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Political Leadership Succession and Development Crisis in Rivers and Bayelsa States of Nigeria, 2015–2025

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Abstract
This study examined the relationship between political leadership succession and development crises in South-South Nigeria, focusing specifically on the experiences of Rivers and Bayelsa States between 2015 and 2025. The Niger Delta region, despite hosting the bulk of Nigeria's petroleum wealth, paradoxically remains one of the most underdeveloped, conflict-ridden, and governance-challenged zones in the country. Against this backdrop, the paper employs secondary data, qualitative content analysis, and an extensive review of the empirical literature to interrogate how recurring leadership succession crises, manifested in godfather politics, electoral manipulation, judicial reversals of electoral outcomes, inter-party defections, and militarized political transitions, have deepened development deficits in both states. The Developmental Leadership Model (DLM) serves as the analytical framework. Findings reveal that between 2015 and 2025, leadership succession in Rivers and Bayelsa States was overwhelmingly defined by elite capture of democratic processes, weak institutionalization of succession norms, escalating political violence, and the deliberate subordination of development priorities to factional political interests. These structural pathologies have produced infrastructural decay, deteriorating human development indices, mass youth unemployment, persistent environmental degradation, and systematic weakening of state institutions. Critically, available data indicate that Rivers State's capital expenditure implementation rate fell below 45% during peak periods of succession conflict, while Bayelsa State's multidimensional poverty rate remained above 35% for a decade in which the state received cumulative federal allocations exceeding ₦1.2 trillion. The paper contends that the development crisis in both states is not merely a product of federal neglect or the oil resource curse, but is fundamentally rooted in the character and conduct of sub-national political leadership succession. Recommendations advanced include institutional strengthening of electoral processes, promotion of merit-based leadership recruitment, expansion of grassroots political participation, implementation of sustainable anti-corruption reforms, and development planning continuity as critical pathways toward resolving the interconnected succession and development crises in the South-South geo-political zone.

Keywords: Development Crises, Godfather Politics, Political Leadership, Succession, South-South Nigeria.

Introduction

The relationship between political leadership and socio-economic development remains one of the most enduring debates in the social sciences. Across Africa, and in Nigeria in particular, the quality of political leadership has been widely identified as a central determinant of the persistent chasm between resource endowments and development outcomes (Adeyemi, 2021; Nwosu & Okafor, 2022). Nowhere is this paradox more starkly and painfully visible than in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, a region that contributes the overwhelming majority of the nation's foreign exchange earnings through petroleum production, yet continues to endure pervasive poverty, infrastructural underdevelopment, and political instability (Aghedo & Osumah, 2020; Obi, 2023). Rivers and Bayelsa States occupy a central and analytically instructive position in this narrative. Both states are located in the heart of the Niger Delta, both rank among the highest revenue-generating states in the federation, and both have experienced recurring cycles of political leadership succession crises across the past decade.

Between 2015 and 2025, the two states witnessed dramatic political transitions, court-ordered removal of governors, Supreme Court interventions in electoral outcomes, bitter intra-party conflicts, legislative branch paralysis, and pervasive political violence, all of which have had severe and measurable consequences for governance and development (Egberi, 2022; Omotola, 2023). These events raise fundamental questions about the capacity of democratic institutions in both states to manage political transitions in ways that advance rather than undermine development. The decade under examination 2015 to 2025 is particularly instructive precisely because it encompasses three complete electoral cycles (2015, 2019, and 2023) and has seen Rivers State transition from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) under Governor Nyesom Wike to an APC-aligned administration under Governor Siminalayi Fubara, while Bayelsa State witnessed the controversial Supreme Court nullification of an APC governorship victory and the subsequent installation of PDP's Douye Diri. These transitions have not been peaceful, institutionalized, or development-oriented. Rather, they have been defined by the same clientelism, godfatherism, elite capture, and resource predation that have historically undermined democratic governance across Nigeria (Agbu, 2021; Nwankwo, 2022). This paper advances a central argument: that the development crisis in Rivers and Bayelsa States is not merely a product of federal neglect or oil revenue mismanagement at the national level, but is fundamentally rooted in the character and conduct of political leadership succession at the sub-national level. When leadership succession is driven by elite power struggles, patron-client logic, and factional resource capture rather than programmatic governance, development becomes hostage to political contestation, and the consequences, as the data will show, are catastrophic for ordinary citizens. The paper is organized as follows: after this introduction, it presents the problem statement and the guiding research questions. A conceptual review of key concepts follows, leading to the theoretical framework. Empirical findings are then presented and discussed, incorporating relevant statistical data, before the paper concludes with actionable recommendations.

The Concept of Politics

Politics is foundational to understanding governance, power, and the organization of public life. Aristotle's classical formulation defines politics as the master science through which human communities organize themselves and pursue the common good, an activity inseparable from ethics and justice within the polis (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1998). In modern political science, the concept has broadened considerably. Harold Lasswell's (1936) seminal formulation defines politics as the process of determining who gets what, when, and how, foregrounding the allocative and distributive dimensions of political activity. This instrumental understanding is especially pertinent in African political studies, where state power is frequently deployed as a vehicle for factional resource capture rather than collective welfare (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). David Easton (1965) advances a systems-based definition, conceiving politics as the authoritative allocation of values for a society, while Robert Dahl (1963, p. 6) defines it as encompassing any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves power, rule, or authority to a significant degree. In the Nigerian context, Ake (1996) and Ayoade (2008) argue that politics in post-colonial African states is primarily characterized by the struggle for state power as a mechanism for primitive accumulation rather than for the realization of public goods. This understanding is indispensable for analyzing political leadership succession in Rivers and Bayelsa States, where political competition is driven overwhelmingly by access to oil revenues, federal allocations, and state patronage networks (Nwankwo, 2022). In this context, politics degenerates into a zero-sum contest in which the stakes of winning or losing power are existential for competing elite factions, generating the intense conflict and institutional destabilization that characterize succession episodes in both states.

The Concept of Leadership

Leadership refers to the capacity of an individual or group to guide, influence, or direct others toward the achievement of collective goals. Burns (1978) offers an enduring distinction between transactional and transformational leadership: transactional leadership is premised on exchange relationships, whereas transformational leadership involves mobilizing followers toward higher collective purposes and systemic change. Burns argues that transformational leadership is fundamentally moral in character, as it aligns the interests of leaders and followers around genuinely shared objectives. Northouse (2019, p. 43) defines leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group to achieve a common goal, emphasizing the relational and dynamic character of leadership as an ongoing interaction among leaders, followers, and the institutional context. Kellerman (2004) offers an important corrective to idealized conceptions of leadership by demonstrating that leadership is not inherently beneficial; bad leadership characterized by incompetence, callousness, rigidity, corruption, or cruelty is as politically consequential as good leadership. Applied to the Nigerian political context, Adeyemo (2020) argues that political leadership in Nigeria suffers from what he terms leadership deficit, a chronic incapacity or unwillingness of political leaders to translate state authority and public resources into tangible development outcomes. This leadership deficit is compounded in Rivers and Bayelsa by the culture of godfatherism, whereby powerful political patrons impose, sustain, or remove leaders in exchange for political loyalty and continued access to state resources (Aniche & Eze, 2021). The result is a model of political leadership that is accountable not to citizens or democratic institutions, but to narrow factional interests and patron-client networks.

The Concept of Development

Development is among the most contested and theoretically debated concepts in the social sciences. In its earliest formulation, development was conceptualized primarily in economic terms as the growth of national income, industrialization, and capital accumulation along trajectories already traversed by Western liberal democracies (Rostow, 1960). By the 1970s, the profound limitations of purely economic conceptions of development had become apparent, particularly in the Global South, where rapid aggregate growth often coexisted with mass poverty, deepening inequality, and political exclusion. Scholars associated with the dependency tradition, including Frank (1969) and Cardoso and Faletto (1979), argued that underdevelopment was not an original historical condition but was actively produced and reproduced by the structural dynamics of global capitalism and neo-colonial relationships of economic subordination. The capabilities approach, associated primarily with Amartya Sen (1999) and elaborated by Nussbaum (2011), marked another fundamental paradigmatic shift. Sen's Development as Freedom reconceptualizes development as the expansion of substantive human freedoms, the real capabilities of individuals to live lives they have reason to value, free from the multiple deprivations of poverty, disease, ignorance, social exclusion, and political disenfranchisement. The United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (HDI) operationalizes this approach. In the context of South-South Nigeria, development must be understood comprehensively, encompassing economic growth, infrastructure provision, access to quality education and healthcare, environmental sustainability, political inclusion, and the state's institutional capacity to deliver public goods. Rivers and Bayelsa States record HDI values substantially below what their enormous fiscal capacities would predict, reflecting profound governance failures that have prevented resource wealth from translating into meaningful human development (Nwosu & Okafor, 2022).

Nexus between Leadership and Development

The relationship between political leadership quality and development outcomes has been extensively theorized in comparative politics, development economics, and governance studies. The dominant consensus in contemporary scholarship is that leadership quality, encompassing the values, competencies, institutional commitments, and accountability relationships of political leaders, is among the most consequential determinants of whether societies develop or stagnate (Leftwich, 2000; Edigheji, 2020). This leadership-development nexus operates through several identifiable and mutually reinforcing causal pathways. First, political leaders shape the institutional environment within which development occurs. Leaders committed to the rule of law, institutional integrity, and meritocratic public administration create the enabling conditions for sustained and inclusive development. Conversely, leaders who deliberately undermine institutions for personal or factional advantage through corruption, nepotism, or the weaponization of security agencies systematically erode the governance foundations upon which development depends (Evans, 1995; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Second, leadership quality directly determines the effectiveness of public resource management. In resource-rich states where government revenue is predominantly derived from oil and gas receipts, the decisions of political leaders regarding allocation, management, and accountability of public funds are decisive determinants of development outcomes. Third, the character of political leadership succession shapes the continuity of development. When transitions are smooth and institutionalized, incoming administrations can build on the work of predecessors. When successions are conflict-ridden and characterized by elite antagonism, incoming administrations typically dismantle predecessor programs, creating costly discontinuities in development planning that no amount of subsequent policy innovation can adequately compensate for (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Omotola, 2023). Fourth, leadership legitimacy shapes citizen engagement with public institutions. Leaders who reach power through contested, elite-manipulated, or extra-democratic processes suffer from chronic legitimacy deficits that reduce their capacity to mobilize citizens, broaden the tax base, enforce regulations, and build the social compact necessary for effective governance (Hyden, 2006). The persistence of disputed elections and court-ordered reversals of electoral outcomes in both Rivers and Bayelsa States has generated a culture of political alienation that

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undermines social capital and civic participation, the very social infrastructure upon which sustainable development depends (Abali, 2020; Agbu, 2021).

Theoretical Background

This study is anchored in the Developmental Leadership Model (DLM), developed through the research program of the Development Leadership Program (DLP) at the University of Birmingham and associated institutions (Leftwich, 2000; Leftwich & Wheeler, 2011). The DLM argues that successful development, both historically in the now-industrialized world and in contemporary developing states, has depended critically on the sustained presence of leaders, political elites, coalitions, and institutions that are collectively and genuinely committed to a developmental agenda, even as they navigate the complex and often contradictory pressures of political competition and elite interest management. The DLM identifies three foundational and interconnected elements of developmental leadership. First, developmental leaders must possess the political will, strategic vision, developmental commitment, and administrative competence to prioritize long-term collective development over short-term rent-seeking, factional loyalty, and personal enrichment. Such leaders are not simply administrators; they are architects of developmental coalitions and institutional reforms that outlast their individual tenures. Second, developmental coalitions are broad alliances of political, economic, and social actors whose interests align with, or can be harnessed to support, a development agenda. These coalitions provide the political base necessary for leaders to pursue development policies despite resistance from entrenched rent-seeking interests. Third, effective institutions comprising rules, organizations, enforcement mechanisms, and governance norms channel political and economic activity in productive, accountable, and development-enhancing directions (Edigheji, 2020; Leftwich & Wheeler, 2011).

Applied analytically to Rivers and Bayelsa States, the DLM powerfully illuminates why, despite their enormous resource endowments, development has remained elusive and truncated. Political leaders in both states have consistently and demonstrably failed to exhibit the core characteristics of developmental leadership: they have prioritized political survival, factional loyalty, and personal accumulation over long-term developmental commitments. The political coalitions sustaining power in both states are rent-seeking rather than developmental, organized around the capture and strategic redistribution of oil revenue and federal allocations rather than the promotion of productive economic activity, public goods provision, or human capital investment. And the institutional environment, persistently weakened by political manipulation, corruption, legislative capture, and impunity for governance failures, provides wholly insufficient constraints on elite opportunism (Leftwich, 2000; Nwosu & Okafor, 2022). The DLM thus provides both a normative counterpoint specifying the leadership qualities, coalition structures, and institutional arrangements necessary for development to succeed and a diagnostic standard against which the actual performance of political leadership in Rivers and Bayelsa States can be assessed. This dual function of the DLM makes it an especially powerful analytical instrument for the present study: it explains both the failures of existing leadership and the reforms necessary to produce developmental outcomes.

The South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, of which Rivers and Bayelsa States are central constituents, is home to approximately 31 million people and accounts for 70-80% of Nigeria's crude oil revenue (Niger Delta Development Commission [NDDC], 2022; World Bank, 2023). Despite this enormous resource base, the region consistently records some of the lowest human development indices in the country. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022), Rivers State has a multidimensional poverty rate of approximately 41%, while Bayelsa State records a figure slightly above 35%, both of which are staggering for states given their fiscal capacities. Over the 2015–2025 period, Rivers State received cumulative federal statutory allocations estimated at over ₦2.1 trillion, while Bayelsa State received approximately ₦1.2 trillion over the same decade (BudgIT, 2024). That both states remain deeply impoverished despite such resource flows constitutes one of the most troubling governance failures in contemporary Nigerian public administration. The paradox of resource wealth and development failure in these two states has attracted significant scholarly attention. Yet much of the existing literature has focused on the oil resource curse, federal revenue allocation mechanisms, and environmental degradation as primary explanatory variables (Ikelegbe, 2021; Obi, 2023). Less systematic attention has been directed at how the recurring crisis of political leadership succession, that is, the processes, norms, conflicts, and outcomes associated with the transfer of executive power, contributes independently and significantly to development failure. This constitutes a critical gap in the literature that this paper seeks to fill. Between 2015 and 2025, Rivers State experienced the politically seismic rupture between Governor Nyesom Wike and the political establishment around President Bola Tinubu, culminating in an unprecedented governance crisis between Wike, serving as FCT Minister, and his erstwhile anointed successor, Governor Siminalayi Fubara. This conflict paralyzed the Rivers State House of Assembly, stalled budget implementation for extended periods, and resulted in federal executive intervention unprecedented in the state's recent history (Channels Television, 2024; Emorinken, 2024). Bayelsa State, on the other hand, witnessed the extraordinary Supreme Court nullification of APC's David Lyon's governorship victory on the eve of his inauguration in February 2020, followed by the installation of PDP's Douye Diri, a constitutionally valid but democratically controversial transition that deepened political polarization and governance uncertainty (Abali, 2020). Against this background, this paper examines the nexus between political leadership succession and development crisis in both states between 2015 and 2025. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. identify the dominant patterns and characteristics of political leadership succession in Rivers and Bayelsa States between 2015 and 2025.
2. examine the development outcomes- economic, social, infrastructural, and institutional in both states over the study period.
3. Analyze the causal pathways through which leadership succession crises contribute to development deficits in the two states.
4. propose institutional and policy recommendations for improving leadership succession processes and addressing the development crisis in the South-South region.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

a. What are the dominant patterns and characteristics of political leadership succession in Rivers and Bayelsa States between 2015 and 2025?
b. How have development outcomes in terms of infrastructure, human development, and institutional capacity evolved in the two states over the study period?
c. Through what specific causal pathways have leadership succession crises contributed to development failures in Rivers and Bayelsa States?
d. What institutional and policy reforms are necessary to address the intertwined problems of succession crisis and development deficit in the South-South region?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design anchored in the use of secondary data sources and qualitative content analysis. The qualitative design was considered appropriate because the study sought to examine the relationship between political leadership succession and development crisis in Rivers and Bayelsa States between 2015 and 2025 through an in-depth analysis of documented political events, governance outcomes, and development indicators, rather than by generating primary survey data. The design enabled the researchers to explore the nature, patterns, and implications of leadership succession crises within their political and institutional contexts.

Sources of Data The study relied exclusively on secondary data obtained from credible and verifiable sources. These included peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, government publications, reports of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), reports of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), BudgIT fiscal reports, World Bank publications, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) publications, official state budget documents, policy reports, newspapers, and reputable online news platforms such as Channels Television that extensively documented political developments in Rivers and Bayelsa States during the period under study. These diverse sources provided information on leadership transitions, electoral disputes, judicial interventions, governance performance, fiscal management, and socio-economic development indicators.

Criteria for Selection of Documents. The documents included in this study were purposively selected based on four criteria. First, only documents directly related to political leadership succession, governance, and development in Rivers and Bayelsa States were considered. Second, preference was given to publications from 2015 to 2025 to ensure temporal relevance to the study period, although seminal theoretical works published earlier were included where necessary to explain key concepts and theoretical foundations. Third, priority was accorded to documents produced by recognized academic institutions, government agencies, and internationally respected development organizations because of their credibility and methodological rigor. Finally, documents whose information could not be verified by other reliable sources were excluded to enhance the study's validity.

Data Collection Procedure. Data collection involved a systematic review of published and unpublished documentary materials. Relevant literature and official reports were identified through university libraries, electronic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus, and institutional repositories, as well as the official websites of government agencies and international organizations. Documentary evidence on political succession, electoral outcomes, judicial decisions, public finance, development indicators, and governance performance was extracted, organized, and classified in accordance with the study's objectives. Where statistical information was obtained from multiple sources, the figures were cross-checked to ensure consistency and reliability.

The study employed qualitative content analysis to analyze the collected data. The analysis followed a systematic process consisting of five stages. First, all selected documents were read repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of their content. Second, relevant information on political leadership succession and development was coded into thematic categories aligned with the research objectives. Third, the coded data were grouped into broader analytical themes, including leadership succession patterns, governance challenges, institutional weaknesses, development outcomes, and policy implications. Fourth, similarities and differences between Rivers and Bayelsa States were identified through comparative analysis, thereby highlighting common patterns and state-specific experiences. Finally, the emerging themes were interpreted using the Developmental Leadership Model (DLM) as the analytical framework to explain how leadership succession dynamics influenced development outcomes in both states. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study adopted data triangulation by comparing information obtained from multiple independent sources. Statistical figures were corroborated using official publications from institutions such as the National Bureau of Statistics, BudgIT, the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Program, while accounts of political events were verified using academic literature and reputable media reports. This triangulation minimized bias, strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings, and enhanced the overall reliability of the study.

Although the study covers the period 2015–2025, complete official statistics for some fiscal and development indicators covering the terminal years of the study were not available at the time of the research. Consequently, the selected 2024 values presented in Tables 1 and 2 were obtained from reputable secondary sources, including BudgIT (2024), official state budget performance reports, and other credible institutional publications that provided projected or estimated figures based on available fiscal trends and budget implementation records. These projections were not treated as definitive statistical values but as indicative measures of the prevailing trajectory of governance and development within the study period. To enhance analytical rigor, the projected figures were triangulated with qualitative evidence from documented political developments, official reports, scholarly publications, and media accounts on governance, leadership succession, and development outcomes in Rivers and Bayelsa States. The analysis, therefore, relied on the convergence of multiple sources of evidence rather than on projected figures alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Bowen, 2009). This triangulation minimized the possibility of bias and ensured that the projected values served only as complementary evidence for identifying emerging trends rather than as the sole basis for the study's conclusions.

Results

Patterns of Political Leadership Succession in Rivers State, 2015–2025

Table 1: Rivers State Selected Fiscal and Development Indicators, 2015–2024

Indicator	2015	2018	2021	2024
Federal Allocation (₦ bn)	154.6	187.2	201.8	312.4
Capital Expenditure (% of total)	48.3%	43.7%	39.2%	34.8%
Capex Implementation Rate	62%	55%	51%	45%
Poverty Rate (Multidimensional)	40.1%	40.8%	41.0%	41.3%
Youth Unemployment Rate (est.)	38%	40%	42%	44%

Source: BudgIT (2024); NBS (2022); Egberi (2022). Note: 2024 figures are projected/estimated.

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It should be noted that the 2024 fiscal and development indicators presented in Table 1 include projected or estimated values obtained from BudgIT (2024) and related official fiscal reports. These estimates were incorporated to capture the most recent developments leading up to the terminal year (2025) of the study and to illustrate the trajectory of governance and development during the latter phase of the political succession crisis in Rivers State. Rather than treating the projected figures as conclusive evidence, they were interpreted alongside qualitative information on legislative conflicts, budget implementation, infrastructure delivery, and executive-legislative relations. The consistency between the projected fiscal trends and documented governance disruptions strengthens the credibility of the analysis and supports the conclusion that prolonged political instability adversely affected development outcomes in the state (BudgIT, 2024; Channels Television, 2024; Emorinken, 2024). The inclusion of projected 2024 indicators does not alter the study's substantive conclusions, as the analysis is not based solely on numerical trends. Rather, the projected values were employed to complement documentary evidence on political succession, governance performance, and development outcomes across the study period. The consistency between the quantitative projections and qualitative evidence from official reports and scholarly literature reinforces the argument that leadership succession crises significantly influenced development trajectories in both Rivers and Bayelsa States. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as demonstrating broad developmental trends rather than precise forecasts, a limitation inherent in qualitative studies utilizing recent secondary data (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Patterns of Political Leadership Succession in Bayelsa State, 2015–2025

Table 2: Bayelsa State Selected Fiscal and Development Indicators, 2015–2024

Indicator	2015	2018	2021	2024
Federal Allocation (₦ bn)	102.3	118.6	136.4	201.7
IGR (₦ bn)	3.4	4.1	4.6	5.8
Poverty Rate (Multidimensional)	34.2%	34.8%	35.1%	35.4%
Infant Mortality (per 1,000 live births)	89	86	84	82
Access to Clean Water (%)	41%	43%	44%	46%

Source: BudgIT (2024); NBS (2022); NDDC (2022); World Bank (2023).

The projected 2024 indicators presented for Bayelsa State were used to identify emerging patterns in fiscal performance and socio-economic development during the final phase of the study period. These estimates were interpreted with caution and corroborated by qualitative evidence from government reports, academic studies, and development agency publications. The projections indicate modest improvements in internally generated revenue and access to basic services; however, they also reveal persistent structural development challenges, including high poverty levels and continued dependence on federal allocations. The convergence of projected quantitative indicators with documentary evidence suggests that, despite relatively greater political stability after the 2020 succession dispute, the developmental gains recorded in Bayelsa remained modest (BudgIT, 2024; World Bank, 2023; NDDC, 2022).

Development Crisis in Rivers and Bayelsa States

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Table 3: Comparative Human Development Indicators, Rivers and Bayelsa States vs. National Average (2022)

Indicator	Rivers State	Bayelsa State	National Average
Multidimensional Poverty Rate	41.0%	35.4%	40.1%
Youth Unemployment Rate (est.)	42%	39%	33%
Access to Safe Drinking Water	52%	46%	57%
Primary School Completion Rate	71%	68%	72%
Infant Mortality (per 1,000)	84	82	69

Source: NBS (2022); UNDP (2023); World Bank (2023).

Institutional capacity has also declined markedly across the study period. The State Houses of Assembly in both states have been systematically compromised by executive dominance, political faction conflicts, and outright constitutional subversion by extra-legislative actors. In Rivers State, the 2023–2024 Assembly crisis resulted in a period during which the state effectively lacked a constitutionally functional legislature capable of conducting the business of appropriation, oversight, and legislation, with devastating consequences for budget authorization, executive accountability, and the passage of critical development legislation (Channels Television, 2024). Environmental deterioration resulting from decades of intensive oil extraction, routine gas flaring, widespread pipeline vandalism, and chronic regulatory failure continues to undermine agricultural productivity, devastate fish stocks, and impose catastrophic public health burdens on communities across both states, while the NDDC, established specifically to address these development deficits, has remained chronically mired in corruption and governance failure (Ikelegbe, 2021; NDDC, 2022).

Discussion

Rivers State has experienced some of the most dramatic, contentious, and institutionally destabilizing political succession episodes in Nigeria's recent democratic history. The 2015 governorship election, which produced Nyesom Wike of the PDP as governor following the defection of the incumbent Rotimi Amaechi to the APC, was deeply contested, marked by pervasive allegations of electoral manipulation, widespread political violence, and the deployment of federal security agencies in what opposition politicians characterized as systematic partisan interference (Egberi, 2022). Wike's emergence, ultimately confirmed by the courts after protracted litigation, consolidated a formidable PDP political machine that combined substantial financial resources, strategic alliances with traditional institutions and community leaders, and a demonstrated capacity for organized political mobilization. During Wike's first and second terms (2015–2023), Rivers State exhibited a pattern of governance that blended visible, high-profile infrastructure investments, particularly road construction and flyovers in Port Harcourt, with systematic marginalization of political opponents, recurrent allegations of contract inflation and misappropriation, and the repeated weaponization of the State House of Assembly against political rivals (Omotola, 2023). The state became notorious nationally for political turbulence, including impeachment controversies, the sacking and reinstatement of local government council officials through political fiat, and sustained conflicts with INEC over the management of local government elections. Significantly, an analysis of budget data for Rivers State suggests that capital expenditure as a proportion of total expenditure declined from a reported 48.3% in 2015 to below 38% in 2022, reflecting the progressive subordination of developmental priorities to recurrent political spending (BudgIT, 2024).

The 2023 succession crisis, however, was the most consequential and constitutionally unprecedented in the state's democratic history. Following the election of Bola Tinubu as President, an outcome Wike had controversially supported while remaining formally a PDP member, Wike was appointed FCT Minister. His politically anointed successor, Siminalayi Fubara, won the 2023 governorship election but almost immediately fell into open and escalating conflict with his political godfather. By late 2023 and extending through 2024, the conflict between Wike and Fubara had engulfed the Rivers State House of Assembly, with the overwhelming majority of the Assembly's membership defecting to Wike's political camp, producing a constitutional crisis of extraordinary proportions. A rival faction of Assembly members loyal to Fubara simultaneously claimed to constitute the legitimate legislature (Channels Television, 2024; Emorinken, 2024). This legislative standoff resulted in protracted governance paralysis, multiple

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Supreme Court proceedings, and eventually a federal executive intervention involving a declaration of a state of emergency over Rivers State itself, constitutionally controversial and politically charged. According to BudgIT (2024), Rivers State's capital expenditure implementation rate declined precipitously to below 45% during the height of the legislative crisis in 2023–2024, with multiple capital projects suspended and billions of naira in federal statutory allocations effectively immobilized by political uncertainty. This figure compares especially poorly with the state's own benchmark of 60% capital expenditure implementation set in its Medium-Term Expenditure Framework for 2022–2024 (BudgIT, 2024).

Bayelsa State's political succession history between 2015 and 2025 has been equally turbulent and, in certain respects, constitutionally more dramatic. Governor Seriake Dickson of the PDP completed his constitutionally mandated two terms (2012–2020), a formally laudable adherence to term limits in a region where such institutional compliance has not always been guaranteed, though his tenure was marked by persistent controversies regarding development performance, financial management, and allegations of political manipulation (Abali, 2020). Nevertheless, Dickson's two-term completion represented a degree of succession regularity unusual in Niger Delta politics. During his tenure, Bayelsa's internally generated revenue (IGR) remained stubbornly low, averaging approximately ₦3.8 billion annually between 2015 and 2019, against projected targets typically above ₦6 billion, a chronic shortfall reflecting weak domestic revenue mobilization that made the state almost entirely dependent on federal allocations (BudgIT, 2024). The 2019 governorship election produced what is almost certainly the most extraordinary succession episode in contemporary Nigerian electoral history. David Lyon of the APC won the November 2019 governorship election with what appeared to be a commanding majority. However, on the eve of his scheduled inauguration in the early hours of February 14, 2020, a seven-member panel of the Supreme Court of Nigeria unanimously nullified his election because his running mate, Biobarakuma Degi-Eremienyo, had submitted forged academic certificates to INEC during the candidate screening process. The Court ordered that the candidate of the party with the next-highest number of votes, Douye Diri of the PDP, be immediately sworn in as governor (Abali, 2020; Nwankwo, 2022). This ruling, while constitutionally defensible, sent shockwaves through the Nigerian political system and raised profound questions about the adequacy of pre-election candidate vetting processes and the vulnerability of electoral outcomes to post-election judicial reversals that effectively disenfranchise millions of voters. Governor Diri's assumption of office was marked from the outset by questions of democratic legitimacy, political polarization, and the enormous complexity of governing a state whose electorate had voted substantially for a different candidate. His administration inherited the accumulated developmental deficits of preceding administrations, compounded by the governance uncertainty generated by the succession controversy itself. Between 2020 and 2025, Diri navigated a complex political landscape, managing tensions with the APC opposition and its substantial support base, managing fiscal and political relationships with successive federal administrations, and attempting to address the state's chronic and worsening development deficits (Omotola, 2023).

Common Structural Pathologies of Leadership Succession

Across both Rivers and Bayelsa States, several deeply entrenched structural pathologies of political leadership succession are discernible during the 2015–2025 period. These pathologies are not incidental or conjunctural; they reflect durable structural features of the political systems in both states that must be addressed at the systemic rather than merely individual level. First, the phenomenon of godfatherism, wherein wealthy, powerful political patrons use substantial financial resources, security networks, and institutional connections to determine who ascends to executive power, remains absolutely central to succession dynamics in both states. In Rivers State, the Wike-Fubara rift illustrates with almost pedagogical clarity what occurs when a political godson acquires sufficient institutional resources and political support to challenge his patron's continued dominance after assuming office (Emorinken, 2024). In Bayelsa, the influence of former President Goodluck Jonathan's extensive political networks, channeled through various political operators and financial intermediaries, has consistently and significantly shaped the character of political succession throughout the decade (Agbu, 2021). Godfatherism structurally subordinates democratic succession to patrimonial logic, replacing electoral accountability with patron-client obligation and making developmental governance almost impossible to sustain. Second, the deployment of state security apparatus and political violence as instruments of succession management is a persistent and deeply troubling feature of both states' political systems. Political violence during election periods, including voter intimidation, destruction of electoral materials, attacks on political opponents, and outright assassination of political actors, has been documented in both states across all three electoral cycles of the study period (Aghedo & Osumah, 2020). The militarization of political competition creates an environment of fear that systematically disadvantages candidates without access to financial

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resources and organized violence networks, structurally excluding large segments of potential leadership talent from political competition. According to Omotola (2023), at least 17 deaths directly attributable to electoral violence were recorded in Rivers State across the 2015 and 2019 election cycles alone, a figure that understates the real toll, as many incidents go unreported. Third, judicial interventions have become a normalized and deeply problematic feature of succession determination in both states. The extraordinary frequency with which electoral outcomes are contested in Nigerian courts and the frequency with which courts reverse those outcomes reflect both the pervasiveness of electoral malpractice and the inadequacy of pre-election dispute-prevention mechanisms. While judicial review of elections is constitutionally indispensable, overreliance on courts as the primary mechanism for determining succession creates persistent governance uncertainty, imposes enormous transaction costs on democratic competition, and generates legitimacy deficits for administrations whose right to govern is established judicially rather than electorally (Omotola, 2023). Fourth, intra-party conflicts, particularly within the PDP, which has historically dominated both states, have repeatedly generated succession crises that spill destructively into governmental dysfunction. The inability of parties to manage internal succession through transparent, rules-based, and participatory processes forces resolution through extra-party channels, courts, federal executive interference, and ultimately political violence, with devastating consequences for the coherence of governance and the continuity of development (Nwankwo, 2022).

The development crisis in Rivers and Bayelsa States during the 2015–2025 period is genuinely multidimensional, encompassing infrastructural deficits, deteriorating human development outcomes, institutional decay, environmental deterioration, and a deepening crisis of youth marginalization. Despite receiving some of the highest per capita federal statutory allocations of any state in the federation, cumulative allocations of over ₦2.1 trillion and ₦1.2 trillion, respectively, over the decade (BudgIT, 2024), both states have consistently and dramatically underperformed relative to their extraordinary fiscal capacities across virtually all key development indicators. In terms of infrastructure, both states exhibit a recurring and troubling pattern of high-profile, politically motivated project visibility combined with widespread neglect of basic service infrastructure in non-capital communities. While the Wike administration in Rivers State constructed several notable arterial roads and flyovers in central Port Harcourt infrastructure with high political visibility and symbolic significance, rural communities across Ogoni, Khana, Eleme, and other local government areas remained without basic road connectivity, functional electricity supply, reliable clean water, and accessible primary healthcare facilities (BudgIT, 2024; Egberi, 2022). A 2023 assessment of capital projects in Rivers State found that fewer than 40% of announced projects across the 2019–2023 budget cycles were completed on schedule, with the remainder either stalled, abandoned, or still at varying stages of implementation as of the end of the study period (BudgIT, 2024). Human development indicators in both states remain deeply and persistently concerning. The NBS (2022) reports multidimensional poverty rates well above 30% in both states, with significant proportions of the population lacking meaningful access to basic healthcare, quality education, and social protection. Youth unemployment in the two states is estimated at over 40% of the economically active youth population, a figure that contributes directly to the ready availability of young men for recruitment into political thuggery, pipeline vandalism networks, and oil bunkering syndicates that further destabilize both states (Obi, 2023). The UNDP (2023) ranks Nigeria 163rd out of 193 countries on the Human Development Index, and sub-national data suggest that Rivers and Bayelsa States score significantly below even the national average when disaggregated provincial HDI values are computed. The profound irony that both states collectively spend hundreds of billions of naira annually on recurrent governmental expenditure, including enormous security votes, legislative allowances, and executive running costs, while failing to deliver public goods commensurate with their fiscal capacity, reflects the fundamental misalignment of political incentives with developmental priorities under elite-captured governance.

Comparative Analysis of Rivers and Bayelsa States

The data presented in Tables 1–3 reveal important similarities and differences in the relationship between political leadership succession and development outcomes in Rivers and Bayelsa States. Although both states are major oil-producing states with substantial federal allocations, their development trajectories differ in several respects. Rivers State consistently received higher federal allocations than Bayelsa State throughout the study period, yet this greater fiscal capacity did not translate into proportionately better development outcomes. Instead, Rivers recorded higher multidimensional poverty rates, higher youth unemployment, and a sharp decline in the implementation of capital expenditure during periods of intense political succession conflict. By comparison, Bayelsa State received relatively lower federal allocations but maintained comparatively lower poverty rates and recorded modest improvements in social indicators such as infant mortality and access to clean water. However, the state remained heavily dependent on federal allocations due to persistently low internally generated revenue, thereby limiting its fiscal sustainability and development capacity. The succession crises also manifested differently in the two states. In Rivers State, political conflict largely revolved around intra-party rivalry, executive-legislative confrontation, and the prolonged Wike–Fubara political crisis, which disrupted governance, delayed budget implementation, and reduced capital project execution. Conversely, Bayelsa's major succession crisis arose from judicial intervention following the nullification of the 2019 governorship election, creating political uncertainty but without producing the same degree of legislative paralysis as in Rivers State. The comparative evidence, therefore, suggests that while both states experienced leadership succession crises, Rivers State suffered more severe governance disruptions, resulting in weaker fiscal performance and slower implementation of development projects. Bayelsa's challenges were more institutional and fiscal in nature, particularly its dependence on statutory allocations and weak internally generated revenue. Nevertheless, both cases demonstrate that unstable succession processes undermine development by diverting political attention from governance to elite power struggles, weakening public institutions, and reducing the effectiveness of public expenditure. Overall, the comparison confirms that leadership succession crises constitute a common structural constraint on development in both Rivers and Bayelsa States. However, the intensity, institutional manifestations, and developmental consequences vary between the two states, underscoring the importance of adopting state-specific institutional reforms alongside broader democratic and governance reforms.

Causal Pathways: From Succession Crisis to Development Crisis

The causal linkages between political leadership succession crises and development deficits in Rivers and Bayelsa States are multiple, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing. Understanding these pathways is essential for designing effective reform interventions. First, succession crises generate acute governance uncertainty that directly disrupts development planning and investment. When a state's political future is actively contested through protracted court battles, legislative standoffs, or violent factional conflict, domestic and international businesses reduce their commitment and investment, capital flight accelerates, development partners reduce programming activities, and government agencies operate in a condition of sustained organizational paralysis that makes coherent development programming impossible (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In Rivers State's case, the value of abandoned or suspended capital projects during the 2023–2024 legislative crisis has been estimated at approximately ₦187 billion, equivalent to roughly 42% of the state's entire capital budget for the 2023 fiscal year (BudgIT, 2024). Second, succession conflicts systematically redirect public resources away from development toward political competition and elite self-preservation. In both states, significant and documented proportions of public funds are routinely channeled toward election campaigns, security expenditure for managing political violence, legal fees for electoral tribunal and court proceedings, and patronage payments to maintain the political loyalties of key constituency actors (BudgIT, 2024). These resources, which should, by any development-rational calculus, be invested in schools, hospitals, rural roads, clean water systems, and social protection programs, are instead consumed by the dynamics of political competition generated by contested succession. Third, succession crises systematically undermine bureaucratic continuity and institutional memory. Incoming political administrations following contentious successions characteristically undertake wholesale replacements of senior civil servants, technical advisers, and political appointees, disrupting institutional continuity, eroding organizational capacity, and losing the accumulated technical and administrative knowledge indispensable for effective development governance (Leftwich, 2000).

Fourth, the culture of godfatherism that structurally drives succession crises creates a political economy in which public office is instrumentalized primarily for patron-client redistribution rather than for public service delivery. Governors who owe their offices and their continued political survival to powerful political patrons must divert substantial public resources to service these political debts, leaving insufficient resources and diminished political will for genuine development (Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Aniche & Eze, 2021). This structural dynamic explains with considerable precision why both Rivers and Bayelsa States, despite their extraordinary revenue profiles, consistently and dramatically fail to deliver public goods commensurate with their fiscal capacity. Fifth, the political violence that accompanies succession crises has direct, immediate, and severe development consequences: disruption of economic activity, forced closure of schools and health facilities, trauma-induced breakdown of social cohesion, and the normalization of armed violence as a political tool with the latter creating lasting security externalities as armed groups transition from political thuggery to organized crime when electoral contests are resolved (Aghedo & Osumah, 2020). Viewed through the lens of the Developmental Leadership Model, these causal pathways illuminate the fundamental gap between the actually existing political order in Rivers and Bayelsa States and the developmental leadership that the DLM prescribes. The DLM requires leaders committed to long-term development, coalitions organized around productive rather than extractive interests, and institutions that constrain opportunism and reward accountability. What exists in both states is, in almost every critical respect, the inverse of this developmental template: leaders primarily committed to political survival and personal accumulation, coalitions organized entirely around rent-seeking, and institutions systematically weakened by the very political actors charged with their stewardship (Leftwich & Wheeler, 2011; Nwosu & Okafor, 2022).

Conclusion

This paper has systematically examined the relationship between political leadership succession and development crisis in Rivers and Bayelsa States between 2015 and 2025. Through conceptual analysis, a Developmental Leadership Model anchored theoretical framework, and an empirically grounded discussion of the political and development record of both states enriched by statistical data on fiscal performance, human development indicators, and capital expenditure patterns the study has demonstrated that the development crisis in these two oil-rich but persistently underdeveloped states is deeply and fundamentally rooted in the character and conduct of political leadership succession at the sub-national level. Succession in both states over the study decade has been driven not by programmatic political competition among parties with differentiated development visions, nor by transparent institutional processes that respect democratic norms, but by the strategic calculations of small, organized elite networks seeking to capture and retain exclusive access to state resources. The structural pathologies of godfatherism, judicial succession determination, legislative capture, political violence, and intra-party factional conflict, all extensively documented in both states during the study period, have created a governance environment that is fundamentally hostile to the continuity of development, institutional integrity, and accountable public resource management. The statistical evidence assembled in this paper makes the development cost of these pathologies concrete and undeniable: capital expenditure implementation rates below 45% in Rivers State during peak succession conflict; Bayelsa State poverty rates holding above 35% despite ₦1.2 trillion in federal allocations; youth unemployment above 40% in both states; and human development indicators below national averages in states that should, based on their fiscal profiles, be development leaders. The Developmental Leadership Model provides the normative counterpoint to this grim reality, specifying the leadership qualities, developmental coalitions, and institutional arrangements that are necessary for development to succeed where it has persistently failed. The gap between the actually existing political leadership in both states and the developmental leadership that the DLM prescribes is wide, persistent, and self-perpetuating due to the absence of structural reforms. The study concludes that resolving the development crisis in Rivers and Bayelsa States requires not merely better individual leaders, but a fundamental restructuring of the political and institutional environment within which leaders are selected, sustained, and held accountable. This restructuring must address the deep structural conditions of oil-revenue dependence and its associated rent-seeking incentives, chronically weak democratic institutions, a clientelistic political culture that rewards patron-client loyalty over public service, and effective impunity for electoral and governance violations that have sustained the current system of elite-captured, development-averse governance throughout the study period and well before it.

Recommendations

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

1. The Independent National Electoral Commission should strengthen electoral administration through improved technology, transparent voter management, and strict enforcement of electoral laws to promote credible leadership succession.
2. Political parties should institutionalize transparent, merit-based, and democratic candidate selection processes to reduce godfatherism and elite manipulation of political succession.
3. The governments of Rivers and Bayelsa States should strengthen the autonomy and oversight capacity of their State Houses of Assembly to promote accountability and institutional stability.
4. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offenses Commission should intensify the monitoring and prosecution of corruption to ensure that public resources are utilized for sustainable development.
5. Political leaders should prioritize developmental governance over personal and factional interests by promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making.
6. Civil society organizations and the media should strengthen civic education and public accountability initiatives to encourage greater citizen participation in democratic governance.
7. The Niger Delta Development Commission should improve project implementation, transparency, and financial accountability to accelerate socio-economic development in Rivers and Bayelsa States.

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8. The Federal Government should strengthen democratic institutions and uphold the rule of law to ensure that political leadership succession contributes to sustainable development rather than political instability.

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