

From Oil Wells to Wellness: Youthpreneurship and Experience-Based Economy Models in Delta State's Post-Oil Transition

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Abstract: This paper investigates the experience economy as a strategic pathway for inclusive and sustainable post-oil development in Delta State, Nigeria. Despite decades of oil-derived revenues, the state faces persistent challenges, including rising youth unemployment, environmental degradation, and overdependence on extractive industries. Adopting an ex post facto design, the study integrates qualitative fieldwork, via stakeholder observation and informal dialogues at community events, with secondary analysis of demographic and fiscal data from 2015 to 2023. The study population comprised Delta State's youth (estimated at 3.35 million in 2023), from which a purposive sample of 120 participants aged 18–35 was engaged across four local government areas. Findings show that youth unemployment rose from 32.5% to 38.5%, underscoring systemic barriers to labour market inclusion. However, six diversification pathways emerged with significant potential: cultural and heritage tourism, eco-tourism, wellness and lifestyle ventures, creative industries, youth entrepreneurship, and sustainable agribusiness. The study recommends targeted investments in youth-led enterprise, infrastructure development, and cross-sectoral partnerships to harness local capacities and reposition the state's economy toward resilience and regeneration. These findings contribute to an evidence-based, context-sensitive framework for sustainable development in post-oil contexts.

Keywords: experience economy, Youthpreneurship, creative industries, post-oil, development, sustainable livelihoods.

I. Introduction

Delta State, located in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, has long served as a strategic centre of the country's oil economy. As of early 2024, it produced approximately 346,000 barrels of crude oil daily, ranking it as Nigeria's second-largest oil-producing state (Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission [NUPRC], 2024). Yet, this economic prominence obscures deeper structural challenges, including environmental degradation, economic monoculture, and persistently high youth unemployment, that have hindered inclusive development.

With an estimated population of 7.8 million, over 60% of whom are under 35 (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2024; Delta State Government, 2024), the state is approaching a demographic crossroads. The socioeconomic consequences of over-reliance on oil, including ecological vulnerability, fiscal volatility, and youth disenfranchisement, reflect broader patterns observed in resource-dependent economies globally (Abubakar, 2017; United Nations Development Programme Nigeria [UNDP Nigeria], 2023).

In response to these challenges, this study investigates the experience economy as a strategic pathway for post-oil diversification and regenerative development. Drawing on ex post facto fieldwork conducted between September 2023 and early 2024 across four local government areas (Asaba, Warri, Ughelli, and Sapele). The study engaged 120 youth participants through informal dialogues, stakeholder observation, and community-based events. These locations were selected for their cultural vibrancy, population density, and active youth-led. Most research on entrepreneurial ecosystems privileges finance, technology, and formal institutions, offering limited insight into how locally embedded resources shape enterprise. In Delta State, where a dynamic youthful population, cultural heritage, creative innovation, and ecological assets remain undervalued, scholarship has yet to explore how these resources can be mobilised through an experience-based economy model. This gap restricts understanding of how geographically specific ecosystems can generate alternative economic pathways that foster experiential value, resilience, and sustainable livelihoods beyond extractive growth models. It is this gap that motivates the present study, which examines how Delta can transition from "oil well" dependence to "wellness" by leveraging youth innovation, population energy, cultural engagement, and ecological potential within a place-based entrepreneurial ecosystem.

II. Literature Review

The paradox of resource wealth coexisting with structural underdevelopment, commonly termed the "resource curse," is evident in Nigeria's economic landscape. As Auty (2001) and Sachs & Warner (2001) observe, nations dependent on finite natural resources often experience distorted economic growth, governance challenges, and environmental degradation. In Delta State, oil extraction accounts for the majority of export earnings while simultaneously fostering economic monoculture, ecological harm, and persistent youth unemployment (Ebeku, 2020; UNDP, 2023). Scholars highlight governance deficits, elite capture of revenues, and inadequate reinvestment in diversified sectors as central to this cycle (Iledare, 2007), underscoring the urgent need for alternative development pathways.

Contemporary development discourse increasingly challenges GDP-centric models in favour of holistic frameworks that prioritise human wellbeing, social equity, and ecological balance. Fioramonti (2017) and Raworth (2017) argue for economic systems that

value health, resilience, and environmental sustainability alongside traditional growth metrics. This paradigm shift finds institutional expression in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (2015), particularly those addressing health, decent work, and sustainable communities. For Delta State, wellness-centered development implies redirecting resources toward youth empowerment, cultural regeneration, and green infrastructure. This represents a fundamental reorientation of economic priorities (World Bank, 2022).

The experience economy framework advanced by Pine and Gilmore (1999) offers a compelling pathway for such a transition by placing value on culturally rich, memorable interactions rather than commodity production. This aligns with emerging sectors such as creative industries, eco-tourism, and wellness services, which demonstrate potential for labour-intensive, locally rooted growth (Florida, 2019; Gibson & Connell, 2016). African case studies, ranging from Lagos' creative hubs to Calabar's carnival economy and Ghana's diaspora tourism, illustrate how experience-driven economies can generate inclusive development while preserving cultural heritage (Ayedun & Akinbamijo, 2017).

Nigeria's demographic structure further amplifies this potential. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2024), over 60% of the country's population is under 35, positioning youth as pivotal agents in economic transformation. Evidence highlights youth-led innovation across creative technology, sustainable fashion, and agri-business ventures that are reshaping informal economies (Okonkwo & Ojeifo, 2022; UNDP, 2023). Yet systemic barriers, including limited financing, infrastructure gaps, and misaligned policies, continue to constrain this potential. These realities suggest the need for targeted institutional support (World Bank, 2022).

The conceptual transition from "oil wells to wellness" encapsulates a regenerative economic philosophy emphasising circular systems, ecological restoration, and the valorisation of indigenous knowledge (Raworth, 2017; Jackson, 2009). For Delta State, operationalising this vision requires policies that foster creative clusters, local production networks, and value chains rooted in sustainability and cultural preservation (Fioramonti, 2017). Such an approach promises not only to diversify the economic base but also to heal the social and environmental wounds inflicted by decades of resource extraction, thereby charting a course toward sustainable and inclusive development.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical foundations of the experience economy, as articulated by Pine and Gilmore (1999). They argue that in post-industrial societies, economic value is increasingly derived from curated, memorable, and emotionally resonant experiences rather than tangible goods or standard services. This paradigm highlights the centrality of cultural, aesthetic, and participatory encounters as drivers of economic activity (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Boswijk et al., 2007). It provides a lens to examine how cultural assets, youth innovation, and ecological resources can collectively foster a transition from extractive industries to sustainable, people-centered development.

The framework integrates three interdependent pillars. First, cultural capital, which encompasses oral traditions, festivals, performance arts, and creative practices, serves as a foundation for experiential offerings that preserve local identity while creating economic value (Throsby, 2001; UNESCO, 2013). Second, youth creativity and innovation highlight the role of young entrepreneurs leveraging digital literacy and artistic expression across fashion, music, film, and eco-tourism (UNCTAD, 2010; Florida, 2002). This underscores the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in shaping Delta's economic future. Third, ecological resources and landscapes, including rivers, mangroves, and forests, are positioned as critical assets for immersive and sustainable tourism (Honey, 2008; UNWTO, 2020). Together, these pillars reflect a holistic approach to development that integrates environmental stewardship with cultural and economic vitality.

The framework further draws on post-industrial economic theory (Bell, 1973), creative economy scholarship (Howkins, 2001; DCMS, 1998), and sustainable development paradigms (UNDP, 2015) to provide a multidimensional perspective on Delta's developmental trajectory. By synthesising these strands, the framework not only aligns with global discourses on the experience economy but also adapts them to local realities, addressing the unique opportunities and constraints of a resource-dependent region.

Empirical Review

Several studies on creative industries and ecotourism highlights its potential to foster inclusive development. For instance, studies by Okwuosa & Udechukwu (2019) on Nigeria's music and film industries and Boakye & Ampadu (2018) on Ghanaian cultural festivals demonstrate the economic benefits of these sectors, particularly in job creation and cultural exports. However, their narrow focus on urban centers and formal economies overlooks the significant role of informal networks and rural contexts, where much of the creative and ecotourism activity occurs.

Furthermore, a recurring theme in the literature is the tension between economic development and equitable participation. While Adebayo & Akintunde (2021) emphasize the role of community engagement in enhancing ecotourism sustainability in Cross River State, Nigeria, their analysis lacks a deeper socio-economic assessment of host communities. Similarly, Otieno (2020) examines conservation-livelihood linkages in Kenya's Maasai Mara but neglects governance structures and exclusionary practices that may undermine inclusivity.

Community participation enhances sustainability in Cross River State's ecotourism, yet their analysis lacks a socio-economic evaluation of host communities. Otieno (2020) documents conservation-livelihood linkages in Kenya's Maasai Mara but omits

governance dimensions and exclusionary practices. These gaps suggest a need for more nuanced examinations of power dynamics and equity in community-based initiatives.

Mbatha & Naidoo (2022) illustrate how township tourism in Cape Town generates economic opportunities yet perpetuates unequal benefit distribution and reinforces stereotypes. Likewise, Martínez & De Souza (2020) highlight the voyeuristic and safety risks associated with favela tourism in Brazil. However, Hernández & Ortega (2017) critique Medellín's urban transformation for displacing long-term residents under the guise of progress. These studies highlight the commodification risks and ethical dilemmas inherent in leveraging marginalized communities for tourism and creative economies, calling for more reflexive and justice-oriented approaches.

These studies collectively revealed the importance of creative industries and ecotourism around the world but also identified challenges with urbanisation, governance dimensions, insufficient attention to rural and informal sectors, power dynamics, and ethical commodification and exclusionary practices

III. Methodology

This study employed an ex post facto research design to examine Delta State's socio-economic conditions, where variables could not be experimentally manipulated but where historical patterns significantly influenced current dynamics. The approach proved particularly valuable for investigating the region's readiness for economic diversification through empirically grounded insights into youth participation in creative and experiential economies. The research focused on capturing both structural conditions and community-level perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of development potential.

The study targeted Delta State's youth population aged 18–35, estimated at 3.35 million. From this population, a purposive sample of 120 participants was drawn across four strategically significant local government areas: Asaba, Warri, Ughelli, and Sapele. These sites were chosen for their cultural vitality, high levels of youth engagement, and concentration of creative enterprises. Within each location, participants were identified through community networks, youth associations, and cultural groups, with selection guided by their active involvement in creative, ecological, or entrepreneurial initiatives. Fieldwork, conducted between September 2023 and March 2024, was intentionally timed to coincide with major festivals and community events in order to capture authentic expressions of cultural practice and economic activity. Ethical considerations were observed by securing verbal consent, assuring participants of confidentiality, and framing informal dialogues as voluntary, non-extractive exchanges that respected local norms of trust and reciprocity.

Multiple data streams were integrated to ensure methodological rigour and depth of analysis. The secondary statistical data from the National Bureau of Statistics and Delta State's fiscal documents provided crucial macroeconomic context regarding youth unemployment and demographic trends and the ethnographic field observations during community gatherings yielded rich qualitative insights into lived experiences and grassroots economic practices. This methodological triangulation of quantitative and qualitative sources allowed for a detailed examination of how structural conditions intersect with local practices and aspirations in Delta State's evolving economic landscape.

Table 1: Youth Population and Unemployment in Delta State (2015-2023)

Year	Youth Population	Unemployment Rate%
2015	2,850,000	32.5
2017	3,000,000	34.8
2019	3,150,000	36.1
2021	3,300,000	37.9
2023	3,350,000	38.5

Source: Adapted from National Bureau of Statistics (2024)

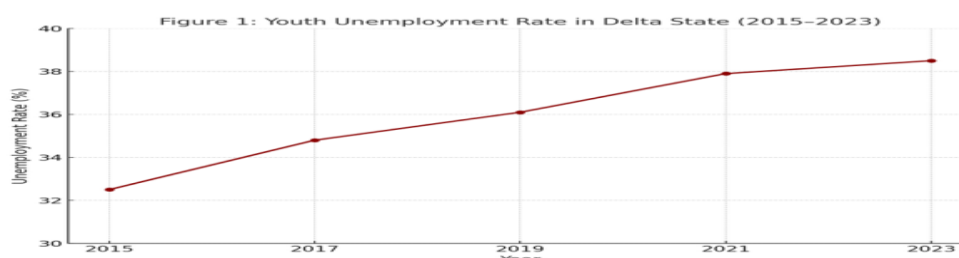


Figure 4.1: Youth Unemployment Rate in Delta State (2015–2023)

Source: Delta State Economic Planning Department (2024)

IV. Discussion of Findings

These findings are further contextualized by drawing parallels with global case studies. For instance, they align with Okwuosa & Udechukwu (2019) and Boakyee & Ampadu (2018), who demonstrate the potential of experiential sectors to drive job creation and cultural exports. However, much of the literature overlooks rural and informal economies, where Delta State's cultural and ecological assets are most deeply rooted. The tension between economic development and equitable participation, as seen in Cape Town's township tourism (Mbatha & Naidoo, 2022) and Brazil's favela tourism (Martínez & De Souza, 2020), provides a cautionary precedent. These cases underscore the risks of commodification and exclusionary practices, highlighting the importance of policies that safeguard community ownership and ensure ethical engagement.

Within the experience economy framework, Delta State's cultural capital, youth creativity, and ecological resources emerge as critical pillars for diversification. The framework's integration of post-industrial theory (Bell, 1973) and sustainable development paradigms offers a holistic lens to evaluate these assets. Youth-led ventures in creative technology, sustainable fashion, and agrobusiness exemplify the interplay between tradition and modernity, which is a core principle of the framework (Okonkwo & Ojeifo, 2022). Nonetheless, systemic constraints such as limited financing, policy misalignment, and infrastructure deficits continue to restrict the full realization of this potential (World Bank, 2022).

V. Conclusion and Practical Implications

Delta State's transition from oil dependency to an experience-based economy offers a viable pathway for inclusive and sustainable development. The study highlights the urgency of diversifying the state's economic base to confront youth unemployment and ecological degradation. To operationalize this transition, the following practical implications are proposed:

Youth empowerment through targeted interventions: Training programmes, incubation hubs, and access to finance should be prioritized to support youth-led ventures in creative, cultural, and ecological sectors, particularly addressing the challenges of informal and rural entrepreneurs.

Strategic investment in cultural infrastructure: Performance spaces, museums, eco-parks, and festival platforms should be developed to amplify Delta State's cultural capital, transforming intangible heritage into sustainable economic opportunities.

Institutionalized multi-stakeholder collaboration: Structured partnerships between government, private investors, academia, and creative entrepreneurs are needed to build robust value chains, close infrastructure gaps, and align policies with grassroots innovation.

Youth representation in governance: A Youth Development Council representing creative, cultural, ecological, and technology sectors should be established to ensure youth-sensitive policies and participatory monitoring. This approach reflects stakeholder theory (Freeman et al., 2007) and strengthens accountability in ecosystem building.

Delta State's transition from oil dependency to an experience-based economy presents a viable pathway for inclusive and sustainable development. The study's findings underscore the urgency of diversifying the state's economic base to address rising youth unemployment and ecological degradation. To operationalize this transition, the following practical implications are proposed:

1. Targeted interventions, such as training programmes, incubation hubs, and access to capital, should be prioritized to empower youth-led ventures in creative and cultural sectors. These initiatives must be tailored to address the unique challenges faced by informal and rural entrepreneurs.
2. Strategic investments in performance spaces, museums, and festival platforms can amplify Delta State's cultural capital, transforming intangible heritage into economic opportunities.

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