

# In the Shadows: Maritime Crime, Illicit Operational Chain and Informal Economy in West Africa

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## Abstract

*With the exception of a few, academic publications on the political economy of crime in West Africa, to date, has given no consideration to the 'organised' nature of maritime crime, its interlinked operational mechanisms, the dynamics of its relationship with the formal economy, and the implication of entrenched mutually reinforcing relationships for regional security. This study seeks to unearth the interconnections between formal and shadow economies in West Africa, in the context of maritime-piracy business, the variables that engender transition from illegal to legal activities, vice versa, and the impact of such forward-backward linkage on the region's political economy. Using qualitative research techniques, the study argues that illicit maritime activities and their sustaining operational structures exist in the shadows of legality, and are reinforced by the formal economy, suggestive of a fussy but loose overlap between two economic worlds. The dynamics of such relationships are not only crucial to understanding the adaptableness, resilience and continued existence of shadow maritime economies and criminal networks in West Africa, they are critical to developing an effective delinking strategy and security governance framework towards combating maritime crime in the region.*

*Keywords: illicit business model, organised crime, petro-piracy, natural resource extraction, shadow economy*

## Introduction

The West African subregion is a 'dual economy' of some sort. In this sense, a dualistic economic theory speaks not strictly to the reality of economic development of underdeveloped or developing countries in the region but the dichotomy in the region's economic landscape viz-a-viz interactions between two separate economic sectors; formal and informal. Like several countries of the world, West Africa's economy is structurally anchored on a mutually beneficial and sometimes antagonistic relationship between upperworld and underworld activities especially in its energy-maritime sector. The underworld maritime economy is characterised by covert piratical operations, offshore breach of energy infrastructure and illegal offshore trade in petroleum, creating a lucrative organised crime tripod sustained and nourished by an enormous so-

cio-economic infrastructure in the world's most dangerous maritime corridor. The region's maritime space, especially the Southern coast of Nigeria, in the Niger Delta, is particularly explosive, and therefore constitutes a maritime security albatross. Energy-maritime crime defined by institutionalised offshore and onshore trends and patterns in illicit extraction and transportation of energy resources, drawing parallels with the burgeoning illicit gold economy across the Sahel region, and especially in Zamfara, North-West Nigeria, has created a maritime debacle in West Africa. What has ensued, in this milieu of energy resource-centred maritime crime, a well-oiled 'black' economy sustained by criminal collaborations across national, regional and international divide has emerged, threatening ocean-going businesses and, by extension, international commerce (Balogun, 2021). However, such intensified and robust illicitness is deeply entrenched in the region to the extent of the vulnerability of, and collusion with, the formal economy. Informal and illegal energy-maritime enterprise is not a segmented market, but a critical component of a formal national, regional and global market. Indeed such markets exist in the shadows of the formal economy, resulting in a double jeopardy; incentivising criminality and eroding the capacity of regional governments to effectively contain and combat illicitness.

Meanwhile, a structural analysis of maritime crime in the region shows active involvement of organised crime groups operating in connivance with formal political economy structures and institutions, transforming maritime criminality into a lucrative illicit economy, with entrepreneurship and social networks providing necessary ingredients nourishing a criminal convergence and reinforcing continued existence of maritime crime in West Africa (ibid). As crude oil and petroleum-laden vessels criss-cross the region, pirates waylay, hijack vessels, attack and kidnap crew members in an operation reminiscent of organised crime.

Several national, regional and global anti-piracy policy initiatives, strategies and institutional frameworks have been articulated and operationalized with varying degrees of successes. For instance, as part of its mandate, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) has developed a sustainable maritime security strategy for West Africa geared towards combating maritime crime. Through strategic collaborations, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) have also evolved policy initiatives and protocols to combat maritime piracy and other forms of illicit activities in the maritime space of West and Central Africa. In addition, national navies in the region, in active collaborations with international and regional security architectures, continuously embark on joint naval operations, such as Exercise Obagame Express in the war against ocean-based illicit activ-

ities. Nevertheless, despite these measures, the sub-region remains a hotbed of maritime crime, accounting for over 90% of recorded maritime kidnapping cases worldwide in 2019 (IMB, 2020). Continued adaptableness and resilience of illicit maritime activities in the sub-region especially how they are reinforced by the formal economy should, therefore, elicit major concerns from governments, ocean-bound business enterprises, international maritime organisations and academics across the region and beyond.

Through an exploratory research anchored on oral interviews and review of extant literature on maritime piracy, this study interrogates the political-economy of illicit maritime enterprise in West Africa. The study contends that illicit and informal energy-maritime economies in West Africa exist in the shadow of formality, and are enabled and constrained by formal socio-economic and political environment through shared spaces of exchange and mutually reinforcing collaborative socio-economic ventures. Understanding the dynamics of criminal exchanges in a spatial context is critical to delinking formal-informal economic exchanges and pivotal in the war against maritime criminality in West Africa. The study is organised in five sections. The first section; this part deals with the introduction, while the second examines the evolution of maritime piracy in West Africa. This is followed by the business and operational model of piracy in the region, the political economy of piracy and the intertwined nature of formal and shadow economies. The last section examines policy implication of the phenomenon.

### **Evolution of Maritime Piracy in West Africa**

Piracy is an age-long phenomenon with a rich history (Tuerk, 2012). In spite of this, it is an act that is little understood, ill-defined and often trapped in controversies (Burnett, 2003). Several academic definitions of piracy exist as there are scholars across different academic disciplines over different historical epochs. As for legal definition, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) Article 101 defines piracy as follow:

Piracy consists of any of the following acts: (a) any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship or a private aircraft, and directed: (i) on the high seas, against another ship or aircraft, or against persons or property on board such ship or aircraft; (ii) against a ship, aircraft, persons or property in a place outside the jurisdiction of any State; (b) any act of voluntary participation in the operation of a ship or of an aircraft with knowledge of facts making it a pirate ship or aircraft; (c) any act inciting or of intentionally facilitating an act described in subparagraph (a) or (b), UNCLOS (1982).

A noteworthy point in the above definition is that the UNCLOS definition conceives of piracy from a narrow confine of sea-based activity, excluding any attack in territorial waters. Hence, attacks within territorial waters of states are not acts of piracy. However, the IMO, in paragraph 2.2 of its operational guideline for investigating acts of maritime piracy and armed robbery, clearly states what constitute armed robbery against ship. Armed robbery, according to the Code, is:

any illegal act of violence or detention or any act of depredation, or threat thereof, other than an act of piracy, committed for private ends and directed against a ship or against persons or property on board such a ship, within a State's internal waters, archipelagic waters and territorial sea (IMO).

Therefore, territorial jurisdiction or exercise of sovereign rights determine how an incident is described. Whether or not a maritime crime is considered armed robbery or piracy, which has been the controversy around maritime crime in West Africa, depends on the maritime space within which the incident takes place; national or international. This implies that, within maritime security studies, similar circumstances and conditions account for the prevalence of the two incidents (piracy and armed robbery), regardless of jurisdiction.

The historical background of maritime piracy on the Atlantic coast of West Africa can be traced to the wider context of globalization of commerce and criminality. The wave of globalization is inextricably linked to overseas trade relations between the West African coast and the rest of the world, spanning six centuries. The period transcends three historical epochs: the transatlantic slave trade, the trade in palm produce (legitimate trade) which lasted up to the 20th century, and (now) the trade in crude oil (covering 1958 to date) and its illegal trade variant. Indeed, from the era of the slave trade through the palm oil trade to the age of crude oil, pirates, privateers, and commerce raiders have laid siege on West Africa to take advantage of existing business opportunities, or even as merchants themselves, with the lure of profits too high to resist. Through these epochs, wherever business opportunities existed, piracy has emerged, often as a parallel business or industry. So, rather than being considered as an entirely new phenomenon, petro-piracy especially and kidnapping for ransom are only the latest phase in a long history of a complex web of the globalisation of commerce and criminality, which has made the region the epicentre of energy-maritime crime. Like their predecessors, the pirates of today are criminal entrepreneurs who continue to feed on the formal economy of West Africa.

By the 1970s, most economies in West Africa had become integrated into the Western capitalist economic framework (Nwagbara, 2004), with austeri-

ty and severe economic conditions forcing several countries in the region to adopt Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP). However, rather than alleviate the sufferings of the people and improve their well-being, SAP and the conditions attached to it worsened people's living socioeconomic conditions (Anyanwu, 1992). Some workers had their salaries slashed while others lost their jobs through retrenchment, bringing about a dramatic rise in unemployment, crime and social dislocations (ibid). These developments prepared the ground for the resurgence and entrenchment of organised criminalities including piracy in West Africa.

Meanwhile, the advent of crude oil exploration and production changed the piracy narrative in West Africa (personal communication, November 26, 2020). Crude oil production had created new business opportunities which pirates took advantage of, and set in motion a double shift in piracy from the Niger Delta region to Lagos port and back to the Delta region (personal communication, November 26, 2020). Following the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in the early 1970s by Shell Petroleum and its attendant jump in national revenue, the Nigerian government embarked on capital intensive industrialization, prestige projects, and wasteful social expenditure. What followed, there was a boom in the country's foreign trade, especially the number of foreign vessels arriving the nation's major ports in Lagos and Port Harcourt. These ports, which had not seen commensurate capacity expansion, were not able to handle increasing maritime activities hence delays in berthing at harbours which consequently provided opportunities for armed robbery and theft of which foreign vessels were mostly victims (personal communication, November 26, 2020). Such cases of robbery and theft had significantly risen which prompted the International Association of Port Authorities (IAPA) to issue a prohibition on Nigerian waters in the 1980s (Perouse de Montclos, 2012). The 'cement armada' which followed the nation's economic boom of the 1980s resulted in increased cement importation, and created a shortage of berthing space in the few operational ports, inevitably generating long queues at the Lagos port and made waiting vessels easy prey for robbers (Ellen, 1989).

What started as small opportunistic attacks (Uadiale, 2012) rapidly became organised (Murphy, 2013) as pirates exchanged small boats for ones that could carry 20 to 30 men driven by outboard motors (Guilfoyle, 2013). In 1979 the master of the *Lindinga Ivory* was killed and all 14 crew injured, and by the early 80s attacks in Lagos had risen to twelve at most in a day (Murphy, 2013). But by 1984, there was a downward trend in the spate of piratic attacks, ostensibly a reaction to the declining oil prices of that decade (ibid).

By mid-1980s, the second shift in piracy (Lagos-Niger Delta) was well underway. During this period, the non-violent struggle led by Ken Saro-Wiwa against

the degradation of the environment of the Niger Delta had become violent, and criminal in some instances, with several ethnic militia groups evolving under self-imposed mandates of advancing the interest and agenda of the region for resource control. The shift in piracy from Lagos to the Niger Delta region and the Atlantic coast came in the aftermath of “the militarization of the protest for local control of oil resources” (Perouse de Montclos, 2012, p. 534), and “politicization and the sophistication of gangs” (ibid). Illicit Maritime activities after that became a common feature, reaching new grounds in West Africa. Today, maritime piracy in West Africa has evolved into an organised parallel business around the region’s oil industry, operating in a criminal collaboration with oil theft, oil bunkering and kidnapping for ransom (Balogun, 2021).

### **From Petro-Piracy to Kidnapping for Ransom**

Maritime piracy in West Africa is a multi-million dollars business. For several decades, the illicit economy, anchored on the business model of petro-piracy; illegal taking of oil after vessel hijacks, was carried out using motherships (Barrios, 2013). In what is known as oil bunkering, oil laden vessels were largely the objects of piratic attacks because the cargo could be sold at exorbitant prices especially in Nigeria and regional crude oil markets (Starr, 2014). In 2011 alone, the coast of Benin recorded 22 pirate attacks, and by 2012, Togo had registered a tanker attack (UNODC, 2013). The phenomenon of vessel hijack became well entrenched as a money-spinning criminal enterprise in West Africa until the global crude oil price shock between 2014 and 2015, though there is yet a huge prospect of oil bunkering in the region as pirates continue to expand violent operations, and criminal support structures and logistics are as much active as they used to. For instance, in 2018, six hijackings targeted oil tankers were recorded, up from zero recorded tanker hijackings in 2017, raising concerns of possible resurgence of petro-piracy in the region (CSR, 2019).

However, West African pirates have found new lucrative ventures in kidnapping for ransom, evident in the upsurge in cases of kidnappings and robbery in the first quarter of 2020, in the region. In the first nine months of 2020, a total of 112 vessels were attacked by pirates in the region, 85 crewmembers kidnapped and 31 held hostage (IMB, 2020). The attack on the Togo-flagged vessel *Stelios K* on November 16 by pirates was the 23rd kidnapping in West Africa in the year 2020, with the captain of the vessel and two crew members whisked away by the criminals. This incidence brought the total number of people kidnapped in 2020 to 118 (Dryad Global, 2020; DW News, 2020). However, these figures may not be an accurate reflection of the extent of maritime-piracy in the region because of the problem of underreporting. Nevertheless, the frequency of the attacks and rapidity with which negotiations for ransom are effected attest to the

lucrative-ness of the illicit economy as much as it highlights the weakness of regional security architecture. In a region where poverty is endemic with chronic youth employment, the lure of quick returns on kidnapping is an attraction too good to ignore for criminals. But the frequency of piratic attacks has significant economic implication. The cost of piracy in the region rose from estimated \$793.7 million in 2016 to \$818.1 million in 2017 (Dryad Global, 2020), with almost a quarter of that \$818.1m spent on anti-maritime security services (Oceans Beyond Piracy, 2017). The scale and complexity of the illegal economy highlights rising criminal influence in the region's energy-maritime industry, so that maritime piracy supplements the income of a large number of people across the industry and wider economic spectrum, and the proceeds therefrom are ploughed back into the illegal business thereby creating a vicious cycle of crime.

The operational mode of petro-piracy in West Africa has seen significant transformation over the last decade. In recent times, as noted above, piracy for kidnappings, hijackings, and robberies have grown quite dramatically as kidnapers, mostly from the Niger Delta of Nigeria, typically target petroleum industry vessels whose most valuable crew members are whisked away, often identifying them with information provided by insiders, and negotiation for ransom coming afterwards, a development somewhat akin to the Somalian model of piracy off the East Coast of Africa. Such negotiations take two forms; directly and indirectly. Whereas direct negotiations involved kidnapped victims seeking to "buy their freedom" by paying, usually, huge sum of money as ransom, indirect negotiation is conducted through a third party, individuals or organisations, negotiating with the criminal syndicates on behalf of kidnapped victims (personal communication, November, 30, 2020). From petro-piracy model of maritime criminality, West African pirates, responding to changing socio-economic, political and security realities in the region, are transitioning to hijacking and kidnapping for ransom (personal communication, November 26, 2020; IMB, 2020). As regional navies become more effective in dealing with the threats of petro-piracy coupled with increasing plunging in the global price of crude oil, pirates in West Africa are compelled to change their tactics and operational modes to include kidnapping for ransom (personal communication, November 26, 2020; Saul, 2016). Inevitably, the crash in the price of crude oil made the risk-to-reward ratio of bunkering unfavourable hence West African pirates pivoted to kidnapping for ransom, a business model long coveted by Somalian pirates off the coast of East Africa. The geography of West Africa significantly compromises pirates' capability to hold vessels or its cargo for ransom unlike the situation in East Africa. The Niger Delta region, for instance, does not have safe havens for securing captured ships. Continuous modification of tac-

tics by pirates has seen the use of fishing vessels, especially in Nigeria to execute piratic operations in the waters of Benin and Cameroun. Hence, such evolving tactical changes of piracy have not only affected the targets of pirates but also their methods of operation. And one of these methods is violence. West African pirates have access to sophisticated weapons, and attacks have become incessant (Balogun, 2021; Peters, 2020).

Meanwhile, resolution of kidnapping cases take shorter time in West Africa compared to the Somali coast, where negotiations could last for 10 days (Pigeon and Moss, 2020). And companies are reported to have paid between \$50,000 and \$100,000 per person (ADF, 2015) as ransom. The Numbers Blessing gang, for instance, were promised a cash reward of US\$101,000 for one operation (Hastings and Phillips, 2015) but, in some instances, the figures have been higher. A sum of \$2 million was said to have been paid to secure the release of two Americans in 2013, in what is referred to as the largest known ransom in West Africa (*ibid*). As regional security mechanisms are troubled by maritime hotspots across the region and therefore unable to deal decisively with piracy, coupled with the challenge of inadequate weapons, the ugly trend of kidnapping for ransom will continue into 2022 and 2023. Incessant attacks on vessels have also forced shipping companies to consider safer international shipping routes thereby undermining the prospect of international collaboration and assistance in the fight against maritime piracy.

Unlike a legitimate business, the planning is often shrouded in secrecy as are other post-attack activities. However, interview data suggest that the business of maritime piracy in West Africa follows a well-organized and sophisticated process which commences with how targets are selected to the disposal of the proceeds of attacks, negotiation for ransom and release of kidnapped crew. Onuoha (2013) also aligns with this position with his eight-stage process of piracy which traverses planning and disposal of loot. Suffice it to say, here, that the layered-process highlights the organized nature of the enterprise, occupational differentiation, and vast networks of people and operations involved in the illicit business. Meanwhile, proceeds from successful piracy operations, regardless of the business model, are determined and shared based on the nature of assigned roles in the business (*ibid*). Usually, pirates collect their full or partial payment before embarking on operations, with a promise of payment of any outstanding following successful operations (*ibid*). However, there are significant variations in contractual arrangements. Cases abound where piratic operations do not precede from contractual terms and conditions; where sharing formula is not definite and defined before pirates venture offshore on illicit operations. Such is the case with gangs who have had several successful operations and are already guided by 'conventional' practices (personal commu-



nication, November 30, 2020). Whether or not contractual arrangements exist, the enterprise suggests the existence of a structured instrument or governance mechanism by which trust and ties, such as those in legal businesses, are strengthened; a system that ensures order in disorderliness and formality in informalities.

The multi-layered enterprise produces structural variations and complex dynamics of interconnections between actors and institutions. Small-scale piracy operation, for instance, is sustained by a less complex web of interaction, reflect and perform illegal enterprise functions of hierarchy, network, and market, which are not mutually exclusive. The operational mechanism is also devoid of a hierarchy of any sort but does not lack in orderliness, with jobs collectively assigned and executed across the value chain (ibid), affirming the existence of a system of division of labour and functional differentiation. It, therefore, means that a network and market- both in form and function could mutually co-exist.

As the illegal business becomes more complex so too the web of interactions among actors and institutions sustaining it, and takes on an international dimension at the sales end of the enterprise spectrum. The medium and large scale layers of piracy operations, such as involving Greek-owned *MT Kerala* and Togo-flagged *Stelios K* provide more sophisticated, robust and often global mechanisms for interactions. These levels of operations combine both elements of hierarchy and network, in pursuit of market goals.

### **Maritime Piracy Business and Operational Model**

Maritime piracy business in West Africa survives on a networked and layered mechanism through which pre and post attack activities are determined and orchestrated. Such a layered, networked process constitutes the piracy infrastructure or operational/value chain, but, like oil theft, functions within the constraints and opportunities set by the formal energy maritime economy of the region. This study, based on interviews with some ex-pirates, government officials, fieldwork notes as well as literature and official documents, identifies four main stages in the petro-piracy operational/value chain. These are the target selection and planning stage, attack stage, transloading and transportation, storage, distribution and sale of cargo (see figure 1.0 below). These interlinked stages provide a medium of interaction for several local and international criminal syndicates, who operate within the complexity of an illegal enterprise, and creates a link between global formal and informal energy-maritime economy. The stages involved in kidnapping for ransom are not markedly different from the model of petro-piracy. The transportation stage in kidnap operation involved movement of kidnapped crew to hidden locations to commence nego-

tiation of ransom. And once ransom is successfully negotiated, the captured crew regains their freedom.

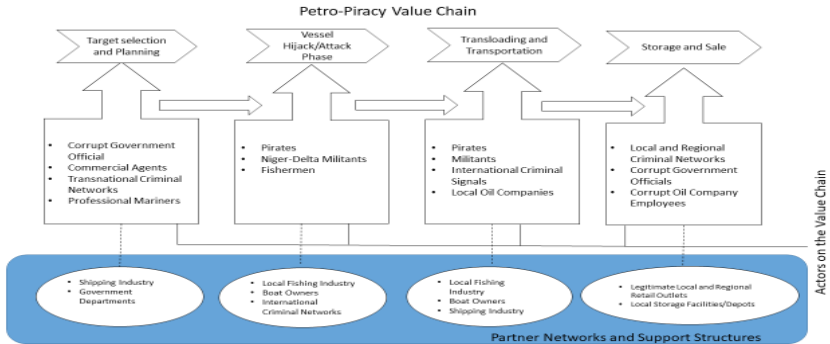


Fig.1: A typical petro-piracy operational chain. Source: Author

### Target Selection and Planning Phase

Target selection and planning is the first stage in maritime piracy. Central to this stage are intelligence gathering, identification of targets, recruitment of pirates, weapons acquisition and financing of operations. Target selection is dependent on availability of information about possible targets (Peters, 2020; Davis, 2014, Onuoha, 2013), including “details of all ships arriving and the cargo they are carrying to any terminal in the Gulf of Guinea” (Davis, 2014). Such information usually come from commercial agents, corrupt government officials, and transnational criminal networks who have insider knowledge of the schedule of vessels. Hence, maritime piracy relies on a network of informants and spies who work together to plan and organize both land-based and marine-based support services, to ensure the success of the attacks. The piracy enterprise also requires considerable knowledge of maritime operations and expertise, with professional mariners said to be culpable in vessel hijack by providing support services to pirates through their know-how in the navigation and communication control systems of vessels, tracking obstruction, illegal ship-to-ship transfer etc. (Onuoha, 2013).

Operating in cell, which are well inter-connected and armed with accurate and up-to-date information on the environment, the West African piracy syndicates plan their operations with carefulness and meticulousness (Davis, 2014). A lot careful consideration and thoroughness goes into the operations. Failure to plan carefully could spell doom, and this the pirates are very much aware of. Things can go wrong quickly (personal communication, November 27,

2020). They hardly indulge in random and speculative attacks, rather following a structured process of collecting information about vessels, the kind of security mechanism on board and carry out a risk analysis before embarking on operations (personal communication, November 26, 2020). Their chances of success are determined by the volume and accuracy of the information gathered (personal communication, November 27, 2020). The case of MT Kerala further buttresses the structured nature of piracy attack. The vessel was singled out for attack out of more than 30 vessels in Angolan waters at the time of the attack in January 2014. And following a successful hijack, it made a northwest sail covering about 1,300 nautical miles, during which time 12, 270 tonnes of the oil cargo were stolen, before being abandoned off the Ghanaian coast (Bridger, 2014). This intricate operation underscores the level of intelligence gathering, organization and sophistication that undergird petro-piracy attacks in the waters of West Africa.

The pirate groups also need to buy supplies, such as weapons, fast boats needed to stage attacks, boarding equipment, such as ropes, etc. This brings to question piracy financing in the region. Piratic operations are significantly funded in view of the several cases of successful hijackings in the region. The funding structure typically reflects three business ownership structures viz: the sole proprietorship, partnership, and cooperative (personal communication, November 26, 2020), akin to ownership structures in legal entrepreneurship. In the sole proprietorship structure in which the whole operation is solely funded, the financier may or may not be part of the pirate group, but he controls the largest share of the criminal proceeds. Individual pirates may also pool resources together by way of ploughing back into the business proceeds from earlier operations, in a partnership. But the proceeds sharing-formula is determined by the financial commitment of each member to the enterprise. The majority of hijackings are however financed by international syndicates, in an international cooperative structure with links to Niger Delta militants, who equip several pirate groups, draw up terms of contract, including proceeds sharing formula (Jacoben & Nordby, 2015; personal communication, November 27, 2020).

Piracy planning operations often cut across the entire spectrum of the operational chain, covering land-based and marine-based support activities, with different layers of role specialization and skill requirements, and involve considerably complex logistical operations (Peters, 2020). Such complex planning operations very much depend on the diverse nature of piracy groups, which could range from a small and loosely-organized group to more structured and elaborate groups (Kamal-Deen, 2015; Onuoha, 2013). Nevertheless, and regardless of group composition, the leader of the piracy gang in West Africa plans and organizes the operation, including provision of operational logistics, and

financial inducement of state officials to look the other way. The leader's financial involvement also covers down payment for the pirates, and cost of weapons procurement and transport facilities. He therefore benefits the most from piracy proceeds.

Planning, however, only worked if it was shrouded in secrecy such that the details were made known to those with primary responsibilities on the enterprise value chain. The success of any piracy business, therefore, depends on careful planning and identification of targets, facilitated by transnational socioeconomic networks within the formal energy-maritime economy to gather intelligence, acquire weapons, and determine storage facilities and markets for stolen crude. This underscores the significance of coordination and proper integration of activities and roles which are key ingredients in any operational chain.

### **Attack Phase**

Intelligence gathering and plan formulation informs the actual attack, with pirates equipped with the necessary tools, such as mobile phones, global positioning devices etc. to embark on illicit operations. This deployment stage is immediately followed by actual attacks where the plan is finally executed. For this purpose, pirates enter into contractual agreements by which a down-payment is made with the assurance of payment of outstanding balance once the operation is completed, or are themselves investors/financiers of the enterprise. Wherever the attack is launched, surprise, speed and mobility are all important for successful operations, which is why pirates prefer fast easy-to-manoeuve and shallow drafts ships. Most pirates are between the ages of 25 and 35 and operate in smaller groups, say between 10 and 15 members, for operational convenience and ease of manoeuvring and escape should operations go dreadful (personal communication, November 27, 2020).

Once the pirates get hold of a ship, the officers of the watch (OOW) and crew are attacked, and the vessels' bridge consequently hijacked. Using a wide range of weapons, such as AK-47s (Kalashnikov) and rocket launchers, pirates attack the vessels and consequently divert the cargo for siphoning. Depending on the organization of the syndicate, pirates either operate with their weapons or are provided with weapons by the ring leader, or their sponsors (personal communication). There are reported cases of arms supply by a network of traffickers with links to groups in the Niger Delta, but also by accomplices within the state security apparatus (Igbeke, 2018).

How pirates locate their targets is certainly not at the realm of conjecture. Piratic attacks follow a carefully orchestrated planned procedure, which means that pirates act based on information and knowledge of the shipping industry

especially targeted vessel, its cargo and movement schedule. However, there are instances where pirate attacks are less coordinated and planned and the pirates would simply launch attacks from their hideouts on any unsuspecting vessels (*ibid.*). Regardless of the level of coordination put into the operation, knowledge of the shipping industry, the region's geography and ability of pirates to navigate through difficult terrains for operations play important roles in the success of maritime piracy (personal communication, November, 27, 2020).

Maritime criminals deploy several measures to execute their illicit acts. In some instances, the piracy syndicates used the mother-ship concept similar to what is used by Somalian pirates, ostensibly a deceptive ploy to get close to oil vessels before carrying out the attacks. In this sense, the pirates make their journeys “far out onto the sea with fishing boats, switch to smaller boats so they can approach the ship they target, hijack the ship and take it to an unknown destination” (Breuer and Kaufmann, 2013, p.2). The same operational mechanism also speaks to piracy for ransom, with the difference being the object of attack. Other modes of operation involve piratic attacks during trans-shipment operations with another vessel. Either way, the pirates usually board the vessels using extending ladder, and once hijacked, the vessels' communication and automatic identification systems are disconnected, while the tankers are directed towards a secure offshore location, usually in the Niger Delta region, before transshipment is made and then the cargo sold to the crude market (Dua, 2019; Onuoha, 2013), or the kidnapped crew taken to a safe corridor for ransom negotiation to commence. Such operations have, in some cases, resulted in violence, robbery of crew members, maiming or killing (personal communication, November, 26, 2020; Adusei, 2015; Kamal-Deen, 2015).

### **Transloading, Transportation, Storage and Sale (TTSS)**

The activity stage following attack is transloading and transportation of hijacked and stolen oil/petroleum, in the case of cargo theft. Once the hijack is completed, the contents of the vessels are emptied or pumped into pirates' vessels, in a process of transloading. Transloading is a complex activity requiring sophisticated equipment, and navigational and engineering knowledge to manoeuvre a merchant vessel. Upon successful transfer of stolen crude to the receiving tanker, the pirates are provided further information by the broker about onshore storage facilities where the oil is transferred while security is provided (Onouha, 2013). Following the hijack of *MT Anuket Emerald* in 2012, its cargo was first transferred to a chartered vessel, *MT Grace* before moved to onshore oil tank farms allegedly owned by some local oil companies and members of the ruling elite in Nigeria (Hastings and Phillips, 2015).

Successful hijack operations are followed by cargo offloading into storage

facilities, for sale and distribution. Storage and sale is usually the last stage on the piracy value chain. The products are then sold off to local and international black markets, whose presence incentivize the illegal business enterprise in the region.

### **Political Economy of Maritime Piracy in West Africa**

Active connivance of state officials and formal institutional apparatus in maritime criminality has been copiously documented in maritime security literature (Balogun, 2021; Balogun, 2018; Hastings, 2015; Otto, 2011; Rosenberg, 2009). Most research participants in this study also affirmed the reality of the formal state structures providing necessary reinforcements for criminality in the region. At the heart of the discourse on political economy of maritime crime in West Africa, therefore, is an understanding of the interconnections of the formal and informal governance structures and how economic costs and benefits are distributed on illicit operational chains. Formal governance and economic structures provide the context, and sets the limit, for the operations of criminal groups. The dynamics and manifestations of maritime piracy in the sub-region are enabled by inherent contradictions in the region's political economic framework, and are reflective of a region in crisis. Whether vessels are hijacked or ransoms paid, the limit of piratical operations is set by the political, economic and legal environments of the sub-region, which also determine response initiatives and interdiction capability (personal communication, November, 26, 2020). In this light, Murphy (2013) argued that sea-based illicit economic activities evolve from land-based conditions. Proceeds of crime also feed into formal political economy, threatening the survival of already fragile states by infiltrating politics and reinforcing criminality. The capability of states' apparatus to effectively deal with both land-based and sea-based criminal activities is undermined further by the ferociousness and daringness of criminal gangs and networks armed with proceeds of maritime crime. The enormity and complexity of the challenge can be appreciated in the wider context of security challenges bedevilling the region. The Sahel region is ravaged by the menace of terrorism while Lake Chad Basin is increasingly drying up as a result of overuse and climate change effects, heralding continuous conflicts between herders and farmers across the countries bordering the Lake (Usigbe, 2019).

Political economy of piracy also extends to cost distribution, beyond causal considerations. Cause-impact interactions are critical to rationality underpinning piratic acts. Pirates of the coast of West Africa are rational actors who take decisions to embark on sea-bound illicit activities having weighed in on cost-consequence variables of their action. Cost is at the heart of the criminal

enterprise, and covers the entire gamut of vessel hijack and its support services from planning and target selection to sale.

Along the operational value chain of piracy in West Africa, costs, much like Bowden's (2011) analysis of Somalia, comes in various shades, but can be grouped into two. The first is the external cost of piracy, that is, global costs of the illegal maritime enterprise. This cost variable includes ransom payments, deterrent costs, cost of naval presence and prosecution among others, are borne by shippers, insurers, military entities, etc. The second is the sunk cost (investment) or internal cost, which is the operational cost of the illegal enterprise both on land and sea (personal communication). An important cost element on the piracy operational chain is fatalities, injuries and trauma, and loss of valuable properties in some cases in the aftermath of petro-piracy attack. Added to this are trade and investment challenges resulting from doing businesses along a maritime corridor prone to risk and uncertainties. Unsurprisingly therefore, the region's maritime corridor is considered high risk area (HRA) due to rising cases of piracy, which significantly affect the cost of goods being shipped to the region (IMB, 2020; Pigeon and Moss, 2020). The insurance premiums have skyrocketed in the region with rising risks associated with transportation of goods, increasing operating costs of maritime commercial activities.

Maritime-piracy in West Africa has resulted in the dislocation of means of livelihood of several thousand coastal communities, with attendant shortages in food supply. Fishing communities have suffered enormous losses on account of the impact of piracy on fishing business and the blue economy. The oil-dependent economies of West Africa have suffered significant financial losses due to hijacks of oil vessels by pirates, too. A 2018 report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated an annual economic loss of \$777.1 million to piracy in West Africa between 2015 and 2017 (UNODC, 2020). In 2017 alone, the cost of maritime piracy in West Africa exceeded the \$800 million mark, with almost a quarter of the entire cost being channelled into maritime security (CMRP, 2017). The figures above discountenance the cost of insurance. In same year, premium paid on insurance by shipping vessels transiting the maritime corridor of West Africa stood at \$18.5 million (*ibid*). Indeed, maritime piracy generally increases the costs of doing business in West Africa.

On the pirate side, maritime-piracy represents a significant income source. According to a UNODC report, pirates often make profit around US\$10,000 to US\$15,000 per attack (UNODC, 2013). Refined petroleum offered greater income to pirates and represents a lucrative criminal enterprise, (*ibid*) despite the fact that, in the case of Nigeria, government subsidy program pushes down the price of petroleum. Kidnap of crew following successful hijack also yield significant returns to piracy networks. The abducted crew of the Malta-flagged

MT Kalamos were released following the payment of \$400,000 as ransom (BBC News Africa, May 3rd, 2016).

### **Illicit Business Model, Networked Operations, and the Formal Economy**

The discussions above clearly point to the reality of petro-piracy business and operational model as a networked mechanism which relies significantly on the formal legitimate economy and its infrastructure. The enterprise operational chain requires the ships and storage facilities of the formal economy as well the states institutions, such as shipping companies, local financiers, legitimate domestics and international markets, to exist. This relationship with the legitimate business also extends to informal ties with corrupt government officials and ruling elite aimed usually at mitigating threats and evading arrest. What this implies, petro-pirates of the coast of West Africa operate within the limits set by the formal energy-maritime economy, and are constrained by its guidelines and rules. In another dimension, petro-piracy value chain often set off from within the formal economy and is facilitated by corruption before the attack is executed at sea. Organizational and operational requirements would ensure that pirates interface with the formal economy and its institutions to ensure successful operations (Hastings and Phillips, 2015).

In addition to the formal economic infrastructure and institutions, petro-pirates require resources that are external to them, such as a less hostile security environment. The issues of security environment have never ceased to be a concern for illegal entrepreneurs involved in energy-maritime crime. Efforts are thus geared towards ensuring that state security apparatus are evaded to have successful operations. There is also the requirement of external markets to buy much needed operational materials and dispose of the stolen and hijacked crude and petroleum produce after operations. The illegal economy thus survives on the legitimate businesses and markets for the entire gamut of its operations. A host of legitimate businesses in the Niger Delta communities, for instance, depend on illegally refined diesel to run their operations. Some quantity of this produce, especially kerosene and diesel make their way to legitimate businesses, such as fuelling stations and transportation companies where they are either sold to the end-users or used for transportation purposes. Illegally refined petroleum products, therefore, provide an alternative means for running legitimate businesses especially in Niger Delta communities and regions where there is acute shortage of petroleum amidst significant oil wealth. The means by which legitimate businesses move from production to profit is thus largely



shaped by the presence of illegal economic activities, which provide in some cases the necessary lubricants for legal operations.

On the other hand, petro-piracy operational chain has shown that illegal economic activities could also be sustained by legitimate businesses and legal goods and services. For instance, the transportation end of the vessel hijack business sub-operational chain underscores this dimension of legal-illegal business-operational chain relationships. In another instance, the proceeds of piracy are laundered through legitimate financial institutions, helping criminals achieve their objectives in the process. Such funds, as Ralby (2017, p. 4) observed, can have “a wide range of effects—funding other illicit or even violent activities, intentionally destabilizing states, creating shortages that breed conflict...” Both dimensions of legal-illegal relationships are usually facilitated by corruption especially within legitimate state economic institutions and commercial infrastructure - the state being its own enemy- which allows the criminals to access legitimate infrastructure for illegal maritime operations and help further expand “the social milieu for illegal businesses” (Dean et al., 2010, p. 93).

The foregoing discussion is suggestive of the interconnectedness or mutually reinforcing relationship that exist between the legal and illegal economies and within which a constellation of economic activities (legal and illegal) take place. It therefore implies that, as Smith (1975) noted, the marketplace does not end at the edge of legitimacy; in fact, legal boundaries often change; and as long as demand exists, a marketplace exists, and entrepreneurs will seek to meet that demand regardless of legality. The difference between the markets is that one enterprise is perceived as legitimate, while the other is not; they operate at opposite ends of the “spectrum of legitimacy” (Smith 1975).

West African pirates engage in criminal economic activities, and in doing so, they are constrained by the formal institutions that govern and make up the “legitimate political economy” (Hastings and Phillips, 2015, p. 556). As shown, the pirates prey upon, and arise principally from, the formal energy downstream and maritime economy and its accompanying economic value chain. Corrupt elements within state institutions that regulate and protect oil production help to facilitate the illegal operations through provision of information on vessel and security by military personnel on patrol operations. This highlights the fact of a robust relationship between pirates and the different institutions of the formal economy before, during, and after illegal operations. The formal economy, therefore, constrains and facilitates illegal business value chain and activities, as “there are no rigid lines demarcating formal and informal institutions as they necessarily overlap and interact with one another” (ibid, p. 556).

Piracy operational chain is a network of operations which straddle both the formal and informal economy. The business is defined by a long and complex

'supply-demand' chain, involving several onshore support staff and large and sophisticated offshore operations. For instance, the pirates who attacked and boarded tanker *G Dona 1* on May 11 2019 within Togolese EEZ include seven Nigerians, two Togolese and a Ghanaian (Areteafrika, 2021). The extensive operation which resulted in the tanker being temporarily hijacked and robbed bear the signs of a criminal network with far-reaching influence. In executing their operations, pirates require weapons, which necessitate that they enter into relationships with Niger Delta militant groups who are themselves complicit in both oil theft and piracy, in exchange for stolen goods, thereby profiting from the region's conflict environment, but also heighten the state of lawlessness in the region and undermine energy-maritime activities on the Atlantic corridor. This mutually beneficial relationship is indicative of how criminal offshore activities influence decisions onshore in West Africa. A more complex network involves multiple actors, who belong to regional and global criminal networks, including money launderers who facilitate ransom transfers. Some of these players belong to major cartel, enjoy regional connections, and access transnational business networks. These networks facilitate the supply of arms to the pirates, coordinate the movement of stolen oil to storage facilities or depots within the region, control the sale and distribution networks, and coordinate the sharing and laundering of crime proceeds (personal communication, November 26, 2020). What the foregoing therefore implies is that the piracy operational chain in West Africa witnesses a convergence of several players and interests- those who bear the cost and those who benefit from the proceeds of crime across the operational chain- who operate a network-like structure to further the course of the illegal energy-maritime business.

Suffice it to say that there is ambiguity as to the nature of relationships among different crime groups in furtherance of illegal energy-maritime business across the maritime space of West Africa. The varying forms of network arrangements that characterize black markets in oil and petroleum, link together oil thieves, armed robbers and kidnappers and illegal dealers in fuel, in managing illicit chains of custody (personal communication, November 27 2020). Some of these illegal commercial exchanges are managed through simple networks of people, routes and methods of concealment, while the more complex and larger-scale transaction economic cost or investment require professional and well organized complex transnational relationships of communication and exchange that span the illicit and licit economies and that link local segments of the enterprise value chain to a global marketplace (personal communication, November 20, 2020). They involve multiple participants in the logistics trail, including complex trade and transportation routes, and sophisticated methods of concealment (personal communication, November 27, 2020).

Therefore, pirates and other energy-maritime criminals in the region reinforce each other, as much as they conflict. A relationship of mutual benefits and mutual suspicion undergird interactions among these different players on the criminal value chain. The relative ease with which pirate syndicates infiltrate the formal economy is largely a function of the nature of their relationships with other criminal groups.

The discourse on maritime-piracy operational chain reveals its sophistication, complexity, and integration into a global criminal capitalist economic system sustained by an intersection of ‘glocal’ criminal entrepreneurs (actors), institutions and markets. The process of globalization of the criminal operational chain has been catalysed by the deregulation of the global market and integration of Third World economies into the liberalised global economy, eroding several sovereign states in the process, and heralding a transnational borderless world (personal communication, November 30, 2020). This idea of a “global village”, popularized by Marshall McLuhan (1962), presents a platform for criminals to evolve mechanisms to adapt and expand the scope of their operations beyond originally state-centred spheres of influence. Such expanded scope of operation gives further impetus to criminal collaboration on the operational chain.

### **Evolving an effective delinking strategy towards combating illicit maritime activities**

Combating maritime piracy and illicit operational chain in West Africa requires an integrated approach which appreciates continued interconnections between formal and illicit political-economy structures and their significance in the resilience of maritime criminality in the sub-region. The paper has affirmed the complicity of the formal economy in the troubling maritime landscape of West Africa. Such entrenched ‘formalisation’ is decentralised as pirates exploit sub-economic structures in furtherance of illicitness, with local economic institutions providing necessary covers for pirates and enhancing their imperviousness against military onslaught. Nevertheless, militaristic offensives are fundamental in combating maritime piracy in West Africa. Nigeria’s assemblage of critical security assets in a Deep Blue security project heralds a new dawn in the country’s determination to neutralising the menace of piracy in her maritime space and the wider Gulf of Guinea and should be integrated as a critical component of the country’s maritime diplomacy with the Gulf of Guinea Commission and ECOWAS. Nevertheless, such offensiveness should be reinforced with strategies targeted at crippling the flow of criminal proceeds and assets.

Maritime piracy in West Africa is essentially land-based; and its operational

chain reveals that illicit activities offshore are coordinated and executed within formal onshore economic landscape, with onshore support services serving as an enabler. It therefore means that regional anti-piracy strategies should have significant onshore components which address land-based environment conditions that nourish illicitness. This would mean that greater attention be focused on addressing socio-economic and environmental conditions that drive coastal dwellers into illicit activities either as collaborators or as ‘gateways’ of crime. A maritime strategy delinked from land-based socio-economic environment will merely address the manifestations of the problem rather than its roots.

Political economy of crime highlights the significance of corruption in the formal economy as a critical pillar of criminal enterprise and its operational chain. From giving out information by corrupt government officials to pirates on the schedule of vessels, corruption has given life to maritime piracy, and ensures its sustenance. Corrupt practices help sustain existing links between the illegal enterprise and formal economy, and ensure that hijacked and stolen crude and petroleum produce access the energy market by moving through several legal and illegal channels, shielding the source of the product in the process, and reinforcing the persistence of the criminality. Local communities are also paid off for being complicit in piracy, a development which has significantly undermined the efforts of the governments towards evolving a delinking strategy. So, war against corruption should be seen as an important component of anti-maritime piracy strategy of governments in the sub-region.

Given the nature of the illicit business, it is incumbent on governments in the sub-region to criminalize piracy and strengthen national legal and regional legal frameworks proscribing maritime piracy and illegal bunkering activities. In the case of Nigeria, several legal frameworks exist to address illegal maritime activities, the most recent being the Suppression of Piracy and Other Maritime Offences Act (POMO Act). So, the concern lies not in the absence of laws, but the inability to prosecute diligently by applying the existing laws. The absence of an effective judicial system which could promptly dispense with justice in cases involving maritime criminality has provided some comfort for pirates and encouraged illicit activities. But the narrative is gradually changing. Togo is bringing some level of proactiveness and decisiveness to the criminal justice administration especially on issues of maritime piracy. Nine pirates who hijacked the G-DONA 1 tanker were given prison terms of between 12 and 20 years last year in what has been referred to as “first of its kind trial in West Africa” (The Maritime Executive, 2021) and a landmark judgement in the fight against maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. On July 24, 2021, a Federal High Court in Lagos, Nigeria’s economic hub, handed down 12 years imprisonment each to ten pirates for hijacking a Chinese fishing vessel, FV Hai Lu Feng II, in May 2020.

Such judicial uncompromising stands are expressive of renewed commitment to combating illicit maritime activities in the region and should be sustained.

Weak governance apparatus has been identified as a sustenance of maritime piracy in West Africa. Therefore, there is a greater need to strengthen government agencies, such as national navies, and regional institutional frameworks and instruments such as ECOWAS integrated maritime strategy (EIMs), Code of Conduct Concerning the Repression of Piracy, Armed Robbery against Ships, and Illicit Maritime Activity in West and Central Africa, among others saddled with responsibilities of ensuring maritime security. It is important to build human capacity in these organisations through continuous training, and their operational mechanisms should be knowledge-driven.

An inclusive resource governance regime which ensures that the interest of host communities are protected in the scheme of things should guide operations of both governments and oil multinationals in the Niger Delta. In line with this, the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) 2021 is a commendable step in the right direction. Such a governance regime would make the inhabitants of the oil producing communities see themselves as co-owners in the oil business; a development which will help in reducing the wave of illegal energy-maritime activities in the region.

Though the loose network structure of the illegal enterprise makes tracking and interdiction difficult, there is an urgent need for the government to begin to clamp down on revenues from stolen crude oil and hijacked crude laden vessels. Revenues from the illegal enterprise are laundered across the globe, especially in entities with lax anti-money laundering regulations. Thus, the anti-money laundering act should be strengthened by the Nigerian Government to provide an effective legal framework for combatting illicit flow of proceeds of crime. In this regard, there is a need for effective collaboration with international partners, especially countries known to have lax anti-money laundering regimes, to identify the fiscal institutions through which proceeds of the enterprise are laundered, and prevent lodgement of proceeds of crime in their financial institutions.

It is difficult to imagine the rapidity and the seamlessness with which piratic operations are carried out in the waters of West Africa. Reversing the ugly trajectory would mean that governments across the region invest in sustainable surveillance techniques towards effective monitoring of the region's maritime domain. Already, NIMASA is deploying a surveillance operational mechanism in monitoring maritime activities in Nigeria's maritime space.

The study has consistently argued that the presence of criminal business opportunities around the region's energy and maritime industry drives illegal energy-maritime activities, but it is inconvertible that poverty and unemploy-

ment creates a pool of disenchanted and aggrieved youths who see survival opportunities in criminalities. Endemic poverty, environmental degradation and unemployment define the survival fabric of most youths in coastal communities in the Niger Delta. Addressing the poverty and unemployment dimension of the criminality will help to tame the steady flow of labour, which has sustained the operational chain of the business. I have argued elsewhere that socio-economic conditions that are at play in the region fuel illegal activities by creating an army of unemployed youths who are ready to take on part-time jobs as pirates. Rising unemployment and lack of opportunities for youths in a region endowed with enormous energy-maritime resources reinforced the perception of criminality as a viable alternative. Combating the menace of maritime piracy in the region would require a holistic approach to addressing the socio-economic constraints which bolster criminality.

### **Conclusion**

Maritime piracy business in West Africa has evolved into a criminal enterprise with a robust operational chain, which implies that West African pirates are not merely rational political and social actors constrained and enabled by the economic milieu within which they operate; they are criminal entrepreneurs or businessmen, who operate in the shadow of the legal energy-maritime economy of the region. The enterprise has also witnessed significant transformations regarding its operational mechanisms. In that continuous process of transformations, West African pirates have succeeded in developing a reciprocal causal and mutually beneficial relationship with entrepreneurs, institutions and markets in the formal economy, at the local, regional and global levels. Cargo hijacks and kidnappings for ransom evolve to the extent of enabling environment provided by formal socio-economic and political structures. However, such relationships remain ambiguous especially because of the underworld nature of the enterprise. Nevertheless, the interconnections between the legal and illegal markets is critical to understanding the dynamics of illegal enterprise and its sustaining operational chain. In addressing the phenomenon of energy-maritime crime, especially how it is linked to the formal economy is accentuated and sustained, and the various forms it takes, greater attention should be given to the dynamics of its connections and shared spaces of exchange with the formal economy. This would require instituting a delinking framework which should be targeted at those operational chain mechanisms, connecting channels and spaces and the factors that reinforce the linkages. The two economies can be delinked by looking into variations in the degree of involvement of the illegal economy in the legitimate economy. Such variations include how illegally gotten crude oil and refined petroleum help to sustain legitimate busi-

nesses; how legal goods and services are provided to the illegal energy-maritime entrepreneurs; and how legitimate businesses have helped in furtherance of the criminality. The organised nature of the enterprise and the social network undergirding its operations are critical elements in determining how the challenge is addressed from the standpoint of policy. More importantly, the way and manner proceeds of the illegal enterprise are laundered and investments into which they are injected should be of utmost interest to the governments of the region, especially state security mechanisms given the destabilising impact of illicit wealth on governance, security and economic development in West Africa.

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