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YOUTH IN URBAN VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

A Case Study of Urban Gangs from Port Harcourt

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**Youth in urban violence in Nigeria: A case study of
urban gangs from Port Harcourt**

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1.0 Introduction

Urban youth gangs¹ and cult groups have been in existence in Nigerian cities for a long time. In the immediate post civil war period, i.e. from early 1970s, there was a noticeable increase in the incidence of violent crimes and in the heinous nature of these crimes particularly in the use of dangerous weapons and killings. By 1970, Decree No. 47, the first armed robbery decree was promulgated. The national awareness and emergence of cult groups and increased violence can be traced back to the aftermath of the Nigerian civil war that lasted from 1967 to 1970. The roots of urban violence have been attributed to the loss of traditional structures that kept people together (Aderinto, 1994).

Akparanta (1994) attempted to provide reasons for urban violence in post civil war Nigeria, arguing that following the war, there was an abundance of guns in private hands and times were hard economically. Accompanied by deterioration in the standard of education, and the lack of specific training in areas relevant for sustaining both the agricultural and the industrial sector, many youths went astray. Another argument was that the continuously unpredictable political atmosphere and lack of progressive management of the economy brought about galloping inflation, and concentration of wealth in the hands of the few who were in positions of public authority fuelled a sense of hopeless desperation among the masses. Albert (1994) identified causes of urban violence in Africa. These include: high population growth rates with its attendant unemployment, poor wages, poor living conditions, urban culture shocks, and poor quality of urban management that is manifested in the crisis in health care, transportation, housing and employment.

However, the genesis of violence is multi-causal and Salami (1994) postulates that any attempt to explain violence should be approached from the psychological, social and anthropological prisms. In spite of attempts at theoretical contexts in which to situate rising crime rates in urban areas of Nigeria, the more recent phenomena of violence by urban gangs, cult groups and ethnic militias are serious causes of concern occasioning dislocations in urban economy and life.

Several attempts have been made by researchers to decipher this trend. The phenomenon of street gangs, known as “area boys” in Lagos (the country’s commercial capital), has been the focus of some studies (Omitoogun, 1994; Adisa, 1994). “Area boys”, according to Adisa (1994) are youths who graduate from petty thievery to drug pushing and charged with drug delivery to consumers. These are known as “strikers”. Adisa (1994) explained that area boys once conditioned are fools of others and are used for extortion, organized street violence, political campaigns, and enforcers by operators

of night clubs, restaurants and brothels. Rival outfits engage each other in gang warfare on the streets. They are strongly associated with the drug trade and many of the area boys end up as users.

The violent activities of the *Oduduwa* People's Congress (OPC), an ethnically based association, has been a focus of studies by the Human Rights Watch Group in 2003 and also by Akinyele in 2001. Reviews of the findings of these studies provide some insight into the emerging trend of urban gangs in Nigeria. The reasons for the surge in gang activities include: political, economic, and social factors at the individual and micro levels and also at medium and macro levels. These factors are what Osaghae (1994) called "mobilizers." Ethnically based groups are becoming increasingly militant as identified by the OPC. Other groups include: the *Igbo* Peoples' Congress (IPC), the *Arewa* Peoples' Congress (APC), the *Ijaw* National Congress (INC), The *Egbesu* Boys of Africa (EBA), and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of *Biafra* (MASSOB). Almost all these groups have their military wings whose goal is to protect the identities and interests of the groups they represent within the federation by violent means if deemed necessary. Their activities have at most times posed threats to the continued existence of the Nigerian state. The sheer enormity of the problems associated with urban violence especially gang violence, rising militancy and the potential for destruction, and social disruption, give impetus to the following questions:

- i.) What are the social realities in Nigeria that have given rise to gang violence by youths?
- ii.) What is the relationship of the political economy of oil to the rapid development of youth gangs in Port Harcourt?
- iii.) To what extent has poor urban governance including institutional failure been a factor in youth violence?
- iv.) What are the responses by civil society and government?
- v.) What lessons emanate from the experience with youth gang violence in Nigerian cities?

2.0 Objectives of the Study

The main goal of the study is to use the incidence of violence attributable to urban gangs and cults among youths in the Port Harcourt metropolitan region to explain the nature and effects of urban violence in Nigeria. The study has the following specific objectives:

- i.) To provide some explanation for the rising incidence of youth gang violence in Nigerian cities.
- ii.) To examine the direction and adequacy of interventions by government and civil society.
- iii.) To use our findings as crucial learning points for the broader context of urban management in Nigeria.

3.0 Historical Perspectives of Urban Gangs in Nigeria

3.1 Youths in Urban Violence from Colonial Period to Present

According to Olutayo (1994), incorporation of their colonies into the world capitalist system was the major task of the colonial regimes. Unfortunately, the neo-colonial structures in Africa have continued in this manner. As a capitalist society engenders the supremacy of the economic institution over all other societal institutions, the political institution was and presently is used to determine economic predominance in all of the former colonial states in Africa. Those who own the economic substructure in these states do not control the superstructure. It is the contradiction of this disjuncture in the neo-colonial social structure that Mabogunje (1990) once argued as constitutes the predicament in African societies.

Youths were taken away from family labour and incorporated into the urban capitalist establishment principally through education. The socialization of the youths was extended by new agencies that had their own rules and regulations different from the substructure. Children became independent of their parents by enjoying the new life but they were still attached to the age-old traditions. Extended family commitments had to be attended to even when they could not afford them financially. With time, school drop-outs either became vagrants in the cities or entered non-formal activities as the returns from rural living depreciated. This ushered into the urban areas a wave of migration of able-bodied youths and adults from rural areas in search of better life.

With time education became the pre-requisite for the emerging urban culture. Education also became the only avenue for mobility (social and economic). With time also, increased awareness of the social, political and economic importance derived from education was adversely affected by worldwide depression. This led to reduction in salaries and unemployment among school leavers. However, in spite of this problem, the lesson that education especially technology should have relevance to indigenous economic substructure was not learnt then and even today (Olutayo 1994). Unemployment among the youths has steadily increased and the unemployed youth becomes a ready-made tool for unscrupulous politicians and businessmen to be used as thugs, hooligans and bodyguards.

Since the early 1970s, after the end of the Nigerian civil war, violence compounded by military involvement in political governance became legitimised, and the youths' social mobility and struggle for survival now require violence. Society gradually stopped recognising merit and force became a plausible avenue to the top of the social and economic strata with drug trafficking, smuggling and other perceived negative moneymaking ventures like armed robbery and pen-robbery, becoming attractive ways of getting rich quickly.

The re-introduction of democratic governance (after the military regimes) that was expected to be the panacea for sustainable governance did not produce a positive result. This may be due to the fact that the majority of the legislators were former military personnel that embezzled the country's resources as governors, service chiefs, etc. These ex-military officers who are still in their prime, idle and jobless but rich, are the people that have the resources to practice partisan politics as prescribed, recommended and directed by international aid agencies. Since they have no idea about governance, they have been perpetuating irresponsibility, corruption and embezzlement amongst others in the country. A lot of the politicians are patrons of jobless youths that they use as their accomplices.

Following the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) from about 1984, the country started experiencing a serious contraction in the labour market. This resulted in a large proportion of urban youths, both in-situ and migrants, searching for jobs under the prevailing harsh economic conditions. The presence of this enormous pool of idle youths, who are both skilled and unskilled and sometimes homeless, created a fertile ground for deviant activities. This culminated in an increase in urban crime of different types, including drug-trafficking and drug abuse by youths.

Historically, cults in Nigeria were for the adults in the communities and they were part of the traditional religious systems. Although their activities were enshrined in secrecy, the members were known and revered by everyone in the communities, e.g. the *Owegbe* cult of Benin kingdom and the *Ogboni* cult of the Yoruba land. These secret associations still exist and are powerful in assisting their members gain political, social and economic recognition in the country.

In the case of youth cult groups, they emerged from the nation's university campuses first as social groups that promoted the recognition of indigenous technology and culture immediately after independence. They later started acting as mouthpieces of students by using satires to protest administrative lapses in the universities. They also acted as the moral custodian of students by ridiculing those who were involved in unbecoming activities on the campuses. They were not secret and every one knew the members because they led processions regularly on the campuses. After the civil war (as facilities in the universities deteriorated and the hope for the future became bleak), these cults transformed to secret cults. The rival cults rivalled among themselves to control the students' ideological apparatus - the students' union - while adjusting to the rapid deterioration of facilities on the campuses through demonstrations that yielded paltry fruits and progressively became vicious and very violent. However, while the respective universities administrations battled unsuccessfully to contain the scourge of cult activities, the state security agency, to a large extent, isolated itself from these occurrences. As a spill over from youth protests on campuses, the youths on the streets formed neighbourhood gangs that were sometimes roving gangs and initially provided security in their neighbourhoods. They gradually derailed, becoming groups of terrorists that steal, rape, arson and currently attack with guns.

The situation at present is that the streets and neighbourhoods of the nation's urban centres, especially the low income ones, are theatres of violence occasioned by

the spill over of cult activities. During electioneering campaigns, the politicians supply the gang members with arms that they have refused to return after the elections. The unscrupulous businessmen supply the gangs with sophisticated guns and employ them as their security guards during bunkering (the illegal sale of crude oil on the high seas). Violence is sustained in part, by arms obtained from unscrupulous gun runners in ships on the high seas.

Most of the gangs have more sophisticated weapons than the police. The populace has lost faith in the ability of the nation's police to defend them against the gangs. The police are equipped with outdated guns while the gangs carry state-of-the-art machine guns. Coupled with this, the police force is seen to be an epitome of corruption. Residents do not have the confidence to give information to the police for fear of being victimised, as some of the policemen are informants for the gangs, and sometimes are members of dangerous gangs.

To quell most of these disturbances in the country, the army and/or the navy are called in for assistance by the government. Since they are trained for combat, the situations are worsened by their reactions. They destroy neighbourhoods, loot and rape; they plunder the communities they occupy for prolonged periods. Residents flee the areas especially the young and innocent youths who may not necessarily be involved in gang activities. This is the current situation in the country.

3.2 The Special Case of Port Harcourt

The selection of Port Harcourt for this case study is significant for two reasons. First, Port Harcourt is the capital of Rivers State and the heart of oil sector activities in Nigeria. The gangs have become a security threat to oil workers as the involvement of the gangs in bunkering, extortions, kidnapping of expatriate oil workers and rivalry wars, along with the viciousness with which such acts are occurring, is both alarming and frightening. Second, Port Harcourt has witnessed and is still witnessing the most extreme documented (by the media) incidences of urban gang violence in the last five years in the country.

In Port Harcourt, cults and gangs exist from the street level to the neighbourhood level and even the ethnic militias whose bases are outside the city operate in Port Harcourt for specific violent activities. In an interview with the Rivers State Security Agencies, the genesis of urban youth gangs was traced to inoffensive cultural groupings. The youths from the same ethnic background hang around together and over time they metamorphosed into gangs to protect themselves against other gangs from different ethnic backgrounds. Sometimes it was even children from the same school. Thus, the reasons for their emergence included social, economic and political considerations.

Whatever their background urban gangs and their violent engagement against rival groups, innocent persons, and politically associated killings are a daily reality in Port

Harcourt. No one is ignorant of the existence and activities of the gangs. People living in some parts of the city, especially the marginal squatter settlements (or what are known locally as "watersides"), and high density, low-income neighbourhoods and the urban villages have been especially affected. The magnitude of the gang problem is seen in the one hundred and three groups (103) listed as banned organizations in the Rivers State Anti-cult Bill. Among the groups are the University Campus cults like the Vikings, Pirates Confraternity and Black Axe. There are also the neighbourhood-based gangs that operate in low-income neighbourhoods of Port Harcourt. However, the banning of these groups has not been effective. The gangs are still very much around and they operate in broad daylight in the presence of law enforcement agents.

However, the best organized and most destructive groups in the area, whose activities have been brought to the notice of the Head of State of the country (since their activities disturb oil exploration activities), are the two ethnic militias. These are:

- i. The Niger Delta Vigilante Group (NDVG)
- ii. The Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF)

The leaders of these two groups have been described as "warlords."² No one who knows the extreme cases of violence associated with the two groups can deny this tag. The rivalry between them holds parts of the Rivers State and Port Harcourt under siege for months. Although both leaders claim to have a liberation agenda and claim to protect the interests of their communities, the Rivers State and (in the case of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force) the interest of the Niger Delta region, the rivalry is about territory and territorial claims. Conflict has spilled over to political associations, relationships with government officials including the police, traditional chieftaincy tussles and simple ego trips. A noted local newspaper columnist summarised the situation as that of urban terrorism³. Based on documented accounts of attacks, he suggested that the urban gangs in Port Harcourt had developed terrorist infrastructure, logistics and tactical capabilities.

The leader of the NDPVF introduced a broader perspective to the violence: control of crude oil produced in the Niger Delta and governance⁴. The issue of resource control is one that has been on the political agenda for some time. However, since the mid nineties and the conflict between the Shell Petroleum Development Company Nigeria Limited (SPDC), the Federal Government and the *Ogoni* people that drew international attention, resource control has been an issue that has led to youth militancy in the entire Niger Delta. In spite of political manoeuvres, it remains the single most important cause of conflict and violence in the region. These gangs have degenerated into terrorizing neighbourhoods, extorting money from residents, and shooting at random, maiming and killing innocent residents in the process (See Box I.)

4.0 Methodology

Data for the study was obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data collected was based on interview schedules. Key informants were selected from the Nigerian Police Force, State Criminal Investigation Department, local vigilante group leaders, opinion leaders in Rivers State, administrators of tertiary institutions of learning and suspected cult members themselves. One of the areas lacking in the literature on urban youth violence is the aspect of discussing issues from the perspective of the youths who are involved, especially those that kill other people as a vendetta, as armed robbers or as agents.

Box 1: Funding for ethnic militias

Our investigation showed that most of the funding for the ethnic militias are realised from large scale oil thefts (bunkering) via barges and flow stations for the international markets. The ethnic militias have captured bunkering with the active involvement and connivance of high ranking military and navy officials, politicians and both national and international oil executives. The whole group is a mafia that is very vicious and deadly. These warlords use the proceeds to purchase sophisticated machine guns, etc. that they use to terrorize innocent people in the towns and villages: anytime there is a lull in the bunkering trade, when there are democratic election activities, they use their ill-gotten might to eliminate opponents of their political godfathers, whom they blackmail viciously after elections. They also carry out broad daylight armed robbery of oil servicing organizations in the city and presently, they kidnap expatriate oil workers on the rigs while holding them for high ransoms. Most times, the federal government wade into the negotiations with the kidnappers. The government is forced to pay heavily for the release of the workers. This makes the threats by the Head of State powerless and ineffective. Meanwhile, no one has ever been arrested for the operation and the hostages always praised the kidnappers for taking good care of them while in their custody.

In this study, nine (9) boys were interviewed. These were randomly selected, as it was difficult and dangerous to openly canvass for them. In all, the nine boys were persuaded to participate. A tape recorder (unobtrusively placed) was used to tape the discussion. An interview schedule used for this, sought information on their social and educational background, their reasons for joining gangs, their roles in the gangs and their expectations. Secondary data was obtained from police reports, records from school disciplinary committee files, newspaper publications and government official publications.

5.0 Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings is in four parts. The first part is concerned with the profile of urban gangs and includes membership of gangs, their organizational structure, method of operation and funding. Second is a discussion of oil exploration and the development of youth gangs. Third are the responses of civil society, security agents, and responsible government agencies and fourth is a discussion of another perspective of youth gangs.

5.1 Profile of Urban Gangs

i. Classification of Urban Gangs

Urban gangs in Port Harcourt can be classified according to their geographic scope of operation, i.e. territory, and also on the basis of the motivating factors whether economic, political and/or social. Our field survey showed that there are gangs that consist of a few youths (especially male) who operate at the level of a neighbourhood. They gather around local drinking parlours, drug distribution joints, or hotels, or even bus stops and engage in stealing, rape, murder and extortion. Victims are sometimes assaulted with weapons. Any time there is scarcity of fuel; they engage in illegal sale of fuel and openly control access to petrol stations through imposition of "entry fees" on motorists. Murder and arson is common in these gangs as they jostle for territorial control. The membership consists mostly of school dropouts and unemployed youths. In the neighbourhoods where they operate; it is common to find corpses of murdered victims on the streets for which neither the residents nor the police can give account. Over time, "a strong man" emerges and leads the gang, mobilizing the members to terrorise the neighbourhood. Our investigation reveals that the police know the hideouts and some of the members of the gangs but are unwilling to put them under surveillance or to confront them as long as their victims are also gang members.

Neighbourhood gangs are the most common in Port Harcourt. Our interviews with security agents reveal that a number of these groups are in alliance with cult groups at the two universities in the city. The "Icelanders" for example are said to be an off-shoot of the "Vikings," a notorious campus cult. The other class of youth gangs is not only urban but regional. These operate everywhere in the Rivers State and even the entire Niger Delta Region. These are affiliated to ethnic militias. The two largest are NDVG and NDPVF already discussed.

While the primary motive for gang formation is economic, power and politics become relevant as rival gangs struggle to protect their territories and also as politicians retain their services for personal protection and to intimidate or even kill perceived enemies (especially political opponents, even in the same political party).

ii. Organization and Membership

A number of urban gangs have well-defined structures. The leader of the NDPVF described the structure of his rival gang i.e. NDVG as comprising a hierarchy. The leader of the gang is called "Angel." Strikers are members of the gang who engage in the killing, targeting and other criminal activities. The "Intells" are those who gather information. Girls in the group are referred to as "Black Bra". There is a team of hit men referred to as "executioners" that usually go on special operations that require selective or targeted attacks. Another category includes the band of fighters. Few groups have

some girls as "wives" to members. These girls do the cooking and provide free sex when needed, especially to the top hierarchy of the gang. Patrons are usually referred to as "father". The overall leader, who is usually selected from the core team, heads and supervises the routine activities of the group. Leaders bear different names - Capone, Presido, The Boss, etc. Describing the recruitment process, police sources explain that usually the earliest members of the existing groups were not recruited through any formal procedure. A group of friends either living on the same street or from the same school just come together to oppose whatever they perceive as injustice or oppression. The foundation of each group is normally those boys that call themselves "hard boys", who decide to lord it over the other boys and girls on their street. When they come together, they start imposing rules and codes of conduct on everybody within their territory. The core team scouts for other hard boys in the area to join the gang over time.⁵

Most urban gangs also have tattoos branded on their skins during initiation by which a member can be recognized. Recruitment is through voluntary initiation, kidnapping and abduction. Refusal to join can mean execution. In a recent arrest and prosecution of twenty-one cult gang members at a Port Harcourt Magistrate Court,⁶ the suspects ranged in age from 20 years to 37 years. This puts the average age of suspects at 24 years but allegations have been made that, children as young as 8 years of age are recruited. Police reports put the age bracket as ranging from 15 to 35 years; adding that there are a few cases of older people who usually act as consultants and strategists.

Offshoots, factions and affiliations exist within and between gangs. However affiliations are not based on any serious ideological foundation or consideration, but on economic interest that prevails at certain times. Gangs which once operated together can subsequently become rivals.

In terms of occupational background, gang members are mostly unemployed youths who have usually grown up on the street in the harsh economic setting. About 70% of respondents have engaged in jobs considered menial like motor-park and waterside touts and bus conductors. Others (10%) have been bus and boat drivers and even government task force officers (5%), such as local government sanitation and revenue collection, and traffic enforcement personnel. About 14% of the members are artisans with some skills such as auto-mechanics, electricians and carpenters. Not all gang members are school dropouts as even university graduates (1%) are today identified as gang or cult members. The members sometimes serve as personal bodyguards to well-placed citizens that can ensure their "protection" from the law. This provides further impetus to belong.

iii. Method of Operation

Violence is the method of operation for all gang activities. It defines interactions within groups. Intimidation, harassment, assault, murder, rape, abduction and armed robbery are known processes of engagement. Group attack on entire communities is

also on the increase. Parts of Port Harcourt are known to have been theatres of war between rival gangs, leading to large-scale displacement of persons living in these places. Gangs have become self-styled liberators of communities. A common occurrence and one causing extreme concern among the populace is that of vendetta killings of parents, siblings, friends and even neighbours of rival gang members.

Gang members maintain *esprit d'corp* and are willing to protect the identity of other members when caught. It is very uncommon to squeal on others even to the point of being killed. One known traditional method for ensuring secrecy is the taking of an oath, most often under traditional religious covenants involving blood-oaths.

iv. Funding

Funding of gangs comes from a variety of sources. These include: armed robbery, protection money, contribution by members who have jobs such as commercial bus drivers and artisans, retainership fees from local politicians and drugs. Prostitutes are made to buy "landing rights" or asked to relocate. Police sources confirmed that about 20% of the loot from major robbery operations is normally set aside for "operational expenses". Gang members have the ability to impose themselves on businesses that refuse to seek their patronage. This is also common in high density, low-income residential areas and waterside settlements. Landlords sometimes utilize the services of gang members to forcefully evict tenants. Gangs have been known to write to multinational oil and allied companies with threats to the lives and property of their staff members if the companies refuse to pay specified huge sums of money. Some of the recorded cases of kidnap, especially of expatriate staff, are related to these demands.

5.2 Oil Exploration and Development of Youth Gangs

Nigeria is the world's sixth largest oil-producing nation. However, mismanagement by successive military and civilian governments has left the country poverty-stricken. The Niger Delta Region (NDR) is the oil producing area in the country and is an unstable area where violent inter-ethnic clashes are common. Often access to oil revenue is the trigger for the violence. Pipelines are regularly vandalized by impoverished residents, who risk their lives to siphon off fuel. Vandalism is estimated to result in thousands of barrels of crude oil wastage every day - a loss to the Nigerian economy of millions of dollars each year.

Historically, the roots of conflicts in the NDR lie deep in the contemporary social circumstances of the area. Contemporary history of the region can be summarized as economic decline and broken promises. Before colonization, NDR communities prospered as "middlemen" controlling trade particularly of palm oil products and slaves, between the interior of the country and the early European explorers. But with the development of the colonial state and independence, the region experienced a steady decline and stagnation as no new sources of wealth developed there to replace these activities. With the advent of oil exploration, the residents were alienated from the oil

economy since they do not have any knowledge about the industry. Also, environmental contamination of the fragile ecosystem by oil activities eroded traditional livelihood activities. More recently, the problems in the region have been worsened by the failure of the early independent Nigerian government to follow through on a promise made at independence in 1960 to treat the NDR as a special development area. Also, the steady reduction in the share of oil royalties that states in the region have received has been an issue of disagreement with the federal government for some time.

All of these issues have exacerbated the political and economic problems of the region. The NDR, in part because of its riverine/swamp topography, has been politically extremely fragmented historically, and subject to frequent and at times violent disputes over land and fishing rights, as well as over traditional leaders' political jurisdictions. These led to cycles of vendettas. As more powerful weapons became available in the region (bought from unscrupulous international gun runners with proceeds from illegal oil trade i.e., bunkering) in the mid- and late-1990s, disputes became more violent. Youth gangs that were willing and able to protect their villages and elders emerged and became very powerful. As democratic competition returned in 1998–1999, some of these same youths took up a new line of activity, i.e., paid disruption of campaign events, and/or provided candidates protection from unwanted attention.

In an attempt to buy off discontentment in the region, the federal government and the oil companies frequently corrupt community leaders. As a result of these factors, and because oil companies do make tempting targets, many aggrieved youths in the region resort to direct action to extract compensation for their perceived losses. They invade oil company properties, take employees hostage, and shut down facilities. Oil companies typically negotiate the release of captured personnel and properties with relative ease by paying the youths ransoms. This oil company strategy creates a moral hazard arising from the willingness of companies to pay ransoms, which stimulates imitators of this lucrative business. This strategy has led to sustained disruptions, at times to competition among youths, and to a general sense of anarchy in the NDR. Thus, we can say that a major factor in the development and proliferation of youth gangs is the tactics of oil companies and the federal government to ease their disruption in the short run by payment. Presently, intense competition for political office is closely linked to federal control over oil revenue and the economy in general. For politicians, and for their communities, control of federal office opens the high road to resources that can be diverted from public to private control. Competition is naturally intense for federal political offices and has historically turned political elections violent.

This atmosphere of cynicism about government, economic stagnation and hopelessness, historical political fragmentation, and low-grade violent conflict encouraged the formation of small groups of youth gangs with weapons that operate unchallenged and most times find oil companies easy targets for hold-up and ransom. As the oil companies paid off the first gangs, others were inspired and soon followed suit. Throughout the 1990s, incidents of youth gangs extorting payments from oil companies and engagement in violence escalated. Presently, the culture has extended into the

urban areas and Port Harcourt being the administrative headquarters of oil activities in the country, has the largest share of these youth gangs.

5.3 Responses by the Stakeholders

i. Responses by the Civil Society

Fear has been the main response of the civil society. People generally have a deep distrust for the police, accusing them of collusion.⁷ Local people living in Port Harcourt make alternative arrangements to provide their own security. Some communities mobilized their own youths, who are not gang members, into vigilante groups whose sole aim is to provide security, as they feel the police activities are inadequate. The local communities arm vigilante groups and residents take turns to serve. Some of the worst cases of violence have occurred between gangs and vigilante groups. Vigilante groups interviewed say they collaborate with the police and neighbouring vigilante groups to provide security through night watching. Residents pay security levies and community leaders hold regular meetings with the vigilante groups. Strangers are subject to “stop and search” and those who look suspicious are arrested until they can be properly identified. All known access points into the community are blocked after a certain time of day. Regular patrols occur in the night and vigilante groups receive "intelligence reports" on security in the neighbourhood.

Wealthy Nigerians, top government officials, politicians and company executives who can afford it have armed police escorts or bodyguards and pay the police regular allowances for special patrols. Gangs and armed robbers sometimes shoot it out with the police. Coupled with this, residents in high-income residential areas live in barricaded homes with high fenced walls, internal security posts and installed other security gadgets.

The print media, especially local tabloid newspapers, are the most important sources of information on gang activities in Rivers State. The government-owned media houses are not able to be forthright about gang activities especially as allegations abound of collusion between gangs and some persons in government. According to respondents, this is the main reason why curbing gang violence is not possible.

ii. Response by Security Agents

Security agents are totally out-gunned by youth gangs in Port Harcourt. The Commander of the Rivers State Command of the National Drug Law and Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) said that drug peddlers belong to secret cults, carry arms and present the toughest challenges to his men. Special units manned by the mobile police force known as "Operation fire for fire" and "Swift Operation Squad" have failed to curb violence in the city. The police are known to retreat when confronted by marauding

youth gangs. It is for this reason that the military - both the army and navy are brought into communities when rival gangs engage in combat.

A major problem confronting the security agents especially the police force, is the distrust ordinary people have for them and the allegations of collusion that has not been properly addressed. The police are accused of providing weapons to some of the gangs and also of providing security for the leaders. The police are also accused of taking punitive measures against perceived enemies of these gang leaders⁸

The police in Nigeria lack the training for sustained surveillance of suspected criminals. They also lack motivation as well as equipment. Most importantly, the populace views the police as the epitome of corruption. If the price is right they can cover any crime.

iii. Response by Policy Makers

The most important response by the Rivers State Government has been the Anti-Cult Bill of 14th June, 2004. The state government rider to the bill pledges to rehabilitate any cult member who renounces his/her membership and hands over arms in his/her possession. The State Government pledged to offer them money ranging from 10,000 naira to 100,000 naira (\$1 = ₦135) and also jobs depending on the calibre of the guns returned. A charade was put up (and captured by the press) of some youths returning their arms. However, the populace distrusted this action by both the government and the concerned youth gang members.

For a long time government did not show the level of concern that people wanted. The Rivers State Governor agreed during an interactive session with the press⁹ in May 2004 that he had gotten security reports that some government officials sponsored some cult gangs. He is yet to make good his threat to deal with the problem of exposing the culprits and making them face the consequences of their actions.

It is almost impossible for the police in Nigeria to investigate top government officials properly and by implication; it is easy for cult gangs to hide behind such officials. When asked whether legislation can tackle the urban gang problem in Port Harcourt, a senior police officer was uncertain¹⁰. His response was that, while legislation would bring awareness of the problem, it must be applied equally across the board in order to produce results. Otherwise, the legislation will be subject to abuse especially by the privileged groups in the society. Pessimistically, he expressed that no amount of legislation can wipe out gangs and that elimination of gangs requires proactive re-orientation of the attitudes and mindset first of the youths, then the entire populace especially the political class, the armed forces and police.

Government response has fallen far short of cleaning out its own house especially within the political class. The penchant of this group to use gangs to unleash violence as they struggle for political offices is an all too familiar pattern in Nigeria's electoral

process. Indicators from all across the country are that it will continue. It is for this reason that state-sponsored terrorism is publicly alleged and poorly investigated without results.

5.4 Another Perspectives on Youth Gangs

The boys selected for this special case study are aged between 20 years and 35 years and are presently unemployed. They see their involvement in the gangs as gainful employment. Two of them have never worked. They dropped out of secondary schools. Two are trained drivers who could not find work. Two are university drop-outs because (they claimed) of inability of their parents to fund their education. Two are practically illiterates that dropped out of primary school and have been fending for themselves since then. One is a graduate who after finishing his studies did not get a job for five years before he joined the gang.

The boys are mostly recruited into the gang by their friends. They did not start out as killers. They are provided with food and clothes by the "big boys" in the group. To show their gratitude for being looked after by the gang, they started first by threatening people who disturbed the leaders of the gangs and graduated into hit men for the gang. This comes with rewards that they use for their upkeep. There is also the subtle threat of being eliminated by the gang itself if suspected of being a traitor.

They do not think or plan for the future. They live each day at a time. They were prepared for this life by inadequate upbringing with no father or absentee fathers and very poor mothers that were overwhelmed by the responsibilities of bringing them up alone. They do not value their lives or that of others. They abuse a lot of drugs. They exhibit a lot of insecurity and bravado and there is this fatalist attitude about them that is very pathetic.

6.0 Summary of Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

Urban youth gang violence is the reality of daily life in Nigeria and urban dwellers are treated to its numbing effect. For example in Port Harcourt, the high density marginal waterside settlements that provide the cheapest forms of housing are increasingly becoming "no -go" areas for the urban poor. Many are now trying to relocate to the urban fringes with the attendant high cost of commuting to sources of livelihood. It has also been observed that this move is bringing gang violence to the fringe villages. Husbands are living away from their families, having sent the wives and children to places perceived to be safer.

Two key implications are identified from our studies. First is the broader issue of poor urban governance and oil activities. Second, is the absence of the rule of law. One of the principal observations in our study is the use of youth gangs as revenue collectors by both the local and state government agencies. The police and other state security

agents cannot touch these boys. Another observation is the use of youth gangs in political thuggery. In Nigeria, the political class has become untouchable and they use their power, wealth and connections to break the laws of the land with impunity and without fear of prosecution or conviction in any court of law. Our investigations show that apart from refutals by accused serving government officials and politicians, the Nigerian police have not publicly exonerated anyone of sponsoring urban gangs.

Also, the same vigour used in quelling militia activities that threaten oil exploration is not brought to bear on urban gangs. Government appears to regard crude oil production activities as more important economically than the urban economic sector. Moreover, the tendency by government to see urban gang violence as isolated incidences is faulty. The real tragedy however, is the engagement in violent acts by youths as means of livelihood, and as means of settling scores rather than recourse to the laws of the land. The relative ease with which those involved get away with their actions gives great impetus to continue in this trend.

Government attempts to address the problem of youth gangs have also been very piecemeal. In the absence of effective urban planning, there are no clearly identifiable street systems and house numbers in the waterside settlements. This makes the core areas of gang activities almost impossible to patrol. Additionally, the obvious absence of any planning for local urban economic development in Nigerian cities, attendant rising unemployment opens the door to criminal survival measures by the populace. In the face of increasing poverty, evidence of unfettered access of the political class to the state treasury abound. This generates anger and frustration. The urban informal sector, which provides livelihood for about 82% of households, continues to attract the poor and unemployed and even those that are employed in the formal sector are in it to increase their incomes. Furthermore, the government is decreasingly able to provide basic services. Households in urban areas are forced to provide all the services they need to live decently including electricity, water, sanitation, security and other services. It is this environment that makes the urban poor so susceptible to gang violence as recruits and victims. In the midst of this chaos, the government is bent on privatizing essential services in the country. How do we expect the poor urban households that are already overwhelmed to pay for essential services like water, electricity, health, education, etc., without facilities put in place to weather the shocks? The unanswered important question is what will happen to state resources when essential services are privatised.

With obvious absence of the rule of law, a crucial problem is the influence of arbitrary power, multiple and often contradictory policy positions, and the personalisation of power especially by political office holders. Government, officials and those connected to them are often exempted from obeying the laws that govern other citizens or from the jurisdiction of the ordinary courts. This trend cripples serious criminal investigations of alleged sponsors of cult gangs and creates avenues for the abuse of office. It is also this factor that protects children of the well - connected in Nigerian society from prosecution for criminal activities when they join urban gangs.

Our recommendations reflect the specific interventions that are necessary and the agencies that should take the lead:

- i.) State and federal governments in Nigeria must take a more critical look at the nation's urban centres especially in the areas of physical planning, economy and the provision of services. In doing these, priority must be given to helping the urban poor meet their needs for sustainable livelihood. The generally poor quality of urban life and growing poverty are serious enticement for criminal activities. No government in Nigeria has a sustainable urban management program including a well-defined policy for addressing urban security and urban environmental planning. Port Harcourt has over fifty waterside residential areas that provide accommodation for over 500,000 persons. The poorest housing conditions in the entire Niger Delta Region occur here (World Bank, 1995). These neighbourhoods provide shelter for gang members.
- ii) The nation's rural economy must also be planned to promote growth in the agricultural sector, provide jobs and improve rural quality of life. This should reduce the lure of urban employment that fuels the large-scale migration of young children especially boys to growing urban areas.
- iii) An important pool of recruits for the gangs is from among the street children, not the weak and feeble, but the strong and able. This calls for action to take the children off the streets before they become targets. Children's shelters are needed to provide for their care and education. In this regard, local governments, religious organizations, non-governmental organizations and even charitable individuals can partner to provide care on a regular and consistent basis.
- iv) As gangs move from marginal settlements to urban villages, local vigilante groups need to be encouraged. With the police recently engaged in community policing, the possibility of training vigilante groups to assist it in the work of surveillance should be explored. Local vigilante groups are traditional responses to violence, and government should seek ways of structuring and linking them properly to the police for a multi-pronged effort, with the police taking the initiative.
- v) There is need for retraining and refocusing the police force. Background checks should be made at recruitment to ensure that only persons of integrity and proper education are taken. Training should focus more on investigation and surveillance techniques, record keeping and handling crisis situations. To attain this, there is need to recruit persons who have proper educational qualifications. The present quality of recruits is very poor. For increased surveillance within the cities, the police need better equipment, in form of vehicles, cameras, phones, and security gadgets.
- vi) The attitude and integrity of the state security agents and the police has been called into question in many instances in this study. Presently, many residents are not prepared to give information to the police, as they cannot trust that their identities will be protected. The state security agency must do its own house cleaning exercise and its personnel that lack integrity removed and publicized.
- vii) There must be ways of knowing the identity of persons who live and work in the urban areas. The national identity card scheme is a positive step but it is not enough. If during routine surveillance some one is asked to give a residential address, the police need to be able to crosscheck and confirm the information. Thus, street naming and registration of houses are important. The city planning authorities should take up this responsibility in partnership with the police.

viii) The rule of law must be the basis of life in Nigeria if crime is to be checked. This implies equality before the law. The present practice where the rich and the well connected and highly placed flout the laws with impunity and hide behind official protection needs to be stopped. Even those in executive positions should be made to face the law when they commit acts that contravene it. Civil society must insist on this. Collectively, it is possible to bring those who run the government to be accountable to the people. Civil society organizations, NGOs, religious leaders and human rights groups in Nigeria must mobilize and sensitise the populace to ensure that this happens.

ix) There is need to counsel the youths that are in gangs to re-orientate their mindset and to be able to know how to prevent young children getting into the same situations. This has to be done on a sustainable basis. The Ministry of Youth Affairs must take part in this endeavour. In the on-going national political reform conference, security should be a key point on the agenda with containment of youth violence targeted for specific actions.

(x) Job creation and making sure that youths are gainfully employed is a major task for government. The political class and those in government must appreciate this and give it the serious attention it deserves.

Endnotes

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1. Although according to the United Nations Organization, “youth” refers to anyone between the ages of 15 and 24 years (O.A.U. 1996), in this study we will be concerned with the ages between 15 and 35 years. This actually portrays the situation on the ground.

2. *The News*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 19th July, 2004. pp. 30-32

3. “When Bullets begin to Flow” by Uchegbu Karl Chinedu in *The Beacon* May 21-27, 2004

4. *Weekend Telegraph*, July 3-9, Vol. II, No.5, 2005.

5. Police Sources: Interview by Mr. Izeze in April, 2004.

6. *Independent Monitor*, July 8-11, 2004

7. *Independent Monitor*, Vol.10, No. 41, 27th – 30th May, 2004.

8. *Hard Truth*, May 27th – June 2nd 2004

9. *The News*, July 12th 2004.

10. Police Sources: Interview by Mr. Izeze in April, 2004

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