

“A Sea of Troubles”: Oil Theft, Crude Economy and the Business of Organised Energy Crime in the Gulf of Guinea

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Abstract

The menace of oil theft in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) has evolved into a ‘syndicated enterprise’ which mirrors underlying economic principles of formal business operations. The involvement of organised crime groups in primordial resource appropriation has altered dramatically the region’s energy landscape, accelerating a transition from an economy of greed to an economy of crime, underpinned by organised socio-economic structures which exploit the fragility of a manifestly troubled Gulf. The objective of this study flows from a resurgence in oil theft in the Niger Delta region, threatening energy-dependent economies like Nigeria and the wider Gulf of Guinea. The study submits that oil theft is an enterprise crime, and the resurgence of criminality particularly in Nigeria is a corollary of the entrenchment of organised crime in the region’s energy landscape and the availability of a flourishing crime environment in the Gulf of Guinea. The study concludes that oil theft poses a significant and growing threat to national and regional security, and combating criminality requires a cocktail of measures anchored on a

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robust appreciation of the nature of organised crime and the context within which it is nourished in the region.

Keywords: Enterprise crime, oil theft, Gulf of Guinea, organised crime, black market.

Introduction

The title of this study is partly an adaptation of Dona Leon's 2009 "A Sea of Troubles" which centres on the insularity of a virtual island people on the fringe of the Venice lagoon, whose abode got enmeshed in the murder of two fishermen and resultant rigorous investigation by a Venetian police detective, Guido Brunetti. Like the troubled Venice's sea, the Gulf of Guinea (GoG), a 6,000-kilometre shoreline stretching from Senegal in the northwestern part of Africa to Angola on its southern-most fringes (Council of EU, 2012), is a huge crime scene, albeit of a different characterisation, and offers a wider, complex spatial crime context. While Leon's exploration may have circled around a murder case, this present undertaking, in reference to crude oil theft and obvious complicity of organised criminals, is a journey in a much more intricate crime scene, a study in "why nations fail", to borrow Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson caption of their famous 529-page book, and a good case of "theft of the nation", in reference to Donald Cressey's copiously-cited literature on organised crime. So, like the Venice lagoon, the GoG offers an insight into the death of a people, but also of a region. To buttress this point, over a hundred people were killed at Abacheke Kpofire illegal bunkering site at the oil-rich Egbema community in Imo State, Nigeria in the last week of April this year (Uzoma, 2022) with attendant significant loss to the environment, the ecosystem and economic livelihoods of the people.

Moving away from that, the GoG's geopolitical and economic attribute-a global energy-maritime corridor- enhances criminogenic tendencies and stimulates the convergence of energy-maritime criminalities of distinct characteristics as much as it promotes her global outlook. While renewed rapprochement of the great powers in the region is perceived in some quarters as a decoy by the extraterritorial actors to protect their energy-maritime security interests (Adesanya, 2014), others view it as complicit in the

persistence of criminal activities in the region. The geopolitical and economic realities of the region, its energy-maritime endowments, as well as the great powers' rapprochement, have therefore, combined to create a region in the image of diverse actors and interests (Adesanya, 2018), both legal and illegal. In particular, continuous exploration of the region's energy resources combined with a troubled socio-political and economic environment have created different shades of informal and illegal entrepreneurs and structures whose operations form an intricate mix of insecurity and nourish a 'convergence crime' corridor on the Atlantic shores of West and Central Africa.

The menace of crude oil theft in particular has developed into a well-organised business with the involvement of organised crime groups in the region's energy landscape, as several states and non-state actors converge on the corridor to exploit its vulnerabilities through unregulated resource appropriation, creating an economy of racket and a crude enterprise, eroding collective security mechanisms in the process, and unleashing significant devastation on the regional and global energy market. In comparison to the latter years of President Jonathan's Presidency, the last few years of President Muhammad Buhari's administration in Nigeria may have witnessed a massive reduction in the wave of criminality as the country's oil output exceeded 2 million barrels p/d in 2019 (Statista, 2022), in direct response to anti-maritime piracy and blue economy development initiatives of the government. However, there has been a resurgence in criminality since January 2021 (PIND, 2021), resulting in a massive decline in the country's daily crude oil production to about 1.35 million barrels in the month of April 2022. Several theories may be deduced as explanatory factors for the sudden surge. In an election year where the major political parties in Nigeria are conducting their primaries, illicit economic activities become ready sources of financing for electioneering campaigns. In this regard, oil theft finds ready justification in the political economy of crime. The greed theory may still hold some potency, especially in crime scenes of uncoordinated crude operations. But what could justifiably explain the humongous volume of oil being stolen in the wetlands of Nigeria on a daily basis? This study advances the position that the infiltration of the Gulf's energy industry by organised crime groups with latent entrepreneurial intent

is a game-changer, and manifestly justifies a well-coordinated socio-economic infrastructure underpinning the resurgence of what is clearly an international criminal syndicate. The involvement of organised criminal entrepreneurs is complicit in the resurgence of oil theft in the Niger Delta.

As recently as the 25th of March this year, the Federal Government of Nigeria disclosed that about \$3.27 billion worth of oil had been lost to vandalism and theft in the past 14 months (Esidesa, 2022). The *Punch Newspaper*, quoting Tony Elumelu, the Chairman of Heirs Oil and Gas, points out that Nigeria lost about \$4 billion (about N1.68 trillion) to crude oil theft within 9 months in 2021, representing about 10% of the country's foreign reserves (*Punch Newspaper*, 2022). A 2019 report by the Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI) affirmed that Nigeria lost about \$38.5 billion to crude theft between 2009 and 2018 (*Punch Newspaper*, 2022). The same noted that the country lost 300,000 barrels of crude oil per day to oil theft, vandalism and other related criminal vices (*Punch Newspaper*, 2022), almost double the daily crude oil production of Ghana which stood at 174,000/p as of October 2021 (Statista, 2021).

Meanwhile, the significance of the GoG *vis-à-vis* its energy potential is highlighted by the continuously accelerated convergence of global state and non-state actors in the region, who are partly driven by geopolitics and energy security considerations. Despite Covid-19 devastation and attendant contraction in global commercial relations, this trend is unlikely to abate with huge offshore hydrocarbon deposits being discovered particularly in Nigeria and Ghana and increasing demand for energy by China and India. The region houses three-quarters of around 65 billion barrels of sub-Saharan Africa oil reserves, equivalent to around 5% of the world total. These are held in two countries, Nigeria and Angola (IEA, 2014).

Basically, this study is an interrogation of the menace of crude oil theft - a network of operations which has developed into a global, well-organised and networked criminal economy. In achieving its objective, the paper is divided into nine sections. Following this introduction is a conceptual analysis of organised crime, an examination of the context of crime in the GoG, nature of the enterprise, impact and policy options for combating organised energy enterprise crime in the GoG, and the conclusion.

Conceptualising Organised Crime as an Enterprise

The concept and practice of organised crime are the subjects of debate among scholars. According to Smith (1980), the workings of organised crime are almost usually guided by entrepreneurship. In this regard, entrepreneurship is seen as “an ongoing economic operation whose business is to provide illegal goods and services” (Kenney & Finkenauer, 1995:22). Such entrepreneurship is ensured and sustained by the inability of a legitimate marketplace to satisfy the needs of potential customers (Smith, 1980). This suggests that the marketplace is a connection point for both legal and illegal businesses and behaviour. Organised crime is, therefore “different from legitimate organised business only because its activities fall at a different place on a spectrum of economic enterprise” (Balogun, 2021:4; Finckenauer, 2012:22). Such a spectrum accommodates a myriad of economic activities, “from the very saintly to the most sinful” (Balogun, 2021, p. 4; Beare, 2017).

Smith’s enterprise conception aligns with Albin (1971) who described criminals involved in organised crime as illegal entrepreneurs that constitute a ‘syndicated crime’ characterised by a loosely structured patron-client relationships guided by codes of conduct and mutually agreed upon roles, responsibilities and benefits. Such considerations of possible benefits underpin the rational theory of crime, which posits that criminality is a product of a careful risk assessment and rationality.

Organised crime principles speak to “how, by whom and with what effects opportunities to create future profits are discovered, evaluated and exploited” (Gottschalk, 2009:9-10) and a “necessity to maintain and extend one’s share of the market” (Savona & Williams, 2012:3). Much like legitimate enterprises, illegal business activities strive to meet the demands of several players in the industry, including competitors and regulators (Balogun, 2021). Hence, the only difference between the two opposing business activities (organised crime business and legitimate business) is the nature of the goods or/and services provided. Whereas organised criminal syndicates deal in illegal products/services, legitimate businesses usually do not. However, a legally recognised business activity or product may be exchanged in a business transaction through an illegal mechanism or process to make what becomes an illicit profit. In this case, what is criminalised is not the product

or business activity but the mechanism by which the product is exchanged and services rendered. This is the case with stolen crude oil and refined petroleum produce. Both products in the GoG are not proscribed by law but remain illegal when stolen, transported and sold illegally. So, the notion of illegality or organised criminality can be ascribed to both the product and the process by which it is sold. Hence, as Balogun (2021) avers, a legal product derived and sold illegally qualifies as illicit business dealing, regardless of whether the law affirms the sale of such product, and becomes organised crime subject to certain elements which have been identified above.

The goal of the enterprise model is to provide a basis for analysing illicit enterprises. Such an analytical foundation can be anchored on two notions: (1) that the marketplace often mutates from legal to illegal because of the fluid nature of legal boundaries; and (2) that the existence of demand will sustain the marketplace and thus drives entrepreneurs towards ensuring that demand is satisfied regardless of legality (Balogun, 2021). To have a reasonably uniform approach and parameters by which to analyse and understand illegal enterprises, Smith (1980) makes a case for the marketplace as an analytical tool in any industry which indicates a range of business activities operating at opposing ends of enterprise spectrum, that is, the different legal and illegal business activities operating at the marketplace. But as the edge of legitimacy is subject to constant change, the existing status of an enterprise (especially an illegal enterprise) may change. What however remains unchanged are the continuum of entrepreneurial behaviours and ability to measure the scale.

By focusing on a continuum of business activity, the enterprise theoretical perspective nullifies the assumption of a gap between legality and illegality, emphasising instead a mutually reinforcing relationship between legitimate and illegitimate businesses. However, this assumption has been criticised by some scholars. For instance, Reuter (1983) argues that both legal and illegal economies are fundamentally different. He submits further that illegal businesses do not enjoy the attributes of formality, complexity and rationality which are the basic features of the legal edge of the enterprise spectrum; it may therefore hold little promise to examine organised business crime from the standpoint of legal business and market theories. Nevertheless, as Newburn (2017) remarked, the globalisation process and continuous

integration of global economies into a single market have encouraged the growth of both legal and illegal economic activities, ensuring that economic transactions sit at the intersection of legal and illegal businesses. Therefore, at least in principle, both legal and illegal energy activities can be analysed using a single analytical framework, and it is this assumption that informs the objective of this research. However, analysing organised crime strictly from the economic perspective blurs the social dynamics of the phenomenon which have been emphasised by the Social Network Analysis (SNA) of crime and which may significantly affect the structure of the market (Balogun, 2021).

Context of Criminal Enterprise: Assessing the Threats Environment of the Gulf of Guinea

Understanding a social phenomenon requires careful consideration of the political and socio-economic threats environment that underpins it. Such structural analysis strengthens the premise of a study and helps in validating its explanations and conclusions. Suffice it to say that the GoG speaks to a potent cocktail of bad governance, corruption, and poverty, “a volatile mix of forces” (Watt, 2007:643; Adesanya, 2012: 65), which have national, regional, and perhaps global dimensions. Such a combination fuels energy insecurity and engenders an ominous convergence of a whole range of illegal structures and markets. The political climate in the region is characterised by corruption and maladministration, with the latter manifesting in the erosion of the institutional governance framework, socio-political and economic stagnation, and breakdown of law and order (Annan, 2014). It thus creates an enabling environment for violent and illicit activities to flourish offshore (ICG, 2012). In this regard, energy crime is a manifestation of much wider land-based problems.

Conflicts and political disputes accentuate the challenge of bad governance. Such is the case with a host of West and Southern African countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Angola that have suffered significant dislocations as a consequence of continuous and prolonged conflicts (Balogun, 2018), which created fertile ground for illicit activities, and undermined drive towards evolving cooperative mechanisms to addressing criminality.

Alongside bad governance and political instability is corruption. Transparency International (2021) observes that corruption and conflicts are inextricably linked, and this is also true for energy security challenges in the GoG. The GoG has some of the world's most corrupt countries, according to Transparency International (TI). Of the 180 countries and territories indexed by TI in 2021, Angola ranked 136th, Benin 78th, Cameroon 144th, DRC 169th, Gabon 1245th, Gambia 102nd, and Nigeria 154th. As Angola and Nigeria have shown, corruption in the region is directly proportional to wealth. The two countries are the richest in the GoG by oil reserves, yet they are the most corrupt as oil proceeds are either stolen through official corruption or allocated most times unfairly (Ejibunu, 2007). Corruption undermines the political economy of the region (Ukeje & Mvomo Ela, 2012), as well as the capacity of the states to evolve a joint attack against energy-maritime illicit activities. As resources, which hitherto would provide infrastructure and enhance the living standard of the people, fizzle away in corruption, a feeling of disenchantment among the people heightens an atmosphere of violence and criminality. Corruption is seen as a driver of criminality in the entire region especially, its peculiar nature in Nigeria speaks to a "massive patronage economy that safeguards the dominance of existing Nigerian political elites in and outside of the Delta" (Newsom 2011, p. 5).

Most GoG states also suffer from weak law enforcement and are further incapacitated to mount and coordinate energy security surveillance by a clear lack of coastguards and patrol teams (Barrios 2013). Even Nigeria, "the only country in the region that has significant naval or coastguard capability to tackle maritime crimes" (Ukeje & Ela 2013, p. 10), does leave most of its distress calls unanswered (ICG, 2012).

Prevailing socio-economic realities in the GoG further undermine the region's energy security capability. The area ranks very high in world infant mortality. Guinea-Bissau with 90.92% and Angola having 79.99%; as CIA (2015) avers, these are some of the worst records in the world. Nigeria with 74.09% and Sierra Leone with 73.29% are not better off (CIA, 2015). These countries also rank high in the list of Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) in Africa South of the Sahara (The World Bank, 2016).

Poverty is a social reality in several GoG states. Almost half of sub-Saharan population live in poverty (UNDP, 2022). In Equatorial Guinea,

76.8% of a population of less than a million live in endemic poverty while the percentage of people living in poverty against the population of Sao Tome and Principe stands at 66.70% (World Bank, 2022). Nigeria with a population of over 200 million people has 40% poverty rate in 2018 and is expected to jump to 42.6% by the end of 2022 (World Bank, 2022). Social scientists have established a correlation between poverty and criminality. Consequently, hunger and lack of economic and job opportunities are complicit in crime both on land and on the sea in the GoG. However, as noted by a 2020 report of the UN on climate change, there is a preponderance of poverty in the riverine areas over the hinterland, therefore there is the likelihood of accelerated criminality in coastal communities (UNCC, 2020).

One of the root causes of energy crime which amply ran through the research interviews and is corroborated in the literature is the high level of unemployment, particularly among the youth in GoG countries. “Youth unemployment”, as a respondent claims, ‘provides an incentive for criminal activities such as oil theft, petro-piracy and illegal oil activities offshore as they can be the only sources of livelihood’ (Personal Communication, 2020). Really, oil thieves and pirates are often young unemployed men lured into illicit activities on account of their joblessness by prospects of financial reward and luxury consumer goods and weapons. For instance, Nigeria has the highest number of unemployed youths in Africa South of the Sahara (Fox & Ghandi, 2021). In the Niger Delta, although the skill-acquisition component of the Amnesty Programme of the Federal Government has resulted in a drastic reduction in pipeline vandalisation, bunkering, and oil theft by providing skill acquisition training in diverse fields, there has been a renewed resurgence of criminality since late 2021.

The problem of youth unemployment is compounded further by the government’s inability to effectively utilise oil wealth to create job opportunities for youths and a conducive environment for them to maximise their potentials. The consequences of limited legitimate opportunities especially in the midst of plenty have created frustrated and disenchanted youths who now see criminal activities like illegal offshore operations as a way of life.

The geography of the GoG is a perfect mix of “hunting grounds, reasonable risk levels and nearby hideaways” (Tepp, 2012, p. 189). In particular, the Niger Delta is a water-logged topography with “a maze of creeks and swamps” (Kemedi, 2006, p. 3). The region’s hinterlands are characterised by a tricky terrain which makes easy access challenging, and its waters are some of the most difficult (Kashi, 2008), which therefore encourages criminality, especially in the creeks, severely undermining interdiction (Ukeje, 2009; Adesanya, 2018). The region’s complex geography and vulnerability thus make it one of the most difficult places to navigate and mount surveillance (Ugor 2013). Such difficulties are compounded further by the marginalisation of the region from public transportation and communication infrastructure (Kemedi, 2006). These geographical attributes offer significant opportunities for the inflow of different varieties of SALWs, which armed gangs, including oil thieves and pirates, could use to perpetrate criminality.

These threats combine to create an atmosphere of continuous conflicts and primitive wealth accumulation through violent and illicit energy activities in the GoG. Though Angola and Equatorial Guinea have recorded cases of illegal energy-maritime activities in their territorial waters, the Nigeria-Cameroon axis records a significant amount of the threats in the region along Nigeria-Cote d’Ivoire axis (Lucia, 2015). Most criminal groups involved in oil theft, piracy and illicit trade in petroleum emanate from the delta region or have close relations with actors from there.

While the business of oil theft was disguised or inherent in the nature of criminal hostilities and militancy pervasive in the Niger Delta up until 2009 when the Amnesty Programme was initiated, it is, today, a major talking point in global energy-maritime security discourse, with several commentaries on its criminality, criminally organised nature, and the implication it brings to bear on global energy and maritime security.

Crude Plunder: Oil Theft and the Black Economy in the Niger Delta

Oil theft in Nigeria is an organised business crime of international dimension (Balogun, 2021), an extremely lucrative multi-million-dollar racket (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013; Asuni, 2009). Though earnings from theft of crude oil are subject to fluctuations in oil prices (Amuwo, 2013; Jablonski & Oliver, 2013),

the business is, by far, the most lucrative illegal enterprise in Nigeria's petroleum industry (Balogun, 2021). It may appear disorderly and chaotic, oil-related criminalities are usually planned and structured (Chatham House Report, 2012), and the rate of theft of Nigeria's crude oil is not comparable with anywhere in the world (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013). These crimes are driven by commerce, they have the features of legitimate businesses and are mostly project-based (Balogun, 2018; Ikoh, 2013). Their work forces and recruits are however, organised along socio-cultural lines, with a loose and fragmented network (UNODC, 2005; Alemika, 2013). It is entrepreneurial, and in many instances, exists based on the contacts and activities of key players who maintain and lubricate several links and alliances that form a network around a range of criminal projects (De Andres, 2008).

The phenomenon poses immense socio-economic and political threats to Nigeria. It harms its economy, undermines growth and creates social dislocation (Asuni, 2009). It also fuels prolonged militancy and insurgency in the Delta region, engenders insecurity in the wider GoG and contributes significantly to global energy market volatility (Boris, 2015). The proceeds of the illegal enterprise find its way into the international financial system, fund other illicit activities across the globe (Chatham House Report, 2012:11), and create mutually reinforcing relationships between illicit activities (Farah, 2013). Such links may have broader implications for global security, with "bunkering of hijacked vessels now feeding into Lebanese and Eastern European criminal interests, who reportedly arrange black market sales of stolen crude and refined cargos" (Balogun, 2018).

The business of oil theft in the GoG has evolved into a parallel industry with a developed value chain (Attah, 2012); a demand and supply chain (Onuoha, 2008), with a network of actors, including senior military personnel, government officials and political elite, Niger Delta Joint military task forces, among others. Hence, the "Nigerian state in its various expressions and the oil thieves are both oppositional and organically self-sustaining" (Watts, 2009:113). Like the oil thieves, some elements in the Nigerian government participate in illicit movement of oil, while some others supply useful information to pirates on the content of vessels, their location and schedule of movement (Starr, 2014). Other actors are politically exposed or well-connected oil traders and merchants; local criminal elements and syndicates

that are linked to international criminal networks (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013). The latter involves several countries, including some of Nigeria's immediate neighbours (Benin, Ghana, Cameroon, and Côte d'Ivoire) which serve as either transit or destination hubs for stolen oil. Extra-African countries suspected to be implicated are a legion: Eastern Europe, the Balkans, China, Brazil, Cuba, Singapore, India, Thailand, Indonesia, the US and the Philippines (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013; Obasi, 2011).

Oil-producing communities are enmeshed in the illicit business as collaborators and facilitators (Balogun, 2021). In most of these communities, those who have privileged information about the activities of the bunkerers especially the loading and transportation schedule often put up blockades to prevent the passage of barges or vessels through their territories for financial benefits (Obasi, 2011); a practice comparable to payment of protection fee by oil thieves to security personnel.

Overall, "some of those involved are working for local markets, inefficiently refining products for communities desperate for fuel and power. Some— far larger in scale, organisation and significance— are managing an international export business with tentacles across the globe" (Chatham House Report, 2013:11). However, those involved in the Niger Delta were foot soldiers; "the networks were orchestrated by individuals both inside and outside Nigeria, running an industry worth billions of dollars" (Chatham House Report, 2013). As such, Omeje (2008) insists that oil bunkering trade embraces all manner of agents motivated by all manner of desires.

Nature, Scope, and Drivers of Energy Crime

Suffice it to say that the theft of oil has developed in three stages ranging from small-scale through medium to largescale operations (Onuoha, 2013), and involves activities carried out either by 'boys' or 'barons' (Amuwo, 2013). Whereas small-scale operations are the exclusive preserve of the 'boys' who know the swamps, creeks and mangroves of the Delta very well and who constitute local gangs specialising in tapping into pipelines, stealing, diverting and smuggling oil within and outside Nigeria, medium scale offers a more technical operational mechanism involving breaking into the pipeline and thereafter connect wellheads hose to tap crude (Boris, 2015). It is more technical and involves larger quantities of oil which feeds

small barges and even bigger trawlers offshore (Amuwo, 2013). The third and final type is the exclusive domain of the barons who specialise in lifting oil in excess of the amounts officially licensed (Chatham House Report, 2013).

The business is sustained by a robust black market where illegally stolen crude oil is traded, which also provides an intersection between buyers and sellers of the commodity for exchange of other items such as arms (UNODC, 2013; Etim, 2015). Hence, the crude black market provides an incentive for crude oil theft; without which there may be no reasonable ground to hijack crude oil vessels, and “for as long as this exists, the practice will continue. When those who buy crude oil refuse to buy from the black market, the practice will become non-profitable and useless” (Etim, 2015, p.13). Yet, the illegal enterprise empowers the youths financially such that they are able to buy better weaponry and build up a formidable arsenal (Lyons et al., 2015), in what is known as crude for arms deal (Etim, 2015). In this regard, there is a mutually-reinforcing relationship between illegal oil activities and weapons proliferation in the Niger Delta; a case of “gunning for oil and oiling the gun” (Badmus, 2010, p.323). This development accounts for the upsurge in criminal gangs who not only engage the government but also one another in a bid to remain in business (Etim, 2015). Beyond the Niger Delta region, accessibility of oil-purchased arms has helped to create an atmosphere of criminality in Nigeria, with proceeds from illegal bunkering lubricating violent criminal activities such as armed robbery and kidnapping and inter-ethnic clashes in several parts of the country (Onwuemenyi, 2012).

Corruption in the form of rent seeking has been implicated in the rising phenomenon of oil-related criminality in Nigeria. As noted by Turner (1976), official corruption which has seen the state increasingly attacked and capture rebellion and transform it in its own image since the dawn of democracy in 1999, has resulted in a widening of the scope of rent-seeking or rentier economy, creating opportunities for a black market economy to thrive around the country’s oil industry in which government officials and clients are profoundly entrenched, in a patron-client relationship; a practice which has come to define Nigeria’s political system post-1999 (Nwajiaku-Dahou, 2012). Relatedly, Katouris and Sayne (2013) observe that Nigeria’s oil industry lacks transparency in terms of sales and management of proceeds from

crude which manifests in the network of shadowy middlemen operating in the oil value chain thereby allowing for an intricate, volatile market place and illicit activities.

Ikoh (2013) observed that Nigeria's geography and that of the wider West African sub-region not only allows for easy illicit activities, they are vulnerable to exploitation of criminal networks. Ikoh (2013:4) concludes that:

With the Atlantic Ocean bordering the western and southern part of the region, the Sahara in the north, and the Sahel and Savannah which constitute a part of the western and entire eastern border, the region is made up of many unmanned and porous routes. This multiplicity of routes – rivers, creeks, desert, and savannah – provides criminals with a favorable ground with reduced risk to conduct their activities.

Like its twin crime; oil theft in the GoG can be seen as part of an organised crime (Onuoha, 2012; Malaquias, 2012; Kamal-Deen, 2015), with the Niger Delta at its centre (Onuoha, 2012). Like Somalia piracy (Percy and Shortland, 2013), the GoG piracy is a land-based organised criminal act with a complex business structure, and feeds into a larger range of organised crimes on both land and sea (Ridley, 2014). Onuoha (2012) adds further that, oil piracy in the region is a well-organised and lucrative criminal enterprise, "sometimes highly sophisticated illicit taking of oil" (Malaquias, 2012:1), conducted by criminal gangs, mostly operating from Nigerian waters. "It is a vocation that compares to any other enterprise where money is made illegally. Gulf of Guinea pirates are driven to the sea on the conviction of having a comparative advantage over their targets; buoyed by incentives, means and opportunities" (Malaquias, 2012:1). They carry out a cost-benefit analysis, to justify embarking on risky ventures into the sea. Rewards from such risky ventures are expected to be higher than the costs (Malaquias, 2012).

According to Onuoha (2012), piracy in the GoG, unlike Somali piracy, which relies on low technology to sustain the illicit business (Percy &

Shortland, 2013), is characterised by violence and the use of sophisticated arms and weapons, and is mostly carried out by transnational mafia groups (Onuoha, 2013). These groups finance and facilitate the operations of pirates whose targets are the oil tankers, and also give out useful information on names of vessels, and movement schedules, among others. Onuoha (2012) identifies several explanatory factors for maritime piracy in the region, such as widespread poverty, ease of access to arms and navigational tools such as speedboats, and congestion at port facilities which slows cargo movement especially offshore. However, he is quick to add that poverty is not the main driver, submitting that, if it were, Africa would be a land of pirates. Thus, Ukeje and Ela (2013) further note that the causes of piracy in the region “stem from decades of bad governance and truncated developmental aspirations for the vast majority of citizens living in the GoG.”

Contrary to the perspective of Percy and Shortland (2013) on Somali piracy, those involved benefit from improved business environment and economic stability, the GoG piracy thrives on the disorderliness surrounding the region’s energy industry and instability in the Niger Delta of Nigeria and the GoG. UNODC (2013) observes that the GoG piracy feeds largely on the region’s oil industry.

The Enterprise Structure: Hierarchy versus Network

Understanding the entrepreneurial structure and functions, especially crude oil theft and petro-piracy requires a consideration of the pre- and post-2009 amnesty order. In May 2009, President Yar’Adua, as part of a two-pronged approach to addressing the Niger Delta crisis, launched the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) by which militants were to be disarmed, demobilised, rehabilitated, and reintegrated. Originally planned to last for five years, the programme made provision for an initial 60-day window during which militants exchanged their weapons for vocations, education and monthly income (Burchard, 2015).

In the pre-amnesty era, entrepreneurial functions of oil thieves primarily were carried out within a system of hierarchy or an ‘organisation’ akin to the “Capone Syndicate” with a formalised structure. The character of oil theft in the region was structured along hierarchical and operational arrangement, with militants emerging and organising in camps under more

powerful militants often referred to as ‘Generals.’ These Generals with an army of youths, gangs, and fraternities such as Icelanders and Greenlanders had succeeded in carving out areas of influence or camps for oil bunkering and operated a camp-like structure, particularly in Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta States (Ibaba & Ikelegbe, 2010). The hierarchies had defined boundaries, centralised command and control system, and internal divisions (Osaghae et al., 2008). Members subjected themselves to a central authority, and roles and tasks were assigned to members individually and jointly through a command and control process (Osaghae et al., 2008). This structured hierarchy should, however, not mask oil theft operations which took place outside of this order. Small-scale operations yet existed alongside more coordinated activities. A major feature of this period were instances of internal wrangling within the ranks of the different camps and between camps as seen in the case of Ateke Tom and Asari Dokubo- two commanding Creek Generals; this is what is known as ‘war of the creeks.’ Such wars were fueled mostly by the struggle for control of areas of bunkering and illegal oil operations.

The period from 2009, when the amnesty deal was struck, transformed the operations of, and interrelationship among actors in the oil theft business in particular. Following the amnesty, there was a shift in the structure of the enterprise from a centralised image under a camp ‘General’ to a more decentralised arrangement, which further liberalised the market and enhanced the scope of oil bunkering operations. This shift resulted from a host of factors. Most important, the government, through amnesty, succeeded in ‘buying the peace’ but failed in her bid to put an end to energy-maritime criminality in the region as the weapon-for-money initiative further incentivised acquisition of SALW and crime. Related to this is that some of the militants rejected the amnesty on account of what they considered meagre monthly stipends the Federal Government had promised, and returned to the creeks to continue illegal oil theft and bunkering (Researchers’ Communication, October 10, 2019). “Some of these guys became lords and masters onto themselves in the creeks as they further widen the spectrum of oil bunkering” (Researchers’ Communication, October 10, 2019). Some of the ‘boys’ who hitherto were apprenticed to the ‘Generals’ or worked as foot soldiers for the barons had mastered the

ropes and become ardent at the business. So, they would go on to carve out areas of influence for oil theft and bunkering activities, enlarging the scope of the enterprise in the process.

It is, however, important to note that both the command and control mechanism and decentralised network systems straddled the two periods. Despite the amnesty, oil theft business continued unabated, and the Nigerian government's account had reached 400,000 bpd a day by 2012 (Obenada & Amangabara, 2014:26). Such an unusual volume could not have been stolen without hierarchy or command and control structure coordinating activities. More so, storage facilities, security, and intelligence require significant funds and layers of operations, and could not be possible without a coordinated mechanism. What this means is that many formerly small-scale merchants have coalesced under more powerful entrepreneurs and financiers who have the financial requirements and political contacts for the protection of their businesses as discussed below.

Complex Web of Interconnections

The multi-layered enterprise produces structural variations and complex dynamics of interconnections between actors and institutions. Small-scale theft of oil and piracy operations, for instance, is sustained by a less complex web of interaction, reflect and perform illegal enterprise functions of hierarchy, network, and market, which are not mutually exclusive. The operational mechanism is also devoid of a hierarchy of any sort but does not lack in orderliness, with jobs collectively assigned and executed across the value chain (Researchers' Communication, 2019), affirming the existence of a system of division of labour and functional differentiation. It, therefore, means that a network and market- both in form and function could mutually co-exist.

The relationship between buyers and suppliers of illegally refined petroleum produce at this stage is not only continuous but sustained by pre-existing conditions, which are usually in the form of ethnic affiliations, communal, friendship and associational ties. These conditions ensure that the buyers and suppliers are known to each other, and guarantee a steady market for illegally refined produce (Researchers' Communication, 2019). The existence of such communal and ethnic ties reinforces the fact of

community involvement either as a facilitator for oil theft operations or passage communities because the oil thieves are known in the community, as are the buyers. The communities provide the context and operational field. Community engagement in the enterprise, passively or actively, therefore, further complicates an already complex web of interaction.

As the illegal business becomes more complex so too the web of interaction among actors and institutions sustaining it does, and the business takes on an international dimension at the export end of the enterprise spectrum. The medium and large-scale layers of crude theft provide more sophisticated, robust, and often global mechanisms for interactions. These levels of operations combine both elements of hierarchy and network, in pursuit of market goals.

The internationalisation of the enterprise further broadens the scope of interaction and creates an additional layer of duties and responsibilities beyond the internal/domestic component of the enterprise. The external component of the medium-large scale oil theft business ensures that stolen crude is loaded onto the vessels docking at the coast, and is then transported across the Atlantic Sea, for outright sale or to refineries, for refining, after which the by-products are sold. The form and functions of actors that converge on this segment are complex and sophisticated with detailed and clear-cut rules of engagement or codes of conduct as the business transaction is shrouded in secrecy.

The enterprise is not open to all comers. Except for small-scale oil theft operations and illegal trade in fuel (smuggling) characterised by low entry barriers such as basic material requirements, there are roadblocks that hinder free access to the criminality, and thus make the market less competitive. For instance, to gain access to vessels on the high sea or stolen oil, the starting point is usually by providing such ancillary services as security or work as a 'boy' to the already established group (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013; Ngwu, 2014). Also, the enterprise especially oil theft is reportedly regulated by a 'union', made up of some high-level and corrupt security officers operating under JTF, who administer a tolling system or 'tax regime' on oil bunkering; tap operation, refining, and other components of the business. While 'taxes' are paid based on the number of trips, weekly, or even monthly, and the amount paid is a function of the volume of stolen

oil and the number of barges and vessels involved (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013; Ngwu, 2014). There are consequences for default, however, which could result in the business being shut down, arrested, and prosecuted. Such a closed and regulated system makes entry difficult.

Entry into the business, in some cases, is characterised by the use of force, depending on the scale of operation, which further attests to difficulties in joining the enterprise. Some ex-militants had joined the illegal business through the threat of pipeline vandalism to frustrate legitimate business or actual use of force. Similar instruments were used in securing pipeline protection contracts from the government. Because it often involves serious penalties when apprehended, either through prosecution and prison sentence, or death, in the case of petro-pirates on the high sea, very few people especially those who are not risk averse would venture into the enterprise. It is for this reason that such operations are underpinned by oath-taking as obtained in fraternities, to ensure the sacrosanctity of the business in the event of arrest and prosecution.

The business does, however, enjoy free exit. Once a transaction is completed, and proceeds shared, a member may choose to discontinue his participation in the racket. Membership is also not permanent. Exit could quickly be effected as the influence of actors wanes. Such inherent flexibility in membership may also be as a result of an arrest by security operatives, and the illegal nature of the business.

Quasi-Governmental Roles and Instruments

When conflicts occur among the actors in the enterprise, how are they resolved? Every underworld business has a system of government (quasi-government) that manages its affairs, including conflicts among criminals (von Lampe, 2016; Gambetta, 1993; Gardiner, 1970). Such an ‘underworld government’ (von Lampe:103), in addition to conflict management, serves other functions, including protective and regulatory functions similar to functions performed by a legitimate government, within a society (von Lampe:103). The enterprise tripod has a mechanism that performs quasi-governmental functions, which can be categorised into three: Regulation; Conflict Resolution and; Protection against External Threats.

The first, which is the regulatory role of the enterprise' governance structure relates to the control of the business, which operates in a given territory or oil bunkering camp. Since the medium and large-scale component of the enterprise, for instance, is not an all-comer affair, the barons and camp generals regulate the business by protecting against 'unlawful' oil bunkering activities in their areas of bunkering influence. This form of regulation is geared toward controlling entry into a territory. The regulatory function could also serve the need to protect a market share.

The second function is the resolution of conflict. As noted above, inter and intra-enterprise conflicts occur between the entrepreneurs, which may be a result of personal altercations or from business transactions. The latter may involve contractual agreements. There have been reported cases of conflicts over the sharing of proceeds, and between suppliers and customers over such issues like late payment. Compared to a legitimate environment, conflicts are more likely to arise under conditions of illegality because agreements between criminals are rarely documented (Reuter, 1984). Likewise, criminals have no recourse to the legal system. Hence, Reuter (1984:34) argues, there are incentives for criminals to "seek nonviolent third-party dispute resolution" by a quasi-governmental structure.

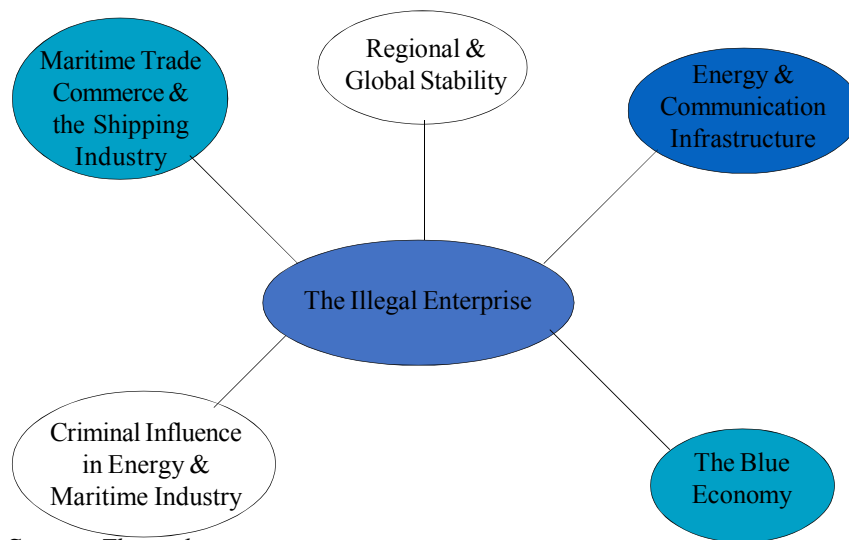
Another quasi-government function is the provision of protection against external threats. Apart from conflicts across the enterprise spectrum, especially within the criminal network, the actors in the business face a significant threat in that of possible arrest by law enforcement. As it is usually the case, 'union' fees are a form of protection payment, which is sometimes paid by pooling resources. Such a pooling payment system neutralises law enforcement more effectively than individual illegal enterprises or individual criminals.

Effective governance of the enterprise depends on many instruments. The ability to enforce decisions and the authority of an individual, based on charisma and high esteem, are important considerations. Several other research participants observed that the ability and the reputation for efficient use of violence as well as an intelligence capability for collecting information are essential instruments by which 'order' is maintained in the business (Researchers' Communication, October 10th, 2019).

The Crude Enterprise and Energy Security in the GoG

Energy crime of the maritime dimension constitutes a major security challenge in the west coast of Africa. Petro-piracy especially poses significant risks to maritime commercial activities, with considerable energy commodities, such as crude oil and petroleum produce being shipped across the Atlantic. The export-import energy industry in the region has evolved into a major target for pirates, with several vessels hijacked and crude oil theft incidents making major headlines since the turn of the century. These cases of piracy in the region are a major source of concern not only for the maritime industry but also to most West African countries bordering on the 6,000 kilometres of coastline between Cape Verde and Angola as it threatens global maritime trade. Illegal offshore criminal entrepreneurial activities are having a negative impact on the maritime-dependent industries in the region, including shipping, tourism, and fishing. In the context of the focus of the study, the various ways by which the illegal enterprise undermines the region have been grouped into five as shown in the figure below, and the categorisations form the focus of the discussions that follow.

Fig 1: Impact of Organised Energy Enterprise in the GoG



Source: The authors

Growing Criminal Influence in the Energy Industry

The alleged involvement of some oil multinational companies and their workers in energy crime not only sustains the illicit enterprise or attests to oil companies and their officials as actors in the criminality, it affirms the infiltration of oil companies by criminal elements and their rising influence within the energy-maritime industry. Hence, the former Nigerian Naval Chief, Vice Admiral Usman Jibrin, accused oil companies of complicit in energy-maritime crime by “aiding and abetting all forms of criminality in the nation’s maritime sector, especially crude oil theft, illegal bunkering and piracy” (Balogun, 2018; *This Day*, 2014). There are criminal elements among oil company staff who are alleged to deliberately open manifolds of their oil wells for illegal activities. The erstwhile Special Adviser on Niger Delta Affairs, Kingsley Kuku was noted to have insisted that:

I know of one thing and this is the bombshell that there are workers in the oil and gas industry who have the expertise, the technical know-how, and know about the ways and means of sabotaging the oil and gas industry, who are likely to be involved. So, you have a situation where some pipeline protection contractors empowered by oil companies participate in the theft. The same people, who are meant to be securing these pipelines participate in oil theft (*Vanguard*, 2013).

Kuku’s position is yet a pervasive aberration up till today. Despite the obvious blame game between oil multinationals and host communities as to their complicity in the renewed scourge of oil theft, prudential evidence suggests that neither of the two nor regional and global extraterritorial actors are insulated from the deepening economic sabotage and oil criminality being foisted on Nigeria and the wider GoG.

In some instances, ships had secret compartments built in them where an unreported portion of the cargo is kept, while in other cases, ships are filled with stolen oil using fake documents obtained from ‘friendly’ customs agents. Oil workers with positions in pipeline control rooms are allegedly paid to lower the pressure in pipelines to prevent explosions during illegal tapping operations. A similar scenario undergirds piracy operations, where rising criminal complicity in the maritime industry sustains vessel hijacks.

The scale and complexity of the illegal enterprise underscore rising criminal influence in the energy industry and other state agencies, so that oil theft and petro-piracy supplement the income of a large number of people across the industry and wider economic spectrum, and the proceeds therefrom are ploughed back into the illegal enterprise thereby creating a vicious cycle of crime.

Regional and Global Instability

Illegal energy-maritime criminalities in the GoG significantly threaten national and regional stability. In most cases, the supply of energy is interwoven with deep-rooted corruption which sustains the energy black market, resulting in a downward spiral. These activities undermine governance, the economy, development, and human security. The resulting illicit financial flows erode states' capacity to meet their socio-economic development goals over the long term. The illegal enterprise can become a gateway activity and funding source for nefarious actors perpetrating higher-profile crimes, weapons proliferation, and violence. Once those more organised networks are established, the allure of additional illicit profit becomes more attractive and achievable. Over time, energy crime can become part of the machinery of insurgency and endemic corruption. The illegal enterprise, therefore, represents a net loss for the GoG: shortfalls in revenues accruable to countries and companies, markets, dwindling investments in the energy sector, and most importantly undermining security impact, regionally and globally.

The Black Market and the Blue Economy of the GoG

Economic interdependence and supply chain linkages within the international system are reliant upon shipping. This is because a huge volume of valuable is conveyed across the world through shipping. Specifically, most of Africa's trading relations are conducted through the sea. Lopes (2016) perceptively explained this by submitting that:

Of Africa's 54 states, 38 are coastal, and more than 90% of Africa's imports and exports are conducted by sea. The largest sectors of the current African aquatic and ocean-based economy are fisheries, aquaculture, tourism, transport,

ports, coastal mining, and energy. In addition to harboring some of the most strategic gateways for international trade in Africa, maritime zones under the continent's jurisdiction total about 13 million km², an area lying under the sea that is equivalent to two-thirds of Africa's landmass. If fully exploited and well managed, this hidden treasure constitutes a major source of wealth that could catapult the continent's fortunes.

No doubt, Africa's blue economy holds the key to the economic emancipation of the continent, especially the Gulf of Guinea. However, its enormous potentials exist side-by-side significant challenges. Hence, as Bueger (2016) observed, if the blue economy is indicative of the prospects and promises of Africa's sea, maritime security holds out its risks and perils. This not only underscores the linkage between the blue economy and maritime security (including energy crime of maritime dimension), it affirms their existence as two sides of a coin (Bueger, 2017), with both exerting significant impact on each other. The two issues lie at the heart of ocean governance and the economics of maritime security.

The Gulf of Guinea vividly embodies this relationship. Indeed, the region possesses a blue economy that is valued at USD 1 trillion per year (ECA, 2016). Buttressing this claim is the fact that the domain is endowed with enormous natural resources, including marine resources, which hold significant promise for economic growth and development, but have not been fully tapped. The aquatic and marine resources especially, which need to be harnessed and developed, play no less an important role in transforming structurally the blue economy of the GoG. The significance of the blue economy to the development of the African continent is robustly captured in the 2016 policy handbook of UNECA on Africa's Blue Economy, which recognises the continent's blue economy as "a new frontier for the continent's renaissance." Hence, as Carlos Lopes, Under Secretary General of the UN and Executive Secretary of the UNECA, concluded, "a better understanding of the enormous opportunities emerging from investing and reinvesting in Africa's aquatic and marine spaces" could help mitigate against "illegal harvesting, degradation, and depletion..." (ECA, 2016) of the continent's ocean economy. However, illegal energy-maritime enterprise

undermines the capacity of GoG states to effectively put the sea and its potentials to good use, and ensure the safety of the marine environment. On the one hand, piratic acts at sea create an ungovernable maritime space, and hinders offshore energy exploration activities as pirates have not spared offshore oil platforms. According to a 2016 report of *Energy Business*:

These days, successful movement of tools, equipment and materials from shore to swamp and offshore locations have become very expensive and risky business. It takes days of planning and organisation of all items to be shipped and the entire convoy would set sail, with the full complement of military personnel. Even at that, coordinators of such logistics ensure that they duly settle the platoons of criminals and communities along the travel routes, in order to have a smooth sail. It is, therefore, a great risk if one embarks on such journey without detailed preparations as outlined above as such convoys are likely to stray into the waiting arms of the pirates. Personnel movement is done only and strictly by helicopters.

The report added that:

Virtually all of the offshore support vessels divert to neighboring countries like Douala in Cameroun and Tarkwa Bay in Ghana for maintenance. Offshore rig companies would rather stack their idle rigs on the shores of other African countries than tow them into the Nigerian troubled waters in Nigeria (Energy Business, 2016).

In addition, oil spills have attended illegal oil refining activities in the Niger Delta creeks, resulting in destruction of marine lives, and dislocation of the traditional economy and means of livelihood of the people. Hence, the blue growth will not be possible, and even less sustainable without a sufficient degree of maritime security. Whether it is offshore oil platforms, the sea lanes, or even fishing activities, there is the requirement of an environment which is not threatened by criminality. Offshore oil exploration, for instance, cannot be carried out where the sea is threatened by pirates.

On the other hand, a productive exploitation of the blue economy holds the key to enhancing maritime security. A core factor in the spread of maritime insecurities, violence and crime is the welfare of coastal communities (Balogun, 2018). Neglect and marginalisation of oil-producing Niger Delta communities have justified recourse to maritime crime by youths of the region as a source of income. The interests of coastal communities will have to be adequately addressed in any blue economy development agenda, to ensure a secure environment and “safe sea” vital for the exploration of the resources of the sea. A consideration of such interest is also hinged on the pivotal role they play in “maritime law enforcement, and ... as the eyes and the ears of security agencies” (Balogun, 2018) on coastal criminal activities. The illegal enterprise, therefore, threatens the unlocking of the full economic potentials of the region’s blue economy as it makes it impossible for countries in the region to realise the potential of their oceans. Failure to ensure that the GoG’s ocean territories are secure promotes ungoverned spaces that oil thieves and petro-pirates, among other criminals, exploit.

That these offshore energy platforms and infrastructure must fulfill broader requirements of national security further highlights the need for effective protection against maritime criminals. Thus, the GoG countries must evolve a region-wide security policy framework that draws on the national sea and coastal strategy and strategies for coastlines or basins as part of overall regional security architecture, to strengthen the capacity of the coastal states of the region especially in protecting their territorial integrity.

Illegal Enterprise, Maritime Trade and Commerce

The increasing wave of illegal energy-maritime criminality on the waters of West Africa constitutes a great threat to the flow of commercial activities across global shipping lines. Energy-maritime operators are particularly easy targets as their sea-faring activities and oil and gas vessels are continuously subjected to oil-related piratic attacks. The increasing cases of oil theft and petro-piracy have undermined the attractiveness and competitiveness of West African ports over the years, results in rising cost of shipping.

Energy-maritime crime in the west coast of Africa is a lucrative market which disrupts the Atlantic corridor connecting the US, Europe and West

Africa, and devastates the region's potential as a global shipping corridor for crude oil (Balogun, 2021; Balogun, 2018). So, petro-piracy particularly threatens maritime transportation, but more generally destabilises the entire industry in the GoG. In the first nine months of 2020, a total of 112 vessels were attacked by pirates in the region, 85 crewmembers kidnapped and 31 held hostage (IMB, 2020). The attack on the Togo-flagged vessel Stelios K on November 16 by pirates was the 23rd kidnapping in West Africa in the year 2020, with the captain of the vessel and two crew members whisked away by the criminals. This incidence brought the total number of people kidnapped in 2020 to 118 (Dryad Global, 2020; DW News, 2020). These developments only help to inflict additional costs on trade and commerce, such as insurance premiums for shippers, as insurance rates for vessels transiting the region have gone up (DW News, 2020). The overall impact of crude oil theft and petro-piracy in the region on trade and commerce is most appreciated when considered against the backdrop of the sources of revenue of countries like Angola, Cameroon, Ghana, Guinea and Nigeria who are the region's largest oil producers, and are dependent on the import-export business around the oil industry for economic development. Thus, oil theft and petro-piracy destabilise global trade in oil, trade led development agenda of regional governments as well as regional security.

Illegal Enterprise, Environmental Degradation and Sustainable Development

Environmental and marine pollution, such as oil spillage resulting from oil theft, illegal refining, and illegal ship-to-ship threatens the region's economy, its environment and quest for sustainable development. The illegal refining of crude oil impacts are even more significant in the region's marine protected areas of the Niger Delta. The loss of vessels at sea is just as much a danger for the safety of navigation as a potential source of environmental pollution. Beyond the immediate impact on the environment and navigation, this pollution, whether intentional or not, may have direct or indirect consequences for the economy (port activities, fishing, aquaculture, tourism), national security and, obviously, for public health, both by direct contact with pollutants and concerning food safety.

The Black Economy and Tourism

The entire coastline and inland creeks of Nigeria present very inviting tourist scenes that have not been developed. As Nigeria seeks for more revenue from non-oil sectors, tourism presents a very great opportunity, but the inherent dangers have made it an impossible venture. While the likes of South Africa and Namibia boast of beautiful beaches and waterfronts that attract millions of tourists, In Nigeria, such destinations are nothing but death zones, as maritime criminal elements are ready to pounce on tourists and other visitors. One may be embarking on suicide mission with a boat cruise on these troubled waters.

Policy Options and Strategies for Combating Energy Crime in the GoG

Combating energy crime in the GoG requires an integrated approach that combines both militaristic and non-militaristic strategies. There is a need for sustained militaristic offensives against oil theft and other forms of energy-maritime crime in the region. However, such offensive military operations should align with strategies designed to frustrate the flow of proceeds and assets of crime. Offshore energy crime in the GoG is essentially land-based. Hence, regional and national anti-oil theft operations and strategies should have significant onshore components which seek to address land-based socio-economic and environmental challenges that nourish crimes offshore and offshore. Corruption is a critical pillar of oil theft and its sustaining infrastructure. Corrupt practices help sustain existing links between the illegal enterprise and formal economy, and ensure that hijacked and stolen crude and petroleum produce access the energy market by moving through several legal and illegal channels, shielding the source of the product in the process, and reinforcing the persistence of the criminality. Local communities are passages of crime and also harbor criminals seeking to invade justice. In some cases, local elements are paid off for being complicit in the criminality. Therefore, the war against corruption should be seen as an important component of anti-bunkering and oil theft strategy of governments in the sub-region.

Given the nature of the crime enterprise, it is suggested that national and regional governments should criminalise oil theft and its sustaining crude economy and strengthen legal frameworks proscribing the criminality. In the case of Nigeria, several legal frameworks exist to address illegal maritime activities, the most recent being the Suppression of Piracy and Other Maritime Offences Act (POMO Act). So, the concern lies not in the absence of laws, but the inability to prosecute diligently by applying the existing laws. Relatedly, there is a greater need to strengthen government agencies, such as national navies, and regional institutional frameworks and instruments such as ECOWAS integrated maritime strategy (EIMs), Code of Conduct Concerning the Repression of Piracy, Armed Robbery against Ships, and Illicit Maritime Activity in West and Central Africa, among others saddled with responsibilities of ensuring energy-maritime security. Such capacity development drive should have human component anchored with continuous training of staff.

An inclusive resource governance regime that ensures that the interest of host communities is protected in the scheme of things should guide the operations of both governments and oil companies in the Niger Delta. In line with this, the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) 2021 is a commendable step in the right direction. Such a governance regime would make the inhabitants of the oil-producing communities see themselves as co-owners in the oil business; a development that will help in reducing the wave of illegal energy-maritime activities in the region.

Though the loose network structure of the illegal enterprise makes tracking and interdiction difficult, there is an urgent need for the government to begin to clamp down on revenues from stolen crude oil and hijacked crude-laden vessels. Revenues from illegal enterprises are laundered across the globe, especially in entities with lax anti-money laundering regulations. Thus, the anti-money laundering act should be strengthened by the Nigerian Government to provide an effective legal framework for combatting the illicit flow of proceeds of crime. In this regard, there is a need for effective collaboration with international partners, especially countries known to have anti-money laundering regimes, to identify the financial institutions through which the proceeds of the enterprise are laundered.

It is difficult to imagine the rapidity and the seamlessness with which piratic operations are carried out in the waters of West Africa. Reversing the ugly trajectory would mean that governments across the region invest in sustainable surveillance techniques towards effective monitoring of the region's maritime domain. Already, Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) is deploying a surveillance operational mechanism in monitoring maritime activities in Nigeria's maritime space.

Conclusion

The menace of oil theft has become a multi-million-dollar enterprise in the GoG. In sustaining its productivity, the illicit economy has created a vast network of people, institutions, processes and cross-border trade relationships, and has evolved a robust production and value creation infrastructure, lubricated by the interplay of formal and informal economies, and nourished by a confluence of factors. Such interplay manifests in the emergence of mutually beneficial and sometimes antagonistic relationships between government officials, institutions and criminal groups, often termed political-criminal nexus, on one hand and between different criminal groups, on the other. The huge infrastructure and network of actors and interests undergirding the enterprise not only affirm the entrepreneurial drive behind the phenomenon, but also explain why it has endured overtime. Not only has the organised enterprise crime nourished and created a rich context for violence and conflicts in the region, it has further undermined the capacity of governments across the region to deal decisively with the booming criminal economy. In this regard, organised oil theft is a double jeopardy for the GoG region.

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