

**A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE TRIGGERS OF OIL-RELATED CONFLICTS IN RIVERS STATE,
NIGERIA, 2009 – 2021**

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Abstract

With 40 percent of Nigeria's crude oil production in Rivers State, the landscape of the State has been flooded with oil artifacts and pollution from oil exploration at the detriment of the people's sources of livelihood. Ironically, visible prosperity among the people in particular and development in general, that commensurate with the obvious endowments of the State is absent. It has been argued that the failure of the Nigerian state to enforce its environmental laws and the failure of Transnational Oil Corporations to eliminate oil and gas pollution is linked to three oil and environment related conflicts that have characterised Rivers State/Niger Delta, namely, Resource Curse Conflict; Local Resource Scarcity Conflict; and, Complex Conflict. This article seeks to evaluate the triggers of oil-related conflicts in Rivers State from 2009 – (September) 2021. The Marxian political economy approach was employed to guide data collection and analysis. Secondary data collected from and libraries, national/international agencies and Internet resources were analyzed to describe trends of oil-related conflicts in Rivers State. It was established that there are remote and immediate triggers that have fueled oil-related conflicts in Rivers State. Among others, extreme poverty, the widespread availability of small arms/other weapons and the award of PSCs to ex-militants have precipitated the on-going violence and insecurity in the State. It was observed that the poor partnership with local communities had negative effects on oil conflicts in the State. It is recommended that local communities should be involved in surveillance contracts – to help create jobs. There is also the need to design an orientation and skills acquisition programmes for host and impacted communities in Rivers State.

Key Words: Triggers, Oil-Related Conflicts, Rivers State.

Introduction

After the foremost oil well was struck in commercial quantities in 1956 at Oloibiri, Bayelsa State (Niger Delta) by Shell-D'Arcy Exploration Parties (now Shell Petroleum Development Company (Nigeria) Ltd., crude oil exploration has continued in the Niger Delta region till date (Niger Delta Development Commission, NDDC, 2006). Available Statistics reveal that there are over 11 crude oil producing companies in Nigeria presently, over 159 oilfields producing from over 1,481 oil wells (Ogon,

2017), all situated in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Consequently, Nigeria until recently has about 36 billion barrels of oil reserve, making her the world's 13th, OPEC's 5th and one of Africa's largest producer of crude oil. Beside oil, there is a proven gas reserve of over 180 trillion-cubic feet (tcf) in the Niger Delta which places Nigeria as the world 7th and Africa's largest gas reserve holder (Nwagbo, 2017). All of Nigeria's oil and gas deposits are located in the Niger Delta region of the country, and revenue

from the oil and gas sector constitutes over 95% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings. This means that the oil and gas endowment of the Niger Delta region literally sustains Nigeria as revenue generated from the exploration forms a very large percentage of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Statistics show that about 80% of the total revenue of the Nigerian state for capital (programmes/projects) development comes from the region (Francis, Lapin, & Rossiasco, 2011; United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, 2011; United Nations Environment Programme, UNEP, 2011).

As one of the core coastal oil producing states, more than 40% of Nigeria's output of crude oil and gas resources is produced in Rivers State. After the first discovery of crude oil in commercial scale at Oloibiri in Bayelsa State in 1956, successive discoveries of oil wells were made at Afam in 1957, and Ebubu and Bomu in 1958, all-in present-day Rivers State. The State has become firmly established as one of the major oil producing centres in the country, producing oil from 416 wells out of the 1,481 wells in the country. Accordingly, the State generates about a third of Nigeria's gross domestic product, gross domestic and national income and foreign exchange. Most of the transnational oil and gas companies in Nigeria and abroad are based either in Rivers State or have offices and branches in the State. These companies include, Shell Petroleum Development Company (Nigeria) Ltd., Chevron Nigeria Limited, Total-Elf-Fina, Nigeria Agip Oil Company, Saipem Nigeria Limited, Dawoo Nigeria Limited, and Nigeria Liquified Natural Gas Limited. The State also has two petroleum refineries (Rivers State Government, RSG, 2019).

It has been argued that the distribution (supply) chain security of Transnational Oil Corporations (TOCs) in Rivers State/Niger Delta region is inadequate as frequent leakages from oil pipes have degraded the environment affecting sustainable livelihood of local communities. Thus, local communities and the local economy in the State/region have borne (suffered) most of the social and environmental costs of over 60 years of oil exploration, and apparently receives very little of the gains/benefits from the natural resources in their locality. This is a significant trigger (contributor/setting) to recurring conflicts, sabotage of pipelines/installations and volatility (instability) in the State/region (UNEP, 2011; UNDP, 2011).

Like other oil-bearing states in the region, the landscape of Rivers State has been flooded with oil artifacts and pollution from oil exploration at the detriment of the people's sources of livelihood. Ironically, visible prosperity among the people in particular, and development in general, that commensurate with the obvious endowments of the State is absent (UNEP, 2011; Basse, 2012). As Allen (2014) posits, in practice, the failure of TOCs to comply with extant legal frameworks and their internal poor environmental policies have hindered the reduction of oil spills and gas flared in Rivers State/Niger Delta region. He argued that the failure of the Nigerian state to enforce its environmental laws and the failure of TOCs to eliminate oil and gas pollution is linked to three oil and environment related conflicts that have characterised Rivers State/Niger Delta, namely, Resource Curse Conflict (RCC) – how oil trade and wealth has underdeveloped indigenous population in many aspects, for example, degradation of

land and ecosystems services that has been the bedrock of the local economy; Local Resource Scarcity Conflict (LRSC) – the loss of land which is the main tool of production in Rivers State/Niger Delta; and, Complex Conflict (CC) – which combines the features of RCC and LRSC including the political, social, economic perspectives of those involved. The objective of this article is therefore to evaluate the triggers of oil-related conflicts in Rivers State from 2009 – (September) 2021.

Methodology

Since the paper is historical in nature with social and economic implications, data were derived mainly from secondary sources to reflect past development. Accordingly, secondary sources here include government publications, reports by national and international organizations; textbooks, journals, magazines, newspapers and internet resources. These were collected from libraries (also from e-libraries) and through the Internet. The Content Analysis method was used to analyze the contents of the data collected in order to identify recurring trends and how those trends lead to discernible patterns of oil-related conflicts in Rivers State. The paper is essentially historical, descriptive and analytical, focusing on the relationship between past and present triggers of oil-related conflicts in Rivers State from 2009 – (September) 2021.

Study Area

The study area for this article is Rivers State in Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Rivers State is one of the leading coastal crude oil-producing States of Nigeria. It is one of the three Core Oil Producing Areas (COPAs) of Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers (Azaiki, 2003; Etekepe, 2007). It is one of the present

nine oil producing States of Nigeria, namely: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers (Ekpo, 2004; NDDC, 2006). The state capital is Port Harcourt City and it has 23 Local Government Areas (LGAs) viz. Abua/Odual, Ahoada East, Ahoada West, Akuku Toru, Andoni, Asari-Toru, Bonny, Degema, Emohua, Eleme, Etche, Gokana, Ikwerre, Khana, Obia/Akpor, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Ogu/Bolo, Okrika, Omumma, Opobo/Nkoro, Oyigbo, Port-Harcourt, Tai (Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN, 1999). Rivers state contains mangrove swamps, tropical rainforest, and many rivers (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013).

Rivers State is the sixth-largest geographic area in Nigeria with an area of 8,436 square miles (21,850 square km) and a population of 5,185,400 according to 2006 Census data. The state has an indigenously diverse population with major riverine and upland divisions with an abundant biological diversity heritage. The ethnic groups in Rivers State are diverse and include Abua, Ekpeye, Eleme, Etche, Gokana, Ibani (Bonny and Opobo), Ikwerre, Kalahari, Khana, Ndoni, Odual, Ogba, Okrika (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013; Niger Delta Budget Monitoring Group, NDEBUMOG, 2018; Rivers State Government, RSG, 2019).

Fishing and farming are the primary occupations of Rivers State. Plantains, bananas, cassava, oil palms, coconuts, rubber trees, raffia, and citrus fruits are grown. Large deposits of crude oil and natural gas in the Niger River delta are the State's major mineral resources. Major oil terminals exist offshore from Brass and Bonny, and petroleum refineries have been established at Port Harcourt and nearby Alesa-Eleme. Port Harcourt, the state capital and one of the nation's largest ports, is on the southern terminus of the eastern

branch of the Nigerian Railway's main line (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013). Figure 1 below is a map of Rivers State showing the

23 (twenty-three) LGAs and their headquarters.

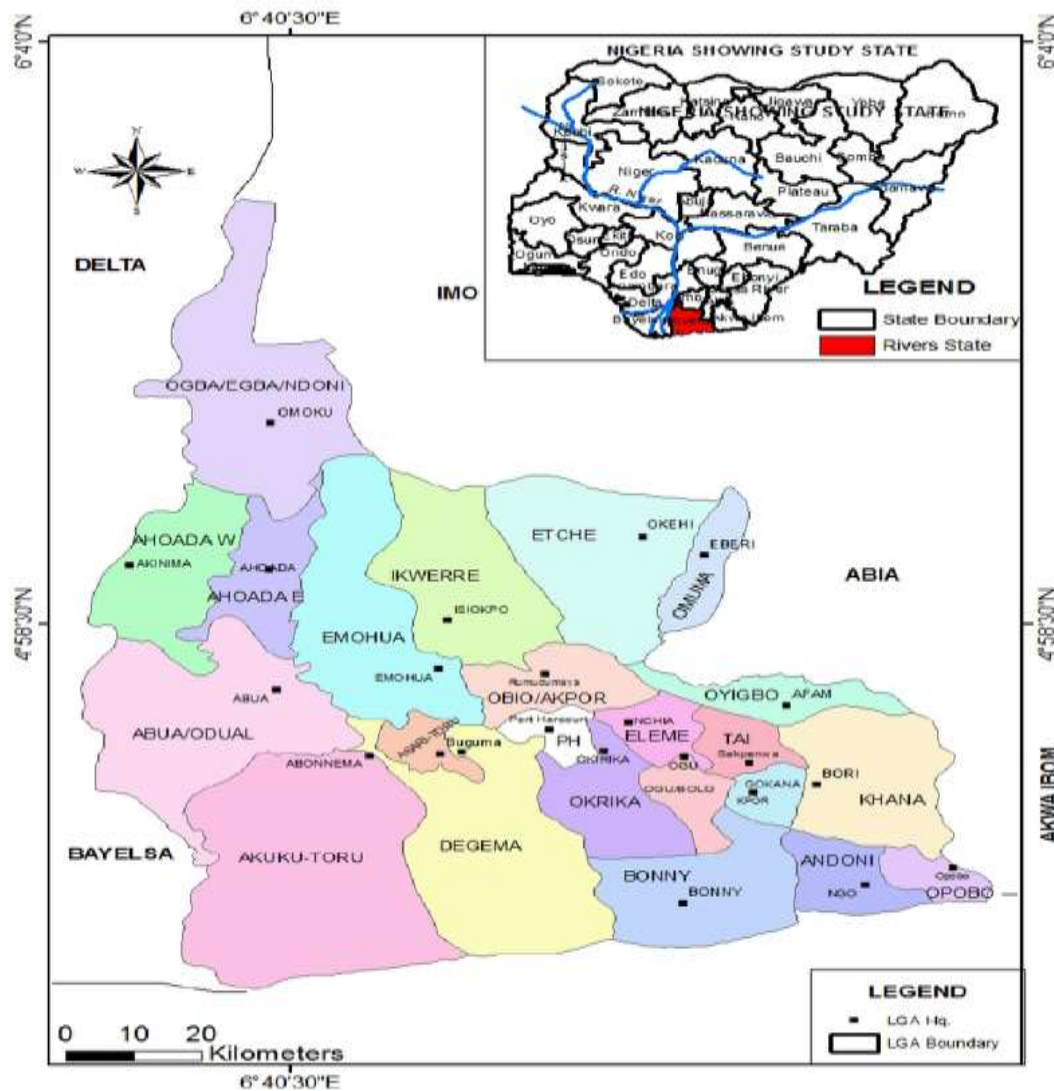


Figure 1: Map of Rivers State Showing Local Government Areas and Headquarters

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Rivers-State-Showing-Local-Government-Areas-and-Headquarters_fig1_288986350 [accessed 10 Jun, 2021]

Theoretical Paradigm and Conceptual Clarification

Theoretical Paradigm

To historically understand the triggers of oil induced conflicts in Rivers State, this article adopts the Marxian political economy as its theoretical framework. This is because an inquiry of

this nature requires a theoretical paradigm that can employ a historical approach to link the past and present in a scientific manner. It has to be one that encapsulates the nature and essence of political and

socio-economic realities thereby satisfactorily explaining the nature of relationship between the triggers and the conflicts.

Marxian political economy or what is also known as Historical Materialism evolved mainly from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Ekekwe, 2009). Basically, the Marxian political economy shows how the ownership of the means of production influences historical processes (Weingast & Wittman, 2008; Fadakinte, 2014). This suggests that materialistic-based interpretations are given to historical developments vis-à-vis class relations and conflicts in society. Class was used by Marx and Engels to refer to a group of individuals in the historical process of society who share similar economic and social status.

The relevance of this approach to social inquiries is buttressed by Okowa (1996). An understanding of Marxian political economy is in relations of a social science and historical approach to the problems of man in society. Ekekwe (2009) corroborated this position when he argued that, Marxian political economy as a science of human history does not only focus on the past. Rather, history is also in the present and future. This is in realisation of the general acceptance that the past is in the present, just as the present is pregnant with the future. This paradigm therefore helps us to make the linkages between the past, present and future, and this is achieved by analysing the present from its historical or past antecedents. Considering its usefulness in the explanation of social change, it helps us to see how we can condition our future towards desirable ends because human beings that work in consonance with nature in the bid to meet their existential needs involve themselves, consciously or inadvertently, with the

present actions that form future history. This means that history is not only concerned with a record of past events, but also a human development process which has past, present and future dimensions (Ekekwe, 2009).

As Ake (1981) noted, the distinctive features of Marxian political economy method of analysis are that this approach gives primacy to economic factors in explaining social life; it takes a systematic account of the interrelationship and interactions between the different social systems (political, economic, social and belief systems in society); it lays emphasis on the dynamic character of reality with the key assumption that social relationships and political processes are defined and driven by economic factors; and, it is historical in nature. Thus, in so far as there is economic inequality in a society, that society cannot have political democracy because political power has the inherent tendency of polarising around economic power. Therefore, a society where a high degree of economic inequality exists has a greater inclination of becoming repressive because of the inevitable necessity to constrain the unavoidable demand of the dominated class for economic redistributions.

Conflict

It is given that any social interaction of individuals or groups with dissimilar interests, goals and purposes will invariably lead to conflict as it will be almost impossible to meet the expectations and aspirations of all parties in all circumstances. Thus, every human group or society with a population of diverse interests has been through one form of conflict or another and will continue to contend with conflicting issues in its affairs. Generally speaking, conflict involves the failure of parties to arrive at commonly

satisfactory agreements. This relates to all categories of conflicts that are between persons (individuals), in families, within communities or those between ethnic groups/organizations and the state (Mark & Snyder, 1971; Buckley-Zistel, 2008; Adegbonmire, 2015).

Legally, Law in human society stipulates that there is a necessity for the state to demand obedience while citizens have a duty (an obligation) to obey. But this has not always been the case in reality. In this respect, a causative element to conflict might be linked to the innate nature of people and animals which is commonly referred to as the flight or fight predispositions. People or animals display these propensities when confronted with threat or anything that impends their survival. The flight propensity is typically accompanied by some sort of aggressive behaviours which leads to a conflict with the perceived invader (Burton, 1998).

Conflict is, therefore, a typical element of group or societal life. Generally, disagreements are not instigated by 'bad' persons who want to be 'troublesome'. Rather, in most cases, they occur because individuals with respectable intents share different views on how best to achieve common goals; on how to prioritize goals; and fundamentally, perceived threats to their resources, productivity, livelihood and dignity (Adegbonmire, 2015).

For this reason, Folger *et al* (1997) see conflict as an interface of codependent people who observe incompatible interests and intrusion from each party in realising such interests. Also, Pruitt *et al* (2004) consider conflict as a seeming divergence of goals or interest, or a concern that each party's present ambitions cannot be attained concurrently with others. As Wall (1985) observed, conflict can be a process

where two or more persons or groups (parties) try to upset each other's interests. Accordingly, interdependence, variances in goals, and divergent perceptions are three issues that have been identified that can incite or create conflict. Essentially, conflict settings are usually bargaining strategies by contending parties. The various definitions of conflict illustrate that conflict is not only based on the context (the setting) but it is also multicausal and multidimensional in reality (Wall, 1985; Folger *et al*, 1997; Pruitt *et al*, 2004; Adegbonmire, 2015).

Accordingly, Anderton and Carter (2011) identified six types of conflicts in human societies namely: Human Conflict – conflicts caused by individual human differences; Ethnic Conflict – conflicts between different ethnic groups usually residing within the same territory; Religious Conflict – conflicts between people of divergent religious outlook; Resource Conflict – conflicts linked to natural resources (the reluctance of the State to address the socio-economic and other needs of affected local communities by the extraction of these resources and destruction of the environment can cause resource conflict – which is accompanied by feelings of inequality and injustice, suspicion, distrust, rage and disloyalty); Political Conflict – conflicts emanating from political rival groups or parties; Civil Conflict – conflicts between the State and a secessionists region or group as in the case of the Nigerian Civil War.

From the foregoing, generally, the political economy of the basis (root causes) or triggers of conflicts includes socio-economic inequalities, religious and ethnic diversity, political differences and poverty (Anderton & Carter, 2011; Adegbonmire, 2015). Relatedly, the broad triggers of oil-related conflicts in Rivers State/ Niger Delta

region are economic (extreme poverty), political (alienation) and social (survival instinct) factors. These three factors are usually interdependent and re-enforcing in any given oil induced conflict in the State/region.

Triggers of Oil-Related Conflicts In Rivers State

From 2009 – (September) 2021

Rivers State (Port Harcourt) - the oil capital of Nigeria - as it is commonly referred to because of its enormous oil resources witnessed several oil-related or induced conflicts since the return of civil rule in the country in 1999. Even with the mopping of small arms and other weapons through the amnesty programmes for repentant militants in 2008 and 2009 by the Rivers State Government and Federal Government of Nigeria respectively, armed conflicts often induced by oil has persisted in Rivers State and beyond. Broadly, the triggers of these oil induced/related conflicts from the inception of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, especially from 2009 – (September) 2021 can be summarised under eight overlapping headings, namely: the struggle for the control of oil bunkering territory/routes by armed groups; the use of armed youth groups by oil theft syndicates/conglomerates; the manipulation of youth groups by state actors and politicians; the pervading culture of impunity in the country; the prevalent availability of small arms and other related weapons; widespread poverty, youth unemployment and underdevelopment; traditional leadership tussles due to payments made by Transnational Oil Corporations (TOCs) to host communities; and, the award of pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) to ex-militants by government agencies and TOCs (Human

Rights Watch, HRW, 2005; Dijkema, 2019; Stakeholder Democracy Network, SDN 2019; Njoku *et al* 2020).

Following the loss of land as the principal means of production and the damage to the environment (ecosystem services) which is the major source of livelihood of the people and the bedrock of the local economy due to oil exploration by TOCs, coupled with the extreme number of unemployed persons in Rivers State and other oil producing Niger Delta states, cases of pipeline vandalism and oil theft for sale/economic purposes (locally called 'bunkery') are as old as the environmental degradation caused by the oil industry in the region. Initially, the scale and volume of oil theft by perpetrators of 'bunkery' is quite small and mainly targeted at finished (refined) products basically petrol and kerosene, and sometimes diesel which are readily sold at cheaper rates below the government approved pump prices at the local markets (referred to as 'black market'). Because of the high risks involved in breaking/vandalizing pipelines containing refined products which are highly inflammable, persons involved in this mainly local oil business are quite few and new entrants are also in trickles as this business is often seen as a deadly last resort to survival.

However, by the late 1990s, persons with oil industry knowledge (both national and foreign) in terms of refining crude oil (artisanal refinery) and illegal oil-export routes/channels embraced the local 'bunkery' business and organized and enlarge it to become an attractive international venture. As this business grew in size and volume, the control over oil bunkering territories and routes became the trigger of conflict of interests between and among principal perpetrators. By late

2003, two major rival armed groups, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Alhaji Asari Dokubo and the Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) led by Ateke Tom emerged in Rivers State. The NDPVF and the NDV comprising mainly of Ijaw youths with multiple affiliate cult groups on both sides, engaged in a violent conflict over the control of illegal oil bunkering business in Rivers State (HRW, 2005; United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, 2006).

The violent conflict between the NDPVF and the NDV (two Ijaw groups) over the control of illegal oil wealth and government attention in Rivers State was complicated and compounded by rival clashes between affiliate cult/armed youth groups on both sides who are used by transnational conglomerates in the illegal oil bunkering business. Often, these international oil syndicates employ the services of various armed youth groups as security guards and these armed youth groups usually maintain business/affiliate loyalty to either the NDPVF or the NDV. Thus, the conflict between the NDPVF and the NDV had multiplier effect throughout the chain of the oil bunkering business, and especially, by arming and triggering local cult/gang related conflicts in Rivers State until the 2009 Federal Government of Nigeria amnesty programme.

Another related trigger of oil conflict in Rivers State since the beginning of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria is the manipulation of youth groups by state actors and politicians in the State. Usually, the oil bunkering business and the ruling class in the State at any given time are mutually inter-connected and re-enforcing. Partly because the same set of armed groups controls both the oil bunkering business and local militia groups, the faction

of the ruling class in the State often work with leaders of militant groups particularly during elections in exchange for state protection. It has been noted that beyond violently suppressing the political opponents of their principals, leaders of militant groups so favoured by state actors usually extend their attacks to perceived rival groups in the oil bunkering business (HRW, 2005).

The perceived prevailing trend of impunity that has characterized Nigeria's Fourth Republic has aggravated the level of militancy in Rivers State and in the country in general. The rising spate of youth militancy in Rivers State can be attributed partly to the lucrative business of political thuggery and the culture of election violence in the country generally and partly to the weakness of law enforcement in Nigeria. Often, politicians use armed groups to intimidate their opponents and secure election victories. Once their principals are in power, during off-election periods, most of the members of these armed groups have been known to engaged in illegal oil bunkering business. The oil related conflicts due to incessant struggles over the control of territories/routes these by militant groups are quite common in Rivers State since the beginning of democracy in 1999 in Nigeria (HRW, 2005; UNDP, 2006 and 2018).

Although the Rivers State Government (RSG) enacted a law in June, 2004, proscribing armed and militant groups in the State, oil conflicts between and among militant groups, especially over the control of oil pipelines are still on-going exacerbating the insecurity in the State. The RSG often responds to these conflicts between militant groups mainly by imposing curfew in affected local government areas or throughout the State. The latest of these measures was the dusk

to dawn curfew by the RSG over the State from May 1 – July 6, 2021. With weak and compromising law enforcement and security agencies in the country, there have been no tangible arrests and prosecutions of perpetrators of these conflicts and general insecurity in the State, thereby, lending credence to the pervading notion of impunity in the country. This notion has also instigated the formation of new armed groups under the pretense of protecting their community from criminal tendencies.

The recurring violent conflicts and fragile security in Rivers State and indeed, in Nigeria, can be traced largely to the extensive availability of sophisticated weapons to militant groups in the State. In spite of the several laws and initiatives by the Federal and Rivers State Governments to curtail the spread of fire arms in the country and in the State respectively, there seems to be more influx of sophisticated arms and weapons to armed groups that usually accord them superior firing power over the Nigeria Police Force. While some of the weapons in Nigeria are recycled (secondhand) from conflicts in neighboring African countries or stolen from security agencies or sold by security operatives, most however, are provided by the sponsors of armed groups in the country. Without doubt, the extensive availability of these sophisticated tools of threat and violence in the hands of militant groups in Rivers State and in Nigeria in general is a pointer to the level of impunity in the country and a critical contributory factor to oil conflicts. The illegal oil bunkering business has often provided both substantial finance and avenues through which most of these weapons come into Rivers State (HRW, 2005; SDN, 2019).

Another very indispensable trigger of oil-related conflict in Rivers State is the very

high rate of unemployment, widespread poverty and general underdevelopment in the State and beyond. Generally, the extreme poverty and very high number of unemployed persons in the Niger Delta vis-a-vis the oil wealth of the region is quite disturbing. The poverty level in the region is quite below the poverty line of the United Nations. It can be argued that, without the persistent of this factor, violence and oil related conflicts will neither thrive nor escalate. Since the re-emergence of democracy in Nigeria in 1999, the teeming unemployed youths in Rivers State have been manipulated by both politicians and oil bunkering business people. Without this group, the extensive availability of sophisticated weapons will remain useless or lie fallow. It is actually this group that is mainly used to activate the weapons, foment and escalate conflicts. The oil conflicts become the source of illegal (oil) revenues to pay fighters, buy more weapons and spread the area of influence of armed groups and sponsors. Thus, the human foundation of the emergence of militant groups in Nigeria's Fourth Republic in Rivers State was largely made possible by this underlying factor. For instance, majority of the fighters in the numerous militant groups were recruited from teeming and willing unemployed persons – most of who graduates with no means of livelihood (HRW, 2005; UNDP, 2006 & 2018).

A similar oil-related conflict is the Traditional leadership tussles due to payments made by TOCs to host communities. By law, before commencing oil exploration, TOCs are required to make appropriate payments to both the Federal government of Nigeria (FGN) and the host communities who owned the sites of oil drilling and production. Usually, the TOCs make these payments to host communities

through their political organograms (traditional leadership hierarchy based on their custom). This procedure has triggered intra-communal conflicts by channelling large sums of money to identified traditional leaders who failed to, in turn, to channel (share) the money to benefit all members of the community (HRW, 2005).

Thus, the position of traditional representative(s) of a host community or communities became quite lucrative and very competitive because of the TOCs payments that are funnelled through them to their respective host community or communities. The struggles to occupy these positions by traditional leaders in the host communities invariably led to the formation of armed groups or the enlistment of existing armed groups to further their course. Usually, victors in these traditional leadership tussles emerge through the use of force, and naturally, benefits from the TOCs payments gets mainly to participants and their supporters. However, this situation has caused those left out in the payments made by the TOCs (who are mostly youth) to compete with the traditional leadership and also to take some actions/measures to hinder the operations of TOCs in their domain. In reaction, TOCs are usually compelled to make concessionary payments to these (aggrieved) youth groups in order to have access to their facilities as well as for the protection of their business interests in the communities. Despite this conflict of interests between the traditional leadership and some youth groups in host communities, some staff of TOCs who are responsible for making payments to host communities still funnel/channel this money to the traditional leaders because of their personal interest in the form of kick-backs (bribes). This alleged corruption on

the part of staff of TOCs has often compounded and complicated these conflicts in host communities.

As indicated above, the return of civil rule in Nigeria in 1999 was accompanied with the emergence and rise in the number of militant groups across the Niger Delta region due to some varied and interdependent factors such as the struggle for the control of oil bunkering territory/routes by armed groups; the use of armed youth groups by oil theft syndicates/conglomerates; the manipulation of youth groups by state actors and politicians; the pervading culture of impunity in the country; the prevalent availability of small arms and other related weapons; widespread poverty, youth unemployment and underdevelopment; traditional leadership tussles due to payments made by TOCs to host communities. All of these factors both singularly and collectively led to a central target – the destruction of oil pipelines/installations of TOCs in the region by the various militant groups. This actions by armed groups on oil facilities especially oil pipelines became very lucrative and increased both in scope and intensity.

The destruction of oil pipelines led to crude oil theft and sale on industrial and international scale. The profits from this illegal oil revenue was mainly used to fund and boost these militant attacks in terms of paying fighters, recruiting more fighters, acquiring more sophisticated weapons to confront Nigerian security agencies. The international dimension of these militant attacks was made possible by the ready markets for Nigeria's crude oil internationally and the active participation of illegal international arms cartels and syndicates who had unhindered access to supply arms either in return for crude oil or

illegal oil money. On their part, militant groups involved in these pipeline attacks and oil crimes often justify their actions on the grounds of environmental degradation from oil exploration by TOCs and the associated neglect of the region by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). They argued that the operations of TOCs have destroyed the ecosystems services (farmlands and mangrove swamps) which are primary sources of the people's livelihood that also supports the local economy. To these armed groups, the inaction of the FGN to effectively address the environmental and developmental problems amounts to the alienation of the people of the region from the natural resources in their land.

As a result of these (nationally and internationally) coordinated attacks on pipelines and oil theft on an industrial scale by several militant groups in the Niger Delta, both TOCs and the FGN suffered colossal loss in terms of facilities and revenues. Particularly, as the major shareholder in the TOCs that are affected and being an oil dependent nation, the revenues and thus the economy of Nigeria were as greatly affected. The fall in oil earning which was the major source of revenue for the country caused the Nigerian government (federal, state and local governments) unable to fund most its capital programmes/projects especially between 2006 and 2009? By June, 2009, the FGN initiated an amnesty deal with militant groups in the region. The amnesty was extended to the armed groups to surrender their arms in exchange for educational and other livelihood support for them. A reasonably number of small arms and light weapons were mopped and about 26,000 fighters mainly youths embraced the amnesty. Essentially, the 2009 FGN amnesty

deal for militant groups in the Niger Delta had two components involving the fighters and the leaders. While the fighters were rehabilitated based on their field of educational competence or inclination, the identified major leaders of the militant groups were offered pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs).

Accordingly, between 2012 and 2014 the FGN awarded several PSCs to leaders of ex-militants both individually and to their private companies. This marked the official beginning of privatising pipeline surveillance (security) in Nigeria. In response to some criticisms, the FGN rationalised its amnesty deal involving the award of PSCs to ex-militant leaders on national interests (Adibe, et al, 2018).

Since its inception in 2012, several PSCs have been awarded by government agencies and TOCs to old and new private security firms owned by ex-militant leaders in the region. Ironically, these PSCs have become a major trigger of conflict in oil bearing communities in Rivers State and in the region generally. Additionally, in spite of existing numerous PSCs, pipeline vandalism and oil theft have continued and even increased in some cases exceeding recorded figures before the commencement of PSCs regime. Conflicts related to PSCs are mainly between ex-militants involving holders of PSCs and those left out in the contracts. The target of this conflict of interests is centred on the destruction of oil pipelines by ex-militant non-beneficiaries of PSCs and other criminal elements who have engaged in the conflicts as oil thieves. Through these conflicts, the nation and indeed, the host communities have been experiencing double tragedies. The nation and their business partners – the TOCs – after making huge payments to ex-militants for pipeline security still incur heavy loss of revenue and

facilities through pipeline ruptures. For host communities, apart from their already polluted environment, still experience the negative consequences of conflicts between ex-militants over benefits (PSCs) traversing their communities from which they are officially side-lined (Stakeholder Democracy Network, SDN, 2019).

The foregoing has informed several stakeholders in the region to call for community security of oil pipelines in place

of the existing PSCs to ex-militants which has turned out to be counter-productive. A major stakeholder clamouring for this paradigm shift is the Host Communities – Producing Oil and Gas (HOSCON) – a grassroots-umbrella body comprising oil bearing communities in Nigeria. Table 1 below is a summary of the triggers of oil-related conflicts in Rivers State from 2009 – (September) 2021.

Table 4.1: Triggers of oil-related conflicts in Rivers State from 2009 – 2021

S/NO	Triggers	Nature/Factors
1.	Struggle for the control of oil bunkering territory/routes by armed groups	Illegal
2.	Use of armed youth groups by oil theft syndicates/conglomerates	Illegal and Transnational
3.	Manipulation of youth groups by state actors and politicians	Political
4.	Pervading culture of impunity in the country	Political
5.	Prevalent availability of small arms and other related weapons	Illegal
6.	Widespread poverty, youth unemployment and underdevelopment;	Socio-economic and Political
7.	Traditional leadership tussles due to payments made by Transnational Oil Corporations (TOCs) to host communities	Corruption
8.	Award of pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) to ex-militants by government agencies and TOCs	Political and socio-economic

Source: Compiled by the Researcher

From the triggers listed above, the factors which actually precipitate or constitute the immediate triggers of oil conflicts from 2009 – 2021 include the prevalent availability of small arms and other related weapons; the struggle for the control of oil bunkering territory/routes by armed groups; the use of armed youth groups by oil theft syndicates/conglomerates; and the existing system of awarding pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) to ex-militants by government agencies and TOCs. These

factors are considered the immediate triggers because they provide the instruments of the war in terms of equipment and personnel for belligerents and they are mutually intertwined and reinforcing factors.

For instance, the rampant availability of small arms and other related weapons led to the emergence or formation of multiple armed groups in Rivers State – which resulted in the armed struggle for the control of oil bunkering territory/routes by armed groups – because armed youth

groups are being used by oil bunkering theft syndicates/conglomerates.

The remote triggers or background factors of oil-related conflicts in Rivers State during the same period under review include widespread poverty, youth unemployment and underdevelopment; the manipulation of youth groups by state actors and politicians; the pervading culture of impunity in the country; traditional leadership tussles due to payments made by TOCs to host communities. Though these factors are considered as remote triggers, they, in fact, actually set the tone and the arena for virtually all the oil-related conflicts in Rivers State since the beginning of Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Conclusion

The central theme of this article revolves around the triggers (remote and immediate) of oil induced conflicts in Rivers State from 2009 – (September) 2021. The conflicts caused by these triggers have led to unnecessary loss of lives and property, undermined government security agencies and caused general insecurity in the State. On the whole, the conclusion reached is that, the poor partnership with local communities in Nigeria's oil industry instigated and re-enforced both the remote and immediate triggers in Rivers State; and these triggers are largely (though unconventional) vocal reactions to government policy and activities of TOCs in the Niger Delta region. Meanwhile, the conflicts precipitated by these triggers have created general insecurity and worsened the distortion of the environment in Rivers State.

Recommendations

In view of the above identified remote and immediate triggers of oil-related conflicts in Rivers State, the

following recommendations are made to help contain the on-going conflicts/insecurity in the State and bring succor to host and impacted communities. First, to create immediate job/livelihood opportunities for the teeming unemployed persons who are considerable caused by loss of land and destruction of ecosystems services that had traditionally supported the local economy, the FGN and TOCs should review existing pipeline surveillance contracts and accommodate host and impacted communities appropriately. Second, there is also the need to design an orientation or re-orientation and skills acquisition programmes for host and impacted communities in Rivers State. The main objective of these programmes should be partly to enlighten local communities about the dangers involved in illegal oil bunkering, and partly to create alternative livelihood skills and ventures for the people since apparently, the oil pipeline surveillance contracts cannot absorb all unemployed persons in the communities. Finally, the FGN should ensure the rule of law for both for persons and corporate entities throughout the country. The present practice of protecting corporations, especially TOCs, and controlling and suppressing people in a democratic dispensation do not reflect the primary purpose of government – which is to ensure the security and welfare of its citizens. Judicious enforcement of the rule of law will eliminate acts and consequences of the prevailing culture of impunity in the country.

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