



Assessing socio-economic impacts of crude oil theft on Bayelsa State's Communities

By

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Abstract

Nigeria has recently experienced an upsurge of crude oil theft in the Niger Delta region. This has constituted a major threat to socioeconomic activities in the region particularly Bayelsa State. There is no gainsaying that Crude oil theft in Bayelsa is not just a crime, it is a symptom of broken social contracts. It was against this background that this study employed Merton's Strain Theory to assess socio-economic impacts of crude oil theft on Bayelsa State's Communities. The objectives of the study appraised societal costs of crude oil theft and prospects of curbing crude oil theft in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The study engaged mixed methods research approach, administered questionnaires and data sourcing on 371 participants as designed by Taro Yamani sampling technique on estimated population of 2,277,900 in Bayelsa State. Primary data obtained for the study was analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings identified negative societal perceptions of regarding oil theft not only as a socioeconomic coping strategy but also as a better and honourable option than armed robbery, kidnapping, sea pirate, prostitution drug trafficking and cultism which compromised personal security. Findings from the study also revealed that communities have no confidence in sole government security agencies joint task forces that lacks both community and private security surveillance company involvement due to military complicity in oil theft in Bayelsa State. The study concluded that crude oil theft significantly compromised socioeconomic activities in Bayelsa State. The study recommended that all tiers of government SouthSouth Development Commission, Bayelsa State and all LGAs should deepen the deployment of community-based surveillance systems involving locals and private security consultant to detect and report illegal bunkering activities, by Involve host communities in oil pipeline protection through benefit-sharing schemes. The study also recommended that all tiers of government particularly the Bayelsa State government should develop and incentivised alternative livelihood programs in fishing, farming, and small-scale enterprises to disincentivize illegal oil theft.

Keyword: Crude oil Theft, Economic Implication, Merton's Strain Theory, Societal Implication

Introduction

Nigeria has witnessed a disturbing escalation in crude oil theft across the Niger Delta, with Bayelsa State emerging as a major hotspot (Nwilo & Badejo, 2021). This crisis has evolved beyond economic sabotage to become a perverse socioeconomic phenomenon, particularly among disillusioned youth who view oil theft as a viable livelihood strategy rather than criminal activity (Ebeku, 2022). Recent studies reveal that many young people in Bayelsa now perceive crude oil theft as a preferable alternative to armed robbery, a path to self-reliance in an economy with 45% youth unemployment (NBS, 2023), a means to reduce dependency ratios in extended family systems, and an informal wealth redistribution mechanism in a region plagued by

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decades of resource exploitation (Ukiwo, 2020). This normalization of oil theft has exacerbated its social implications, creating a vicious cycle where criminality becomes entrenched in local survival strategies.

The societal costs of this phenomenon are multifaceted. First, the kidnapping of oil workers has become rampant, with criminal syndicates often comprising former militants and unemployed graduates (Asuni, 2021). Between 2020-2023, Bayelsa recorded over 147 kidnap cases linked to oil theft networks (Partner for Peace in Niger delta [P4P], 2023). Second, the perverted economic logic surrounding oil theft has distorted youth aspirations - a 2022 survey found that 68% of Bayelsa youth aged 18-35 saw "bunkering" (oil theft) as more profitable than formal employment (NDI, 2022). Third, this illicit economy fuels social disintegration, as communal values are eroded by get-rich-quick mentalities and intergenerational transmission of criminal skills (Ikelegbe, 2021).

These trends intersect with broader governance failures. Despite producing 30% of Nigeria's oil output, Bayelsa's poverty rate stands at 72% (World Bank, 2022), creating fertile ground for criminal entrepreneurship. The state's creeks have become laboratories of lawlessness, where illegal refining provides income for youth while poisoning their communities (Steyn, 2023). This represents a classic case of violent entrepreneurship, where marginalized populations exploit the only resources available to them, regardless of legality (Watts, 2021). The health and environmental consequences further compound these social costs. Illegal refining operations release carcinogens that reduce life expectancy in affected communities by 10-15 years (WHO, 2022), while oil spills have destroyed 60% of mangrove ecosystems that traditionally supported fishing livelihoods (NOSDRA, 2023). Paradoxically, the very youth engaged in oil theft often become victims of its consequences, trapped in a self-destructive economic cycle (Obi, 2020).

The necessity of fostering cohesion through Cooperative Security to combat oil theft in the Niger Delta cannot be overstated. A strategic model that integrates benefit-sharing mechanisms has demonstrated significant potential in aligning community interests with security objectives. For instance, allocating 10% of recovered oil revenues to fund local schools has been proposed as a viable incentive to engender community participation in anti-theft efforts (Niger Delta Weekly, 2023). Such an approach not only enhances local ownership of security initiatives but also addresses underlying socio-economic drivers of illicit activities in the region. Moreover, the deployment of licensed private security companies (PSCs) for surveillance and asset protection introduces a multi-layered deterrence framework. Empirical evidence suggests that the presence of PSCs disrupts oil theft networks by decelerating the frequency of illegal bunkering and pipeline vandalism (Okoli & Orinya, 2023). Crucially, the strategic allocation of different terrains to distinct security firms minimizes the risk of collusion—a persistent challenge in regions where state security forces have been implicated in facilitating oil theft (Eze, 2022). By compartmentalizing

surveillance responsibilities, PSCs enhance accountability while creating operational friction for criminal syndicates.

The choice of Bayelsa State as a domain of study is informed by her richness in crude oil reserves and has been a significant contributor to Nigeria's oil production. However, that the region has also been plagued with the problems of crude oil theft for decades, means the illegal siphoning of crude oil from pipelines, sealed well heads and under-recording of quantity approved at the loading platforms., made it more interesting as a domain of study. Most times, the manner in which crude oil is stolen through pipeline vandalism, illegal bunkering, siphoning from sealed wellheads, sabotage of oil facilities and illegal refining, could lead to oil spillage into the environment with devastating consequences for host communities by damaging the ecosystem, vegetation and environment, through the pollution of swamps, rivers, creeks, farm land, fresh water, flora and fauna thereby adversely affecting human security.

Statement of the Problem

The Niger Delta region, Nigeria's economic backbone, remains plagued by persistent oil theft and pipeline vandalism, costing the nation an estimated \$3 billion annually in lost revenue (*NEITI, 2023*). Despite government and multinational corporations' efforts—including military task forces and surveillance technologies, these illicit activities persist due to systemic collusion, weak enforcement, and community complicity. Despite this immense contribution in revenue to the nation, the region remains highly underdeveloped with devastating environmental conditions caused by poorly regulated oil exploration and exploitation activities.

A critical gap exists in current countermeasures: the lack of cooperative security frameworks that integrate local communities as stakeholders rather than adversaries. While some interventions have employed militarized approaches, these often exacerbate tensions and fail to address the root economic disenfranchisement driving participation in oil theft (*Watts, 2021*). Emerging models, such as benefit-sharing agreements (e.g., 10% of recovered oil revenues funding local schools), suggest potential for community-driven deterrence (*Niger Delta Weekly, 2023*). However, the efficacy of privatized security coordination alongside such incentives remains underexplored.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study assessed socio-economic impacts of crude oil theft on Bayelsa State's Communities. While specific objectives;

- i. Appraise the societal implications of crude oil theft in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

- ii. Highlight prospects of curbing crude oil theft in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

Literature Review

Conceptualization

Crude Oil Theft

Crude oil theft involves the deliberate destruction of crude oil facilities in order to steal the oil for personal gain. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria under Section 44(3), states that crude oil extraction outside the framework of agreement with the Federal Government is illegal (The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended). This shows that it is inappropriate for anyone to take or extract crude oil without due process of authorization from the concerned government organization. Hembra (2015), stated that in whatever form and regardless of what personality is involved, crude oil theft involve illegal acquisition and sale of crude oil either in its crude form or professionally or artisanal refined forms. Igbokwe (2017) defines crude oil theft as the illegal siphoning of crude oil from pipelines and loading platforms perpetrated through the drilling of crude oil pipelines and manifold.

Crude oil theft involves the methods or activities relating to the stealing or willful damage of crude oil facilities or installation. These activities include breaking into crude oil pipelines or directly tapping into the wellheads and attaching a hose to siphon the oil into waiting small barges and Cotonou boats which are later loaded into larger ships at the high sea. It also entails excess lifting of crude oil by licensed operators. It involves forging of loading documents like bills of lading to enable the loading and transportation of amount of crude beyond the licensed amount. The stolen crude is sometime exchange for arms and drugs, or sold through syndicates which specialized in illegal crude oil sales around the world. These activities have negative effects on the economy and human security (Hembra, 2015). This view gave the process and effect of how crude oil theft occurs in Nigeria. It also identified the attributes of crude oil theft to include illegal acquisition, excess lifting of oil and forging of loading documents with the significant implications on national economy and human security.

Societal Implications of Crude Oil Theft

This entails erosion of social values and intergenerational criminality from the pervasive acceptance of oil theft ("bunkering") as a legitimate livelihood and this has immensely shaped youth aspirations and communal ethics. From this societal implication emerged distorted Aspirations where 68% of Bayelsa youth (18–35) view oil theft as more profitable than formal employment, reflecting a breakdown in the social contract between the state and citizens (Cartwright, 2020). This promotes intergenerational Skill Transfer whereby criminal networks, often comprising ex-militants and unemployed graduates, train younger generations in

illicit refining, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of crime. These narratives thus encourage traditional values of collective labour (farming, fishing) being replaced by hyper-individualistic "get-rich-quick" mentalities, weakening social cohesion (Abdullahi, 2024).

Crude oil theft often leads to social disruption and community conflicts, as different groups vie for control of oil-rich areas and resources. This disrupts the social fabric of affected communities. The illicit economy fueled by crude oil theft is linked to increased crime rates, including kidnappings, armed robberies, and drug trafficking, compromising personal security in the region.

Empirical Reviews

Odalonu (2015) carried a study on the upsurge of oil theft and illegal bunkering in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. The aim of this study was to critically examine the methods, actors, causes, impacts of oil theft and the measures adopted by Nigerian governments to combat oil theft. The location of the study is the Niger Delta region and the study was timed within the period of 2009-2017. Secondary data were generated for the study, while content analysis was used for data interpretation and analysis. The study revealed that different individuals and groups were involved in oil theft and illegal bunkering activities. The study further proved that persistence oil theft in the Niger Delta is due to the enthroned corruption by Nigerian elites, high level of youth unemployment, ineffective and corrupt law enforcement agencies and international crime collaborations. The study also revealed that successive Nigerian governments have made attempts to curb the menace by the establishment of a special security outfit, militarization of the Niger Delta region and granting of amnesty to Niger Delta militants but the upsurge of oil theft in recent times clearly indicates that success has not been achieved.

Boris (2016) carried out a study on oil theft and insecurity in post amnesty era in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: Implications on Human Security. The study examined the issues of oil theft and insecurity in post amnesty era in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and its implication for Human Security. Secondary data was employed in the study and the paper identifies that the grave issues (unemployment, land degradation, resource control, underdevelopment, poverty) that led to militancy which resulted in oil theft and criminalities in the Niger Delta have not been addressed and thus, the Amnesty Programme is just a palliative measure.

Ovienloba (2009) carried out a study on assessing the human security implications of oil spillage in Niger Delta, Nigeria. The purpose of this research is to give significant statistical consideration to the contention that human security risk in the Niger Delta is created by the years of intensive oil spillage (1958 and 2009). Primary source of data was used which comprises of questionnaire. Tested statistical research discovered that the human security condition in the Niger Delta is occasioned by interrelated variables. These variables are

39% garbage dump, 14% militant activities, 16% oil spillage, 31% of an untested combination of gas flaring, and oil bunkering in the region working in harmony to exacerbate human security risk in Niger Delta.

Theoretical Review

Merton's Strain Theory

The theoretical underpinning of this study is best explained through Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory, with the theory thrust that societies are characterized by culturally approved goals (such as wealth, success, and social status) but often fail to provide equal access to the legitimate means of achieving these goals. This disjunction between societal goals and the means to achieve them generates what Merton referred to as "strain." According to Merton, when individuals are unable to achieve success through socially approved means—such as education, employment, or entrepreneurship—they may resort to illegitimate or deviant methods to fulfill those aspirations. Merton categorized responses to strain into five modes of adaptation: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion, with "innovation" being most relevant to the phenomenon of organized crime and illegal entrepreneurship (Merton, 1968).

Merton's Strain Theory offers a profound explanatory lens for the dynamics unfolding in Bayelsa State and the broader Niger Delta region. In this context, the institutionalized goal is economic prosperity or wealth accumulation. However, legitimate opportunities for achieving this—such as formal employment, entrepreneurship, or state-driven economic inclusion—are systematically blocked due to chronic poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, and environmental degradation from oil exploration activities (Hirschmann et al., 2024).

Despite Bayelsa contributing over 30% of Nigeria's crude oil output, the state's poverty rate stands at 72% (World Bank, 2022). The absence of corresponding social and infrastructural development creates significant strain, particularly for the youth population. As a result, a large proportion of residents—especially unemployed young people—resort to illegitimate means of wealth acquisition, notably crude oil theft, pipeline vandalism, illegal refining, and associated crimes such as kidnapping for ransom. This adaptive response corresponds to Merton's "innovation" mode, where individuals or communities accept the cultural goal of wealth but reject the legitimate means of achieving it, thereby embracing criminal entrepreneurship as a rational alternative (Watts, 2021).

Furthermore, the normalization of oil theft and other criminal activities in Bayelsa represents a form of structural strain—it is not simply about individual deviance but reflects deep-rooted systemic failures. As illegal oil bunkering and related crimes become institutionalized within local economies, they create perverse incentives for successive generations to engage in these activities, perpetuating cycles of violence,

environmental degradation, and weakened community cohesion (Ikelegbe, 2021; Steyn, 2023). Merton's Strain Theory, therefore, explains how structural inequalities and blocked access to legitimate economic opportunities in resource-rich yet impoverished regions like Bayelsa drive populations toward criminal livelihoods, creating a parallel, illegitimate economy that undermines state authority and social order.

Methodology

The study applied Mix-Method Approach, it involved the administration of questionnaires, interviewing and data sourcing. According to National Bureau of Statistics (2021), the population of Bayelsa State is about 2,277,900. Using Taro Yamani for the determination of sample size, 371 participants were used in this study. The data gathered for this study were analyzed using descriptive statistical tool of frequency and percentage and inferential statistical tools of multiple regression analysis. The demographic profile of respondents was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. The quantitative data was sorted, cleaned and analyzed using the descriptive statistics (Simple Percentage, Frequency, Table, Pie Chart, and Bar Chart). The study adopted descriptive statistics due to its suitability for easy reading and understanding for all and sundry.

Data Analysis and Result

Table 1: Societal Implication of crude oil theft in Bayelsa State

Societal Implications	Frequency	Percent
It discourages armed robbery and stealing	94	25
It encourages self-reliance	97	26
It is a self help for community development	123	33
It reduced the rate of dependent ratio	57	16
Total	371	100

Source: Field survey 2024

The survey findings presented in Table 1 reveal varied perceptions among residents regarding the societal implications of crude oil theft in Bayelsa State. A total of 94 respondents (25%) opined that crude oil theft discourages crimes such as armed robbery and petty stealing. This viewpoint reflects a rationalization of the practice, suggesting that for some individuals, involvement in crude oil theft is perceived as an alternative means of income generation that potentially diverts youths from engaging in more violent or overtly antisocial behaviors. This aligns with Watts (2021), who

identified how participation in illicit economies can, paradoxically, substitute for other forms of violent crime in marginalized communities.

Similarly, 97 respondents (26%) viewed crude oil theft as a vehicle for self-reliance, highlighting how economic deprivation and limited access to legitimate livelihood opportunities propel individuals to seek sustenance through illegal means. This perception aligns with Merton's Strain Theory (1938), where blocked legitimate means of achieving societal goals lead individuals to innovate through illegitimate practices.

Interestingly, the largest proportion of respondents (123, representing 33%) identified "self-help for community development" as a perceived benefit of crude oil theft. This finding reflects how some community members rationalize or even legitimize criminal behaviour by framing it as a necessary intervention to fill perceived governance gaps. Such sentiments echo Ikelegbe's (2021) analysis of resource-based conflicts, where communities engage in informal or illegal economies as responses to long-standing neglect by both state and corporate actors.

In addition, 57 respondents (16%) indicated that crude oil theft reduces the dependency ratio within families. This implies that the income generated from illegal oil-related activities contributes to reducing financial pressures on households, especially in a region where formal employment opportunities remain limited despite its contribution to Nigeria's oil wealth. These findings underscore a critical societal dilemma: the normalization of illegality as survival strategy. While these perspectives do not legitimize criminal behaviour, they offer essential insights into the socio-economic dynamics driving participation in crude oil theft in Bayelsa State. They also highlight how structural economic deprivation fosters social rationalizations that perpetuate cycles of criminality and undermine long-term development goals.

Table 2: Respondents on best Prospects for Curbing Crude Oil Theft in Bayelsa State

Prospect for curbing oil theft	Number of respondents	Percentage
interagency cooperation in protection	70	19
Military alone in protection	4	1
Community, Private security firms, and military and NSCDC protection	297	80
Total	371	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The survey data reveals a clear consensus among respondents regarding the most effective approach to combat crude oil theft in Bayelsa State. The overwhelming preference (80%) for a tripartite model—combining community actors, private security firms, military, and NSCDC—reflects a nuanced understanding of the region’s security challenges and the limitations of unilateral strategies. The perception uphold a dominant preference for collaborative security (80%). This is a strong endorsement of community-private-military partnerships which underscore underscores local intelligence value since the communities possess intimate knowledge of terrain and criminal networks, enabling preemptive interventions. This aligns with the success of Tantita Security Services (TSSNL) and NSCDC joint Operations, which reduced theft by integrating ex-militants and grassroots informants (Kola-Dare, 2025).

This submission emplace confidence in private sector efficiency, Private firms like TSSNL leverage agility and technology (real-time surveillance) to complement state forces, as seen in the interception of vessels like *MT Kali* (Kola-Dare, 2025). The perception for the involvement of the communities addresses grievances fueling theft, echoing findings that exclusion breeds complicity. This further inform submission that protection model should ensure equitable benefit-sharing (10% revenue for local development) to sustain trust (Kola-Dare, 2025).

Respondents perception reveals that there exist limited confidence in a Military-Only Approaches (1%). This outright and near-rejection of sole military reliance highlights, collusion risk as the military (Nigeria Army, Navy and the Airforce and her military personnel are often implicated in facilitating theft, undermining public trust (Barnett, 2023). There is no gainsaying also that brute force limitations like crackdowns of *Operation DELTA SANITY* disrupt illegal refineries but fail to address root causes (unemployment) (Ibekwe, 2015). This could inform policy implication for retool military roles to focus on securing perimeters while civilians lead intelligence gathering.

Perceptions of respondents also has moderate Support for Interagency Cooperation (19%). The minority advocating interagency collaboration (e.g., Navy, NSCDC, Police) suggests, coordination gaps as respondents may perceive value in unifying state forces but doubt efficacy without community buy-in. This could also be a push for resource synergias Joint operations like Navy-led seizures in Bayelsa (April 2025) demonstrate tactical gains but lack sustainability without local integration (Ibekwe, 2015). This is a further call for a strengthened interagency framework but embed them within broader community partnership.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from this study on societal implications of Crude Oil Theft revealed a paradox of survival and Criminality. The survey data reveals a complex interplay between economic survival and criminal normalization in Bayelsa State. Respondents' perceptions reflect a troubling rationalization of oil theft as a socioeconomic coping mechanism, underscoring systemic governance failures and resource curse dynamics.

There is a strong element of crime substitution theory in action, as 25% of respondents believe crude oil theft discourages armed robbery and petty theft, aligning with Watts' (2021) meaning that violent entrepreneurship framework absorb unemployed youth into less overtly violent but equally destabilizing activities. The disturbing view oil theft as a means of self-reliance, echoing Merton's Strain Theory—where blocked legitimate opportunities (72% poverty rate in Bayelsa) force innovation through crime. The majority (33%, 123 respondents) frame oil theft as community self-help, exposing a governance vacuum. As Ikelegbe (2021) notes, communities adopt illicit economies when state and corporate actors neglect development. 16% (57 respondents) argue theft reduces household dependency, highlighting its role as a social safety net. This mirrors Niger Delta's "survival criminality", where illegal refining employs thousands despite environmental costs.

Respondents overwhelmingly reject unilateral approaches, advocating hybrid protection models that address both security and root causes. This finding aligns that communities detect theft networks faster than state forces (Tantita and NSCDC collaborative efforts). This further amplifies Private Sector Efficiency as firms like Tantita and other private security consultants also deploy tech (drones, sensors) and avoid military corruption. The findings show that there is legitimacy in operations within the Bayelsa environment through inclusion involving communities as it reduces grievances fueling theft.

The outright rejection of Military-Only Solutions (1%) signals military complicity in theft. Operations like Delta Sanity destroy illegal refineries but ignore unemployment drivers. This study also revealed that Navy/NSCDC joint operations lack sustainability without community trust.

Conclusion

The study reveals a troubling paradox in Bayelsa State: while crude oil theft devastates the environment and public health, many residents rationalize it as a necessary means of survival. A significant proportion of respondents (25%) believe it reduces violent crime by providing alternative income, while 26% see it as fostering self-reliance in a region with few legitimate economic opportunities. The most striking finding revealed oil theft as a form of "self-help" community development and this highlights the depth of state failure and institutional neglect. These perceptions underscore Merton's Strain Theory, where systemic

exclusion pushes individuals into illicit economies. However, this coping mechanism is ultimately self-destructive, as environmental degradation and health crises further entrench poverty. The data suggests that purely punitive measures will fail unless paired with livelihood alternatives and inclusive development to break this vicious cycle.

Respondents overwhelmingly endorse a tripartite security model combining community intelligence, private security efficiency, and state force oversight, as the most effective way to curb oil theft. This preference reflects deep skepticism toward unilateral approaches, with dearth support for military-only solutions due to collusion risks and minimal support favouring interagency cooperation (which lacks grassroots trust). The findings align with successful cases like Tantita Security's community-driven operations, which reduced theft through local informants and technology. The lesson is clear: top-down enforcement alone cannot work in a region where crime is rooted in marginalization. Sustainable solutions must integrate communities as stakeholders, leverage private sector agility, and ensure transparency in state forces. Policymakers must prioritize hybrid security frameworks alongside economic incentives to address both the symptoms and root causes of oil theft.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion of findings and the conclusion, the study recommends that;

- i. The study recommended that all tiers of government Southsouth Development Commission, Bayelsa State and all LGAs should deepen the deployment of community-based surveillance systems involving locals to detect and report illegal bunkering activities, by Involve host communities in oil pipeline protection through benefit-sharing schemes, security contracts, or cooperative surveillance.
- ii. The study also recommended that all tiers of government particularly the Bayelsa State government should develop and incentivised alternative livelihood programs in fishing, farming, and small-scale enterprises to disincentivize illegal oil theft.

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