



Foreign cartels and local accomplices: Socio-economic realities of criminality and deforestation in the Nigeria's forest belts

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Abstract

From a green criminological perspective, this study examined the dynamics of foreigners and local actors in Nigeria's forests belts, specifically with regards to deforestation and criminality in agrarian communities. It also highlighted the security lapses and manoeuvring strategies of suspects and arrested foreigners held in custody in the Nigerian Criminal Justice System for violating forest laws. Data collected for the study was basically qualitative, among fifty-five (55) respondents in selected forest belts connecting South and Western Nigeria. It was discovered that a strong network of syndicates (often foreigners with local accomplices) capitalized on the prevailing economic recession and on the high level of unemployment in the country to lure young able-bodied men and women into environmental crime for survival. This is evidenced by the indiscriminate lumbering of precious economic trees that are not fully matured by law for exportation to the international market. These activities have often overwhelmed security personnel, while few foreigners caught; often find their ways out of the Nigerian criminal justice system. The study concluded that there is the urgent need for security operatives to intensify their searchlights on illegal activities of foreigners and local collaborators in the Nigerian forest belts to curtail green crime.

Keywords

Foreign cartels; green crime; forest protection; criminal justice system;

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Introduction

Generally, the removal or destruction of significant areas of forest cover has resulted in a degraded environment with reduced bio-diversity. In Nigeria, like many other countries in Africa and Asia, massive deforestation is ongoing and shaping not only climate change, livelihood and geography, but also the economic losses and socio-cultural mal-adaptation. In the last two decades Nigeria has lost over 70 % of its share of the world's great tropical rainforests (Ogundele, Oladipo & Adebisi, 2016). In 2017, tree cover loss was reported to have grown up to 171kha, an equivalent of 12.1 metric tons of CO₂ of emissions (globalforestwatch.org, 2017). The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) (2015) earlier report identified forest crime and corruption as some of the main causes of deforestation and warned that immediate attention has to be given to illegal activities and corruption in the world's forests in many countries (Ogundele, Oladipo & Adebisi, 2016; Trump, K. & WWF Germany).

There are quite a number of criminal activities involving transactions in illegal products, acts and practices conducted in protected areas that have a significant impact on the environment in Nigeria and Africa generally (Nellemann, Henriksen, Raxter, Ash, & Mrema, 2014; UNODC, 2016; International Union for Conservation of Nature, (IUCN) Red List, 2016). These realities are often overshadowed by research focusing on deforestation, loss of vegetation, urbanisation and industrialisation, and their implications on agriculture and sustainable development. Criminological research (specifically green criminology) has often undermined criminal activities in the forest belts due to the difficulties and dangers therein in getting first-hand information from the field. Secondly, the abundance of forest reserves and the economic dependence on forests mostly on small scale subsistence farming in Nigeria have also not enhanced criminological research. An overview of the economic dependence on agriculture shows that over 70 percent of the population rely on forest and aquatic produce for survival (Ruhl, 2001). Similarly, rural and urban unemployed youths account for about two-thirds of the entire population relying on the forest for their livelihood (Patterson, Okafor & Williams, 2006; Rademeyer, 2012; Ikuomola, Okunola & Akindutire, 2016). Since the 1980s, when Nigeria's economy took a turn for the worse seeing the world petroleum price tumbled, devaluation of nation's currency, so also the rise in criminality and deforestation (Ikuomola et al., 2016; Isamah & Okunola, 1997; NYA24, 2018). Though a pocket of research has portrayed the forest belts in Nigeria as a safe haven and a saving grace for youths who are unemployed, the forest belts were also approached as a prospect for criminally minded opportunists who tried to escape poverty and operated due to unregulated entries in the field. The inadequate security in Nigeria as a country allows individuals and foreigners to venture into unscrupulous economic activities as evident in the illegal logging of woods, indiscriminate felling of economic trees and poaching of wildlife in the country sides (Akintoye, 2008; INTERPOL-UN Environment, 2016; Ikuomola et al., 2016).

Available data shows that in Africa, countless plants and animals fall victim to trafficking yearly. It is estimated that an astounding 70,000 animals have been poached every year on average for the illegal market between 2000 and 2016 (Trump & WWF

Germany, 2017) – out of which about 20,000 African elephants and 1000 rhinos were killed for their body parts. The astronomical prices paid for these products on the black market make illegal trade in endangered species extremely lucrative. Together with illegal logging and other environmental crimes, wildlife crime is the fourth largest offence in the world after trafficking in drugs, in counterfeit products and in persons. Global revenue generated solely from the illegal sale of wildlife is estimated to be USD 9–23 billion annually (Trump & WWF Germany, 2017).

The demand and supply in international markets, as well as the availability of black markets encourage poaching, illegal logging and wildlife trade; and also deprive the communities of their natural resources and economic value. Studies have shown that elephants lost to poaching represent a tourism value of USD 25 million a year—revenue potentially lost for the African tourism sector (Trump & WWF Germany, 2017; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014). Global Initiative (2013) report, buttressed the fact that illicit trade in wildlife is often linked to other crimes, corruption in particular. It is well obvious in situations where security agents attempt rescuing the forest from poachers and lumbers, and other illegal activities that constitute environmental crimes, only to know that those involved are politically connected. Thus, the works of committed security officers are thus undermined, and further empower forest criminals (mostly powerful individuals from the cities and foreigners) whom are rarely apprehended (Gray, 2012; Ikuomola et.al., 2016; INTERPOL, 2013; New York Times, 2013). The New York Times, (2013), noted that the nature of corruption makes it difficult to assess the quantum of deforestation and criminality taking place in Africa’s forests. This is one of the reasons why Transparency International often deals with empirical data from Africa:

‘Corruption generally comprises illegal activities, which mainly come to light only through scandals, investigations or prosecutions. It is thus difficult to assess absolute levels of corruption in countries or territories on the basis of hard empirical data’ (Transparency International, 2012:5).

The effect of corruption on food production and deforestation is an issue to contend with. In areas that are rural or semi urban, with abundance of forest trees and produce (agricultural zones), the forest is readily available to be explored and exploited not only by locals but also by foreign syndicates (Martin & Vigne, 2011). Most worrisome is the activities of illegal traders of forest produce, comprising of foreigners who are in dire need of rare and hard species of woods for European and American markets. Thus, with the security lapses on the part of the law enforcement agents, the wanton destruction and felling of trees on communal and individual farmlands are unavoidable (Egbewole, Ogunsanwo, & Omole, 2011; Rademeyer, 2012).

The increasing rate of forest depletion in the country is no doubt alarming; with statistics showing that Nigeria experiences a 3.5 percent annual rate of forest depletion. Forest reserve estimated to cover about 10 million hectares in 2012 accounts for more than 10% of land area, of approximately 96.2 million hectares; 923,768 km square expected to serve a population of about 198million (Federal Department of Forestry, 2012; National Population Commission, 2018). Notwithstanding, the fertile landmass for

agriculture, Nigeria is bedevilled with an average unemployment rate of 18.4 percent; hosted by widespread poverty, underemployment and criminality (Ikuomola et al., 2016). Nigeria used to have about 20% of its area covered with natural forests, but this has been reduced to about 10%. It lost about 60% of its natural forests to agricultural encroachment, excessive logging and urbanization between the 1960s and the year 2000 (FAO 2001; SFM Tropics. 2005).

The socio-economic loss to the nation is unquantifiable, especially on some endangered species in the South-west and Mid-west forest zones in Nigeria (comprising states of Oyo, Ondo, Osun, Ogun, Ekiti, and Edo and Delta states). The fast deforestation and criminal activities cum urbanization processes experienced in Nigeria together with the increasing rate of unemployment, persistent poverty, inequality, inadequacy of social services, the consolidation of trans-national crime organizations, the widespread use of drugs and drug trafficking, ill equipped security officials and forest guards; infiltration of the forest economy in the country by foreign cartels and criminals; emergence of clandestine markets and sawmills for rare forest products, have further intensified the number of youths seeking for opportunities in forest business and the proverbial greener pastures (Pretty et al., 2013).

The ultimate objective therefore is to examine the interplay between foreign cartels and local accomplices in the forest belts. Key research questions raised focused on why do the activities of forests criminals go unreported and also on why the suspects often go scot-free in the criminal justice system. These questions by nature clearly speak to the fact that deviant activities no doubt are bound to flourish in such a scenario, especially in the agrarian communities if there are lapses in security (Okunola & Ikuomola, 2010; Ikuomola et al., 2016). The lapses in security cuts across several sectors of the economy beyond agriculture to other related ventures which this study did not cover. It is in this regard that this study is focused on narratives about the presences and activities of foreign cartels and local accomplices' involvement in the deforestation and criminalities taking place in selected agrarian communities in Nigeria.

Methodology

This article reports on a purely qualitative and exploratory study in Edo and Ondo States, two neighbouring state located in the mid-west and south-west forest' belts in Nigeria. The forest belt in the two states is located between 6° East of the Greenwich Meridian and Latitude 7° North of the Equator along the Benin-Owena River Basin (see beninowena.gov.ng). A purposive sample with a convenient population was utilized. The sample comprises of fifty-five (55) respondents (Security personnel, community heads, forest guards, and youths) in the selected forest belt. Specifically, the sample comprised of 28 forests scavengers, 15 forest guards/ security officers and 12 community leaders. The age of the respondents was between 18 and 54 years. Comprehensive in-depth interviews (face-to-face) and focus group discussions were conducted by the researcher and 5 field assistants in English and pidgin (less Standard English) mixed with local dialects; all interviews were audio recorded. Interviews averaged one hour. The shortest interview

was 50 minutes and the longest lasted just over one hour and 30 minutes. The variability in interview duration was a product of the semi-structured nature of the interviews, as well as variation among individuals in terms of knowledge, experiences, and involvement in the forest space; and most importantly the desire to discuss personal experiences with a relative stranger. The discussion was limited to issues related to foreign cartels involvement in the forest space, local accomplices' collaboration and contribution to deforestation and environmental crime within the Nigerian forest belts (specifically illegal lumbering) in the study areas. During data collection, I took extensive field notes on any interactions and observations relevant to the study of illegalities taking place in the region. All issues were transcribed and translated by the researcher. After data collection was completed, I identified and sorted recurring themes apparent in respondents' narratives, through line-by-line analysis. Once initial memos were written and links between themes became clearer, I returned to the full body of data to begin focused content analysis. Focused content analysis helped me to ensure that the themes that emerged from the initial subsets of the data were both relevant to and appropriately configured for the full set of data. Data analysis followed the iterative process that often characterises grounded theory in particular, and qualitative research more generally (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Wengraf, 2001). The principle of anonymity and confidentiality of respondents were maintained. This informed the use of gender (male/female) basically as respondents' identifier in the transcription, sorting, and analysis of responses. In the paragraphs below, I present the content and structure of these themes.

Empirical findings and discussion

Dynamics of involvement: Indigenes, state officials and foreigners

Respondents' narratives revealed that there were quite a number of people involved in forest crime, with particular references to the corrupt practices that foster the illegal trade in logs. State officials were mentioned in the illegal logging and lumbering of economic woods (classified as precious wood). Logging of precious and uncommon woods in these environments, are restricted by law, only to registered companies and private individuals licensed to operate in the geographical habitat; but the lapses in regulating entry and exit and public knowledge of the demand, and foreign cartels willingness to pay higher prices for scarce log motivates all and sundry into the clandestine business of lumbering. In terms of the quality, rarity and desirability of precious woods, the demand is often higher because of its limited availability. This is corroborated by Jenkins (2012), in his study on illegal precious woods, where he noted that the slow-growing rate of hard and precious woods often put much pressure to cut them before they reach their optimum size. This explains its demand and scarcity. Precious woods are anecdotally cited as being harvested on a tree-by-tree basis rather than from formal concessions. This type of harvesting is more difficult to control than in well-delimited concessions and are often illegal (Alamu & Agbeja, 2011; Eman, Mesko, & Fields, 2009; IUCN, Red List, 2009; Ikuomola et al., 2016). The indiscriminate and illegal

felling of precious woods was discovered to be driven by a syndicate of foreigners, mostly Asians (Indians, Chinese and Lebanese) located in major port-cities (Warri, Port-harcourt and Lagos) in Nigeria. These woods are often exported abroad to manufacturing companies for boat building, coachwork, firearms, and ceremonial objects (Trump & WWF Germany, 2017; White, 2008; 2011; 2013). Research regarding the dynamics of foreign cartels involvement in environmental crime, apart from agricultural produce, poaching of wild animals was also common (Trump & WWF Germany, 2017; White, 2008; 2011; 2013).

This is well captured in the generic flow chart of illegal activities in the forest belt as highlighted by WWF/ Dalberg, (2012), in Figure 1. The involvement of a significant number of actors across the various phases of source, transportation, processing and sale; including poachers, intermediaries facilitates the local and international smuggling (established companies, corrupt authorities, etc.), couriers, logistics specialists, traders and wholesalers in the forest economy. A community head noted that:

Our big-time customers are the White skinned guys, mostly Lebanese, Chinese and Indians who come to the village in search of precious woods and other forest resources. They come with pictures of their needs, specific trees, measurements and sizes of what they want. Sometimes they drop with us albums of forests products that are in demand. And when there is less security personnel on duty, they even go with us to the forest to physically identify their needs (Chief/ Male/ 51 years/ Ondo State).

While another (a youth leader) noted that the foreigners come under different guises, and that, some, are more sincere than others regarding their mission (illegal logging of woods and wildlife for ankle bracelet and interior decorations):

(...) they come under different missions. There are some who tell you strictly – ‘we have come to do business’ others will ask ‘what have we got to sell?’ and how mature is the wood you have in stock? They are particularly interested with the sizes of logs. The bigger, the better the bargain! For us as hustlers in the community, our main concern is with the amount of foreign exchange they are willing to drop for us (Youth leader/ middleman/ 32 years/ Edo State).

Responses also revealed that there are those who come with the intention to exploit the forest and the community’s wildlife without engaging the youths in the communities (but the local security operatives) or parting ways with their money. This is often the cause of clashes between the youths and security personnel. Responses showed that conflict is inevitable whenever the youths are disregarded as stakeholders in the community. Similarly stated was the disguise of foreigners as government researchers or contractors only to be found carting away logs overnight. This was well captured in a focus group discussion in Ozalla;-Sabongida-ora in Edo State, and Ifon-Sobe axis in both States:

(...) there are those who come into the forest in search of rare species of woods, bigger breed of antelopes and wild-dogs (mainly for their furs, teeth and skulls), but pretend that they are government sponsored researchers in search of medicinal plants. They use

fake identities and the privilege and opportunity to explore and exploit the availability of matured woods. What they do is to obtain fake licenses from the Ministry of Agriculture and forest departments. All these tricks we have come to know, whenever we see them late in the night with their trucks. They keep on employing so many tricks. We are getting to know their ways as they keep changing tactics (Community head/ Male/ 56 years/ Sabongida-ora / Edo State).

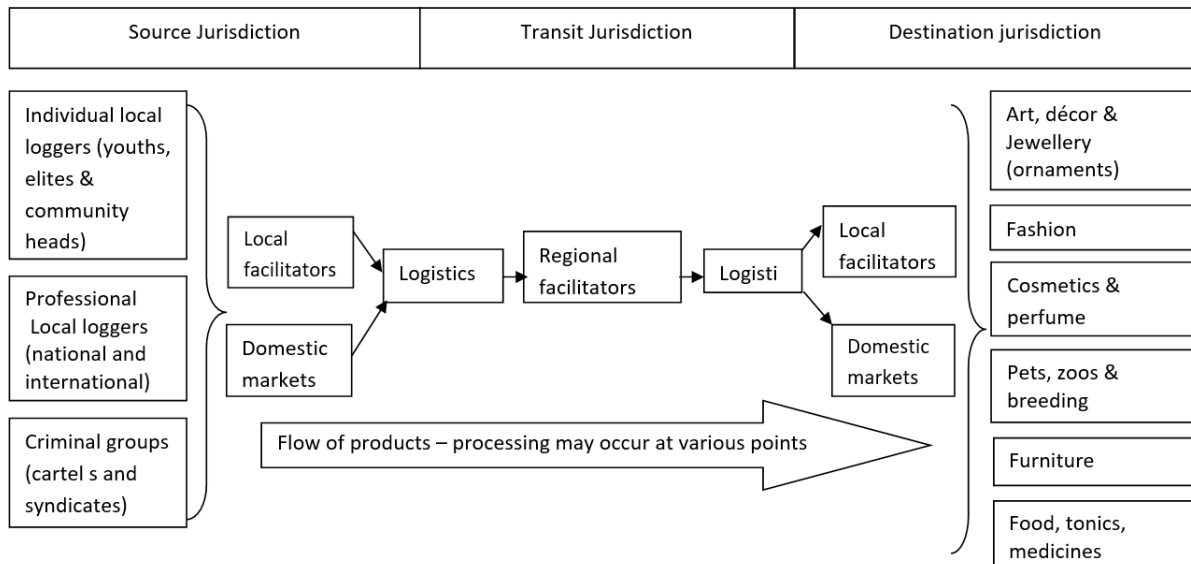


Figure 1 – Generic flow chart of the illegal supply chain of forest materials (Adapted from WWF/ Dalberg (2012))

A stakeholder in Ifon-Sobe axis in both Ondo and Edo States echoed thus:

There was a time in the 1990s, a group of Asians came into the community, clearing and expanding the roadsides between Ifon and Sobe, the community was very happy with the thought that it was a government sponsored project; they came with heavy duty machines such as tractors, motorised-saws, and pale loaders, they opened up a portion of the forest, while still working on the major road for about four to six weeks, they were seen carting away hard wood such as tick, obeche, iroko and mahogany trees. By the time the community became suspicious of their activities as fake contractors they were already gone leaving behind some of their spoilt and condemned equipment (Male/ 52 years/ Agent/ Sobe/ Edo State).

Another noted that:

When the foreigners go into the bush, they pretend to be excavating the soil for research. But that is usually not their intention! It was later realised that at midnight they uproot and cart away matured and hard woods. This is usually not without the presence of uniformed men, (members of the Nigerian police and forest guards). The people in these communities are not completely ignorant; questions are being asked, though without adequate answers (Female/ Agent/ 53 years/ Owo/ Ondo State).

A member of a local vigilante group in Elegbeka summed the conspiracies fostering criminality in the forest belts to cut across three major stakeholders: foreign cartels, youth, and security personnel in the communities. He also revealed that the above incident involving the Asians was reported to the divisional police department for necessary investigation and action. The outcome of the investigation exonerated foreigners and implicated the youths and community leaders. A situation described as ridiculous and a pointer to the corruption and mistrust about the criminal justice system in the country. Buttressing further he said:

(...) in no time the case was dead. It was later discovered that it was only possible for the contractors and foreign cartel to succeed because of the conspiracy that existed among the police, the forest guards and some of the youths in the community. In the course of the investigation, youths who assisted in identifying the portions of the forest where the woods initially laid, were arrested and taken into custody for criminal prosecution (Male/ 37 years/ Agent/ Elegbeka/ Ondo State).

Criminality and deforestation in the Nigerian forest belts: Foreign cartels and local accomplices

Despite the suspicion, accusations and counter accusations of security personnel involvement in illegal logging of woods, wildlife and environmental crime, directly or indirectly as revealed by the community heads, cases brought to the police department were often disregarded and at best treated with kid gloves. This a security officer in NIFOR (Nigerian Institute for Oil and Palm Research)-village (Edo State), debunked, noting that forest security is much more complex than securing the city or township:

There are so many escape routes in and out of the forests. Community leaders cannot deny their involvement in the activities, big construction firms are involved, and furniture companies from the big cities and townships are not left out. There are also those, whose businesses are strictly to export logs, but are found cutting corners. There are forest cartels and syndicates (foreign and local) everywhere. If we were to go after them in their numbers in this zone as they were, we will not have time for other pressing security issues such as kidnapping and drug peddling in the same communities and in the country; generally (Police Officer/ Female/ 45 years/ NIFOR/ Edo State).

In an interview with a mobile police officer (in a federal patrol team assigned to man the two states), he reiterated the difficulties in prosecuting some of the criminal cartels and suspects arrested in the past:

It is true that foreigners are involved in the criminal activities taking place in the forest but, we have had course to make some arrests occasionally. The problem is that they are often complex to deal with. They have all the necessary connections with registered companies (some multinationals), and some of them have links with top government officials in the presidency. Many a time, the consular general or ambassador of their countries intervene in the criminal investigation and obstruct justice. When these events of interferences take place, it becomes 100 percent certain that the foreigners involved will be discharged and acquitted. At the community, law enforcement officers are seen

as unserious, corrupt and not doing their jobs as expected (Mobile Police/ Male/ 39 years/ Molenge-Elegbeka/ Ondo State).

There are several narratives indicting foreigners, multinational companies and their personnel; and different consuls offices' involvement not only in negotiating the escape route for their nationals, but also in the passage and exportation of woods and wildlife to different countries. There were other accounts of foreigners conniving with the unemployed youths, registered and unregistered saw-millers and government agencies to gain access into the forest belts. Forest guards and security operatives were said to be involved in the issuance of fake permits with the cooperation of staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Both the forest guards and officials have also been alleged as conniving (and giving consent) to foreigners through registered local agents with genuine forest permit to exploit the forest illegally. For some of the outspoken forest guards who are up and doing in their jobs, many have lost their lives as a result of forest criminals getting tip-offs about planned checks and raids. In one of the interviews with a youth leader (and an accomplice) in Elegbeka, Ondo State, he emphasised that the activities of foreigners and local accomplices is an age long collaboration and tradition. Though he was of the opinion that the cartel of foreigners, do not come directly to the forest, rather they have agents, who are mostly educated elites and chiefs in the local communities:

The reality is that illegal logging of woods has been on for long. In some cases, it is a family business. The foreign cartels engage us in sourcing and delivering of specific woods which are difficult to come by, like iroko and mahogany, obeche, that are often scarce and in high demand. For instance around November 2011, I was introduced to a Lebanese merchant, all he wanted was (10) ten thick and matured mahogany and obeche woods (un-sawed). He was ready to pay close to N250, 000 (Two hundred and fifty thousand Naira) for each. I was able to engineer some boys around to search the forest from Ifon in Ondo State, to NIFOR in Edo State. It took us about 6 weeks to make the delivery because the woods were needed in full length and not in pieces or bits as often the case. And ever since, we have been in business. I have become wealthy; but it is a risky business! Going in and out of the forest is easy, but it becomes difficult when it has to do with illegal logging and lumbering for business purposes (Male/ 32 years/ Elegbeka/ Ondo State).

By taking into account the amount this particular respondent and his group made, it is worthy to mention that in the above deal, they made over five million Naira (about \$16,000) after delivering the woods. The consequence, this will have on the continuous deforestation and unwholesome exploitation of forest reserves in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. A female respondent noted that their customers do come from faraway places within and outside the country; and negotiate with them directly for businesses, 'customers and patrons cut across, ... from local contractors within the country – Abuja (federal capital territory), Lagos, saw millers from the different states – to foreigners based in and outside major Nigerian cities'. The foreign buyers are usually Lebanese, Chinese and Indians some with legitimate businesses in Nigeria but are also involved in buying rare hard woods from locals at the black-market rate. The foreigners were

described as their 'preferred customers' because they often pay more on delivery and sometimes part payments are made prior to delivery, especially when trust has been built. However, issues bothering on incessant kidnappings of foreigners, and local elites for ransom in the two states were described as negatively affecting patronage. This is further described as a situation that brings more middlemen into the business thereby reducing their bargaining power of doing business directly with the foreigners. A female interviewee in Uhumora, Edo State echoed 'we now have to pay smugglers to deliver the woods to the foreign customers, worst of all foreign currencies are no longer in circulation in their numbers as it used to be (...). This was not the case many years ago when security was much better'. For another respondent in one of the focus group discussions in Ifon, the notion that foreigners also make use of chiefs and elites in lumbering of precious woods was never in dispute. This was highlighted thus:

(...) we are not the only ones in this business. Just because we are peasants, we are often targeted by security personnel. But the truth is that the chiefs and community leaders are also involved and do partner with security officers and the foreigners too. They also collect money in hard currency (US dollars) from the foreigners and their agents, only for them to negotiate in local currency (Naira) with small dealers like us. Often we are short changed, and when we complain we are easily apprehended (Female/ 27 years/ dealer/ Ifon/ Ondo State).

In Uzeba, a community in Edo State, an incidence involving a young, street-smart, middleman from Ozalla was narrated. He was portrayed as fronting for an Indian firm in Lagos and wanted to swindle the community. Having collected \$5,000.00 from the Indians, he remitted \$1,200.00 to the chiefs for uprooting and selling of 15 mahogany and 10 Iroko trees, all rare hard forest woods. For fear of the name of the company as well as the identity of the Indians involved being exposed to press, the company representative quickly came to settle the differences by paying off the balance and resolving the case between the chiefs and the police, and other parties who wanted to make it public. A probe revealed that the villagers came to know about it months later when the Indians returned to the community the second time, for another transaction. This time, the middlemen were sidelined; they went directly to negotiate with the chiefs for a new deal. These events corroborate past findings that foreign companies who specialize in sourcing for woods for furniture, exterior and interior decorations have also contributed a lot to the illegal exploitation of forest products (Martin & Vigne, 2011). In this study, the Indians and Lebanese companies who operate in major cities in Lagos, Benin, Port-Harcourt, (River States); Owerri, (Imo State); Ibadan (Oyo State) and Warri (Delta State) were described as culprits. A number of studies have also shown that despite some of these Asian companies licensed to do business in Africa, they also venture into illegal businesses, especially in the exportation of wildlife and woods for wealthy clients and marketers overseas (IUCN Red List, 2009; Ola-Adams, 1983; South & Wyatt 2011;). It further implies that most of the woods out there, in the open market were illegally brought out from the forest without proper documentations.

The forest – easy entry and easy exit: Delinquent opportunities and youth involvement in the train of local accomplices

The active involvement of youths in the forests' corridors was well echoed in the community. Put differently, a male discussant buttressed the fact that youths are very active in sourcing for forest products, the same way they source for foreign merchants, under the watchful eyes of the security personnel and corrupt government officials. As accomplices, they often engage in double dealing, either with the security personnel or foreign merchants depending on how the bargain goes or/ and the security challenges encountered. Instances where foreigners and agents were given permission by community leaders to source for trees, logs and agricultural products of their choice after collecting huge amount of money, only for them to still go behind, to report them to the forest guards and security officers were noted. Other interviewees in the zones buttressed the constant arrests and disturbances by forest guards and security operatives as common; especially when bargains were not remitted. Similarly, the youths constitute majority of the suspects in the police custody, not necessarily for crime related to illegal logging, but for drug related offences (peddling of marijuana and other psychoactive plants). Nevertheless, when set free, they often see no reason to desist from the illegal and clandestine trade in the forest for survival. Youth leaders in Sobe, Uhumora, Elegbeka and Ifon communities captured their fearlessness with the following words:

(...) We do not need to stop this business because of the police or forest guards. They are human like us. When they shoot we also shoot at them. The forest is a jungle (Male /42 years/ Elegbeka/ Ondo State).

(...) They are always after us, and we are also after them; We know how they operate and also how to settle them when caught. Once this is done we are of their hook. It is a normal routine thereafter (Male/ 41 years/ Ifon/ Ondo State).

(...) When forest guards become tough on us, and prove difficult to contend with, we change our tactics, especially when new officers are deployed to a particular zone (Male/ 53 years/ Uhumora/ Edo State).

(...) If luck runs against us and we are caught with the logs or any other regulated forest produce, all we need to do is to contact an insider in the State Security Services or Command, and we get bailed, and back to business again. The security men also need money. It is a give and take situation in this business (Male/ 34 years/ Sobe/ Edo State).

In terms of security, forest guards complained that they are just like 'boys scout', 'our guns are less sophisticated', 'patrol vehicles are not enough, and the few ones are not often in good state'. (...) 'it makes the work boring and hectic in pursuing forest criminals out of the forest'. Thus, it is easy for everyone to get in and out of the forest without any fear of security concerns. Observations during the course of the study revealed that there were few forest patrol vehicles and guards plying Akure – Owo, (Ondo axis) – and Ifon-Benin axis in Ondo State, down to Ekpoma and Owan-East and

Owan-West in Edo state. The constant surveillance and patrol of the forest belt was said to be mainly focused on drug peddlers in the forest and less attention to illegal loggers of woods and wildlife in the two States. This is because Ondo and Edo States are the major routes and sources of cannabis cultivation and other psychoactive substances in Nigeria (Mustapha, 2018). According to the Nigerian Drug Law and Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) officers in NIFOR and Owo communities, 'drug mafia is the major mandate in the region:

(...) the two states remain among the leading six states in the country with a very fertile landmass, of thick forest, favourable for the cultivation of cannabis. And also, the forest gives a protective cover and a comfortable hideout for criminals. (...) Most of the suspects and convicts are teaming unemployed youths and community elites (men and women) who venture into farming and peddling of marijuana because of the huge sum of money they get from the sales across the country (Male/ NDLEA, officer/ Owo/ Ondo State).

Another buttressed further that:

(...) illegal logging is much more common than poaching of animals in the zones. Nobody gives a damn to wildlife crime here. The presence of zoological crime is minimal compared with states like Cross-rivers and Akwa-Ibom located in the South-South zone; where there are several cases of poaching of wild monkeys and chimps. Of late however, crimes such as kidnapping of persons and drug peddling are gradually overshadowing environmental crime at least in the past five years (Female/ NDLEA, officer/ Ozalla/ Edo State).

It is important to emphasize that the forest zones in Nigeria have well been linked as hideouts for criminals who engage in kidnapping, be it for political or for economic gains (Abdulkabir, 2017; NYA24, 2018). The NYA24 Global Trend report for 2017 shows that Nigeria is one of the three countries in the world with the highest number of reported incidents of kidnapping (second behind India and above Pakistan), with the worst record of foreign nationals being kidnapped in Africa, ahead of Libya and Somalia (NYA24, 2018). In combating this menace, search and rescue operations were constantly taking place, in hideouts located in the forests' zones. Thus, a number of forests routes and spaces were gradually being opened up (in the process of searching for the whereabouts of kidnapped victims and the kidnappers) to aid security checks. By implication, security operatives in Nigeria (unintentionally) are also contributing their own quota to the rapid deforestation in the zones, at least in recent times. Narratives from security officers show that kidnapping as a social problem has seriously diverted attention away from other traditional crimes in the country, most especially in communities between Benin and Owo axes. On the other hand, respondents in the communities (local cartels) revealed that it has also deprived a number of foreigners from going into the forest directly to see and negotiate directly with the dealers. Over 70 percent of the interviewees and discussants were of the opinion that 'kidnapping has created a fearful atmosphere for foreigners to freely visit the forests, unlike in the past years, when they would walk into the community to inspect and search the forest for their specific needs'. This was captured by a youth leader in NIFOR/ Benin (Male/ 37years). Narratives below highlight the influx of

middlemen and women as fronting for foreigners; and also security personnel collaborating with courageous and relentless foreigners in the business:

(...) It is not business as usual. The situation has changed the way business used to be done. There are now a lot of middlemen and women within and outside the zones, who front for the foreigners. And this has seriously affected the cost of logs and other associated businesses. The middlemen pay far lesser than the foreigners who sometimes pay us in foreign currencies. It was not uncommon to see us conducting businesses with Dollars and Euros. It has gradually become scarce (Male/ 43 years/ Ozalla/ Edo State).

(...) This is not to say that all the foreigners have stopped entering the forests or engaging in the business. There are a number of courageous foreigners most especially the Indians and Lebanese who have stayed long enough in Nigeria to understand the criminal justice system, and the terrain; as well as having strong ties with the security operatives and community leaders. These categories are still very much in circulation (Male/ 40 years/ Agbanikaka/ Edo State).

(...) With the help of corrupt police officers, paid vigilante and militia groups; who serve as guards, few foreigners occasionally find their ways into the forest, but not in their numbers as it was in the past decade (Male/ Ifon/ 35 years/ Ondo State).

Conclusion

This study highlights unemployment, poverty and the need for survival as major reasons fostering deforestation and criminality in the forest belts in Nigeria. The forest needs to be well preserved and protected against criminals whose activities have led to the destruction of wildlife and economic trees. It is important to state clearly that the forest is an economic venture which must be properly regulated by the state and her security agencies to wade off both local and foreign accomplices; who have capitalised on the current security lapses and ill-equipped security personnel in charge of forest management in the country. The increasing illegality in the forest belts of Edo and Ondo States, as depicted in this study is worrisome, as it contributes more, not only to the continuous deforestation taking place in the country, but also directly to the menace of foreigners (expatriates inclusive) being kidnapped for ransom by criminal gangs. As serious as the unemployment situation is in Nigeria, this should not be taken as an excuse for criminal cartels irrespective of their nationalities, economic status and political influence to lure Nigerian youths and community chiefs into criminal livelihood. The long time effect of foreigners' incursion into local communities (with foreign currencies and criminal intentions), which will further breed criminality, insecurity and threats to genuine forest vendors and investors, who are capable of diversifying and improving the country's revenue base for good; into a more robust agro – allied economy.

Lastly, the Nigerian government and civil society groups should seriously examine the manifestations of criminality and disorderliness along the forest belts in Edo and Ondo States respectively to ensure adequate security of the forest zones. Emphasis should be placed on equipping the security agents, revitalization of the criminal justice

system, and efforts geared towards alleviating poverty, unemployment and insecurity. With regards to the narratives emanating from the study, and the diversity of opinions and the plurality of views established, this study argues for more attention to be given to ecological issues, which is the hallmark of green criminology.

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