

FROM RESOURCE CONTROL TO OIL THEFT: EVOLVING CRIME IN THE NIGER-DELTA AND THE NIGERIA POLICE FORCE'S ROLE IN MITIGATION AND ENFORCEMENT.

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Abstract

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria, endowed with abundant natural resources, particularly oil, has long been a site of intense socio-political conflict and economic exploitation. However, the region has increasingly been plagued by oil theft, significantly reducing the nation's revenue. This paper examines the evolving dynamics of crime in the Niger Delta and the response of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) to these challenges. Based on the routine activity theory (RAT), findings reveal that a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of a capable guardian are all responsible for the continued oil theft in the Niger-Delta. It further revealed that corruption, the proliferation of small and light weapons, and other systemic issues have exacerbated criminal activities in the Niger-Delta and despite government measures, including the engagement of state and non-state actors to address the menace, oil theft persists. It also found that while the military and non-state actors have been deployed, the Nigeria Police Force have not been deeply involved. It therefore advocates for an integrated and improved policing, community collaboration, and robust policy measures to tackle the root causes of insecurity and crimes in the region. By doing so, it underscores the critical role of the NPF in safeguarding national resources while promoting sustainable peace and development in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Oil theft, Tompolo, Resource Control, Nigeria, Resource Curse, Militancy

Introduction

Oil is a very important resource not just for domestic use but also a bargaining power in global politics. Colgan (2014) contended that oil politics is a major force in global and domestic politics, especially in developing countries. It is not common as only few countries possess this important commodity. Oil, commonly referred to as the black gold, is a blessing to Nigeria, which prides itself as the sixth largest producer of the crude in the world. This natural resource is steeped in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. The Niger Delta, once known as the Oil Rivers for its palm oil production, became the British Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1885 (Faga and Ngwoke, 2021). Following the discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri in 1956, Port Harcourt exported Nigeria's first shipment in 1958. Covering 112,106 km², the Niger Delta is Africa's largest and the world's third-largest delta, with the continent's largest freshwater swamp and a rich biodiversity (Thompson et al 2024). The region is home to 13,329 settlements,

predominantly rural hamlets. With a 2.9% annual growth rate, its population reached 30 million by 2004 and is projected to hit 41.5 million by 2015 (Oyegun et al. 2023). The challenges of oil theft seems to be prevalent in oil producing third world countries. For example, Berbotto and Chainey, (2021) in their findings revealed the roles performed by members of criminal groups, the recruitment of individuals outside of the criminal group to provide information about the pipelines and perform technical activities, and the supporting role of citizens and businesses from local communities.

Though a lot of studies have delved into insecurity and threats in the Niger-Delta (Obi, 2009; Ite, 2012), adequate attention has not been dedicated to the interrelationship between Nigeria police force and the shifting crime in the region. This article explores the role of the Nigeria Police Force in addressing the changing nature of crime in the Niger Delta, focusing on the transition from resource control movements to the rise of oil theft. Emeka (2024) noted that “Oil theft costs Nigeria many millions of dollars yearly; \$23 million was lost daily in 2022, and \$1.43 billion was lost in March 2023 alone”. By examining the NPF's strategies, challenges, and responses, this study seeks to understand how the police have adapted to the evolving security threats in the region and what this means for broader efforts to combat crime and promote stability in the Niger Delta. The paper relies on documentary evidences. This include books, newspapers and journals.

Literature Review

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has long been the focal point of complex socio-political and economic struggles, particularly regarding the control and distribution of the vast natural resources, especially oil. Historically, the Niger Delta has been at the heart of Nigeria's resource control debate. The discovery of oil in the region in the 1950s has been a double-edged sword for the local communities. While the oil industry contributed significantly to Nigeria's economic development, the region's inhabitants have long argued that they have been denied a fair share of the wealth generated from their land (Ikporukpo, 1996). The movement for resource control gained significant momentum in the 1990s, especially through the efforts of groups such as the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), led by Ken Saro-Wiwa. These movements focused on highlighting the environmental degradation and the economic inequalities that stemmed from the oil industry (Watts, 2008). While the activism initially focused on securing a larger share of oil revenue for the region, it has evolved into more direct confrontations with the Nigerian state, particularly as the government resisted calls for resource control (Saro-Wiwa, 1995).

While resource control movements involved political protests and civil disobedience, a new and more insidious form of crime began to emerge in the late 1990s and early 2000s—oil theft. Oil theft, or “bunkering,” refers to the illegal extraction, refining, and trading of crude oil, often involving local communities, criminal syndicates, and even some state actors (Akinyemi, 2009). The scale of oil theft in the Niger Delta has grown significantly, with estimates suggesting that Nigeria loses billions of dollars annually due to this illicit activity (Ite, 2012). Scholars have noted that

the rise of oil theft is linked to both local frustrations over poverty and underdevelopment and the broader corruption within the oil industry and Nigerian government (Obi, 2009). While resource control sought to ensure local communities received fair compensation, oil theft has become a means of survival for some, albeit one that undermines national security and the rule of law.

The implications of oil theft for national security are profound. The activities of oil thieves and their associated militant groups have contributed to violence, instability, and a weakening of state authority in the Niger Delta. Oil theft has become not just a criminal enterprise but also a form of insurgency, with militants attacking oil installations, kidnapping oil workers, and engaging in sabotage (Duru, 2014). These activities have led to significant losses in oil production, further exacerbating Nigeria's economic woes. The NPF has been criticized for its inability to prevent or mitigate these acts of violence, which continue to disrupt oil production and threaten Nigeria's economic stability (Naanen, 2017).⁴

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) has faced significant challenges in addressing the changing face of crime in the Niger Delta. In response to the rise in oil theft, the NPF has employed various strategies, including raids, the establishment of special units to combat oil bunkering, and collaborations with other security agencies (Ukeje, 2011). These other security agencies include the military, navy and airforce as well as local vigilantes. However, the effectiveness of these efforts have been questioned. Akinwale (2024) pointed out that the NPF is often hampered by insufficient resources, inadequate training, and corruption, which undermines its ability to effectively combat criminal activities. Additionally, the complex political and economic interests in the Niger Delta, including the involvement of political elites and the oil industry in oil theft, further complicate the NPF's response (Ejiogu, 2010). This has led to several accusations and counter-accusations on allegations of collaboration between the oil thieves and the law enforcement agencies including the military.

Resource Control in the Niger-Delta

The colonial era in the Niger Delta was marked by the British consolidation of power over what was then the Oil Rivers Protectorate, established in 1885. The British sought to secure the region's rich palm oil trade and other agricultural resources for export, with little regard for the welfare of the indigenous populations leading to resistance by the local indigenous people such as Jaja of Opobo, Nan OlomuItshakiri among others (Aghalino, 2000). These early colonial era, which centralized control over resources, laid the foundation for later resource control struggles. Attempt by the British colonial government to address this led to the Willinks Commission.

After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the struggle for resource control intensified. This led to the early manifestations of the resource control movement, where groups in the Niger Delta began to demand a greater share of oil revenues and autonomy over the management of their resources. One of the first prominent figures to

champion the cause was Isaac Adaka Boro, who, in 1966, led a group of militants in the Niger Delta in an unsuccessful attempt to declare the Niger Delta Republic, calling for resource control and autonomy. Boro's actions highlighted the deep-seated grievances over the economic exploitation and political neglect of the region (Tantua, Devine, and Maconachie, 2018; Larry and Otoworo, 2024)

With the creation of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) in 1977 and consolidation of state control over the oil industry several groups emerged to advocate for resource control. The most notable of these was the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), founded by the Ogoni ethnic group in the early 1990s under the leadership of Ken Saro-Wiwa. MOSOP's demand for resource control was rooted in the severe environmental degradation caused by oil extraction in Ogoni land, and its calls for greater local participation in oil revenue management resonated with many in the Niger Delta (Tantua, et al 2018).

The 1990s were marked by violent clashes between local communities, government forces, and multinational oil companies, as resource control became a central demand. In 1995, the Nigerian government executed Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists, an action that drew widespread international condemnation and highlighted the government's disregard for the region's demands. The 1990s also saw the rise of militant groups in the Niger Delta, who sought to use force to achieve resource control. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), established in the early 2000s, became one of the most prominent of these groups. MEND's activities, which included the kidnapping of oil workers, attacks on oil infrastructure, and the destruction of oil pipelines, were directly linked to demands for a larger share of the region's oil wealth and greater political autonomy for the Niger Delta. The group's violent tactics reflected the frustration and anger of local communities, who felt that their demands for resource control were being ignored by the federal government.

The government responded with military force, but this only exacerbated the violence, as the region became a hotbed of armed conflict between militants, government forces, and oil companies (Obi and Rustard, 2011). The Niger Delta crisis escalated to a point where oil production was significantly reduced, and the region became a security hotspot in r Nigeria. By the mid-2000s, the federal government began to recognize the need to address the resource control issue in a more structured way. In 2008, the government set up the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to focus on the development of the region. While the NDDC's creation was a step toward addressing the economic and infrastructural neglect of the Niger Delta, it did not fully satisfy calls for resource control. The central government maintained its control over the majority of the oil revenues, and local communities remained dissatisfied with the distribution of these funds.

In 2010, the introduction of the Amnesty Program, which granted amnesty to militants

in exchange for the surrender of arms, brought a temporary ceasefire in the region. However, the fundamental issue of resource control remained unresolved, as communities continued to press for greater local ownership and management of oil resources (Okonofua, 2016).

From Resource Control to Oil Theft

Crude oil is Nigeria's main export but production, and revenue, has been dwindling for years because of thieves, authorities say. [Oil production fell from 2.5 million barrels per day in 2011 to just over a million in July 2022, according to the regulator](#) (Orjinmo, 2022). This is majorly due to oil theft. Oil theft, particularly through pipeline vandalism and illegal bunkering, has become a significant criminal enterprise in the Niger Delta. It is believed that the country loses \$10 billion every year, or the equivalent of about 200,000 barrels of oil per day, to illegal actors (Obiezu, 2024). This criminal activity is not only economically damaging, with billions of dollars in revenue lost annually, but it also exacerbates the environmental degradation of the region. The practice has led to widespread pollution, with spills from damaged pipelines contaminating water sources, farmland, and wildlife habitats.

Local communities are often directly or indirectly involved in oil theft. For many, engaging in the illegal oil trade has become a means of survival in a region where the majority of the population has been neglected by the government. The lack of proper infrastructure, high unemployment rates, and inadequate social services have fueled the growth of this illicit industry. Additionally, proliferation of small and light weapons have also increased the act (Abubakar, 2024). The Nigerian government has struggled to address oil theft effectively, partly due to corruption, lack of coordination among security agencies, and the growing militarization of the region.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts Routine Activity Theory (RAT), a criminological framework that explains crime as an outcome of everyday activities rather than solely as a result of social conditions like poverty or inequality. First formulated by Cohen and Felson (1979) and later refined by Felson, RAT has become one of the most influential and widely cited theories in criminology and crime science. Unlike theories that emphasize offender characteristics, RAT focuses on crime as an event that is closely related to its environment and the routine behaviors of individuals. It posits that crime occurs when three key elements converge in time and space: a motivated offender—an individual or group willing to commit a crime; a suitable target—a person, object, or location that is vulnerable to victimization; and the absence of a capable guardian, meaning there is a lack of effective security measures or enforcement to prevent the crime. Cohen and Felson (1979) highlighted a sociological paradox in which improvements in socioeconomic conditions during the 1960s—such as reduced poverty, increased education, and lower unemployment—were accompanied by significant rises in crime rates. To account for this contradiction, they shifted attention from traditional social

causes to changes in the structural patterns of daily routines. These alterations, they argued, created greater opportunities for crime, particularly offenses against persons and property (Felson & Cohen, 1980).

In the **Niger Delta**, RAT can explain oil theft by highlighting how a motivated offender such as criminal gangs, militants or corrupt officials seek financial gain through oil theft and bunkering. The suitable targets are usually oil pipelines, storage facilities and transport vessels while the weak security include poor policing, corruption, and lack of surveillance which generally creates an environment where oil theft thrives. Thus the theory suits the paper.

Government Response to Oil Theft in the Niger-Delta

In response to the increasing threat posed by oil theft and militant activities in the Niger Delta, the Nigerian government has sought various means to curb the problem. One of the most controversial moves was the recruitment of Government Ekpemupolo, also known as Tompolo, a former militant leader, to help combat oil theft in the region. Tompolo was once the leaders of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), a militant group that had carried out numerous attacks on oil infrastructure in the early 2000s (Orjinmo, 2022).

Figure 1: Tantita Security Service Personnel on Patrol



Source: Adeh (2024, July 8)

In 2016, Tompolo was granted a government contract to provide security and surveillance for oil installations in the Niger Delta, particularly in the areas most affected by oil theft (Adibe et al 2018). His company, Tanita has been at the forefront of securing the Niger-Delta oil pipelines. His recruitment was part of a broader strategy to engage local communities and former militants in efforts to restore peace and security to the region. This move was viewed by some as a pragmatic approach, recognizing that Tompolo's knowledge of the region, his influence over local communities, and his previous militant activities gave him an edge in combating oil theft. Tompolo's recruitment also signified a shift in the Nigerian government's approach to managing militancy and oil theft. Rather than solely relying on the military and police, which have often been accused of human rights abuses and heavy-handed tactics, the government sought to engage local actors who had intimate knowledge of the region's socio-political dynamics. By involving Tompolo and other ex-militants, the government hoped to neutralize the influence of criminal gangs and militant groups operating in the Niger Delta (Orjinmo, 2022; Obiezu, 2024).

While Tompolo's recruitment was hailed by some as a step in the right direction, it has not been without its challenges and criticisms. One of the key criticisms is the perception that the government's strategy of engaging ex-militants may further legitimize violent actors, making it difficult to address the root causes of oil theft, such as the lack of development and poverty in the region. Additionally, Tompolo has been involved in several legal disputes, including corruption charges, which have raised questions about his suitability for the role as both the private security company and the Nigerian Army have both exchanged words (Transparency International, 2019; Abbey, 2024). The culpability of the Nigeria Army has been affirmed by Transparency International (2019:5) when it reported that "In some cases, military personnel would actually sit in the front of the vehicle transporting the oil and escort it to the final destination." Moreover, Tompolo's involvement has not been a guarantee of success in curbing oil theft. Despite the government's efforts to curb the illegal oil trade, oil theft has continued at alarming rates, and the Niger Delta remains a volatile region (Emeka, 2024). This has often raised more questions about the complicit nature of not just the security company but also a web of actors involved in the illegal business of oil theft.

Theoretical Framing and Oil Theft in the Niger-Delta

In explaining the theory and how it relates to oil theft and the role of the Nigeria police in curbing these crimes, it is trite to first examine the first element of the Routine Activity Theory. The first element, a motivated offender who could be an individual or group willing to commit a crime. In the Niger-Delta, oil theft is not done by individuals rather it is a complex web of business where the people involved include government officials to oil workers and even the security agencies. Any wonder Ikelegbe, (2005) and Soremi, (2020) agrees that criminal gangs are involved in the crime. Igwe (2023) revealed that the Former National Security Adviser Babagana Monguno noted that oil theft has

grown increasingly sophisticated with international collusion, persisting despite government efforts, prompting a House of Representatives committee to investigate its impact on national revenue. Ume-Ezeioke (2023) reported how prominent Niger Delta leader Asari Dokubo accused the Nigerian military of orchestrating 99 percent of oil theft, claiming powerful cabals in Abuja are involved, while President Bola Tinubu promised to investigate naval commanders linked to oil bunkering and take decisive action to end the practice. The implication of this is that other than nationals, some international agencies and stakeholders are now involved. With their wealth of experiences and illegal wealth, they can influence most of the people who are grossly underpaid, greedy and corrupted. There is no doubt that these powerful groups are the likely people who provide the market and logistics for the crime to succeed.

Secondly, there is usually a suitable target. The targets could be individuals guiding the oil wells or oil reservoirs, or ships to location vulnerable to victimization. This explains why vessels with limited security officials are attacked as well as oil pipelines. These oil pipelines are vandalized because apart from being suitable targets, they are under-manned or under secured and in remote places where there are no agencies to protect them.

Finally, there is an absence of a capable guardian which may include a lack of security measures or authorities to prevent the crime. The military were first used solely to protect these pipelines and oil wells but the crime there in the Niger-Delta continued. The joint patrol consisting of Navy, Air Force and the Nigerian Army have also been used until recently when the non-state actor owned by Tompolo was employed. Though the Tantitah has claimed that it has apprehended so many ships stealing crude oil from the area, no serious arrests and prosecution have been made. This also shows that the ungoverned spaces has also made it possible for the attackers to attack soft or vulnerable targets. This suggests that the Nigerian Police Force which has the power to prevent crime has not been fully integrated and utilised in the scheme of things. The question then is what role can the Nigeria Police Force then play when it evidences has shown that the joint military efforts have not yielded expected results?

What Role can the Nigeria Police Play?

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) can play several critical roles in curtailing oil theft in the Niger Delta. Given the region's significance as the heart of Nigeria's oil industry and the escalating challenges posed by oil theft, the NPF's involvement is crucial in ensuring security, law enforcement, and collaboration with other stakeholders. First enhanced surveillance and intelligence gathering. Oil theft in the Niger Delta is often orchestrated through covert operations and underground networks. The NPF can invest in robust surveillance and intelligence-gathering mechanisms to identify and disrupt these criminal networks. By utilizing technology such as drones, satellite imagery, and intelligence-sharing with local communities and other security agencies, the NPF can monitor pipelines, oil facilities, and illegal bunkering activities. Collaboration with

local communities, through community policing and trust-building, can also help gather crucial intelligence.

The NPF can deploy specialized units to protect key oil infrastructure such as pipelines, oil rigs, and refineries from vandalism and theft. With the support of the Nigerian military and other law enforcement agencies, the NPF can ensure round-the-clock security around critical oil installations. This proactive role can reduce incidents of sabotage, pipeline breaches, and illegal bunkering. A visible police presence can also act as a deterrent to criminal groups involved in oil theft. Already there used to be special police known as spy (HRW, 1999; Nigeria Police Force, 2024).

More so, the NPF can implement stronger law enforcement and prosecution. One of the most significant roles of the NPF is enforcing the laws related to oil theft (NUPRC, 2024a). This includes arresting perpetrators of oil theft, investigating cases, and ensuring that offenders are prosecuted. To do this, the NPF needs to be equipped with the capacity to conduct detailed investigations into oil theft syndicates, including gathering evidence, tracing illegal oil shipments, and identifying individuals within the networks. Effective prosecution of offenders in the judicial system is crucial for deterring future crimes. Many oil theft activities in the Niger Delta are tied to illegal refining of stolen crude. The NPF can target illegal refineries and workshops where stolen oil is processed. This requires intelligence gathering, raids, and strategic enforcement of environmental laws against illegal refining operations, which are often associated with environmental degradation. The NPF should work alongside environmental protection agencies to curb this practice and dismantle illegal refineries, thereby reducing the profitability of oil theft.

Combating oil theft requires a multi-stakeholder approach. The NPF can enhance collaboration with oil companies, the Nigerian Army, the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), and local government authorities to conduct joint operations targeting oil theft and bunkering activities (NUPRC, 2024b). Regular meetings and coordination between these entities can facilitate a more organized and effective response to criminal syndicates involved in oil theft. Oil theft syndicates often operate across borders, with illegal oil being smuggled out of Nigeria through neighboring countries. The NPF can work with regional and international security agencies to monitor cross-border oil theft and trafficking. Sharing intelligence and coordinating enforcement efforts across national and international boundaries can reduce the smuggling of stolen oil and disrupt oil theft syndicates that operate at a transnational level.

The NPF can strengthen community policing efforts in the Niger Delta to engage local communities in the fight against oil theft. Many individuals in these communities are involved in or aware of illegal oil activities but may not cooperate with law enforcement due to distrust or fear of retaliation. By fostering positive relationships between the police and local populations, the NPF can gain the trust and cooperation of

the communities in identifying oil theft syndicates and preventing future incidents (Ndakotsu, 2023). Community outreach programs can educate locals on the legal and environmental consequences of oil theft, motivating them to report illegal activities (Ogunyemi, 2009). This also involves The NPF to play a role in raising awareness among the public about the dangers and consequences of oil theft, both for the local environment and the economy. Through public education campaigns, the police can inform communities about the legal consequences of engaging in oil theft, the environmental damage caused by illegal refining, and the long-term impact on the region's development. This can reduce the social acceptability of oil theft and galvanize local communities to support anti-theft efforts.

Furthermore, there is need for capacity building, training and retraining. The need for capacity building is germane to police reform and crime prevention (Harris, 2005; Interpol, n.d.) The NPF must undergo specialized training to effectively handle the complexities of oil theft, which often involves organized crime and militancy. Officers should be trained in anti-oil theft operations, as well as in the legal frameworks surrounding oil theft and the environmental hazards associated with it. Additionally, capacity building should extend to areas like intelligence analysis, cybercrime (given the increasing use of digital platforms in illegal oil trade), and conflict management, which are essential for effectively addressing the evolving nature of oil theft in the region.

Conclusion

The evolution of the Niger Delta's struggles from resource control agitation to oil theft highlights the persistent socio-economic and environmental challenges confronting the region. Oil theft, as a symptom of deeper issues such as marginalization, poverty, and environmental degradation, has transformed into a sophisticated criminal enterprise that undermines Nigeria's economy, national security, and ecological sustainability.

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) stands at a critical juncture in combating this evolving menace. By enhancing intelligence gathering, fostering collaboration with local communities and other security agencies, and enforcing laws with transparency and accountability, the NPF can play a pivotal role in addressing oil theft. However, policing alone is insufficient. A holistic approach involving community engagement, infrastructural development, and tackling corruption is necessary to address the root causes of this crisis. The interplay between historical grievances, modern criminality, and state response underscores the need for enduring reforms that prioritize justice, inclusivity, and sustainable development. Only then can the Niger Delta emerge from its turbulent history and reclaim its potential as a cornerstone of Nigeria's progress.

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