



Oil Theft and Conflict in the Niger Delta, Nigeria 2009-2019

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ABSTRACT

This research work examined oil theft and conflict in the Niger Delta, 2009-2019. Relying on qualitative research design and adopting dependency and frustration-aggression theories, the study addressed its two-pronged objectives which sought to interrogate and examine the nexus between oil theft and conflict, and the inherent environmental and socio-economic consequences of oil theft in the Niger Delta in particular, and Nigeria as a whole. With two corresponding research questions, the study obtained data from secondary sources through critical review of published documents and related academic materials. Data collected from secondary materials were presented on tables and plates and analysed in line with research objectives. Findings and recommendations were made to include that oil theft activities which represent its international dimension proceed on an industrial-level scale and implicates on huge financial loss as well as socio-economic and environmental hazards to the immediate Niger Delta communities in particular, and the Nigerian economy as a whole. Following from this, the study recommended that the Nigerian government should synergise efforts with oil multinationals and Niger Delta communities and their leaders to tackle oil theft and sundry criminalities in the Niger Delta as this will help to reduce social conflicts in oil bearing communities.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's most prized revenue generating commodity is under a serious threat of being stolen on a scale that jolts the mind. Most of what is being stolen is exported or smuggled out to other countries. The proceeds are sometimes laundered through world financial centres and channeled into acquisition of assets within and outside Nigeria.

Stealing of crude oil and the illegal business of refining it have become massive and ever growing problem in the Niger Delta. These activities seem to present unthinkable magnitude of both environmental and economic devastation to the immediate Niger Delta environs and Nigeria at large. For those who are domiciled within the cities and remote areas of the Niger Delta states of Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta and Akwaibom where illegal oil activities seem to proceed at an increased scale, seeing clouds of thick dark smoke spiraling up high and diffusing into the sky has become a daily experience. Such large emissions of gaseous pollutants into the atmosphere from local refining sites or ruptured oil pipelines with explosions are a constant threat to the environment. They contaminate the entire Niger Delta area and constantly damage its biodiversity.

Obviously, the event of oil theft has been a source of concern to scholars and environmentalists, as much as to governmental leaders in Nigeria. The problem has meant huge revenue losses to the Nigerian government and threat to the environment. An average of 11,000 barrels of oil is said to be stolen per day in 2018 alone. A simple arithmetic of that figure shows that over 77,000 barrels is lost to oil theft on a weekly basis. About 308,000 barrels is recorded per month and an overwhelming 3,696,000 barrels on annual basis. Valued in monetary terms, we would be left with no doubt that this obviously translates into loss of trillions of naira.

In a similar circumstance, an approximation of 90% oil spillage is said to occur due to oil theft activities, commonly regarded as third party interference. Of the wide percentage of oil spill, only about 57% is said to have been remediated in 2018. Sadly, over 22% oil spill sites were identified in 2018 alone. Shell, one of the many oil companies operating in Nigeria claims to have removed over 1,160 illegal oil theft points since 2012 (Shell-<https://www.shell.com.ng>media>). Due to serious damage on pipelines that is directly responsible for over 95% spills around the country, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) is said to have spent over 2.3 billion dollars on pipeline repairs and security between 2010 and 2012 (Agbonifo, 2016, p.30). Despite efforts to assuage such disturbing situation, sabotage on oil installations tends to maintain a steady upward trend, due largely to a renewed interest in the theft of oil mineral.

Few years ago, the general perception of curious observers was that oil theft crime was solely committed by "*creek boys*" and other locals who hide under the cover of violence to perpetuate heinous crimes which include oil bunkering among others. The international dimension of oil theft, which relates to a number of illegal activities by perpetrators has mainly been secretive. Yet a section of the literature agrees that this is one reason conflict in the Niger Delta has endured.

In many oil-rich countries of Africa, the literature reflects the existence of illegal economies such as those driven by resource-thieves. Effective tackling of conflicts in such economies requires policy attention on these activities. To come up with effective policies that will take care of oil theft in Nigeria, it is necessary to determine the basic dimensions of the problem. Over the years, attention has been on oil bunkering or theft mainly as it relates to activities of the "*creek boys*" or other locals who steal oil as a reprisal against the Nigerian government and oil companies over social negligence.

While it is not strange that resource theft occurs in most places that play host to natural resources, the rate at which Nigeria's oil is being stolen and the operational mechanisms that are being adopted by perpetrators of the crime raise a great deal of suspicion as to what caliber of persons are involved and what level of expertise is employed in achieving successful theft of the commodity. This suspicion leads us to investigating the problem beyond the usual domestic dimension to probe into its international angle.

However, a critical look at certain pointers such as the volume or amount of oil stolen; existence of international black market, supply/movement routes of stolen oil and the oil theft money trail defines a process of internationalisation of oil theft in Nigeria. It is on the basis of the above that this thesis proceeds to investigate the pertinent issues surrounding the international dimension of oil theft and conflict in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine oil theft and conflict in the Niger Delta, 2009-2019. In line with the above, the study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. Investigate the nexus between oil theft and conflict in the Niger Delta
2. Identify the impact of oil theft on the Nigerian economy.

Research Questions

This research work is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the correlation between oil theft and conflict in the Niger Delta?
2. To what extent has oil theft impacted on the Nigerian economy?

METHODOLOGY

With regard to the nature of this research and its objectives, this study adopted a historical and descriptive research design. The descriptive research design method concerns itself with the description of observation made concerning the subject matter of the study. Based on research guidelines provided by Amara and Amaechi (2010), Asika (2006); Comery and Lee (1992); Dagi (1991); Ikeagwu (1998); Lockhart (1981); Manhein and Rich (1991) Amadi (2014); Ohaja (2003); Okoro (2001); Robinson (1954); Yergin (1997); Okwandu (2004); Amadi-Okechukwu (2014) & Ndu (2016), the study relied solely on secondary sources to generate data with which to execute its investigation. Data for the thesis were exclusively sourced from secondary materials through content analysis. Majorly, this study relied on the use of information or data from secondary sources. Since the study is descriptive and historical in nature, the researcher described and narrated facts or salient themes in the research work using data generated from secondary sources.

With regard to the stated objectives of this study and, in pursuance of answers to its study questions, this study analysed information from data archives from reputable institutions such as CHATHAM HOUSE, published and unpublished materials from journals, books, magazines, newspapers, articles, internet, published and unpublished theses and dissertations submitted to schools, government official sites, letters, gazettes, reports from oil companies and security agencies. Materials sourced from Nigerian Natural Resource Charter (NNRC) and policy briefs from organisations such as National Coalition on Gas Flaring and Oil Spills in the Niger Delta (NACGOND) are equally analyzed. The study also relied on documentary materials and statistical data and figures from National Bureau of Statistics (NB S) in writing up our report.

The researcher relied on secondary sources to collect data for this research. The study adopted the following steps to collect or gather data for the research. This study relied solely on secondary sources of data as enumerated earlier. We placed emphasis on qualitative method of documentary sources. For that, we relied on official documents and reports from government and non-governmental organisations to adapt tabulated data or create tables with relevant information teased out from secondary materials. Data analysis was carried out once the ground work for the study was done. In light of the above, information or data gathered from secondary sources were analysed in the context of the research objectives, questions and assumptions. In doing so, we established a link between the major variables which form the basic set of objectives of this work. Basically data/information gathered from literature search were presented in tables. Plates were also used to complement data presented in tables.

RESULTS

Table 1 below shows the frequency of vandalism on oil and gas pipelines in the Niger Delta region. It is noted that two major oil pipelines transverse the entire Niger Delta region and others which are the Port Harcourt (Sys. 2E, 2EX) and the Warri (Sys. 2A, 2C, 2CX). It is observed that within the study period of 11 years a total of 24,054 cases of oil pipeline vandalism occurred with the Port Harcourt (Sys. 2E, 2EX) accounting for 6826 cases while the Warri (Sys. 2A, 2C, 2CX) accounted for 2750 cases. Pipeline vandalism is attributed to third party interference which defines oil theft activities.

Results are presented in tables

Table 1 Cases of Oil Theft via Pipeline Vandalism

Year Area	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Port Harcourt Line (Sys. 2E, 2EX)	382	142	336	393	616	269	917	1596	691	948	536	6826
Warri Line (Sys. 2A, 2C, 2CX).	280	161	548	495	315	378	236	205	24	12	96	2750
Mosimi (Sys. 2B)	605	184	463	479	1078	1071	1114	398	61	784	637	6874
Kaduna (Sys. 2D)	100	240	571	622	634	657	445	311	129	107	50	3866
Gombe (Sys. 2D)	86	109	850	241	862	1325	71	24	59	43	68	3738
Total	1453	836	2768	2230	3505	3700	2783	2534	964	1894	1387	24,054

Source: NNPC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2015 and 2019

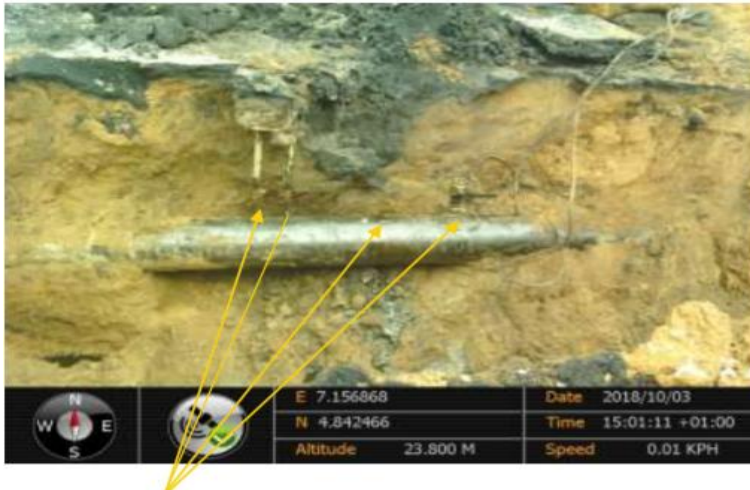
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Table 2 Ascertaining the Degree of Conflict in the Niger Delta by Registered Militants and Asserted Weapons

State	Number of Militants	Weapons	Ammunitions	Dynamites	Magazines
Rivers	6,1997	1,009	82,496	102	1,048
AkwaiBom	163	51	559	05	41
Delta	3,361	449	52,958	1556	414
Bayelsa	6,961	951	130,877	54	1,585
Edo	458	82	772	77	29
Cross River	160	20	9,748	59	38
Ondo	1,200	198	no data	no data	no data
Imo	300	149	7,758	no data	299
Abia	no data	no data	no data	no data	no data
Total	74,600	2,909	2,851,68	1853	34 54

Source: Adapted from Kuku (2012)

Table 2 shows the number of registered militants who invariably engage in oil theft activities and the number of weapons they possess. Although, the militants claim to fight against government's and Multinational Oil Companies economic and developmental negligence in the Niger Delta, but a wide range of literature shows that most of the militant groups and their commanders own and operate illegal oil camps. Being aware of the illegality of oil bunkering business they are involved, they arm themselves and their groups in readiness for federal government security agents who launch armed attacks against them. To resist government security operatives, the oil theft actors across the Niger Delta communities avail themselves with sophisticated weapons. Table 4.4 shows that Rivers State, which is one of the core Niger Delta states has well over 61, 997 militants; 1,009 weapons; 82,496 ammunitions; 102 dynamites and 1,048 magazines. Bayelsa State has more than 6,961 militants with 951 weapons; 130,877 ammunitions; 54 dynamites and 1,585 magazines. Across the core Niger Delta region and its fringes of Ondo and Imo states, there is a total of 74,600 militants with over 2,909 weapons; 285,168 ammunitions; 1,853 dynamites and 3454 magazines. With militants across the Niger Delta states having huge number weapons to resist state security operatives from interfering with oil theft activities in the region, there is a clear indication that oil theft activities in the region correlate with violent conflicts in the Niger Delta.

Plate 1: Illegal fitting of second pipeline on a 12” mother oil pipeline by oil theft operators

Source: NNPC, 2018

Plate 1 shows the illegal fitting of secondary pipelines by oil theft operators on a 12” mother oil pipeline to siphon oil for illegal refining at a local refining site or for illegal shipment to international back market.

Plate 2 Examples of Oil Spill on the Coastal Water in the Niger Delta as a result of Oil Theft

Source: Adapted from: Jennifer, M.H. (2017)

Plate 2 shows devastating effect of oil spill on water as a result of oil theft activities

Discussion of Findings

Oil exploitation and its theft as a push factor for conflict in the Niger Delta

Nigeria before the colonial era was made up of different societies and communities that were mostly reliant on cultural means and method of production. They maintained their different economic modes of production and through that, they were also able to take care of the economic needs of individuals without significant instances of exploitation. The economic system that was operational in pre-colonial communities was basically communal. There was shared social relationship with minimal exploitative tendencies (Darlington & Raimi, 2019, p.231).

In view of that, the pre-colonial period was not so much fertile for conflict and criminality as greed for inordinate appropriation and accumulation of wealth was quite low. Cultural discipline helped the young ones to acquire acceptable behaviour that permitted cordial social interactions among community members. This friendly and cordial interaction among members of communities who were less prone to exploitative exertions made societies considerably less chaotic and conflictual than is the case in post-colonial era (Weisheit & Donnermeyer, 2000).

However, the consciousness for economic appropriation, the desire to acquire and own private property as a result of capitalist intrusion into the traditional communal economy individuals began to seek means of satisfying the desire to accumulate (Adler, 1975 in Darlington & Raimi 2019 and Simon, 1975).

It is noted also that the rate of crime and conflict was not high in the Niger Delta in early post-colonial period. Scholars argue that before the crude oil era, significant contradictions or economic disparity did not exist. That was because most individuals adapted within the value chain of agriculture which invariably was the dominant sustainer of the pre-crude post-colonial economy in most of the Niger Delta communities (Darlington & Raimi, 2019).

Unfortunately, the emergence of the crude oil economy in the Niger Delta ushered in the culture of exploitation and created wide economic gap in the Niger Delta communities. With the oil economy replacing the traditional mode of production, there became a sudden rise in the earnings of oil employees, leaving those outside the oil industry stagnant in the previously low economic status, thereby creating class contradictions of economic inequality.

Majorly, conflicts and crimes in the Niger Delta area became exacerbated as a result of the exploitative nature of the crude oil economy and the attendant class contradiction in the Niger Delta. Scholars agree that crime and conflict in the region accentuated due to inimical actions of oil miners that undermine even the local means of production of the local people and the almost complete removal of the capacity of the Niger Delta communities to survive (Ogadi et al. 2012). This implicates on such social problems created by oil industries as serious environmental degradation, destruction of means of survival of the people and the resultant extreme poverty conditions in most Niger Delta communities.

Slowly, an economy that promoted conflict and crime emerged in the Niger Delta communities where people engaged oil companies over struggles for oil-related benefits. To placate the people, some community and opinion leaders were awarded benefits from the oil economy at the detriment of others especially as a means of dousing tension. But such selective award of benefits did not provide long term solution as more individuals entered into the struggle to appropriate resource benefits and opportunities (Oduniyi & Nzeshi (2004). Hence the commission of oil theft crime became more extensive – graduating from small scale to industrial scale that involves foreign actors. It is the imminent escalation of violent crisis as a reaction to oil induced economic contradictions in the Niger Delta that has birthed a rather conducive environment for illegal oil economy.

The Nexus between Oil Theft and Sustained Conflict in Niger Delta Communities

The oil economy in the Niger Delta provides gigantic opportunities to indulge in legal or illegal activities in the Niger Delta. However, the relationship between giant oil operators and host Niger Delta communities has tended to be hostile where, as a result of possible degrading impacts of oil mining activities, oil host communities seek to be pacified, settled and incorporated fully in the blossoming oil economy. Thus, oil companies often concede to make available such benefits as contract jobs, security and oil facility surveillance jobs and carry out community development projects. But such benefits are most often accessible to persons within the traditional leadership structures who constitute the elite groups. Such economic benefits and opportunities exclusively available to the so called elite groups birthed stiffer resource struggles where militia leaders, youths and group leaders exert violent and criminal resistance (Ikelegbe, 2005, p.216).

The struggle for resource opportunities ignite conflict among businessmen, youths, community leaders, politicians, women and various ethnic groups in the Niger Delta communities. To prove their relevance, these groups tend to engage one another in violent conflicts in a bid to dominate access to oil benefits and hold significant control of the oil economy. It is this that has fueled conflicts and criminalities in the oil producing states of the Niger Delta.

According to Ibeanu (2002, p. 165), the situation created in the Niger Delta in view of struggle for resource benefits and opportunities is a “matrix of concentric circles of payoffs and rewards built on blackmail and violence”. The scholar averred that:

The closer people get to the centre, the greater their capacity to blackmail the multinational oil companies and therefore the greater their payoff. Accordingly, those in the raucous inner circle fade away in a whimper and silence in a process of time, paving the way for a new core of vocal, active and more powerful community leaders resulting in more and more blackmail and more payoffs.

In a bid to fight or resist oil theft in the Niger Delta, the state approach has been to deploy security agents who adopt the use of massive military force to achieve the goal. The implication is the militarisation of the Niger Delta communities. The heavy involvement of the Navy, and the Joint Task Force on the Niger Delta with over 4000 soldiers in the region and several military check points mounted on roads and waterways just to curtail theft of oil. Often times, the military personnel encounter violent resistance from the youths and various Militia groups. The military response to oil theft, piracy and militia activities has been a source of conflict in the region (Omonobi, 2004). Subair & Adesanmi (2003).

It has been identified that community leaders, elite groups, politicians, top oil workers, military personnel businessmen and several ethnic militia groups are involved in the oil theft activities. A number of them control illegal oil camps, creeks and waterways. Backed by top ranking government officials, party big weights, respected traditional rulers and strong financial support base, the oil theft operators have in their command, highly sophisticated weapons and communication facilities with which they are able to engage the state military agents in sustained armed conflicts (Abia, 2003; Amaize, 2003).

Similarly, the involvement of traditional rulers and ethnic militia groups in oil theft activities has also promoted communal conflicts in a bid to appropriate oil wealth through theft (Okhomina, 2004; Onuorah, 2004; Oni, 2004; Igbikiowubo, 2004; Oduniyi, 2003).

However, earlier in the history of militia groups in the Niger Delta, they were not associated with the theft of crude oil. They started off by organising and mobilising for resource benefits from the oil companies. Having entered into the oil theft business, they mobilise themselves to resist or foil attempts to pull them out of the money spinning illegal business of stealing oil (Newswatch, 20 Sept 2004, p.17; Scoop p. 2004). Most militia group leaders assume that stealing oil is for the interest of the Niger Delta communities and that they have a duty to sustain it as a means of livelihood. For that reason, the theft of oil is a major source of fund for the sustenance of the Niger Delta militia movement (Associated Press 2004). Among the interested groups, there is always intensified disagreements leading to sustained conflicts in the Niger Delta communities.

The international dimension of oil theft and conflict in the Niger Delta is to the effect that the international community takes measures to provide safety and security of their investments and nationales. Omonobi&Okhomina, (2004) stated that France as a major investor country in oil industry in the Niger Delta communities was ready to provide protection for its company and staff in the Niger Delta by all means. Britain, America and other countries were ready to swing into action against the increasing spate of oil related criminality and conflict in the Niger Delta area (Bisina, 2003; The Punch, 2003; Omonobi&Okhomina, 2004; Vanguard, 2002).

Given their interest to secure their investment in oil industry in the Niger Delta and their workers, governments of the multinational oil companies that operate in the Niger Delta tend to intervene in the security of the Niger Delta for the sake of their business and investment in the Niger Delta oil. Instances support that there had been propositions and eventual deployment of foreign security measures such as the American marines to provide surveillance against oil theft and attacks on oil facilities in the Niger Delta (Ighodaro, 2003; Ogwuda et al. 2004).

Resistance by those involved in stealing of oil either as freedom fighters or militia groups against government and international security measures has accounted for a more intensified conflict in the Niger Delta. To be able to resist state security forces, the militia groups and various other interested parties acquire weapons to hold the lines. This, as noted by Ikelegbe (2005, p.228) has supported and encouraged massive arms trade where various calibers of weapons are illegally smuggled into Niger Delta. As a result of the proliferation of arms in the Niger Delta, dangerous weapons concentrate in the hands of community youths and empower militia gangs and oil criminal gangs to engage in conflicts. Most times, the style of conflict is such that oil theft operators instigate communal or ethnic conflicts while they hide under the anarchic environment to continue to muster successful theft of oil.

It is also noted that oil theft underpins sea piracy. Oil theft operators involve sea pirates in several of the creeks and swamps to guide and provide protection for the movement of stolen oil through such routes. However, strong disagreements erupt between and among oil theft syndicates, armed gangs, militia groups and several other actors in the illegal oil economy over such interests as profit, control and distribution of stolen products. Such disagreements almost always result in violent conflicts that escalate and deposit negative effects within the Niger Delta communities. In view of this, Maier (2004) notes that over one thousand death casualties are recorded yearly as a result of armed conflicts involving armed forces, militias, cult groups and communities.

There is a visible link between oil theft operators, armed gangs, militias, cultists, pirates and most other participants in the oil theft economy in the Niger Delta (Vanguard, 2003). The chain of interaction between these actors is such that sea piracy is connected to robbery on waterways; protect theft of oil and provide protection for the transportation and movement of stolen crude from initial points of stealing through the creeks and oceans. The actions of oil theft operators provoke violent conflicts directly or indirectly (Scoop, 2004). This, implies summarily that there is a strong nexus between oil theft and the sustenance of conflict in the Niger Delta area. Whereas oil theft is not a major reason for conflict in the Niger Delta, the operational modes and the resistance mechanism of oil theft actors in order to sustain the illegal oil economy play significant role in sustaining conflict in the Niger Delta area.

Conclusions

Based on investigations concluded that Oil theft in the Niger Delta area is both a reactionary response to socio-economic exclusion of the Niger Delta communities and a capitalist influence imposed on the oil economy of the region through over dependence on foreign exploration companies. Oil theft activities and the militarised nature of security responses escalate and sustain conflict in the Niger Delta area. Oil theft activities in the Niger Delta communities exacerbate environmental degradation of the Niger Delta communities and diminish socio-economic heritage of the people.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommended the following:

1. Oil host communities in the Niger Delta area should be integrated fully in economic and developmental projects or plans in order to make them feel less excluded and less aggressive in the pursuit of economic gains which, nonetheless, inclines them to oil theft and other violent activities. Government should also be less dependent on foreign technology in crude oil exploration, as this will curtail imperialistic influence of Western capitalists on the economy.
2. Government approaches to oil theft activities should be less militarised as this will tone down crises and violent conflicts in the Niger Delta area.
3. The Nigerian government and multinational oil companies should engage more in media enlightenment campaigns aimed at educating the

Niger Delta communities of the environmental, social and economic risks associated with oil theft and bunkering activities to their environments and traditional means of livelihood.

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