanity's failure as stewards of God's creation, tasked with tending and keeping it (Genesis 2:15). The widespread pollution and ecological damage manifest the "groaning" of creation, as described in Romans 8:22, "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." This suffering is compounded by the neglect and oppression of indigenous communities, violating the prophetic call for justice: "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isaiah 1:17) and "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). The denial of basic human rights and desecration of ancestral lands through environmental degradation are profound ethical and theological transgressions.

Despite its rich natural resources, development in the Niger Delta falls short of expectation. Sustainable development is critical, focusing on the security of ordinary people's lives, including food, shelter, health, jobs, and social amenities. Beyond state violence, undercut livelihoods have fueled anxieties, violence, conflicts, and insecurity in the region.

The Niger Delta has experienced significant protests by indigenous communities against multinational oil companies' resource-exploitation activities in their homelands. Concurrently, indigenous people have violently attacked multinational assets and personnel. Violent conflicts between state security forces and "ethnic militia groups" have also occurred. As Imoukhuede observed, these attacks severely impact the populace, especially women, with reported cases of women in Choba, Ogoni, and Odi being gang-raped by soldiers sent to restore peace.

The situation has worsened among youth, who form heavily armed militia groups to demand greater control over their natural resources. While their demand for accountability and responsible leadership is valid, their approach is often labeled as "restiveness."

The Niger Delta's acute conflict mirrors global patterns where states and indigenous people clash over natural resource exploitation by multinational corporations, often sanctioned by the state. However, proper management of this conflict could lead to good governance, conflict prevention, human rights, and sustainable natural resource management within a framework of social justice.

Oil exploration in Nigeria has caused severe ecological damage, particularly in the Niger Delta. Frequent oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation have devastated local livelihoods, especially fishing and farming. Amnesty International (2009) reports over 1,000 oil spills annually in the region, with dire consequences for human health and biodiversity (pp. 28-30). This environmental neglect contrasts sharply with the region's generated wealth. UNEP's 2011 report on Ogoni land revealed oil pollution rendered water sources undrinkable and farmlands infertile, recommending a one billion dollar cleanup effort (UNEP 2011, 10). Yet, neither the government nor oil companies have substantially implemented these recommendations.

Oil and Infrastructural Decay

Despite massive earnings from oil, Nigeria has some of the poorest infrastructure in the world: about 60.5% of the population has electricity access (World Bank, 2022), with many receiving only 4-5 hours of service per day (AFD, 2024). Less than one-third of the country's road network (~195,000 km) is paved, and the country's infrastructure stock is valued at only ~30% of GDP, which is well under the international benchmark of 70% (World Bank Nigeria Development Update, 2025).

These statistics illustrate the magnitude of the infrastructure deficit, suggesting that much of the oil revenue has been squandered rather than invested in public goods. For example, the paradox of abundant resources and decaying infrastructure is particularly visible in the Niger Delta, where this oil is extracted (World Bank Nigeria Development Update, 2025). The problem isn't just a lack of money, but misuse and institutional failure (Watts, 2008, p. 23).

Oil Theft and Illegal Economies

Oil has encouraged the growth of a massive illegal economy in Nigeria, where there is bunkering, pipeline vandalism, and militia funding. Despite massive earnings from oil, billions of dollars are lost yearly through illegal siphoning and sales of crude oil in Nigeria. For instance, NEITI reported that in 2023 alone, about 7.68 million barrels of crude were stolen or lost—though this was a 79% drop from the 36.69 million barrels lost in 2022 (NEITI, 2024a). Over the longer term, between 2009 and 2020, losses amounted to 619.7 million barrels, valued at approximately US\$46.16 billion. (NEITI, 2024b). These illicit activities fund violence, arms smuggling, and criminal syndicates. Oil theft in Nigeria is systemic and linked to powerful state and non-state actors, making it both a security and governance issue (Sayne, 2013, p. 9).

619.7M

7.68M

589

Barrels Lost

Between 2009-2020, valued at
US\$46.16 billion

2023 Theft

Million barrels stolen or lost in
a single year

2024 Oil Spills

Incidents recorded, many due
to sabotage and theft

Over the longer term, between 2009 and 2020, losses amounted to 619.7 million barrels, valued at approximately US\$46.16 billion (NEITI, 2024b). These illicit activities fund violence, arms smuggling, and criminal syndicates. Oil theft in Nigeria is systemic and linked to powerful state and non-state actors, making it both a security and governance issue (Sayne, 2013, p. 9).

Theological Framework: Transforming Curse to Blessing

From a theological perspective, Nigeria's oil predicament, while fraught with challenges, can be viewed through the lens of divine purpose and transformation. Just as Joseph in Genesis 50:20 declared, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives," so too can seemingly destructive forces be re-purposed for blessing. This framework suggests that even a resource like oil, which has brought suffering and corruption, can, through intentional and righteous stewardship, be transformed into a catalyst for national flourishing and equitable development.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS: HARNESSING THE BLESSING MORE EFFECTIVELY

To consolidate oil's blessing, Nigeria must implement strategic reforms:

01

Diversification

Strengthen agriculture, manufacturing, and technology to reduce oil overdependence, as demonstrated by the UAE's "Operation 300Bn." Theologically, this aligns with the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), advocating for full utilization of God-given gifts.

02

Institutional Reforms

Empower anti-corruption agencies (e.g., EFCC) and improve judicial independence for accountability in resource management. This aligns with the biblical imperative for justice: "Justice, justice you shall pursue..." (Deuteronomy 16:20).

03

Transparency

Fully implement EITI principles; Nigeria scored 72/100 in 2019, but stakeholder engagement needs improvement. This echoes Jesus' teaching in Luke 8:17: "There is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed...", underscoring the divine demand for transparency.

04

Environmental Accountability

Enforce stricter environmental laws and require companies to clean up oil spills, implementing UNEP's recommendations. This directly applies the creation care mandate from Genesis 2:15 ("work and take care of" the earth), reinforced in Revelation 11:18 (warning against destroying the earth).

05

Covenant Renewal

Nigeria must re-evaluate its relationship with natural resources and citizens, returning to a foundational understanding of stewardship as a covenantal responsibility. This involves recognizing oil as a shared blessing for the well-being of all, embodying a national commitment to justice and flourishing for future generations.

06

Jubilee and Restoration

Inspired by the biblical concept of Jubilee (Leviticus 25), policies should consider debt forgiveness, land restoration, and economic empowerment for communities severely impacted by oil extraction, particularly in the Niger Delta. This aims to reset economic inequalities and restore dignity, ensuring burdens are not perpetually borne by the marginalized.

From a theological perspective, this aligns with the principle of stewardship, which calls for responsible management of God-given resources not for selfish gain but for the flourishing of all (Genesis 2:15). It also reflects the biblical demand for justice, ensuring that those who bear the environmental and social burdens of extraction are not excluded from its benefits (Isaiah 1:17; Amos 5:24). Finally, it embodies moral responsibility toward marginalised groups, as oil-producing communities—often the most affected by pollution and displacement—are given a fair share in national prosperity, honouring the call to care for "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40).

The Petroleum Industry Act (2021) represents a significant step, as it introduces clearer fiscal frameworks and grants more benefits to oil-producing communities (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021). If implemented diligently, such policies can enhance the blessings of oil while minimising its drawbacks.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, Nigeria's oil has been seen as a curse rather than a blessing (Sachs & Warner, 2001; Collier & Hoeffer, 2005). It seems to facilitate corruption and environmental damage; these are products of governance failures, not the resource itself. Nigeria's oil wealth has become a driver of systemic corruption and elite mismanagement, weakening national development and deepening poverty. Furthermore, misappropriation of oil revenues has severely impacted public infrastructure, leaving many without access to clean water, electricity, or quality healthcare (World Bank, 2025; AFD, 2024).

Nigeria's dependence on oil has led to the neglect of agriculture, manufacturing, and solid minerals, sectors once vital to its economic sustainability. Environmental degradation from oil exploration has devastated the Niger Delta, with around 40 million litres of oil spilling annually, causing widespread contamination (Amnesty International, 2009). In 2020 and 2021, Nigeria's National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency recorded a combined total of 822 oil spills, resulting in 28,003 barrels spewing into the environment.

People in the affected areas complain about health issues including breathing problems and skin lesions; many have lost basic human rights such as health, access to food, clean water, and an ability to work (Amnesty International, 2009). Despite its vast oil wealth, Nigeria suffers from crumbling infrastructure, especially in oil-producing areas, due to mismanagement and weak institutions (World Bank, 2025; AFD, 2024).

This reality underscores a profound issue of moral accountability: leaders bear an ethical obligation to safeguard national resources for the common good, not for narrow elite interests. Within a theological framework, stewardship requires that wealth generated from oil be managed responsibly to promote human flourishing and protect creation (Genesis 2:15; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1993/2000). Catholic Social Teaching emphasises the common good as a moral principle demanding that social and economic policies serve all, particularly the poor and vulnerable (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004).

Similarly, African communal ethics such as ubuntu stress shared humanity and mutual responsibility, insisting that prosperity is legitimate only when it uplifts the entire community (Tutu, 1999). When infrastructure remains neglected in regions that bear the environmental and social costs of extraction, it reflects a failure of justice and a breach of moral responsibility (Amos 5:24). Leaders, therefore, must be held accountable not only politically but also ethically and theologically, as custodians entrusted with the welfare of both present and future generations.

Oil theft and illegal bunkering in Nigeria have evolved into a large criminal economy involving influential actors, undermining national security and governance. NEITI estimates that between 2009 and 2020, Nigeria lost about 619 million barrels of crude oil worth US\$46.16 billion, with much of the theft enabled by networks of elites and security personnel (ICIR, 2024; THISDAYLIVE, 2022).

To solve the problem, therefore, Nigeria must deepen reforms, diversify its economy, and commit to environmental and fiscal responsibility. Oil's blessing can be fully realised—but only through diligent stewardship.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Kehinde Olukunle, Coker

 kehinde.coker@wesleyuni.edu.ng

Department of Theology, College of Arts, Wesley University, Ondo, Nigeria.

Olukayode A. Adegoke

Department of Theology, College of Arts, Wesley University, Ondo, Nigeria.

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