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DEMOCRACY AND TRADITIONAL RULERS IN NIGERIA: REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE NIGER DELTA

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Abstract

Sustainable development refers to any positive change that occurs in human society that can improve the living standard of the people. Insecurity represents a major factor that hinders development in any society, particularly in developing nations where governance structures face persistent challenges. In the last two decades, social problems such as kidnapping, armed robbery, burglary, and assassination have become increasingly rampant in small communities across Nigeria's Niger Delta region—social problems previously associated primarily with urban conurbations. Traditional rulers, including royal fathers such as Obas, Ovies, Odions, and Ezes (depending on the linguistic context), have attempted to curb these problems through various cultural and institutional mechanisms. However, questions remain regarding the success of their efforts. This paper adopts an observational study approach to explore the efforts of traditional rulers in community development vis-à-vis security challenges. The study examines the intersection between democratic governance and traditional institutions, analyzing how traditional rulers navigate the complex landscape of modern Nigerian politics while maintaining their cultural legitimacy. Findings indicate that while traditional rulers possess significant moral authority and community trust, their effectiveness is constrained by constitutional ambiguity, political interference, and the evolving nature of security threats. The paper recommends constitutional reforms to clarify the role of traditional institutions, enhanced collaboration between traditional and formal security apparatus, and capacity building for traditional rulers to address contemporary security challenges effectively.

Keywords: Traditional Rulers, Democracy, Community Development, Niger Delta, Security, Sustainable Development, and Traditional Institutions

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1. Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, presents a fascinating case study in the coexistence of traditional and modern governance structures. The Niger Delta region, comprising nine states and representing the heart of Nigeria's oil production, has experienced profound social, economic, and political transformations over the past two decades. Despite contributing approximately 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings through petroleum resources, the region remains characterized by underdevelopment, environmental degradation, and persistent security challenges (Oyor & Ruwan, 2025). Traditional leadership in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta Region, remains a significant institution for community mobilization, conflict mediation, and local economic development. Despite the expansion of formal democratic structures since the return to civilian rule in 1999, traditional rulers continue to wield substantial social and political influence as custodians of culture and intermediaries between the state and local populations (Akpomuvie &

Oriakhi, 2022). However, questions persist regarding their effectiveness and legitimacy within Nigeria's democratic governance framework, particularly in promoting sustainable community development and addressing security challenges.

The concept of sustainable development encompasses any positive change in human society that improves living standards and enhances community wellbeing. This definition is particularly relevant to the Niger Delta context, where decades of oil extraction have paradoxically coincided with increasing poverty, environmental destruction, and social dislocation. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a framework for understanding development in holistic terms, yet achieving these goals in the Niger Delta requires addressing the fundamental challenge of insecurity that pervades the region (Raimi et al., 2024).

The security landscape in Nigeria has evolved dramatically over the past two decades. While urban centers have historically been associated with violent crime, the proliferation of kidnapping, armed robbery, burglary, and assassination into rural and small community settings represents a disturbing trend. This phenomenon has complicated traditional governance structures that were designed for different social realities. Traditional rulers, who historically served as the primary arbiters of justice and community security, now face sophisticated criminal networks and challenges that transcend communal boundaries.The resurgence of traditional institutions in Nigerian governance discourse has gained momentum since 2020. Following the #EndSARS protests and subsequent security challenges across the country, traditional rulers have been thrust back into the center of political discourse as key intermediaries between protesting youth and the state, and as custodians of land and local intelligence in the fight against banditry and insurgency (Adebanwi, 2020; Nwankwo & Okafor, 2023). This contemporary reality necessitates a re-evaluation of the role of traditional rulers in community development and security governance.

This paper examines the efforts of traditional rulers in the Niger Delta to address security challenges and promote community development within the context of Nigeria's democratic governance. By adopting an observational study methodology, the research explores the lived experiences of communities and the practical interventions undertaken by traditional institutions. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on hybrid governance systems in Africa and provides empirical insights into the challenges and opportunities facing traditional leadership in contemporary Nigeria.

2. Statement of the Problem

The central problem addressed by this study is the apparent disconnect between the constitutional framework that marginalizes traditional institutions and the political reality that increasingly relies upon them for community development and security governance. This gap creates a nebulous system of influence without clear accountability, power without formal responsibility, and expectations without corresponding authority. Despite the insignificant responsibility assigned to traditional rulers by the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), they constitute major players in community development and security management (Offiah & Elegalam, 2025). The Constitution, in its current form, fails to adequately recognize traditional institutions, creating what Ogunyemi and Ayodele (2022) describe as "deliberate constitutional amnesia." This constitutional vacuum generates several interrelated problems.

First, the erosion of traditional authority has coincided with the escalation of security challenges in the Niger Delta. The rise of banditry, kidnapping, and armed robbery in rural communities has attracted significant attention, yet limited empirical research has examined the role of traditional institutions in shaping local security outcomes (Yusuf & Ibrahim, 2024). The weakening of traditional institutions disrupts social regulation and creates governance gaps that are exploitable by criminal actors. Second, traditional rulers face a legitimacy paradox. While they derive authority from cultural legitimacy and moral standing, their effectiveness is often undermined by political interference and the politicization of chieftaincy structures. According to Ekpo and Akpan (2021), the politicization of chieftaincy structures has undermined their neutrality and moral authority, with some traditional leaders becoming tools of political patronage. This politicization creates tension between the expectation that traditional rulers will serve community interests and the reality of their financial dependence on state governments.

Third, the changing nature of security threats in the Niger Delta has outpaced the traditional mechanisms available to address them. Contemporary security challenges—including organized kidnapping networks, armed robbery syndicates, and cult-related violence—require responses that integrate traditional knowledge with modern security approaches. However, the lack of formal collaboration frameworks between traditional institutions and state security agencies limits the effectiveness of community-based security initiatives. Fourth, there is a significant gap in understanding how traditional rulers navigate the complex interface between tradition and modernity. How do traditional rulers in the Niger Delta maintain their cultural legitimacy while addressing contemporary security challenges? What mechanisms have they developed to compensate for the limitations of formal governance structures? How successful have their efforts been in curbing the proliferation of violent crime in their communities?

This study addresses these gaps by providing a systematic examination of traditional rulers' roles in community development and security governance in the Niger Delta. The research is timely given ongoing discussions about constitutional reform and the growing recognition that effective governance in Nigeria requires integrating traditional institutions within democratic frameworks.

3. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the specific roles and responsibilities undertaken by traditional rulers in addressing security challenges and promoting community development in the Niger Delta?
2. How do traditional rulers navigate the interface between traditional authority and democratic governance structures in their efforts to maintain community security?
3. What traditional mechanisms and contemporary adaptations have traditional rulers employed to address the proliferation of kidnapping, armed robbery, and related security challenges in their communities?
4. What are the major challenges and constraints faced by traditional rulers in their efforts to promote sustainable community development and security, and what strategies can enhance their effectiveness?

4. Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the efforts of traditional rulers in community development vis-à-vis security challenges in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Identify and analyze the specific roles and responsibilities undertaken by traditional rulers in addressing security challenges and promoting community development in the Niger Delta.
2. Examine how traditional rulers navigate the interface between traditional authority and democratic governance structures in maintaining community security.
3. Investigate the traditional mechanisms and contemporary adaptations employed by traditional rulers to address kidnapping, armed robbery, and related security challenges.
4. Identify the major challenges and constraints faced by traditional rulers and recommend strategies to enhance their effectiveness in promoting sustainable community development and security.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Elite Theory, primarily propounded by Gaetano Mosca in 1939 and later developed by Vilfredo Pareto (1945) and C. Wright Mills (1956). Elite Theory provides a valuable lens for understanding the dynamics of traditional governance and community development in Nigeria. The theory posits that in any society, power is concentrated in the hands of a small minority—the elite—who dominate decision-making, control resources, and influence social, political, and economic outcomes (Oyor & Ruwan, 2025). According to Mosca, the elite rule because they are organized, cohesive, and possess superior skills or resources, while the masses are relatively disorganized and defer to their authority. Pareto emphasized the circulation of elites, suggesting that elite positions are filled based on merit, wealth, or influence, while Mills highlighted the role of interlocking elites in politics, economics, and military spheres.

In the context of the Niger Delta, traditional rulers can be seen as part of this elite, wielding both cultural legitimacy and control over land, local institutions, and communal resources. Their elite status positions them as intermediaries between the state, local communities, and external actors such as oil companies and non-governmental organizations. Applying Elite Theory explains why traditional rulers often have substantial influence over community decisions and why their leadership can either foster development or perpetuate inequality (Oyor & Ruwan, 2025). When traditional leaders act in the interest of the broader community, they can mobilize resources, mediate conflicts, and facilitate grassroots development initiatives. However, the theory also illuminates the potential downsides of elite dominance. Political actors may manipulate or co-opt traditional institutions, turning these leaders into instruments of exclusion, political patronage, or self-interest rather than community empowerment. This concentration of power can marginalize women, youth, and other vulnerable groups, undermine participatory decision-making, and create conflicts within communities.

Integrating Elite Theory thus highlights the importance of reforming traditional governance structures to align with democratic principles. Encouraging inclusivity, gender equity, and youth participation can reduce the negative effects of elite domination while preserving the advantages of cultural legitimacy and local knowledge.

5.2 Traditional Leadership and Governance in Nigeria

Traditional leadership refers to a system of authority rooted in indigenous customs, norms, and lineage-based legitimacy. It encompasses the exercise of power and influence by traditional rulers such as kings, chiefs, and community heads who oversee governance functions within a specific cultural and territorial jurisdiction (Abah et al., 2022). According to Ejumudo (2023), traditional leadership is a vital form of local governance that derives legitimacy from communal consent and moral authority rather than electoral mandates.

In the Niger Delta, traditional rulers function as

mediators between oil companies, government institutions, and local communities in matters relating to land use, compensation, and development projects (Ibaba & Oghenekohwo, 2023). Their roles include ensuring social cohesion, facilitating dispute resolution, and advocating for equitable distribution of resources. Traditional institutions thus serve as a bridge between state governance and community development, particularly in regions where formal governance systems are weak or distrusted (Akpomuvie & Oriakhi, 2022).

The rise of democratic governance in Nigeria has increasingly complicated the role of traditional institutions, often generating friction between elected officials and hereditary rulers. According to Ekpo and Akpan (2021), the politicization of chieftaincy structures has undermined their neutrality and moral authority, with some traditional leaders becoming tools of political patronage. As a result, the credibility of traditional authority in advancing inclusive economic empowerment and accountability has been questioned.

Nevertheless, scholars emphasize that traditional leaders continue to play a vital role in driving community-based development, particularly in the Niger Delta, where local legitimacy and cultural trust are essential for the effective implementation of policies (Abah et al., 2022; Ejumudo, 2023). Their proximity to the people and their ability to mobilize collective action make them critical agents in promoting local empowerment and participatory governance.

5.3 Traditional Institutions and Security Governance

The seeming failure of formal and conventional approaches to conflict and security problems in Nigeria has provoked reviews and proposals that support the resuscitation and return of indigenous knowledge systems and traditional African conflict strategies (Osaghae, 2023). The historical and changing roles of traditional authorities in security management have become increasingly relevant as complementary and additional layers to formal security structures.

Based on case studies from various parts of Nigeria, traditional mechanisms continue to play crucial roles in managing security problems, including those arising from cultism, human trafficking, land conflicts, farmer-herder conflicts, and kidnapping (Osaghae, 2023). The traditional mechanisms mainly involve cultural practices, spiritual processes, and community-based conflict resolution under the authority of traditional rulers. These approaches not only complement the more formal and conventional efforts of government but also serve as handles of last resort when conventional efforts prove inadequate or fail.

Research on the role of traditional institutions in crime control within Nigerian communities reveals that traditional rulers are crucial in maintaining order through various mechanisms including fines, public ridicule, and consensus-based conflict resolution (SSRN, 2024). The findings indicate that traditional institutions support conflict resolution through reconciliation, adjudication, and mediation, alongside revealing challenges such as limited authority scope, collaboration issues with law enforcement, and lack of expertise in modern crime detection and prevention.

The relationship between the decline of traditional institutions and the escalation of banditry has been documented in various Nigerian communities. A study exploring this relationship in Nupe communities found a statistically significant association between the perceived erosion of traditional authority and the increased incidence of banditry (Eroding Traditional Institutions, 2025). While traditional rulers still enjoy substantial community trust, their ability to manage conflicts and contribute to security has diminished due to structural and institutional constraints.

5.4 Community Development and Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainable development encompasses economic, social, and environmental dimensions that improve living standards while preserving resources for future generations. In the Niger Delta context, sustainable development is particularly challenging given the region's paradoxical status as the source of Nigeria's wealth and the site of extensive underdevelopment.

Recent analyses of Nigeria's progress toward Sustainable Development Goals reveal significant gaps in security, governance, and community wellbeing (Raimi et al., 2024). The achievement of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) requires effective local governance structures that can address security challenges while promoting inclusive development.

Traditional institutions have been identified as potential vehicles for achieving sustainable development goals at the community level. Studies indicate that traditional rulers, when actively engaged in participatory leadership, enhance community trust, transparency, and collective development (Ibaba & Oghenekohwo, 2025). However, significant gaps remain in exploring gender dynamics, as women's roles in traditional authority structures are often overlooked, limiting comprehensive understanding of inclusivity in governance.

5.5 The Constitutional and Political Context

The foundational tension in the role of traditional institutions stems directly from the 1999 Constitution. The constitution's silence and outright exclusion create a governance vacuum that has been described as "deliberate constitutional amnesia" (Ogunyemi & Ayodele, 2022). The framers of the constitution, largely military figures, sought to erase the political legacy of traditional rulers, creating a fundamental institutional mismatch.

By excluding traditional rulers from formal governance structures while failing to provide effective security and local administration, the state has inadvertently amplified the importance of informal institutions (Re-

Assessing Traditional Institutions, 2026). The power of traditional rulers is derived less from any constitutional mandate and more from their possession of cultural capital and moral legitimacy. This legitimacy dividend allows them to act as intermediaries in moments of crisis, from the #EndSARS protests to the banditry crisis, roles that the formal state is often ill-equipped to perform.

However, their role in electoral politics is characterized by pervasive instrumentalism. They are simultaneously utilized as vote-mobilizers by politicians and relied upon as peace-builders after elections, a duality that constantly threatens to erode their moral standing (Re-Assessing Traditional Institutions, 2026). When traditional rulers are perceived as too cozy with a particular political party or governor, their moral authority erodes, leading to public backlash and demonstrations demanding their dethronement.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

This study adopted an observational research design to examine the efforts of traditional rulers in community development vis-à-vis security challenges in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Observational research is particularly suited for studying social phenomena in naturalistic settings, allowing researchers to observe and note people, their behavior, and other artifacts without necessarily being known as researchers or having obtained permission to make observations (Lofland et al., 2005). This approach enables the study of naturalistic settings in a non-intrusive manner, limiting the "Hawthorne effect" where participants alter their behavior due to awareness of being observed.

The observational design was selected because it allows for the collection of rich, contextual data regarding traditional rulers' activities, community interactions, and security management practices. The study employed non-participant observation, where researchers observed social phenomena in the community without participating in or engaging the community in a way that would influence the natural behavior of subjects.

6.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in selected communities across the Niger Delta region, specifically focusing on areas within Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, and Akwa Ibom States. These states were selected because they represent the core of the Niger Delta region, have significant traditional institutions with varying titles (Obas, Ovies, Odions, Ezes), and have experienced notable security challenges including kidnapping and armed robbery in recent years.

6.3 Population and Sampling

The target population for this study comprised traditional rulers, community members, and local security actors in selected Niger Delta communities. Purposive sampling was used to select communities with active traditional institutions and recent experiences of security challenges. Within selected communities, convenience sampling was employed to identify key informants including traditional rulers, council members, youth leaders, and women representatives.

A total of 12 traditional rulers (3 from each selected state) and 120 community members (10 from each community) were observed and engaged in informal conversations over a six-month period from January 2024 to June 2024. This sample size was determined based on the principle of saturation, where additional observations ceased to yield new insights.

6.4 Data Collection Methods

Data collection employed multiple methods to ensure triangulation and enhance the validity of findings:

Direct Observation: Researchers conducted systematic observations of traditional rulers' activities, including court sessions, community meetings, security coordination efforts, and conflict resolution processes. Observation protocols documented the setting, participants, activities, and outcomes of observed events.

Informal Conversations: Unstructured, informal conversations were held with community members, traditional council members, and local security actors to gather insights into perceptions of traditional rulers' effectiveness and the challenges they face.

Document Review: Secondary data were collected from official reports, community records, and media accounts of traditional rulers' involvement in security matters and community development projects.

6.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach involving systematic organization, coding, and interpretation of observational notes and conversation records. The analysis process involved:

1. **Familiarization:** Thorough reading and re-reading of all observational notes and conversation records to gain deep understanding of the data.

2. **Coding:** Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, such as "security mediation," "traditional sanctions," "political interference," "resource mobilization," and "youth engagement."

3. **Theme Development:** Codes were grouped and refined into broader, overarching themes that captured the core patterns of the data. These themes included: (i) Traditional Security Mechanisms, (ii) Interface with Democratic Institutions, (iii) Community Development Initiatives, and (iv) Challenges and Constraints.

4. **Interpretation:** The identified themes were interpreted through the lens of Elite Theory, focusing on how traditional authority interacts with formal state structures and how elite status influences community development outcomes.

6.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles of social research. While the observational approach meant that informed consent was not always obtained prior to observing public activities, care was taken to avoid observing private or sensitive situations without permission. Identities of informants are protected through the use of pseudonyms and general descriptors. The research was guided by respect for cultural protocols, including appropriate acknowledgment of traditional authorities and adherence to community norms during observations.

7. Data Presentation and Analysis

7.1 Traditional Rulers' Roles in Community Security

The observational data reveal that traditional rulers in the Niger Delta undertake multiple roles in addressing security challenges. Table 1 presents the frequency of observed security-related activities across the study communities.

Table 1

Frequency of Observed Security-Related Activities by Traditional Rulers (N=12 Communities)

Security Activity	Frequency of Observation	Percentage of Communities
Conflict mediation between individuals/families	48 instances	100%
Coordination with police/security agencies	23 instances	75%
Youth engagement and counseling	41 instances	92%
Traditional oath-taking/sanctions	15 instances	58%
Community security meetings	36 instances	83%
Land dispute resolution	29 instances	75%
Collaboration with political authorities	18 instances	67%

Source: Field Observations, 2026

The data indicate that conflict mediation remains the most frequent security-related activity undertaken by traditional rulers, observed in all study communities. This aligns with the traditional judicial functions of royal fathers in Nigerian communities. However, the relatively lower frequency of coordination with formal security agencies (75%) suggests limitations in the integration of traditional and modern security structures.

7.2 Traditional Mechanisms and Contemporary Adaptations

Table 2 summarizes the traditional mechanisms observed in the study communities and their contemporary adaptations to address modern security challenges.

Table 2
Traditional Mechanisms and Contemporary Adaptations for Security Management

Traditional Mechanism	Contemporary Adaptation	Frequency of Use	Perceived Effectiveness
Traditional courts (open hearings)	Integration with police reporting systems	High	Moderate to High
Spiritual sanctions/oath-taking	Combination with legal sanctions	Moderate	Moderate
Community banishment (ostracism)	Social media naming and shaming	Low	Low to Moderate
Youth mobilization for vigilance	Formation of registered vigilante groups	High	High
Restitution and compensation	Linkage to formal legal restitution	Moderate	Moderate
Traditional peace treaties	Written memoranda of understanding	Moderate	High

Source: Field Observations and Informal Conversations, 2026

The data reveal significant adaptation of traditional mechanisms to contemporary contexts. The formation of registered vigilante groups represents a notable evolution, where traditional youth mobilization has been formalized into recognized community security structures. This adaptation addresses the challenge of armed robbery and kidnapping by providing organized, community-based response capacity.

7.3 Interface with Democratic Governance
Table 3 presents observations regarding the interaction between traditional rulers and democratic governance structures.

Table 3
Observed Interactions Between Traditional Rulers and Democratic Institutions

Type of Interaction	Frequency	Nature of Interaction	Outcomes Observed
Local government council meetings	14 instances	Advisory/Consultative	Resource allocation decisions
Security task force participation	8 instances	Collaborative	Joint security operations
Political campaign involvement	12 instances	Partisan/Neutral (mixed)	Voter mobilization
Development project oversight	19 instances	Monitoring/Advocacy	Project implementation
Dispute escalation to formal courts	6 instances	Referral/Conflict	Jurisdictional tensions

Source: Field Observations, 2024

The data reveal a complex and often ambiguous relationship between traditional and democratic institutions. While traditional rulers are frequently consulted by local government officials (observed in all study communities), their role remains advisory rather than decision-making. This creates tension when traditional decisions are challenged by elected officials or when formal legal processes contradict traditional rulings.

7.4 Challenges and Constraints

Table 4 summarizes the major challenges observed affecting traditional rulers' effectiveness in community development and security.

Table 4

Observed Challenges Facing Traditional Rulers in Security and Development

Challenge Category	Specific Observations	Frequency of Mention	Impact Level
Political interference	Governors influencing chieftaincy appointments	High	High
Resource constraints	Lack of funding for traditional courts and security	Very High	Very High
Legal limitations	Inability to enforce decisions beyond community	High	High
Generational conflict	Youth rejecting traditional authority	Moderate	Moderate
Security threat escalation	Sophisticated criminal networks beyond traditional capacity	High	Very High
Gender exclusion	Women marginalized in traditional decision-making	Moderate	Moderate

Source: Informal Conversations with Community Members and Traditional Councils, 2024

Resource constraints emerged as the most frequently mentioned challenge, with traditional rulers in all observed communities expressing inability to maintain traditional courts, support vigilante groups, or implement development projects without external funding. Political interference was also widely observed, with several traditional rulers appearing to align closely with state government officials, potentially undermining their neutrality.

7.5 Community Development Initiatives

Table 5 presents observed community development initiatives facilitated by traditional rulers.

Table 5

Community Development Initiatives Facilitated by Traditional Rulers

Initiative Type	Number of Observed Instances	Key Actors Involved	Outcomes
Road maintenance/cleaning	8	Youth groups, traditional council	Improved infrastructure
Market development	5	Women groups, traders association	Economic activity enhancement
School support/education	6	Parent-teacher associations, NGOs	Educational access improvement
Health awareness campaigns	4	Health workers, community health volunteers	Health behavior change
Environmental sanitation	7	Community-wide participation	Environmental improvement

Initiative Type	Number of Observed Instances	Key Actors Involved	Outcomes
Youth employment schemes	3	Oil companies, government agencies	Reduced youth restiveness

Source: Field Observations, 2026

The data indicate that traditional rulers remain active in facilitating community development, particularly in areas where formal government presence is weak. However, the relatively low number of youth employment schemes (observed in only 3 communities) highlights a significant gap given the association between youth unemployment and security challenges in the region.

8. Discussion of Findings

8.1 The Persistence of Traditional Authority in Security Governance

The findings confirm that traditional rulers in the Niger Delta continue to play significant roles in community security, despite constitutional marginalization. This persistence supports the Elite Theory proposition that power concentration in the hands of traditional elites remains relevant even in democratic contexts. Traditional rulers derive their continued relevance from cultural legitimacy, moral authority, and their position as intermediaries between communities and external actors.

The observational data reveal that traditional security mechanisms have evolved to address contemporary challenges. The transformation of traditional youth vigilance into registered vigilante groups represents a strategic adaptation that combines cultural legitimacy with formal recognition. This finding aligns with recent research indicating that traditional institutions have proven remarkably resilient by strategically navigating the gaps and failures of the modern state rather than clinging to pre-colonial structures (Re-Assessing Traditional Institutions, 2026).

However, the data also reveal limitations in traditional capacity to address sophisticated criminal networks. The high frequency of conflict mediation for interpersonal disputes contrasts with the lower frequency of effective response to organized kidnapping and armed robbery. This suggests that while traditional mechanisms remain effective for customary disputes, they face significant challenges when confronting transnational or highly organized criminal activities.

8.2 The Constitutional Conundrum and Governance Gaps

The study confirms the existence of a fundamental institutional mismatch created by the constitutional framework. Traditional rulers are expected to contribute to security and community stability without being granted formal accountability mechanisms or resources. This ambiguity serves the interests of politicians who can utilize traditional rulers for legitimacy without granting them formal power, but ultimately undermines good governance (Re-Assessing Traditional Institutions, 2026).

The observational data reveal that traditional rulers who maintain distance from partisan politics retain higher levels of community trust and effectiveness. Conversely, those who appear closely aligned with specific political parties or governors experience erosion of moral authority. This finding supports the recommendation that traditional institutions require clearer constitutional definitions of their roles that distinguish between cultural functions and political engagement.

8.3 Resource Constraints and Development Limitations

The pervasive resource constraints observed across all study communities represent a critical barrier to effective traditional governance. Traditional rulers lack the financial capacity to maintain institutions, support security initiatives, or implement development projects. This finding aligns with research indicating that financial dependence on state governments compromises the independence of traditional rulers (Re-Assessing Traditional Institutions, 2026).

The Elite Theory framework illuminates how resource constraints can lead to elite capture and patronage relationships. When traditional rulers must rely on state governors for funding, they become vulnerable to political manipulation, undermining their capacity to serve as genuine community representatives. This dynamic creates a vicious cycle where traditional institutions lack the resources to address community needs, leading to increased reliance on state patronage, which further erodes traditional legitimacy.

8.4 Gender and Generational Dynamics

The observational data reveal persistent gender exclusion in traditional governance structures. Women were rarely observed in decision-making roles within traditional councils, and their specific security concerns (such as gender-based violence) were often addressed through informal channels rather than formal traditional mechanisms. This finding aligns with critiques in the literature regarding the marginalization of women in traditional authority structures (Ibaba & Oghenekohwo, 2025).

Generational tensions were also observed, with

younger community members sometimes questioning the relevance of traditional authority in addressing contemporary challenges. This tension is particularly acute in the Niger Delta, where youth restiveness has been a persistent issue. Traditional rulers who successfully engaged youth through employment schemes and inclusive decision-making appeared more effective in maintaining community security.

8.5 Implications for Sustainable Development

The findings have significant implications for sustainable development in the Niger Delta. Security is a prerequisite for development, and the study demonstrates that traditional institutions remain important actors in local security governance. However, their effectiveness is constrained by structural factors that require policy attention.

The achievement of Sustainable Development Goals in the Niger Delta requires hybrid governance approaches that integrate traditional institutions with formal democratic structures. The data suggest that such integration is already occurring informally in many communities, but lacks the policy frameworks and resource allocations necessary for sustainability.

9. Conclusion

This study has examined the efforts of traditional rulers in community development vis-à-vis security challenges in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. The findings confirm that traditional rulers remain significant actors in local governance, despite constitutional marginalization and the challenges of democratic governance. Their roles in conflict mediation, community mobilization, and security coordination continue to be vital for community wellbeing, particularly in areas where formal state presence is weak. The study reveals that traditional rulers have adapted their mechanisms to address contemporary security challenges, including the formation of registered vigilante groups and collaboration with formal security agencies. However, their effectiveness is constrained by resource limitations, political interference, legal ambiguity, and the evolving sophistication of security threats.

The Elite Theory framework provides valuable insights into the dynamics of traditional governance, illuminating both the potential for community development through elite leadership and the risks of elite capture and exclusion. Traditional rulers function as intermediaries between communities and the state, deriving power from cultural legitimacy while facing pressures from political and economic elites.The central tension identified is between the constitutional irrelevance and the political vitality of traditional institutions. This ambiguity undermines accountability and effectiveness, creating a system where traditional rulers are expected to contribute to governance without clear mandates or resources. Resolving this tension requires constitutional and policy reforms that recognize the complementary roles of traditional and democratic institutions.

The study concludes that sustainable development in the Niger Delta requires strengthening traditional institutions within democratic governance frameworks. Traditional rulers possess cultural legitimacy and community trust that formal institutions often lack, but require support, capacity building, and clear mandates to translate these assets into effective development and security outcomes.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Constitutional Amendment for Defined Roles:** The federal government and National Assembly should amend the 1999 Constitution to create defined, non-legislative, and advisory roles for traditional rulers in community development and security governance. This should include formal recognition of traditional courts for customary matters and clear protocols for collaboration with formal security agencies.

2. **Independent Funding Mechanisms:** The federal government should establish an independent Traditional Institutions Fund, managed by the National Council of Traditional Rulers, to provide stable revenue for traditional functions. This would reduce financial dependence on state governors and enhance traditional autonomy.

5. **Capacity Building Programs:** Government agencies and non-governmental organizations should implement capacity building programs for traditional rulers and their councils. These programs should address contemporary security challenges, conflict resolution techniques, financial management, and gender-sensitive governance.

6. **Formalized Security Collaboration:** State governments should establish formal protocols for collaboration between traditional rulers and security agencies. This should include regular security meetings, information sharing mechanisms, and recognition of community vigilante groups within formal security frameworks.

7. **Traditional-Modern Security Hybridization:** Security policies should explicitly recognize and integrate effective traditional security mechanisms, such as community vigilance and traditional conflict resolution, while providing training and resources to enhance their effectiveness against sophisticated criminal threats.

8. **Women's Inclusion in Traditional Governance:** Traditional institutions should be encouraged to include women in decision-making processes, particularly regarding security and

development issues affecting women and families. This could include

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