



The Urhobo Progressive Union in Nigeria, 1999 to 2024		Vol. 3, No. 2, 2026 (Pp. 33-40) https://journal.upy.ac.id/index.php/qrobss https://doi.org/10.31316/crobss.v3i2.8863
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Received: October 2023 Revised: October 2023 Accepted: October 2023 Online: November 2023	ABSTRACT	
Keywords: <i>Challenges, Economic, Health, UPU.</i>	<p>The Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU), which was established to unify, represent, and advance the interests of the Urhobo people of Delta State, Nigeria, has played a significant role in fostering community cohesion, cultural preservation, and socio-economic development between 1999 and 2024. This period marked a transformative era for the UPU, characterized by adaptation to modern challenges while retaining its foundational principles. Data were gathered for the study through oral interviews, focus groups, textbooks, internet sources, journals, and unpublished theses. From 1999 to 2024, the UPU expanded its influence through strategic partnerships with governmental, non-governmental, and international organizations, focusing on advocacy for the rights and welfare of the Urhobo people of Delta State, Nigeria. The Union also played a pivotal role in addressing critical issues such as environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, youth unemployment, and the marginalization of the Urhobo people in national politics. However, challenges such as internal leadership disputes, evolving socio-political dynamics, and the need to engage younger generations tested the organization's resilience. By 2024, the UPU emerged stronger, having to redefine its strategies to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world. This study traces the UPU's journey from 1999 to 2024, highlighting its successes, challenges, and ongoing commitment to advancing the Urhobo nation. It provides a framework for understanding the union's impact and its roadmap for future progress.</p>	

1. Introduction

The Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) was founded in 1931 and is the umbrella socio-cultural organization representing the Urhobo ethnic group, one of the largest in Delta State, Nigeria. The organization was established to promote unity, cultural preservation, socio-economic development, and political representation for the Urhobo people. Over the years, the UPU has become a vital institution for addressing the unique challenges faced by the Urhobo nation, particularly within Nigeria's complex socio-political landscape. The Urhobo people are located in southern Nigeria, near the northwestern Niger Delta. They are the major ethnic group in Delta State. The Urhobo people speak the Urhobo language; their population is approximately 7 million. The Urhobo people live in the territory bounded by latitude 6 degrees and 5 degrees north and longitude 5 degrees to 40 degrees and 6 degrees, 25 degrees east in the Delta and Bayelsa state of Nigeria (Usman & Opone, 2025).

The Urhobo people, indigenous to Delta State, Nigeria, have a rich cultural heritage that dates back centuries. The establishment of the UPU was a strategic response to the colonial policies of marginalization and the need for unity among Urhobo communities. The period from 1999 to 2024 marked a significant era in the UPU's history as it adapted to the socio-political and economic changes in Nigeria, especially during the country's return to democratic governance in 1999 (Omoruyi, 2001). The UPU operates through a hierarchical structure that includes the national executive council, branches across Nigeria, and diaspora chapters. This

decentralized structure ensures grass-roots representation and inclusive in decision-making processes. The union's leadership during this period introduced reforms to improve efficiency and transparency in response to growing member demands for accountability (Ekeh, 2004). The UPU has been instrumental in fostering socio-economic development in Urhobo land. Its initiatives included scholarship programs for youth, the promotion of agricultural development, and advocacy for equitable resource allocation in the oil-rich Niger Delta. The union also focused on preserving Urhobo culture through annual cultural festivals, language promotion, and traditional rites (Otite, 2019). Despite its achievements, the UPU encountered numerous challenges. Leadership disputes often led to factionalism, undermining the union's effectiveness. Additionally, the global migration of Urhobo people necessitated the adoption of digital tools to engage the diaspora and sustain cultural values. The Niger Delta's environmental degradation from oil exploration further exacerbated socio-economic issues, prompting the UPU to intensify advocacy efforts (Okoko & Nna, 2017). Moreover, the emergence of globalization and technological advancements prompted the UPU to redefine its strategies. It sought to engage the Urhobo diaspora in meaningful ways, leveraging their resources and expertise to support development initiatives at home. In the above note, the study examined the evolution of the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) from 1999 to 2024, including its impacts, challenges, successes, and its cultural landscape on the Urhobo nation.

The Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) has long been a crucial entity in representing the interests of the Urhobo people, an ethnic group native to the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Founded in 1931, the UPU has undergone various phases of evolution, particularly since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999. During this period, the UPU played an essential role in addressing the political, social, and economic needs of the Urhobo people, advocating for improved representation, development, and cultural preservation. Despite its contributions, the organization has faced numerous challenges, including leadership tussles, factionalism, and the region's socio-political dynamics, which have affected its effectiveness (Omoruyi, 2001).

The focus of this study is to examine the activities, achievements, and challenges of the UPU from 1999 to 2024. This research will investigate how the UPU has adapted to changing political environments, responded to socio-economic issues, such as environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, and fostered unity and development among the Urhobo people. As Otite (2019) suggests, ethnic organizations like the UPU are integral to maintaining cultural identity while also navigating contemporary political landscapes. This study will assess the union's successes in implementing programs for youth empowerment, education, and community development, as well as its ability to unite the Urhobo diaspora (Ekeh, 2004). Furthermore, it will explore the UPU's role in addressing environmental challenges in the Niger Delta, particularly those linked to oil exploration, which have led to widespread impoverishment and social unrest (Okoko & Nna, 2017).

2. Method

The research methodology provides the framework through which this study was conducted, ensuring that the findings are valid, reliable, and relevant. This study employed a combination of qualitative and historical research methods to analyze the activities and impact of the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) from 1999 to 2024. Interviews and focus groups were

conducted, and journal articles, books, internet sources, and unpublished theses provided data for the study.

3. Results & Discussion

3.1. The Political Impacts of UPU

The Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) has been a formidable political actor in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta region, since its formal establishment in 1931. From 1999, the dawn of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, to 2024, the UPU's political interventions have had profound implications for the collective fortunes of the Urhobo people. Its political role has been shaped by its mandate to protect Urhobo interests, mobilize for representation, and negotiate for inclusion in governance at the state and federal levels. One notable political contribution of the UPU has been the mobilization of the Urhobo electorate. As the apex socio-cultural organization of the Urhobo people, the UPU provided a unified political voice at a time when fragmented party politics threatened to marginalize the community. For example, in the 2003 and 2015 Delta State elections, the UPU played a decisive role in shaping electoral alliances and voting patterns, urging the Urhobo people to support candidates and parties that aligned with the "Urhobo Agenda" (Ekeh, 2004). This collective mobilization gave the Urhobo nation political leverage in state politics, even when they were not in control of the governorship. The UPU also served as a platform for political negotiation and advocacy. Through meetings with federal and state governments, it consistently pressed for Urhobo inclusion in political appointments, federal projects, and resource allocation. In doing so, the UPU positioned the Urhobo as a critical bloc in Delta State politics, often reminding stakeholders that, as the largest ethnic nationality in the state, the Urhobo deserved proportionate recognition in governance (Otite, 2019).

Another significant political impact of the UPU was its role in defending Urhobo interests in periods of marginalization. For instance, when the Urhobo felt sidelined in power-sharing arrangements, the UPU spearheaded peaceful protests, issued communiqués, and lobbied political actors both within and outside the Niger Delta (Omoruyi, 2001). This defensive political posture helped the Urhobo maintain their relevance in the competition for political space, particularly in the oil-rich Niger Delta, where ethnic competition is intense. Equally important was the UPU's ability to act as a bridge between tradition and modern politics. By invoking cultural authority, the union legitimized its political interventions, positioning itself not merely as a political group but as the authentic custodian of Urhobo destiny. This gave its pronouncements significant weight, as politicians across party lines often sought UPU endorsement to secure grassroots legitimacy (Okoko & Nna, 2017).

Despite these achievements, the UPU has faced numerous challenges that undermined its political effectiveness. In its early stages, the UPU was strictly a socio-cultural organization. Its major aim was the development and promotion of education in the Urhobo community. This shift into politics is very recent, has not had any significant impact on the Urhobo community, and has also proven quite difficult. The major challenge is internal leadership crises and factionalism. Disagreements over succession, influence of external political actors, and allegations of bias in endorsements created deep divisions within the UPU. These crises sometimes resulted in parallel leadership structures, which weakened the union's political

bargaining power and confused its grassroots supporters (Ekeh, 2004). The pressure of external political manipulation also posed challenges. Political elites, both within and outside the Urhobo nation, often sought to use the UPU as a tool for personal or party gains. This external interference compromised the union's independence and weakened its credibility among sections of the Urhobo populace (Omoruyi, 2001).

Additionally, the UPU's political influence has been constrained by structural realities in Nigeria's federal system. Despite being the largest ethnic nationality in Delta State, the Urhobo often found themselves disadvantaged by zoning arrangements and ethnic balancing in the Niger Delta. The UPU's calls for equitable power-sharing were frequently counterbalanced by competing demands from other ethnic groups, such as the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Isoko, making it difficult for the Urhobo to assert dominance without triggering inter-ethnic tensions (Okoko & Nna, 2017). Lastly, the challenge of youth restiveness and generational divides has strained the UPU's political authority. Many young Urhobo activists felt excluded from the union's decision-making processes, leading to parallel youth movements that sometimes contradicted the UPU's official position. This generational gap weakened the UPU's claim to represent all sections of the Urhobo people (Otite, 2019).

3.2. Education and Health

The Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU), as the apex socio-cultural organization of the Urhobo people, has had a profound and multifaceted impact on the educational and healthcare development of Urhobo communities, especially from 1999 to 2024. During this period, the UPU increasingly embraced a more strategic developmental agenda aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of its people. Among its most prominent areas of intervention have been education and health, both of which are crucial indicators of human development. The UPU has consistently identified education as a critical tool for the socio-economic upliftment of the Urhobo people. Even before 1999 and in the early years of the UPU, it has been one of the UPU's major focuses. In the mid-1930s and 1940s, and under the leadership of "Chief Mukoro Mowoe", the union sponsored two (2) Urhobo youth named "Macneil Gabriel Ejaife from Okpara and Ezekiel Norucho Igho from Udu" with scholarships to study abroad in the UK. They both returned in 1948 and established a secondary institution known as "Urhobo College". During the tenure of a famous UPU president general, T.E.A. Salode, from Ovu in 1963, who also became the federal commissioner for education at that time, he influenced many secondary schools in the Urhobo community, including St. Vincent's College, Okwagbe, and Ogbaweni Grammar School in Usiefrun. Immediately, he arrived at his office in Ibadan. His first task was to grant permission for the school's establishment in his region (Ofuafor, 2023).

In 2015, the Urhobo Progress Union (UPU) played a significant role in the creation of the Urhobo curriculum in schools, advocating for its inclusion and development. The UPU, as a socio-cultural organization, recognized the importance of preserving and promoting the Urhobo language and culture through education. They actively lobbied for the integration of the Urhobo language and culture into the school curriculum, ensuring that Urhobo children could learn about their heritage. Several letters were written to the commissioner of education, but there was no response. The female president-general at that time, named "Lady Christy Siakpere, "whose major agenda was to develop the Urhobo language, took it upon herself and

led some of the members and Excos of the UPU to see a prominent Urhobo man who also happened to be a formal governor of delta state “chief Ibori” to seek his assistance with the government for the approval of the Urhobo curriculum. Which was approved exactly 2 (two) weeks after the meeting. It was unveiled at the UPU cultural center in Uvwiamuge-Agbarho, Ughelli, where the former governor, Chief Ibori, was in attendance (Ofuafor, 2023).

In addition to financial assistance, the UPU played a pivotal role in educational advocacy. The union regularly engaged with state and federal governments to demand the establishment and upgrading of educational institutions within Urhobo territory. A major achievement in this regard was the union’s role in the campaign to upgrade Delta State University (DELSU), particularly the expansion of its campuses in Abraka and Oleh. The UPU also lobbied for the establishment of additional public schools and vocational institutions to cater to growing youth populations in rural areas (Ekeh, 2004). Educational support extended to infrastructural development as well. The UPU, through community fundraising and partnerships, constructed classroom blocks, donated learning materials, and renovated dilapidated school structures in towns such as Ughelli, Ovu, and Ekpan. The involvement of the diaspora in funding library projects and ICT Centers further enhanced educational access and digital literacy among students in urban and semi-urban Urhobo communities (UPU Secretariat, 2020). In parallel with its educational efforts, the UPU made significant interventions in the healthcare sector to improve the well-being of Urhobo people. With inadequate health infrastructure and persistent environmental pollution from oil exploration in the Niger Delta, the region faced alarming rates of health issues ranging from respiratory diseases to waterborne infections. The UPU, aware of the health crisis, began implementing community-based health initiatives as early as the 2000s.

The union organized medical outreach programs in collaboration with local and international partners. These outreaches provided free medical services, including immunizations, malaria treatment, maternal care, and health education. In rural areas where government healthcare presence was minimal, these interventions often served as the only source of professional medical care. For instance, annual free health missions were carried out in Ughelli, Jesse, and Warri between 2015 and 2022, reaching thousands of residents (Otite, 2019). Some affiliates of the UPU, for example, UPU-America, UPU-Northern Arizona, UPU-California, and UPU-United Kingdom, do come from time to time to conduct projects such as the Urhobo language competition, provide free medical treatment, and send items across to assist the Urhobo people at home (in Delta State). Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Limited financial resources, dependence on donations, and occasional leadership crises have at times hindered the sustainability of the UPU’s health and education programs. Additionally, the union continues to face difficulties in ensuring the equitable distribution of these services across all Urhobo kingdoms due to logistical constraints and political influence. Nevertheless, the long-term impact of UPU’s interventions in these sectors is evident in improved literacy rates, increased school enrolment, better health awareness, and enhanced access to healthcare facilities (Mbata et al., 2024).

The UPU’s contributions to education and health have been instrumental in laying the foundation for human capital development among the Urhobo people. Through scholarships,

school infrastructure, health missions, and advocacy, the UPU has positioned itself as a central actor in the socio-economic advancement of the Urhobo nation, empowering communities with the tools necessary for sustainable development (Aziza, 2016).

3.3. The Challenges Faced by UPU

Despite its notable achievements in Politics, education, healthcare, infrastructure, and youth empowerment, the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) has faced a series of persistent and complex challenges in its pursuit of socio-economic development from 1999 to 2024. These challenges have significantly limited the scale, reach, and sustainability of many of the union's initiatives, thereby hindering its overall effectiveness in transforming the socio-economic conditions of the Urhobo people. One of the most pressing challenges has been financial constraints. The UPU, being a non-governmental and non-profit socio-cultural organization, relies heavily on voluntary donations from individuals, community fundraising, and contributions from diaspora chapters. While there have been moments of generosity and philanthropic support from wealthy Urhobo elites, these funding streams are neither consistent nor adequate to meet the expansive developmental needs of over two million Urhobo people across Delta State and beyond (Ekeh, 2004).

Another significant obstacle is leadership instability and internal factionalism within the UPU. Over the past two decades, leadership crises and power struggles have led to the emergence of multiple parallel factions within the UPU, especially during election periods for national executives. These internal divisions have not only weakened the organization's credibility and unity but also caused donor fatigue and reduced public trust. In 2014 and again in 2020, leadership disputes led to legal battles and boycotts of UPU-organized events, stalling critical development initiatives during those periods (Omoruyi, 2001). Such instability undermines continuity in project execution and weakens institutional memory. Closely tied to this is the politicization of the union's activities. While the UPU has historically maintained a non-partisan stance, the involvement of political actors seeking to use the union as a platform for personal or electoral gains has created tension and division among stakeholders. In some cases, politicians have attempted to hijack development programs, divert resources, or manipulate executive elections, thereby weakening the union's developmental focus (Okoko & Nna, 2017). This politicization distracts from core socio-economic priorities and breeds resentment among community members who view the UPU as no longer representing the collective Urhobo interest. Furthermore, the limited collaboration with government institutions and international development agencies has restricted the scope and funding of UPU's initiatives. While the union occasionally receives support from state or local governments, such partnerships are often marred by bureaucracy, mistrust, and political interference. This lack of synergy with governmental structures means that UPU projects often run in parallel with state development plans, reducing their effectiveness and leading to duplication of effort. Greater institutional alignment and strategic partnerships would be required to scale impact and attract technical and financial support from donor agencies (Mani & Mani, 2020).

4. Conclusion, Limitation & Suggestion

The study of the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) from 1999 to 2024 highlights the complex and dynamic role played by socio-cultural organizations in shaping not only the

identity and welfare of ethnic groups but also their political and socio-economic future. The UPU, as the oldest surviving ethnic union in Nigeria, has demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and influence, even in the face of numerous challenges. Over the years, it has transcended its original cultural objectives and evolved into a multi-functional institution that bridges tradition, development, and politics within the Urhobo nation. One of the major findings of this research is that the UPU has been central in sustaining and promoting the cultural identity of the Urhobo people. In a period when globalization and internal displacement threatened local traditions, the union actively mobilized resources to preserve language, heritage, and festivals. This cultural renaissance strengthened community pride and gave the Urhobo people a collective sense of belonging, both at home and in the diaspora. The role of the diaspora branches, especially in North America and Europe, further amplified the UPU's global identity, making it not just a local but a transnational actor (Dijkzeul & Fauser, 2020).

Economically and socially, the UPU has also left an enduring mark. As revealed in the union, by investing significantly in education and health initiatives. Through scholarships, bursary awards, and infrastructural projects, the UPU empowered generations of Urhobo youths with access to learning and career opportunities. These interventions not only improved literacy levels but also expanded the human capital base of the Urhobo community, enabling them to compete within Nigeria's fast-changing socio-economic landscape. In the health sector, the UPU sponsored community health outreaches, lobbied the government for improved facilities, and encouraged medical missions that alleviated long-standing deficits in healthcare delivery in rural Urhobo communities. Politically, the UPU has served as the most formidable platform for Urhobo mobilization in the Fourth Republic. By articulating the "Urhobo Agenda," advocating for equitable power-sharing, and endorsing candidates, the union gave the Urhobo people a coherent political voice. Its mobilization at both elite and grassroots levels ensured that the Urhobo were not entirely sidelined in state and national politics. Despite the challenges, the UPU has endured as a symbol of Urhobo unity and resilience. Its adaptability across decades shows that ethnic unions can reinvent themselves to remain relevant in rapidly changing socio-political contexts. For the Urhobo people, the UPU remains a rallying point for identity, empowerment, and representation. Its longevity and influence suggest that the future of indigenous socio-cultural organizations in Nigeria depends on their ability to balance cultural preservation, socio-economic advocacy, and political engagement while maintaining internal cohesion and transparency (Obodoagu & Anyaehie, 2024).

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