

Ungoverned Spaces, Youths and Human Security Challenges: Interrogating Human Rights Based Development in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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History: Received 20/03/2024 | Revised 06/04/2024 | Accepted 23/05/2024 | Published 30/05/2024

Abstract. This study tries to examine the connection between the phenomenon of ‘ungoverned spaces’ and youths, and the challenges it poses to leadership in the Niger Delta region, South-south Nigeria. The methodology applied by the study comprised the qualitative method, and two research designs, namely, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Groups. Results of the study showed that lack of regulatory capability on the part of government, unemployment and poverty among youths, weakness of state security governance system, and the oil exploration and exploitation activities by the foreign multinational oil companies (MNOCs) contributed to the emergence and flourish of ungoverned spaces in the Niger Delta Region. The study recommended the need for government to always ensure that it acquires enough regulatory capability. To achieve this, the study specifically recommended three measures. The first measure was revitalization or stronger commitment to the deployment of the local government system and traditional institutions as a third-tier government and as a tool for grassroots governance. The second measure was prioritization of the ‘bottom-up’ (rural-centric) approach to development policies and programmes as opposed to the ‘top-down’ (urban-centric) approach that tends to alienate or discriminate against territories located in the hinterlands. The third measure was the need to strengthen the state security governance system through greater funding and equipping of the various law-enforcement and security agencies in the region. Finally, the study also recommended urgent resolution of the protracted Niger Delta conflict, which is driven by struggle for resource control and political autonomy in the face of systemic poverty, unemployment, environmental pollution and degradation, economic injustice and lack of infrastructural and human capital development being inflicted by the MNOCs in concert with the Nigerian state and local bourgeoisie on the people of oil-bearing communities in the region. Against this backdrop, the study also recommended a special form of development approach known as Human-Rights-based Development Approach, which is not only people-oriented and people-driven, but, as opposed to other forms of the development approach, has also all the essential elements of equity, justice, transparency, accountability, and participation and reflect the socio-cultural realities of the Niger Delta region.

Keywords: *Ungoverned Spaces; Youths; Criminal Gangs; Government; Mnoc*

INTRODUCTION

Local insecurity has reached a crisis point, leading to a recent declaration of a state of emergency in that sector (Okoli & Abubaker, 2021; Olaniyan, 2017, CLEEN Foundation, 2020). The foregoing state of

emergency recently led to the establishment of special joint taskforces with various code-names and comprised personnel of various security agencies in the country, include men and officers of the three branches of the nation’s Armed Forces (Army, Navy, and

Airforce). This, of course, followed the failure of the conventional law enforcement agencies, led by the Nigeria Police to effectively deal with the ugly development (Ojo, 2020).

Although Nigeria is not in a state of war or national catastrophe, its internal security ambience, over the years, has been characterized by trepidations that include militancy, communal violence, insurgency and armed banditry (International Crisis Group, 2017; Lenshine, 2018; Okoli & Azom, 2019). Of all these threats, the phenomenon of armed banditry appears to have been the most pervasive and, arguably, the most virulent in recent times. According to the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), (2020:2): *“the multifaceted layers of criminality involved, and recurrent nature of the armed banditry call for effective mechanisms to mitigate the threat it poses to peace and security in Nigeria.*

Investigations point to the fact that armed banditry as a criminal endeavour doesn't just happen or come into existence or sustained by itself, it is a usually midwifed and nourished by a number of factors, prominent among which is a phenomenon known as 'ungoverned spaces' (Lenshine et al., 2020; Okoli & Abubakar, 2021; Rabasa et al, 2007). In its literal meaning, 'ungoverned spaces' simply refers to swathes of uninhabited physical land areas, including forestlands, borderlands, river-lines disused oil-well areas and mining sites, creeks, swamps, and

hinterland settlements or local communities that have for long been abandoned or neglected by government in terms of provision of basic social amenities (IOM, 2019; Onwuzuruigbo, 2020) and services, particularly security provisioning (Barnett, Rufai & Abdulaziz, 2020).

While a number of previous studies had investigated the phenomenon of armed banditry in Nigeria, including its nature, contexts, causes, consequences, and implications (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016; Onwuzuruigbo, 2020; Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014; Okoli & Abubakar, 2021), not much efforts had been made by researchers to examine the socio-spatial dimension of armed banditry. More specifically, one salient variegation of the emerging socio-spatial dialectics of armed banditry, such as the hideouts or operational bases of the component criminal gangs known as 'ungoverned spaces' has not been duly explored by contemporary studies. Against the foregoing backdrop therefore, this empirical study, examined the phenomenon of ungoverned spaces, youths who are usually recruited into various criminal militia gangs whose operational bases and hideouts are the aforementioned ungoverned spaces and the challenge the foregoing pose to contemporary leaders in the Niger Delta region, South-south Nigeria.

Nigeria's jurisdictional sphere is at best grossly under-governed. The evidence in the existence of swathes of scarcely controlled

hinterlands, forestlands, borderlands, and international frontiers, where anti-state actors and groups have carved a niche for themselves (Albert, 2018; Okoli and Ogayi, 2018). Instances in this regard abound. The creeks and river-lines of the Niger Delta have been under the competitive control of the region's various militant groups. Similarly, significant portions of the forested landscapes and borderlines of the embattled Lake Chad frontier in the country's north-eastern region have been occupied by local insurgents and their international cohorts (Okoli, 2017).

In the north-western and central parts of Nigeria, rings of bandit militias have taken over chunks of hinterland communities in Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Plateau, Niger and Benue States. In the aforementioned contested spaces, there are pockets of sanctuaries and enclaves where insurgents and bandits wield near exclusive territorial control, constituting themselves into a sort of parallel government (Onwuzuruigbo, 2020). In such places, the authority of the Nigerian state has become endangered as the government at all levels struggle rather precariously to reassume authoritative territorial control. It is such a context that the rise and reign of criminal militia gangs which contest territorial control with the state, would be better conjectured.

The weak state syndrome in the country has manifested in various ways: poor governance of hinterland, forestland, and borderland governance, ineffective arms

control, unregulated rural agrarian and mining sectors, and prevalence of communal, sectarian and extremist violence. Nigeria's vast borderlands, forestlands, and hinterlands have remained scarcely secured (Okoli, 2018, 2019b). They have become safe havens and corridors for subversive activities, ranging from organized criminality to insurgency (Olaniyan, 2017; Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016). The porosity of Nigeria's borderlines and international frontiers, as well as the existence of disparate militia groups in the hardly 'governed' countryside, have created an abiding and enabling condition for arms and drugs trafficking, often resulting in proliferations of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) and substances (WANEP, 2020). The under-governed hinterland have also provided an avenue for violent organized crimes such as cattle rustling and kidnapping for ransom, as well as market, mine and village raids (Okoli & Lenshie, 2018). Such treasonable activities have provided impetus for the emergence and sustenance of a criminal economy within which armed banditry is produced and reproduced (Okoli & Abubakar, 2021: 5).

Again, one recent study also reported that in Yobe State, North East Nigeria, certain criminal gangs operating from particular hideouts had seized control of an almost neglected community for years running without any intervention by any government security agencies. As the said study put it,

these criminal gangs usually moved about unmolested as they wielded their sophisticated guns, including AK 47 and AK-49 in high-speed motorcycles in their routine 'supervision' of the area. It was also reported that these criminal gangs, apart from routine collection of various quantities of foodstuff from the local residents, also imposed and collected monetary levies and taxes as if they were government officials. As also reported, the said criminals in the process also occasionally murdered a number of innocent souls, raped women with reckless abandon, and even looted some wealthy households in the said enclave.

Furthermore, ungoverned spaces create largely unfettered opportunities for non-state armed groups (NSAGs) to market themselves and undermine government authority. For instance, in 2021, some communities in Niger State negotiated peace deals with insurgents by offering them motorcycles and cash gifts in return for safety. In other cases, terrorists provide makeshift governance frameworks in some communities. The unaddressed nature of Nigeria's ungoverned spaces is a breeding ground for underdevelopment and the spread of non-state armed actors. It also engenders a disconnect between residents in the ungoverned spaces and the government. Due to ungoverned spaces, government's authority is severely undermined by the rise and dominance of non-state armed groups which provide an agenda-

driven ideology that is often at variance with that of the Nigerian state. The northeast insurgency and banditry in the northwest and north-central zones are clear cases.

Invariably, Nigeria's ungoverned spaces can also stem from an uptick in armed conflicts and government's inability to manage violence triggers proactively. For example, the Niger Delta region was arguably a governed space until the exponential rise in violent militancy turned the region into a conflict theatre, reducing semblances of governance structures until amnesty was extended to agitating militants in 2009. Currently, in South-east Nigeria, the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and unknown gunmen (UGM) are pushing many locations in the region into an ungoverned status. While formal and informal security arrangements strive to maintain stability in the region, many locations remain vulnerable to criminal gangs. For instance, Mondays are still observed as sit-at-home days in the South-east despite government encouraging people to go about their normal activities. Many residents sympathetic to IPOB's cause, are afraid of disobeying their orders or do not trust security agencies to protect them on Mondays. Hence, the stay-at-home orders meet widespread compliance on designated days. By and large, the danger and consequences posed by the vexed phenomenon known as 'ungoverned spaces' and its sister monster of armed banditry to local security and, by extension, the

very corporate existence of the Nigerian federation are better imagined than described. They have indeed joined the phenomenon of insecurity to compete for the soul of the country.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the extent the level of regulatory capability of government contributed to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces.
2. To find out the extent the level of capability of state security governance system contributed to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces.
3. To investigate the level of contribution of the employment status or income level of youths to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces.
4. To assess the extent oil exploration and exploitation activities by multinational oil companies contributed to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces.

Research Questions

1. To what extent did the level of regulatory capability of government contribute to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces?
2. To what did the level of capability of state security government system contribute to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces?
3. What is the level of contribution of the employment status or income level of

youths to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces?

4. To what extent did the oil exploration and exploitation activities by multinational oil companies contribute to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a methodology that comprised the qualitative method and semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Groups. Recruitment of target participants for the study was guided by an earlier established recruitment threshold of $t = 2 - 51$, meaning that the study targeted a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 51 participants. However, at the end, 29 target participants took part in the study (See Table 1).

Participants for the study were recruited from eight (8) sample areas with 36 sample units spread across the five (5) States that make up the Niger Delta region (South South Zone) of Nigeria, including Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, and Rivers States. These sample areas included 5 state Headquarters of the Nigeria Police, Military Joint Task Force for the South South Zone of Nigeria code-named Operation Delta Safe, Federal Government MDAs in the Zone, Multinational Oil Companies (MNOCs) operating in the Niger Delta region, youth groups, community leaders/watch groups, State Government Ministries, and State

Headquarters of the DSS in the Zone. See Table 1 for the distribution of the target participants across the zone.

Worthy of note also is that participants for the study were recruited using special gatekeeper referrals and the purposive sampling technique that was guided by the level of knowledge of and wealth of experience about the topic under study on the part of those targeted for inclusion in the study. For reason of confidentiality, the 29 participants were duly identified using three alphabets (NDR) representing Niger Delta Respondent and two Roman numeral number digits, ranging from 1-29 (ie NDR-01 to NDR – 29).

15 semi-structured interviews and six (6) Focus Groups were conducted in various locations across the five (5) States that make up the South South Zone of Nigeria (the Niger Delta region). These locations included Uyo, Yenogoa, Calabar, Port Harcourt, Asaba, Degema, Obior, Ogoja, Ugep, Ouoque, Ughelli, and Isoko.

RESULT

To what extent did the level of government control and regulatory capability over all its territories contribute to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces?

Findings of this study showed that an overwhelming majority of the 29 participants in the study were of the opinion that successive governments in Nigeria, particularly in the study area (Nigeria Delta region) lacked

enough control and regulatory capabilities over some of its territories, in the region, particularly those located in the hinterlands areas. They contended that as a consequence of legitimacy deficits, or sheer administrative or political indolence and waywardness, successive governments failed to reach down to certain hinterland territories or swathes of very remote locations within the state's territorial boundaries or jurisdiction. This, according to them would be achieved by way of the not establishing government's presence or talking firm and authoritative control with provision of basic social amenities and services, including physical security provisioning. In some instances, so argued the said interviewees, certain territories were wholly or partly neglected or abandoned as they remained either ungoverned, under-policed or not policed at all, thereby leaving behind big legitimacy gaps and power vacuums that yawned for someone to occupy. Most of the respondents also opined that in the face of such legitimacy gaps and vacuums, local bandits, and criminal militia gangs did not waste time in moving in to take over firm control and regulation of the affairs of such ungoverned spaces. According to most of these respondents, the control and influence the criminal gangs wielded was so strong enough that in some instances, feeble attempts by some detachments of state security forces to dislodge them from the said ungoverned territories were stoutly resisted or repelled, as

the state security forces were always overpowered by the firepower of the criminal gangs. As one respondent in one of the interviews sessions, a retired Lt. Colonel in the Nigerian Army and now a prominent community leader, put it: "... once they (criminal gangs) take over control of such ungoverned territories, they set up underworld governance structures and an illicit criminal economy headed by a crime lord, variously addressed as "de boss", "mafia king", "the don" etc. From such territories, the gang commits all sorts of criminalities against the local residents of neighbouring areas, such as armed robbery, looting, kidnapping, rape, arson, assassinations, thuggery etc. in fact, they do this unmolested" (NDR-09).

Most of the participants also opined that the said criminal gangs not only had the ungoverned enclaves under their firm control, they as well wielded visible influence, legitimacy, acceptance, and endorsement among the local populace in their midst. Apparently in support of the foregoing, one respondent, a university don and a town union executive in one of the States, had this to say: "The criminal gangs are not only in authoritative control of their enclaves, but have acquired such high level of acceptance and legitimacy as the real "government" of the day to the point that in certain areas, the gangs also impose and collect taxes and levies, exact donation of various foodstuff items from the locals unquestioned and without hesitation by

the latter" (NDR-03).

To demonstrate the fact that government lacked enough control and regulatory capabilities over the ungoverned spaces or that it might have ceded such capabilities to the criminal gangs, most of the respondents cited the evidence of existence of what some call "crime-power synergy". According to these respondents, organized criminal networks and kingpins sometimes maintained mutual relationship with the local political elites. The political elites enlist the services of some criminals in their various partisan endeavours, such as electioneering. In reciprocation, the criminals are tacitly granted operational endorsement by politicians upon assumption of power. For instance, one of the respondents, a serving police Superintendent with the JTF (Operation Delta Safe), voiced his opinion in this way: "In a typical ungoverned territory, the usual authority and power capabilities of the government or the state are virtually subverted and supplanted by the illicit or underworld 'government' established by the occupying criminal or insurgent gang. In such a territory, organized crime is not only politically and socially tolerated, but also systematically entrenched, patronized and protected by the powers that be and public security operatives themselves. The foregoing is the bone of contention" (NDR-13).

Similarly, majority of the interviewees were also of the opinion that the fact of the failure on the part of most State Governments

in Nigeria to effectively deploy the local government system as a potent vehicle for reaching down to those territories that are located at the hinterlands and borderlands of their boundaries constituted very strong evidence that government lacked both control and regulatory capabilities over all its territories. On the strength of the foregoing, the respondents, therefore, concluded that this apparent deficits in the control and regulatory capabilities of government must be responsible for the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces in Nigeria, particularly in most parts of the Niger Delta region. As one respondent, who was a retired Director in the Cross River State Civil Service and now a prominent community leader, put it: “In most civilized climes outside Nigeria, the local council system and traditional institutions like Kingship stools and their councils are often deployed to reach down to the grassroots populace, provide amenities and services, including local security to them. However, in Nigeria, power elites see the local governments only as tools for selfish purposes. In those civilized climes, the local government system is held in high esteem as an autonomous third-tier of government presence in the grassroots hinterland and an agent of mobilization for development and change. It is never treated as a political opportunity for state governments to practice their whims and caprices” (NDR-25).

To what extent was the level of capability of state security governance system responsible for the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces”?

As results of this study showed, majority of the study participants were also of the observation that the state security governance system, represented, of course, by the various law enforcement and other security agencies in Nigeria, particularly in the study area was inherently weak and to that extent lacked the requisite capability to combat modern acts of criminality and insurgency by local criminals, bandits, criminal gangs and insurgents. They were, therefore, of the opinion that the foregoing was responsible for the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces in the study area in particular, and the other parts of the country in general. They further contended that as a consequence of a number of factors, the Nigeria Police, and other law enforcement and security agencies in the country lacked, for instance, the required number of personnel, stock of professional acumen, expertise, and experience, the right quantity of modern weaponry and equipment and the morale and commitment badly needed in fighting modern local criminality and insurgency, particularly the twin phenomena of criminal gangs and ‘ungoverned spaces’. Majority of the respondents placed the blame squarely on poor funding of the said security agencies by successive governments in the country. According to the submission of one

respondent, who was a serving senior DSS officer, for instance: “As a consequence of poor funding of the entire security agencies in the country, most of them hardly recruit enough number of new men required in policing the entire country with a population of over 200 million. For instance, while the international standard set by the United Nations with regard to police-population ratio is 1:450, that of Nigeria is over 1:5,000. This scenario also applies to other senior security agencies like the DSS, Armed forces etc. The implication is that Nigeria is grossly under-policed as of today, and this explains the inability of the Nigeria Police to effectively combat crime, not in the urban neighbourhoods, but also in various hinterland territories” (NDR-15).

Similarly, in support of the foregoing opinion, one participant, who was a Deputy Commissioner of Police in the defunct JTF in the Zone known as Operation Pulo Shield, also observed that: “The evidence of the fact that most security agencies in Nigeria lack the right quantity of modern weaponry and equipment could be conjectured from the case of the Nigeria Police versus the rampaging armed bandits. While a typical armed bandit goes about robbing or terrorizing people with sophisticated weapons like AK-47 or AK-49 and costly Smartphone, including iPhone, the police officer pursuing after him does so with a rickety assault rifle or double barrel gun. Who wins in the ensuing gunfire between the

two at the end is left for you to find out” (NDR-07).

Another respondent, who was a demobilized army officer and a leader of one of the community vigilante groups, in supporting the foregoing opinion, also observed as follows: “Even where security personnel, particularly the police officer is well equipped with modern weapons and equipment, he still lacks the right stock of professional acumen in terms of expertise, tactical discipline, patriotic and professional commitment badly needed to carry out his job effectively. For instance, the high level of professional indiscipline in him usually leads such a personnel to get influenced by ethnic, religious, gang, or communal sentiment and soon gets easily swallowed up by his selfish interests. Rather than serve the people and the nation diligently, instead he becomes saboteurs of government efforts by supporting and fuelling criminality and insurgency through either leaking vital intelligence to criminal gangs or assisting criminals to acquire weapons and equipment or to escape from prison custody and the long arm of the law” (NDR-20).

In another dimension, majority of the respondents also attributed the inability or failure of the state security governance apparatus (law enforcement and security agencies) to effectively police the ungoverned spaces in the country, particularly in the study area (the Niger Delta) to their apparent

inability to embrace the modern tactics in policing crime and insurgency known as intelligence-led policing (ILP), as opposed to the traditional technique known as police-led policing (PLP) that relies wholly on excessive use of raw force or attacks in combating crime. These respondents were also of the opinion that most security and law enforcement agencies in the country, especially in the study area also lacked the right quantity of modern surveillance and intelligence-gathering technologies and enough number of experienced intelligence analysts. They also observed that majority of the said agencies hardly placed due emphasis on the tactics of intelligence-sharing amongst themselves through the approach known as inter-agency collaboration (IAC). As one of the respondents who was an aerial combatant with the JTF (Operation Delta Safe) and its predecessor, Operation Pulo Shield in Calabar and Bonny, respectively, observed during one of the interview sessions: “From the information we extracted from two suspects (one was a member of one certain hinterland criminal gang and the other a notorious militant) who we picked up from two separate operations at Bonny Island creeks, we discovered that these criminals place greater emphasis on intelligence gathering, sometimes much greater than we do in our own case. For instance, they also own a sophisticated radar equipment that monitors our movement, particularly as we advance towards their

operational base. In fact, from these two arrested suspects, we began to appreciate the fact that they (criminal gangs) have more intelligence materials about us than the ones we have about them” (NDR-023).

To what extent did the employment status or income level of youths contribute to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces?

A good majority of the study’s participants were of the view that both the employment status and income levels of youths in Nigeria, particularly in the study area of Niger Delta contributed significantly to the emergence and festering of ungoverned spaces. They argued that majority of Nigerian youths are ravaged by absolute poverty and feature among the 70 percent of Nigerians that live below the poverty line of US\$1 per day. They also contended that most of these youths were poor due the high level of unemployment amongst them as a result of their lack of access to quality functional education that would have equipped them with employable skills and competencies. Majority of the respondents to the foregoing research question also observed that as a consequence of the said acute poverty and high level of unemployment, feelings of hopelessness, despair, frustration and aggression and becomes an easy prey to the lure of such vices as armed banditry, kidnapping for ransom, violence, and the tendency to join criminal gangs. Responding

in support of the forgoing opinion, one respondent, who was a serving civil servant in the Ministry of Youths Development in one of the States in the Niger Delta, observed as follows: “Poverty and its twin sister known as unemployment usually conspire to produce an acrimonious feelings of frustration-aggression in the hapless and dejected youths, which sooner than later degenerates into a complex that oftentimes predisposes them to committing acts of restiveness, violence, or criminality, including kidnapping and armed banditry, and drift into ungoverned territories where they join criminal gangs” (NDR-11).

Similarly, in support of the foregoing opinion, another respondent, who was a retired professor of education, but who was seating on the Board of the Niger Delta Development Commission at the time of this study, also observed that: “It is a reality and unfortunate that successive policies on education compounded the problem of unemployment in Nigeria. This is because, the knowledge received is never functional, as such does not develop in the young recipients the much-needed skill set and core competencies for productivity. Obviously because they lack quality functional education, most youths in Nigeria go about jobless and frustrated. To that extent, they easily fall prey to temptations of committing all manner of criminal acts, including ransom kidnapping, armed robbery, and joining criminal gangs as the only opportunity left to them to eke out a living”

(NDR-26).

To what extent were the oil exploration and exploitation activities of multinational oil companies (MNOCs) in the host environment of oil-bearing communities responsible for the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces?

Results of this study also showed that a greater number of respondents were of the opinion that the oil exploration and exploitation activities of the multinational oil companies inflicted untold damage to the environment of their host communities by way of pollution and degradation of the components of the said environment, and that the foregoing contributed significantly to the emergence and festering of the phenomena of ungoverned spaces and its twin sister known as criminal gangs in the study area. These respondents also went ahead and pinpointed two distinct ways in which the said activities of the MNOCs gave rise to and sustained the monsters known as ungoverned spaces and criminal gangs. One of these two ways was physical in nature, while the other was socio-economic-cum-psychological.

In the first, the respondents observed that through their oil exploration and exploitation activities, the multinational oil companies left behind a number of other abandoned, disused or exhausted oil rigs and oil-well areas, burrow pits of different sizes, ditches and camp tents in different remote

parts of Niger Delta region, including difficult creeks, high seas, swamps, and marshlands. They also revealed that with time, some of these structures became difficult to access or completely inaccessible by ordinary human beings, particularly the police, other security agents, and government officials owing to the high level of damage done to the access roads and the surrounding areas, thus turning these locations into neglected, ungoverned or unpoliced territories. The respondents also informed that in the face of the foregoing reality, local bandits and criminal gangs from either far or near wasted no time and drifted to these locations and firmly took over control as their hideouts and operational bases. In support of the foregoing opinion, one respondent, an ex-member of one of the criminal gangs and a vigilante group member in one of the communities, also observed: "Before I joined MEND at Igbogene near Yenogoa as a freedom fighter (militant), I used to be a member of a certain gang that operated in the Degema area. Police and JTF people used to harass us during and after operations, and we looked for a safer place for hideout. We later found one, which was an abandoned oil-well area that was owned by Chevron people. It was located at a very remote and difficult hinterland, very far away from Degema. The place was good, because neither police nor even military JTF nor Government people could reach there. I thank God I left the place and the gang very safe and

for making me to have surrendered to Jesus Christ and now a happier person" (NDR-04).

With regard to the second way, majority of the participants were of the opinion that the crude oil exploration, production, and transportation activities of the MNOCs really inflicted untold damage to the environment of their host communities in ways that led to the emergence and festering of ungoverned paces. For instance, the said respondents also observed that the MNOCs in their activities polluted and degraded the host communities farmlands, fishing areas, such as rivers, lakes, streams and other freshwater bodies, and the entire aquatic ecosystem, watersheds, sundry natural resources, general ecology, and ambient atmosphere, which prior to the arrival of the MNDCs were generally fertile, unpolluted, and highly productive and which sustained the entire livelihood of the people of the communities all the year round. The respondents also observed that the MNOCs did all this through mindless deformation and compaction of natural soils, crude oil spillage, and gas flaring activities; and that all this foisted untold hardship, abject poverty, hunger and systemic deprivation on the mass of the people. In support of the foregoing, one of the respondents, who was also the President General of one of the communities in Degema summarized the situation in the following way: "In fact, the effects of the exploration, exploitation or production, and transportation activities of the oil companies, including gas

flaring have been devastating to the oil-rich region called the Niger Delta. The mass of the people of the region are, therefore, pauperized through rural poverty that is foisted on them by the oil multinationals” (NDR-04).

Findings of this study also showed that majority of the participants also observed that in addition to the said mindless pollution and degradation of the environments of the host communities, which foisted poverty on the mass of the people, it was soon discovered that the oil companies were, on the other hand, making huge profits from sale of oil and gas resources being extracted from the areas. They also observed that under the wicked acquiescence of the Nigerian State, and the local bourgeoisie that comprised of both traditional and political elites, the MONCs refused to invest much back in the cash-cows (the oil bearing communities) by way of provision of such infrastructural amenities such as pipe-borne water, rural electrification and decent schools, health facilities, industries, and motorable roads, among others, thereby turning most communities in the Niger Delta region into grossly neglected territories and, of course, ‘ungoverned spaces’, where criminal gangs and militant groups made up of restive youths rule the roost. They also observed that aside of the non-investment in infrastructure, the multinational oil firms also refused to commit meaningful investments in human capital development in the host communities, in terms of provision of abundant quality and

functional education that would had adequately equipped thousands of their youths with employable skills and competencies for life-long employment and opportunities for self-actualization” in white-collar employment, public service, commerce, industries, or the professions (NDR-19).

Finally, results of this study also showed that majority of the respondents also observed that the pains and burden from the aforementioned mass poverty amongst the people conspired with their being denied their rightful share of the huge revenues from the crude oil and gas being extracted from their environment by the multinational oil companies to generate in the people, particularly the youth demographic cohort, feelings of resentment, anger, frustration, betrayal, aggression and deviance, not only against the oil multinationals, but also against the Nigerian state represented, of course, by government of the day, and the local bourgeoisie (both traditional and political elites). In their collective reaction to the foregoing, so also observed by most of the respondents, the people decided to embark on both legitimate and illicit courses of collective action. In the first course of action, legitimate as it was, the people developed some protest, resource-control, separatist or self-determination ideologies, which they had leveraged on to form a number of both militant and non-militant agitation movements or bodies, including the Movement for the

Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), and Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), among so many other groups as the rallying pillars for their grievance protest against the MNOCs, the Nigerian State, and their local collaborators. In the second course of action, a number of criminal-minded elements in the youth demographic cohorts in the communities moved down to the various ungoverned hinterland territories (ungoverned spaces) and joined those criminal gangs that had taken control of those hinterland territories as their safe hideouts and operational bases. From these hideouts, they launched attacks against the personnel and facilities of the multinational oil companies, and nearby local communities, particularly residences of certain local elites. For instance, one of the respondents, an ex-member of one of the criminal gangs and now an Executive of one of the community vigilante groups had this to say: "The last place I approached for a job was one oil services company working for Chevron and they rejected me. I remained jobless for years. When no hope was coming, I finally succumbed to the temptation to join a criminal gang to enable me eke out a living. When I was there, our boss ensured that the gang was well-organised and well-armed. We robbed local residents and also kidnapped some local chiefs and some other rich men. Our greatest enemies were the foreign thieves called oil companies which steal oil and gas from our

land. In our operations, we always made sure, we punished them very severely" (NDR-17).

Similarly, the above view was corroborated by one of the participants, an expatriate and a management staff of one of the multinational oil companies, who also observed as follows: "We are always aware that we are the prime target of those militants and criminal gangs. In fact, we have always paid dearly for it, as they steal large volumes of our crude oil worth millions of dollars yearly. They also invade most of our oil and gas facilities, shut down our operations on several occasions, and kidnapped a number of our valued staff. They have always sabotaged our equipment, vandalized most of our pipelines, and killed a number of our men. In spite of all this, we still love the people; we also appreciate their anger, their grievances, their frustrations and above all, their demands. We have always strived to address them through our Corporate Social Responsibility (SCR) interventions. They themselves should also try to show a little patience and understanding, as we promise to always do more" (NDR-22).

In conclusion here, the foregoing represents the way majority of the respondents opined that the oil exploration and exploitation activities of the multinational companies were significantly responsible for the emergence and sustenance of the phenomenon of "ungoverned spaces" which most parts of the Niger Delta region had turned into.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between ungoverned spaces and youths in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and the challenge before leaders in the area. The study was guided in its investigations by four objectives and four research questions that centred on the phenomenon of ungoverned spaces, youths, the regulatory and control capability of government, state security governance system, employment or income status of youths, and the oil exploration and exploitation activities of multinational companies. Relying on the data obtained through the responses of participants in both the Key Informant Interviews and Focus Groups, complemented by secondary data from few relevant documents, the study made a number findings.

Results of this study showed that the Nigerian state represented, of course, by the government of the day lacked the regulatory and control capability over all its territories within its boundaries, and this contributed significantly to the emergence and flourish of ungoverned spaces in the Niger Delta region. This finding is, of course, in tandem with the earlier findings by Onwuzurigbo (2020), and Okoli & Abubakar (2021), Olaniyan (2017), Olaniyan & Yahaya (2016), Okoli & Lenshine (2018), who in their separate studies identified situations whereby the Nigerian state failed to exercise firm and authoritative

control over a number of hinterland territories, forestlands, border lands, and seashore lines and anti-state forces had capitalized on such legitimacy gaps and vacuum of governance to engage in subversion, and takeover of such places as ungoverned spaces.

Again, findings of the study also showed that the level of capability of the state security governance system in Nigeria represented by both the law enforcement and other security agencies has proved to be weak and that this contributed significantly to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces in the study area. The foregoing findings were also in line with the earlier findings by Olonisakin (2008), Chukwuma (2015), CLEEN Foundation (2012), and Alemika security governance systems, represented by the Nigeria Police and DSS, and other security agencies, including the various military Joint Task Forces had all along shown some systemic weakness that saw them not being able to police and secure all the territories of the Nigerian state, particularly the hinterlands, forestlands, and border areas. They also found that such lack of capability which was caused by poor funding by the government, professional incompetence and courage, lack of adequate weaponry and modern equipment, and inadequate number of personnel, among other factors, prevented them from reaching down to the said hinterland territories, thus turning

such places into neglected or ungoverned territories.

Results of the study also showed that the employment or income status of youths, whereby majority of them were found to be ravaged by the two twin monsters of unemployment and poverty, contributed significantly to the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces in the region under investigation. This finding was in conformity with the earlier results of separate studies by Chukuezi (1994), Imomoh (2002), NBS (2020), and Abdullahi, (2012), who found high level of unemployment and poverty among the Nigerian youths and how it had predisposed the affected youths to frustration and hopelessness that often led them into committing all manner of criminal acts, including armed banditry, kidnapping, hired assassination and, above all, drifting down to the rural hinterlands or neglected places where they joined criminal gangs to visit mayhem on the society.

Finally, results of the study also showed that oil exploration and exploration activities of the multinational oil companies were responsible for the emergence and sustenance of ungoverned spaces in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This result completely agreed with the earlier finding by Ejumudo (2014), Onosode (2005), Roberts (2005), and Jhingan (2009).

In fact, valuable portions of farmland, lowland, fresh water swamps, forests, and

mangrove resources have been degraded resulting in loss of habitat and resources in the oil communities that depend on natural resources for livelihood, thus leaving the people in a vicious cycle of poverty (Onosode, 2006). The trail of natural resource degradation in places such as Oloibiri, Kokori, Sangama, Boma, and other oil-bearing communities are testimonial.

Associated implications of the operations of oil conglomerates in the Niger Delta region are oil spillage, gas flaring, and pipeline vandalism. While oil spillage occurs at various stages of product handing, from exploration to production through refining to distribution and marketing, no less than 96% of the spills are associated with the exploration and production and, therefore, localized in the producing areas (Roberts, 2005). Over the years, oil companies have spilt much oil in the region.

That the alliance of the Nigerian state with the oil giants and the domestic bourgeoisie has played a dominant role in the underdevelopment of the Niger Delta is never disputable. The choice of the word “underdevelopment” is predicated on the understanding that the region has prospects for development, but not potentialities for same, due to the laws, policies, actions and operations of the trio (three actors) in the alliance that has produced stagnation and retrogression in the region (Jhingan, 2009).

In summary, the effects of the exploration, exploitation, production, and transportation activities of the oil companies, including gas flaring, have been devastating to the rich-oil region called the Niger Delta. The mass of the people of the region are, therefore, pauperized through rural poverty that is foisted on them. It is, therefore, in response of the foregoing that the youths in the Niger Delta resorted to taking up arms against the state and the oil companies, one of the manifestations being the tendency to join criminal gangs that operate from various ungoverned spaces in the region (Ejumudo, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The emergence and flourish of a strange phenomenon known as ‘ungoverned spaces’ across parts of Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region without doubt reflect the crisis of governance, legitimacy deficits, and lack of patriotic commitment on the part of the Nigerian leadership to forge a very strong state out of the present structure of the country. As a matter of fact, two inter-related factors, namely, lack of government regulatory and control capability, and the systemic weakness of the state security governance systems have conspired to disable successive governments from reaching down to various hinterland territories with infrastructural development and more importantly, protection of life and property, which are the *raison de taine* of the existence of government. The

foregoing turned the said hinterland territories into neglected, ungoverned enclaves otherwise known as “ungoverned spaces”. It also created a governance vacuum which various non-state actors, including criminal gangs and insurgent groups capitalized on to contest the control of such spaces with government.

Besides, the multinational oil companies (MNDCs) operating in the various oil-bearing communities in the region also did not help matters, as they equally contributed significantly to the rise and flourish of the phenomenon of “ungoverned spaces in the study area. For, as the results of the study showed, they inflicted untold damage to the environment of their host communities through crude oil exploration, production, and transportation activities. Through the foregoing, the said MNOCs foisted systemic poverty on the mass of the people of the oil-bearing communities. In another dimension, findings of the study also showed that the oil multinationals earned very huge profits from the oil production revenues running into billions of dollars annually. However, out of their insensitivity and greed, these MNOCs refused to invest meaningfully in the infrastructural development of the host communities. Through the foregoing, they turned a good number of these host communities into neglected, devastated, and so to speak, “ungoverned spaces”, which any non-state actor groups that care are free to go in and contest control of.

Again, results of the study also revealed that the worst hit by the effects of the progressive downturn in the Nigerian economy was the youth demographic cohort, as they were thrown into high level of unemployment and poverty up to this day. As results of this study also showed, like they did in the case of provision of infrastructural development, the oil multinationals also in their crass insensitivity to the plight of the people and primitive greed, also refused to invest meaningfully in human capital development in the host communities, particularly in provision of abundant, quality and functional education. The foregoing worsened the unemployment and poverty situations of the youths in the study area. Even the 2009 and 2015 Amnesty Programmes by the Federal Government in concert with the MNOCs did not help matters, as they were seen as mere cosmetic palliatives. Visibly under the pains and burden of high unemployment and systemic poverty, the youths in the region began to nurse heavy feelings of resentment, anger, frustration, aggression, and deviance not only against the insensitive and greedy foreign multinational oil companies, but also their perceived local collaborators, particularly the Nigerian state or government and the local bourgeoisie. To ventilate their grievances and frustration, a good number of the said aggrieved youths joined various violent militant groups that had sprung up to that effect. Most worrisomely, a

large population of the same youths, on the other hand, joined various criminal gangs operating from various ungoverned spaces, which had spread across parts of the region. The foregoing was exactly how youth unemployment and poverty masterminded mainly by the activities of the foreign oil companies caused the phenomenon of ‘ungoverned spaces’ to flourish in the Niger Delta region under study. As it were, from these ungoverned spaces these youths joined their fellow criminal gang members to commit all manner of criminal acts against the nearby local communities, and the foreign oil multinationals, including armed banditry, armed robbery, kidnapping, organised murder, village raids, rape, arson, and vandalism.

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