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# 'Bleeding Nigeria through the Pipelines': Understanding Oil pipeline Vandalism in Arepo, Southwest Nigeria

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## **Abstract**

*Crude oil has been the mainstay of the Nigerian Economy for decades. However, vandalism, oil theft and bunkering are flourishing criminal activities that have impeded the growth of the oil sector and invariably the economic development of the country. The study explored the modes of operation used by vandals and the networks of individuals involved in the vandalization of the oil pipelines in Arepo area of Ogun State, Nigeria. Using largely qualitative method of data collection, 25 participants were purposively selected while opinion were sampled and gathered through in-depth (IDI) and key informant interviews (KII). A total of 15 IDIs was conducted to sample opinions of NSCDC members while 10 KIIs conducted comprised of Arepo community leaders and residents. Successful vandalisation of oil pipelines in Arepo community occurred majorly due to the connivance of the security agents and the sponsors of vandalization (usually influential Nigerians). Some members of Arepo town acted as informants to vandals while they were in return provided with the proceeds of vandalism. Findings further showed that the terrain of buried pipelines influenced successful vandalism operation and impede surveillance. Although vandalism soared higher during raining season, the vandals operated mostly at night. Vandals had uniforms, used hotels as hide outs and made use of encoded words to disguise their operations. Arising from the study's findings, satellite tracking of geo information system will effectively enhance the policing of the networks of pipelines rather than relying on state agents.*

**Keywords:** Arepo, Nigeria, oil pipeline, vandals, vandalism

## **Introduction**

Pipeline vandalism is a recurring crime in Nigeria especially in oil rich Niger Delta region and in communities where the pipeline networks pass through. The devastating consequences that pipeline vandalism unleash on the social and economic life of the nation is enormous. Apart from human livelihoods that are affected, aquatic fauna, agricultural activities and transportation are negatively touched. As a result of breaking and drilling pipelines (Vidal, 2011; Sanusi, Onovo and Isa, 2016), vandals constitute themselves as threat to the economy of Nigeria (Asu, 2016; Njoku, 2016). Studies have shown the public health cost of pipeline vandalism, (Aroh, Ubong, Eze, Harry, Umo-Otong & Gobo, 2010); loss of vegetation and lives (Omodanisi, Eludoyin & Salami, 2013); threat to human security (Onuoha, 2009) and fall in Oil revenue (Wilson,

2014). While these studies are not entirely representative of the huge research in this area of study, our survey of literature shows that scholars have investigated vandalism mainly in the Niger-delta (Ayanrouh, 2013; Naanen and Tolani, 2013) region of Nigeria. Unlike these highlighted works, our study contributes to the existing works on pipeline vandalism by focusing on the networks of actors involved in pipeline vandalism and strategies used in Arepo, Ogun State in the south-western geopolitical zone.

Oil pipelines are operated at high pressure and any damages poses a great danger to human health and properties, environmental and ecological disaster, interruption of gas or premium motor spirit (PMS) supplies. In fact the economic implications of vandalized pipelines in Nigeria in general and Arepo community of Ogun State in particular are huge. While pipeline vandalism has caused a loss of about 3.6billion naira in Arepo (*Vanguard*, 8th April 2015), the Stakeholder Democratic Network (SDN, 2014) emphasized that the Nigerian government, NNPC and oil companies incurred more than \$14billion Dollars in 2014 through pipeline vandalism. Studies also reported that Nigeria lost over 300,000 barrels of crude oil per day to oil theft, pipeline vandalism and related oil crime vices in the country's oil sector (Akpan, 2013; Olusola, 2013; Odenwingie and Nda-Isaiah, 2013; Okere, 2013).

Essentially, petroleum pipeline networks in Nigeria spread over 7,000 kilometers (Agbazie, 2004), while Arepo covers about 4kilometers. The networks of pipelines in Arepo is under the 'system 2B' networks of pipelines in Nigeria, from which refined products are transported from the Atlas Cove Jetty in Lagos State to the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) regional depots in Mosimi Area of Sagamu in Ogun State and onward to the different depots in the south western states and Kwara State. Hence, the Arepo pipelines are product pipelines that aid the transportation of refined petroleum products to regional depots where trucks can easily convey gasoline to local filling stations for public consumption. As a result of the critical role it plays in the zone, pipeline vandalism affects individuals, business concerns and government.

While studies have attributed incessant pipeline vandalism to failure to prosecute arrested vandals and the involvement of influential Nigerians in the crime (Olateju, 2013; Mernyi, 2014; Adeniyi, 2007; Abolurin, 2018), little is known about the strategies of vandalism. Insightful as these studies have been on the possibility of actor-networking in vandalism, such efforts were tangential to their works. However, studies have documented the highly sophisticated structure and organisation of vandalism (Boris, 2016; Ayanrouh, 2013; Korstanje, 2011) that frustrates government efforts to checkmate the crime. It is against this background that we investigated the networks of vandals and their strategies with a view to designing counter vandalism strategies and offender-specific response.

### ***Social Network Theory***

The Social Network theory is an interest based theory advanced by J.A. Barnes (1954) which focused on the networks and ties (nodes) amongst actors that permeates social relationship to engage in criminal activities. These nodes comprise individuals who have and share common interest and will stop at nothing to actualize the agreed interest no matter the forces repelling them. These nodes to which an individual is thus connected are the social contacts of that individual and can be used to measure social capital (benefits) and the value that an individual derives from the social network he or she belongs. This network (nodes) determines the individuals to be involved based on the capital or value enjoyed.

The pecuniary gain attached to oil sabotage is perhaps the social capital and value derived by individuals in nodes that connect vandals and their collaborators or sponsors. The ties in the nodes entails that individuals involved in vandalism interacts and carries out assigned tasks for a successful vandalization of oil pipelines for agreeable values.

As we would later show in this paper, the web of person(s) involved in pipeline vandalism included security men assigned secure the pipelines; oil workers who are abreast of the flows of pressure on pipelines; aggrieved (politically motivated) rich individuals who sponsor vandals with ammunition and the on-field (criminally motivated) individuals who carry arms to perforate pipelines. All the aforementioned are united by interest achievable through their actor network structure.

### ***Routine Activities theory***

In order to accommodate the weakness of actor network theory, we utilise routine activities theory (RAT) propounded by Felson and Cohen (1979) to explain the modus operandi of pipeline vandalism in Arepo. RAT is an environmental and location based criminological theory predicated on 3 basic elements where the convergence of motivated offenders (vandals and collaborators) locate their attractive target (crude products, pressure in the pipelines) in the absence of capable guardian (lack of surveillance, compromised security apparatus).

Routine activity theory sees the location/place of crime as a major factors influencing crime occurrence due to the convergence in time and place between motivated offenders, suitable targets and the absence of adequate guardian. These elements explain the occurrence of pipeline vandalism in Arepo. The terrain which pipelines are buried is muddy and beneath the soil due to the nature of the product passing through it making surveillance (absence of guardian) difficult for the security outfits while motivated vandals (pecuniary gains) converge to vandalize. Essentially, poor surveillance on Arepo pipelines and the compromise among security personnel will make pipeline vandalism a huge possibility.

These elements as observed by Cohen and Felson (1979) are suitable to justify why Arepo vandalism might persist if measures are not emplaced to

curb the crime. The motivated offender in this context typifies vandals and their collaborators (those who sponsor the on-field person to vandalize) and who are highly motivated by self aggrandizement among others factors and makes plan to vandalize oil pipelines. These motivated individuals, just like other legitimate business individuals invest and ensure necessary steps are taken for reap dividends of their 'investment'. They also act whenever opportunities arise especially when suitable target and unguarded pipelines are available. No matter the volatility or danger involved, oil pipelines are suitable targets vandals who take solace in the illegal business of sabotaging national interest. Vandalism occurs where the guardianship is weak or non-existent. It follows therefore that a formidable and uncompromising security structure would repel and checkmate criminal vandalism.

### ***Research Methods***

The study was conducted in Arepo community in Obafemi Local Government Area of Ogun State. Arepo can be accessed by water from coastal areas such as Elepete in Sagamu, Ogun State, Ikorodu and Majidun, areas of Lagos State. The community is host to series of networks of pipelines belonging to the NNPC and serve as linkage to depots across the south western states and Kwara State from the Atlas Cove in Lagos State. This study spanned fifteen months. We chose Arepo for the study due to the preponderance of pipeline vandalism reported in the community.

The study was purely qualitative in nature and utilised in-depth and key informant interviews to collect data from purposively selected participants. Our participants comprised 15 NSCDC anti-vandal officials (10 from the Ogun State command and 5 from the Ikorodu Lagos State command); 10 participants in Arepo village five of whom were community leaders while the other five were individuals who had resided in Arepo community for about 6years consecutively prior to 2014. The interviews were transcribed. The transcription indicated an emerging thematic pattern which has to do with the network of actors and the mode of operation of vandals. The qualitative data were thematically analysed.

### **Findings and Discussions**

#### ***Vandalism: The Actors***

Pipeline vandalisation involves a number of actors who work together to sabotage Nigeria's oil economy (Njoku, 2016; Asu, 2016). Vandalism is an organized crime, with syndicates serving one purpose or the other in ensuring a successful operation. Findings showed the following persons as critical actors in line with the role they play to ensure a successful vandalism: One, wealthy Nigerians who make financial contribution. Two, top government personnel in NNPC and DPPR who furnish their cronies with information on when pressure are sent. Three, security agents namely the police who compromise the core of their duty to give security cover to the vandals; and four, the youths who are used to siphon crude products.

The siphoned products are sometimes sold in kegs by women around Arepo village and the Neighbouring communities. These are the actors (node) involved in the Arepo vandalism. This social networks (ties) involved in Arepo vandalism is similar to what is obtainable in other areas of the country where the menace is prevalent. According to Boris (2016), the activities of vandals in the Niger Delta region are highly sophisticated and organized. He reported that the actors comprised highly placed oil company workers, engineers, security personnel, rich politicians, members of the local communities, oil traders, militants, bankers, refiners and wealthy Nigerians. This list seemed to be in-exhaustive as different people in the society take part in this organized criminal activities. A research participant elaborated on this:

Some vandalism involves the use of truck, those are the ones sponsored by big men and they are faceless. You will only see their boys who go to the lines to vandalize. So when we make arrest, we arrest their boys and those boys are not likely to tell us their sponsors. The second one is those that siphon using kegs, jerry-can. Anybody can do that one, but that of the truck without having big men to sponsor them operation cannot be successfully floated. (*IDI/M/30-40/Christianity/NSCDC/OGS*)

The rich act as godfather and send these boys on errand against civil responsibility. Opinions of respondents were in line with literatures ((Korstanje, 2011; Boris, 2016) on the social network of vandals. Some of these real vandals behind the scene as claimed by respondents are the big wigs in NNPC and other agencies connected with transporting the product in Nigeria. Similarly Olateju (2013) stressed that Oil theft is a big criminal ring with sophisticated organization and international network as the poor people are unlikely to get the millions to buy or rent vessels, bribe customs and get military cover for their operations. Oil theft is not for the poor, it is an extensive racket involving military, security apparatus, politicians, dubious industrial moguls and oil companies. Another respondent interviewed had this to say:

I have always known that the real vandals are the rich in our society. I don't want to mention names, but the top official in NNPC, the DPPR knows a lot about this as well. They give information; work hand in hand with those sending these vandals on errands. (*IDI/M/21-30/Christian/NSCDC/LGS*)

Similarly, this response from a community member further buttressed the above assertions

There is no government agency that they brought to this place that does not connive with these vandals. If anybody tells you that government agency guides this pipeline truthfully that is a total lie. Whoever (security agents) they bring to Arepo end up joining these vandals to aid vandalism. Similarly some bad eggs

in NNPC aid vandalism, the professionals, they know how to drill this thing they know how to dig, they know everything, they certainly assist them and vandals reward them later. (*KII/M/41-50/Christian/ Arepo*)

This particular assertion from an Arepo indigene throws more light on the connivance/networks of the security agents and the vandals.

The police and other security apparatus are aware of vandalism in Arepo. They have not done anything to stop it, rather they joined vandals. We have complained, reported to them nothing was done. In fact there was a time, we saw tanker load of fuel and we informed Police, they came telling us the men we saw were NNPC staff. We are tired of this thing here. It seem the security operatives can't do anything here rather they make case worst. This is no jokes; we were so tired to the extent that we wrote to the governor of Ogun state, even the president. (*KII/M/41-50/Christian/Arepo*)

Opinions of respondents aligned with literature on the social network of vandals and importantly the aiding and abetting offered by both the security agencies and oil workers in Nigeria. Generally, vandals have links everywhere, they also rely on information but more worrisome are the connivance of security operatives meant to secure the pipelines and oil workers. Additionally findings from the study revealed that vandalism is a business of the rich, but the poor young boys used as mercenary are the ones paraded as vandals and are sent to jail. In addition, another respondent interviewed had this to say:

Vandalism is done by the top rich in our society, how many of those boys we paraded can afford the drilling machines they use in drilling pipelines. The gun they carry, AK 47 riffle sometimes cost about 250-400 thousand per one. An average speed boat cost 4-5 million but the one mostly used in this terrain are the locally constructed speed boats and still very expensive as well. While the gun boat cost a whopping sum of 20 million naira. These ammunitions cost fortune, where would those boys see money to purchase these guns. Vandalism is sponsored by the rich in Nigeria. (*IDI/M/31-40/Christian/NSCDC/OGS*)

This assertion by an NSCDC official further clarifies the profile of those sponsoring vandalism in Arepo community.

Vandals have the backing of godfathers. Because to vandalize a pipeline requires a lot of money and machines and poor people can't finance these things. The people we catch on the lines are just labourer and are been given peanuts, though they work for some people but they are not the real people financing the

operation. See no vandalism without the knowledge of security operatives. (*IDI/M/41-50/Islam/NSCDC/LGS/*)

This was the direct words of another respondent:

“Police are one of the problems in Arepo on the issue of vandalism” When we meet police at the line most of the time, they will even hand cuff the vandals thinking that they’ve already apprehended them. But the moment we leave the scene they will set the boys free. The vandals often call police for backup, there are so many operations that we went for, they (vandals) will call police to come and assist them and our boss warned us not engage in a clash with police. In situations we often quit the lines since police will not let us work except we engage them in a fire to fire thing. (*IDI/M/31-40/Christianity/NSCDC/OGS/*)

It can be inferred from the narrative above that the involvement of state actors such as security men, who are supposed to prevent it now abetting it confirms the RAT assumption that crime occurs in time and space in the absence of capable guardianship.

### ***Vandalism: How it is executed***

Vandalism is perpetuated principally by syndicates who perforate pipelines to affix tap head for successful diversion of crude products in their night operations (Sanusi *et al.*, 2016). The study examined the methods used by these vandals to actualize their goals while vandalizing oil pipelines in Arepo. The activities of the vandals are marked with highly planned methods to include persons from different occupations to enhance successful operation. Generally it was gathered that the economic sabotage in Arepo were principally perpetuated at night and that oil pipeline vandalism soared during rainy season. These conditions presents the security outfits with challenges of surveillance given the muddy areas where these pipelines are buried and the night falls might be dangerous for security operatives due largely to the unfamiliar terrain and the sophistication of the vandals weapon, whereas men of the Nigerian Security and Civil defence Corps (NSCDC) were given refurbished Ak 47 while vandals had G3, Ak47 and other superior ammunitions. Oil pipeline vandalism is high at two different occasions, essentially the terrain is the major determinant of how successful an operation can go and vandalism is frequent and mostly done during the night when surveillance by security operatives are not constants. One of the respondents interviewed had this to say:

Loading fuel in jerry cans, tanks is done at night and they have ideas of when pressures are sent from refineries, trust me they have insiders, they know the thickness of the pipe, there are two periods vandalism is high in Arepo: number one is during raining season which present the second been low accessibility, that is terrain that are not easily accessible by security personnel, see



during raining season vandalism is higher because the terrain is swampy and for the low accessible place, the terrain is such that ferries cannot ply the place and if you dare such place on foot you will definitely sink, so you don't just jump after vandal if you are not sure of the areas. (IDI/M/21-30/Islam/NSCDC/LGS/)

The modus operandi of vandals across the different regions in Nigeria seemed similar. According to Adegbite (2013), the most common method of this malicious act of vandalism is to puncture the pipeline conveying crude products from one location to another and affix a tap at the point where it has been punctured or ruptured to divert to their tanks. This was the exact manner these oil thieves operate in Arepo. Vandals tap directly into the NNPC pipelines buried along Arepo village and oil gush out like water does in our toilets tap. Here is a vivid description of the malicious acts. This was the direct words of a respondent to buttress the vandal's modus operandi:

Vandalism is mostly done during the night while the day is used to perforate the pipe and solder their pipe to the pipeline for effective oil theft. Soldering cannot be done during the night as lightening from soldering of pipe to pipeline will draw attention but having soldered their pipe during the day. Bunkering is done at night and they just open the soldered pipe like the normal way you open your tap at home. (IDI/M/31-40/Christian/NSCDC/LGS/)

A participant opined and describes that vandalism activities is a sophisticated business that entails a lot, this was his narration:

To operate vandals have machines, they have caucus they have different state of the earth equipments to use, they have carriers, they have godfather backing them, pumping machine that they are using to ensure smooth vandalization and sometime vandalism is done during day but most time late in the night. So vandalism is an organized activity that cannot be easily undermined by any security personnel(s) no matter surveillance or training. (IDI/F/21-30/Christian/NSCDC/OGS/)

Similarly, responses from the interview conducted showed that the terrain of the buried oil infrastructure is a major determinant of how successful and frequent an operation to vandalize pipeline become. With the aid of different gadgets, vandals are poised to carry out flourishing business activities no matter the height of surveillance by security outfits and where these pipes are sited. The study sampled opinions of some security personnel majorly in the NSCDC and the Nigeria Police, the claims were that security personnel can hardly access the core terrain of these buried pipes. The security personnel had little or no prior knowledge of the swampy environs of the pipelines unlike vandals who were mostly groomed there and this gives them an edge to

operates successfully and escape arrest in most gun confrontations. Vandal's activities were further described by another respondent;

loading of stolen products is done at night and they have ideas of when pressures are sent from depots, Atlas Cove in Lagos (informants within) they know the thickness of the pipe, there are two periods vandalism is high: number one is during raining season and the second is the place of low accessibility that is terrain that are not easily accessible by security personnel, see during raining season vandalism is high because the terrain is swampy and for the low accessible place, the terrain is such that ferries cannot ply the place and if you dare such place on foot you will definitely sink, so you don't just jump after vandal if you are not sure of the area. (*IDI/M/21-30/Islam/NSCDC/LGS*)

The manner with which oil theft is been perpetuated across Nigeria is an indication that the economic sabotage (vandalism) will remain for as long as the syndicates involved are not tamed. Vandalism is an everyday menace that have assumed higher dimension when compared with the ways government approaches to put an end to its occurrence. The government needs to adopt a pro-active measure by routinely training men manning the pipes, making available ammunitions for her agencies while relying more on geo information since most security officer compromised and are lured with greed to aid, abet vandalism.

### **Conclusion**

The study examined the strategies employed in pipeline vandalism and the network of actors involved in Arepo community, southwest Nigeria. Going by the centrality of oil revenue to the Nigerian economy, pipeline vandalism sabotages the national interest of the country while elevating personal desires of criminal vandals. Guided by routine activities and actor network theories, the study unpacks the complex web of actors and the role that each plays in making vandalization of oil pipelines which passes through the Arepo community a reality.

The findings show how the understanding of the environment and the routines of oil flow make criminal vandalism possible in Arepo community. It revealed how vandalism is usually more frequent during the raining season. The wet season makes the area inaccessible for security agents. Felson and Cohen (1979) had posited that the convergence in time and space of motivated offender (vandal), attractive target (oil flow in pipeline) and the absence of capable guardian (compromised security, lack of oil flow tracker) make crime occurrence possible. In this study, we found that these three elements were critical in making oil pipeline vandalism happen in Arepo. In line with the postulations of actor network theory which also recognises the functionality of groups which work in nodes, we found the interdependence of actors (rich Nigerians, community people, armed vandals, comprised security officers and

oil workers) who combined their strengths to actualise and further their individual economic interests through pipeline vandalism.

Arising from our findings, we suggest utilisation of community policing of oil pipelines involving host communities. The involvement of youths in pipeline vandalism may not be unconnected with the problem of unemployment. Hence, while there is need to provide employment for teeming unemployed youths, it is important to make policies/law that stiffens or attaches grievous punishment to oil sabotage in Nigeria. It is expedient for Nigeria government to deploy modern technology in reducing both internal and external compromises within the oil industry, security agencies and communities hosting oil pipelines with a view to tracking the activities of vandals and reducing incidence of vandalism.

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