



Oil Theft in the Niger Delta and its Impact on the Environment and the Nigerian Economy

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Abstract

The increase in oil theft in spite of the enormous sums of money invested to stop it from happening indicates a lack of awareness of the issues facing the nation's oil sector. Nigeria, the world's twelfth-largest producer of petroleum, has battled fiercely in the past to keep complete control of her crude oil business from hostile non-state entities, but her efforts have not yielded much fruit. Oil theft has continued to be a problem for the federal government despite the amnesty initiative and the enormous sums of money spent on pipeline security. This is because an increasing number of artisanal, or illegal, crude oil refineries are opening up in the area, devastating the local economy and costing the government billions of dollars. The work argued that the government's inability to stop oil theft in the Niger Delta is due to both the compromise of its security agencies and a clear lack of understanding of the scope of the crime. It did this by using the queer ladder theory and the triangulation method of data analysis. Recommendations pertinent to the study were so made.

Keywords: *Oil Theft, Economic Sabotage and Poverty*

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Background to the Study and Statement of Problem

Nigeria, the world's twelfth-largest producer of petroleum, has fiercely battled in the past to keep complete control over her crude oil sector from hostile non-state entities. The Yar' Adua administration's 2009 amnesty proposal was an attempt to appease fighting militants in the Niger Delta who had interfered with the free flow of crude oil in the area due to their demands for more local control over the revenues from crude oil sales. The amnesty programme was required since their activities (militancy) had severely impacted the nation's budget and interfered with the federal government's financial flow.

Regretfully, prior to the amnesty, the militancy-induced weapons race in the region had fostered the conditions necessary for an illicit crude oil industry. This industry was utilised to fuel the arms race in the region, which is why Judith (2009) referred to it as "blood oil." While the administration of Yar'Adua's amnesty programme was successful in ending unrest in the area, it was not successful in stopping the prevalence of oil theft in the same area. Therefore, contracts worth billions of Naira were given to certain ex-militants to provide security for oil sites in an effort to further assure the security of the oil pipeline and reduce oil theft in the Niger Delta (Boris, 2015: 10).

The federal government has been plagued by the issue of oil theft despite the amnesty plan and the substantial sums of money allocated to pipeline security. This is because an increasing number of artisanal (illegal) crude oil refineries, also known as AIRs, are opening up in the area. For instance, data that is now available indicates that, between 2009 (the year the amnesty programme was introduced) and 2013, the total number of AIRs destroyed was a startling 2061 (This Day Newspaper, 2013 reported in Zibima, 2015:3). The rise in oil theft in spite of the enormous sums of money put in to checkmate indicates a glaring ignorance of the issues facing the nation's oil industry. This conundrum is aptly illustrated by Christina and Aeron (2013: 3), who pointed out that:

At present oil theft is a species of organized crime that is almost totally off the international community's radar. Officials outside Nigeria are aware that the problem exists, and occasionally show some interest at high policy levels. But Nigeria's trade and diplomatic partners have taken no real action, and no stakeholder group inside the country has a record of sustained and serious engagement with the issue. The resulting lack of good intelligence means international actors cannot fully assess whether Nigerian oil theft harms their interests.

The business and "trade in stolen oil...poses an immense challenge to the Nigerian state, harming its economy" (Judith, 2009; 2). Specifically, oil theft cost Nigeria about \$6 billion annual revenue (Okafor, 2013 cited in Omoyibo and Osunde, 2014: 297). In fact, "some think the volume of the trade is too big not to act, "yet it is not entirely clear how much of the oil Nigeria produces is stolen or exported. Without better knowledge of the network of how oil theft works, governments hoping to check the quagmire could find themselves out of their depth" (Christina and Aeron, 2013: 3). It is thus in line with the above that this research work is structured to look at the following areas in order to have a better insight as to the problem of oil theft in the Niger Delta region

1. The causes of oil theft
2. The patterns,
3. The actors (international and local) and
4. The impacts on the local peasant economy

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this research work is to investigate the impact of oil theft on the Nigerian economy. This study is driven by the following objectives:

- i. To investigate the causes of oil theft.
- ii. To ascertain the impact of oil theft on the local peasant economy and national economy

Literature Review

Although oil theft has been a major concern for the Nigerian government, most narratives around the problem have centred on how it affects national security (Boris, 2016). According to Judith (nd), "the trade in stolen oil, or "blood oil,"remains' an immense challenge to the Nigerian state, harming its economy and fueling a long-running insurgency in the Niger Delta." This opinion is consistent with this point of view. Christina and Aaron have contended that the reason oil theft has persisted in Nigeria for such a long time is that the nation provides a conducive atmosphere for the illicit oil market to flourish, in reference to the prevalence of oil theft in the Niger Delta area (Christina and Aaron, 2013:2). They continued by pointing out that the "lines between legal and illegal supplies of Nigerian oil are not well defined," which makes it a complex scenario, and that this exacerbates the problem of oil theft in the Nigerian oil market. Similarly, Ikelegbe (2005), referenced in Osunde (2014: 297), has contended that the Niger Delta's high rate of oil theft is made more complex by the fact that:

...the Niger Deltans or those who engage in oil theft do not perceive their actions as absolutely wrong, rather they view it as "taking albeit illegally, what naturally belongs to them but is appropriated by non-indigenes"

In agreement with the above, Zibima (2015: 18) have argued that the issue of oil theft:

...is also intrinsically linked with the responsibility of government in utilizing oil revenue in improving social and economic wellbeing in the region. The later on the other hand is more specific and contingent on location of extraction facilities. Impacts are localized and action anomic...which has presented the conflict over ownership of oil resources between the central government and the Niger delta region.

The aforementioned argument finds support in the oil industry's and government's apparent lack of motivation to improve the lot of host communities who bear the brunt of oil production (Obenade and Amangabara, 2014: 2390). When the Niger Delta scenario is viewed in perspective, the main points of the argument become even more apparent. For instance, the Niger Delta area continues to be the main source of Nigeria's foreign revenues and its greatest contribution to GDP, despite the fact that the region is often regarded as incredibly undeveloped. The fact that environmental contamination is a result of crude oil extraction in

the area and has a greater direct impact on the quality of life for residents of municipalities that host oil activities supports the aforementioned claim. This line of reasoning has supported the aggravation-frustration perspective about the Niger Delta oil disaster. In light of this, Zibima (2015: 17) continued to contend that:

The conflict over resource ownership has broader structural implications than oil-related environmental pollution. It also lays the institutional foundation upon which matters of extraction and pollution have been handled in the region. Notwithstanding, both are embedded in and reinforced by varying degrees of state power. Both are sustained by an oil governance regime that provides the political, institutional and legal arrangements that entrench a centralized control of crude oil resources and the associated processes of extraction. The impact of the former in the region is broader and less direct as it extends beyond just communities hosting oil installations and includes ethnic and elite power struggles and international capital (Zibima, 2015: 17).

In light of this, the question of what factors contribute to the prevalence of oil theft in the Niger Delta is essentially divided into two camps. 1. Oil theft is viewed as a justifiable reaction to the injustice that the Niger Delta people believe they have endured as a result of the discovery and extraction of crude oil in the area; 2. It is a billion-dollar industry that involves both domestic and foreign players and transcends national borders. Whatever the situation, oil theft is still a problem in the Nigerian oil business that has been hard to combat because of a lack of awareness about its scope. Christiana and Aaron (2013: 3) share this viewpoint and have said among other things that:

At present oil theft is a species of organized crime that is almost totally off the international community's radar. Officials outside Nigeria are aware that the problem exists, and occasionally show some interest at high policy levels. But Nigeria's trade and diplomatic partners have taken no real action, and no stakeholder group inside the country has a record of sustained and serious engagement with the issue.

From the foregoing, it is quite clear that there is a paucity of research as to the outcomes associated with each aspect of the two major issues arising from oil theft in the region which this research seeks to address.

Research Methodology

The methods utilized to conduct this investigation are described in this section. The different approaches are shown under the following subsections: population/sample of study, research design, data sources, data collecting techniques, and data presentation method. All the components that comprise your technique or research process are implied by a research design. This section's main goal is to break down and itemize this procedure.

A research design is just a strategy that outlines the procedures for gathering and interpreting data. This makes data more than simply information. Using their tool, studies have collected this data (Isaac, 1999: 54). The case study approach was chosen as the research strategy for this

investigation. A case study is a type of research that concentrates on a specific topic, such as people, communities, organisations, projects, etc. It is a research that, in order to maximise details, focuses in-depth on a certain topic. It is a thorough investigation into the topic from the start to the end. It might also involve carefully inspecting the item for a predetermined amount of time. An issue seen in the subject of the study gives rise to case studies (Amara and Amaechi, 2010, 11).

A case study research project has the benefit of not requiring a lot of travel or comparative analysis. It calls for a high degree of research discipline in that the investigator must gather pertinent data at the appropriate moment. However, the absence of external generalisation in case study research is one of its weaknesses. This implies that one cannot extrapolate from what occurs in one thing to another. Despite this flaw, the researcher believes that the case study's limitations won't have an influence on the research's conclusions because the study aims to comprehend how oil theft affects Nigeria's economy.

Technique for gathering data: The secondary sources will provide the data for this investigation. In order to do this, secondary sources like books, scholarly journal articles, newspapers, magazines, and online resources would be the main sources of information. Technique for analysing data: The triangulation and process tracing methods of data analysis were used for this study project. Triangulation is a research process that combines many approaches to get a more comprehensive understanding of a certain issue or phenomenon. According to Denzin (Roberta and Dorit, 2006; 239), "triangulation in qualitative research is a means of using the strengths of one method to offset the weaknesses of another." The approach is most appropriate for qualitative studies like this one because it entails a meticulous process of validating various data sources and the manner in which they were acquired in order to assess the degree of relevance to the overall research and to boost the validity and trustworthiness of the study's conclusions. The main issues with the triangulation approach are its time-consuming nature and the difficulty of creating mixed-methods research studies.

The second approach used in this research Process tracing is the scientific analysis of data that has been verified and chosen in order to address the research questions and hypotheses that have been put forth. It is a technique for analysing data that entails finding patterns in case studies, frequently by applying a historical analytical approach. Therefore, process tracing "inherently analyses trajectories of change and causation, but the analysis fails if the phenomena observed at each step in this trajectory are not adequately described," as David (2011) correctly points out. Therefore, a "static" description serves as a fundamental building component for the analysis of the processes under study. Process tracing is primarily concerned with revealing an event across time by capturing a picture of critical concerns. Thus, process tracing can significantly advance a variety of research goals, including understanding causal processes (David, 2011; 824).

Theoretical Roadmap

The theoretical underpinning for this research endeavor is the Queer Ladder Theory. The theory was developed by Daniel Bell (1919- 2011). The main preposition of the theory is "that organized crime thrives in context where the government's capacity to dictate and sanction

abnormality and crime is poor, where public corruption is endemic and where legitimate livelihood opportunities are slim". (Nwoye, 2000; Lyman, 2007). Thus, the Queer Ladder Theory has three assumptions:

1. Organized crime is an instrumental behaviour/ practice, it is a means to end.
2. It is an instrument of social climbing, fame and socio – economic advancement.
3. It is a means to accumulate wealth and build power. (Mallory, 2007).

The relevance of the theory is drawn from the fact that over the years the Nigerian government despite their numerous efforts to halt the incidence of oil theft in the country has failed in her capacity to dictate and sanction perpetrators of oil theft as it is most often times casually assumed that this is due to the prevalence of corruption amongst governments officials and security agents. Thus, it is the believe that this theory would help to establish this linkage.

The Discussion

The Causes of Oil Theft

According to Christina and Aaron (2013), Nigeria provides a favourable atmosphere for widespread crude oil theft. Major players in the oil business are becoming concerned about the spread of artisanal crude oil refineries in rural areas and the local support for them. The quantity of crude that remains unaccounted for in Nigeria's oil market as a result of the oil theft phenomenon is unmatched. For instance, data that is currently available indicates that, between 2009 and 2013, there were 2061 Artisanal Illegal Oil Refineries (AIRs) that were demolished (Thisday, 2012). Why has oil theft flourished in spite of all the efforts to stop it is the issue that has spurred inquiry. As they say, "we cannot know where we are going if we do not know where we are coming from". Therefore, the purpose of this section is to examine the root causes of oil theft in this region of the world closely.

Poverty: Oil theft in the Niger Delta may be analytically framed within the frameworks of the relationship between poverty and crude oil as well as the related dualities of sustainability and/or environmental damage. This claim has a reasonable foundation. This truth is brought to light by a cursory examination of the UNDP (2006) and UNEP (2011) publications on the Niger Delta ecosystem, although with an emphasis on the development paradigm. The Niger Delta is still incredibly undeveloped and impoverished despite being home to five large international oil firms and making a substantial financial contribution to Nigeria. The region's commercial crude oil operations are not unconnected to this egregious underdevelopment; the local population in this area is heavily dependent on their environment for survival, and as a result, the region has been hit hardest by crude extraction, which has all but obliterated their means of subsistence. In light of this, it is noteworthy that the problem of environmental contamination resulting from the extraction of crude oil in the area has had a greater direct influence on the standard of living for residents of the areas where oil activities are located.

One may argue that an individual's behaviours and responsibilities for surviving and overcoming anxieties are shaped by their objective vulnerabilities and insecurities. When this occurs, as it seems to be in the Niger Delta, survival instincts take on a greater influence on people's behaviour. There is a contradiction in the tale of the Niger Delta. Though the

inhabitants live in poverty, the region is wealthy. The region's ecosystem has suffered greatly as a result of decades of uncontrolled crude oil production. Because of this, one of the primary defences used to explain the frequency of oil theft in the Niger Delta is the area's extreme poverty. The UNDP (2006) made notice of this and stated that:

...Poverty in these communities (Niger Delta) has contributed to the potency of intent. The region has had an average incidence of poverty of 44.15% in the past 8 years with rural poverty peaking at 68%. A self-assessment / Perception index puts the incidence of poverty in the region at 74.8%, way more than per capita and income methods show.

In light of this, Rufus, A. contended that although poverty brought on by a lack of sources of income is not the only factor contributing to oil theft, it does play a major role (Rufus, 2017). The reasons for the actions of local players involved in oil theft are still largely influenced by poverty. The residents in the area have no alternative but to engage in economic sabotage due to the destruction of their primary source of income due to the region's careless production of crude oil. It has been suggested that the majority of persons who steal oil do so out of a necessity to survive, despite the danger involved, which can occasionally be fatal. The major driving force in a person's existence is still survival, as Abraham Maslow correctly notes in his hierarchy of needs. This argument might be used to explain the motivations of those who steal oil in the area. This report aims to highlight that poverty is still the primary factor contributing to oil theft in the Niger Delta.

Porous Oil Market: The topic of Nigeria's porous oil market is intimately tied to the debate over poverty. According to Christina and Aaron (2013), it is challenging to distinguish between legitimate and illicit sources of Nigerian oil, making it hard to checkmate and distinguish between stolen crude supplies. They went on to claim that a complex and dangerous market is created by the government's method of selling its own oil, which draws in a lot of shady intermediaries.

Nigeria doesn't fingerprint its oil, which makes it simple for illicit and legal oil to be confused. However, as Christina and Aaron (2013) point out, fingerprinting crude oil does not ensure that it won't be stolen because there are already a lot of security holes in the technique. Nonetheless, it is thought that the illicit industry has gained pace since it is difficult to tell the difference between illegal and legal oil. Ifeanyi (2017) also pointed out that "oil companies based their total production figures on unconfirmed volume estimates, using dipsticks to make volume calculations." This is another issue. The physical characteristics of the crude may be changed to readily manipulate this computation approach. The information shown above indicates that the Nigerian government is unsure of how much oil is produced there. The crooks that steal oil take advantage of this gap.

The Question of Legitimacy: The Niger Delta's residents are well aware that they have been engaged in a protracted war for control of their resources for aeons. From a peaceful demonstration, this conflict has evolved into an armament's competition in the Delta. The people living in the Niger Delta have long harboured sentiments of being robbed of their

riches. In light of this, Ikelegbe (2005), cited in Osunde (2014: 297), observed that the people who steal oil from the Niger Delta, or the Niger Deltans, do not see their activities as wholly evil; rather, they see it as "taking, albeit illegally, what naturally belongs to them but is appropriated by non-indigenes." This argument offers an alternative viewpoint on the occurrence of oil theft by pointing out that local support for the practice is a major factor in why it has persisted over the years. It seems sense that Asari Dokubo, the commander of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), would consider bunkering to be acceptable given that the crude oil discovered on their territory is their own. Osunde (2014: 297).

The Patterns and Actors in the Dynamics of Oil Theft

According to Christina and Aaron (2013), the stories that have been spread about the theft of Nigerian petroleum have been oversimplified, but the problem is still complicated. For instance, it has been tritely suggested that in order to pilfer oil, criminals in the Niger Delta should break into pipelines and other infrastructure. The oil is subsequently pumped into vessels and barges that are waiting. While bigger vessels transport the remainder overseas, some of it is processed locally (Christina and Aaron, 2013).

Although the aforementioned appears to be the typical pattern, the illicit crude industry has expanded into a multimillion-dollar industry with both domestic and foreign participants. As Christian and Aaron (2013) pointed out, "Even in Nigeria, the details of who steals oil are elusive." A typical large-scale larceny network consists of buyers and sellers, a variety of opportunists, local and international transportation, operations and security personnel, and facilitators"

Figure 1 & 2: Showing Artisanal Illegal Oil Refineries



Source: Plate 1: Al Jazeera English 2017 **Source:** Plate 2: Zibima, 2015

Presently Nigeria loses an estimated 400,000 barrels of crude everyday as a result of oil theft which cost the country an estimate of about \$1.5 billion (US dollars) or ₦12.7 billion every month (Irina, 2016; and Vanguard, 2017). The figures above reveal that the specifics of Nigeria's oil theft involve a chain of sophisticated and organized criminal syndicates that cuts across local and international borders.

At the local level, oil theft is perpetuated by the indigenes/residences of oil hosting communities, security agents, militants (ex militants inclusive), security agents, and politicians. While at the international level oil theft is aided by buyers who patronize stolen crudes by taking undue advantages of Nigeria's porous oil market. It is very difficult to be specific on how oil theft is carried out in the Niger Delta. However, the general consensus on oil theft is that at the primary level, thieves tap into pipelines and other oil infrastructure (these thieves are the foot soldiers in the illegal business). When this is done, some are refined locally with the aid of AIRs while others are transferred to barges and boats which are then shipped abroad to buyers. The foot soldiers are mostly sponsored by ex-militants and local politicians, this crime is aided by security agents (Soldiers, Police, and NSCDC) who take huge bribes and turn a blind eye on the business. While the above is oversimplified no doubt, it still remains the general pattern in which oil theft is perpetuated.

Impacts of Oil Theft on the Local Peasant Economy and Nigerian Economy

Historically, the people of the Niger Delta have depended heavily on their environment for the source of their livelihood as a bulk of the local population relies heavily on fishing and farming for survival. However, the discovery of crude at Oloibiri (present day Bayelsa State) and the subsequent production of crude in commercial quantity have meant that the efficacy of the Niger Delta environment has been gravely hampered. The destruction of the environment has meant that the economic position of the Niger Deltans has been unfavorably weakened as a result of an unregulated crude oil business. The above reveals the negative externalities of crude oil production as a source of environmental pollution in the Niger Delta.

It is an undisputable fact that crude oil production has an adverse effect on the environment. The Niger Delta region which plays host to 5 major multinational oil firms have bore the brunt of Nigeria's oil industry. The issue of environmental pollution, as an outcome of crude oil extraction in the region, has had more direct impacts on the livelihood of inhabitants of communities hosting oil operations. This fact has made it a point of action for rural communities as well as a major advocacy and research issue for environment-friendly organizations (Amnesty International, 2012). This systemically demarcates concern for the environment in to two; concern from the point of the environment in itself and concern for the state of environment arising from the impacts on the socio-economic conditions of communities affected. With emphasis on the later, often highlighted is the position of communities as 'victims' of the dynamics of oil extraction in the region.

However, the above position is being threatened by the functionality of artisanal crude oil refineries in rural communities and the associated environmental pollution which associates their operation. This negative externality of oil extraction by operators of AIRs points to the fact that oil theft has had a negative impact on the local peasant economy as it has been implicated as the major source of oil spillage which adversely affects the environment. The above argument is made plausible by the fact that between 2009 and 2013, available data show a total number of destroyed AIRs to be 2061 (Thisday Newspaper, 2012). The above revelation is significant as the operation of AIRs involve hacking into oil facilities which spills oil into the environment thereby worsening the condition of the already damaged environment.

At the national level, oil theft has made Nigeria to lose nothing less than an estimated 400,000 barrels of crude everyday which has cost the country an estimate of about \$1.5 billion (US dollars) or ₦12.7 billion every month (Irina, 2016; and Vanguard, 2017). The impact of this figure on the nation's economy is highly significant as the nation relies heavily on sales of crude for foreign earnings. Adversely, the distortion of the nation's income due to oil theft heavily affects funds to fund the budget. Over the years, Nigeria's crude supply has been cut short due to economic sabotage by crude oil criminals. The overall impact of this on the nation's development cannot be overemphasized as this has had serious negative effect on the government's ability to implement her budgets. To this end, it could be stated that oil theft has had serious negative economic implications at both at the local and national level.

Recommendations

This study in terms of its recommendations has borrowed heavily from the work of Christina and Aaron (2013) that made the following recommendations:

To combat oil theft, investigators should focus on four key areas:

1. The analyzing capacity of active export bunkering cartels;
2. Investigating the quantum of any so-called 'white collar' oil theft and its dimensions;
3. Monitoring ship movements and patterns in Nigerian waters;
4. Surveying small to mid-sized tankers anchored offshore
5. Mapping illegal bunkering hotspots.

Tracing the Movements of Stolen Oil;

Intelligence personnel should get a clear grasp of the following by:

1. Examining the role of commodities traders in oil theft;
2. Identifying key nationalities as well as actors involved, especially at higher levels;
3. Investigating suspect refining companies of possible involvement;
4. Exploring any possible links between oil theft and fuel oil trading;
5. Case studies of suspect refining companies;

Following the money trail

Investigators in this area could focus on:

1. Investigating how oil thieves finance large expenses, including ship purchases;
2. Uncovering bulk cash smuggling schemes to conceal oil theft benefits;
3. Identifying Nigerian banks used for money laundering;
4. Profiling facilitators used by suspected oil thieves to move funds;
5. Analyzing data on ship charters, insurance, and letters of credit linked to stolen oil;

Assessing the Security risks involved:

To better comprehend the risks, intelligence officers could investigate:

1. Investigating the role of Niger Delta militants in oil theft since the 2009 amnesty;
2. Examining recent tensions and rivalries between oil theft rings and networks;
3. Understanding northern Nigerian desired gains in oil theft;
4. Exploring the nexus between oil theft, drug trafficking and terrorism;

5. Investigating possible use of oil theft for campaign finance strategies.

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