

ILLEGAL CRUDE OIL REFINING: HOW INCENTIVIZED VIOLENCE IS DRIVING THE MOTIVATION FOR ILLICIT JOBS IN NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA

VOLUME: 7 ISSUE: 2
FEBRUARY, 2023

eISSN: 5733-6783

pISSN: 5532-7563

IMPACT FACTOR: 3.78

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Abstract

Despite associated environmental challenges, the illicit workspace of crude oil theft and illegal refining also referred to as kpo fire in Nigeria's Niger Delta has continually defied all attempts to stop it by the Government. This is due to the absence of sufficient legitimate jobs and the incentives that conflict actors get within a widely established economy of violence. This study examines how illegal crude oil refining drives the motivation for illicit jobs amongst youths as a result of the incentives accruing to warlords. To achieve this objective, the study relies on the qualitative method and extensive content analysis. It covers two states (Rivers and Bayelsa) in the Niger Delta given the high incidence of illegal crude oil refining in these states. 54 Key Persons made up of 5 owners of illegal refineries, 41 employees of these refineries, 6 government officials and 4 members of the armed forces, constitute the sample size. The study employs the purposive and snowballing sampling techniques to select participants with Key Persons Interview (KPI) as the method of data collection. Information gathered was analyzed using the thematic method. The findings reveal that the illicit workspace of crude oil theft and refining will continue to proliferate because warlords who own these illegal refineries are mostly supported by the government and high ranking security officers. Also, youths prefer to find jobs in illegal refineries because the pay is relatively very high when compared to some entry level legitimate jobs. The study concludes that the skewed reward system that favours conflict actors provide incentives for illegal oil refineries to thrive and more youths continue to make inroad into the illicit workspace because they find it more rewarding than legitimate work. It recommends that government should make legitimate workspace more attractive in addition to enforcing existing laws against oil theft and illegal refining in the region.

Keywords: Illegal Refineries, Conflict Warlords, Incentivized

1. Introduction

All over the world, members of natural resource endowed communities continue to maintain a high level of expectation given the massive revenue accruing from the exploitation of such resources especially crude oil and gas. While this expectation amongst community people for a better life that is at least proportionate to their natural resources is justified, natural resources governance differential across the world and particularly in Africa remain a significant disincentive in terms keeping up with these expectations. In Nigeria for instance, the oil and gas industry remains the largest foreign exchange earner for the country attracting about 95% of foreign exchange earnings and 80% of budgetary revenue (Nwuke, 2021; global EDGE, 2023). Given the role of this all important industry in the country's revenue generation and the global relevance it has, it is only normal for the masses to expect better human development interventions from the government that should ordinarily be visible through expansion of decent jobs, quality education and healthcare among others.

However, despite being known for playing host to the oil and gas industry in Nigeria, long years of mismanagement of these natural resources in the Niger Delta region by successive governments coupled with host communities' discontent over significant deficits in enabling physical infrastructure, poor human development realities and the progressive degradation of local livelihood systems have combined to trigger what Ikelegbe (2005) referred to as an economy of conflict. Interestingly, since Ikelegbe's economy of conflict analogy, the Niger Delta has remained a major hotspot for violent conflicts with significant incentives for peripheral and yet illegal socio-economic activities within the oil and gas sector that dovetail to undermine the viability of the industry. Currently, the region is agog with massive youth involvement in crude oil theft, illegal crude oil refining and sale as well as kidnappings among others. The emergence of these illicit socio-economic scenarios in the Niger Delta is traceable to a history of stakeholders' complicity that has provided the enabling environment for the commodification of violent conflicts (Raimi, 2017) that comes with a boomerang effect on the region's economic wellbeing.

In their respective works, Amadi, Imoh and Obomanu (2016) as well as Raimi (2017) did allude to an emergent social formation in the Niger Delta that is predicated on an unholy reward of violent conflict actors which has now provided a basis for a new power relation where erstwhile militia leaders control a section of the economy of the region by virtue of the massive wealth they now wield. Furthermore, this skewed reward system that sees conflict warlords gaining access to government contracts associated with pipeline security, political appointments and even cash handouts has progressively encouraged new dimensions of commodity violence (Raimi & Boroh, 2017). In this regard, youths now channel their violent orientation into clusters of camp-based activities that control economic territories for crude oil theft and illicit refineries also known as *Kpo Fire* with over 150,000 barrels of crude oil stolen every day (Ogala, 2013). This new illicit workspace which employs a significant number of youths across the Niger Delta has continually defied all legitimate attempts to stop it due to the inability of government to provide legitimate jobs and the risky but huge get-rich-quick opportunity that *Kpo Fire* jobs avail youths. While studies have illuminated the problems of illegal crude oil refining (Akpomrere & Uguru, 2020;

Bebeteidoh, Kometa, Pazouki & Norman, 2020), nothing has been done on how this new illegal workspace is fueling the motivation for illicit jobs among youths in the region. This study is therefore focused on examining the issue of illegal crude oil refining and how incentivized violence is driving the motivation for illicit jobs in Nigeria's Niger Delta region.

2. Study Objectives

Examine how illegal crude oil refining is fueling the motivation for illicit jobs amongst youths in the Niger Delta region.

Find out what social structure provide incentives for illegal refineries to proliferate despite all attempts at curtailing its spread.

Recommend ways of solving the problem of illegal crude oil theft and refining in the region

Conceptual Framework & Related Literature

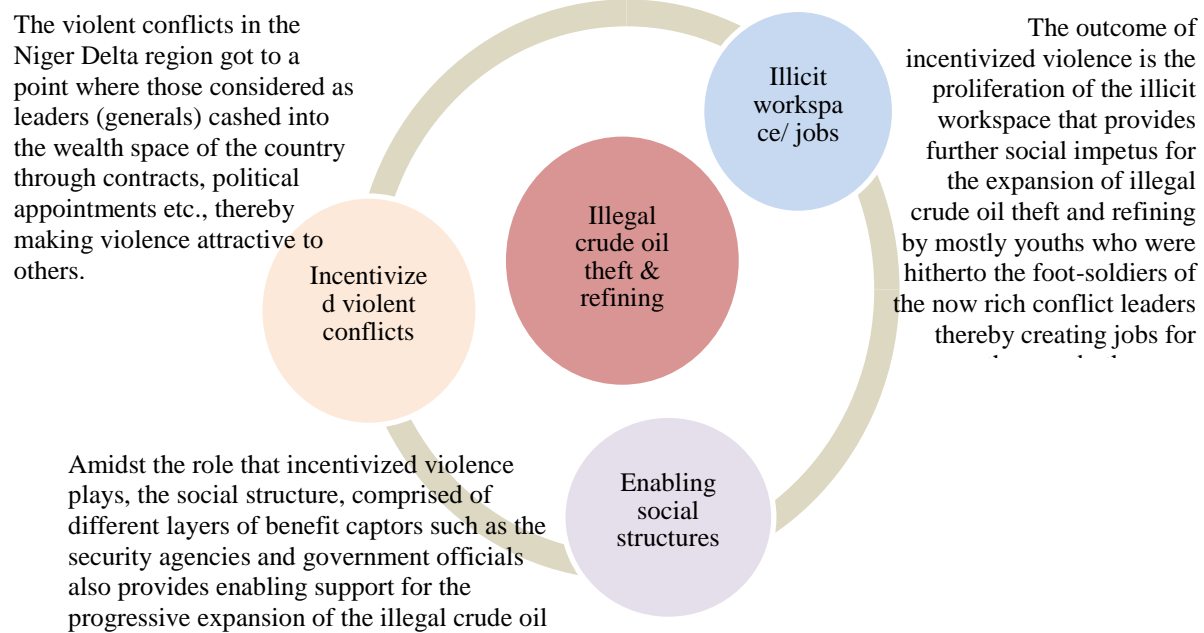


Fig. 1.1: Conceptual Framework for Illegal Crude Oil Refining & Incentivized Jobs in the Niger Delta

Figure 1.1 above provides insight into the intricate link between the concepts in this study. Drawing from the diagram, it is easy to see that the illegal crude oil theft and refining environment is enabled by three distinctive but mutually related domains starting with the incentivized violent conflict space (rewards for conflict actors) which provided the initial impetus for more youths to make inroad into conflict and by extension expanded the scope of the conflict economy (Ikelebe, 2005). The conflict economy in turn provided the enabling environment for illicit workspaces such as crude oil theft and refining to thrive unhindered with more youths finding this new job lucrative than any formal employment. Interestingly, the illicit workspace of artisanal crude oil theft and refining attracted other stakeholders such as the security agencies, government officials and community leaders who became part of the benefit system and this further expanded the scope and sustained the potentials of the illicit economy in the region.

Studies on conflict and illegal artisanal refining in the Niger Delta region

represent a double-edged analytical relationship with some kind of a cyclic understanding of the problem. For instance, on the one hand, there are those who believe that the long years of exploitation and mismanagement of the natural resources of the region created conditions for violent conflicts to emerge and by extension, an enabling environment for illicit socioeconomic activities to thrive (Bannon & Collier, 2003; Ikelegbe, 2005; Raimi, 2018). On the other hand, you find scholars who attribute the violent conflicts in the region to the proliferation of illegal artisanal crude oil refining (John & Nnadozie, 2021; PIND, 2022). While these polar understanding of the analytical or operational interface between artisanal crude oil refining and conflict may be instructive, it is important to note that they are not in any way misleading. The reason we say this is that violent conflicts and artisanal crude oil refining have a cyclic relationship that gives them the most fluid reason to switch places as dependent and independent variables with ease. In other words, the conflict scenario in the region constitutes a healthy justification for all manner of illegal socioeconomic activities, especially artisanal crude oil theft and refining to thrive. In the same vein, the massive space of artisanal crude oil theft and refining serves as a social incentive for contestation of economic turfs between different groups with huge gravity for a different kind of violent conflict in the region.

Although we find the different analysis of the link between conflict and illegal artisanal refinery to be mutually reinforcing here, it is worthy to note that we have better sentiments for the literature that sees violent conflict as a socio-economic enabler of the emergence and subsequent entrenchment of the artisanal crude oil refining workspace. We say this because of the buffering role that other studies such as those of Amadi, Imoh and Obomanu (2016) as well as Raimi and Boroh (2017) have played in exposing the fact that the tacit reward of violent behaviours helped to instill in the youths a mindset that illicit activities can be rewarding. In this sense, while the government was occupied with paying for violent conflicts through all forms of rewards such as pipeline surveillance contracts, political appointments and cash handouts to mostly warlords described as militia capitalists (Amadi, Imoh & Obomanu, 2016), the conflict foot-soldiers were busy creating a new illicit economy of artisanal refining that now employs a large mass of young people in the creeks.

The emergence of an illicit informal workspace within the oil and gas industry with a huge promise of financial gain for young people remains a significant worry especially as the formal workspace holds little promise of decent paid jobs for youths. Omisakin (2022) notes that the get rich or die trying philosophy that defines the motivation for youths within the illicit economy especially those involved in the risky business of artisanal refining of crude oil (locally referred to as Kpo Fire) can better be comprehended if we understand that widespread violent conflicts in the region enables as well as sustains the motivation for illicit jobs associated with the oil and gas industry. In support of this view, the Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN, 2018) holds the opinion that artisanal refining of crude oil and the associated markets have grown remarkably in the past few years with significant socio-economic incentives for communities that play host to them especially in terms of employment opportunities as well as filling the supply gap of refined petroleum products in the region.

Despite marginal attempts by some state governments in the region to curtail the activities of artisanal crude oil refiners and the negative environmental as well as

health implications that for those who have direct involvement in it and the communities in general, the illicit economy has continued to expand with increasing inflow of young people. The SDN (2018.) notes that local refining industry remains largely expansionary and the campaigns to end it continues to meet widespread resistance mostly among youths especially as the illicit economy is now worth around \$28m (NGN 4.4 Bn) per month or \$336m (NGN 52.8 Bn) per annum which by far surpass the revenues accruing to affected communities through the local governments and makes refining by far the highest employer of local labour.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Marxist Political Economy (MPE) theory which as the name implies is linked to the German social thinker known as Karl Marx. Although there are several versions of the political economy approach with similar assumptions, the primary focus of the MPE is its insistence on the intricate relationship between the economy and the political sub-systems as a falloff of the dialectical social relations inherent in the mode of production of society. For instance, Ryazanskaya (1993) notes that the MPE rests on the knowledge that the social relations inherent in the economic sub-system goes a long way to determine the political sub-system with huge implications for policy formulation that oftentimes reflect the ideas and interests of those who own the means of production and that of the ruling class. Interestingly, the MPE argues that the inherent exploitation of the workers or the general masses by the propertied cum ruling class creates conditions of chaos that oftentimes find expression in pockets of violent uprisings as is the case with the Niger Delta region over the years.

In light of the above, Amundsen (2010) shares the opinion that the Marxist political economy approach provides a clear indication of the fact that a strong structural relationship exists between the polity and economy. By extension, it becomes quite easy to see how ruling class policies or ideology creates the enabling condition that expands the exploitation and pauperization of the masses in society. Hence, it is in response to this level of pauperization that the conflict economy in the Niger Delta was created as militia groups emerged in agitation for a better life for the people. However, instead of dealing with the root cause of the problem and typical of the ruling class, a policy that rewards violent conflict was introduced leading to government interventions like the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) which only served to incentivize the violence further. It is therefore within this scope of incentivizing violence and raising the status of conflict to a commodity that we can better understand emergence of the enabling environment for an illicit economy driven significantly by artisanal crude oil refining with mostly youths as the key actors.

4. Method

The study adopted the participatory qualitative research method. It covered two states (Rivers and Bayelsa) of the Niger Delta given the high incidence of illegal crude oil refining in these states. The sample size is 54 participants made up of 5 owners of illegal refinery camps, 41 employees, 6 government officials and 4 members of the armed forces. Purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were employed. The Key Persons Interview (KPI) method was used to gather information from the participants and the thematic cluster technique was deployed for data analysis.

5. Results and Discussion

Drawing from the interviews conducted with key stakeholders and the analysis that followed, three major themes emerged. These are discussed below and where necessary verbatim quotes from interviewees are presented.

Theme 1: How Illegal Crude Oil Refining Motivates Illicit Jobs among youths in the Niger Delta

Where there is high level of unemployment within a highly materialistic social system, illicit workspaces tend to thrive. The situation in the Niger Delta region is not different as a significant number of youths remain largely unemployed despite finding themselves within a society that is filled with abundant oil and gas resources. This is further compounded by a highly thriving conflict economy that increases the chances of those who wield the instrumentality of violent conflicts becoming rich. Hence, providing incentives for violent conflicts have a way of attracting new entrants into the violent conflict economy either as direct participants in the violence or as peripheral participants who cash into the violent economy to establish illicit businesses for themselves. This is the exact scenario in the Niger Delta according to most of the interview participants.

In fact, the participants involved in the workspace of illegal crude oil refining otherwise known as *Kpo Fire*, are largely motivated by two key issues. The first is the relative sense of operational freedom that the incentivized violence system accords them. In other words, the incentivized conflict system makes it easy for them operate an illicit socio-economic workspace that relies on the conflict to thrive. For instance, one of the KPI participants noted that:

“before I joined this job, I was surprised how people who carry guns continue to get rich while I wallowed in poverty. So I decided to take up arms and form my own group and oil refinery camp” Since then, I have been having money from the business and I am not willing to let it go because the government has no job for us the youths in the region (Male KPI participant, Camp Owner, Aged 38 years old).

It is easy to see that the conflict economy coupled with the near absence of formal employment for youths provided the motivation for some of the youths to take up arms only this time, not for the emancipation of the region, but to secure their turf for illicit crude oil refining. Most of the youths believe that since the government does not want to provide enabling environment and conditions for them to gain access to legitimate employment, they have no choice but to employ themselves somehow and the best possible option available to them is to take advantage of their natural resources. As a result, those who have the guts to get into the economy of violence do so with ease and in most cases, these youths are conflict foot-soldiers who have been marginalized from the tacit reward system that makes capitalists out of warlords in the region. With a feeling of neglect and having the firearms within their reach, they have no choice but to channel their energy into illicit economic activities within the oil and gas industry given its lucrative nature. This has given room for more entrants into the illegal workspace of artisanal crude oil refining. One of the participants had this to say:

“let me quickly say that I am a graduate who didn’t think for once that I will turn out to work in an illegal system like this but having graduated for a long time without any job despite coming from a community with crude oil, I have no choice but to align myself with a group of young minds to make a living from our God given natural resources and honestly I have no regrets because no company would have paid me the kind of money I

make from bunkering business (Male KPI participant, Camp Employee, Aged 31 years old).

This brings us to the second reason why most of the youths in the region prefer to work within the illicit workspace of artisanal crude oil refineries. This reason is the get-rich-quick mentality that is associated with the *Kpo Fire* workspace. Most of the KPI participants especially the illegal refinery employees are largely motivated by the amount of daily income that they make which is far bigger than most legitimate jobs can offer them. One of the participants noted that:

"I earn as much as 20 to 30 thousand naira daily. If you sum this up, I practically get close to 1 million naira every month and sometimes if I involve in different other tasks within the camp, I can get above that. Tell me which company can pay me such money. So you see why it will be really difficult for us to leave this job that pays us well despite the risks that we encounter every day. Let me tell you, life is risky on its own and if we do not take this risk, we will remain poor despite having abundant crude oil in our backyards" (Male KPI participant, Camp Employee, Aged 23 years old).

In addition to the above, some of the other employees who shared similar views on the lucrative nature of *Kpo Fire* business pointed out that they know the risks associated with what they are doing as several of their friends have died or are living with massive injuries that they sustained as a result of the precarious process of carrying out local refining of crude oil but they are not swayed in any way and are not willing to live what they are doing for nothing. They lamented that the government is responsible for what they are doing especially because they feel that as youths from the region, they should be better off socio-economically and not wallowing in poverty while few persons cart away the wealth accruing from their homes.

Theme 2: Social Structures that help Proliferate Illegal Crude Refineries in the Region

Although it is clear that the protracted nature of underdevelopment and marginal attempts at improving on the human development realities of the region dovetailed to provide the incentives for a good number of the illegal socio-economic activities going on in the Niger Delta region, it is important to stress the social structures that scale up the motivation among youths when it comes to artisanal crude oil theft and refining. Based on this, the study also discovered that while economic factor is a major incentive for illegal crude oil refining, political and social structures largely incentivize the proliferation of camps. Although the government officials and members of the armed forces who participated in this study refuted this claim, the camp owners and employees noted that powerful politicians, security personnel and big community players are major stakeholders in the illegal refinery workspace. For instance, a KPI participant noted that:

"why do you think we are still in business, the politicians, military officers and community chiefs also get their cuts". They are all involved especially the military who always visit our camps to get their own share from us. It is a syndicate kind of business and we ensure that everyone who can be a problem to the smooth running of the camps is settled so that we don't have any problems (Male KPI participant, Camp Owner, Aged 35 years old).

On the other hand, the government officials believe that the military and other security agencies have been doing their best to extinguish the illegal workspace of artisanal refining of crude oil but every time a camp is destroyed, another one springs

up. One of the government officials that participated in the study noted that:

"I cannot stand here and say that government has done enough to address the problem of kpo fire, but effort is being made to reduce the spread of the illegal business using the military and other security outfits. However, we know that corruption among some members of the security agencies will always spring up and this has a way of undermining genuine efforts at curtailing the activities of artisanal refiners (Male KPI participant, Camp Employee, Aged 28 years old)."

Interviews with camp owners and employees at the camps deviate significantly from the position of the military participants who did not want to provide robust information on the subject matter. However, some of the employees seem to stand their ground that the military and other security agencies are part of the reason why crude oil theft and artisanal refining will not stop easily. According to some of them, the social network of benefit captors (Raimi, 2018) within the illicit economy is quite vast ranging from the security agencies to community chiefs who play their different roles in enabling the business to thrive. One of the KPI participants noted that:

"my brother it will surprise you to know the magnitude of the social network that is involved in this our business. Let me tell you, the community leaders, the security agencies and some government officials are involved in it. In fact, most of the camps are owned by some government officials because they find the business to be very lucrative. Let me even tell you what will humble you, in my state here Rivers State, about 16 of the camps in a particular Local Government Area are owned by a Local Government Chairman. (Male KPI participant, Camp Owner, Aged 32 years old)."

Drawing from the views presented above, it is easy to see that the network of benefit captors associated with the illicit workspace of artisanal crude oil refining is quite vast and this clearly provides the social structure that increases the spread of the camps and by extension the activities of oil thieves and local refiners in the Niger Delta region. Interestingly, most of the participants noted that the government officials and security agencies are even the ones that look for young people to start up new camps knowing that once the camps begin operations, they stand to benefit from them. Given this intricate network of benefit captors associated with the *kpo fire* business in the region, mitigation measures are expected to take cognizance of each stakeholder within the business ecosystem of illegal crude oil refining.

Theme 3: Mitigating Illegal Crude Oil Theft and Refining in the Niger Delta

The discussion emerging from Theme 2 above has shown that there are different stakeholders that somehow maintain a stake within the workspace of illegal crude oil refining in the Niger Delta region. To address the problem, these divergent stakeholders have to be targeted in a manner that also addresses related concerns. This is perhaps why one of the KPI participants noted that:

"Sir with all due respect to you, this business will not stop if we do not address the key reasons why people have to endanger their lives to make money in the name of local refining of crude oil. People are poor and hungry even those working like the military are paid peanuts as salaries and you expect them to fold their hands and not do something to augment their income?" (Male KPI participant, Camp Employee, Aged 30 years old)."

Most of the participants align with the above submission that poverty and hunger are major drivers of the illicit business of artisanal crude oil refining. They argue that government should create jobs for youths who have suffered to go to school for years and ensure that industries are created to expand the chances of employment. In fact, one of the participants stated out-rightly that he will not stop

illegal crude oil refining even if he is given a new job. For him;

“the best way out is to improve on the condition of the illegal crude oil refining and make them standard refineries to continue producing petroleum products. Since we already know how to refine crude oil, the government should upgrade our industry to standard so we can continue in the business. Forcing us to leave this business will be futile because no one who has tested the money associated with it will want to leave”
(Male KPI participant, Camp Employee, Aged 29 years old).

Based on the opinions of the interview participants, stakeholders in the business of illegal crude oil refining are mostly involved because of the huge financial incentives associated with it and are driven by the need to augment their income. By extension, low income coupled with the enabling space that comes with the already entrenched conflict economy and the skewed reward system for violent actors all converge to incentivize the illegal crude oil refining workspace.

Conclusion

While legitimate jobs are shrinking considerably and are largely unattractive financially, the illicit workspace of crude oil theft and refining continue to proliferate because of associated incentives both in terms of the systemic social structures that incentivize them and the risky but intrinsic get-rich-quick prospect associated with the illicit industry. The study concludes that youths are increasingly motivated to make inroad into illegal crude oil refining either as camp owners or employees given the high sense of the enabling workspace created by the system and the financial incentives linked to it despite the challenges it poses to the environment and human lives. Interestingly, several stakeholders tend to provide enabling support that proliferate this illicit workspace especially government officials and security agencies who themselves benefit from it.

Recommendations

Dis-incentivize Violent Conflicts

One of the major motivations for the emergence and proliferation of illegal crude oil theft and refining is the incentives that violent conflict leaders get from the government and oil companies. This has a way of entrenching a violent and illicit economy as most youths tend to see violence as rewarding. This has to be reversed to ensure that instead of rewarding violence, government and oil companies should start rewarding good and positive behaviours instead. This can be done by giving the same rewards such as government contracts, political appointments among others to well behave youths in the communities as a way of spreading good values instead of bad or violent ones.

Better Remuneration for Security Personnel

The security personnel are involved in the illicit workspace of local crude oil refining mostly for extra money. This is because their salary is largely insufficient given the high rate of inflation in the country. There is need to review salaries of security personnel and ensure that it keeps up with the current market realities to sway them being part of the illegal crude oil refining industry.

Improve on Legitimate Workspaces

Government should make legitimate workspaces more attractive by increasing entry level remuneration and other associated allowances. This will encourage youths

to consider getting jobs in legitimate workplaces such as the Ministries and other institutions of work instead of patronizing illegitimate jobs

Enforcement of Laws

When the three recommendations above have been put in place, there is need to promote enabling conditions for the enforcement of relevant laws that criminalize illegal crude oil theft and refining in the country. Government should therefore ensure that security personnel are on their toes to apprehend and prosecute anyone caught in the act of local refining of crude oil.

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