

IMPLICATIONS OF VIGILANTE GROUPS IN PROMOTING SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: The study which examines the implications of vigilante groups in promoting socio-economic and political development in Nigeria explains improved security as the basis for the growth and development of Nigeria nation. It traces the emergence of vigilante groups or community-based security organizations from the pre-colonial era when traditional institutions took the responsibility of security management to the post-colonial period especially in 1999 when the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) was established to assist the police in providing security. In spite of their underscored efforts in policing Nigerian territories, the study revealed several challenges that impede their efficiency in the discharge of assigned duties. And in an attempt to ensure the continuous assistance of the vigilante groups in the security management of our nation, some possible measures were proffered to enhance their efficiency. Having considered their relevance in national development; the study recommends that all tiers of government and private organizations should support and encourage the existence of vigilante groups in Nigeria society.

Keywords: Vigilante Groups, Economic and Political Development

Introduction

Security is basically the responsibility of law enforcement agencies which by law include the police, armed forces and other security bodies recognized by the government. But with the high increase in crime, it became evident that protection of life and property cannot alone be left in the hands of state security agencies, rather there should be a collaborative effort of all citizens.

It is therefore on this premise the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) at the national level came to existence in 1999 to primarily assist the security agencies in the fight against all forms of crime and criminality. By its formation, similar vigilante groups were formed by various states, local government, ethnic groups and communities within the federation of Nigeria.

Evidently, the argument of scholars against some perceived activities 10.5281/zenodo.8239727 of the informal security bodies does not completely condemn their relevance in the development of Nigeria nation hence the state security agencies on their own part share some criticisms. Highlight of this study shall focus on the meaning of vigilante group, origin of community-based security organizations, their relevance to national development, challenges and possible measures to enhance efficiency in security management by the vigilante groups.

Conceptualizing Vigilante Groups

The term vigilante or vigilante group denote a range of different groups having different reasons. It could refer to persons or groups who consider the security of their communities as their responsibility to uphold the law in their neighbourhood. The main purpose of vigilante groups is to assist in protecting the communities as well as fighting crimes without associating the group to political gain. Vigilante or any self-defence group having various nomenclatures could be locally, ethnic, state or religiously based (Agbu 2004:28).

Similarly, Okechukwu (2015:77) described vigilante groups as youth-based ethnic militia formed for the purpose of protecting and advancing the selfish interest of their own people. In the attainment of their objectives, such a vigilante group always applies violence in discharging their duties. Examples of such groups are the Bakassi Boys, O'odua Peoples Congree and Egbesu Boys.

The Development of Community-Based Security Organizations in Nigeria

In every human society, security has been a major concern of the inhabitants. During the pre-colonial period, various communities in Nigeria had their own indigenous system of providing security to the citizens through the Families, Secret Societies, Masquerader Groups, Messengers, Chiefs, Palace guards, and Age Grade, Medicine Men, Titled Societies and Oracles. The age grade which Talbor (1969: 543) described as the greatest part of population in any community were used to police the towns as they look after the roads and rest-houses. Titles societies such as the Okomko, ezeji, ndi-nze and ozo which dominated Igbo communities with men of influence and proven integrity could initiate policies on how to safe guide the people (Onwuzirike 2005: 78).

Similarly, the Ekpe and Ekpo Societies in Ibibio and Efik performed policing functions in their areas like those of the *Sarkin Yan doka* in Hausaland and the *Kakanfo* who was the Committee-In-Chief of the Oyo army in Yorubaland. It is pertinent to state that in the areas of the Niger Delta Secret Societies played a very prominent role in providing security to the people in the pre-colonial era. The secret societies helped to maintain law and order, and provided useful training ground for both youths and adults. As women were not admitted in any of the secret societies, in Efik state of Calabar, slaves were not allowed entrant into *ekpe society*, but in Ijo, Kalabari and Okrika, slaves were allowed to become members of *ekine* and *sekiapu societies* where they displayed special skills in dancing and drumming. Among their security functions, Alagoa (1985: 77) highlighted to include; enforcing a code of conduct on all its members to collect debts, punish pilferers and offenders against public morality. They also held regular meetings where village matters were discussed.

But in the colonial era, the indigenous systems used in the protection of lives and property in the pre-colonial era were still relevant in their functions despite their subjugations by the British government in the event of any opposition to colonial rule. For instance in Igboland because of the role played by the Arochukwu Oracle (Obini Okpabi), the British government felt that the destruction of Arochukwu would mark the end of resistance in the whole Igboland. It was therefore on this premise; the British in 1901 to 1902 launched an attack against the Arochukwu soldiers (Omolewa 1986:85-86). A similar incident was the repel of a strong opposition against British rule by the invisible Ekumeku Movement. The movement which was a strong defence for their people was defeated in 1911 when their leaders were rounded up from different parts of Igboland and imprisoned. Again, the Tiv in the middle belt had onslaught with the British in 1906 when the Tiv refused the British administration the construction of telegraph line to link Lokoja and Ibia. The Tiv believed that by such project their territory would be violated by the British. In spite the superior weapons of the British, the Tiv in demonstrating their strength made use of spears and poisoned arrows (Okafor 1989:346).

It could therefore be argued that the role played by the indigenous institutions in providing security to their people forced the colonial government to start the process of establishing a police force in Nigeria. The process which began in 1861 by a British Consul William Mccoskry was actualised in 1930 with the name Nigeria Police Force (Asenime, 2014:11). Thereafter, the police force became only interested in protecting commercial interest of the colonizer. The persistence of this attitude and other illegalities perpetrated by the Nigeria Police Force existed to the post-colonial period.

While in the new era, Hunsu (2011:7) traced the emergence of community based security organisations in Nigeria to the mid 1980s which came as a result of economic and political crisis during the long period of military rule. As a vital political response to security issues the initial vigilante groups in Nigeria came into existence by the military governors under the administration of General Ibrahim Babangida (Fourchad, 2008:20). Furthermore, in 1984 the Nigeria Police Force under the Inspector General of Police (IGP) Etim Okon Inyang midwife the introduction of Police Community Relation Committee (PCRC) in all State, Area and Divisional Commands across the country. This, Jimam (2015:120) explain that the PCRC represented a shift in Policing and Crime Prevention been initiated following the increase in crime rate. At the centre of the implementation were the traditional rulers who were critical drivers of the origin and transformation of vigilante groups. Nevertheless, since after the establishment of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) in 1999 by Alhaji Ali Sokoto, other indigenous security organisations with various names ranging from diverse regions, states and communities sprang up to complement and assist the state security agencies in the provision of security in Nigeria.

Vigilante Groups and Socio-Economic and Political Development in Nigeria

The high rate of crime in Nigeria gave rise to the establishment of people's oriented security groups to assist the security agencies. Although, it has been strengthened through the formation of neighbourhood watch and vigilante groups as no nation attain development under an insecure situation. As the groups work in collaboration with the police and other security agencies to guarantee security, law, order and stability to members of Nigerian communities, their contributions in various ways has helped in the development of Nigeria (Okorie and Worlu, 2015:122; Aderinto, 2014:62).

In promoting socio-political development in Nigeria, the vigilante groups provide an orderly and secure environment during national assignments like voters registration and elections into various elective positions. When considered the number of policemen posted to each polling unit, achieving a secure environment was quiet difficult, unlike when the vigilante groups were co-opted to assist the police in maintaining law and order during elections (Obeagu, 2014:63). This, Akubor (2014:386) explains that the involvement of the vigilante groups in providing security during elections help to reduce the threat on national integration pursued by the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme of the federal government. He further adds that their complementary efforts could avert a repeat of post-election crisis of 2011 presidential election where seven NYSC members were killed in Bauchi State.

Again, in achieving national development through an improved security, the vigilante groups in demonstrating their efficiency in policing Nigerian communities embarks on regular sensitization and at the same time educate the people on crime and its inherit dangers. Such measures are passed, by advising residents in a given locality to be careful and observant of people in the neighbourhood especially the visitors, persuading residents to promptly report suspects through phone calls or personal visit to the office. In this regard, inhabitants of communities are equally advised on how best to secure their homes. Through this measure, people are acquainted with situations that could result in crime, which in effect impede national development.

Nmba (2019) in his response to the contributions of the local security groups to economic growth, says: “Without security, economic growth in any state or nation remains a mirage”. It is therefore on this premise that protection of lives and property through the efforts of the vigilante groups has been applauded to have done well in detection, investigation, prevention and tracking-down criminals in an attempt to make Nigeria a safe and secure environment attractive to both local and foreign investors. Because of their existing cordial relationship with security agencies, they carry out these functions jointly with the police.

Unemployment as a major cause of poverty constitutes a threat to Nigeria’s nation building. It could be said to be on a decrease through the establishment of Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) as a body to assist the police in the protection of lives and property. As a voluntary organisation which serves as a vehicle in providing security, the group has helped in the recruitment of able-bodied men and women who sustain their livelihood through the scheme. Evidence from field work reveals that all of the states visited have over six hundred (600) members employed by the Vigilante Group of Nigeria.

The vigilante groups in ensuring the development of Nigeria also remains committed in providing security both to private and public property located in any part of the country against vandalism and theft. In their surveillance duty, they protect petroleum pipelines, electrical installations and telecommunication masks (Omowimoi, 2019). Other properties vital to the nation’s economy that are always protected include markets, broadcasting stations, newspaper corporations, industries and companies. Ikpeata (2011:17) in his support narrated the story of an attempted theft of transformer, he said:

The vigilante group in Umuaga in Udi local government area of Enugu state crept to the place, the sound was heard. On getting there, we saw a small lorry packed along the road. Suddenly, we saw four boys working on the new transformer given to the community by the local government chairman. We stepped back and strategized on how to catch them. The ten of us surrounded them and caught three of them while one striped off our hands.

Furthermore, working in synergy with the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency in achieving development in Nigeria, Jafaru (2019) hints that cases of drug trafficking and peddling in the country at present are on a regular check. He drew his emphasis from the metropolitan city of Kano where previously intake of cocaine and other drugs were at optimum rate. By this development, the youths are actively involved in meaningful activities aimed at promoting development in the nation.

Also, in ensuring effective protection of the citizens towards national development, members of the vigilante groups or neighbourhood watch sometimes stand as prosecution witnesses especially on cases emanating from areas of their jurisdiction.

Nevertheless, national integration and unity of Nigerians have been achieved through the practices of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) in their recruitment policies. This is because enlistment of members into the scheme in all states visited is not restricted to state indigenes, but to Nigerians resident in any state of the federation.

However, in spite of their enormous role in promoting socio-economic and political development in Nigeria, there are several criticisms against the activities of the vigilante groups in Nigeria. Most informants were of the view that in course of discharging their duties, they interfere with private matters; such as marital cases and children’s misconduct. To this, they sometimes become more brutal than the Nigerian Police to the extent that suspected persons are overtly maltreated.

Again, as most of the indigenous security outfits in Nigeria uses arms and ammunition in the fight against crime and criminality in the various communities, it is argued that their emergence in Nigeria contributes

greatly to the proliferation of arms in the country. In the event of this, Tangban (2014:386) expressed high rate of mistrust and suspicion among members of the vigilante groups.

Similarly, their use of magical powers in crime detection and investigations without the application of scientific policing attract condemnations against the vigilante groups in achieving their desired goal. It is on this regard that cases of extra-judicial killings have been recorded against some of the informal security organisations in Nigeria.

The Challenges of Vigilante Groups in Nigeria

Security as the responsibility of every person is an idea aimed at promoting effective policing through the support of the citizens by giving information to the police is faced with many challenges hence there are still high prevalence of crime in Nigerian societies. In view of checking crime situations in Nigeria, there emerged the Neighbourhood Watch and vigilante groups whose primary duties are to protect lives and property within our environment. But, upon these efforts, attempt to check crime in our society has suffered a set-back as enumerated below:

The inability of the police to work in unity with the vigilante groups is a foremost challenge of the scheme. Kasali and Odetola (2016:105) explain that as many police officers are used to the traditional form of policing, it remains a difficult task for them to resort to the system which enables partnership and co-operation with the local security outfits. Thus, he opines that the possible changes required to achieve success could be empowerment, problem solving and partnership.

Next is the nature of training. Comparing the training of members of the vigilante groups to that of the police, there is a great difference. This is because police training is rigid and basically restricted to policies, procedures and laws of the country. Moreover, the nature of their training seems to be more of a para-military. In other words this implies that their training is civil oriented which probably may not be useful in fighting criminality in our environment. The worst happens among the vigilante groups who possibly received no professional training but handles a single or double barreled gun in the discharge of their duties. This inefficient training could not effectively help in the control of crimes in the society.

There is also the problem of lack of support from the politicians, traditional rulers, opinion leaders and even the police to the workings of the local security outfits. The experience of Rivers State on 29th November 2018 when the military invaded the neighbourhood training camp at Nowagbam, reveals that the politicians on the opposition party regard the Neighbourhood Watch as a militant wing of the ruling party. It is equally evident that most personalities in our communities exhibit less commitment on the progress of policing their community through the vigilante groups.

Similarly, funding of the vigilante groups for policing our environment is another major challenge that impede efficiency. Most of the vigilante groups are sustained through levies paid by inhabitants or traders under their watch. As a result of poor funding the vigilante groups in Nigeria find it very difficult to provide materials like torch light, lantern and most importantly vehicles for effective patrol and fighting equipment.

Another visible challenge facing the vigilantes in discharging their duties is the fear of intelligence gathering and report from the locals. During field work, Mike (2018) explained that intelligence gathering and report is lacking from most members of the vigilante groups because of fear of being exposed by the police. They also avoid dissemination of information in order to avert attacks from opposing groups or gangs within the communities.

It is also evident that poor road network which hinders easy accessibility to crime prone areas constitute a great challenge to effective security management in Nigeria. This problem, according to Amadi (2018), could be attributed to the lukewarm attitude of the government and as well the multi-nationals on the plight of the citizens.

Furthermore, the attitude of the local, state and federal governments against the welfare of vigilante groups in Nigeria impose a serious threat to their efficiency. During interview with Akpan at Afaha Eket, he revealed that the government, instead of paying the vigilantes, deemed it necessary to pay their political thugs and the “so called repentant militants”. He even cited instances where vigilante members were killed without compensation to the family. He was therefore convinced that risk taking by any informal organisation while protecting lives and property is not guaranteed by the government.

Again, power tussle between the traditional rulers, chairmen of community development committees and the youth leaders constitute a major challenge to the security of our nation through vigilante groups. Under such situation, Wike (2019) posits that disunity among the various community leaders makes it very difficult for any informal security organization to function effectively in the discharge of their duties. However, general lack of policing materials and equipment constitute a serious challenge in achieving the desired goal of community policing in Nigeria. Hence officers in the Nigeria Police Force and other members of the informal policing service charged with responsibilities of providing security lack basic means of communication – walkie-talkie. They are unable to communicate with one another while on duty. Also, as most officers do not have their own means of transportation, it remains very difficult for them to move from one neighbourhood to another.

Similarly, there is the challenge of inadequate policing programmes of the vigilante groups. In reality, Abraham (2018:259) explains that “the operation of local outfits is essentially theoretical without structures, processes and programmes to effect its philosophy and strategy”. Programmes in schools, youth organisations, police athletic league, long vacation or summer camp, youth programmes, anti-cult programmes in schools, anti-gang programmes, anti-drug programmes, and also foot patrol and bicycle patrol to touch every community member is highly weak. In spite of the fact that officers are trained, the arrangement for the programme to liaise with communities are not yet well developed.

The challenge of inadequate structures for inter-agency collaboration and weak inter-agency relations on its own affect effective delivery of policing in our society. Evidently, there are no functional existing structures and programmes that are capable to initiate and consolidate inter-agency synergy except for few emergency joint operations intended to control threat. As there exist a very weak organizational collaboration and absence of interpersonal relations among personnel across organizational formalities, it is therefore inimical to the ideas, plan of actions and requirements of enhancing effective security plans in our communities.

There is also the problem of non-recognition by some state governors which in effect led to the formation of a parallel vigilante groups in the state. This attitude, as explained by Mohammed A. Balla and Ahungwu Samuel, State Commanders of Vigilante Group of Nigeria in Kaduna and Benue States respectively, was to weaken the VGN for their refusal to give political support to the ruling political parties. For example, the governor of Kaduna State Mallam Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai on 20th May, 2016 established a civilian security outfit named “Kaduna State Vigilante Service” under the Kaduna State Law No. 10 of 2016. Similarly, the Benue State Governor Gabriel T. Suswan also established and sponsored the Benue State Vigilante Task Force.

Furthermore, the activities of the *amajiri*'s in northern Nigeria is a major obstacle against the efficiency of community based security. The *amajiri* who because of their social and economic background became beggars. Jafaru (2019), in an interview, asserts that they could not only enter the household solely as beggars, but could also be used as spies for perpetrators of crime. Also, the persistent oppression of the unknown gunmen against the vigilante groups across the Nigeria state has been identified as a major threat against their efficiency in the performance of security duties.

In the course of research, it was discovered that illiteracy also constitutes a serious challenge in achieving effective security through the indigenous security outfits. Experience reveals that most members of the vigilante groups and other security organisations in Nigeria are not educated and therefore cannot equip researchers with security information. In this regard, they are also unable to write their weekly or monthly security reports to their local government area and state commanders.

Measures to Enhance Efficiency in Community Based Security Organisations

Community based security organisations in their collaboration with the formal security agencies in the protection of lives and property is fundamentally centred on the safety and wellbeing of individuals. The mechanism to achieve such obligation in ensuring national security is through intelligence gathering and proactive policing within the neighborhood. It is however in recognition to the challenges that impede the desired purpose for the establishment of vigilante groups in Nigeria since 1908s that the following measures are identified to further strengthen the system.

Firstly, there should be a legislative amendment of the country's constitution to remove security from the exclusive list to allow governors and council chairmen to equally decide on security issues in their various states and local government areas of the federation. This will at the same time enable the state Houses of Assemblies to enact laws that could enable the states form their separate security outfit.

Similarly, the Police Act and Regulation, the Public Service Rules, administrative institutions and any other existing laws, administrative orders and regulations that restrain legitimate dissemination of information for national security intelligence development be revealed in order to enhance the flow of information between the security apparatus and the community (Abraham, 2018:262).

Again, efforts to enhance effective security and policing should focus on the establishment, equipment and operation of Divisional Intelligence Units (DIU) in every police divisions to strengthen intelligence activities that could aid tactical plans and actions in the country. In spite of this, the option to establish an Operational Local Government Joint Intelligence and Security Councils (OLGJISC) to oversee the activities of intelligence within the nation could assist to enthrone effectiveness and efficiency in security management.

As the idea behind community based security is to achieve improved security within Nigeria society, there should be an establishment of more police stations that will cut-across at least all political wards in the country. According to Jafaru (2019) such development will foster closeness between the police and the vigilante groups in combating crime.

Furthermore, to enhance efficiency in the protection of lives and property through non-state security providers, Kwala (2013) advocates for the integration of vigilante groups into the national security architecture. Adherence to this is very significant based on the critical role they demonstrate in crime fighting, following the inability of the police to effectively protect the citizens. On this regard, the conditions for the recruitment of volunteers into the non-state security outfit should have a standard procedure and a code of conduct capable of regulating their actions and activities as security officers (Mohammed, 2013).

Also, as Arase and Iwuofor (2007:296) identified 'Hi-tech crime' otherwise referred to as computer and cyber crime, effectiveness of community based policing in Nigeria should embrace technological based policing. Such method, which include the use of Circuit Camera Television (CCTV) and tracking devices for security management should be extended to all communities in the country.

Considering cultism as a push or force to perpetrators of crime in Nigeria society, it implies that there is need to establish a functional counter-cultism groups and counter-drug abuse groups in our institutions at all levels, and as well the corporate organisations. This action plan will not only check insecurity as explained by Okeke (2006:265), but will also breed a new generation of people with sense of maximum security

awareness, anti-cult and anti-drug culture. As schools and communities are training ground for criminals and hoodlums, there should be Schools and Community Security Cadets Corps (SCSCC) established in all schools and communities in partnership with all informal and formal security agencies or organisations charged with the task of providing security. By this, all schools, universities and communities will have some members of the security outfit posted for proactive policing activities.

Furthermore, as people demonstrate commitment, love and dedication to duties in their places of work because of its financial benefit, it should therefore be reasonable for all tiers of government to payroll all members of the vigilante working under their areas of concern. This idea when implemented will make crime fighting by the vigilante groups and other security outfits more effective and efficient as it operates in Lagos and Kogi States.

In the course of this study, it was discovered that Muslims in northern Nigeria operate an Islamic religious vigilante known as the “Hisba” who check immorality as a requirement to achieve improved security in the society. So, among the faithful Christians in Nigeria, such similar security outfit should be instituted to also monitor the behaviour of Christians in the neighbourhood. This is necessary because a disciplined and morally sound individual could contribute enormously to achieve security within his nation.

In addition to community and neighbourhood vigilante groups, effective security provision could be enhanced through the establishment of “Community Road Safety Corps (CRSC). Achieving this in relation to community policing, members of the corps are to partner with road safety workers, the road transport workers, and community road safety volunteers. They will also organise seminars and workshops based on the importance of security on highways and possible defensive driving in course of emergencies (Abraham, 2018:269).

Conclusion

The activities of the vigilante groups in assisting the security agencies in security management has helped in the reduction of all forms of crime and criminality in Nigeria. Their roles in national development are demonstrated in the areas of employment, providing a peaceful and secured environment during national events. Despite the problems of inability of the Nigeria police to work in unity with the vigilante groups, inadequate training, lack of funding and political interference which affect their efficiency, the study among other things call on all tiers of government, politicians and private organization as to adequately support the vigilante groups as partners in Nigeria’s security management.

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