

The Urhobo Progressive Union in Nigeria, 1999 to 2024

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Abstract

The Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU), 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 Data were gathered for the study through oral interviews, focused groups, textbooks, internet sources, journals, and unpublished theses.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 encapsulates the journey of the UPU from 1999 to 2024, highlighting its successes, challenges, and ongoing commitment to the advancement of the Urhobo nation. It provides a framework for understanding the union's impact and its roadmap for future progress.

Keywords: Challenges; Economic; Health; UPU; Nigeria

Introduction

The Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) was founded in 1931, 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 in the context of Nigeria's complex socio-political landscape.

The Urhobo people are located in the southern part of Nigeria, near the north western 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 degree and 5 degree north and longitude 5 degree 40 degree and 6 degree, 25 degree east in the Delta and Bayelsa state of Nigeria.

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, responding to growing demands for accountability among members (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 due to oil exploration further exacerbated socio-economic issues, compelling the UPU to intensify advocacy efforts (Okoko & Nna, 2017). Moreover, the emergence of globalization and advancements in technology 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. Despite its successes, the union faced internal leadership conflicts, generational divides, and difficulties in maintaining relevance among younger Urhobo people Ekeh (2007).

On the above note the study examined the evolution of the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) from 1999 to 2024, examining its impacts, challenges, successes and cultural landscape to the Urhobo nation.

Statement of the Problem

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. However, despite its contributions, the organization has faced numerous challenges, including leadership tussel, factionalism, and the socio-political dynamics of the region, which have impacted 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 worked towards fostering 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 role of the UPU in addressing the environmental challenges in the Niger Delta, particularly those linked to oil exploration, which have led to widespread impoverishment and social unrest (Okoko & Nna, 2017).

Literature Review

This literature review explores the significant scholarly contributions that inform the activities, achievements, and challenges of the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) from 1999 to 2024. By examining the body of existing research, this section contextualizes the UPU's role within broader discussions on ethnic organizations, cultural preservation, socio-economic advocacy, and environmental justice. These themes are explored through diverse perspectives to establish a robust foundation for analyzing the UPU's contributions to the Urhobo people and their broader impact on the Niger Delta and Nigeria as a whole.

Ethnic organizations like the UPU have historically served as platforms for collective action, enabling marginalized groups to advocate for their rights and foster cultural identity. Ekeh (2004) highlights the critical role such organizations play in bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, ensuring their relevance in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. Similarly, Otite (2019) emphasizes that ethnic unions are vital for community cohesion, particularly in multi-ethnic states like Nigeria, where political and economic inequalities often fuel tensions.

The UPU, established in 1931, is one of the earliest ethnic organizations in Nigeria. According to Omoruyi (2001), its foundation marked a turning point in the collective mobilization of the Urhobo people, who sought to assert their identity and protect their interests in the face of colonial domination. The organization's resilience over decades reflects its capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, making it a model for other ethnic unions (Ekeh, 2004).

Preserving cultural identity is a cornerstone of the UPU's activities. As globalization and urbanization continue to erode traditional practices, ethnic organizations have become custodians of cultural heritage. Scholars such as Adebani and Obadare (2010) assert that cultural preservation is integral to maintaining a community's sense of identity and unity. In the Urhobo context, the UPU has employed festivals, traditional leadership structures, and language promotion initiatives to safeguard cultural practices (Otite, 2019).

Omoruyi (2001) notes that cultural preservation efforts often extend beyond local boundaries, particularly for groups with a significant diaspora presence. The UPU's efforts to engage the Urhobo diaspora highlight the transnational nature of cultural preservation. For instance, digital platforms have been used to facilitate cultural exchanges and promote Urhobo traditions among younger generations living abroad (Ekeh, 2004; Otite, 2019).

The Niger Delta, where the Urhobo people are concentrated, is both an economic hub and a region plagued by underdevelopment. Despite contributing significantly to Nigeria's economy through oil production, the region remains marginalized in terms of infrastructure, education, and health services (Okoko & Nna, 2017). The UPU has taken on the role of an advocate, pushing for equitable resource distribution and the development of Urhobo communities.

Ekeh (2004) identifies education as a key area where the UPU has made substantial contributions, particularly through scholarships and skills development programs. These initiatives are critical in addressing high levels of unemployment and poverty in the region (Omoruyi, 2001).

According to Obi (2009), environmental advocacy is closely tied to broader issues of socio-economic justice in the Niger Delta. The UPU's campaigns for sustainable development align with global environmental movements, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies that protect both people and the environment.

Diaspora communities play an increasingly important role in ethnic organizations. For the UPU, engaging the Urhobo diaspora has been crucial in fostering unity and generating resources for development projects. Ekeh (2004) argues that diaspora networks provide financial and intellectual capital that can drive local development. Similarly, Udogu (2005)

emphasizes the importance of transnational collaborations in addressing the challenges faced by ethnic communities in Nigeria.

Through diaspora engagement, the UPU has been able to strengthen its cultural preservation efforts and advocate for Urhobo interests on a global scale (Otite, 2019). This has included organizing cultural festivals, fundraising for community projects, and lobbying for international support on issues affecting the Niger Delta (Ekeh, 2004).

Despite their achievements, ethnic organizations like the UPU face significant challenges. Leadership disputes, factionalism, and external political interference often undermine their effectiveness. Omoruyi (2001) highlights the need for transparent governance within such organizations to maintain credibility and legitimacy.

Formation and Early Years of the UPU

The Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) remains one of the most influential ethnic socio-cultural organizations in Nigeria. Originally founded in 1931 as the Urhobo Brotherly Society (UBS), the organization was later renamed the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) in 1946. It was established with the primary goal of fostering unity among the Urhobo people, promoting their cultural heritage, and ensuring their socio-political and economic development (Otite, 2019). The UPU's emergence coincided with a period of intense nationalist and ethnic mobilization in Nigeria, where indigenous groups sought self-determination, education, and economic empowerment in response to colonial policies that often marginalized local ethnicities (Ekeh, 2004). During its early years, the UPU focused on educational development and community mobilization. Recognizing that education was a critical tool for economic and social advancement, the UPU played a central role in establishing scholarship programs to support Urhobo students. It also contributed to the creation of the Urhobo College in 1948, one of the most significant educational initiatives aimed at empowering young Urhobo men and women, it was first named Urhobo Collegiate school but later changed to Urhobo College (Omoruyi, 2001). The organization also served as an advocacy platform, championing the political and economic rights of the Urhobo people in Nigeria's evolving political structure.

The return of democracy in Nigeria in 1999 marked a turning point for many ethnic organizations, including the UPU. With increased political participation and economic restructuring, the UPU realigned its objectives to address the contemporary needs of the Urhobo people. The Fourth Republic ushered in new challenges, particularly regarding resource control, environmental degradation, and political representation. As a major ethnic group in the oil-rich Niger Delta, the Urhobo people faced issues of marginalization despite contributing significantly to the nation's economy (Ibeanu, 2000). In response, the UPU intensified its advocacy for resource control and infrastructural development within Urhobo communities. Throughout the early 2000s, the UPU engaged in political advocacy, lobbying the Nigerian government for fair representation of Urhobo sons and daughters in federal and state governance. The organization also sought to address concerns over oil exploration and its devastating impact on Urhobo lands. The Niger Delta crisis, which intensified during the early 2000s, saw the UPU participating in negotiations between local communities, the government, and multinational oil companies (Watts, 2008). It also played a key role in promoting peaceful resolutions to conflicts between militant groups and the government.

Between 2010 and 2020, the UPU faced internal leadership challenges, particularly regarding the selection of its president-general and political affiliations. These internal conflicts sometimes weakened the union's effectiveness in championing the cause of the Urhobo people. However, despite these challenges, the organization continued to advocate for infrastructural development, economic empowerment, and cultural preservation. In recent years, particularly from 2020 to 2024, the UPU has strengthened its focus on youth empowerment, women's inclusion, and digital transformation.

From its initial mission of cultural preservation and education, the UPU has evolved into a multidimensional organization addressing various socio-political and economic issues affecting the Urhobo people. Key areas are:

The UPU has continued to promote Urhobo language, traditions, and festivals as a means of preserving the cultural identity of the people. Initiatives such as the annual Urhobo Cultural Day have become platforms for cultural education and heritage promotion (Otite, 2019). The UPU has actively engaged in lobbying for better political representation of the Urhobo people at national and state levels. It has played a critical role in mobilizing electoral participation and ensuring that Urhobo interests are represented in governance (Udogu, 2005). Recognizing the need for self-sufficiency, the UPU has supported local businesses, trade groups, and skill acquisition programs, particularly for youth and women. These initiatives have aimed at reducing unemployment and economic dependency (Oyovbaire, 2007). While the UPU has played a significant role in shaping the socio-political and economic trajectory of the Urhobo people, it has not been without challenges. Leadership struggles, political interference, and financial constraints have occasionally hampered its effectiveness. The need for internal reforms to strengthen transparency, accountability, and unity within the organization remains a key area for further improvement (Onah, 2011). Nevertheless, the future presents several opportunities for the UPU. With increasing globalization and technological advancements, the organization has the potential to leverage digital tools for greater advocacy, cultural promotion, and economic empowerment. Additionally, stronger partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations can further enhance the UPU's ability to achieve its objectives.

Political Structure of the UPU

The indigenous people of the Urhobo Nation in Delta State are desirous of protecting and promoting the interests and well-being of the Urhobo Nation and its people; Whereas it is desirable that there be a body of Urhobo people capable of interacting with both the various levels of government and other socio-cultural groups within Nigeria for the promotion of cultural, socio-economic and political development as well as ethnic and political harmony within the context of a united Nigeria. The UNION is a socio-cultural organization established for the purpose of protecting, promoting, and projecting the interest and general welfare of Urhobo people in Nigeria and the diaspora and for the promotion of Urhobo culture, tradition and values that accord with a progressive society to which Urhobo people aspire and subscribe to. The Headquarters/National Secretariat of the UNION is located at Uvwiamuge-Agbarho town in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. (Constitution of the Urhobo progressive union, 2024.)

The National Executive Council: The National Executive Council of the UPU consist of the following:

- (a) The President-General
- (b) The 1 Deputy President-General
- (c) The 2 Deputy President-General
- (d) The 3 Deputy President-General
- (e) The National Secretary
- (f) The National Treasurer
- (g) The National Legal Adviser
- (h) The National Auditor
- (i) The National Publicity Secretary
- (j) The National Financial Secretary
- (k) The Assistant National Secretary
- (l) The Assistant National Publicity Secretary
- (m) The Assistant National Legal Adviser

(n) Ex-Officio Members which consist of all past Presidents-General, Deputy Presidents-General and National Secretaries of the Union. (Constitution of the Urhobo Progressive Union, 2024).

UPU Historical Events (1999–2024)

The Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) has played a significant role in the socio-political and economic landscape of the Urhobo people since its establishment in 1935. However, the period between 1999 and 2024 witnessed transformative changes that shaped the organization's mission, structure, and influence. This period coincides with Nigeria's return to democratic rule, the increasing globalization of Urhobo culture, economic challenges in the Niger Delta, and the rise of new leadership structures within the UPU. Several key events define this era, each highlighting the UPU's evolution in response to emerging challenges and opportunities.

With the return of democratic governance in 1999 after decades of military rule, the UPU reassessed its role in Nigeria's political space. During this period, the organization intensified its advocacy for fair representation of the Urhobo people at both state and national levels. The UPU played a crucial role in supporting Urhobo candidates for political positions, particularly in Delta State, where the Urhobo ethnic group is the largest (Ovwasa, 2003). The union publicly advocated for the equitable distribution of political appointments and government projects within Urhobo communities, ensuring that the region was not side-lined in the new democratic dispensation (Ekpu, 2001).

The period between 2007 and 2015 was characterized by heightened conflict in the Niger Delta due to increased militancy and agitation for resource control. During this time, militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) engaged in attacks on oil facilities, kidnapping of expatriates, and demands for economic justice (Watts, 2009)⁴⁸. The UPU played a mediatory role, calling for peace while also advocating for fair treatment of the Urhobo people by oil companies and the government. The organization demanded environmental accountability and infrastructural development as compensation for decades of oil exploitation in Urhobo lands (Ibaba, 2011).

In 2009, the federal government introduced the Niger Delta Amnesty Program (NDAP) to pacify militants and promote economic reintegration. The UPU supported this initiative, urging Urhobo youths involved in militancy to embrace peace and take advantage of skill acquisition and education programs under the amnesty scheme (Oyovbaire, 2013). However, concerns arose regarding the perceived marginalization of Urhobo youths in the distribution of amnesty benefits, leading the UPU to demand greater inclusivity (Aghalino, 2012).

One of the most challenging periods in the UPU history occurred between 2015 and 2019, when internal conflicts leading to a leadership crisis. Disputes over the selection of the UPU's president-general created factions within the organization, weakening its ability to present a united front in advocating for Urhobo interests (Onajomo, 2016). This division was further fueled by political interference, as some factions aligned with different political parties and interest groups in Delta State (Ediyanga, 2017). The leadership crisis significantly affected the UPU's activities, leading to reduced engagement in cultural promotion, political advocacy, and economic initiatives. Several Urhobo leaders and traditional rulers intervened to resolve the disputes, emphasizing the need for unity in confronting the socio-economic challenges facing the Urhobo people (Akpomuvie, 2019). By 2019, reconciliation efforts had yielded positive results, leading to a more stable leadership structure. Following the resolution of leadership disputes, the UPU refocused its efforts on economic empowerment and cultural preservation. Between 2019 and 2024, the organization launched several initiatives aimed at promoting Urhobo entrepreneurship, skills development, and youth empowerment. Recognizing the growing role of digital technology in economic

transformation, the UPU established programs that provided training in information technology, agriculture, and small-scale business management for Urhobo youths (Ejiogu, 2021).

In addition to economic development, the UPU intensified its efforts in cultural revival. It collaborated with linguistic experts and educational institutions to develop programs aimed at preserving and promoting the Urhobo language, which was increasingly at risk due to globalization (Otite, 2021). The organization also worked with media outlets to broadcast Urhobo cultural programs, ensuring that traditional values remained relevant to younger generations (Ojaruega, 2020). Furthermore, the UPU played a significant role in mobilizing the Urhobo diaspora for community development. Urhobo's living in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other parts of the world were encouraged to contribute to infrastructural projects, educational scholarships, and healthcare programs in Urhobo communities (Ugbome, 2023). This period witnessed a strengthening of transnational ties, with the UPU hosting international conferences that brought together Urhobo professionals, academics, and business leaders to discuss development strategies.

Research Methodology

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 focused groups were conducted, journal articles, books, internet sources and unpublished thesis provided data in conducting the study.

Discussion of Findings

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 up to 2024, the UPU's political interventions have had profound implications on the collective fortunes of the Urhobo people. Its political role has been shaped by its mandate to protect Urhobo interests, mobilise for representation, and negotiate for inclusion in governance at state and federal levels.

One notable political contributions of the UPU has been the mobilisation of the Urhobo electorate. As the apex socio-cultural organisation of the Urhobo people, the UPU provided a unified political voice at a time when fragmented party politics threatened to marginalise 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 mobilisation 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 the Urhobo, as the largest ethnic nationality in the state, deserved proportionate recognition in governance (Otite, 2019).

Another significant political impact of the UPU was its role in defending Urhobo interests in periods of marginalisation. For instance, when the Urhobo felt side-lined 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 relevance in the competition for political space, particularly in the context of 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 legitimised 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. At the beginning and early formation of the UPU it 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 and does not have any significant impact on the Urhobo community and it also proved to be quite difficult. (Atiti, 2025).

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 independence of the union 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 official position of the UPU. This generational gap weakened the UPU's claim to represent all sections of the Urhobo people (Otite, 2019).

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 the sectors of education and health, which are both 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 the period of 1999 and in the early years of the UPU, it has been one of the major focus of upu. 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 came back in 1948 and established a secondary institution known as "Urhobo college" (Darah, 2025). During the tenure of a famous UPU president general T.E.A Salode from Ovu in the 1960s, who also became the federal commissioner for education at that time, he influenced many secondary schools in Urhobo community, for example St. Vincent college Okwagbe and Ogbaweni grammar school in

Usiefrun. Immediately he got to his office in Ibadun, his first project was to grant permission to the request of school's establishment in his region (Darah.2025).

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 Urhobo language and culture through education. They actively lobbied for the integration of 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 the members and Excocos of the UPU to see a prominent Urhobo man who also happened to be a former 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 town in Ughelli where the former governor "chief Ibori was in attendance. (Darah.2025).

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 for the upgrade of the 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 Centres further enhanced educational access and digital literacy among students in urban and semi-urban Urhobo communities (UPU Secretariat, 2020).

Parallel to 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 such as 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, UPU-United Kingdom, do come from time to time to do projects like; Urhobo language competition, free medical treatment also send Items across to assist the Urhobo people at home (in delta state). They also fund scholarship both in secondary and tertiary institutions (Atiti.2025).

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Limited financial resources, dependency on donations, and occasional leadership crises have sometimes hindered the sustainability of the UPU's health and education programs. Additionally, the union continues to face difficulties in ensuring equitable distribution of these services across all Urhobo kingdoms due to logistics 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.

In summary, 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.

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 multiple parallel factions of the UPU emerging, especially during election periods for national executives. These internal divisions have not only weakened the credibility and unity of the organization but have 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 parallel to state development plans, reducing their effectiveness and duplication of efforts. Greater institutional alignment and strategic partnerships would be required to scale impact and attract technical and financial support from donor agencies.

Conclusion

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 mobilised 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.

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 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 mobilisation 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 mobilisation at both elite and grassroots levels ensured that the Urhobo were not entirely side-lined in state and national politics. Despite the challenges, the UPU has continued to endure 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.

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