

Criminality: Illegal Logging of Woods in Nigeria's South-West Forest Belt

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Abstract

The problems facing the rich forest belts in Nigeria have become so intense in relation to the unemployment dilemma ravaging most youths in several urban and rural settlements as well as the wide-ranging negative impacts on environmental crime in South-West Nigeria. This study examines the dynamics of forest exploitation, youth adaptability and survival strategies in the nation's forest belt. Data collected for the study was basically qualitative, among a hundred and twenty-five (125) respondents in Ondo-Edo forest belts. It was discovered that a strong network of syndicates often (local and foreign) capitalized on the prevailing surge of unemployment in the country to lure young, unemployed and able-bodied men and women into criminal survival strategies and environmental crime of illegal logging of precious woods (Iroko, Mahogany and Obeche). The study concludes that illegal activities of unemployed youths should be curtailed by providing agro based industries in the forest belt as well as adequate security to stop the illegal and indiscriminate logging of woods by local and foreign syndicates.

Keywords: Unemployment, forest exploitation, social network, laundering, syndicates

Introduction

The forest reserve in Nigeria is estimated to cover about 10 million hectares, which accounts for more than 10% of land area, of approximately 96.2 million hectares; 923,768 km square with a population of about 170,790 in 2006 (National Directorate of Employment, 2012). Nevertheless, in recent times the area marked as forest lands have been decreasing steadily due to the indiscriminate felling of trees and activities of illegal loggers which have

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continued in virtually every part of the country. For instance, the Federal Department of Forestry (2010) estimated that Nigerian forests are being depleted at an annual rate of 3.5%. 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). Overtly, industrial and social development which competes for the same pieces of land upon which the forest stands has not been commendable. As a result of its large land area, the country covers different and favorable climatic and ecological zones. The size and its diverse population coupled with the socio-political and economic challenges have put much pressure on the forest belts as increasing number of unemployed youths have come to realize that there are opportunities in looting forest products for survival (Ola-Adams, 1983; Patterson et al., 2006). Thus unemployment as one of the developmental challenges in Nigeria has wide-ranging negative impacts, on environmental crime, which is often treated as a low-priority crime in most developing countries, with the belief that the forest belongs to everyone in the community (Mason et al., 2012; South and Wyatt 2011). In Nigeria the over dependence on crude oil has also led the government to place less emphasis on what is being lost yearly to theft of forest produce.

International statistics portray that rural and urban youths living in developing regions account for about two-thirds of the unemployed (Patterson et al, 2006). Unemployment has been a problem in Nigeria, especially since the 1980s, when the nation's economy took a turn for the worse as world petroleum prices tumbled, the Nigerian currency became devalued, corruption became rampant, and the population of the country ballooned at a breathtaking pace (Akintoye, 2008). Its effect on food production and deforestation also became issues to contend with. In areas that are rural or semi urban with abundance of forest trees and produce (agricultural zones), the forest was readily available to be explored and exploited not only by locals but also by foreign syndicates (Martin and Vigne 2011). Most worrisome is the activities of illegal traders of forest produce, through the aid of foreigners who are in need of rare and hard species of woods for European and American markets, thus the wanton destruction and felling of trees on communal and individual farmlands (Egbewole et al., 2011; Rademeyer, 2012).

Scientifically speaking the destruction of these trees has a very powerful effect on the carbon cycle and boosts the greenhouse effect as a result of the depletion of carbon (Alamu and Agbaje, 2011). But the socio-economic loss to the nation is quite 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 impressively fast urbanization process 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 wide spread drug use and drug trafficking, ill equipped security officials and forest guards to combat illegal logging and lumbering cartel cum clandestine markets and saw mills for rare forest products,

have led a lot of youths to seeking for opportunities in forest businesses (Pretty et al., 2013). Illegal logging, lumbering and sawmilling can be described as a system and as a system with various persons and institutions involved in the supply and demand needs of the industry, be it legitimate or illegitimate.

Going by the unemployment rate in the country, about 20.3 million Nigerians are currently jobless and not employed in any form of job (National Directorate of Employment, 2012), of which bulk of the population are youth. The question therefore is how are they surviving? Deviant activities no doubt are bound to flourish in such a scenario, especially in the forest belts (Okunola and Ikuomola, 2010). The diversity and dynamics of crime and illegalities in the forest belt have been less emphasised and often times subsumed under environmental degradation and climate change discourses. This study examined the patterns and trends of illegal logging of woods, forest exploitation and youth adaptability and survival strategies in Nigeria's South-West forest belt.

Methodology

This article reports on a purely qualitative and exploratory study. It was conducted in Owo-Ifon forest belt in Ondo State, Ozalla, and Sabongida-Ora zones in Edo State respectively. These are two neighboring states in the Southern part of Nigeria. A purposive sample with a convenience population was utilized. The sample was composed of 125 respondents (93 men and 32 women). Specifically the sample comprised of 50 youths, 30 forest guards and 45 dealers in timbers and allied products. The age of the respondents was between 17 and 65 years. A comprehensive face-to-face in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted by the researchers in English and pidgin mixed with local dialects; all issues were transcribed and translated by the researchers. The discussion was limited to issues related to deforestation, and the dynamics of criminality (specifically illegal logging) in the communities. The principle of anonymity and confidentiality of respondents were maintained.

Empirical Findings and Discussion

Youth Unemployment: Forest and illegal survival opportunities

Economic reasons were the underlying issues in the analysis of discussants and interviewees responses regarding the dependence on forest for survival. While majority of the youths (two third of the respondents), asserted that unemployment, poverty and the need for survival were the major reasons they took to illegal logging in the forest belts for their livelihood, especially for males. It was however quite different for the females who noted that they got involved as a result of their parents and guardians who were hitherto into forest produce and lumbering as a family business. Among the well educated respondents with tertiary education, lack of job opportunities in the city centres and the increasing

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rate of poverty were highlighted reasons. The knowledge of the demand and supply of forest products in the city centers can be drawn from respondents' statements. Some acknowledge that their parents are so poor and that they are tired of earning meagre sum from tilling the soil and waiting for crops to germinate. With exposure to the illegal trade of logging, youths have come to realize that they can make quick money from the forest:

...since I discovered that I can make some good money from locating timbers and other hard and rare species of woods; connecting and negotiating buyers from my small village in Sabongida-Ora, to major cities, there has been no need for me to look for another job (Male/31 years/Sabongida-Ora, Edo State).

A female respondent in Ozalla community noted that lack of tertiary education has made it difficult for her to find a suitable job in the city, hence she had to fall back home to join her family members in dealing on hard woods. She noted that she became tired with city life after many attempts to find a suitable job failed. Thus after engaging in several menial jobs such as house cleaning, hawking of wares on the street to baby seating in Benin City, Edo State for two years she quickly had a rethink when she got to know that she could make a good living in her village if only she can connect saw millers in the city with men who can supply woods to them from the villages where hard woods can be found at a relatively cheaper prices:

I heard that I could become rich and successful in life if I can link saw-millers to forests where they can get mature woods. This piece of information sank deep into my head, and I discussed it with my grand uncle, I told him the amount a mature timber would cost. He was happy and saw the benefit in it. That was how I got into the business (Female/34years/Ozalla, Edo State).

Another respondent narrated her first adventure into the illegal logging, buttressing her starting point to her current involvement and how she has built a strong network of friends, youths, and older associates beyond Ozalla and Ora in Edo state to Ifon and Owo communities in Ondo State. 'Though it was not easy at first' she narrated how she gathers information from friends, saw millers and market women:

They give information on the availability of matured hard woods and those who are willing to sell such woods. We go to the owners and buy from them and cut the trees down, other times I re-sell depending on the distance and the risk of bringing the wood out of the forest (Female/34years/Ifon, Ondo State).

The World Bank (2006) and Contreras-Hermosilla et al., (2007) studies showed that illegal logging is a clear problem in tropical Africa and this is widely acknowledged. It is estimated that 80 per cent of all wood extracted in Africa is for wood energy purposes and others for construction activities (FAO, 2005; 2006); and over 50 per cent of total wood extractions are deemed illegal in many tropical African countries. The consequence is inescapable as most supposedly illegal wood extraction is a form of informal logging, carried out by millions as a basic survival strategy (Alamu and Agbeja 2011). This shows the concept of illegal logging, encompasses a broad range of activities, and is relevant to both industrial and small-scale logging. Unlike informal logging, illegal logging activity is not simply unregulated, but in direct conflict with regulation. Individuals and logging companies are fond of breaking the rules outlined in their concessions, they bribe officials, or neglect legal obligations to local communities (OECD, 2012).

Dynamics of involvement: Indigenes, state officials and foreigners

Respondents' narratives revealed that there are quite a number of people involved, alongside the corrupt practices that foster the illegal trade in log. State officials were mentioned in the illegal logging and lumbering of woods especially regarding the varieties classified as Precious wood (PW). This confirms the EIA, 2008; and White, 2008, reports noting that corruption permeates every aspect of environmental crime. These species are often restricted in geographical habitat and its natural quality and scarcity thus increases the price whenever it is logged. In terms of the quality, rarity and desirability of precious woods, the demand is often higher because of its limited availability. Jenkins (2012), in his study on Illegal Precious Woods noted the slow-growing rate of hard woods and how often too much pressure to cut them before they reach their optimum size as trees. This explains its demand and scarcity. PWs 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 and Agbeja, 2011). This illegality of felling precious woods was discovered to be driven by a syndicate of foreigners, mostly Asians (Indians, Chinese and Lebanese), who export them to manufacturing companies overseas for boat building, coachwork, firearms, and ceremonial objects (Eman et. al., 2009). Studies in Congo DRC and Cameroon are evident of the destination point of such precious woods (Anon, 2007; IUCN, 2009).

As revealed, 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. Forest guards and security operatives were said to be involved in the issuance of fake permits with the cooperation of other officials in 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 local agents to exploit the forest illegally. For sincere forest guards who are up and doing in their jobs, many have lost their lives as a results of forest criminals getting tip-offs about planned checks and raids

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(Rademeyer, 2012). These cartels of foreigners as emphasized, do not come directly to the forest, rather they have agents, who are mostly educated elites and chiefs in the local communities. In one of the interviews in Elegbeka, Ondo State, a youth leader expressed the reality as something that has been on for long:

Specific woods that are difficult to come by, like Iroko and Mahogany, Obeche, are often in high demand by foreigners who export them. There was a time around November 2011, I was introduced to a Lebanese man, all he wanted was (10) ten thick and matured mahogany and Obeche woods (un-saw), He was ready to pay close to N250, 000 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 three weeks to make the delivery. That was the best in terms of money I have ever made; but the most risky because the woods were needed in full and not in pieces or bits (Male/42 years/Elegbeka/Ondo State).

Taking into account the amount this particular respondent and his group made, it is worth saying that they must have made about three million Naira (over \$18,000) 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 business, she noted that customers and patrons cut across, '...from local contractors in Ondo and Edo States to Abuja (federal capital territory), Lagos, local saw millers from the different states to foreigners based in major Nigerian cities'. The foreign buyers are usually Lebanese, Chinese and Indians who have other legitimate businesses in Nigeria but are also involved in buying rare hard woods from locals. They were discussed as their 'preferred customers' because they often pay on delivery. However issues bordering on incessant kidnappings, most especially in Edo State was described as negatively affecting patronage as loggers are now forced to pay more to smugglers who act as middlemen and agents to the foreigners. A female interviewee in Uhumora, Edo State echoed 'we now have to pay smugglers to deliver the woods to the foreign customers. 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 cutting down precious woods was never in dispute. This was highlighted thus:

...we are not the only ones in this business, just because we are small peasants, we are known and can be pointed out at any time as illegal dealers in woods, but the truth is that the chiefs and community leaders are also involve and do partner with us. 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 (Female /47 years /dealer/ Ifon/Ondo State).

Put differently, a male discussant buttressed the fact that the local elites often engage in double dealing. Instance where foreigners and agents are given permission by community leaders to fall trees, after collecting huge amount of money only for them to go behind reporting to the forest guards and security officers on the high ways, that illegal loggers are within the community and certain location in the forest, was voiced as also common. Other narratives in both forest zones buttressed the constant arrest and disturbances by forest guards and security operatives. They nevertheless did not see it as a hindrance to desist from illegal logging as a business. Youth leaders in Uhumora, Elegbeka and Ifon captured their fearlessness with the following words: “We do not need to stop this business because of the police or forest guards’ arrests. They are always after us; if luck runs against us and we are caught, we bail ourselves and buy it back. The security men also need money. It is a give and take situation”

A discussant in Uzeba area in Edo State narrated an incidence involving a young middleman from Ozalla, who was fronting for an Indian firm in Lagos and who wanted to be smart, noted that it was a big issue in Uhumora between the chiefs and the middleman. He was said to have collected \$5,000.00 from the Indians, only to remit \$1,200.00 to the chiefs for cutting and selling of about 15 mahogany and 10 Iroko trees, all rare hard forest woods. For fear of the name of the company being exposed as well as the Indians involved, the company representative quickly settled the chiefs and the police who got wind of the information by paying off the balance.

A probe revealed that the villagers came to know about it months later when the Indians returned to the community the second time, they went directly to the chiefs for negotiation of a new deal. The involvement of foreign companies specialized in sourcing for woods for furniture, exterior and interior decorations has also contributed a lot to the illegal exploitation of forest products (Martin and Vigne, 2011). 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 research have shown that such Asian companies genuinely licensed to do business in Africa also venture into businesses they are not licensed for, especially in the exportation of woods and furniture works overseas for wealthy clients and marketers (IUCN, 2009; South and Wyatt 2011; Ola-Adams, 1983; Lucas, 1982). It further implies that most of the woods out there in the open market are illegally brought out from the forest without proper documentations.

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Illegal Logging: Narratives of an Uneasy Venture

Logging and lumbering activities (both legal and illegal) have been highlighted in many studies as difficult task, in terms of risks, loss of lives to wildlife and security operatives, time, manpower needed, the capital involved in getting motorized saw and the movement of trucks to various nodes where the sellers meet the buyers or saw millers (Lucas, 1982; Egbewole et al., 2011; Nurse, 2011). Similarly the stress and nocturnal engagement with security officers and forest guards came up in the focus group discussions in Uhumora, Ifon, and Owo. The sixteen female discussants in the study were all of the opinion that illegal exploitation of forest woods is not an easy survival strategy. Excerpts from two respondents in Owo and Uhumora revealed illegal activities in the forest are often nocturnal in nature, and full of life threatening experiences:

Travelling from the city to the forest location is not easy for me as a woman, with husband and children to cater for. Once there is a client or business, I had to prepare a day earlier to make sure the motor saw boys are at close range at night. This arrangement includes the driver who will convey the logs out of the forest. It is an all-night affair (Female, 28 years/Uhumora/Edo State).

In Owo, a divorcee and mother of three (a boy and two girls), echoed the peculiar difficulties women faced in the business saying 'the forest is not for the beautiful and lazy ones'. Another respondent described the forest as "thick, dark and frightening enough to scare the beautiful ladies. There is no fun here, people get killed; women get raped". The fears and challenges account for the predominance of men in illegal logging and lumbering activities. The gender dimension of participation in environmental crimes reveals that females' involvement in both legal and illegal logging is often in conjunction with stronger and reliable men with physical strength; and most of whom are in possession of charms and machetes to wade off other forest bandits:

...Otherwise in the process of transporting big log of woods, these bandits may forcefully create a scene and cart away with the logs. I have so many nasty experiences that do not need to be told (Female 53years/Owo/Ondo State).

The experienced difficulties were also discussed as some of the reasons why the cost of hard woods is so high and unpredictable. Some respondents were of the opinion that the hike and fluctuations in prices of woods and other forest products do not affect the zeal as it is still very much cheaper to get forest products from illegal or unregistered wood vendors. While issues of personal safety in and out of the forest were raised by female respondents, the males were more interested in the profit motives and how best to make more money. This is not to say they did not experience similar challenges like the women, they were only silent on personal security issues and preferred to emphasize more on the

issue on equipment (cost and maintenance) and the increasing patrol of forest guards and security operatives around the forest corridors. A dealer in Mahogany highlighted one of the challenges he is facing in this regard:

...for me, as a dealer I have to get a good motorized saw. It does not come easy any longer, especially with the price which has skyrocketed, I have to borrow to get the one I am currently using (Male/dealer in mahogany/41 years/Ifon/Ondo State).

For another in Elegbeka, it was the type of motorized saw and the maintenance that were the major challenges, the cost of getting a noiseless and good motor saw was said to be so high as well as the charges for renting other equipments. A probe into the reason and the demand for specific *noiseless motorized saw* revealed that since most forest are becoming more and more open and less dense, regular motor saw becomes too noisy and attracts a lot of attention from rural dwellers to the particular spot where illegal logging and lumbering activities are being carried out. The attention, the old and noisy machines creates was noted as exposing their activities.

The discussions above illustrate that most illegal felling of trees are done at night. By implication it also suggest that illegal loggers have fortified themselves with weapons and charms against any form of attacks by wild animals or security operatives and forest guards especially if it is a government reserved forest zone. The activities are often haphazard as described by the forest guards. Forest guards were unanimous in stating that "increasing surveillance and crackdown of youths involved in felling of trees and farming of marijuana, are very tasking and difficult because they do not operate in a particular place" Most interesting, is the involvement of women in the planting and selling of marijuana a dominant trade for men. The forest guards noted that these young ladies often accompany the men to farm and also as buyers. They are usually pitied when in the forest, but now we have realized that they are becoming more and are mostly used as cover up to prevent security operatives from suspecting the men.

A senior guard along Ifon, also corroborated that:

....ever since NDLEA officials started possessing guns, the pressure has shifted to the forest. Whenever marijuana dealers and illegal loggers are pursued, they moved into the forest to take cover. On few occasions we have lost our men to stray bullets (Male/Forest guards, Ozalla, Edo State).

The battle has been intensified on forests criminals. The forest guards though agreed that they are also armed when going into the wide and thick forest, but not in comparison to the officials of the National Drug law Enforcement Agency

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(NDLEA). 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 in good state', 'it makes the work boring to pursue forest criminals in and out of the forest'. Observations during the course of the study reveal that there are series of patrol vehicles plying Akure - Owo axis in Ondo State down to Ekpoma and Oluku junction in Benin, Edo state. This continuous surveillance was however linked to the increased cultivation of marijuana and illegal logging in the two states. When asked about youth involvement in other criminal activities, respondents (over 96 percent) mentioned marijuana trade and prostitution as common means of survival among the unemployed.

Conclusion

The accentuation of illegality in logging activities in the forest belts of Edo and Ondo States is worrisome, as it contributes more to the continuous deforestation taking place in Nigeria. The study reveals youths' attribution to unemployment as a causal factor engendering them into environmental crime of illegal logging for survival, amidst lack of job opportunities. Nevertheless the article posits that environmental criminals are made up of a number of social network of youths (males and females), custodians of community farm lands and the elderly along Ondo and Edo States forest belt, as evident from the analysis of responses from the field which reveal the divergent number of persons perpetuating, despicable acts in the forest. There is the need for government to put in place measures to curtail illegalities in forest reserves. Government and community leaders should also collaborate in curbing the activities of illegal loggers. The forest guards and security operatives should be well-equipped in the short run. This will only be possible if more men are recruited, trained and armed with better ammunitions. Similarly the collaboration between forest guards, men of the Nigerian Drug Law Enforcement Agencies (NDLEA), the Nigerian Police Force (NPF), and the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corp (NSCDC), should be intensified along the nation's forest belts.

Lastly as serious as the unemployment issue is in Nigeria, this should not give room for cartel of foreigners mostly of Asian origin to lure Nigerian youths and community chiefs into the habit of fetching hard and precious words from the forest without license and proper permission from the appropriate authorities. The long time effect of foreign incursion and exposure of local communities to foreign currencies will further breed criminality, insecurity and threats to genuine forest vendors. Foreigners as shown in studies in Congo Democratic Republic and Uganda have the capacities of exposing youths to arms and ammunitions, which will endanger their immediate community and the nation (See Debroux, 2007). The nation is already tensed in terms of insecurity in the North and South-South region of the country. Therefore the South-western states should become cautious. The unemployment level in Nigeria needs to be looked into by both the state and federal government, to channel the activities of the youths in these locations into more productive and legitimate occupations that are agro based.

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