Delta

Bayelsa

Rivers

SDN

**Public perceptions of security dynamics
in the Niger Delta:**
a review of 2017-2020

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SDN supports those affected by the extractives industry and weak governance. We work with communities and engage with governments, companies and other stakeholders to ensure the promotion and protection of human rights, including the right to a healthy environment. Our work currently focuses on the Niger Delta.

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Introduction

This report summarises key findings from a series of research surveys conducted by Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN) between September 2017 and January 2020. These surveys were carried out in the Niger Delta states of Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers. The purpose of this research was to:

- Examine local perceptions of peace and security issues in the Niger Delta.

- Identify concerns of inhabitants about specific threats in the region, and how these affect their lives.

- Generate data to inform government and civil society interventions to address these issues, and also capture regular feedback on the perceived performance and impact of interventions.

- Provide a view from the ground for international actors supporting security and stabilisation initiatives in the Niger Delta.

Key messages

- Respondents to our surveys consistently identified the activities of cult groups as their biggest security concern in the Niger Delta. These groups, which are involved in organised crime, violence, and kidnapping, are often alleged to be under political control, and their activity spikes when elections are held.

- State governments were repeatedly named as the actor most people considered should be responsible for maintaining peace and security, and also as the actor who has implemented the most effective interventions to improve security and stabilisation.

- There was limited awareness of federal government initiatives to address insecurity, with the exception of the Presidential Amnesty Programme, which was intended to contribute to resolving the long-running militancy in the Niger Delta. This partly indicates a need for better communication and engagement on the part of federal government, but also a perception that there has been limited action to effectively tackle security problems in the Niger Delta.

- Job creation and other employment programmes are seen as the key priority by many in the Niger Delta to improve security and stabilisation, along with investment in public infrastructure, which together reflect the structural factors pushing people into illicit activities such as artisanal oil refining.

Methodology

Between September 2017 and January 2020, Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN) conducted six public perception surveys (PPS) on security dynamics and stabilisation interventions in the Niger Delta. For each survey, we asked 300 (different) people a series of questions designed to identify what their key security concerns are, who they consider is best placed to help, and what the most effective interventions might be.

A broad range of people were surveyed, across three core states: Rivers, Bayelsa, and Delta—and the findings of each survey were validated in focus group discussions (FGDs). Gender, socio-cultural background, and other factors were taken into account in the selection of respondents, via a mix of purposive and convenience sampling. The reports correspond to the following periods:

PPS 1: September–October, 2017

PPS 2: October 2017–March 2018

PPS 3: March–September, 2018

PPS 4: October 2018–March 2019

PPS 5: April–September, 2019

PPS 6: October 2019–January 2020

Findings

Key security threats–the view from the ground

The main threat respondents to our surveys identified, throughout the research period, was cultism. Cultism, in this context, refers to specific types of organised criminal gangs. Respondents were particularly concerned about the recruitment of young people into cult groups, and also tended to attribute killings to their activities, including the murder of both rival cult and non-cult members.

The concern regarding cults is made clear, for example as in Fig. 1, from the fourth survey we conducted.

Figure 1: Who do you believe is most likely to be involved in security threats in your state?
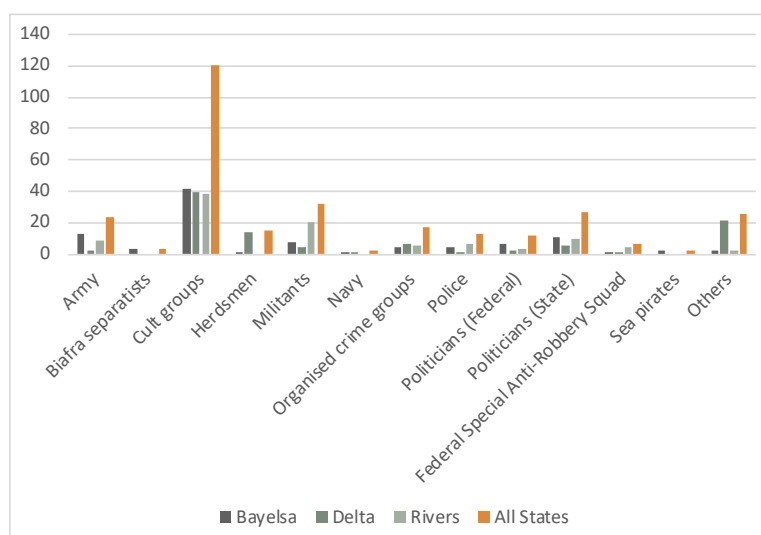
State security agents, such as the army and police, were also listed as concerns. A key dynamic which emerged over the course of our research was the generalised perception that state-level politicians are involved in the direction of political violence and criminality. Respondents described how they thought politicians sometimes use cult gangs to implement their plans, gangs that subsequently turn to kidnap and other activities to make money through the arms provided by their connections. This was noted, for example, in relation to the election cycles which fell during the research period, notably the general elections of early 2019. One focus group participant, commenting on the role of cultism during these elections, said that:

> " *The hike in the level of cultism during elections can be explained because of the collaboration between the military and cultists. The youth were armed for the elections, hence the increase.* "

Security and stabilisation: who should be responsible?

Respondents to our surveys over the course of the research said that different parties should be responsible for improving security and stablisation. Notably, this tended also to highlight the role of state governments. This may reflect the fact the Nigeria's federal system of governance mean state governments have the most effective combination of logistical capacity, and political and community reach—as well as the local perceptions of the role of state officials in insecurity in the first place. This was observed repeatedly.

Another key group respondents thought should be involved were traditional leaders, as in Fig.2, from our fifth survey. The Niger Delta has approximately 30 million inhabitants, many of whom live in rural communities governed by traditional structures that play an important role in resolving intra and inter-community disputes.

Figure 2: Who do you believe should be responsible for improving security in the Niger Delta?
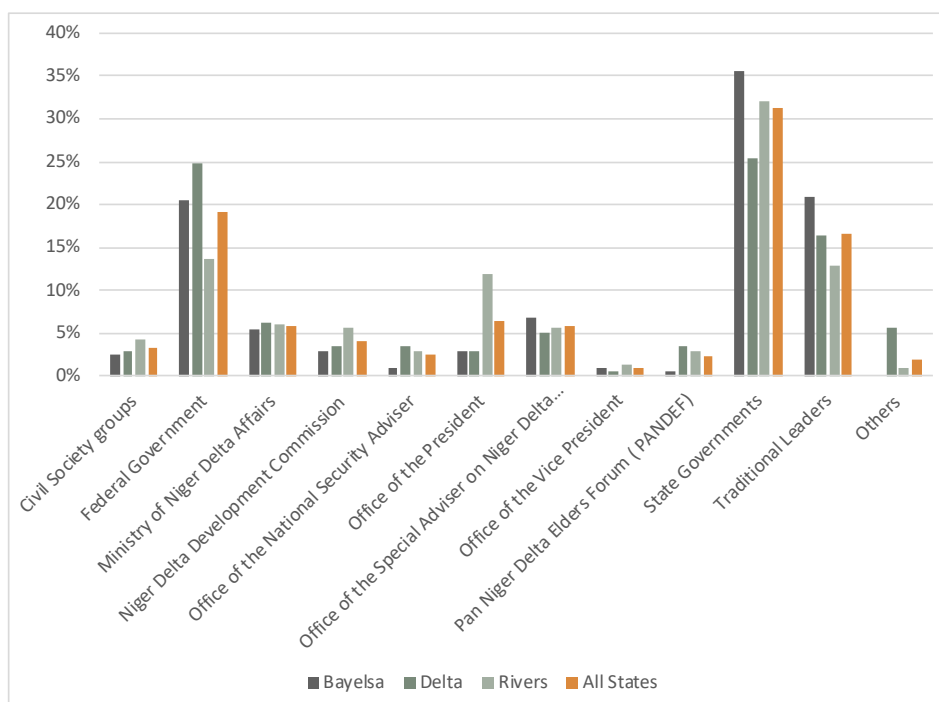
Priorities for action

After asking respondents about their concerns, who they considered to be involved, and who they considered should be responsible for resolving them, we asked those we surveyed what their priorities would be for addressing the issues they identified.

The percentage of respondents to our third survey, which is representative of the other surveys, selected the options in the graph below as their highest priority for addressing their concerns. As is clear, supporting employment and social services was by far the most common response, as well as investment in infrastructure. Survey respondents and focus group participants often raised overall levels of poverty and unemployment as a factor contributing to all the issues identified in these surveys.

Figure 3: What should be the biggest priority for Government to improve security and stabilisation in the region in the next 12 months?
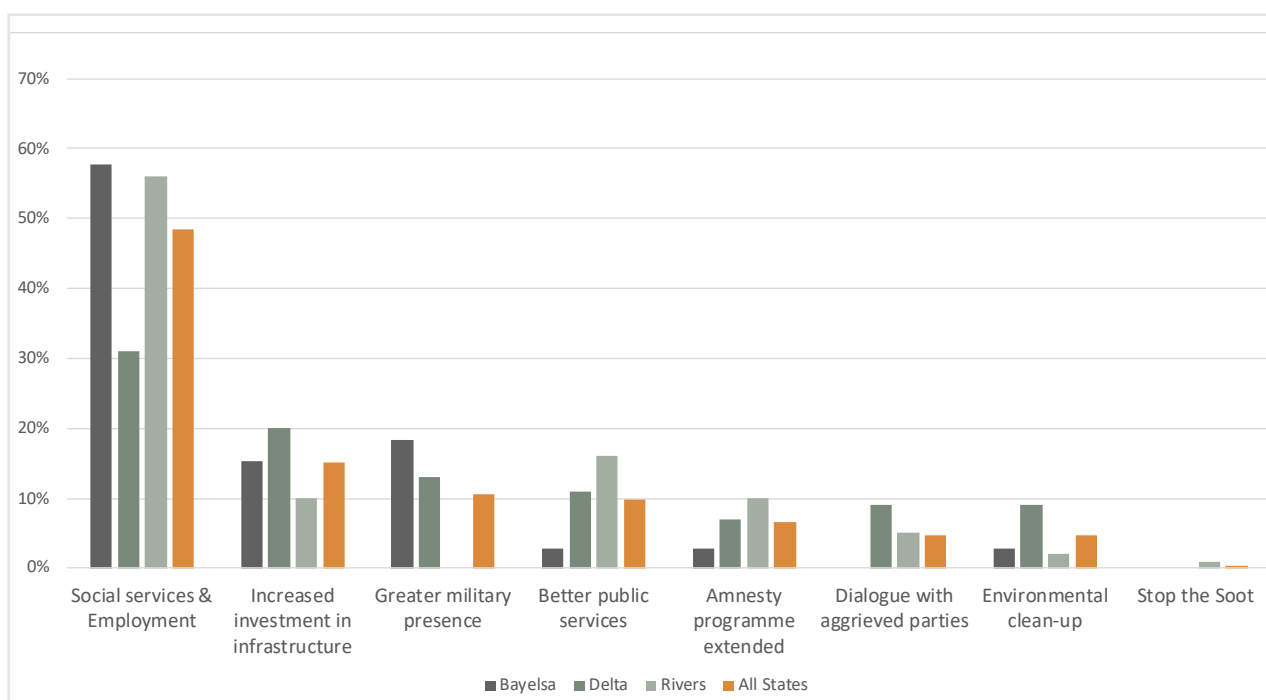
Although some called for a greater military and broader security presence, in general this did not rank highly among responses. This may reflect the concerns previously noted about the role of security forces in perpetuating destabilising activities they are supposed to prevent, as well as the collateral effect their operations have on communities. One respondent noted that:

> "There is increased hunger in the land since the coming into being of this government. If they listen to us and build factories, it would engage youths. All these people trained [under the Amnesty Programme]—if they remain unengaged they would go back to crime."

Conclusion

SDN's public perception surveys make clear that citizens of the Niger Delta have a wide variety of security concerns and views about how they can be resolved. In terms of threats, this notably includes cultism, which was repeatedly designated as the issue people considered to be the biggest threat over the two-and-a-half-year period. The view that some cults are sponsored by politicians echoes evidence from elsewhere, and demonstrates the degree to which the patronage systems of Nigerian politics make resolving violence and criminality difficult. This is partly because, as participants in our focus groups discussed, cultism has become one of the most rewarding industries in the region. Respondents were also clear to place these issues in the broader context of poverty and a lack of jobs across the region, which means that criminal means of making a living can be attractive. As such, they also highlighted the importance of job creation and broader economic schemes to prevent individuals from entering various vices, and reduce insecurity in the Niger Delta.

Recommendations

The federal and state governments should:

- Develop a targeted communications strategy for the Niger Delta, to explain plans for development and stabilisation, and how they intend to consult with all key stakeholders on these to ensure they reflect local concerns and priorities.

- Develop a multi-stakeholder security framework for targeting the activities of cult groups. This should in particular include actions to identify and prevent the patronage of such groups by current and aspiring public office holders, and also a process for reintegrating repentant cultists.

- Examine the feasibility of developing community policing projects in key areas, ideally linked under a state-wide security system.

- Prioritise job creation and other employment programmes to address a key structural factor involved in pushing people into criminal activity, such as participation in cults, gangs, and artisanal oil refining.

- Enforce and implement existing anti-cult related legislation and laws, also to domesticate any existing federal laws and legislation aimed at cult-related activities.

The full series of public perception surveys are available at www.stakeholderdemocracy.org/report-series-public-perceptions-of-security-dynamics-stabilisation-interventions-in-the-niger-delta
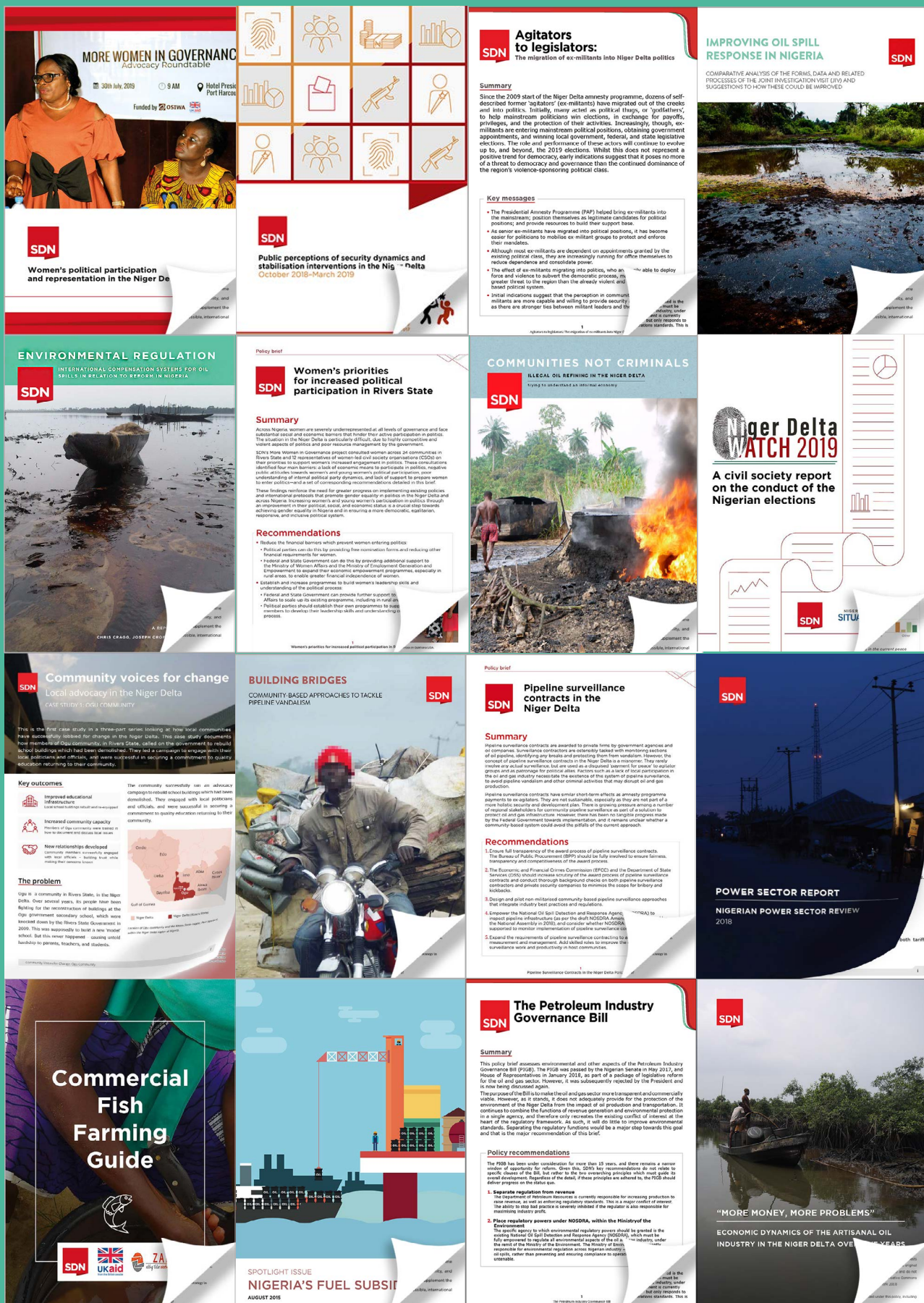
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