

WORLD METEOROLOGICAL DAY 2026 · CLIMATE JUSTICE REPORT

Burning the Future:

Gas Flaring, Climate Change, and Justice in the Niger Delta

A data-driven research brief on routine gas flaring, its contribution to climate change, and the communities paying the price in Nigeria's Niger Delta.

#7

Global Flaring Rank
World Bank, 2024

11.5M t

CO₂ from Flaring
2023 emissions

\$22.9B

Lost Over a Decade
revenue + penalties

~2M

People Exposed
within 4km of flares

WORLD METEOROLOGICAL DAY 2026

Burning the Future: Gas Flaring, Climate Change, and Justice in Nigeria's Niger Delta

A Research Brief by MEDI
March 23, 2026

Executive Summary

Gas flaring; the burning of natural gas extracted as a by-product of oil production, has plagued Nigeria's Niger Delta for over six decades. Despite being technically illegal since 1979 and the subject of more than ten unmet government deadlines, routine gas flaring continues at an alarming scale, contributing significantly to climate change while devastating the health, livelihoods, and futures of communities that bear no responsibility for global emissions.

This report presents verified data from the World Bank, Nigeria's National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA), the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI), peer-reviewed scientific literature, and independent investigative journalism. It frames gas flaring unequivocally as a climate justice issue and calls for immediate, enforceable action.

GLOBAL RANKING (2024) #7 Nigeria among top 9 gas flaring nations worldwide (World Bank, 2025)	CO₂ EMISSIONS (2023) 11.5M Metric tonnes of CO₂ from gas flaring in Nigeria in 2023 (Energy Institute / Statista, 2024)
REVENUE LOST (2012–2023) \$22.9B+ Combined revenue and penalty loss to Nigeria over 10 years (NOSDRA, 2023)	PEOPLE EXPOSED (Niger Delta) ~2M People living within 4km of flare sites across Nigeria (HumAngle, 2024)

1. Background: What Is Gas Flaring and Why Does It Persist?

Gas flaring is the controlled burning of natural gas that is produced as an unwanted by-product during oil extraction. Rather than capturing, processing, or re-injecting this associated gas into the ground, oil operators have historically chosen to burn it; a practice that is both environmentally catastrophic and economically wasteful.

In Nigeria, the practice began in earnest when commercial oil was discovered in Oloibiri, Bayelsa State in 1956. For nearly seventy years, gas flaring has continued across the Niger Delta, despite legislation nominally criminalising the practice since 1979 under the Petroleum Act, and despite over ten government-set deadlines to end routine flaring, all of which have been missed.

1.1 Why Operators Continue to Flare

- Lower cost: Companies prefer to pay fines of \$3.50 per 1,000 standard cubic feet rather than invest in gas capture infrastructure. ^[3]
- Regulatory capture: Fragmented institutional mandates and weak enforcement allow operators to flare without meaningful consequence. ^[4]
- Infrastructure deficits: Nigeria lacks sufficient pipelines and gas processing plants to utilise all associated gas. ^[10]
- Political dependence: Nigeria's heavy reliance on oil revenue grants oil companies leverage to delay enforcement. ^[3]

As researchers at the University of Aberdeen Law School summarise, 'while Nigeria has adequate laws, their enforcement remains weak due to infrastructural deficits and a lack of political will.'

2. Scale of Gas Flaring: The Data

2.1 Nigeria's Global Standing

According to the World Bank's Global Gas Flaring Tracker, the most authoritative independent global indicator of gas flaring; Nigeria consistently ranks among the top ten worst flaring nations in the world.

Year	Global Flaring Volume (bcm)	Nigeria's Ranking	Source
2022	139 bcm (global)	Top 9 (7th)	World Bank GGFR, 2023
2023	148 bcm (global)	Top 9	World Bank GGFR, 2024
2024	151 bcm (global - highest since 2007)	Top 9 (7th)	World Bank GGFR, 2025

The top nine flaring countries, including Nigeria account for over 75% of all gas flared globally, while producing less than half of the world's oil. In 2024, Nigeria was among the five countries that posted the largest increases in flaring volumes, alongside Iran, the USA, Iraq, and Russia.

2.2 Nigeria-Specific Flaring Data

Period	Gas Flared	CO ₂ Emissions	Economic Value Lost	Source
2012–2021 (cumulative)	4.2 billion SCF total	714.62 Mt CO ₂ e (cumulative)	\$22.9 billion (revenue + penalties)	NOSDRA / Springer, 2025
2012–2022 (10 years)	~80 billion standard cubic metres	~12 Mt CO ₂ /year	\$14.6 billion revenue lost	NOSDRA, 2023
Jan–Aug 2022	147.1 billion SCF	7,800 metric tonnes CO ₂ eq	\$514.9 million	NOSDRA, 2023
H1 2023	138.7 million MSCF	7.4 million tonnes CO ₂	\$485.3 million (N373 billion)	NOSDRA, 2023
Jan–Nov 2023	241.1 million SCF	Not stated separately	\$843.7 million (N702 billion)	NOSDRA / Vanguard, 2023
Full Year 2023	183.408 billion SCF	11.5 million tonnes CO ₂	\$458.52 million (N686 billion)	NEITI, 2025

2.3 The Niger Delta in Focus

The Niger Delta is the epicentre of Nigeria's oil industry and, by extension, its gas flaring crisis. Approximately 139 active gas flare locations are distributed across onshore and offshore oil fields in the region, with about 11% of total gas produced being flared.

Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni (Rivers State): Between March 2013 and March 2024, a total of 171 million Mscf of gas valued at \$598.5 million was flared in this single area alone, generating 9.1 million tonnes of CO₂ ; data sourced from the Nigerian Gas Flare Tracker.

OML 17 (Port Harcourt environs): Following Shell's divestiture of assets in 2020, gas flaring volumes in this oil block grew sevenfold by 2024, according to satellite data analysed by SkyTruth for Climate Home News (February 2026).

OML 11 (Ogoniland): Gas flaring tripled between 2021 and 2024 after the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation took over operations from Shell in 2021, according to the same satellite analysis.

Obiafu-Obrikom Gas Plant (Rivers State): Between August 2013 and November 2023, the Obrikom community hospital recorded 1,345 patients presenting with respiratory conditions

attributable to air pollution from the plant's three gas flare stacks ; according to hospital records reviewed by HumAngle investigative journalists (2024).

KEY FINDING: Post-Divestiture Flaring Surge

A critical trend identified in recent data is that gas flaring has sharply increased at sites divested by major international oil companies (Shell, etc.) to Nigerian-owned operators. This undermines multinational claims of 'zero routine flaring' ,which are achieved by offloading high-emission assets, not eliminating flaring itself. The problem has not gone away; it has simply changed hands while communities continue to suffer. (Climate Home News / SkyTruth, 2026)

3. Climate Impacts: What Gas Flaring Does to the Atmosphere

3.1 Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Gas flaring releases a toxic cocktail of greenhouse gases and other pollutants into the atmosphere. The primary climate-relevant emissions include:

- Carbon dioxide (CO₂): The primary product of combustion, contributing directly to global warming.
- Methane (CH₄): Methane makes up approximately 86% of associated natural gas. Because flaring is often inefficient, significant unburnt methane escapes into the atmosphere. Methane is over 80 times more potent than CO₂ as a warming agent over a 20-year period.
- Black carbon (soot): A short-lived but powerful climate forcer that also settles on agricultural land, water bodies, and rooftops.
- Nitrous oxide (N₂ O), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), and sulphur dioxide (SO₂): All contribute to atmospheric warming and acid rain formation.

The World Bank's 2025 Global Gas Flaring Tracker estimates that gas flaring worldwide produced 389 million tonnes of CO₂ -equivalent (MMtCO₂ e) in 2024, including 46 million tonnes from unburnt methane alone. Nigeria's contribution to this total, as one of the top nine flaring nations, is substantial.

3.2 Acid Rain and Environmental Degradation

A study by researchers at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, found that rainfall in the Niger Delta , particularly in Rivers State is acidic as a result of gas flaring. This acid rain has the following consequences:

- Soil degradation: Acid rain reduces soil pH, diminishing agricultural productivity and rendering some land barren.
- Crop damage: Research in Umutu-Ebedei community documented stunted growth and reddened leaves in cassava, palm trees, plantains, and other subsistence crops near flare sites.
- Aquatic ecosystem collapse: Water bodies in the Niger Delta have turned dark and acidic, destroying fish populations that communities depend on for nutrition and income.

- Infrastructure corrosion: Acid rain dissolves the zinc-coated metal roofing sheets commonly used in Niger Delta communities, accelerating physical deterioration of homes.

3.3 Temperature Anomalies

A 2011 study published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) found that homes located close to gas flare stacks could experience temperatures up to 4 degrees Celsius above the surrounding environment. The average temperature in affected communities like Obrikom averages 33°C during dry seasons, significantly above the regional norm and consistent with what local residents describe as unbearable heat.

3.4 Nigeria's Climate Commitments vs. Reality

Nigeria has made several high-profile climate commitments that are directly undermined by continued gas flaring:

Commitment	Year Made	Status
End routine gas flaring	Policy since 1979	Ongoing — 10+ missed deadlines
Zero gas flaring by 2020	2017 (World Bank GGFR pledge)	Not met
Net-zero emissions by 2060	2021 (COP26 pledge to UN)	Gas flaring increased 16% in Jan–Aug 2023 vs same period 2022
Zero Routine Flaring by 2030	Signatory to World Bank ZRF initiative	Flaring rose sharply in 2023 and 2024

4. Human Health Impacts

The health consequences of gas flaring for Niger Delta communities are severe, documented, and disproportionately borne by populations who have contributed almost nothing to global greenhouse gas emissions.

4.1 Documented Health Conditions

Health Condition	Evidence	Source
Respiratory disorders	21.1–76.3% of hospital visits in flaring communities are for respiratory/dermal ailments; NO ₂ and PM10 exceed WHO limits in dry season	ScienceDirect / AAAS

Health Condition	Evidence	Source
Hypertension	Residents near flares are 1.75x more likely to be hypertensive than those in non-flaring areas	Niger Delta study, 2017
Lung cancer & tumours	Long-term exposure to PM2.5 and benzene linked to lung cancer and upper respiratory cancers	HumAngle / Geofluids, 2024
Eye and skin irritations	High frequency among residents of communities like Igwuruta (Rivers State University)	Rivers State Univ. study
Birth defects & miscarriages	Documented reproductive abnormalities including stillbirths, miscarriages, leukaemia	JELP / Grassroots Journals, 2025
Cardiovascular disease	Links to cardiomyopathy, heart failure risk, and kidney disease	Climate Home News, 2026
Neurological impacts	Prolonged flare exposure linked to neurodevelopmental disorders	Int. J. Sci. Reports, 2021
Bronchitis in infants	Documented infant bronchitis attributed to gas flaring proximity, e.g. 5-month-old in Obrikom, 2023	HumAngle investigation, 2024

4.2 Noise and Thermal Pollution

Beyond chemical pollutants, gas flaring generates continuous industrial noise reaching up to 86 decibels ,comparable to heavy traffic or a lawnmower, according to researchers at the Federal University of Technology, Minna. Residents near flare stacks such as Obiafu-Obrikom describe being unable to sleep or hear conversations, with children particularly vulnerable to the compounded effects of heat, noise, and toxic air.

4.3 Water Contamination

Research by Dr Raimi Morufu Olalekan of Niger Delta University, published in 2022, found that borehole water in Obrikom community is unsuitable for drinking due to physicochemical contamination attributable to gas flaring. Prolonged consumption is linked to kidney malfunction, lung cancer, asthma, heart disease, and nasal passage cancers. The Nigerian Tribune confirmed in July 2022 that the water 'remains unsuitable for drinking' and that inhabitants 'are vulnerable as a result of their prolonged exposure.'

5. Economic Dimension: Who Pays the Price?

Gas flaring is not only an environmental and health catastrophe; it is an enormous economic waste. The gas being burned holds significant energy value that is simply destroyed.

5.1 Revenue Losses

- Between 2012 and 2021, Nigeria lost \$14.6 billion in potential gas revenue and a further \$8.3 billion in uncollected penalties, totalling \$22.9 billion lost to gas flaring over one decade (NOSDRA, 2023). ^[37]
- In 2023 alone, 183.408 billion SCF of gas was flared, with an estimated economic value of \$458.52 million (N685.95 billion). NEITI projects this could amount to over \$2.29 billion (N3.43 trillion) in lost value over five years if the trend continues. ^[38]
- The gas flared between January and August 2023 alone could have generated 17,100 gigawatt-hours of electricity, enough to significantly address Nigeria's chronic power deficit. ^[33]

5.2 The Penalty Evasion Problem

Oil companies are required to pay a statutory penalty of \$3.50 per 1,000 standard cubic feet of gas flared. However, multiple NOSDRA reports confirm that billions of dollars in assessed penalties remain unpaid. The Federal Government recorded a revenue shortfall of N13.33 billion from gas flaring penalties in January and February 2023 alone. Companies demonstrably prefer paying (or ignoring) low fines to investing in gas capture infrastructure.

5.3 Comparison with Norway

Norway whose crude oil production is approximately 25% higher than Nigeria's at 1.79 million barrels per day, flares just 3% of its total gas production. This is internationally recognised as the global benchmark. Norway achieves this through a combination of strict regulation, political will, substantial investment in gas capture infrastructure, and high, consistently enforced penalties. Nigeria's experience demonstrates that flaring is not an economic necessity but a policy failure.

6. Legal and Policy Framework

6.1 Domestic Law

- Petroleum Act (1969/1979): Established the foundational prohibition on gas flaring without ministerial permission.
- Associated Gas Re-injection Act (1979): Formally prohibited routine flaring and set deadlines; the first of more than ten that would be missed.
- Nigerian Gas Master Plan (2008): Set strategic targets for gas utilisation.
- Flare Gas (Prevention of Waste and Pollution) Regulations (2018): Introduced commercialisation pathways and updated penalty structures.
- Petroleum Industry Act (2021): Omnibus legislation consolidating oil and gas regulation, reinforcing anti-flaring provisions.

- Gas Flaring, Venting and Methane Emissions (Prevention of Waste and Pollution) Regulations (2023): Introduced mandatory daily reporting, measurement protocols, and annual public disclosure requirements.

6.2 International Commitments

- Zero Routine Flaring by 2030 (ZRF) Initiative - World Bank signatory.
- Paris Agreement: Nigeria's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) commits to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
- COP26 Net-Zero by 2060 Pledge (2021).
- African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights: Gas flaring's health impacts have been argued to violate rights to health, life, and a clean environment.

6.3 The Enforcement Gap

Despite this extensive legal architecture, enforcement remains the critical failure point. As documented by both Nigerian and international legal scholars, 'the country still ranks in the top 10 among global gas flaring nations' despite having laws technically criminalising the practice for over four decades. Key enforcement failures include:

- Fragmented regulatory mandates between NOSDRA, NUPRC, and other agencies.
- Persistent undercollection of statutory penalties.
- Political economy pressures: Government revenue dependence on oil companies reduces political will to enforce strictly.
- Absence of independent community-level monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

7. Climate Justice Analysis

The framing of gas flaring as a 'climate justice issue' is not rhetorical, it is analytically precise. Climate justice refers to the disproportionate burden borne by communities that are least responsible for climate change yet most severely affected by its causes and consequences.

7.1 The Injustice

Dimension	Oil Industry / Global North	Niger Delta Communities
Contribution to emissions	High: responsible for extraction and combustion decisions	Negligible:among the world's lowest per-capita emitters
Economic benefit	Substantial profits from crude oil extraction	Little to no financial benefit; subsistence livelihoods destroyed
Health exposure	Operations managed remotely; no proximity risk	Live within metres of flare stacks; chronic exposure

Dimension	Oil Industry / Global North	Niger Delta Communities
Political voice	Strong: direct access to regulatory and government bodies	Minimal:communities repeatedly ignored
Legal recourse	Well-resourced legal teams; delays enforcement indefinitely	Limited access to justice; decade-long court cases

7.2 Sacrifice Zone Dynamics

The Niger Delta has functionally become what environmental justice scholars term a 'sacrifice zone' ; a region where communities are implicitly expected to absorb the environmental and health costs of industrial activity for the economic benefit of others. The phrase used by local public health physician Dr Bieye Renner Briggs (Port Harcourt) encapsulates the moral weight: 'Everything a smoker will suffer and more is what somebody that is exposed to soot will suffer', yet unlike smokers, Niger Delta residents cannot choose to stop.

7.3 Intergenerational Justice

Gas flaring has been occurring continuously in some Niger Delta locations for over 30 years. Children born into affected communities have never known life without flare stacks. The documented links to birth defects, neurological impacts, and impaired childhood development mean that the injustice is not only present, it is being inherited.

8. MEDI's Call to Action

On World Meteorological Day 2026, the Miideekor Environment Development Initiative -MEDI makes the following specific, evidence-based calls:

8.1 To the Federal Government of Nigeria

- Enforce existing law immediately: Stop extending deadlines and begin applying full statutory penalties without exception or deferral.
- Publish monthly gas flare data publicly: The 2023 Emissions Regulations mandate annual reporting; this should be expanded to real-time or monthly public dashboards accessible to affected communities.
- Reinvest penalties into host communities: Establish a dedicated Flare Penalty Community Fund directed to Niger Delta health infrastructure, clean water, and climate resilience.
- Accelerate the National Gas Flare Commercialisation Programme: Of the 49 flare sites awarded to companies in 2023, ensure binding timelines are enforced.

8.2 To Oil Companies Operating in the Niger Delta

- Commit to independently verified, timebound zero-routine-flaring plans , not just pledge documents.

- Cease the practice of divesting high-flare assets without binding post-sale environmental performance requirements.
- Provide community health compensation proportionate to decades of documented harm.
- Allow independent third-party monitoring of flare volumes and emissions, with data made publicly accessible.

8.3 To International Partners and Financiers

- Condition investment, development finance, and credit ratings on independently verified gas flaring performance, not self-reported data.
- Support Nigeria's gas capture infrastructure with technical and financial assistance, specifically targeted at the Niger Delta.
- Classify routine gas flaring as a human rights violation in investment and trade frameworks, not merely an environmental concern.

8.4 To Nigerian Civil Society and Media

- Maintain rigorous, data-driven reporting on gas flaring volumes, health outcomes, and penalty collection, holding both government and industry accountable.
- Centre the voices and testimony of Niger Delta community members in climate policy debates at national and international levels.
- Support legal action by communities seeking enforcement of their constitutional rights under Sections 33 and 34 of the 1999 Constitution and the African Charter.

9. Conclusion

Gas flaring in Nigeria's Niger Delta is not a legacy problem on the cusp of resolution. The data is unambiguous: flaring increased in 2023 and again in 2024. Nigeria remains among the world's seven most prolific flaring nations. The communities of the Niger Delta who have collectively contributed less to global warming than most individuals in the industrialised world, are paying for this failure with their health, their livelihoods, their children's futures, and their climate.

Ending routine gas flaring is technically achievable. Norway has demonstrated this at scale. The barriers are not technological, they are political, economic, and moral. On this World Meteorological Day, MEDI asserts that the continued tolerance of routine gas flaring in the Niger Delta is a form of climate injustice. It must end, not by 2030, not by 2060, but now.

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