
An Etiological Study of the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria has not been thoroughly investigated and examined by scholars and policy makers. Hence, the extent of its danger in the security of the oil rich region has not been properly understood. This study sets out to investigate the etiology of the proliferation in SALW in the Niger Delta region. The study employed the use of secondary data gathered from journals, textbooks and other materials to highlight the causes of the proliferation of SALW in the region. The conflict theory propounded by Karl Marx was used as the background for this study. Hence, the study unraveled the impact of the uncontrollable spread of SALWs in the hands of individuals and militant groups in the region. In addition to this, it is also argues that the proliferation has been responsible for the security challenges in the region. The study suggests ways by which the proliferation in SALW can be curbed in the region.

KEYWORDS: Arms, weapons, proliferation, militancy, Niger Delta, Etiology

INTRODUCTION

Recently, there have been interceptions of large cache of arms which are being smuggled into the country by unknown people. These arms which are mainly from the Middle East and Asian countries find their ways into the hands of criminals who mostly operate in the Niger Delta region. This arms is adjudged as the most immediate security challenge to individuals, societies, and states worldwide, fuelling civil wars, organized criminal violence, insurgency and terrorist activities posing great obstacles to sustainable security and development (Malam, 2014).

In the Niger Delta region, these Small arms and light weapons are often used to maim innocent residents of the region, kidnap expatriates and well-to-do individuals, cult activities, prevent or delay development

projects, bunkering of oil facilities, create terror and fear, and general insurgency. In addition, these small arms and weapons may be used in criminal violence such as armed robbery, homicides, suicides, and accidents. And they are frequently the primary tools of militants bent on sowing chaos and discord in the guise of agitations (Stohl and Hogendoorn, 2010).

A vast number of weapons are in public and private hands in the region (Anyim, n.d.). These arms find their ways into the region from overseas. Globally, there are more than 1,200 companies in 90 countries that produce small arms (Small Arms Survey, 2004) and these SALW kill between 500,000 and 750,000 people annually and are a contributory factor to armed conflict, the displacement of people, organized crime and terrorism, thereby undermining peace, reconciliation, safety, security, stability and sustainable social and economic development. These arms are also responsible for fueling crime and sustain armed conflicts world over, facilitating terrorism and creating anarchy after civil wars (Malam, 2014).

Since the discovery of oil in commercial quantity in the Niger Delta region, there have been violent clashes between the ethnic groups in the region on the one hand, and the Federal

Government (or the state) with its business partners, the multinational oil corporations (MNOCs) on the other (Obi, 1999). This has given rise to militancy and struggles as minority ethnic groups of the region have consequently challenged the state and foreign oil multinational policies and attitudes. These phenomena have increased since the early 1990s in the region.

According to Okeke-Uzodike and Ojakorotu (2006), the Ijaw ethnic group, in particular, has appeared the most violent, aggressive and warlike when one considers how it has engaged other major ethnic groups and oil multinationals in the Niger Delta. The military prowess of the Ijaw militia has proved a hard nut to crack, as state forces are faced with the herculean task of curbing the excesses or hyper-nationalist tendencies of the Ijaw militant youths. This has given rise to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the region by both sides to the conflict, the federal government/oil multinationals and the people. This culminated to the state security forces and ethnic militias alike have procured weapons in bids to achieve their interests. While the state security forces are out to quail the excesses of the militant groups and restore sanity, the militants were fighting perceived marginalization arising from environmental degradation and other economic

issues. Foreign interests and multinational oil companies have been indicted for their role in the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta through their procurement of weapons for state security forces. However, as at October 2006, the situation in the region is far from being resolved as it is easier to get a hand-made pistol than a loaf of bread and the number of hostage taken have tripled (Okeke-Uzodike&Ojakorotu, 2006).

There is no gainsaying that the oil economy in the Niger Delta is the chief cause of the proliferation of SALW therein. The irony of oil and gas production in Nigeria, however, lies in the fact that while it is beneficial to both the Nigerian state and its business partners such as the multinational oil companies, it has brought a lot of woes and sufferings to the oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta. Oil exploration in the Niger Delta has adversely affected the ecosystem of the region, resulting in serious environmental degradation. Indeed, the degradation that oil production has caused in the Niger Delta environment is a yardstick for understanding the dynamics of the conflict in the region. The destruction of the Niger Delta environment can be attributed to a number of factors relating to the production of crude oil in the region. High-pressure pipelines carrying

crude oil, diesel and gas have been constructed all over the oil-bearing communities. These, however are rarely maintained by the government or the oil companies. Such neglect of these pipelines and other oil installations, coupled with the activities of vandals, often results in spills and leakages which destroy wildlife, farmlands, forests, aquatic and human lives (Okeke-Uzodike and Ojakorotu, 2006; Daniel, 2016).

Again, another cause of the agitations and militant activities in the region is the perception of the oil bearing communities that they have been cheated, neglected, marginalized and alienated in the distribution of the wealth from revenues of the oil produced from lands and waters (Obi, 1999). These communities have complained of lack of basic infrastructures such as health care facilities, roads, electricity and so on. They also complain that indigenes of such communities where multinational oil companies are located are not considered during employment of skilled and unskilled workforce. In addition, they have argued that the wealth from their lands and waters is being used in developing big cities and areas in other parts of the country where oil is not produced. These perceptions and the resulting frustration caused the people of the Niger Delta to take up arms against the oil companies and the government in

order to correct what they perceive as injustice (Daniel, 2016).

Furthermore, the oil bearing communities of the Niger Delta are crying wolf about their marginalization in the politics of the country. This point is partly illustrated by the process of creating local government areas and/or the locating of headquarters for such council areas. In 1997, when additional states and local government areas were created, crisis erupted Delta state. The relocation of the headquarters of the newly created Warri South Local Government from Ogbe-Ijoh to Ogidigben stirred a protracted war between the Ijaws and the Itsekiris. The repercussions of this administrative fiat persist till today (Okeke-Uzodike and Ojakorotu, 2006).

These are the chief reasons for the conflict in the Niger Delta region which have created the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the region. These agitations have now been hijacked by rascals who hide in the guise of agitations to cause mayhem on the communities in the region. A recent example is nefarious activities of a militant leader and cultist, Prince Ikedibia, popularly known as Don Wannu whose group masterminded several killing in River state, with the most recent being the killing of worshippers who were on their way home after

attending the 2018 new year eve programme in Omoku, an oil bearing community in Ndoni/Egbema LGA of Rivers state. Hence, the present study is aimed at highlighting the etiological factors of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) can be defined as any portable lethal weapon that expels or launches, or is designed to expel or launch, or may be readily converted to expel or launch a shot, bullet or projectile by the action of an explosive (Arms Survey, 2013; Heinrich, 2006). Therefore, SALW may include; revolvers and self-loading pistols; rifles and carbines; sub-machine-guns; assault rifles; light machine-gun; heavy machine-guns; hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers; portable anti-craft guns; portable anti-tank guns; recoilless rifles; portable launchers of antitank missiles and rockets system; portable launchers of anti-aircraft missiles systems; and mortars of calibers less than 100mm (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR,2006).

According to Daniel (2016), small arms refer to weapons meant for individual use, including revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and

carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns. Light weapons on the other hand are portable weapons designed for use by several persons serving as a crew: heavy machine guns, automatic cannons, howitzers, mortars of less than 100mm caliber, grenade launchers, anti-tank weapons and launchers, recoilless guns, shoulder fired rockets, anti-aircraft weapons and launchers, and air defense weapons (SADC Firearms Protocol, 2003). According to Best Practice Guidelines (2005) for the Implementation of the Nairobi Declaration and Nairobi Protocol on Small Arms and Light Weapons, small arms are weapons which are designed for personal use and shall include: light machine guns, including machine pistols, fully automatic rifles and assault rifles and semi-automatic rifles. A light weapon, Man-portable Air Defense System (MANPADS) is referred to as shoulder-fire anti-aircraft missile which the terrorists use to attack aviation anywhere in the world. Small arms and light weapons are a subcategory of conventional weapons and range from pistols and rifles to mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and man-portable air defense systems, or MANPADS (Conventional Weapons Destruction (CWD)).

According to Aver, Nnorom and Ilim (2014), proliferation of small arms and light weapons is

a method in which arms and weapons are sold to private citizens especially in places that are in crisis or conflict. Also, Hazanand Horner (2007) defined proliferation as the growth or numerous multiplications of illegal arms and weapons in the country. This study will adopt the definition of Aver et al (2014) which defined proliferation of SALW as sudden increase in the number of arms and weapons beyond those needed for legitimate national security. This means when state supplier recipient, does not exercise restraint in the production, transfer and acquisition of such arms and weapons beyond those needed. This act is done by unidentified groups either for economic or political purposes. These arms and weapons get easily in the hands of private individuals especially politicians (Aver et al, 2014).

As highlighted by Okeke-Uzodike and Ojakorotu (2006), the present geo-politics of Nigeria's Delta region concerns nine states, namely Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, Ondo, Edo, Cross Rivers, Imo and Abia, all of which account for over eighty per cent of Nigeria's oil reserves or deposits. In terms of demographics, ethnic minority groups such as the Ijaw, Urhobo, Itskiri, Isoko, Kalabari, Nokws, Ndom, Ogoni, Efik, Annang and many others inhabit the area (Obi, 1999). Since the successful discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956

by Shell D'Archy (making history as Nigeria's first commercial oil well), the Niger Delta has produced the bulk of Nigeria's oil. By 1958, Nigeria became an oil exporter with a production level of about 6 000 barrels per day, with other multinational oil companies like Mobil, Elf Aquitaine, Chevron and Agip joining Shell in exploration activities in the region (Ibeanu 2000 cited in Okeke-Uzodike&Ojakorotu, 2006). Presently, Nigeria is the fifth largest producer of crude oil in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study is premised on the conflict theory which emphasizes the role of coercion and power in producing social order. The progenitor of this theory, Karl Marx (1818-1883) viewed society as fragmented into groups that compete for social and economic resources. Social order is maintained by domination, with power in the hands of those with the greatest political, economic, and social resources. When consensus exists, it is attributable to people being united around common interests, often in opposition to other groups (Anderson and Taylor, 2009).

According to conflict theory, inequality exists because those in control of a

disproportionate share of society's resources actively defend their advantages. The masses are not bound to society by their shared values, but by coercion at the hands of those in power (Anderson and Taylor, 2009). This perspective emphasizes social control, not consensus and conformity. Groups and individuals advance their own interests, struggling over control of societal resources. Those with the most resources exercise power over others with inequality and power struggles resulting. There is great attention paid to class, race, and gender in this perspective because they are seen as the grounds of the most pertinent and enduring struggles in society (Aver et al, 2014).

Aver et al. (2014) asserts that conflict theorists believed that Societies are defined by inequalities that produce conflict, rather than those produce order and consensus. This conflict based on inequality can only be overcome through a fundamental transformation of the existing relations in the society, and is a product of new social relations. The disadvantaged have structural interests that run counter to the status quo, which, once they are assumed, will lead to social change. Thus, they are viewed as agents of change rather than objects one should have sympathy for (Sears,2008).

ETIOLOGICAL FACTORS OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS PROLIFERATION IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION

The procurement, availability, accumulation and proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW), and their subsequent transformation into violence and instability is triggered by different causes which is usually categorized by demand and supply factors. Yacubu (2005) identified some of the factors to include the quest for easy profit by gun runners and those who deal in firearms. Since there is a huge profit from dealing in these arms, it becomes available as many more persons peddle them in order to make huge gains. Hence, even foreign expatriates who wish to garner much profit engage in gun running.

Also, Yacubu (2005) highlighted another etiological factor to be self-defense. With the apprehension and lack of security in the region, individuals procure these arms and weapons to defend themselves. It is no gainsaying that an average resident in Nigeria has lost hope in the nation's security agencies to protect them from insecurity. Hence, individuals have become their own police by illegally acquiring these

arms and weapons to protect themselves from any attack whatsoever.

The rise in crime, criminal practices and perceived injustice in the Niger Delta region facilitates the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. According to Yacubu (2005) activities that encourage the proliferation of arms and weapons are violent crime, workers revolts, subversion, sabotage, religious crises, conflicts between communities, social agitation, micro-nationalism (ethnic conflicts), insurrection, and terrorism. However, the different causes of small arms proliferation in Nigeria can be attributed to: trafficking in small arms; local arms production; theft of arms; and security sector black-marketeering/illegal arms brokering.

One of the chief etiological factors for the proliferation in small arms and light weapons in Nigeria is the porous borders which arise from the inefficiency of the agencies saddled to protect the borders (Okeke-Uzodike&Ojakorotu, 2006). Most small arms and light weapons find their ways into the country undetected through the land and sea borders. Most of the personnel stationed to check these illegal trafficking in arms are corrupt and lackadaisical. Once they are bribed, they fail to carry out their mandates of scrutinizing cargoes coming into the country.

In 2017, two badges of large caches of small arms were intercepted in the sea port in Lagos. This feat was achieved largely because of the doggedness of the newly appointed Comptroller General of the Nigerian Customs Service. Many Nigerians were skeptical because they do not know how many of such caches of arms had been smuggled into the country prior to the appointment of the no-nonsense Comptroller General.

Political strives is another etiological factor for the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria. Quest for political power and the mentality of Nigerian politicians to win elections at all costs have been a major cause in the rise of illegal firearms in the hands of private individuals. During elections, unscrupulous politicians hire the services of idle youths and equip them with firearms to intimidate their opponents and snatch ballot boxes. The 2015 general election saw a plethora of killings and maiming by hired thugs and assassins most especially in the Niger Delta. For instance, in Rivers state, there were bloodbath as candidates of different political parties tried to out-do one another in the quest to win the elections. The politicians procure arms for these thugs in order to achieve their ambitions.

THE IMPACT OF THE PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS IN THE NIGER DELTA

The Niger Delta region is the goose that lays the golden egg for Nigeria. However, the region is ridden with violence thereby plunging it into serious insecurity. There has been human rights and humanitarian costs of the uncontrolled proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the region. Large quantities of small arms and light weapons have circulated the region despite the instruments, laws and prohibitions against their possession and use. This has given rise to the rampant misuse of such weapons by state and non-state actors alike. The widespread availability of small arms to abusive actors in Nigeria as elsewhere greatly contributes to armed violence coupled with further atrocities and also makes peace harder to achieve (Anyim, n.d).

Many innocent souls have been lost through small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta. Hence, the most devastating impact of small arms and light weapons is that it is used in armed violence and conflict which often result in deaths and injuries incurred by their misuse and misapplication respectively. The deaths and injuries resulting from these small arms and

light weapons have been simultaneously described by different researchers as a preventable global health problem (Small Arms Survey, 2001 cited in Anyim, n.d.). These arms and weapons are majorly procured for armed conflicts and militancy which have caused unprecedented deaths and injuries ranging from hundreds to thousands in number. Examples of such conflicts in the Niger Delta which have led to wanton destruction of lives are the Odi, Ugeg-Idomi, Oku Iboko-IkotOffiong, Ijaw-Itsekiri, and more recently, the Omoku conflict. On that same note, crime rates have been exacerbated by the increase in availability and proliferation of small arms throughout the region. Also, crime, especially armed robbery and kidnapping, are primary concerns of citizens of the region.

In terms of the economy, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons which often leads to violence discourages foreign investment, as well as domestic savings, as people lose confidence in a country's prospects for growth. Armed conflict, crime and domestic violence also damage prospects for economic development, affecting agriculture, industrialization, school enrolment rates, commercial activities and overall productivity. Furthermore, armed conflict and crime impose significant constraints on the ability of affected

countries to implement national development programmes. On the one hand, national resources are diverted away from social welfare for purchase of arms to protect the security of civilians. On the other hand, vital infrastructure needed for development initiatives is put in jeopardy by arms-related anxieties (Small Arms Survey, 2001 cited in Anyim, n.d.).

Also, armed conflicts arising from the proliferation of small arms and light weapons affect the revenue of the nation. Instability in the Niger Delta region resulting from the activities of militants leads to a nosedive of the quantity of crude oil produced per day, hence culminating into revenue lost for the nation. When there are conflicts in the region, there are always destruction of oil installation leading to economic sabotage and serious financial consequences on the nation's revenue. This, in turn, will lead to poor infrastructural development and the inability of the government to meet certain obligations such as payment of workers' salary and pensions.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

The high rate of proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta is a function of related fundamental issues that borders on the discovery of oil and subsequent exploration of

same oil in the region. Therefore, the problem of indiscriminate and illegal use of small arms and light weapons by cultists and militants in the region will continue to defy solutions for a long time to come if these fundamental issues are left unaddressed. This study attempted to highlight some of these issues which include environmental degradation, political and social injustice, as well as poor infrastructure in the region which lays the golden egg for Nigeria. Hence, it is the believe of the authors of this study that the violence in the region is far from being solved as the proliferation of small arms and light weapons will continue to exacerbate the problem until more basic solutions are found.

In view of the above, this study suggests the following recommendation to curb the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta region, and by extension, Nigeria as a whole:

1. The amnesty programme that was initiated by the ShehuYar'adua's government has not been efficiently and sufficiently sustained by succeeding governments. Hence, this programme needs to be sustained to discourage youths from militancy, and also mop up arms in the possession of these youths.

2. The Federal Government should be more serious in cleaning up the Ogoniland which has been devastated by oil spills. Also, a workable environmental policy that would regulate oil operations in the Niger Delta should be put in place to forestall future degradation of the environment. The destruction of the ecosystem of the region by the activities of oil companies has for years remained an important issue in the Niger Delta question. Setting up environmental agencies is not enough. Government should enact laws that would protect the environment from being degraded, polluted and damaged by activities of all sorts. In addition, effective machinery should be put in place to ensure the strict enforcement of such laws.

3. Besides, adequate compensation should be paid to the affected local communities as a continuous exercise. Government and the oil companies should embark on community development projects, which are agreed on by the local residents. Schools, scholarship schemes, hospitals, a good transportation system, electricity, gainful employment, good telecommunications, and portable water supply should be adequately provided in the communities. This is the only way by which the ordinary people in the Niger Delta could benefit from compensation.

4. Finally, the rate at which small arms and light weapons flow into the country is alarming and should be a thing of concern to all and sundry. This increasing spate of illegal trafficking in arms not only suggests that the borders are porous, but also portends a great danger to the corporate existence of the nation in future. Government should take up this issue as a matter of national concern. It should ensure that the borders, both on land and sea, are effectively monitored and well policed. All loopholes that may favour illegal trafficking in arms should be blocked.

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