

Sea Piracy and Security in Nigerian Maritime Security Environment: Bayelsa State in Perspective

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Abstract

Maritime piracy has evolved from an essentially localized phenomenon of adhoc banditry conducted by local criminals to one funded by the global networks of transnational organized crime. They further complicating the issue, the sources of transnational pirate finance and organization have become deeply intertwined with legitimate and criminal forms of private enterprise. These criminal organizations are capable of funding sophisticated piracy operations from hundreds or thousands of miles away. Accordingly, the most successful of the localized counter-piracy efforts have merely pushed the pirates and their financiers into waters bodies, in neighbouring states hence sea pirates are always poised to return to their trade if enforcement efforts fade. The Niger Delta region had been home to a plethora of pirate groups operating in the vast mangrove swamp. The long stretch of undeveloped coastline in Bayelsa state and open ocean will continue to permit the launching of pirate attacks, both on government facilities and the general populace plying the waterways. It is pertinent to note that so long as there are poor men along these shorelines, there will be a ready supply of pirate labor. This study will use both primary and secondary sources of data to examine the activities of sea pirates on maritime transportation in Bayelsa state. This study concludes that better leaving condition and youth employment will greatly help mitigate the level sea piracy in Bayelsa state.

Keyword: Ungoverned space, Sea Pirates, Maritime Security, Maritime Transportation

Introduction

The phenomenon of sea piracy has evolved significantly in recent decades, transforming from localized acts of banditry into complex operations often linked to transnational organized crime. In Nigeria, the transformation activities of sea pirate have been profoundly influenced by the Niger Delta's socio-economic, political, and environmental dynamics. The Niger Delta, rich in oil resources, has attracted multinational corporations and vast investments; however, local communities have frequently been left marginalized and impoverished. This disconnection has fueled frustration and resentment, creating fertile ground for sea piracy to flourish as a means of survival among disaffected youth.

Historically, the waterways of the Niger Delta have served as vital conduits for trade and communication among communities. However, the discovery of oil in the mid-20th century marked a pivotal moment, leading to increased exploitation of natural resources at the expense of local livelihoods. Environmental degradation from oil spills and gas flaring has devastated traditional fishing and farming practices, further entrenching economic hardships. As communities grapple with the consequences of these developments, sea piracy has emerged as an alternative livelihood for many, highlighting the urgent need to address the underlying issues that drive individuals toward criminal activities.

The rise of piracy in Bayelsa State is not merely a product of economic despair but is also intertwined with political instability and ineffective governance. The region has witnessed a proliferation of armed groups, often fueled by a history of neglect and mismanagement by both state and federal authorities. These armed groups have capitalized on the pervasive insecurity, using sea piracy as a tool for asserting control over waterways and resources. The Nigerian government's militarized responses to these challenges have often exacerbated tensions, undermining trust between local communities and security forces, and perpetuating a cycle of violence and lawlessness.

This paper aims to examine the multifaceted causes and implications of sea piracy in Bayelsa State, with a focus on its impact on maritime security and local economies. By utilizing both primary and secondary sources, the study will explore the interconnectedness of socio-economic marginalization, environmental degradation, and political instability in shaping the piracy landscape. Ultimately, it seeks to provide insights into effective strategies for mitigating piracy and fostering long-term stability in the region, emphasizing the importance of addressing the root causes of this pressing issue.

Background to Sea Piracy in the Niger Delta Before 1999

The Niger Delta region, characterized by its complex network of rivers, mangroves, and estuaries, has long been a pivotal maritime area for trade and commerce. Historically, the delta's waterways enabled the transport of goods and fostered inter-community relations. However, the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956 marked a significant shift in the region's socio-economic dynamics, transforming it into a site of intense economic interest for multinational oil corporations. While oil extraction brought substantial revenues to the Nigerian state, it resulted in severe environmental degradation, including oil spills and gas flaring, which devastated local fisheries and agriculture (Okumagba, 2009). This neglect and exploitation deepened the economic marginalization of local communities, fostering widespread discontent and resentment among the Ijaw and other ethnic groups.

In the years leading up to 1999, the Niger Delta witnessed increasing unrest fueled by the growing frustration of local populations. Various ethnic militias, most notably the Egbesu Boys of Africa, emerged as responses to perceived injustices wrought by the oil industry and the federal government. Initially focused on cultural identity and environmental advocacy, these groups gradually adopted more militant stances, often resorting to violence as a means of asserting their rights and reclaiming their resources (Etekpe, 2007). The government's failure to address the grievances of these communities, coupled with heavy-handed military responses to protests, created a volatile environment where piracy could thrive. The lack of effective policing in the region, combined with the socioeconomic desperation of local youths, made sea piracy an attractive alternative for survival and economic gain.

By the late 1990s, the rise of organized armed groups in the Niger Delta led to a significant increase in maritime piracy. These groups began targeting oil tankers and supply vessels, using the delta's intricate waterways to evade law enforcement. The porous nature of the region's borders and its under-policed waters facilitated the operations of these pirates, allowing them to conduct hijackings and thefts with relative ease (Hazen & Horner, 2007). The government's militarized approach to quelling dissent only exacerbated the situation, often resulting in violent clashes between armed groups and military forces, further entrenching a culture of lawlessness (Amakiri, 2010). As Nigeria transitioned to democracy in 1999, the groundwork for rampant sea piracy had already been laid, with local armed groups capitalizing on the pervasive insecurity to assert control over their waterways and resources.

Operations of Sea Pirates in Bayelsa state Since 1999

Since the turn of the millennium, Bayelsa State has emerged as a significant hotspot for sea piracy in Nigeria, influenced by a myriad of socio-economic, political, and environmental factors. The discovery of vast oil reserves in the region has drawn substantial investments from multinational corporations; however, local communities have often seen little benefit, leading to widespread frustration and economic hardship. This disenfranchisement has driven many youths to engage in piracy and other maritime crimes as a means of survival. Reports indicate that since 1999, operations have primarily involved hijacking vessels, stealing crude oil, and conducting kidnappings for ransom, which have severely disrupted the local economy and security Bayelsa State (Okumagba, 2009; Hazen & Horner, 2007).

The tactics employed by sea pirates in Bayelsa are notably adaptive, leveraging the region's complex geography to enhance their operations. The intricate network of rivers, creeks, and mangrove swamps offers both cover and escape routes, allowing pirates to navigate stealthily. Small, fast boats are commonly used, enabling quick approaches to larger vessels, such as oil tankers and supply ships. Organized groups have been identified as the primary operators, often employing sophisticated weaponry acquired through illegal arms trafficking and sometimes with the tacit support of local political elites (Nwankwo, 2015). This strategic approach has allowed them to execute attacks with relative ease and evade capture, posing significant challenges to law enforcement agencies.

According Ogoniba Ipigansi, state chairman, Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria (MWUN), on 18 January, 2022, sea pirates dumped boat driver and 14 passengers in the boat and carted away the 115 horsepower yamaha engine of the boat and other valuable items along the Brass River (Ogoniba, 2025). On 15 April 2025, surveillance contract workers in Southern Ijaw were ambushed by sea pirates. One of the workers, Mr Ekerete Odoh, an indigene of Igbomotoru 1 community in Southern Ijaw LGA, was killed, while others sustained injuries (Ombolo, 2025). Also in April, gunmen suspected to be militants ambushed the patrol team of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) at Igbomotoru community, Southern Ijaw LGA, killing NSCDC personnel identified as CAI Victor Ofem Ibang and injuring three others. On 13 May 2025, sea pirates attacked a boat conveying market women to Southern Ijaw Local Government along the Lobia/Foropa waterways where four women were abducted to the nearby bush (Asanebi 2025). The safety of Bayelsa State waterways and other coastal lines in the Niger Delta has continued to be a matter of concern for the people living and doing businesses in the areas.

The Nigerian government's response to piracy has been multifaceted but often criticized for its effectiveness. Military operations, such as Operation Pulo Shield, have been launched to combat

piracy and protect oil installations, yet these efforts frequently result in heavy-handed tactics that exacerbate tensions with local communities. Many residents view the military presence as an occupation rather than protection, which undermines trust and cooperation (Etebu, 2019). The lack of substantive socio-economic development initiatives in Bayelsa has also left many youths with limited legitimate opportunities, perpetuating the cycle of piracy and violence. Without addressing these underlying grievances, the operations of sea pirates in Bayelsa State are likely to persist, presenting ongoing challenges to both national security and regional development (Omeje, 2005).

Impact of Sea Piracy on Maritime Security in Bayelsa State

Sea piracy negatively impacts Bayelsa State economy by disrupting water transportation, impeding the local fishing economy, and increasing the cost of doing business due to security expenses, potential loss of goods, and ransom payments (Edoho, 2023). Attacks on offshore facilities and oil theft by sea pirates reduces the state government's revenue from federal allocations and taxation. Sea piracy in Bayelsa State causes significant economic disruption by targeting vessels involved in oil transportation and fishing, leading to increased operational costs for businesses in the maritime domain of Bayelsa State. Frequent hijackings and kidnappings create an atmosphere of insecurity, deterring investment and driving up insurance premiums for maritime operations for companies in Bayelsa State. The theft of crude oil and other resources perpetrated by sea pirates directly impacts government revenues, as illegal activities reduce the amount of oil available for legitimate sale (Balogun, 2018). Additionally, businessmen and local fishermen operating in the maritime domain of Bayelsa State face losses due to piracy-related violence and restricted access to fishing grounds. This cycle economic of disruption ultimately stifles economic growth and exacerbates poverty in Bayelsa State, as marine communities struggle with diminished livelihoods and heightened insecurity in the maritime domain. The overall effect is a destabilized economy, further entrenching the socio-economic challenges faced by local populations especially those in the rural areas of Bayelsa State (Balogun, 2018).

Rising incidents of sea piracy in Bayelsa State led to anxiety and a feeling of insecurity among residents in various communities. Sea piracy in Bayelsa State facilitates the trafficking of weapons to criminals, reinforcing gang violence and maritime criminality, as sea piracy often overlaps with militancy and cult violence. In Bayelsa, sea piracy has significantly contributed to increased insecurity in the maritime domain of the state through the proliferation of armed groups and the erosion of public trust in law enforcement agencies (Osadume, Okene, Ikubor, 2024). Sea piracy has become more organized, it has attracted various criminal elements, including militants and cult groups, who exploit the chaotic environment for their illicit gains. This convergence of criminal activities exacerbates violence, leading to turf wars among rival gangs and increasing the overall crime rate in Bayelsa State. The presence of armed pirates not only threatens maritime activities in Bayelsa State but also spills over into land-based communities, where violent confrontations with security forces often occur. Residents are frequently caught in the crossfire, resulting in casualties and property damage, which further instills fear and anxiety within local populations in Bayelsa State.

Consequently, the rise of sea piracy has strained relationships between the community and security agencies in the maritime domain of Bayelsa State. In many cases, local communities perceive the Nigerian military and police presence as an occupying force rather than protectors, leading to a breakdown in trust for communities along the Bayelsa State maritime domain. This distrust hampers effective collaboration between law enforcement and riverine communities in Bayelsa State, making

it difficult to gather intelligence on pirate activities and undermining efforts to establish security in the region (Nwakanma, Obafemi, and Eludoyin, 2021). As security forces conduct heavy-handed operations to combat sea piracy, they often exacerbate tensions, resulting in community resentment. Consequently, the insecurity created by sea pirates in Bayelsa State not only affects maritime operations of the state but also destabilizes the entire socio-political landscape of Bayelsa State, perpetuating a cycle of violence and lawlessness that is difficult to break.

The prevalence of piracy in Bayelsa State erodes citizens' trust in the capacity of the state government and national security agencies to protect lives and property in the state maritime domain. Illicit profits from sea piracy have continued to fund criminal networks, such as militant groups and oil bunkering syndicates, which destabilize the state government and fuel political instability (Balogun, 2022). Thus, weakened state-community relations significantly contribute to the flourishing of sea piracy in Bayelsa State. When trust between the government and local communities erodes, it creates an environment where criminal activities like sea piracy can thrive. This breakdown in trust often stems from a perceived failure of the state to provide adequate security, economic opportunities, and social services for the people in the Bayelsa State maritime domain. In Bayelsa State, the marginalization and neglect foster resentment, leading some community members to either actively support or passively condone sea piracy, viewing it as a means of economic survival or a form of resistance against the government and multinational oil companies (Jack and Tokpo, 2021).

Sea piracy in Bayelsa State poses security threats to maritime transport, hindering economic activities within the maritime domain. The coastal communities in Bayelsa State, including Brass, is known for high sea pirate activity, which limits marine operations and increases shipping costs due to high insurance premiums (Essien and Adongoi, 2015). In Bayelsa State, sea piracy continues to pose a significant threat to maritime business operations in Bayelsa State by creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and risk for shipping and logistics companies. The frequent hijacking of vessels and attacks on oil tankers deter investment from the state, as businesses face escalating costs related to security measures, insurance premiums, and potential losses from piracy-related incidents. Shipping companies often find themselves rerouting vessels or employing costly security escorts to navigate the dangerous waters of Bayelsa State maritime domain, directly affecting their profitability and operational efficiency (Chinda, 2025). This disruption not only impacts on the companies operational in Bayelsa State but also has ripple effects on the local economy, as reduced maritime activity leads to job losses and diminished economic opportunities for communities that rely on the maritime sector for sustenance.

In addition, the threat of sea piracy undermines the overall stability of the maritime industry in Bayelsa State, further complicating logistics and supply chains management in the maritime domain. As attacks become more frequent and brazen, companies have opted to avoid the region altogether, leading to decreased trade and commerce. These declines in maritime transactions had exacerbated poverty and youth unemployment in local communities, as many residents depend on maritime activities for their livelihoods in Bayelsa state riverine communities (Joab-Peterside 2015). Furthermore, the negative perception of Bayelsa as a high-risk area for sea piracy can deter foreign investment and hinder the growth of legitimate maritime businesses, perpetuating a cycle of insecurity and economic stagnation for the state. Ultimately, until effective measures are implemented to combat piracy and restore confidence within the maritime sector, the region will continue to face significant challenges in its economic development and security landscape.

In Bayelsa state, sea piracy has ignited social violence in the region, with pirates engaging in kidnapping, robbery, and molestation of local boat passengers, as well as hijacking ships and oil vessels. Clashes between pirates and public security forces often cause collateral damage among residents. Sea piracy has ignited social violence in Bayelsa State by creating an environment of lawlessness that spills over into local communities (Jimoh, 2015). The activities of sea pirates in Bayelsa State often led to violent confrontations with security forces, which can result in collateral damage and fear among residents. This violence is not limited to maritime activities; it frequently manifests in the form of retaliatory attacks, gang rivalries, and clashes between different criminal groups that vie for control over lucrative piracy routes. As armed groups in Bayelsa state engage in turf wars, sometimes innocent bystanders often become casualties, fostering a climate of fear and insecurity that affects daily life in the region. The intertwining of sea piracy with local criminal elements, such as cult groups and militias, further exacerbates the situation, as these factions may resort to violence to assert their dominance or retaliate against perceived threats on the maritime domain of Bayelsa State (Ofosu-Boateng, 2018).

Moreso, the social fabric of Bayelsa State is weakened as sea piracy-related violence breeds distrust and division within communities in the state. Residents may feel compelled to align themselves with criminal factions for protection or economic gain, further entrenching cycles of violence and criminality. This reliance on piracy and associated criminal activities can undermine traditional community structures and norms in Bayelsa State, as the allure of quick financial gain overrides the values of cooperation and mutual support (Ibeanu, 2016). Thus, as violence becomes normalized, it perpetuates a culture of fear and desperation, making it difficult for Bayelsa State to restore order and for communities to engage in constructive dialogue about security and development. The result is a vicious cycle of social violence fueled by the ongoing threat of piracy, which continues to destabilize the region and hinder efforts toward peace and reconciliation.

Factors Responsible for Sea Piracy in Bayelsa State

Youth unemployment and poverty are fundamental drivers of sea piracy in Bayelsa State, creating a fertile ground for criminal activities. With limited economic opportunities and high rates of youth unemployment, many young people in the region find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty, leading them to seek alternative means of livelihood. The allure of quick financial gain from sea piracy becomes an attractive option, as it requires minimal investment and can yield substantial rewards compared to traditional job prospects (Balogun & Adesanya, 2022). This economic desperation often pushes young individuals into the ranks of pirate groups, where they may perceive themselves as taking control of their circumstances, albeit through illegal means.

In Bayelsa State, the lack of access to education and vocational training (skills) exacerbates the situation, leaving youth ill-equipped to pursue legitimate employment opportunities in the oil rich state. Thus, many young people in Bayelsa grow disillusioned with the state's failure to address their needs, breeding frustration and a sense of hopelessness among the teeming youth population in the state (Otoo, 2025). These youths witness the wealth generated by illegal activities, the perception that sea piracy is a viable path to success becomes entrenched. This cycle of poverty and unemployment not only fuels sea piracy but also perpetuates a broader culture of criminality in Bayelsa State, where illegal activities become normalized as a means of survival. Consequently, addressing youth unemployment and poverty through targeted economic initiatives is essential to mitigating the factors that drive young people toward sea piracy and fostering long-term stability in the region (Otoo, 2025).

It is pertinent to note that harsh economic conditions and political instability in Bayelsa State have significantly contributed to the rise of sea piracy, creating an environment ripe for criminal activities thrive. Bayelsa State rich in oil resources, has seen a paradoxical situation where local communities remain impoverished despite the wealth generated by oil extraction. Economic mismanagement, corruption, and a lack of infrastructural development have left many residents without access to basic services, leading to widespread discontent at the pace of development in Bayelsa State (Diepreye, 2025). This dire economic reality drives individuals, especially unemployed youths, to seek alternative means of survival, including engaging in sea piracy, as they view it as one of the few viable options for escaping poverty and securing financial gain quickly.

Political instability further exacerbates the situation by undermining law enforcement and governance structures. The frequent changes in leadership, coupled with ineffective policies and a lack of accountability, create a power vacuum that allows criminal enterprises to flourish in Bayelsa State (Ibaba, 2008). In such an unstable environment, sea piracy becomes a lucrative venture as enforcement agencies struggle to maintain law and order in the maritime domain of Bayelsa State. Additionally, political factions may exploit sea piracy for their own agendas, either by using it as a tool for negotiation or as a means to divert attention from governance failures. This interplay of harsh economic conditions and political instability not only fuels sea piracy in Bayelsa State but also perpetuates a cycle of violence and insecurity, making it difficult for rural communities in Bayelsa State to achieve lasting peace and economic development (Ibaba, 2009).

Another contributory factor to sea piracy in Bayelsa State is socio-economic marginalization and environmental degradation. Socio-economic marginalization in Bayelsa State plays a critical role in fostering sea piracy, as many communities feel excluded from the wealth generated by the abundant oil resources in the state. Despite living in close proximity to these lucrative industries, residents in rural communities in Bayelsa State often experience high levels of poverty, youth unemployment, and limited access to essential services (Okoh and Clark, 2024). This marginalization breeds frustration and resentment, pushing some individuals toward illegal activities like piracy as a means of economic survival. For many, engaging in piracy is viewed as a way to reclaim a sense of agency and access resources that they feel have been unjustly denied to them by both the state and multinational corporations.

Environmental degradation further compounds these socio-economic challenges and fuels sea piracy in Bayelsa State. The oil industry has led to significant ecological damage, including oil spills and destruction of fishing grounds, which are vital for local livelihoods for communities in Bayelsa state maritime domain (Otoo, 2025). As traditional sources of income diminish due to environmental destruction, rural communities are left with fewer options for sustainable living. In Bayelsa State marine domain, this loss of livelihood drives individuals toward sea piracy as a desperate attempt to make ends meet. The intertwining of socio-economic marginalization and environmental degradation creates a cycle of desperation and criminality, where sea piracy becomes a perceived solution to the broader systemic issues faced by the people of Bayelsa State (Orogun, 2010). Addressing these root causes is essential for mitigating sea piracy and fostering long-term stability in Bayelsa State maritime domain.

Availability of waterways and ports that are difficult to secure is one of the factors that continues to aid the activities of sea pirates in Bayelsa State. The geographical features of Bayelsa State, characterized by its extensive network of waterways in the vast mangrove swamp and numerous unconventional sea port, significantly contributes to the prevalence of sea piracy in the state. The

intricate system of rivers, creeks, and estuaries in Bayelsa State maritime domain creates a complex maritime landscape that is challenging to monitor and secure effectively (Chinda, 2025). Sea pirates in Bayelsa state exploit these natural features, using them as routes for escape and evasion, making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to track their movements. The sheer number of access points to the sea allows piratical activities to flourish, as criminals can easily navigate secluded areas to launch attacks on vessels without fear of immediate retribution in Bayelsa State maritime domain.

Way Forward

Curbing sea piracy in Bayelsa State requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the root causes of the problem while enhancing security measures in the state maritime domain. Firstly, there is a critical need for economic development initiatives aimed at creating and improving job opportunities for the youths in Bayelsa State. By investing in vocational training programs, entrepreneurship support, and sustainable livelihoods, the state can provide alternative pathways for individuals who might otherwise resort to sea piracy for financial gain. Engaging rural communities in economic activities related to fisheries, tourism, and renewable energy can help create a sense of ownership and investment in Bayelsa state will foster stability, thus reducing the allure of criminal enterprises.

In addition to economic initiatives, strengthening the security framework is essential for effectively combating sea piracy. This includes increasing the presence of law enforcement and naval patrols in vulnerable waterways and ports in Bayelsa State maritime domain, as well as improving coordination among various security agencies operating in the state. Furthermore, investing in advanced surveillance technologies, such as drones and maritime tracking systems, can enhance the ability to monitor and respond to sea pirate activities in real-time (Otoo, 2025). Furthermore, fostering partnerships with international maritime security forces can provide additional resources and training, bolstering the state's capacity to deal with piracy and ensuring safer maritime operations.

Lastly, addressing the underlying socio-political issues is crucial for creating a sustainable solution to sea piracy in Bayelsa State. This involves promoting good governance, transparency, and accountability within the local government to rebuild trust with the community. Engaging in dialogue with local leaders and stakeholders can facilitate a collaborative approach to governance, where the needs and concerns of the rural population are prioritized in Bayelsa State. By creating an inclusive environment that promotes social justice and equitable access to resources, the state can mitigate the factors that drive individuals toward sea piracy, ultimately leading to a more secure and prosperous Bayelsa State.

Conclusion

In conclusion, effectively addressing sea piracy in Bayelsa State requires a multifaceted approach that tackles the root causes of this pressing issue while enhancing security measures. First and foremost, the government should prioritize economic development initiatives aimed at creating sustainable job opportunities for the youths of Bayelsa State. This could involve expanding vocational training programs and supporting entrepreneurship in sectors such as fisheries, tourism, and renewable energy, thereby providing viable alternatives to sea piracy and reducing economic desperation. Second, strengthening law enforcement is critical; increasing the presence of naval patrols in vulnerable waterways and ports, coupled with the implementation of advanced surveillance technologies, can significantly enhance maritime security and deter pirate activities. Additionally,

fostering partnerships with international maritime security forces can provide valuable resources and training to local agencies.

Moreover, it is essential to address the political instability that fuels piracy in the region. Promoting good governance, transparency, and accountability within local government structures can help rebuild trust between government and maritime communities in Bayelsa State. Engaging in constructive dialogue with local leaders and stakeholders will ensure that the needs and concerns of the population are prioritized. This collaborative approach not only helps in mitigating the factors that drive individuals toward piracy but also promotes social cohesion and stability within the region. Ultimately, a holistic strategy that combines economic empowerment, enhanced security, and inclusive governance will be vital for curbing sea piracy and fostering long-term peace and development in Bayelsa State.

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