

Rethinking Security in the Niger Delta

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Over the last twenty years, widespread social and political conflict has characterized life in Nigeria's oil producing Niger Delta region. Although structural poverty and high youth unemployment set the backdrop for many of these conflicts with admittedly multiple causes, the oil industry (oil multinationals and the Nigerian) itself and the manner which it has conducted its business in the Niger Delta is central. Initially the target of generally non violent community 'lobbying' through public demonstrations, sit ins and mass occupations (all generally violently suppressed by the Nigerian state) in recent years (since Nigeria's return to civilian rule) the oil industry has become the direct target of armed militia violence, notably bombing raids and kidnapping. Production levels declined as kidnapping of expatriate and Nigerian oil industry personnel, became widespread. A hitherto unprecedented oil industry focus on 'security' provision resulted. Although 'understandable' in the circumstances, this new orientation suggests an industry merely responding to externalities. Yet such a reading underestimates the role which the industry itself has played in generating the context of institutionalized armed violence in which they are now forced to operate. Past and present practices of literally paying and arming would be militants, as part of short sighted semi official approaches to securing investments have we argue in this paper created this case of chickens come home to roost. In it, we draw on case study material gathered in two oil producing states (Rivers and Bayelsa) examining security provision practices throughout the 2000s and particularly prior to and since the 2009 Presidential amnesty for former militants (which has introduced a more or less fragile lull in hostilities). In the light of emerging trends within the Post Amnesty rehabilitation programme, which appear to be based on paying off trouble shooter armed former fighters and their patrons, we examine how new approaches to security might include notions of community trusteeship, which make oil bearing communities themselves the principle guarantors of security, by enabling them to have some sort of 'stake' (more than simply monetary) in the way the industry is run, and therefore policed, and rendered secure. At a time when concerns about 'security' and particularly security of supply are part of a new global zeitgeist, drawing on comparative examples from of extractives elsewhere in Africa, and situating security questions both historically and as part of a broader strategy to consolidate peace, is now more vital than ever.