

Prevalence, Causes and Consequences of Oil Theft in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to examine the prevalence, causes and consequences of oil theft in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. Niger Delta is a geo-political region with the highest oil and gas production capacity in Nigeria. Oil theft is illegal act of stealing crude oil or refined oil products from pipelines, storage tanks, and other facilities belonging to the government or private oil companies. The study findings show that the problem of oil theft in the Niger Delta region has reached its crescendo and from the casual observers to the stakeholders, everyone agrees that it is a menace that must be tackled head-on. The study findings also observed that not much has been achieved by the Nigerian state in curbing this menace due to a number of reasons including entrenched corruption in the country, high level of youth unemployment in the Niger-Delta, poverty, ineffective and corrupt security agents, and international oil thieves' collaborations, among others. The paper concludes that, there should be multi-stakeholder approach in solving the problem of oil theft in Niger-Delta oil producing communities. This approach should include effort to tackle poverty, youth unemployment, corruption among security agents and officials of oil regulatory agencies, etc.

Key words: Oil theft, Niger Delta, Poverty, Youth Unemployment, Flow Stations

1. Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that in recent time, crude oil theft has become a major issue of discourse at different levels of policy and intellectual discourse particularly within the criminological research context. This is considering the fact that crude oil theft has become a major challenge in many countries around the world, particularly in developing nations where poverty and corruption are endemic, particularly in Nigeria. Over the past few years, a number of global studies have highlighted escalating level of crude oil theft across oil regions, particularly in the West African oil producing regions (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013; Obieze, 2022; Yusuf, 2022).

Oil theft is the illegal act of stealing crude oil or refined oil products from pipelines, storage tanks, and other facilities belonging to the government or private oil companies. Although oil theft cuts across different oil producing nations of the world such as Venezuela, Indonesia, Malaysia, among others, it has become more problematic in developing nations like Nigeria. It is true that crude oil theft in Nigeria has had a long history with quite a number of policy measures initiated over the years to address it, but there seems to be an awakening of consciousness about the trend in recent time, probably due to its consequences on the socio-economic development of Nigeria. Crude oil deposits are found in different regions in Nigeria, but the issue of crude oil theft has been more pronounced and prevalent in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria due to the fact that the area is the major oil-producing region in the country. In fact, the problem of oil theft in the Niger Delta region has reached its crescendo and from the casual observers to the stakeholders, everyone agrees that it is a menace that must be tackled head-on. This is equally consistent with a number of scholars who have acknowledged that oil theft is a problem that is eating deep into the fabric of the Nigerian society, and it seems to be getting worse in more dynamic ways as the days go by (Odalonu, 2015; Soremi, 2020). Onwuchekwe, Okafor and Madu (2020) argued that the presence of natural resources has brought divergent interests and untold conflict and misery for many of the community inhabitants in the Niger Delta region.

Oil theft in the oil-rich Niger Delta region has over the years been attributed to different factors ranging from corruption, poor governance, lack of accountability of the petroleum ministry and weak security arrangement, which promote the opportunity for organized criminal activities

targeted at oil theft (Assi, Amah & Edeke, 2016). Most people in the Niger Delta region engage in oil theft as a result of not having any gainfully employment. Onwuchekwe, Ibekwe, Ezeh, and Okpala (2023) noted that some of the conditions that breed criminals in many societies is non-provision of jobs. However, the prevalence, causes and consequences of this phenomenon within the host communities remains obscure due to dearth of empirical research on these themes. As such, this present study hopes to investigate these dimensions, with the view to proffer viable measures that could help to address the problem.

Prevalence is often expressed conventionally as the proportion or percentage of cases in a given population at a specified time. This concept is often difficult to conceptualize and measure within the social context, but it has been more applicable to the measurement of social epidemiology (Centre for Disease Control, n.d). This is not to say that its application in the social context is impossible. For instance, some scholars have conceptualized prevalence as the extent to which a social phenomenon occurs (Jasinski, 2005). In this direction, prevalence of oil theft relates to how widespread the phenomenon occurs within an area. There seems to be a dearth of literature regarding the prevalence rate of oil across oil-producing communities, which informs the need for this present research on the theme.

Consequences of crude oil theft relate to the implication of the problem on the communities as well as the socio-economic growth of the nation. As highlighted in extant literature, the consequences of oil theft are often overwhelming. For instance, some scholars noted that the socio-economic consequences of crude oil theft include contamination of water sources, destruction of aquatic and wildlife environment, destruction of farmlands, environmental pollution, loss of revenue for government and divestments by some International Oil Companies (IOCs), with attendant job losses which compound the unemployment situation in Nigeria (Ogbeifun, 2014), among others. Also, Madu, Okafor and Onwuchekwe (2020) noted that the Niger-Delta people and their communities have suffered years from decades of conflict, poverty and underdevelopment as caused by the presence and the struggle for Hydro-Carbon deposits.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is one of the most oil-rich areas in the world, and the most crude oil producing region in Nigeria, with vast reserves of crude oil (Akpan & Akpabio, 2009). Perhaps this single factor could be a reason that has made the zone most susceptible to a rise in

oil theft, which has become a significant problem for the country. Despite the acknowledged prevalence of oil theft in the Niger Delta zone which has serious implications for both Nigeria and the international community, it is yet uncertain how widespread the problem of oil theft cuts across different communities in the area. More so, the current patterns of crude oil theft have not yet been ascertained, as well as the major socio-economic consequences of the lives of the local people in the area. This is considering the fact that a number of researches on crude oil theft have not been holistic in their analysis of the problem. Besides, a number of such studies have become outdated and can no longer stand to provide updated analysis on the current dynamics of oil theft in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria.

This current study is therefore conceived as a step in the right direction considering the view that analysis of social determinants and consequences of criminal activities fall within the ambit of criminological research, which could help to identify effective policy measures that could help to control crude oil theft, particularly within the context of rich-oil regions across the globe. As such, research of this nature is interesting and important particularly in the contemporary crude oil theft issue which has become a major topical issue in governance and socio-economic development in Nigeria.

2. The objectives of the study:

The study has the following objectives;

- a. To identify the causes of oil theft in the Niger Delta.
- b. To examine the consequences of oil theft in the Niger Delta.
- c. To find solutions to oil theft in the Niger Delta.

3. Niger Delta

Niger Delta is a geo-political region with the highest oil and gas production capacity in Nigeria. The region is said to be the world third largest wet land and largest in Africa, which has an area of about 70, 000sq km, an ecological zone of large rivers, coastal, mangroves , fish and salt water swamp forest areas (Okonkwo, Kumar &Taylor, 2015). The Niger Delta region has a population

of about 31,244,587 people (According to 2006 National Population Census). The region is made up of 40 different ethnic groups. The Niger Delta is made up of 9 states namely: Akwa-Ibom, Imo, Abia, Delta, Rivers, Ondo, Edo, Bayelsa and Cross River. The region is endowed with several natural resources which include huge deposit of crude oil. It has remained the main crude oil production base in Nigeria. The region is blessed with 5,700 oil wells, 112 flow stations, 16 gas plants, 126 production platforms, 6 floating production storage offloading (FPSO), 13 oil terminals and 6,000 kilometers of pipelines (Felix, 2022).

Oil Theft

According to Ibenegbu (2018), oil theft within the context of Nigeria, is considered to be illegal appropriation of crude or refined oil products from the pipelines of multinational oil companies. Eugene (2021) sees oil theft as a crime that involves stealing or adulterating crude oil and refined products. As a matter of fact, oil theft can also be referred as an organized crime which involves the activities of non-state actors such as terrorists, drug cartels, and mafias. More so, oil theft is an extensive racket involving the military, security apparatchiks (an official in a large political organization), politicians, dubious industrial moguls and even oil companies.

In a similar opinion above, Ayanruioh (2013) observed that illegal oil theft is the process through which crude oil or refined petroleum products are illegally siphoned from pipelines and sold to interested dealers / buyers waiting on the high sea or to the unscrupulous individuals. The author further noted that oil theft is carried out at several levels; namely the small scale level for the local marketers; and the larger scale levels involving international marketers beyond the licensed amount. Also, Victor, Offing and Sunday (2016) maintained that oil theft is an act of stealing crude oil from the pipelines or flow stations, as well as extra crude oil added to legitimate cargos that are not accounted for. This act is usually perpetrated for personal gain by large criminal elements or unlawful groups who are driven by the desire to loot oil product indirectly aiming to sabotage the oil and gas industries or the government (Aishatu, 2016).

4. Review of Literature

In this section, attempt is made to review relevant literatures that are central to this paper.

Cause of Oil theft

According to Onwuchekwe, Onyeoziri, Ibekwe, Madu, Igboanugo and Mmesoma Agbodike (2025) many people engage in crime due to the lack of legitimate opportunities such as access to education, employment, and financial resource. Crude oil theft in this oil-rich region has over the years been attributed to different factors ranging from corruption, poor governance, poverty, youth unemployment, lack of accountability of the petroleum ministry and weak security arrangement, which promote the opportunity for organized criminal activities targeted at oil theft (Assi, Amah & Edeke, 2016). Ajah, Onwuchekwe and Ugwu (2017) observed that an area's bustling economic activities combined with widespread poverty create a fertile ground for crime to thrive. Dakuku (2022) posited that oil theft in the Niger Delta is facilitated by the pragmatic cooperation between security forces, militia organizations, the local population, and oil company employees who use a variety of methods to steal oil from the multinational oil corporations that are stationed within the country. An inexplicable dimension is the embarrassing failure of security and defense forces in protecting oil pipelines and installations. After over 20 years of insurgent disruptions of oil and gas installations in the Niger Delta, it is curious that the Nigerian armed forces have not yet developed a specialized capacity to protect this vital sector. Instead, military officers and other security agencies deployed in the region are collaborating with other actors have become part of an endless racket of oil thieves and vandals. This evil collaboration between security agencies and other actors has enabled big ocean liners used to lift stolen crude oil to move freely within Nigeria's territorial waters and succeed without detection from all the security agencies and government officials working daily in these areas.

According to Kyari (2022) highly-placed Nigerians, including the religious, community leaders and government officials are allegedly involved in oil theft in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The author disclosed that stolen products are warehoused in churches and mosques with the knowledge of all members of the public where the incidents occurred, including the clerics. Poverty and youth unemployment are also major causes of oil theft in the Niger-Delta. The people of Niger-Delta have suffered years of neglect by the government and oil companies notwithstanding huge profits being made from oil exploration in the area.

Consequences of Oil theft

Availability of crude oil for any society is supposed to be a significant advantage for the socio-economic development of such society. However, the reverse seems to be the case with Nigeria. Available statistics within the period of this study revealed that between January and July, 2022, Nigeria lost an average of 437,000 barrels of crude oil daily, to criminals, which amounted to about 10 billion dollars within the seven months period (Yusuf, 2022). This has equally resulted in the shortfall of supply of crude oil below the quota of 1.71 million barrels per day given to Nigeria by the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The OPEC report as at August 2022 showed that Nigeria was only producing about 50% of OPEC's target for the country (Obiezu, 2022), and this has been attributed to the prevalence of oil theft in the oil producing communities in Nigeria. The consequences of such can be overwhelming for the nation, as scholars have noted that crude oil theft could have both socio-economic and political implications for oil dependent nations like Nigeria (Anyio, 2015; Soremi, 2020). Apart from the socio-economic consequences, scholars have equally noted that crude oil theft could also have serious environmental degradation, water pollution, as well as air pollution (Obenade & Amangabara, 2012; Soremi, 2020). This is notwithstanding the other socio-economic consequences including reduced revenue for the host oil-producing communities, increased unemployment, internal displacement of community members, and diversification of the economy (Ebegbulem, Ekpe & Adejomo, 2013), among other serious consequences. Oil theft also has huge security implications for the residents of the oil producing communities and Nigeria. Most times, the oil thieves engage the security agents in gun duel leading to loss of life on both the security agencies and the criminals involved in the act. Many lives have also been reportedly lost as a result of illegal and unprofessional exploration and mining of crude oil stolen by oil thieves. Also, properties worth millions of naira have been damaged and destroyed. Oil thieves have also caused severe environmental damage in the Niger-Delta Oil producing communities. People's farm land and produce have been destroyed on account of this menace. In fact, the consequences of oil theft are often overwhelming. For instance, some scholars noted that the socio-economic consequences of crude oil theft include contamination of water sources, destruction of aquatic and wildlife environment, destruction of farmlands, environmental pollution, loss of revenue for government and divestments by some International Oil Companies

(IOCs), with attendant job losses which compound the unemployment situation in Nigeria (Ogbeifun, 2014), among others. It is also pathetic and shameful that after 63 years of independence, successive governments in Nigeria has failed to build oil refineries in the country, and even the few ones in operation lacks maintenance, thereby leading to a situation where pipelines are laid in all nooks and crannies of the Niger Delta to foreign countries. Thus, this provides opportunity for criminals to vandalize these pipelines and illegally steal oil from them.

Solutions to Oil Theft

As a way of addressing the problem of oil theft in the Niger-Delta region, past and present governments in Nigeria have initiated and implemented various policies to combat this issue, including increased surveillance and security measures. For instance, the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Cooperation (NDDC) is a step by the Federal government of Nigeria to address the challenges of the oil sector in the Niger-Delta region. One of the most significant policies against crude oil theft in Nigeria is the establishment of a task force dedicated to combating illegal bunkering and pipeline vandalism. This task force is made up of various law enforcement agencies which have shown remarkable success in arresting many individuals involved in crude oil theft, despite its inadequacies. Additionally, the Nigerian government has increased penalties for crude oil theft to include imprisonment and fines, which serve as a deterrent to potential thieves. The inadequacies of various measures adopted in the past has presently informed the need for the government to collaborate with local communities in the fight against crude oil theft; which encourages local communities to report any suspicious activities related to crude oil theft. To buttress this point, recently, the Senate and Federal government of Nigeria endorsed a 48 billion naira surveillance contract with Tompolo, a former Niger-Delta militant, to secure the pipelines in the region against criminal elements (Agency Report, 2022). Edet (2015) advocated that the Nigerian government should initiate discussions and efforts to turn the fight against the theft of Nigeria's crude into an international issue. He argued that the world has been involved in many efforts to rid the world of insecurity, and that the global community can do it also in this instance. The U.N, E.U, A.U should provide platforms for this. Edet (2015) further argued that solution for oil theft should see that security

forces should get adequate allocation of resources, technology, equipment and logistics to make them more effective in the fight against crude oil theft.

5. Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on broken windows theory. The theory is suitable, relevant and best in giving a comprehensive understanding of the causes, consequences and solutions to oil theft in the Niger Delta.

BROKEN WINDOWS THEORY

The broken windows theory, defined in 1982 by social scientists James Wilson and George Kelling, drawing on earlier research by Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo, argued that no matter how rich or poor a neighborhood, one broken window would soon lead to many more windows being broken: “One unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing.” The theory equally posits that visible signs of disorder and misbehavior in an environment encourage further disorder and misbehavior, leading to serious other crimes.

Applying this theory to this study, there is no better way to describe what is happening in the Niger-Delta oil producing communities than to say that the state actors responsible for security of the area have created an environment for crimes and all manner of illegal activities to thrive there. There is wide scale corruption (broken window) among the actors which had further encouraged oil theft in the Niger Delta. Recently, there have been claims by Tantita Security Limited (a private security company engaged by the federal government of Nigeria), that military personnel are even involved in oil theft in the Niger Delta. This visible sign of criminality among military personnel who are under oath to serve and defend the integrity of Nigeria now made militants and other oil thieves in the region to synergize and carry out their criminal activities in large scale. Before now, oil was stolen in small scale through bunkering activities, but as it stands today, oil thieves now have the effrontery to penetrate Nigerian water bodies with mother ships to steal millions of barrels on daily basis. They do so because the state actors had opened the window and shown them the way and manner. One can only say that the windows and doors

of the Niger-Delta have been shattered by the state actors and major stakeholders in oil business and therefore things can never remain the same in the area.

6. Discussion of Key Issues

This study examined the persistent reoccurrence of oil theft in Nigeria focusing on its prevalence, causes, consequences and solutions. Despite the over reliance of Nigerian economy on crude oil, the Nigerian government has not been able to stem the age long tide of oil theft notwithstanding its debilitating effect on national economy. As posited by Dakuku (2022), oil theft in the Niger Delta is facilitated by the pragmatic cooperation between security forces, militia organizations, the local population, and oil company employees who use a variety of methods to steal oil from the multinational oil corporations that are stationed within the country. The broken windows theory applied in this study captures the above view by noting that state actors including the security agencies have created an environment for what is happening in the Niger-Delta oil producing where oil thieves steal crude oil without been caught.

There is also no gain saying the fact that the Nigerian economy and the citizens at large have over the years bore the deleterious consequences of oil theft in Nigeria. For instance, Nigeria has continued to be confronted with budget deficit due to shortages in oil revenue occasioned by oil theft. Amadi, Nte and Ogide (2022) noted that Nigeria between January and July, 2022 lost an average of 437,000 barrels of crude oil daily. This loss, he stated, resulted in the shortfall of supply of crude oil below the quota of 1.71 million barrels per day given to Nigeria by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The implication for this shortfall is that Nigeria has not been able to meet up with financial obligations to cater to provide essential services for the masses. In line with the assumption of the broken windows theory, the persistent oil theft in Niger-Delta is that it has further encouraged other serious crimes in the area. Oil theft no doubt fuel conflict, militancy, arms proliferation and drug abuse, etc in the Niger-Delta region. The effect of oil theft is on the people and their environment as oil thieves and their collaborators are allowed to thrive in the area. For a nation with a mono-economy like Nigeria, oil theft no doubt poses a real and serious threat to the survival of the people and their economic wellbeing.

Presently, Nigeria has the capacity to produce 2.5million barrels of crude oil daily. However, Nigeria produces is about 1 million barrels a day. This is so because when pipelines are damaged and shut down, production is adversely affected. The resultant loss of revenue is the foundation of threats to national security as the nation depends heavily on oil revenue for survival. Considering the devastating implications of oil theft in Nigeria, the leadership of the country must have to urgently fashion out sustainable means of stemming the tide. There should be multinational approach and concerted efforts to the problem. As Edet (2015) advocated, the Nigerian government should initiate discussions and efforts to turn the fight against the theft of Nigeria's crude into an international issue. He argued that the world has been involved in many efforts to rid the world of insecurity, and that the global community can do it also in this instance. Solution to oil theft should see that security forces should get adequate allocation of resources, technology, equipment and logistics to make them more effective in the fight against the menace. The broken window theory explain that if sanctions are accorded against small attempt to steal oil in the Niger-Delta, not only will the oil thieves be punished, the society will be able to feel a sense of closure, the society would also have conveyed a strong message of disapproval for criminality and would-be criminals would be consequently dissuaded. It is therefore imperative that in dealing with this rather entrenched criminality; Nigeria must up the game in the nature and quality of sanction to underscore the importance and devastating nature of crude oil theft in the Niger-Delta region. It is particularly disheartening that in spite of the severity of the crime and its impact on our national economy, the prescribed penalty for crude oil theft remains annoyingly low. Oil thieves together with their accomplices in the Niger-Delta oil producing communities should be properly identified and punished accordingly to serve as deterrence to anyone who may want to venture into the crime.

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine the prevalence, causes, consequences and possible solutions to oil theft in the Niger-Delta. A number of factors ranging from corruption, poor governance, youth unemployment, lack of accountability of the petroleum ministry, weak security arrangement among others are responsible for oil theft in the Niger Delta region. The consequences include the fact that oil theft in the Niger Delta Region is a crime against Nigerian

State; that it no doubt undermines development and engenders social disorder in the country. In fact, oil theft constitutes serious economic, security and environment challenges to the Nigerian State. This paper observes that the upsurge in oil theft has resulted in economic losses by the Nigerian State with attendant environmental degradation, insecurity in the Niger Delta region and threat to even national security. The paper further observed that not much has been achieved by the Nigerian state in curbing this menace due to a number of reasons including enthroned corruption in the country, high level of youth unemployment in the Niger-Delta, poverty, ineffective and corrupt security agents, and international oil thieves' collaborations, among others.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the issues raised and discussed in this paper, the following recommendations are made for possible implementation:

1. Effort should also be made to tackle poverty and youth unemployment in the Niger-Delta. Poverty and youth unemployment are also major causes of oil theft in the Niger-Delta. The people of Niger-Delta have suffered years of neglect by the government and oil companies notwithstanding huge profits being made from oil exploration in the area. The government and oil companies in Niger-Delta should come up with programmes that will tackle poverty and create jobs for the youths of Niger-Delta region.
2. There should be multinational approach in solving the problem of oil theft in Niger-Delta oil producing communities. This approach should create awareness about the consequences of crude oil theft. The campaign should involve synergy between the Nigerian state and International Agencies
3. Also, the systemic corruption in the oil sector in Nigeria must be put to an end. The Nigerian government over the years had excused a lot of bad behaviors in the oil sector. It is now time to deal decisively to the issue of endemic corruption involving security agents, government officials, international oil dealers, locals and major stakeholders in oil industry.

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