



Oil Spillage and Fishing Decline in Ibeno, 1998–2010

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Abstract

This study examines how persistent oil spillage led to fishing decline in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, between 1998 and 2010. The problem it addressed was the destruction of artisanal fishing livelihoods in one of Nigeria's most productive coastal fishing communities. The study adopted an analytical historical methodology and made use of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework as developed by Chambers and Conway and later systematised by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development. Evidence was drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, newspaper accounts, and the documented testimonies of affected individuals, including fishermen. The study found that oil spillage eroded all five livelihood capitals identified by the SLF. Natural capital was depleted through the destruction of fish populations and estuarine habitats. Physical capital was damaged through the contamination and accelerated deterioration of fishing equipment. Human capital declined through health deterioration and the forced migration of skilled fishing labour. Financial capital was progressively exhausted as income collapsed, and no compensation was paid. Social capital was undermined by displacement, community disaggregation, and the total failure of regulatory institutions to enforce accountability. The study concludes that the fishing decline documented in Ibeno was not just a series of discrete environmental accidents but the structural dispossession of a community whose livelihood assets were comprehensively dismantled by environmental



contamination in the absence of institutional protection. The study suggests that multinational oil companies, state and federal governments should be accountable by taking responsibility in preventing the spill from further happening or take immediate steps to clean up whenever it happens.

Keywords: oil, spillage, artisanal fishing, Ibeno, sustainable livelihoods framework, ExxonMobil.

Introduction

Ibeno Local Government Area ranks among the most productive fishing settlements on the Nigerian coast. The Qua Iboe River estuary, which is found on its coastlines, has a rich variety of marine species, including bonga fish (*Ethmalosa fimbriata*), West African herring (*Sardinella maderensis*), shrimp, and molluscs.¹ Artisanal fishing from Ibeno accounts for over 90 percent of annual fish output across Akwa Ibom State's coastal communities.² Long before the onset of industrial petroleum operations in the area, fishing was the major economic occupation of the people of Ibeno. Proceeds from the rivers helped to sustain livelihoods for generations and supported active trading endeavours along the southeastern Nigerian coast.³

Oil spillage refers to the uncontrolled release of crude oil or refined petroleum products into the environment as a result of equipment failure, pipeline corrosion, operational error, or sabotage.⁴ In a marine environment, the consequences of such releases include, but are not limited to, hydrocarbon contamination, disruption of the aquatic ecosystems, reduction of fish populations, destruction of fishing equipment, and rendering

¹T. G. Sokari, and I. R. Udotong, 'Towards Total Conservation and Utilization of Aquatic Resources from Lower Qua Iboe River Estuary', *Tropical Journal of Environmental Science and Technology* Vol. 2, No. 1, (1998), pp. 11–13.

²J. I. R. Udotong, U. P. Udoudo and I. R. Udotong, "Effects of Oil and Gas Exploration and Production Activities on Production and Management of Seafood in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria," *Journal of Environmental Chemistry and Ecotoxicology* Vol. 9, No. 3 (2017), p. 210.

³Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *Marine Fishery Resources of Nigeria: A Review of Exploited Fish Stocks*. Fisheries and Aquaculture Department (Rome: FAO, 2000) Available at: <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/R9004E/R9004E04.htm> (accessed and retrieved, 10 June, 2026).

⁴Nsikan O. Nkodo, Kesit K. Nkeme, and Idaresit U. Umoh, "Effects of Oil Spillage on the Socio-economic Wellbeing of Artisanal Fishermen in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria," *AKSU Journal of Agricultural Economics Extension and Rural Development* Vol. 6, No. 1 (2023), p. 89



productive waters inaccessible to fishing communities for extended periods.⁵ Where spills are recurrent and remediation is barely adequate, the environmental damage can greatly alter the livelihood structures of communities whose survival depends on those water bodies.

On 12 January 1998, a pipeline on Mobil Producing Nigeria Unlimited's Idoho offshore platform ruptured, discharging approximately 40,000 barrels of crude oil into the Atlantic Ocean and contaminating over 850 kilometres of Nigeria's coastline.⁶ This event snowballed into a prolonged period of recurring spill incidents in and around Ibeno's coastal and estuarine waters, culminating in the ExxonMobil pipeline rupture of May 2010, which released more than one million gallons of crude into the delta. Within this twelve-year window, fish populations declined, artisanal fishermen were progressively displaced from fishing zones, their incomes and source of livelihood deteriorated, and the community's age-long fishing economy was disrupted.

Despite the scale and duration of these impacts, the existing literature on oil pollution in the Niger Delta operates predominantly at the regional level, and studies focusing solely on affected communities are scarce. So far, no study has examined the relationship between oil spillage and fishing decline in Ibeno across the 1998 to 2010 period with the precision that the subject demands, and therefore, this study addresses that gap. It adopts the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), originally articulated by Chambers and Conway⁷ and subsequently developed by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development,⁸ as its analytical framework. The SLF's five-capital model, which encompasses natural, physical, human, financial, and social assets, provides a structured basis for assessing how oil contamination progressively eroded the livelihood foundations of Ibeno's fishing households. The aim of this study is to investigate and analyse that erosion across the study period with both historical and analytical rigour.

⁵*ibid.*, p. 90.

⁶O. T. Olagbende, G. O. Ede, L. E. D. Inyang, E. R. Gundlach, E. S. Gilfillan, and D. S. Page, "Scientific and Cleanup Response to the IDOHO-QIT Oil Spill, Nigeria," *Environmental Technology* Vol. 20, No. 11 (1999), p. 1216.

⁷R. Chambers, and G. R. Conway, "Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21st Century," *IDS Discussion Paper 296* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 1992).

⁸Department for International Development (DFID), *Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets* (London: DFID, 1999)



The Fishing Industry in Ibeno

For the people of Ibeno, fishing has been part of their daily routine since they first settled in that location. It is, in the fullest sense, what they have always known and done. Given its geographical location at the confluence point of the Qua Iboe River estuary and the Atlantic Ocean, Ibeno belongs to that arc of southeastern Nigerian coastal communities whose entire social and economic order was built around the sea. Like most seaboard communities, Ibeno's indigenous economy was organised around maritime exchange, with fishing and its associated goods, such as crayfish, crabs, shrimps, and prawns, constituting the primary basis of livelihood and trade long before any other economic system took root. Ekong confirms that in the Ibeno, Oron, Okobo, and Mbo axis of Akwa Ibom State, large-scale fishing was and remained well into the modern period the dominant occupation distinguishing these communities from the farming and craft-oriented peoples of the state's interior.⁹ She noted that:

For centuries, fishing has been a source of livelihood for the people. Small fishing islands scattered off the Atlantic Ocean meant that fishermen would leave their families to fully engage in the catch and processing of assorted types of fish, shrimp, crayfish, prawns, for upwards of 3–6 months, after which they would transport the items to the shores for bulk purchasing, with middlemen and women waiting at the coast.¹⁰

⁹Ekaette U. Ekong, "Industrialisation in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, 38 Years On: A Critical Analysis, 1987–2023," *International Journal of Development and Economic Sustainability* Vol. 13, No. 3 (2025), p. 88.

¹⁰*ibid.*, p. 89



Fishermen at Ibeno Beach preparing their nets

Source: Ayoyinka Jegede, "Ibeno Fish Farmers Under Attack by Sea Pirates," *The Guardian*, 23 October 2022.

The ecological foundation that supports this economy is also exceptional, as the Qua Iboe River estuary, where freshwater meets the Atlantic, produces one of the most biologically productive brackish-water environments along the Nigerian coast. These coastal and estuarine waters host approximately 199 fish species belonging to 78 distinct families, with the commercially significant species including croakers (*Pseudotolithus* spp.), bonga fish (*Ethmalosa fimbriata*), the bigrid catfish (*Chrysichthys nigrodigitatus*), and shynose (*Polydactylus quadrifilis*).¹¹ Essien-Ibok and Isemin, in their assessment of fish diversity across the state's major water bodies, further confirm that the Qua Iboe River zone sustained a distinctive and commercially viable fish assemblage, though one requiring careful management to remain productive over time.¹² Beyond finfish, the estuary and adjoining mangrove swamps yielded abundant shrimps, crabs, and periwinkles, which

¹¹J. I. R. Udotong, U. P. Udouo and I. R. Udotong, "Effects of Oil and Gas Exploration and Production Activities on Production and Management of Seafood in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria," *Journal of Environmental Chemistry and Ecotoxicology* Vol. 9, No. 3 (2017), p. 207.

¹²M. A. Essien-Ibok and N. L. Isemin, "Fish Species Diversity, Abundance and Distribution in the Major Water Bodies in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria," *Biodiversity International Journal* Vol. 4, No. 1 (2020), pp. 43–44.



formed a critical supplementary protein source and an important secondary commodity in local trade.

Fishing before the genesis of extraction and production of oil in Ibeno was conducted through artisanal methods that were consistently passed from one generation to the next. It was the men who operated the canoes used for fishing. Fishing was basically done with boats, and there were some common types of boats that were used for fishing activities. They included the dug-out canoe (*utetippe ubom*), the planked canoe (*ukokong ubom*), the combined dug-out and planked canoe, and fibre-glass boats.¹³ The dug-out canoes were expertly carved out from single tree trunks by wood carvers; they measured between 3 and 7 metres in length and were widely used in inland waters. Planked canoes, on the other hand, ranged from 7 to over 12 metres (8-12m LOA) and were better suited for marine fishing and surf-beaten coasts like Ibeno. Fibre-glass boats, introduced in recent decades, are used primarily by affluent fishers and offer greater efficiency and reduced physical stress.¹⁴ This indigenous canoe technology was the backbone of artisanal fishing.

To catch fish or other seafood, the fishermen expertly deployed their cast nets (*ntop mfuk iyire*), gill nets (*ntuak-nda iyire*), drift nets (*mfiofioro iyire*) or basket traps that were made from bamboo or calabash gourds, locally known as '*akpkrok akpe*'. Sinkers (*nket*) were also fashioned from stones, shells, or animal bones to help with making catches.¹⁵ Women dominated the harvesting of periwinkles and crabs from the shallow mangrove swamps and were the principal agents of fish processing, smoking and drying catches using firewood-fuelled kilns for preservation and sale.¹⁶ Far from being rudimentary, the encoded generations of accumulated knowledge about tidal movement, seasonal fish migration, and knowledge of the different species of fish developed through continuous, intimate engagement with the same waters over centuries.¹⁷

¹³E. U. Ekong, "Blending Heritage and Modernity: Artisanal Fishing Crafts, Gears and Techniques in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria (1960–2020)," *International Journal of Fisheries and Aquaculture Research* Vol. 12, No. 1 (2026), p. 3.

¹⁴*ibid.*

¹⁵E. U. Ekong, "Blending Heritage and Modernity: Artisanal Fishing Crafts, Gears and Techniques in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria (1960–2020)," *International Journal of Fisheries and Aquaculture Research* Vol. 12, No. 1 (2026), pp. 2–5,

¹⁶J. B. Effiong, E. A. Etuk, and D. A. Iyamah, "Perceived Determinants of Oil Spillage on Agricultural Lands in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria," *African Journal of Food, Agriculture, Nutrition and Development* Vol. 23, No. 2 (2023), pp. 22399–22401.

¹⁷E. C. Chukuigwe, S. K. Agbagwa and Q. J. Williams, "Viability of Fish Marketing in Andoni Local Government Area, Rivers State, Nigeria," *International Journal of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development* Vol. 11, No. 1 (2021), p. 8.



The products of Ibeno's fishing economy usually move outward through established trade networks. Smoked and dried fish from Ibeno's processing depots reach markets in Eket, Oron, Ikot Abasi, and other commercial centres across Akwa Ibom State and beyond, supporting a fish marketing chain that is predominantly managed by women traders.¹⁸ Local fish marketing in Akwa Ibom State is labour-intensive but commercially attractive. The income derived from the fishing business is enough to ensure financial stability and social mobility.

Oil Spillage in Ibeno, 1998–2010

The commercial exploitation of petroleum in Nigeria was, for the first two decades of its history, solely a British undertaking. Shell D'Arcy received the exclusive concession to prospect for oil across the entire Nigerian territory in 1938, and under that arrangement, commercially viable oil was first confirmed at Oloibiri in the Niger Delta on 5 June 1956, with the first field entering production at 5,100 barrels per day in 1958.¹⁹ The success at Oloibiri changed Nigeria's economic prospects and drew the attention of non-British multinational oil companies.

Mobil was among the first of these new entrants, and by 1955, the first non-Shell/D'Arcy exploration licence was granted to the Mobil Exploration Company of Nigeria Limited, which was a locally incorporated subsidiary of the Socony-Mobil Oil Company.²⁰ The initial concession covered substantial portions of Northern Nigeria, but Mobil relinquished most of that territory by 1957, having found it commercially unviable and subsequently redirecting its exploration programme toward the shallow offshore waters of the southeastern Niger Delta, the zone fronting the Qua Iboe River estuary and what is today the Ibeno coastline of Akwa Ibom State.²¹ This strategic reorientation was beneficial as the shallow marine environment of the Qua Iboe offshore belt contained substantial petroleum reserves, and Mobil's drilling programme through the late 1950s and 1960s progressively confirmed their commercial character.

On 16 June 1969, the company formally reconstituted its Nigerian operations as Mobil Producing Nigeria Limited (MPN), establishing the corporate entity that would

¹⁸Oral Interview with Ezekiel Umanah, 45 Years, Fisherman, Ibeno Beach, Akwa Ibom State, 6 June 2026.

¹⁹Ann Genova and Toyin Falola, "Oil in Nigeria: A Bibliographical Reconnaissance," *History in Africa* Vol. 30 (2003), pp. 133–140.

²⁰Phia Steyn, "Oil Exploration in Colonial Nigeria, c. 1903–58," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* Vol. 37, No. 2 (2009), pp. 263–268.

²¹*ibid.*



operate the Qua Iboe fields for the remainder of the twentieth century and beyond.²² To mark the MPN's full operational maturity in the area, the Qua Iboe export terminal was commissioned in 1971, the same year that Shell commissioned its Forcados terminal and Nigeria joined the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).²³ The terminal was located directly off the Ibene coastline and was connected to offshore production platforms by subsea pipelines, many of which were laid during this commissioning period. At its peak, MPN operated over 90 platforms and approximately 300 producing wells across a 3,200 square kilometre offshore acreage.²⁴

Mobil Producing Nigeria Unlimited began extracting crude oil from the Qua Iboe offshore fields since the early 1970s. By the late 1990s, most parts of the laid infrastructure were approaching three decades of service without systematic replacement. This issue of poor maintenance was not only observed in Ibene; Nwilo and Badejo had also documented that across the Niger Delta, ageing pipelines and operational failures were one of the primary structural causes of oil spill incidents, accounting for a significant share of the 4,647 incidents that discharged approximately 2,369,470 barrels of petroleum into the Nigerian environment between 1976 and 1996 alone.²⁵

On 12 January 1998, a 24-inch pipeline running from the Idoho production platform to the Mobil Qua Iboe terminal burst, releasing approximately 40,000 barrels of Qua Iboe light crude oil into the coast of the Qua Iboe River estuary.²⁶ The spill was carried westward by prevailing offshore currents, eventually tracking approximately 900 kilometres along the Nigerian coastline to Lagos Harbour, making it one of the most spatially extensive offshore spills in the country's recorded history.²⁷ In its immediate response, Mobil deployed dispersants and containment equipment offshore, and the company subsequently reported that over 90 percent of the discharged oil had been dispersed or evaporated at sea. The spill occurred during the 'harmattan' period when easterly winds carry fine dust from the Sahara Desert westward. The airborne dust resulted in poor visibility and limited the

²²Aniefiok E. Ite, Udo J. Ibok, Margaret U. Ite, and Sunday W. Petters, "Petroleum Exploration and Production: Past and Present Environmental Issues in the Nigeria's Niger Delta," *American Journal of Environmental Protection* Vol. 1, No. 4 (2013), pp. 79–83.

²³*ibid.*

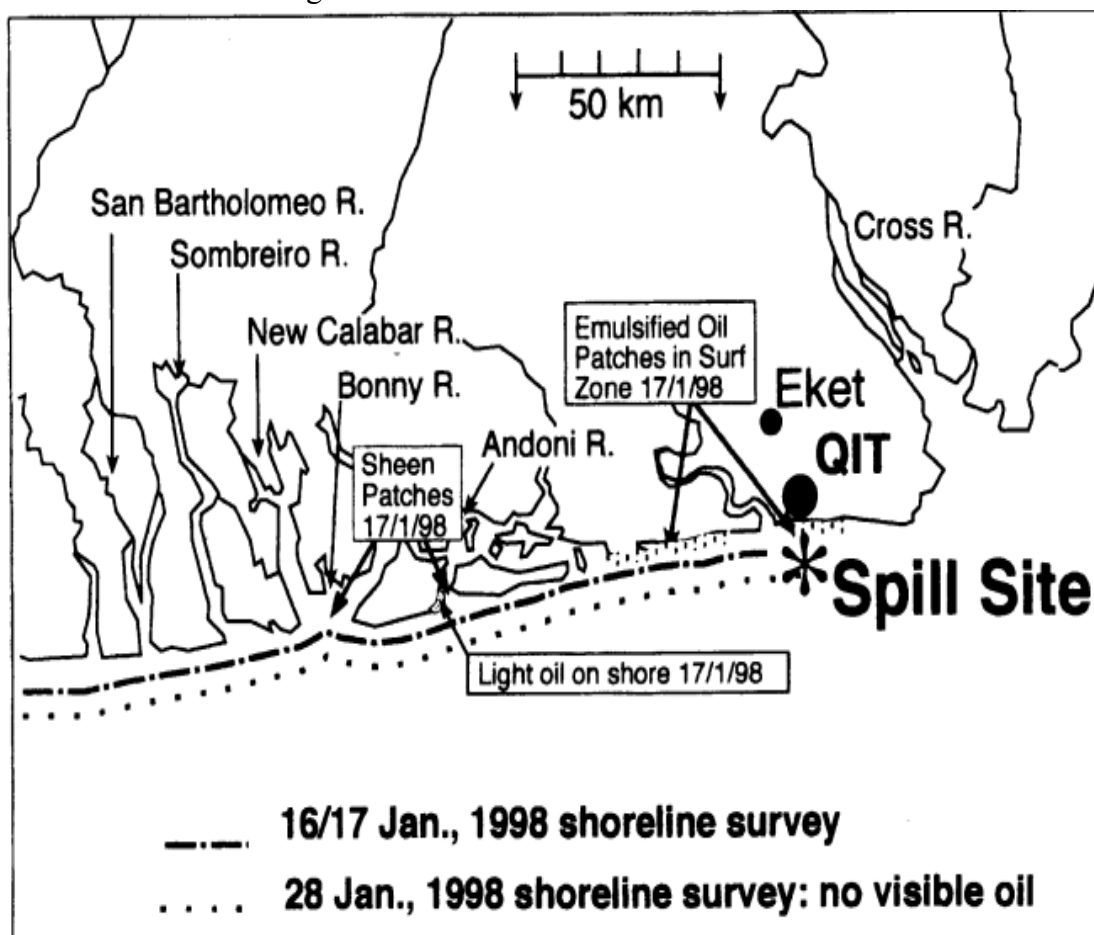
²⁴*ibid.*

²⁵P. C. Nwilo and O. T. Badejo, "Oil Spill Problems and Management in the Niger Delta," *International Oil Spill Conference Proceedings* No. 1 (2005), pp. 567–570.

²⁶O. T. Olagbende, G. O. Ede, L. E. D. Inyang, E. R. Gundlach, E. S. Gilfillan, and D. S. Page, "Scientific and Cleanup Response to the IDOHO-QIT Oil Spill, Nigeria," *Environmental Technology* 20, No. 11 (1999), p. 1213.

²⁷*ibid.*

use of fixed-wing aircraft to track the spill during the initial days of the response and dictated the use of helicopters for spill tracking. During the first four days after the spill, the spill track was generally offshore and westward. By January 17, the predominant wind direction shifted to the SW, causing bodies of oil to go ashore at sporadic locations along the coast between the Sengana and Forcados Rivers.²⁸



Source: O. T. Olagbende, G. O. Ede, L. E. D. Inyang, E. R. Gundlach, E. S. Gilfillan, and D. S. Page, "Scientific and Cleanup Response to the IDOHO-QIT Oil Spill, Nigeria," *Environmental Technology* Vol. 20, No. 11 (1999), p. 1217.

The pipeline involved had been installed in 1971 and was already operating well beyond the lifespan for which its original certification had provided.²⁹ The corporate

²⁸*ibid.*

²⁹O. T. Olagbende, G. O. Ede, L. E. D. Inyang, E. R. Gundlach, E. S. Gilfillan, and D. S. Page, "Scientific and Cleanup Response to the IDOHO-QIT Oil Spill, Nigeria," *Environmental Technology* Vol. 20, No. 11 (1999), p. 1216.



opinion of the spillage and community experience varied greatly, as the corporate company saw it as just another occupational hazard that cost the company barrels of expensive oil that could be attended to, while to the community, it was an event that brought their means of livelihood and sustenance to a screeching halt over a long period of time.

The 1998 incident did not lead to any pipeline replacement or systematic infrastructure upgrade that the scale of the disaster might have warranted. Mobil Producing Nigeria, which became a subsidiary of ExxonMobil following the corporate merger of 1999, continued to operate with the same ageing pipelines that were connected to its offshore platforms to the Qua Iboe terminal. An assessment of oil exploitation and marine pollution in the Niger Delta showed that environmental response measures by oil companies in the region were consistently delayed following spill incidents. The weak enforcement of Nigerian environmental laws allowed operators to neglect the necessary cleanup and restoration obligations over extended periods.³⁰ In Ibeno, this pattern was acutely felt, and between 1998 and 2009, recurring spill incidents from ExxonMobil's Qua Iboe infrastructure continued to affect the community's coastal and estuarine fishing grounds. Amnesty International's 2009 investigation into petroleum, pollution and poverty in the Niger Delta confirmed that across the region, oil companies routinely failed to pay compensation to affected fishing communities and that the regulatory agencies responsible for enforcing remediation and compensation obligations operated under severe institutional limitations that effectively shielded the oil operators from accountability in cases of spillage.³¹

Fishermen in Ibeno specifically received nothing from ExxonMobil for cumulative spill damage sustained since 1998 in the Qua Iboe oil fields.³² Effiong, Etuk, and Iyamah further noted that in Ibeno Local Government Area, the combined disruption of fishing and farming activities by oil contamination had severe consequences for household food security and the nutritional well-being of the community.³³

³⁰S. O. Aghalino and B. Eyinla, "Oil Exploitation and Marine Pollution: Evidence from the Niger Delta, Nigeria," *Journal of Human Ecology* Vol. 28, No. 3 (2009), pp. 179–180.

³¹Amnesty International, *Petroleum, Pollution and Poverty in the Niger Delta* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2009), pp. 42–47.

³²Nsikan O. Nkodo, Kesit K. Nkeme, and Idaresit U. Umoh, "Effects of Oil Spillage on the Socio-economic Wellbeing of Artisanal Fishermen in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria," *AKSU Journal of Agricultural Economics Extension and Rural Development* Vol. 6, No. 1 (2023), pp. 86–87.

³³J. B. Effiong, E.A. Etuk, and D. A. Iyamah, "Perceived Determinants of Oil Spillage on Agricultural Lands in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria," *African Journal of Food, Agriculture, Nutrition and Development* Vol. 23, No. 2 (2023), pp. 22401–22403.



Sahara Reporters confirmed that sources with direct knowledge of the Qua Iboe infrastructure had described the pipelines carrying crude to the terminal as dilapidated and decrepit and that ExxonMobil's refusal to replace them was understood within the industry as the structural cause of the facility's recurring spill incidents.³⁴ By the close of 2009, the cumulative environmental burden on Ibeno's coastal and estuarine fishing grounds was considerable. A particularly significant series of spill events occurred in December 2009, when multiple contamination incidents struck Ibeno communities, prompting demonstrations by fishermen and youths who descended on ExxonMobil facilities to demand accountability.³⁵

The most serious incident of oil spillage occurred on 1 May 2010, when a pipeline connected to an ExxonMobil production platform located 20 to 25 miles offshore ruptured and discharged crude oil into the Atlantic Ocean continuously for seven days before the leak was brought under control.³⁶ The volume of oil discharged in this incident exceeded one million gallons. This magnitude of contamination was vastly greater than any previously recorded single event affecting the Ibeno coastline since 1998. Crude oil contaminated coastal waters and shoreline settlements across Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. Thick accumulations of tar washed ashore along the Ibeno coastline, and fishing grounds that had already suffered years of incremental damage were subjected to a further biohazard assault.³⁷ ExxonMobil declared force majeure on all Qua Iboe crude oil shipments on 12 May 2010 as a formal commercial acknowledgement of the operational breakdown that had produced the disaster.³⁸

³⁴Sahara Reports, "Exxon Mobil Told to Pay \$100 Million for Akwa Ibom Oil Spill Victims," *Sahara Reporters*, June 20, 2011.

³⁵Sahara Reports, "ExxonMobil Oil Spill: Fishermen, Youths Revolt at Ibeno," *Sahara Reporters*, September 2, 2010.

³⁶John Vidal, "Nigeria's Agony Dwarfs Gulf Oil Spill," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2010.

³⁷*ibid.*

³⁸The Nation, "ExxonMobil Declares Force Majeure on Qua Iboe Oil," *The Nation*, May 12, 2010.



Aftermaths of the 1 May 2010 Spillage

Source: Idongesit Ashameri, "Ibeno: A Community Grappling with Environmental Disaster", *Independent*, 18 September 2024.

In the aftermath of the spill, fishermen and community youths in Ibeno staged protests at MPN facilities, during which security personnel reportedly beat demonstrators, with at least one woman documented as having sustained a broken leg.³⁹ At a stakeholder meeting that was convened on 20 May 2010 between ExxonMobil, the Akwa Ibom State Government, and host community representatives, no binding remediation commitment was reached. Community leaders formally demanded one billion US dollars in compensation for accumulated livelihood losses and health damage, a demand that ExxonMobil neither acknowledged nor addressed.

Williams Mkpa, a community leader in Ibeno, stated publicly at this time that his community had experienced ten oil spills in the two preceding years alone. This frequency underscored that the 2010 spillage was the culmination of a long-running pattern of infrastructure failure rather than an isolated event.⁴⁰ Samuel Ayadi, chairman of the Akwa Ibom State Artisanal Fishermen Association, confirmed in media interviews that the previous year had been particularly devastating for fishermen in the area and that the

³⁹John Vidal, "Nigeria's Agony Dwarfs Gulf Oil Spill," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2010.

⁴⁰*ibid.*

business of fishing had become progressively untenable under the weight of repeated contamination.⁴¹

Impact on Fishing

When applied to the experience of Ibeno's fishing industry between 1998 and 2010, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework takes oil spillage as the primary cause of the decline in fishing activities in Ibeno. The framework identifies five categories of capital whose depletion determines the severity of livelihood outcomes for affected households.⁴² In Ibeno, the evidence demonstrates that oil contamination eroded all five simultaneously and interactively, producing a compound vulnerability that no single form of capital loss can adequately represent in isolation.

Natural Capital

Within the SLF, natural capital encompasses the natural resource stocks and ecological flows from which livelihoods are derived.⁴³ For Ibeno's artisanal fishermen, this capital consisted primarily of the fish populations, shellfish habitats, and estuarine ecosystems of the Qua Iboe estuary and the adjoining inshore Atlantic. Oil contamination degraded this capital base across the study period as the hydrocarbon discharge caused mortality of fish larvae, juveniles, and adult stocks, disrupted reproductive cycles, and eliminated the mangrove and brackish-water habitats that function as nursery grounds for commercially important species.⁴⁴ The observable consequence in Ibeno was the progressive retreat of fish populations from inshore waters to the deep sea. Sylvanus Omotoye, a fisherman at the Ibeno Beach terminal with nearly five decades of experience, reported this depletion directly when he noted that:

Due to the effects of oil spills on the water, we have experienced a significant decline in fish catch over the years,” said Mr Omotoye, who has worked in

⁴¹Sahara Reports, "Exxon Mobil Told to Pay \$100 Million for Akwa Ibom Oil Spill Victims," *Sahara Reporters*, June 20, 2011.

⁴²Department for International Development (DFID), *Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets* (London: DFID, 1999), pp. 1–8.

⁴³*ibid.*

⁴⁴J. I. R. Udotong, U. P. Udoudo and I. R. Udotong, "Effects of Oil and Gas Exploration and Production Activities on Production and Management of Seafood in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria," *Journal of Environmental Chemistry and Ecotoxicology* Vol. 9, No. 3 (2017), p. 210.



Ibeno for nearly 50 years. "Some fishermen have migrated to Cameroon."⁴⁵

Species such as periwinkle and crab, harvested from mangrove zones by women in the community, largely disappeared from accessible waters. The natural capital endowment that had sustained the Ibeno fishing economy for generations was progressively drawn down to a level from which seasonal recovery was no longer possible.

Physical Capital

Physical capital within the SLF refers to the productive assets and tools through which households convert natural resources into income.⁴⁶ In Ibeno's case, this capital comprised canoes, gill nets, drag nets, traps, and fish-processing infrastructure, including smoking kilns. Oil spillage attacked this capital through direct physical contamination. Crude oil reduces the lifespan of fishing nets from an expected twenty years to as little as two or three⁴⁷ while saturated nets remain too fouled to catch fish even after extended drying. Sunday Kwesi, a commercial fisherman resident in Ibeno, described the replacement cost as prohibitive, as a single bundle of fishing net was priced at one million naira, and commercial fishing required approximately twenty such bundles. He told Premium Times the following:

Because of the oil spill, my thick nets only last for two years. But if not touched by oil, nets can stay for 20 years. But because of the spill, it does not last longer again.⁴⁸

Unable to afford replacement, he abandoned fishing entirely for weeks following each spill, and sadly, this has been an experience that many households across the community face.

⁴⁵Sylvanus Omotoye quoted in Abdulkareem Mojeed "Special Report: Farmers, Fishermen Suffer as Oil Spills Persist in Niger Delta Communities," *Premium Times*, August 20, 2025.

⁴⁶Department for International Development (DFID), *Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets* (London: DFID, 1999), pp. 1–8.

⁴⁷Oral Interview with Anthony Ukpong, 38 Years, Fisherman, Ibeno Beach, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, 11 June, 2026.

⁴⁸Sunday Kwesi, quoted in Kelechukwu Iruoma, "Investigation: How Oil Spill Contaminates River, Destroys Livelihoods in Akwa Ibom Community," *Premium Times*, April 27, 2020.



Human Capital

Human capital, in view of the SLF, encompasses the skills, knowledge, labour capacity, and health status that enable people to pursue livelihood strategies. In Ibeno, oil spillage depleted this capital through the physical health deterioration and the displacement of skilled fishing labour. A study of artisanal fishermen in Akwa Ibom State confirmed that oil contamination deteriorates the health status of fishermen and induces the out-migration of fishing households from affected areas to safer zones.⁴⁹ Fishermen like Sunday Kwesi and Nsopikpo Afia, who were interviewed by *Premium Times*, have suspended fishing due to the contamination of waters. These forceful migrations often lead to the loss of accumulated ecological knowledge of tidal patterns, seasonal fish movement, and productive fishing grounds, which the fishermen possess.

Financial Capital

Financial capital denotes the financial resources and income flows that households use to meet their livelihood objectives and absorb shocks or navigate through unexpected shortcomings. Oil spillage directly reduces household income, generates food insecurity, and forces the abandonment of artisanal fishing for alternative livelihood activities. Samuel Ayadi, who is the chairman of the Akwa Ibom State Artisanal Fishermen Association, reported that fishermen were unable to go to sea for more than two weeks following major spill incidents, as the coastline was entirely covered in crude oil and any catch obtained was oily and commercially worthless. He said that:

For over two weeks now fishermen in the area could no longer go out to fish, as the entire coastline had been covered by crude oil, leading to the death of aquatic life. It is like the Holocaust; some of our members who even attempt to fish came up with a miserable and oily catch, as all the fish and other aquatic life that provide us our means of livelihood have all disappeared or perished. If you go to the market now, the cost of fish and crayfish has gone up by over 60 percent and it would continue like that until the situation is brought under control.

⁴⁹Nsikan O. Nkodo, Kesit K. Nkeme, and Idaresit U. Umoh, "Effects of Oil Spillage on the Socio-economic Wellbeing of Artisanal Fishermen in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria," *AKSU Journal of Agricultural Economics Extension and Rural Development* Vol. 6, No. 1 (2023), pp. 87–90.



Our only hope now is for continuous rain to fall so that some of the oil can be washed away to enable aquatic life's return because as I am speaking to you now the entire place is covered with oil and our men cannot enter the water.⁵⁰

A fisherman by name, Ukeme Walter, further explained the financial logic of this situation by stating that

We don't have good access to our businesses in terms of fishing; gas flaring is disturbing our water a lot. Before now, the fishes were close to our ocean, but because of pollution, you now need to move into the high seas, which takes several litres of fuel. Sometimes, if you go to the sea, you may not even see the fish, and the ones caught, when sold would not even cover the expenses you made so far. Apart from killing fishes in the ocean, oil spills affect the nets and engine boats. The oil in the water spoils our nets which is very expensive and we go on repairing engines. Sometimes, if you cast your net in the water, you will not be able to catch fish due to gas flares in the water. Sometimes, if you go to the sea, you may not even see the fish and the ones caught when sold would not even cover the expenses you made so far.⁵¹

With incomes eliminated during each contamination episode and no compensation forthcoming from ExxonMobil or the state, households exhausted whatever savings they held. They entered cycles of debt from which recovery proved difficult.

⁵⁰Samuel Ayadi, quoted in "Nigeria A/Ibom Oil Spill: Ibeno Fishing Communities Count Their Losses," *International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)*, 2010.

⁵¹Ukeme Walter, quoted in Lovina Anthony, "Oil Spill, Piracy Crippling Fish Business: Fishermen Count Losses," *Daily Post*, October 8, 2022.



Social Capital

Social capital encompasses the networks, relationships, and institutional memberships through which households access resources and manage risk. Within Ibeno, this capital was eroded internally and externally. Internally, the migration and livelihood diversification induced by oil damage disaggregated the community networks through which equipment was shared, credit was informally extended, and collective fishing expeditions were organised. Externally, successive failures by the Department of Petroleum Resources and the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency to enforce remediation obligations destroyed whatever institutional trust had previously existed between the community and the structures nominally responsible for their protection. High Chief John David of Ibeno gave direct voice to this institutional abandonment when he said that

Many oil spills have been happening. NOSDRA and DPR will come, but at the end of the day, you will not hear anything about it. Politicians, governors, and commissioners would come whenever there is an oil spill and address the community, but up till now, nothing has been done.⁵²

As DFID's guidance notes, social capital can be actively destroyed by interventions or non-interventions that impose new conditions on communities without accounting for the social structures already in place. The state's systematic non-response to Ibeno's crisis achieved precisely this destruction. Taken together, the five-capital analysis demonstrates that oil spillage in Ibeno between 1998 and 2010 did not simply reduce fish catch. It dismantled the entire asset base on which the fishing economy rested, foreclosing the recovery pathways that the SLF identifies as essential to livelihood resilience and leaving the community without the capital foundation from which any sustainable reconstruction could plausibly begin.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between oil spillage and fishing decline in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, between 1998 and 2010. The thesis is

⁵²John David, quoted in Abdulkareem Mojeed, "Special Report: Farmers, Fishermen Suffer as Oil Spills Persist in Niger Delta Communities," *Premium Times*, August 20, 2025.



that the destruction of Ibeno's fishing economy across this period was neither accidental nor isolated, but the increasing and predictable outcome of continuous infrastructural neglect, repeated contamination, and institutional failure to enforce remediation and accountability obligations on the part of the operating company.

The evidence examined established that Ibeno entered the study period as a community whose identity, economy, and social organisation were inseparable from artisanal fishing. The Qua Iboe estuary supported a biologically rich and commercially productive environment that had sustained successive generations of fishing households. What the 1998 Idoho platform spill inaugurated, and what the pattern of recurring incidents through to the catastrophic ExxonMobil rupture of May 2010 confirmed, was the systematic degradation of that environment over twelve years without adequate response from either the corporation responsible or the regulatory agencies charged with enforcing environmental standards.

The application of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework to this evidence has been analytically productive precisely because it refuses reductive explanations. By tracing the erosion of natural, physical, human, financial, and social capital simultaneously, the framework reveals that what Ibeno's fishing households lost across the study period was not simply income or access to fish, but the entire asset structure on which their livelihoods depend. The depletion of any single capital would have been serious, but the simultaneous depletion of all five, with no compensating intervention, was catastrophic. The case of Ibeno between 1998 and 2010 is, ultimately, an argument for the inseparability of environmental justice and livelihood security. Where ecological systems are destroyed and accountability is withheld, communities do not merely become poorer. They are naturally dispossessed, and the path back, as Ibeno's experience demonstrates, is neither short nor guaranteed.

To this end, multinational oil companies should take responsibility by replacing their old and rusted pipe, they should equally put up security measures to avoid sabotage of those pipelines. In addition, clean up excersice should be carried out as soon as there is report of oil spilling - whether on land or offshore. Also compensation should be paid to those affected negatively by such spillage. Government at all levels - local, state and federal should demand for accountability form the multinational oil companies as well as put mechanism in place to ensure that justice is always done to the environment and on time.



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