

## Chapter 10

# Arming Community Vigilantes in the Niger Delta: Implications for Peacebuilding

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### Abstract

This chapter explores the complexity and dimensions of arming vigilante groups in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta, which has been confronted with conflicts and insurgencies since the 1990s. It argues that contrary to common assumptions that local communities arm vigilante groups primarily for protection purposes, state governments, local political elites and Multinational Oil Companies with different motives are also involved in arming vigilante groups in the region. Significantly, the arming of vigilante groups by these different actors contributes to the proliferation and availability of arms in local communities in the Niger Delta with implications for the militarization of the region. The key argument is that since arms availability in villages act as incentives for local hostilities in Nigeria, local communities in the Niger Delta face greater difficulties in sustaining post-conflict intercommunity reconciliation and peace. Accordingly, the continuing availability of weapons in villages in the region problematizes the distinction drawn between conflict zones and post-conflict settings.

### Introduction

In most African States, citizens depend on a variety of private security organizations and vigilante groups to cope with the growing challenges of insecurity and crime in both urban and rural communities. This has called into question, the predominant assumptions about the social role of the State as security provider. Yet, issues of legitimacy, legality and effectiveness of vigilante groups in community protection are at the center of emerging debates amongst scholars. Some have argued that the practices of vigilante groups as local modes of collective security and justice promotion fall below acceptable community norms and cultural values for protecting and advancing human rights (Human Rights Watch 2002; Higazi 2008). Others conclude that vigilante policing activities tend to reproduce and reinforce the very structures and conditions of repression, domination and insecurity in the society (Anderson 2002; Ruteere and Pommerolle 2003). On the other hand, some contend that rather than supplement State policing, vigilante groups have emerged, in some contexts, as effective and viable alternatives to state security institutions in which the people turn to for crime prevention and crime fighting and ultimately physical safety (Abrahams 1987; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Adamu 2008).

Thus, the nature of the States in Africa has been identified as a crucial factor in the growth and reliance of vigilantism by the citizenry for protection. In fact, reflecting largely the deterministic Weberian notions of the state and neo-liberal conceptions of state building that also politicize it, the proliferation of armed vigilantes and more broadly militia groups, in much of Africa, has been attributed to state failure (Reno 2002; Raleigh 2014; Bates 2008; Young 2004). Again, while not completely rejecting the view that African States undoubtedly suffer from functional failure rather than structural collapse (Naanen and Nyiayaana 2013), others see the issue of state capacity differently. Abrahamsem and Williams (2007) argue that the increased visibility of vigilante policing in Africa is complex, relating not only to globalization, but also to the liberalization and privatization of the security space and changing dynamics of the provision and governance of political and social order, a process that has redefined the nature and role of the state globally.

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The nature of this complexity is well articulated by Ian Loader who observes: “across the developed and the developing world there is a broad and diverse network of policing that not only works through government but, above, below and beyond government” (Loader 2000: 328). Accordingly, vigilantism may not necessarily arise as a response to the breakdown of state services as popularly conceived (see Johnston 1996). Rather, vigilant groups collaborate with the state to provide services to the people in complex ways that drawing a clear distinction between the state and vigilante groups as non-state bottom-up mechanisms for fighting crime and protecting local communities becomes increasingly difficult (Kirschner 2011).

Importantly, also, some have maintained that the phenomenon of vigilantism as citizen-led provision and governance of security is neither new in history across cultures (Killingray 1986; Abrahams 1987; Gore and Pratten 2003; Leach 2004; Fourchard 2008), nor are vigilante activities in modern times are uniquely peculiar to African social formations. In precolonial Africa, vigilantism finds expression in the activities of secret societies, warrior bands and night guards which perform diverse functions of law enforcement, extra-judicial practice of adjudication, external defense and peacemaking (Pratten 2008a, 2008b). Similarly in North America, vigilantism dates back to the eighteenth century (Brown 1975) and remains relevant to-date. Brian Newby’s recent research suggests that the continuing use of a variety of vigilante groups in different contexts in the United States is part of the efforts to protect and create a perfect democracy (Newby 2012).

What can be gleaned from the above is that “... vigilantism obeys not only the logics of neo-liberalism but its own local and national historical and cultural logics” (Pratten 2008a: 5). Broadly then, the resurgence of vigilantism in Africa is not necessarily a response to the politics of plunder and disorder (Gore and Pratten 2003; see also Membe 2001; Branch and Cheeseman 2008) or “retraditionalization” as Chabal and Daloz (1999: 45) would argue. After all, state-making especially, if the European experience is anything to go by, is historically and inherently conflictual, a process that is not necessarily unilinear and determinate (Tilly 1992). Given this therefore, it is argued here that the growing significance of vigilantism in Africa’s security architecture reflects continuity and change in relation to state-building processes and peacebuilding conversations taking place in the continent.

In summary, extant scholarships have made important insights into the nature of these conversations, either by presenting vigilante groups as a threat to public order and social stability through their engagement in violent and criminal activities; or as a mechanism for advancing ethno-nationalist claims, cultural and political identity of a group (Last 2008; Nolte 2007); or as a means of promoting justice, security and social control in local communities in collaboration with the State in ways that are complex (Kirschner 2011). But in undertaking the foregoing activities especially physical protection, the use or misuse of weapons by vigilante groups has been a key determinant factor in the acceptance or rejection of vigilante policing by the society. As Laurent Fourchard has observed, “In each case, vigilante groups interrogate the relationships between the society and law enforcement agents, the issue being to know whether such groups are tolerated or even supported by the police or if they are forbidden because they are considered to be a threat to the state monopoly of legitimate violence” (Fourchard 2008: 16). Yet, the question of who arms vigilante groups, for what purpose, and the risks that arms proliferation associated with vigilantism pose for peacebuilding in local communities has only received partial scholarly attention.

This chapter contributes to the literature on vigilantism in Africa by exploring the complexity and dimensions of arming village vigilante groups in Nigeria’s oil rich Niger Delta. It argues that contrary to common assumptions that local communities themselves arm vigilante groups primarily for community protection purposes, evidence from the Niger Delta, which has been confronted with violent communal conflicts, armed insurgencies and criminality especially since the post-Cold War suggests otherwise. This chapter identifies the government, Multinational Oil Companies (MNOCs) and local communities as key actors involved in arming youth-based vigilante groups in the Niger Delta for purposes that are sometimes contradictory. Community chiefs and local political elites, for instance, may arm vigilante groups not only to provide security for the local populations in the region, but also as a means of consolidating their local authority and power bases as well as demonstrating local power. In this regard, constitutive of broader aspects of community arming patterns, vigilante arming, contributes to the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and militarization of local communities in the Niger Delta. For example, when youth/vigilante security structures collapse in the region, in some instances, notably the case of the vigilante group called the Bakassi Boys in 2002, the arms used by the group resurfaced in criminal activities and communal

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conflicts. This has had serious implications and complications for community security and sustainable peacebuilding in the Delta region.

In advancing the above argument, the chapter progresses with a conceptualization of the Niger Delta, while also examining the historical context of the ways and manners ethnic communities in the region have been involved in the maintenance of peace, security and social order. This is then followed by an exploration of community vigilante arming patterns in the Niger Delta, describing the key actors involved and explaining their varying motivations. Finally, the analysis is centered on the peacebuilding implications of vigilante arming in the region.

### Historical, Social and Political Contexts of Community Vigilante Arming in the Niger Delta

It is pertinent to define the area that constitutes the Niger Delta before exploring the historical, economic and social forces that have shaped vigilante activities in the region since the 1990s. By the Niger Delta Development Commission (NNDC) Act of 2000, the Niger Delta comprises nine of Nigeria's 36 states: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers states. All these states have been lumped together on the basis of oil possession and it is more or less a reflection of the larger politics of oil in Nigeria. Until the creation of the NNDC, for instance, the Niger Delta has been conceived as the territory recognized by the Willinks Commission Report of 1958, which contains oil and has a very difficult terrain. This territory includes Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states, which not only has larger deposit of oil and gas but has also been the worst hit by oil-related violence (Okorobia and Olali 2013). These states are regarded by some scholars as core Niger Delta (Isumunah 2013).

By and large, and despite this recent political permutation, the Niger Delta consists primarily of ethnic minority groups such as the Andoni, Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, Ikwerre, Itshekiri, Kalabari, Ogoni, and Urhobo. These minority groups have been excluded from the benefits of oil wealth generated from their land. Accordingly poverty is endemic in the region in the midst of plenty, and is complicated by environmental pollution and dearth of social infrastructure. These socio-economic and political conditions have underpinned the struggle for self-determination and armed insurgencies for the control of their resources by ethnic communities in the region since the 1990s. Indeed, the region has a history of local resistance and violent conflicts dating back to precolonial time in which the existence of strong and effective security institutions and vigilante structures were central to promoting internal social stability and external defense. Secret societies such as the Amanikpo, Ekpo and Egbesu are rooted in precolonial Niger Delta history and cosmology amongst the Ogoni, Ibibio and Ijaw ethnic groups. These societies responded effectively to issues of public accountability, security, peacemaking, social justice and crime fighting in the region in several ways.

The Amanikpo society, for instance, occupied an important place in local arbitration processes, the administration and dispensation of justice and social control in precolonial Ogoni. This is because the Amanikpo was both a secret society and an oath system. The Egbesu deity is well respected amongst the Ijaws for spiritual protection in warfare. In key respects, these societies may be regarded as precursor to contemporary armed vigilante groups not only in the provision of security-related services but also in behavior and practices (Leach 2004). The claims of invincibility of members of the Bakassi Boys as well as the ability of the group to detect criminals through the local medium of juju spirits and occult power has been well popularized in the *Isakaba* video film (McCall 2004). *Isakaba* is a popular Nigerian film that reflects the cultural underpinnings and complexities of the practice of vigilantism in Nigeria. In some sense, for instance, it demonstrates not only the continuing relevance of local cultural beliefs in the power of the juju spirits but also a dramatization of the superiority of charms as a means of protection. This is because the armed robbers themselves also wear charms for protection. David Pratten's ethnographic study of Annang vigilante groups in the Niger Delta shows that the swearing of oaths, an important means of promoting trust, cooperation and solidarity amongst group members is critical to the effectiveness of vigilante activities (Pratten 2008a; 2008b). It has also been argued that the Egbesu deity provided both spiritual and moral foundations for the Ijaw struggle for resource control in the Niger Delta in the 1990s.

It is also important to note that, in addition to the vigilante structure of secret societies and the night guards organized for the protection of person and property (Pratten 2008; 2008b), ethnic communities in the

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Niger Delta as elsewhere in much of West Africa acquire weapons and had local armories prior to European contacts. Weapons systems like clubs, bows and arrows were commonly used for internal security and warfare in the region in pre-colonial times. However, the introduction of European fire arms—Portuguese hand guns in the fifteenth century, and the “Dane guns” in the seventeenth century—enabled access to better weaponry in West Africa (Smith 1989) including the Niger Delta (Isomunah 2013). In fact, Inikori (1977) has shown that by the second half of the eighteenth century, Bonny was the largest firearms importer in West Africa due mainly to but not entirely limited to slave trading.

Interestingly, neither British colonial rule nor the postcolonial administration in Nigeria completely destroyed the well-established community security structures in the Niger Delta especially vigilante structures and practices. Instead, vigilante groups became entrenched in the political, social and leadership structure of several communities in the region particularly after the Cold War. For example, faced with complex and violent insurgencies characterized by a variety of ethnic militia organizations such as the Niger Delta Vigilante Group (NDVG), Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), demanding local political autonomy to control oil resources in the Niger Delta and embarking on “oil bunkering” (oil thefts) and kidnapping as strategies for funding rebellion, the region has become increasingly insecure since the 1990s. In fact, in 2007, “the State and the international community led by United States and Britain had reacted to the security challenges by designating the Niger Delta as a dangerous and insecure place inhabited by criminals, vandals, hostage takers, kidnappers, restive youths, oil thieves and terrorists” (Joab-Peterside 2007: 2).

Responding to the insurgency and armed insurrections in the Niger Delta, the Federal Government initiated the amnesty program for youths and militant groups in the region in 2009. Conceived and implemented in the context of a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program, all Niger Delta militants were directed to disarm within 60 days, August 6 and October 4, 2009, and be free from criminal prosecution. Militants who accepted the State’s offer of amnesty and handed in their weapons were not fewer than 26,358 (Kuku 2013). As part of the demobilization and reintegration processes, the ex-militants were trained in peaceful conflict resolution strategies and paid monthly stipends of N65,000.00. They were also trained both within and outside Nigeria in several trades including under-water welders, pilots, medical doctors, boat builders, seafarers, marine engineers, fashion designers, furniture makers, agriculturalists, information technologists amongst others, to enable them acquire skills and become self-reliant. Some enrolled for various academic programs in selected universities in Nigeria, South Africa, Europe and North America (Kuku 2013).

Importantly, since its implementation in 2009, the amnesty program has contributed to the reduction of militia violence and relative peace in the region, and oil exploration and production have fully resumed. However, focusing primarily on militants and failing to address the structural roots of militancy, which include but are not restricted to environmental insecurity and political and social exclusions of the Niger Delta people from their oil wealth, the amnesty program falls short of lasting solutions to resource conflict in the region. In fact, the amnesty program may best be described as a peacebuilding policy designed primarily to remove the militant youths from the scene in order to create stability and order necessary for oil production activities to resume in the region. As Sofiri Joab-Peterside has argued, security, peace and stability in Niger Delta have largely been conceived in the context of uninterrupted oil flow in the region rather than from a human security perspective (Joab-Peterside 2007).

Thus, in the post amnesty era, oil bunkering activities especially artisanal oil production by local youths, has been on the increase in the Niger Delta, not least because oil-producing communities have turned a blind eye to oil thefts as a result of deeply rooted grievances and perceptions of structural exclusion from the benefits of oil as well as the involvement and support provided by political and military elites (Naanen and Tolani 2014). Oil bunkering business, whether its local version of artisanal crude oil refining is an organized crime that is facilitated by the use of weapons by the youths involved. Yet, the sale of crude oil provides the youth the financial means to purchase better weaponry. Accordingly, oil bunkering and arms proliferation in the region are mutually reinforcing, what Badmus (2010: 323) has described as “gunning for oil and oiling the gun.” However, beyond the rising incidence of oil thefts in the post-amnesty era, the Niger Delta has seen several rural communities engulfed in intercommunity conflicts and youth-based cult violence caused mainly by the armed Deebam and Deewell cult groups, while also contending with rape, kidnapping and armed robbery attacks perpetrated by their members (Nyiaaana 2011). In October 2012, four students of the University of

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Port Harcourt suspected to be cult members were brutally murdered by the Aluu community vigilante group in Ikwerre on allegations of armed robbery (Iyang 2012). Until the 1990s, armed robbery was rare or non-existent in most rural communities in the Niger Delta. However, today, it has become commonplace.

Given the foregoing, there has been an increasing demand for, and reliance on vigilante groups as bottom-up mechanisms for confronting rising insecurities in almost all villages in the Niger Delta. Pratten (2008b) argues that the killing of a villager, by armed robbers in 1995 was the catalyst for the rise and arming of vigilante groups in various communities that make up Annang. A key observation, however, is that oil politics and the nature and character of elites' competition for power and wealth in the region has interfered with the activities of vigilante groups in such a way that the ultimate goal of promoting collective community security interests is sometimes compromised. The case of the creation of the Bakassi Boys, detailed below, is illustrative of the nature of this complexity. In other words, the complex interplay of the internal dynamics and imperatives of creating vigilante groups for protection and the varying motivations for funding them by actors with convergent and divergent interests has become a key problematic in promoting security and peace in the region. This complexity is illustrated in relation to local communities, state governments and multinational oil companies as key actors in community vigilante arming processes in the Niger Delta.

### Vigilante Arming, Actors and Processes: Reflections on Local Communities

A core assumption in the literature on community policing is that local communities arm vigilante groups primarily for the promotion and protection of internal and external security interests of the local population (Johnston 1996). In the Niger Delta, this is true to some extent especially in the face of intercommunity conflicts in which arms have been procured by ethnic communities to prosecute in order to protect themselves (Bisina 2003). These forms of conflicts have come to define the region since the 1990s mainly due but not limited to the changing dynamics of oil politics. For example, why ethnic militia groups have engaged the state in contestations of the right to self-determination to control oil resources in the region, there have also been struggles between local communities themselves over who owns the lands on which oil is found or where oil facilities are situated. The protracted dispute between the Okrika and Eleme over the ownership of the land where the Port Harcourt Oil Refinery Company is located reflects this form of ethnic community contestations and tensions. In an effort to prosecute this communal conflict, the Chiefs and people of Okrika had to task each War-Canoe House to nominate two able men for defense of the community who were armed by the Houses. Importantly, as Sofiri Joab-Peterside (2007) points out, it was within the context of protecting the Okrika against the Eleme people that the vigilante group known as the "Bush Boys emerged among former Okrika combatants who were treated as nationalists by the traditional political leadership" (Joab-Peterside 2007: 6). Indeed, "after the Okrika/Eleme dispute, the Okrika community maintained the group, which became known as Peace Makers because of the services they rendered" (Joab-Peterside 2007: 6) to their community.

Besides intercommunity clashes, there have been intra-community conflicts that also reflect the peculiar dynamics of the struggle for the control of oil governable space in the region. Of particular relevance here is the struggle to control the chieftaincy institutional space. Today, occupying chieftaincy positions in the Niger Delta confers on the Chief or King the right to access oil companies and government contracts, scholarships and employment opportunities including government and political party patronage. Accordingly, the politicization and privatization of the traditional leadership structures in the region has not only led to intense competitions among aspirants to the chieftaincy/kingship positions but also chieftaincy tussles. In most cases, chieftaincy tussles, as in Kula, Nembe, Rumuekpe and Zaakpon have led to protracted violent conflicts and factionalization of local communities along chieftaincy lines in which rival Chiefs/Kings have armed and used youth/vigilante groups to fight in an effort to claim their right to the throne. Similarly, some incumbent chiefs have recruited and armed youth/vigilante members who fight on their behalf as they struggle to retain their positions, what Koblenz (2013) aptly calls the struggle for regime security rather than the security of the people. In either or both ways, vigilante arming and chieftaincy conflicts have been mutually reinforcing and constitutive, thus counterproductive to the promotion and protection community security.

Related to the above point also is the arming and use of youth/vigilante groups by local politicians as structures for rigging elections and subverting of the democratic process to capture political power. In 1999,

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the Ateke Tom's led Niger Delta Vigilante Group was employed, sufficiently armed and funded by the People's Democratic Party led by Governor Peter Odili, to rig elections in Rivers State. Given the nature and extent of involvement of armed cult and vigilante groups in the rigging of the 1999, 2003, and to some extent the 2007 elections, Human Rights Watch (2007) described the elections as criminal politics. Since then, local political elites continue to arm and use village youth groups/vigilante members not only for their personal security but also as a demonstration of their power. This is because the higher the number of highly armed militant youths a local politician has, the more he/she is recognized as being able to deliver electoral victory for his/her party. Expanding their power base, therefore, means that they have to control youth and vigilante structures of power in local communities. All of these, however, are counterproductive to the collective security interests of the society.

### Multinational Oil Companies and the Dynamics of Arming Youth and vigilante Organizations

Multinational Oil Companies (MNOCs) operating in the Niger Delta, especially Shell are structurally embedded in the conflict dynamics of the region in several ways that undermine sustainable peace and security. Shell has in active collusion with the Nigerian state, what Ken Saro-Wiwa (1995) calls "slik alliance" clamped down on local peaceful protests against its environmental degradation activities in the region. The Ogoni case amply illustrates this. It would be recalled that the Ogoni, led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, had under the aegis of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the 1990s embarked on campaigns, locally and internationally, against Shell's environmental damage and lack of corporate social responsibility in Ogoni. In fact, by 1993, MOSOP had declared Shell *persona non grata* in Ogoni and the company ceased operating in the area with attendant loss of oil revenue, the soul of Nigeria's economy. Based on a particular conception of sovereignty and security, the Nigerian State in 1994 responded to the Ogoni agitation by establishing a special Rivers State Internal Security Task Force code-named Operation Restore Order and Stability. The Task Force was headed by Major Paul Okuntimo and stationed in Ogoni mainly to protect oil and Shell. It was well resourced: militarily by the Nigerian State and financially, by Shell Oil Company (Amusan 2014) with an implicit mandate to suppress the Ogoni struggle and broadly any form of local resistance that directly threatens oil production in the region (Obi 1999). Human rights abuses and atrocities committed by the Security Task Force in Ogoni have been well documented (see Odoemene 2012). Similarly in the context of corporate militarism, Shell has been involved in procuring weapons not only for its Shell police but also for the Nigerian security institutions, what Jędrzej George Frynas describes as security cooperation for the destruction of oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta (Frynas 1998).

Closely related to the above and particularly central to this chapter is that Shell has also adopted the British colonial divide and conquer tactics to create and reinforce alternate structures of power in local communities by funding and arming of different youth/vigilante groups. This strategic move is both to reduce the assertiveness of youths in fighting against the company's recklessness in environmental pollution, and to control governable oil space in the region. According to Ike Okonta, "oil companies in the region often offer 'protection work' to youths, arming them with arms in a tactical and cynical move to divide emergent and politically assertive youth organizations that were beginning to emerge" (Okonta 2006: 11). Recently, these behaviors and motivations were evident in Shell's activities in Rumuekpe, an oil-producing community in Ikwerre, Rivers State. Ben Amunwa has shown that field work testimonies and evidence of contracts awarded by Shell implicate the company in regularly assisting armed youth/vigilante groups with lucrative payments in Rumuekpe (Amunwa 2011). Amunwa further notes that in "one case in 2010, Shell was alleged to have transferred over \$159,000 to a group credibly linked to militia violence" (Amunwa 2011: 1). Thus, while "the 2005–2008 Rumuekpe crisis was caused by a multi-layered struggle over land, power and access to oil contracts and payments ... it is possible to identify several ways in which Shell's routine practices increased the likelihood of conflict" (Amunwa 2011: 33). Shell distributed community development funds and contracts via Friday Edu, a youth leader and Shell Community Liaison Officer (Amunwa 2011: 35). Clearly the Rumuekpe community strikingly illustrates Shell's role in promoting and sustaining violence by awarding security contracts and making payments to armed youth/vigilante leaders and their members in the community. Michael Watts has also noted that Shell uses some of the funds allocated in its annual budget

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for the development of the company's host communities to promote community hostilities. In his words, "They represent in practice to a massive infusion of cash designed to purchase consent or compliance—but in practice they are central to the dynamics of rebellion and community violence" (Watts 2008: 27). Thus, contrary to conventional wisdom that conflicts and insecurity are a disincentive to business operations, Shell as a rational actor, has profited much more from conflicts and insecurity in the Niger Delta (Frynas 1998).

### State Governments in Vigilante Arming

The transition from military dictatorships to civilian rule in Nigeria in 1999 saw a fundamental shift in the practice of vigilantism in some sense. State governments have been directly involved in the sponsorship, financing, arming as well as the creation of vigilante groups such as the Hisba and the Bakassi Boys. More recently, local vigilante groups popularly referred to as the Civilian Joint Security Task Force, which have been very useful in fighting the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast of Nigeria have received significant support from state governments in the region. A combination of factors and dynamics accounts for the growing involvement of state governments in vigilante activities since 2000. For example, while the motivation for supporting the Civilian Joint Security Task Force by the state governments in the Northeast has been primarily driven by the security challenges of the Boko Haram terrorist group, the creation of hisba vigilantes by 12 state governments in Northern Nigeria upon the return to multiparty democracy in 1999 to implement and monitor compliance with Sharia reflected the politics of ethnicity, identity, citizenship and religion in Nigeria. As Last (2008) has argued, the hisba enforcers of the Sharia code introduced in 12 states in the North in 2000 was much more concerned with issues of physical and spiritual insecurity of Muslims. Accordingly, the non-Muslim population in the North defined as the *other* became targets of the hisba vigilante attacks, which sometimes resulted in violence especially in Kano (Last 2008). The hisba, to some extent differ from the O'odua People's Congress (OPC) in Yoruba, western Nigeria. Though, it emerged in the mid-1990s, the OPC doubles as an ethnic militia fighting for Yoruba political autonomy within a decentralized federal structure in Nigeria and also as a vigilante group involved in fighting crime especially in Lagos. It was officially recognized by the Lagos State House of Assembly and therefore has the support and backing of the Lagos state government (Reno 2002).

The Bakassi Boys in Abia's Niger Delta on the other hand, were a case of cooption by the Abia government to help complement security services in the state. The social origins of the Bakassi Boys were primarily to confront rampant criminality, particularly armed robbery in the urban city of Aba amongst the Igbo traders. Although it has been largely criticized by some for its instant systems of judgment and barbaric killing of thieves based on automatic presumptions of guilt (Human Rights Watch 2002), the success and popularity of the Bakassi Boys in combating the menace of armed robbery in Aba led to its adoption in neighboring Anambra state. But as it turned out, the Bakassi Boys soon became a tool in the hands of both rival market trade unions and the governor of Abia state for scoring political points in terms of fighting perceived and real enemies (Harnischfeger 2008). The consequence of this political interference was that the Bakassi Boys lost their autonomy; and its leadership degenerated to the extent that the federal government had to ban the organization in 2002. But the key question remains: what happened to the weapons used by the Boys, which were given to them by state governments?

### Peacebuilding and Security Implications of Vigilante Arming

Arguably, in the face of declining effectiveness of the state's capacity to control SALW acquisition and use in the Niger Delta, vigilante arming involving multiple actors such as local communities, political elites and MNOCs with diverse goals, motivations and agendas does constitute an enduring source of weapons diffusion and availability in the region. While it is widely acknowledged that the presence of arms does not directly cause conflict, it has also been shown that arms availability, and arms transfer to areas of conflict may lead to the escalation of violence (Bourne 2004). As it has been noted earlier, communal conflicts and arms proliferation in the region are not mutually exclusive. Yet, when conflicts end, arms remain in the local

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communities with implications for their recirculation and use in future conflicts. The ready availability of arms thus undermines intercommunity reconciliation and peace in the region. Accordingly, the continuing availability of arms in villages, in this case, community weapons problematize the distinction drawn between conflict zones and post-conflict settings (Rogers 2009: 5).

Furthermore, the renting of community vigilante arms by vigilante leaders to armed robbers and communities in conflicts in the Niger Delta has emerged as a key structural factor that feeds and escalates crime, insecurity and conflicts in local communities in the region. In 2008, a vigilante leader in charge of the Kono Boue community weaponry, was arrested by the Joint Military Task Force (JTF) for renting community weapons to armed robbers. This is another form of commodification of violence in the Niger Delta that is synonymous with the practice of renting arms by military personnel to insurgent groups in the region (Agwu 2011).

Yet, youths have also exploited the vigilante space and their access to, and control of community weapons to contest the authorities and powers of chiefs and elders of local communities in their struggle to have a share of the natural resource wealth of the region. In several communities, youth/vigilante groups have been transformed into parallel leadership structures to chieftaincy institutions with implications for armed conflicts. In its complexity, the Rumuekpe conflict of 2005–2008 in which no fewer than 100 people died, is a notable example (Akpobari and Obodoekwe 2009). Some scholars like Obi (2006) have described such violent youth agitation as intergenerational struggle for inclusion and participation in community leadership processes as well as a general dissatisfaction with hierarchies of power, paternalism and patrimonial domination, which they consider as a structural barrier to their own advancement.

From the above, it can be argued that the dynamics of, and risks associated with community vigilante arming in the Niger Delta pose a significant threat to sustainable peacebuilding and security in the region. Paradoxically, however, local communities and their vigilantes have been excluded from various government arms control and disarmament programming in the region (Davidheiser and Nyiayaana 2011). This policy gap therefore has implications for how we seek to transform social relations between vigilante groups and local communities in the context of enhancing the “guarding of the guardians” especially in the face of collapsing traditional means of arms control. It also has implications for how we approach arms proliferation dynamics and arms control in the Niger Delta in the context of the growing involvement of MNOCs and state actors.

## Conclusion

Vigilante policing has occupied a central place in peace and security discourse in Africa. Questions of legitimacy, legality and effectiveness of vigilante groups in community protection have dominated debates amongst scholars. This chapter shifts attention from the legitimacy and effectiveness arguments and advances our understanding of post-Cold War vigilantism in Africa by examining the actors involved in the arming of vigilante groups, their motivations and implications for sustainable peacebuilding and security in Nigeria's Niger Delta. It argues that community policing has a long history in the protection of village-communities in the Niger Delta. However, the logic and contradiction of the diverse interests of local political elites, MNOCs and state governments, which are the key actors involved in the financing and arming of vigilante groups have fundamentally altered the nature, character and purpose of community policing.

For example, while chiefs and political elites arm vigilante groups to acquire political power or in pursuit of regime security, MNOCs particularly Shell, on the other hand, finance vigilante groups in local communities to protect and advance their business goals. Accordingly, community vigilantism in the Niger Delta has acquired a political character, in which there is a shift away from people's collective security to the security of local elites, chiefs and oil companies. Yet, all the various arms procurement patterns of the actors leave the local communities with highly sophisticated weaponry, thus contributing significantly to the proliferation of SALW in the Niger Delta in ways that fuel insecurity, crime and conflicts in the region. This chapter therefore draws attention to the need for arms control and a peace policy that addresses the risks associated with vigilante arming in the region. This is because disarmament and arms control policies initiated in the region have ignored local communities and vigilante arming processes (Davidheiser and Nyiayaana 2011).

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