SDN

A proposed model for disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of cult gang members in the Niger Delta

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

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This report is dedicated to individuals and organisations implementing projects to address cultism in the Niger Delta. We hope that the reflections, while sobering, show encouraging progress and potential.

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Executive summary

Introduction

This report outlines a model for a multi-stakeholder approach to address cult gang activity in the Niger Delta, based on the practical lessons learned by implementers of other initiatives. It seeks to address the urgent need for a strategic government-led response, to stem the devastating trajectory of cultism.

The alarming rise of the cultism phenomenon is the major security concern for people living in the region, SDN's surveys consistently confirm. Cultism is evolving and escalating, coalescing with other illicit activities, such as kidnapping, sea piracy, and the artisanal oil industry. The death-toll is also rising—in 2019, more than 13 murders per week were attributed to cult clashes, with an even higher murder rate recorded so far in 2020.

The Government of Nigeria can develop this model into a strategic implementation framework to decrease the number of active individuals within cult gangs, prevent new entrants, repair fragmented communities, and ultimately reduce the negative socioeconomic impacts of cultism.

Approach

Government and non-government interventions to address cultism over the years were discussed and analysed in workshops with implementers and conflict experts to assess lessons for future programmes. This included field visits to a number of active programmes to discuss with staff and beneficiaries. Conventional disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes were also analysed, to establish the relevance of adopting this strategy to address cult gangs, and to highlight the differences where adaptations are needed.

A working group of experts and experienced implementers designed a strategic model, which was validated by a broader group, and the output is outlined in this report, with a framework for the Government of Nigeria to design an implementation strategy to scale this up across the Niger Delta.

The evolution of cultism

The evolution of the first university fraternities in the 1950s to the cult gangs of today was influenced by a number of political and societal factors. In the late 1980s, university campuses were at the epicentre of opposition movements to the military government, which fraternities were co-opted to disrupt.

Throughout the 1990s, society was increasingly militarised and restricted, and peaceful movements for change were failing—underscoring the perceived need to escalate violent opposition. Under greater scrutiny on campus, cult groups branched into cities to increase numbers.

With the onset of democracy in 1999, politicians mobilised cult groups in campaigns and elections, for security, intimidation, and to influence polls—a role they continue to play to date, particularly in Niger Delta

states. In the 2000s, breakaway groups morphed into the militant groups attacking the oil and gas industry, laying the foundation for their spread in riverine areas and transition into illicit activities.

Recent trends

- Increased geographic spread: there are thousands of groups and cells active across cities and communities in every state of the Niger Delta.
- Increased fatalities: cult-related incidents now result in more deaths per incident and year
- Increased atrocities: killings are increasingly gruesome, such as gang rape, beheadings, removal of private parts, and ritual uses for all of the above.
- Expanded recruitment: including in secondary schools by members and teachers. Membership now spans class, age, and gender.
- Expanded female involvement: from support services to active membership within male-dominated groups, and also spawning their own groups and affiliates.
- Enmeshed in criminality: profiteering off endless crimes including kidnapping, armed robbery, illegal taxation and protection rackets, internet fraud, the artisanal oil industry, sea robbery and piracy, and the trafficking of weapons, drugs, and people.

Government initiatives to curb cultism in the Niger Delta

Legislative: At the federal level, cult groups are classified as secret societies, and prohibited under the constitution. Each State in the Niger Delta has enacted legislation along similar lines, empowering the courts to prosecute suspects and convict them with varying penalties—including the death sentence. These have been amended several times over the years, but tend to lack enforcement.

Security: Each State has established various anti-cult units—some within the police, some as joint task forces between agencies, and others empowering local vigilante groups. These are criticised for cross-cutting mandates, political grandstanding, and also accused of empowering select cult groups over others as a reward for support, and as a shortcut to local security provision.

Political: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Rivers states declared amnesties and disarmament initiatives specifically for repentant cult group members. These however have a poor record in reintegration—lacking a process of reconciliation, reinsertion, and retraining. Because of this, and based on the timing, states have been accused of using amnesties to absolve cult members of their crimes, following their support in elections. Simultaneously, this has incentivised violence by rewarding criminality.

Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration: The Federal Government has implemented the Presidential Amnesty Programme since 2010 across all nine states of the Niger Delta. While this primarily targets militants threatening oil and gas infrastructure, many beneficiaries are cultists, or are members of militant groups that evolved from cult groups. Following disarmament, beneficiaries entered reorientation camps, followed by formal education or vocational training, and then livelihood start-up support or job placements. Many have become financially dependent on the programme, and it has failed to deliver on reintegration.

Analysis: With the political, legislative, logistical, and financial resources made available, these initiatives should have fared better. However, the absence of strategy and enforcement has weakened implementation. The fact members of cult gangs pervade security agencies, political offices, and the judiciary has further undermined efforts. Consequently, initiatives are not sustained and there is no data to track performance. Opportunities exist for politicians to act on a top priority issue for citizens. Civil society experience can be built upon, and draw on different ministries for a holistic approach, and partner with neighbouring states on a shared issue. Interventions may be dropped or diverted between administrations, but outright failure to act will threaten education, economy, security, and stabilisation.

Non-government initiatives to curb cultism in the Niger Delta

Faith-based repentance: Numerous initiatives used repentance and reformed behaviour curricula based on bible teachings, which resonated within a society equating cultism with the devil. This created common ground with the communities they were returning to, and dismantled stigmas. Existing networks of churches within cities and communities were utilised to give initiatives a wide reach, and started at a high level of trust relative to representatives of government and security agencies. Initiatives recorded a high level of success demobilising cultists, and good results on reintegration. However, limited experience of priests and pastors in psycho-social elements of reintegration raises 'do no harm' concerns, and a lack of expertise in job creation means vital economic reintegration was lacking. Initiatives were concentrated in Rivers State, and similar initiatives were working with different groups, including those recently released from prison, or recovering from drug addiction. This strengthens the collective pool of experience in Rivers State for future initiatives to build upon.

Community-level reintegration: Roles were designated to a range of community members to identify and approach cultists, design interventions, mobilise the community, and disseminate information. This proved essential to build confidence, buy in of stakeholders, get messages across effectively, and to reinforce trust and transparency. Approaches that integrated this factor harnessed locals as volunteers, and witnessed a reduction in reprisal attacks on rehabilitated cultists. However, in return for their role, they often expected payments, and involvement heightened the risk of reprisal against community members. Initiatives using this approach were active in Rivers and Delta states.

Specialised rehabilitation centres: Initiatives that have specialised facilities performed best in dealing with deep-rooted issues such as drug addiction and psychological trauma, by rebuilding self-worth through empathy and spiritual approaches. They were also good for taking cultists out of their normal environment—removing push and pull factors that undermine rehabilitation—and could also accommodate those coming out of prison. Yet it is expensive to sustain, and the lack of transition facilities (half-way houses) stunted the potential of this approach to successfully reinsert repentant cultists and ex-offenders. Initiatives using this approach were active in Bayelsa, Rivers, Benue, Enugu, Kano, Lagos and Plateau states.

Economic reintegration: Various approaches were taken, including the provision of starter-packs in several trades (including barbering and mobile phone repairs), training in agricultural business skills, and training in photography and cinematography. The data on the impact of economic support provides mixed results (e.g. many businesses collapsed after three months, and those not receiving support won more people out of cultism). But anecdotally, it is an essential factor in sustaining reintegration in the long term. Practically,

those trained faced difficulties securing jobs, while those receiving starter-packs often sold their tools and abandoned businesses. It can also lead to clashes if all beneficiaries cannot be reached. An initiative using this approach was active in Delta State.

Security collaboration: Structures were established to formalise intelligence gathering and sharing between the police and citizens in the target area, supplemented by engagements and sensitisation visits. This led to increased information flowing to security agents, trust between agencies and citizens, and reduced the rate and frequency of cult clashes. This was most effective as part of a multi-stakeholder effort (i.e. with community leaders). However, with limited time, trust barriers could not be completely dismantled, and results were short-lived as destructive approaches towards cult groups, such as superficial intelligence gathering and arrests, could not be permanently changed. An initiative using this approach was active in Delta State.

Sensitisation: Interventions commonly included an element of civic education and sensitisation on the dangers of entering cultism, as well as the need to forgive and accept repentant cultists. Various methods include radio discussions, town hall meetings, football tournaments, and peace clubs in vulnerable schools. This is a vital element to improve understanding of the issue, dismantle stigmas, prevent new entrants, and foster nurturing environments for repentance—but sensitisation is not enough to achieve results by itself. Initiatives using this approach were active in Rivers and Delta states.

Analysis: Non-government initiatives benefited from an elevated level of trust and relationship with communities, and understanding of the complexity of the operating context and drivers of cultism. Programmes were resourceful, drawing on the dedication of staff and volunteers to work in challenging environments without large budgets, and in areas where they do not have expertise such as psycho-social support. However, in some cases this risks doing more harm than they prevent, and makes staff vulnerable to reprisal. Similar to government initiatives, there was a lack of data collection and management to track the impact of interventions. If opportunities to collaborate with government can be agreed, there are capacities and experiences to build on, to turn promising approaches into longer term programmes that allow reintegration to be achieved and measured.

Comparison with conventional DDR programmes

Permissive environment: DDR presumes a comprehensive peace agreement between a small number of groups, and cessation of hostilities prior to starting. However, in the case of cultism, there are so many battle fronts that commencement of interventions will not depend on the cessation of violence.

Combatant posture: DDR presumes combatants are largely a collection of non-state armed groups fighting against state security forces, with a political or ideological framing. Cult groups are bereft of such ideology, and are largely motivated by commercial or territorial purposes, as well as political power or relevance.

Gender considerations: DDR programmes have typically failed to integrate gender into programme design and implementation. Cultism includes a range of roles for women, as well as a number of groups that are exclusively for women. Therefore, the approach must recognise these roles, as well as the potential roles they can play in the DDR process.

Absence of programming for local communities: In practice, DDR programmes tend to focus on the combatants at the expense of the communities within which they are expected to be reintegrated. However, UN standards recommend linking reintegration to wider recovery and development. As a starting point, the psychological and economic limits of communities need to be identified so interventions can design strategies and include resources to build capacity in these areas.

Politicising and incentivising of criminality: Past DDR approaches in the Niger Delta have monetised participation—increasing the number of opportunistic non-cultists enrolled. This needs to be deemphasised to avoid a bloated system that risks missing target groups. Practically, DDR should be improved to include non-combatants too.

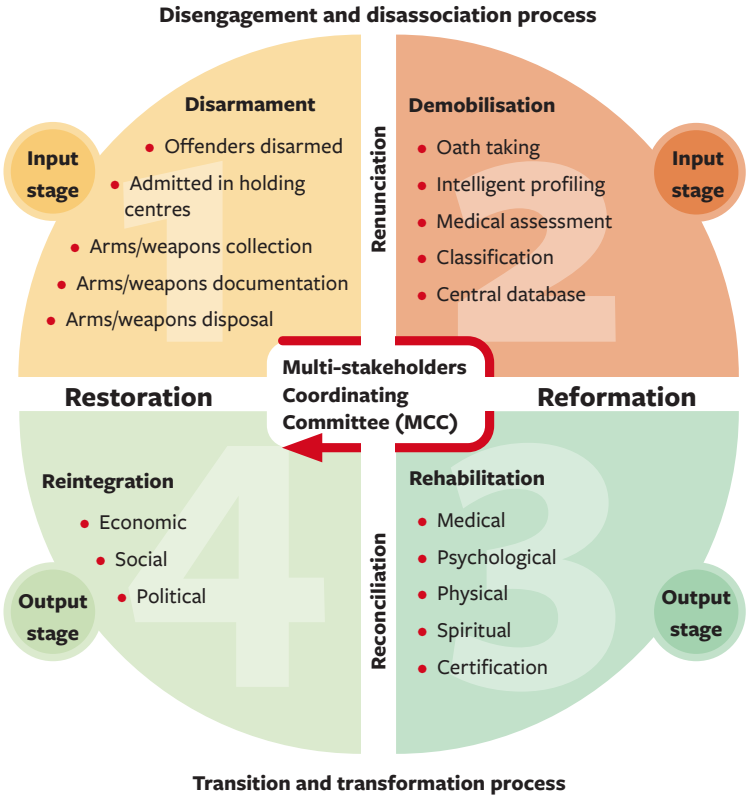
Proposed model of DDRR for repentant cultists

The model is a quartet of interconnected processes and activities designed to deliver comprehensive transformation of the offender and facilitate genuine community reception.

Preparation activities

Community engagement, sensitisation, context analysis, and stakeholder mapping will define the programme parameters, including the eligibility criteria. An independent coordinating structure will be established with three committees: (1) Technical (2) Oversight, and (3) Monitoring, evaluation and learning. These will guide implementation.

Figure 1: Proposed DDRR model to curb cultism in the Niger Delta



1 Disarmament programming

Two components will be implemented: (1) physical to remove arms, and (2) psychological to unhook harmful cognitive attachments to violence. A secure facility will be established, where arms are collected, and offenders admitted to holding centres for assessment and profiling. This will be linked to the Office of National Security Advisor for proper disposal of weapons.

2 Demobilisation programming

Further detailed screening, registration and profiling will be followed by comprehensive medical and psychological assessments. Dialogue and reflection start in this phase, leading to renunciation, amnesty, and pledges to the process. Thorough data is collected to identify the type of psychosocial and economic support required, and improve the ability to track and analyse progress made.

3 Rehabilitation programming

This step has been added based on the extreme psychological, social, and health issues among cultists. Bespoke services will be delivered by diverse experts, depending on the diagnosis—whether medical, psychosocial, or spiritual. It will include re-orientation of values, and reconciliation between members, rivals, and family and community members. It can thus be viewed as a period of healing. This step will help to prepare the individual for the reintegration process, and maximise potential for success. For individuals still vulnerable after rehabilitation, there should be referrals to transitional facilities.

4 Reintegration programming

Community needs and absorption capacity assessments should be done before re-entry of ex-offenders, to define the reintegration sequencing. In terms of economic reintegration, this would identify the facilities required, depending on the range of suitable options, such as basic and higher education, vocational training, economic starter-kits or internships, and apprentices. Social reintegration activities will include trust-building with families and the wider community, and the establishment of new associations for community service.

Principles of the multi-stakeholder model

Primacy: Centrality of government to provide the legal, political, and security backing for the programme, without being politically driven.

Inclusivity: Non-discrimination and equitable treatment in design and implementation, for all groups, whether perpetrators, victims, women, or people living with disabilities.

Acceptance: Communities, employers, and society writ large must be willing and able to accept ex-combatants for the programme to be possible.

Partnership: A diversity of people will play unique roles, and collaboration is important to sustain the process over the long and complex path ahead. This will help address economic, social, psychological, political, security, and humanitarian dimensions.

Coordination: A concerted framework will provide strategy, approaches, and organisation for the collaborating actors from start to finish.

Independence: The structure will be trusted by all parties, and be independent but authorised by the government, to insulate the process from political manipulation and financial corruption.

Conclusion

The frequency and intensity with which cultism is spreading in the region requires a rapid and flexible response, that draws on the capacity and experience of different stakeholders.

This report starts this process, by outlining an integrated model that can be used by the Government of Nigeria as the foundation to developing a framework for implementation.

From left: Pax Viva representative, Police Public Relation Officer of Bayelsa State, & Dandyson of SDN. Location: police headquarters in Bayelsa State.

SDN met with a range of implementers, to find out their strategies and approaches towards curbing cultism. Findings from these meetings fed into the model proposed in this report.

SDN team, Pax Viva, the head of Bayelsa State Vigilante Service and some members of their team. Location: Bayelsa State Vigilante office.

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Introduction

This report outlines a model for a multi-stakeholder approach to address cult gang activity in the Niger Delta, based on the practical lessons learned by implementers of other initiatives.

The alarming rise of the cultism phenomenon over the last decade is a cause of growing concern. Negative political, economic, security, social, and psychological impacts continue to worsen across society, and cultism has become increasingly fatal, with clashes leading to 13 deaths per week in 2019, and an even higher rate during the first quarter of 2020.[1]

This has led to various interventions by government officials, security agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community leaders, civil society organisations (CSOs), development actors, and faith-based organisations (FBOs), among others.

Yet despite these efforts, all indications are that cultism is evolving and escalating, coalescing with other illicit activities, such as kidnapping and sea piracy, and fuelling many drivers of insecurity. Public surveys consistently identify cultism as the biggest threat to wellbeing and stabilisation across the region.[2]

Against this backdrop, Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN) embarked on a process of engaging a diverse mix of experts—including implementers of cult gang projects, repentant cultists, academics, and government officials—with the objective of analysing past approaches, and outlining the most effective ways to address the phenomenon. This culminated with workshops in 2019 and 2020, where experiences and ideas were shared on rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for repentant cultists in the region, highlighting the successes and challenges encountered.

A think-tank of experts and implementers used information from the workshops convened by SDN to develop the comprehensive model outlined in this document, centred on a disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) process for ex-cultists in the Niger Delta, to inform the future design of a strategic framework for interventions.

This report discusses theories of cultism and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) to establish terms, and the relevance of this approach. It then presents a brief overview of cultism in the region, recent trends, and establishes the justification for action. The report then examines some of the state-led efforts to deal with the menace of cultism in the region, then the contribution of non-State efforts encountered during this process, finishing by outlining the lessons learned from these approaches. A comparison is drawn between the task of addressing cultism and conventional DDR approaches, to identify adaptations required, then builds on this by outlining the principles and purpose of the approach. This then leads to an overview of the interconnected components of the model, drawing on the evidence and lessons gathered throughout the process, as well as considerations for mapping stakeholders and risks. Finally, this report concludes with some remarks and recommendations for uptake by the government of Nigeria.

The problem of cultism in the Niger Delta and justification for action

1. Brief epistemic and conceptual foundations

1.1 Cultism

From a sociological point of view, a cult has been defined as "a set of practices and beliefs of a group in relation to a local god" with "a small group of religious activists whose beliefs are typically secrete, esoteric and individualistic".[3] The original meaning of the word is thus related to religion; an act of worship or religious ceremony.

Indeed, Pemede and Viavonu, define cultism as "the formation of a group of initiates or adherent round the figure of a god, a saint or even a living being".[4] However, contemporary understandings of cults in the Niger Delta go beyond this, and do not depend on the involvement of religion.[5] As Ogunade elaborates, cultism is less concerned with religious ceremony for spiritual purposes, and instead uses exclusive sacred symbols, such as oaths of allegiance and pagan deities, as instruments to forge strong bonds among members, and devotion to a cause.[6]

In reality, as noted by Davis and Kemedi, the operational strategies of cult groups are "often less focused and bereft of political ideals or pretences", and instead these groups, "are armed networks of cells, with hierarchical authority structures"[7]. According to Peterside, cult groups "operating in the Niger Delta fall into three basic categories along a spectrum, ranging from poorly organized, disjointed, and motivated by greed, to highly organized, coordinated, and motivated by 'commodification of violence'".[8]

Membership of these groups cuts across gender and status; meaning that the group could have members that include both men and women, or sustain a wing reserved for a particular gender. The presence, reach, and influence extends into universities, schools (secondary and primary), cities, towns, neighbourhoods, communities, and villages. Membership spans across society and classes, from those living and working on the streets, to those working in security agencies and holding political office (allegedly at all levels).

These groups adopt clandestine methods in their recruitment drive, often culminating in an initiation exercise for the newcomers as formal rite of passage into full membership. Such initiation rites may or may not involve physical and psychological violence or symbolic engagements that have esoteric, spiritual, or religious connotations. The symbolic activity may be consummated in the sprinkling or drinking of a substance, usually blood—from an animal or human being—to serve as a bonding sinew for members.

A loose consensus has emerged, based on the above, that these associations assume different names, sizes, configurations, and operational reach, but largely:

- Are a collective of people whose existence and activities are unlawful.
- Hold certain secrets that are unknown to non-members.
- Share common beliefs, interests, signs, symbols, and language.

- Maintain an oath of allegiance and code of conduct.
- Are prepared to act as a unit to preserve their interest or respond to perceived enemies or rivals.[9]

For the purposes of this report and model, cultism is defined as an unlawful social practice by members of a group that is not registered as a lawful association, and whose admission policy, initiation formalities, and mode of operations are done in secret and kept secret, although some other aspects of its activities could be conducted openly, violently, with negative effects on both members and non-members alike. In this model, the terms 'repentant cultists' and 'ex-cultists' are used interchangeably to accommodate possible situations where enrolees for the DDRR programme may either be former cult member who willingly renounced membership of his or her group (repentant) or a cult member who upon arrest by authorities or security forces are profiled to undergo through the programme.

1.2 Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration

The idea of DDR of former fighters in the aftermath of conflict is as old as war itself, but it is a practice that has gained increasing recognition and application by global, regional, and national entities—especially since the 1980s. For all the attention that the concept has received, varying definitions of DDR exist. It is generally understood as a cluster of post-conflict interventions that are focused on removing arms, neutralising combatants, reintegrating ex-combatants into the armed forces or civilian life, and preventing a return to armed conflict.[10]

Disarmament is the collection, documentation, control, and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives, and light and heavy weapons of combatants—and often also of the civilian population. Disarmament also includes the development of responsible arms management programmes.

Demobilisation is the formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces or other armed groups. The first stage of demobilisation may extend from the processing of individual combatants in temporary centres to the massing of troops in camps designated for this purpose (cantonment sites, encampments, assembly areas, or barracks). The second stage of demobilisation encompasses the support package provided to the demobilised, which is called reinsertion.

Reinsertion, which is primarily a part of the demobilisation phase, is the assistance offered to ex-combatants during demobilisation but prior to the longer-term process of reintegration. Reinsertion is a form of transitional assistance to help cover the basic needs of ex-combatants and their families, and can include transitional safety allowances, food, clothes, shelter, medical services, short-term education, training, employment, and tools. While reintegration is a long-term, continuous social and economic process of development, reinsertion is short-term material and/or financial assistance to meet immediate needs, and can last up to one year.

Reintegration is the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time-frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and a national responsibility, and often necessitates long-term external assistance.

Figure 2: Definition of DDR by the United Nations [11]

The definition used by the United Nations (UN) is perhaps the most popular, and is adopted for this report (see figure 1). DDR has become a key component of the UN's efforts to build peace in the aftermath of war since it supported its first process in Central America in 1990. It is now a core programmatic area of their work, codified through a dedicated set of principles, practices, and policy guidance.

The relevant international standards are laid out in a volume called the International Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration Standard (IDDRS). The IDDRS was created and is updated by the UN Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG) on DDR. The latest version of the IDDRS was launched on 19 November 2019.[12] First published in 2006, the IDDRS have undergone many reviews, especially over the past two years against the backdrop of the evolving nature and understanding of conflict, and the need to align the design and implementation of DDR processes with other frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative.

The adoption of DDR has expanded over the years such that between the late 1980s and 2008, more than 60 DDR programmes were initiated, with approximately two-thirds implemented in Africa.[13] The numbers have increased since then, given the outbreak of violent conflicts and the traction the approach has gained in the international development and donor community.

The objective of the DDR process is to contribute to security and stability in post-conflict environments. It acknowledges that this is a complex process with political, military, security, humanitarian, and socioeconomic dimensions. DDR should therefore be planned and closely coordinated as part of broad post-conflict stabilisation interventions, and political and reconstruction efforts, that seek longer-term stability and sustained peace.[14] Meanwhile, the changing landscape of violent armed conflicts such as civil war, militancy, insurgency, and terrorism, among others, has informed the design and delivery of DDR for ex-combatants. Scholars and practitioners therefore maintain that DDR programmes must be adapted to each context, since context and actors differ according to the nature, duration and causes of violent conflicts, and armed actors generally described as 'combatants' can assume different qualifications as state forces, rebels, insurgents, terrorists, militants, and cultists, among others.

Consequently, the diversity of context and actors have occasioned the explosion of different acronyms that combine 'D's, and 'R's as a framework for post-conflict stabilisation. Hence, in scholarship, policy, and practice, it is common to see such interventions framed in various configurations, including: Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration; Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration; Disengagement, Deradicalisation and Reintegration; Deradicalisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration; and Demobilisation, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation.[15] Indeed, the range of activities that now fall under the heading of DDR underscore that its scope is far from a merely technical, sequenced intervention.[16]

In the case of cult groups in the Niger Delta, the subjection of members to some form of spiritual and psychological orientation, their growing use of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), and involvement in deadly criminal activities, indicate that amnesty initiatives with DDR components, are appropriate. Critics have however warned that the 'amnesty approach' being popularised by political leaders tends to make criminality attractive.[17] Herein lies the need for a well-thought out model of DDR for ex-cultists that is fit for purpose in the Niger Delta in order to avoid incentivising criminality and perpetuating cultism.

2. Overview and trajectories of cultism in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta in general, and Rivers State in particular, has been a hotbed of cultism for several years. Its nature, trends, effects, and possible future trajectory make the threat particularly concerning. The details of this evolution are well documented elsewhere,[18] so this section does not seek to replicate this, but instead provides a brief overview of the evolution to highlight the immediacy of recent trajectories.

2.1 Brief overview of evolution

The origin of cult groups is traced to the formation of university confraternities between the 1950s-1980s, where they were largely peaceful forums for intellectual debate and mobilisation on issues such as independence, Pan-Africanism, human and labour rights, and democratisation.

From the late 1980's to the mid-1990's, however, a wave of violent transformation occurred. This started when fraternities were used by the military government to disrupt the activities of university staff and student unions, who were seen as the major organised opposition to military rule. The groups were provided with money, motivation, and sometimes weapons, to use against opposition groups, which helped fuel deadly inter-confraternity rivalries.

Set against the backdrop of the broader militarisation of government and society, there was increased apathy towards the idea that peaceful methods of advocacy could yield results. Thus, the increasing violence between confraternities, and more broadly, within society, led many confraternities to evolve into what has become the cult groups of today.[19] During this period, the groups gradually expanded to the streets and towns to expand recruitment. This move off campus was accelerated in 1999 by a Presidential order to universities, ordering them to eliminate cultism on campus within six months.[20]

In the emergent democratic setting (1999-present), politicians employed the cult gangs as a tool to confront and intimidate opposing groups in the region. Wealthy political patrons emerged as cult 'Godfathers', providing money and weapons to such groups during election seasons for intimidation and thuggery. With money and weapons made available to them, most became increasingly predatory and violent, and in the Niger Delta were the precursor to, or dissolved into, various militant groups, such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), in the peak of militancy between 2002-2009.

In the amnesty era (2010-present), many of the cult groups maintain links with wealthy political patrons, cult godfathers, and erstwhile militant leaders. It is equally pertinent to note that most cult groups have sponsored street-based offshoots without any connection to university campuses to bolster their reach.

Possibly the most common activity of cult groups in the present day is the provision of vigilante or informal security services in civic, commercial, or transport hubs, either employed by a local authority, individual, or enforced as part of a protection racket. Other activities include kidnapping and armed robbery, artisanal oil industry involvement, political thuggery (i.e. intimidation, vote rigging, and assassinations), arms, human, and drugs trafficking, internet and financial fraud, and—increasingly—sea piracy and robbery.

The proliferation of SALWs in the Niger Delta, whether crude or sophisticated, enables them to deploy violence in their operations when targeting real or perceived enemies or rivals. Their actions and members are therefore frequently linked with murder, arson, and rape—and clearly undermine security and stability.

2.2 Recent trends

In the 1990s and 2000s, cult gang violence was a problem that was particularly pronounced in Rivers State, especially in Port Harcourt and a few other towns, and violent clashes were usually between rival groups, such as Deebam vs Deywell or Greenlanders vs Icelanders. However, while Rivers State maintains the highest rate of incidents, high numbers of cult-related incidents and deaths are now recorded every year in each of the nine Niger Delta states.

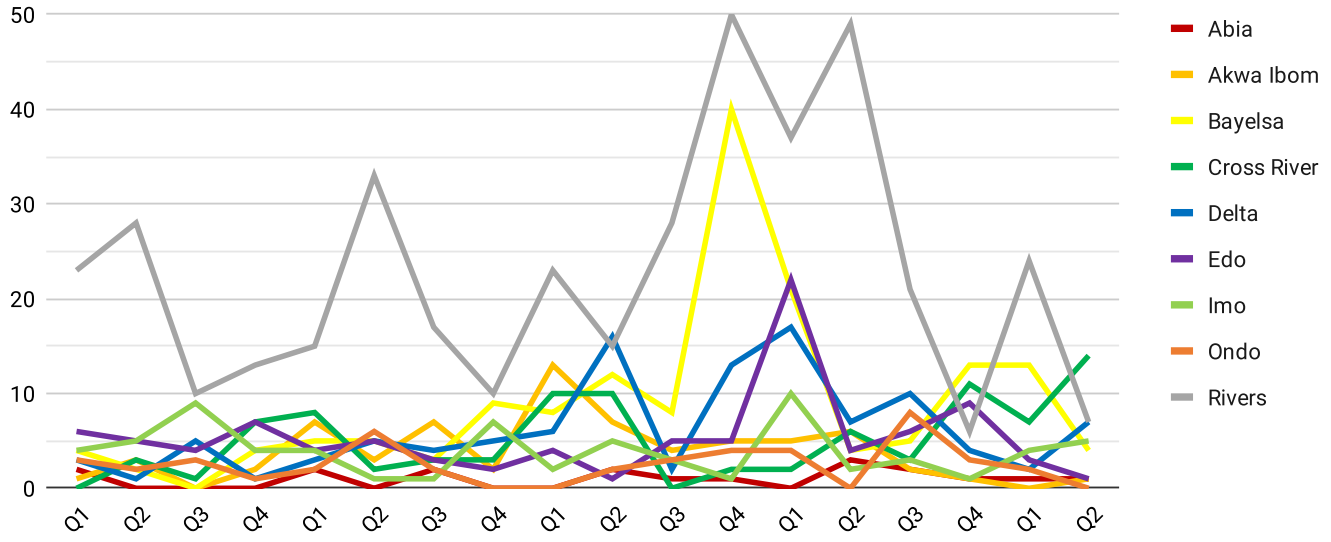

Figure 3: Cult-related incidents in the Niger Delta Q1 2016—Q2 2020. Source data P4P 2020.[21]

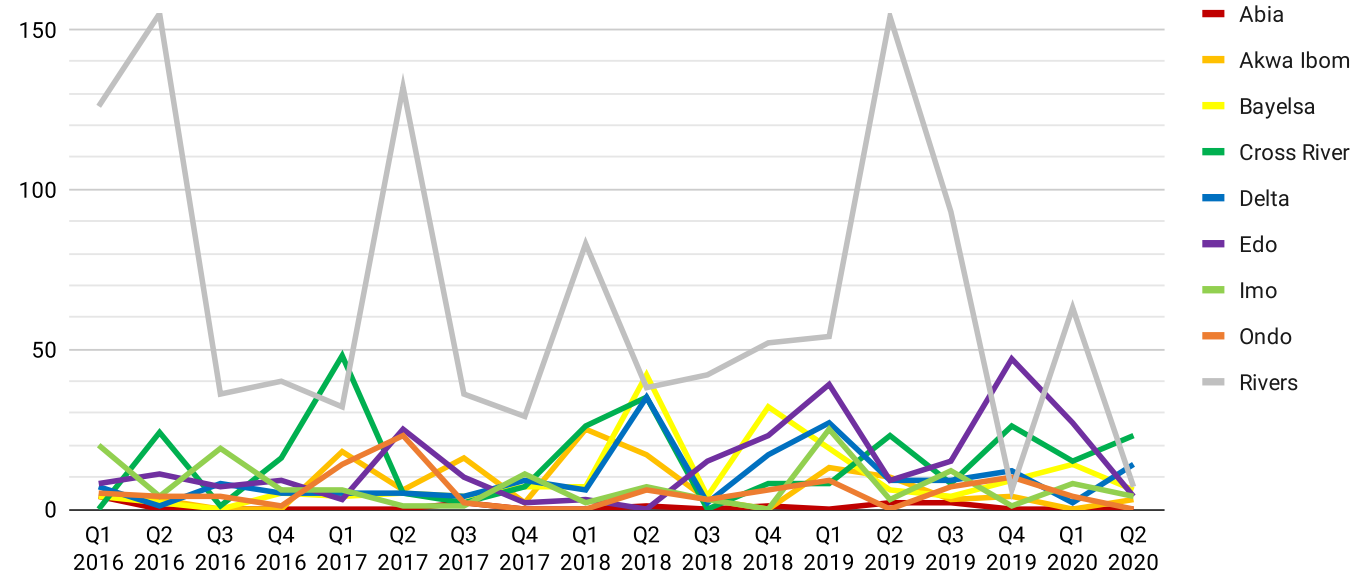

Figure 4: Cult related deaths in the Niger Delta Q1 2016—Q2 2020. Source data P4P 2020[22]

2 The total number of incidents across the states is increasing year on year, as well as the number of fatalities as a result of cult-related incidents. Available data indicates that the number of incidents per year increased by 85% between 2016 and 2019, and the number of deaths increased by 25% during the same period. Clashes are regularly deadly, reaching heights of over 20, for example, on January 1st 2018, 22 persons were shot outside a church in Rivers State.[23]

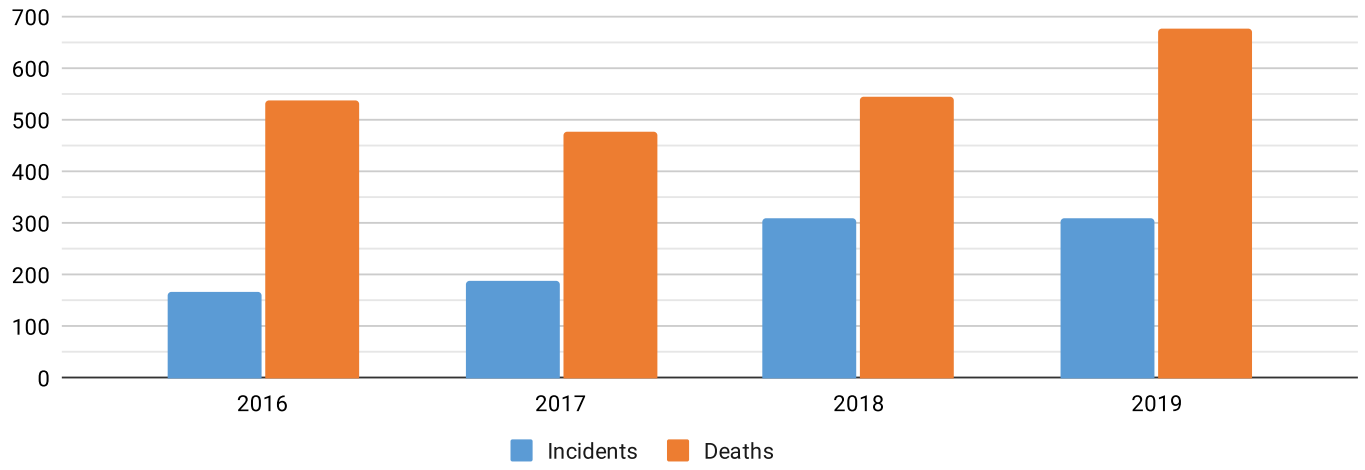

Figure 5: Cult related incidents and deaths in the Niger Delta 2016—2019. Source data P4P 2020[24]

3 Observers note that killings are increasingly atrocious, in the form of decapitation and dismemberment of victims, as part of, or for use in, occult rituals. In April 2019, for example, armed cult members beheaded four people in Omuoko-Aluu, Ikwerre LGA, and killed three other people across Port Harcourt, and Obio/Akpor and Emohua LGAs.[25] An incident of more savage and gory nature occurred in Port Harcourt in July 2019 when a group of cultists beheaded a man and ordered his wife to carry the severed head in a bowl into their waiting car.[26] The evolving gruesome dimension of killings offers a glimpse into the nefarious modus operandi of these groups. Factors such as the proliferation of arms, easy access to hard drugs, desire for rise through leadership positions within the group, and demand for human parts by organ traffickers or cult priests, are some of the factors that fuel this evolving trend.

4 Recruitment approaches are expanding. In the past, the bulk of cult members were mainly university students that were affiliated to known fraternities, or the homeless. With time, it expanded to include many school dropouts and unemployed youths. However, there is growing concern over an emerging trend that involves the recruitment of secondary school pupils, which needs to be prevented to avoid the seeding of a new generation of violent actors in the region.

5 Female cult groups are growing and expanding, such as Daughters of Jezebel, Black Brazier, White Angels, Viqueens, Damsels, Sisters of Darkness, and Pink Ladies, among numerous others. Until recently, female cultists started as friends to male cult members, or played support roles such as informants, couriers of drugs and weapons, and cooks.

6 Cultism is feeding into other, wider, patterns of crimes like armed robbery, kidnapping, drug peddling, assassination, human trafficking, rape, the artisanal oil industry, sea piracy, and political violence, which creates a complex security environment in the region. Membership is not

necessarily a cause, but is certainly an enabler. The widespread circulation of SALWs empower cultists to engage in all forms of criminal enterprise, underpinned by varying motivations and a permissive environment.

The nexus between cultists and political actors is becoming stronger. Since 1999, political actors in the region have either employed cult groups as informal security or used them to intimidate or kill their opponents, especially during elections.[27] As politicians increasingly support cult groups in pursuit of their political interests, cultists are, in turn, demanding a range of favours from politicians, including access, resources, contracts, and political or security service positions (formal or informal). This underpins the emergence of politico-criminal interdependency that is being euphemistically described as the 'system' in the Niger Delta.

2.3 Factors sustaining participation and membership

The reason why people join violent cult groups are as many and varied as the multiple groups with different nomenclature and operational reach in the region. While it is believed that primary school pupils mainly join cult groups due to peer pressure, the adults are known to join cult groups due to desire for protection, respect accorded to leaders, and quest to control economic and political spaces. Indeed, personal engagement in cultism varies widely among its membership.

Overall, studies and ideas harnessed from the process have established the main causative factors as economic, social, political, and psychological in nature, which cut across broad demographic and geographic areas. Broadly, the reasons why young people join cult groups include desire for power, crave for supremacy, sense of belonging, desire for protection, search for responsibility, peer pressure, feeling of inferiority, frustration, protection from—or revenge against—ill-treatment, and quest for other benefits.

Research assistant deploying questionnaires as part of a monitoring and evaluation exercise

2.4 Justification for an intervention to curb cultism

The efforts of both state and non-state actors to contain the spread of cultism are failing. There are several reasons why designing and implementing a robust DDR model targeting cultism is still imperative. These include, among others:

- **Escalating spread**: There is worrisome expansion of cultism both horizontally (across geographic space—street, communities, towns, and cities in the region) and vertically (rapid expansion in membership across different ages—adults, young people, teenagers, and children). The large number of persons believed to be cultists as well as the targeting of primary school pupils for recruitment is certainly an alarming trend that needs to be stopped to mitigate a culture of violence.
- **Political connection**: Many observers believe that cult clashes increase and intensify during, and shortly after, election periods, as many cult groups depend on the patronage and support of politicians, who use them to further their own interest. These "influential public figures are the unseen faces that provide the funds used to acquire arms and support the egregious lifestyle of this band of social misfits".[28] The persistence of this politico-criminal bond has serious implications for electoral politics, good governance, and democratic development in the region, especially with allegations of appointment of cultists to positions within government or security.
- **Economic divestment**: Beyond adding to the wave of insecurity, cultism feeds into the wider pattern of organised crime that results in disincentives for economic investment and conventional livelihoods. Employment is precarious, and earnings from cult gang membership may be more attractive than other professions. The insecurity caused by cult activity impacts bars, night clubs, and restaurants where patrons gather to relax in the evening. The parasitic taxation of businesses by cult groups in return for security (protection rackets) puts further strains on local business activity.
- **Violence and killings**: The trajectory of violent killings associated with cultism, particularly the growing tactics of decapitating and disembowelling victims, also justify the need for an urgent response. Violence and cruel methods of killing normalise a culture of violence that can manifest in other issues, such as domestic violence.
- **Psychological trauma**: As a corollary to the above, the deep psychological trauma suffered by family members of victims, and more broadly the desensitisation in communities immersed in a culture of violence and murder created by cultists further justifies any intervention that will break the cycle of violence.
- **Ineffective kinetic response**: The deployment of law enforcement officials, particularly the creation of anti-cult squads within the police, remains an enduring response to growing cultism in the region. But with no operational guidelines or standard operating procedures (SOP), the police seem helpless, wasteful of resources, and are more reactive than proactive.

Assessment of interventions to curb cultism in the Niger Delta

This section provides a summary of the different approaches discussed and analysed during workshops organised by SDN in 2019 and 2020, which brought together government and non-government representatives that have been involved in initiatives to address cultism in the Niger Delta, alongside conflict experts, academics, and technocrats.

3. Government initiatives to curb cultism in the Niger Delta

Efforts by government to deal with the problem have largely centred around legal (anti-cultism legislation), security (deployment of special anti-cult units), and political (declaration of amnesty and disarmament initiatives) approaches.

3.1 Legal

At the Federal level, cult groups and secret societies are prohibited by Section 318 (4) of the 1999 Constitution, which defines secret societies as:

> *Any society, association, group or body of persons (whether registered or not)—(a) that uses secret signs, oaths, rites or symbols and which is formed to promote a cause, the purpose or part of the purpose of which is to foster the interest of its members and to aid one another under any circumstances without due regard to merit, fair play or justice to the detriment of the legitimate interest of those who are not members; (b) the membership of which is incompatible with the function or dignity of any public office under this Constitution and whose members are sworn to observe oaths of secrecy; or (c) the activities of which are not known to the public at large, the names of whose members are kept secret and whose meetings and other activities are held in secret.*[29]

The enactment of state-level legislation (or the review of existing ones) has sought to increase the powers of states to prosecute cult-related activities. In Delta State, Governor Ifeanyi Okowa, on 16 December 2016, signed into law the Anti-Cultism and Anti-Terrorism Bill, alongside warnings to cult members "no matter the position of the person".[30] Six special courts were set up to try those who were arrested, but the total number of prosecutions to date are not known.

Similarly, Governor Nysom Ezenwo Wike of Rivers State, in March 2018, assented to the Rivers State Secret Cult and Similar Activities (Prohibition) (Amendment) Law No.6 of 2018. The anti-cult law prescribes death penalty for any cultist who kills during a cult activity, and life imprisonment for any cultist apprehended.[31] The anti-cult law was considered controversial because it imposes the death penalty for violators.

Governor Seriake Dickson of Bayelsa State in March 2018, signed into law the Secret Cult, Societies and Similar Activities Prohibition Amendment Law 2018. This law makes it mandatory for offenders to be jailed upon conviction for not less than 20 years, without any option of fine.[32] The law, among other provisions, also empowered the police and other law enforcement agencies to search the homes of suspected cultists

and their sponsors, even without warrant, and take over buildings and premises used for cult activities, initiations, as well as the storage of arms and dangerous weapons.

Also, Akwa Ibom state Governor, Udom Emmanuel, on 16 March 2020, signed into effect the Cultist and Other Violent Behaviour (Prohibition) Order, replacing a previous (2018) Order, and updating it with an additional 65 secret cult groups that have emerged in the state.[33] Cultism appears to be growing rapidly within schools, with lawmakers claiming children are carrying 'axes to school instead of textbooks', so the State Government has resorted to shutting down those that are particularly bad.[34]

While these are relatively new laws, many are amendments or successors of similar laws passed by previous administrations. Moreover, the number of prosecutions in each of these states is not publicised. As such, these are viewed as political statements to distance the administration from cultism, which ultimately lack substance as they are not backed by investigation or prosecution teams to bring cases to court and try offenders.

3.2 Security

In these legal contexts, security agencies—especially the police—have gone on to establish special anti-cult units to stem the tide of cultism in most states in Nigeria. Some of these units have carried out some notable operations such as 'Operation Doo Akpor', in Bayelsa State to eliminate burgeoning cult activity from the state capital.

In Rivers State, after the army prevented the establishment of the State Neighbourhood Watch Safety Corps in 2019, the Governor launched Operation Sting to directly address cultism, kidnapping, and armed robbery. Another new outfit, Operation Delta Hawk, was established in Delta State in 2020 as a joint security outfit, with two community policing committees to define their strategy. Critics view this as a replication of the Delta State Vigilante Group established in 2014, which failed due to lack of funding, and as another example of 'political grandstanding' on security.

Overall, these anti-cult units have been criticised for summary raids of public spaces, arbitrarily arresting innocent citizens over unsubstantiated allegations, and involvement in extra-judicial killings. In many cases, these outfits are reportedly created after elections to reward those that worked for the winning politician, and in many cases this includes cult gang members. Consequently, they perpetuate inter-cult battles, and worsen security and stabilisation.

3.3 Political

State governments have implemented amnesty programmes with disarmament components, including Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Imo and Rivers states. In 2013, for example, the Bayelsa State Government granted amnesty to some 10,000 'repentant' cultists, and offered NGN1 billion worth of 'empowerment' interventions to rehabilitate them.

Similarly, in 2016 Governor Wike of Rivers State appointed a Special Adviser on Amnesty, and set up a seven-member State Amnesty Committee, drawn from the Nigerian Army, the Nigerian Navy, the Nigerian police

and the Department of State Services (DSS), among others. At the conclusion of the first phase, the state government claims a total of 22,430 cultists and militants renounced criminality to embrace the programme, while 1,500 assorted arms, 7,661 assorted ammunitions, and 147 explosives were surrendered to security personnel in the state (see *figure 6*).[35] Once this disarmament period closed, the Governor directed security agencies to "work out a special amnesty programme for Ogoniland".[36]

Despite initial successes recorded in the form of collection of weapons from cultists, critics have warned of the dangers of the amnesty approach to criminality. Besides concerns that the approach tends to 'reward' a life of criminality, there are questions over how state governments are able to define who is a cultist and what makes one a 'repentant' cultist.[37] Oftentimes identification has been exclusively for groups that worked for winning politicians in elections—either as a way to reward and absolve them for their crimes, or to recover some of the arms distributed for elections, and meet cult demands for greater rewards. The failure to follow through with any substantive reinsertion or reintegration strategies means that these initiatives tend to do more harm than good, by reinforcing transactional peace, raising expectations, and undermining trust between citizens and government.

Figure 6: Rivers State Governor, Nyesom Wike, with military chiefs examining arms and ammunition surrendered by cult members in Port Harcourt in 2016.[38]

3.4 Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration

The Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) was set up in 2010 under the office of the Special Advisor to the President on Niger Delta (OSAPND) to implement the terms of an amnesty agreed in 2009, and address the surging 'militancy', which threatened the continued operations of the oil and gas industry. It was designed as a five-year programme, but continues to date.

The PAP followed the typical DDR model, starting with a 60-day period in 2009 to surrender arms and enrol. Beneficiaries were next assembled in camps where they underwent counselling and a variety of classes in topics such as value reorientation and peacekeeping, and where their training needs for reintegration into society were determined. Upon completion, beneficiaries were offered vocational training or formal education opportunities, in Nigeria and abroad. Upon graduation, the PAP offered varying levels of livelihood strengthening support, including start-up funds, capital resources, and job placements, so beneficiaries could start their working life.

The PAP office estimated that 10,000 would benefit, but this number grew to a total of 30,000 ex-militants and dependents (822 female), from nine states in the region (Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers). While it did not specifically intend to address cultism, many of the intended beneficiaries were members of cult groups or militant groups that evolved from cult groups. Moreover, this is the only Federal Government-led, region-wide programme to attempt to address the drivers of conflict, many of which are similar to those of cultism. For these reasons, the lessons are pertinent for the proposed model, and are summarised below:

Reaching the target group can be hard: There was no formal process to map stakeholders and groups across the region. The beneficiary list was therefore mostly constructed by militant 'leaders' and politicians. The true numbers are often questioned under accusation they inserted thousands of their affiliates or 'ghosts', to capture benefits. At the same time, many 'real' militants either refused to enrol or were not captured in the process, some of whom have since agitated for inclusion. These early shortcomings in the identification, profiling, and registration processes, had a knock-on effect on the subsequent activities, and ultimately undermined the impact.

Appropriate livelihood options need to be developed to sustain reintegration: While the PAP office offers statistics claiming the majority of beneficiaries have been trained, educated, and received livelihood support, anecdotal evidence from beneficiaries highlights the flaws in this process. Many were offered training in undesirable fields, and upon returning to society, offered insufficient livelihood support to start a business, or in some cases, different trades to what they were trained in. This is down to a number of reasons including poor planning, the contractor delivery approach, and diversion of opportunities and implementation funds. In any future model, the implementers should nurture livelihood options in local economies, and work with specialists and the private sector to absorb re-trained participants.

Financial independence should be central to the approach: Following the failed attempts to develop livelihoods, a majority of beneficiaries are dependent on the monthly NGN65,000 stipends. Ideally payment should have been tied to a particular timeframe after graduating, but instead it has been paid since enrolment. Whenever these payments are disrupted, or there is talk of the programme ending, thousands protest in anger. Other allowances promised, such as housing, were stopped after a short period, which reinforces the belief amongst participants that the PAP owes them. It is therefore difficult to see how the programme can end, and the beneficiaries can transition from the transactional peace arrangement.

There is a risk of promoting and incentivising violence: As mentioned, militant 'leaders' were put in control of naming beneficiaries, and, as a result, control the flow of stipends and other opportunities. In addition, they have been privileged with political positions, contracts to deliver activities for the PAP, and

also access to other contracts based on the prominence afforded. It is therefore extremely lucrative, and encourages others to emulate their behaviour in the hope they too will be recognised as leaders.

Structures need to promote independence and indigenisation: Many DDR programmes are managed by donors, the UN, or—in Africa—by the African Union. The PAP, on the other hand, was developed and managed in Nigeria, and international actors were excluded. The combination of political leaders, technocrats and local leaders, under the various planning and early implementation committees, was a good approach to design an appropriate and acceptable strategy, which leveraged social capital to encourage actors to enrol. In practice, however, the structure proved too vulnerable to political forces, and has led to corruption and conflict within and between these groups. As a result, implementation has veered away from the original strategy, technocrats and experts were pushed out of administration, and ending the programme has been postponed to prevent political backlash and sustain patronage flows.

Capacity should be inbuilt to implement and monitor efficiency: The Office of the PAP does not operate to a strategic framework, and outside the administrative duties, most programmes are outsourced to contractors and consultants. Procurement processes are notoriously mismanaged, with every head of the programme since inception accused of varying levels of corruption. After ten years, the Office continues to operate with no strategic direction, a lack of continuity between coordinators, and no demonstrable capacity within the Office of the PAP to conduct the DDR duties. Given the programme has been allocated roughly NGN65 billion every year for the past ten years, there should be more oversight of how this is spent. Stemming from the poor profiling and data collection, the PAP has failed to keep track of the progress of beneficiaries, evaluate whether the objectives were being met, and in the process has wasted billions of Naira.

Investment into communities is needed for social license and true reintegration: Out of a total of 30,000 people, it is claimed that 1,000 to 3,000 people from the communities impacted by conflict, who never carried arms during the conflicts but were directly affected, were incorporated into the second cohort of beneficiaries. However, this is a small percentage and has incentivised violence and disenfranchised those that maintain peaceful and productive lifestyles. Furthermore, women were active militants, victims, and have been shown to be key to peacebuilding processes elsewhere, but their representation is just 2.7% of total beneficiaries. Inclusion of more beneficiaries who were not involved in militancy, and investment into local economies with other responsible government ministries and agencies, will help develop the society the beneficiaries are expected to be reintegrated within.

Political processes are key and agreements should be upheld: The 2009 amnesty was a result of various attempts to engage militants after the 2007 election, which would not have succeeded without proposals for development from the Federal Government. Apart from the DDR process, the amnesty package encompassed actions to prevent and address environmental degradation, develop infrastructure, redistribute proceeds from oil rents (increasing derivation from 13% to 25%), and increase the participation of host communities in the ownership and operation of oil and gas blocs. To date, these promises have not been implemented, despite the creation of the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs to, among other things, guide implementation. As a result, the underlying drivers of insecurity and underdevelopment persist, as do the grievances that led individuals to take up arms. This leaves the amnesty undelivered and open to recurrent cycles of conflict.

3.5 SWOT analysis of government initiatives to stem cultism

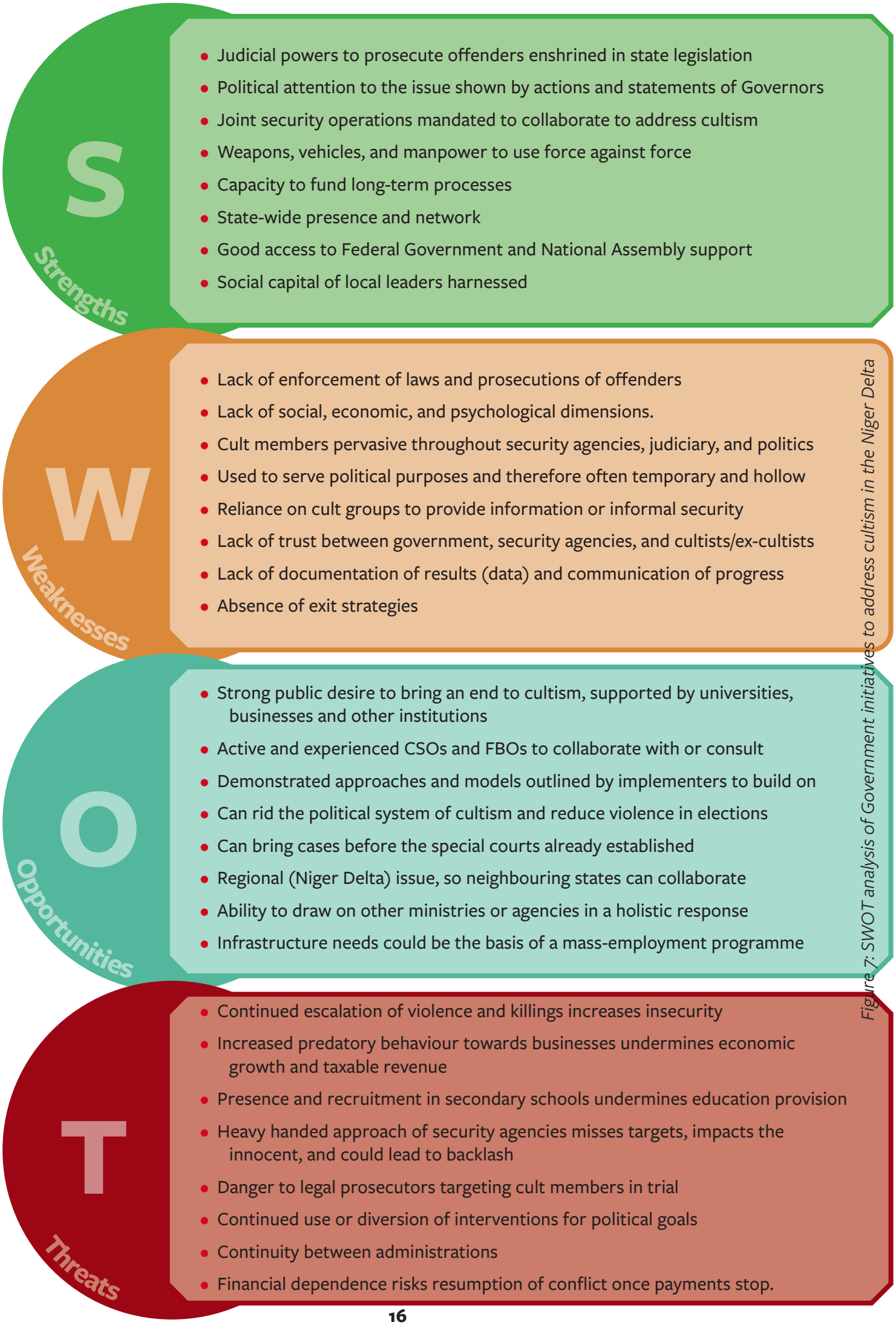

Figure 7: SWOT analysis of Government initiatives to address cultism in the Niger Delta

4. Non-government initiatives to curb cultism in the Niger Delta

Non-government actors, particularly civil society and faith-based organisations, have implemented interventions aimed at curbing the spread of cultism, as well as associated social vices such as drug and substance abuse. Of particular relevance are those that integrate small-scale DDR programmes. Six of such programmes implemented in the region participated in this process, and merit attention below.

4.1 Pax Viva Foundation

Location: Gokana LGA, Rivers State
Duration: 2016–2018

Overview: After the Rivers State Government announced an amnesty for cultists in Ogoni land and registered individuals in 2016, it failed to follow through with any substantive interventions. As such, expectations and tensions increased in the area, and this was identified as a critical risk to stabilisation. The project thus sought to alleviate this, and engaged 4,700 active cultists and their affiliates within all 17 communities of Gokana LGA (one of four Ogoni LGAs), and piloted a DDR module which focused on the civic, psycho-social, and economic dimensions of rehabilitating and reintegrating the target population back into their original communities. 361 people (57 of which were women) received economic starter-packs in a range of livelihoods, including barbering/hairdressing, mobile phone repairs, and mobile food processors. There were parallel activities for community reconciliation and unity, to foster a forgiving environment for returnees. Most of the activities relied upon the Christian church network in these areas, and the curriculum was based on bible stories.

Results: The project recorded successes in the area of rehabilitation of willing repentant cultists. More than 80% of the 4,700 engaged left cultism due to the project, 89% upheld that broken relationships with family and communities had been repaired, and 86% community members reported the initiative reduced cultism in the immediate environment. 96% beneficiaries affirmed they have been sharing experiences with those still engaged in cultism, and more than 80% affirmed they had convinced at least one person to leave cultism. This demonstrates the potential for adoption and replication. Notwithstanding, the project had some obvious weaknesses or challenges, such as insufficient funds and limited government support. Out of those who received economic support, 71% of businesses were still functional three months after support ended. Meanwhile 89% of those who did not receive economic support convinced at least one person to leave cultism, compared to 84% who did. This is likely due to their motivation to work hard to increase their chances of receiving economic support.

4.2 Academic Associate Peace Works (AAPW)

Location: Ughelli North LGA, Delta State
Duration: January 2016–June 2017

Overview: The intervention targeted a reduction of cultism in the area through building or strengthening collaboration between citizens and security agencies in the area. It was preceded by a baseline study to ascertain the nature and dimension of cultism in the area. The programme undertook a collaborative

approach in building cooperation between the citizens, community leadership, and diverse security agencies to reduce cult-related violence in the area.

Results: Some of the achievements recorded include a reduction of the rate or frequency of cult clashes, improved level of mutual trust between the citizens and security agencies, training of 25 ex-cultists in photography and cinematography, relocation of repentant cultists where skills or trade learnt matched with opportunities in a new environment, and the creation of peace clubs in seven volatile schools. Notable challenges that impacted the level of success recorded included high expectations of financial benefits among beneficiaries, a lack of interest on the side of government to address cultism, insufficient time for programme delivery, a distrust of the police in handling weapons surrendered by ex-cultists, and the difficulties of securing job opportunities for repentant cultists.

4.3 National Youth Council of Nigeria

Location: Rundele Community, Emouha LGA, Rivers State
Duration: 2014

Overview: The DDR programme was carried out through multi-stakeholder engagements that included community leaders, cultists, the police, and some victims. The objectives were to stop the cult war, stem the tide of other criminal engagements associated with cultism, and to reintegrate the repentant cultists back into society. The programme used multi-dimensional channels of communication as a confidence-building measure to secure the buy-in of the stakeholders and the cultists. It involved law enforcement officials in the demobilisation process. The programme also embarked on reconciliatory measures to avoid reprisal attacks on rehabilitated cultists after their re-integration. The reconciliation process served as a healing measure for those that were directly affected as victims by the activities of cultists.

Results: Re-integration of over 300 cult members back to the community, increased skills, and recovery of some illicit arms, which were handed over to the police. Some of the strengths of the initiative included trust shown by the various stakeholders, transparency in the organisation of the programme, and adoption of strong confidence building mechanism. Inadequate funding and limited logistics were the major weaknesses. Some notable setbacks witnessed in implementation include fear of reprisal attacks by community members on repentant cultists, vested interest of some political actors/stakeholders, resistance by some of the stakeholders who felt undermined that they were not consulted in the first place, and insistence by the repentant cultists that the organisation pay them the money they used in purchasing the guns.

4.4 Word and Grace Power Assembly Incorporation

Location: Rivers State
Duration: Ongoing

Overview: A rehabilitation and reintegration intervention targeting prison inmates, especially those convicted of cultism. The initiative adopts the gospel instrumental approach toward rehabilitating inmates and reducing the challenges of stigmatisation that they encounter during reinsertion into the community.

Results: The efforts have resulted in positive outcomes as some of the rehabilitated ex-convicts/ex-cultists

have engaged in legitimate livelihoods, such as vulcanisers (tyre pump) and shoemakers. Lack of volunteers, inability to cover other cells owning to inadequate funding, and inability to secure job opportunities for ex-convicts were the main challenges confronting the programme.

4.5 Youth Rescue International Development Organization (YRIDO)

Location: Rivers State
Duration: 2010–present

Overview: Rehabilitation and reintegration of young people who suffer from the effects of cultism, violence, drug abuse, and militancy, with Christian evangelism as the foundation. It works to prevent the vulnerable from engaging in these vices, and has a rescue strategy to pull those engaged out. Generally, YRIDO will identify and map out communities where these vices are predominant, conduct advocacy visits to young people in both private and government establishments, visit prisons and counsel inmates, engage young people in churches and town hall meetings, and organise symposiums on the dangers of cultism. Arguably the organisation's strongest feature is the facilities it runs in Bayelsa, Benue, Enugu, Kano, Lagos and Plateau, where they house and rehabilitate cultists, in preparation for reinsertion to communities.

Results: Some of the young people who have been successfully rehabilitated and reintegrated into their communities have become a strong voice against the menace of cultism. However, inadequate funding, lack of vehicles and accommodation facilities, and political backlash from the major political class has negatively impacted the organisation's ability to achieve optimal success.

4.6 180 Degrees Rehabilitation Centre

Location: Port Harcourt, Rivers State
Duration: 2015–present

Overview: The rehabilitation programme for ex-cultists and drug addicts, run by Rev. Christie Bature, offers another rich insight into the successes, setbacks, and challenges of low-level rehabilitation and reintegration programmes in the region. The high rate of referral the Centre receives from concerned parents is a pointer to the scale of cultism and drug abuse among young people in the region. Experience shared by the rehabilitation Centre suggest that 85%–92% of referrals (young boys and girls) who are cultists come from troubled homes.

Results: The Centre has been able to handle challenging cases of people with drug addictions that were thought to be impossible to rehabilitate. Some of the cultists could be identified by their marks and symbols. In its rehabilitation intervention, the Centre makes use of a humanised approach to give enrolees a sense of self-worth, and adopts a spiritual approach (based on Christian ethics) to rehabilitate inmates, alongside counselling from a qualified team of personnel to address deep psychological challenges. A transitional facility was recently established to house inmates newly released. Some of the strengths of the initiative include a reliance on staff who are themselves products of the rehabilitation centre, emphasis on empathy, Christian teachings on repentance and reconciliation, and partnership with a foreign university that admits rehabilitated cultists and drug addicts. However, challenges such as inadequate funding and absence of government support have hampered the success rate of their interventions.

4.7 SWOT analysis of non-government initiatives to stem cultism

S – Strengths

- Strong level of trust between the organisations and ex-cultists
- Good relationship between the organisations and communities
- Robust team of staff and volunteers committed to working in challenging locations
- Familiarity with terrain, language, and intersecting issues of the region
- Gospel-based approach to rehabilitation that resonates with local populations
- Premium placed on human capital development
- Previous experience with interventions addressing different aspects of DDR

W – Weaknesses

- Unsustainability due to insufficient funding and capacity for long-term reintegration programmes
- Limited psycho-social and clinical experience or capacity
- Difficulty managing expectations of community stakeholders
- Lack of documentation of results (data) and communication of progress
- Logistical deficits (vehicles, facilities etc.)
- Dearth of experienced DDR experts
- Limited access to, and support from, government
- Weak economy (high poverty and unemployment rate) to reintegrate into

O – Opportunities

- Collaboration with CSOs focusing on community safety and security
- Relationships with potential donors and alignment with donor priorities in Nigeria
- Presence of oil multinationals who are concerned with security and, to some extent, corporate social responsibility
- Office of the National Security Advisor backed arms destruction mechanism at 82 Division of Nigeria Army, Enugu
- Large number of FBOs with grassroots spread across communities.
- Substantial number of cultists willing to surrender and engage with CSO processes
- Can bring cases before the special courts already established

T – Threats

- Safety of staff working in extreme, remote conditions without security details, and risk of high stress and post-traumatic stress disorder
- Lack or limited government support, and interest in holistic approaches
- Retributive attacks on repentant cultists from cultists, security agents and others
- Political support and reliance on cult groups could cause policy inertia
- Insincerity of security agencies, especially the police
- Community stigmatisation

Figure 8: SWOT analysis of non-government initiatives to address cultism in the Niger Delta

4.8 Lessons learned

From the various DDR interventions extensively discussed during the workshop, and summarised in this report, some pertinent lessons emerged from those experiences. These lessons could inform the design and implementation of any future DDR initiatives in the Nigeria Delta region:

1. The task of disarming, demobilising, rehabilitating, and reintegrating ex-cultists is a risky venture, both for the programme implementers, host communities, and repentant cultists.
2. The entire DDR programme runs a high risk of failure in the absence of government backing with the necessary legislative, executive, and financial support.
3. Without adequate legal, physical, and security guarantees, ex-cultists are unlikely to enrol in the DDR programmes.
4. It is important to do a baseline or mapping study to provide scoping data for estimating the nature and extent of the problem, and possible opportunities and challenges that exist, prior to designing and implementing DDR activities.
5. Genuine reconciliation should precede the reintegration phase of the DDR, and must involve a cross-section of the communities where they operated and wish to return.
6. Psychosocial support is essential in the long-term rehabilitation, and qualified clinicians should be part of the implementing team and to avoid doing harm.
7. Widespread mistrust of the police regarding management/disposal of SALWs surrendered during disarmament, and use of personal data on beneficiaries provided during profiling.
8. Community participation and acceptance of ex-cultists are crucial to a successful reintegration effort, so should be mainstreamed into community structures and transitional justice systems.
9. A thorough economic needs assessment is important to ensure that assistance matches both the ex-cultists' needs and local economic realities.
10. The credibility of reintegration interventions and implementers relies in large part on creating realistic expectations and delivering benefits to repentant cultists on time.
11. Implementers need to coin an alternative term for repentant cultists, for example 'ex-offenders', to reduce the public stigma.
12. Previous attempts at DDR did not succeed due to the absence of a coordinating body that would engender and sustain a multi-stakeholder approach, whilst ensuring political independence.
13. Previous attempts at DDR have failed because there were hardly any community wide initiatives focused on reparations and economic development, which would have contributed to stability in the long term. Instead, the programmes were often perceived as a 'reward' for criminality.
14. Funds are at risk of mismanagement, especially in a multi-stakeholder model where multiple contracts are issued, so there needs to be transparency and strong independent oversight.
15. Strategies need to incorporate measures to reduce the high proliferation of small arms, beyond the initial disarmament period.
16. Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems are necessary to assess the effectiveness and sustainability of reintegration activities, generating data which should inform changes in a programme's design and delivery of benefits.

A new model to curb cultism

5. Adapting DDR programmes to curb cultism

Against the backdrop of the DDR programmes implemented by state governments and NGOs in the Niger Delta, some notable insights are evident when these experiences are compared to conventional DDR programmes. Unpacking these differences will assist in the articulation of an appropriate and scalable model for the region.

Permissive environment: Conventional DDR programmes often presume that a comprehensive peace agreement should precede such interventions. Often a peace agreement will generally state or otherwise indicate which armed forces and groups will participate in DDR. Specific to cultism, such preconditions may not exist or would be difficult to achieve. In addition, conventional DDR tends to commence with the cessation of armed conflict, although new models of DDR are now being conceived and implemented even as conflict persists. Yet the line between where the cessation of hostilities end and post-conflict development begins is often blurred. In the case of cultism, commencement of such interventions will not depend on cessation of violence, as experienced by some NGOs in the Niger Delta, and therefore the sequencing of activities will need to be inventive and iterative.

Combatant posture: Conventional DDR operates on the assumption that combatants are largely a collection of non-state armed groups fighting against state security forces over territory or resources. Such confrontation is often framed in political or ideological terms; for example, the control of a territory of the state or the creation of any independent state. In relation to cultism, the posture and environment of confrontation is largely different. Their existence and activities are largely bereft of such political and ideological underpinnings. They may be sponsored or utilised by politicians but they are certainly not seeking to attain or retain political power as a group. They are, however, mostly armed and deploy violence in their activities.

Gender considerations: Historically, conventional DDR programmes failed to integrate gender into their programme design and implementation, thereby reinforcing women's marginalisation within post-conflict development processes. Over the past years, however, donors and policymakers have realised the need for a more gender-sensitive and inclusive approach, although implementation often lags behind.[39] In the case of the PAP granted to ex-militants in the Niger Delta in 2009, men were significantly favoured in the DDR peacebuilding processes because they belonged to militant groups (97.5% of those enrolled).[40] The roles played by women in the conflict were not recognised; this included arms smuggling, intelligence gathering, protests, and as carers, nurses, and cooks. Moreover, some of these women were physically and psychologically abused, either due to their direct involvement, or indirectly as victims or from losing loved ones.[41] Similarly, very little gender consideration is built into DDR programme design and implementation by NGOs in the region, apart from the Pax Viva intervention, where 10% of beneficiaries were women (a far higher percentage than are estimated to be directly involved in cultism). Women can play a more impactful role in peacebuilding than men. For DDR programmes to be truly gender-sensitive, they must recognise the agency of women and girls in armed groups, gendered experiences, and the potential roles they can play throughout the entire process of programme design and implementation for ex-cultists.

Politicising and incentivising criminality: The traditional or prevalent approach to DDR in the Niger Delta, especially that of government, tends to incentivise violence, in contrast to conventional DDR practice that deemphasises excessive monetisation of the programme. The result is that those who were not the intended targets end up constituting a sizeable share of the caseload. In other words, those who were not real members of any militant or cult group wilfully enrol for the DDR programme in order to benefit from the financial incentives. Such interventions are highly transactional rather than transformational, and inadvertently increase the involvement of future generations aspiring to access the financial benefits.

Neglect of local community: Another important insight is the neglect of affected communities in the implementation of DDR, even though at the programme conception or design stages the importance of community is recognised. Most DDR approaches are often participant-focused, neglecting the very communities that have suffered harm, or at-risk individuals. Yet, these are the communities where repentant offenders are expected to be reintegrated. While offenders benefit in terms of new opportunities (skills acquisition and training, rehabilitation, and provision of starter packs) offered by the DDR intervention, the community suffers losses (financial and psychological), particularly the victims and their families. This calls for radical departure in the conception and delivery of DDR for cultists to address these realities.

Repentent ex-cultist programme participant and recipient of livelihood training and startup kit. This programme was overseen by SDN with local partner, Pax Viva.

6. Proposed multi-stakeholder model of DDRR for repentant cultists in the Niger Delta

6.1 Principles of the model

The way in which the DDR of ex-combatants is viewed will depend to a great degree, on the philosophy or principles underpinning the programme and this will, to some extent, influence the way in which they are designed as well as the perceived success of such programmes. The multi-stakeholder model proposed here is anchored on the following principles that can guide the design of context-specific interventions.

Primacy: The centrality of government in providing the legal, political, and security backing or anchorage for the programme. It should be emphasised, however, that the programme should not be politically driven, or based on political expediency that furthers the interests of a few influential people.

Inclusivity: Non-discrimination and fair and equitable treatment should underpin both the design and implementation of the programme. Commitment to non-discrimination will help to foster trust and confidence in the process.

Acceptance: Of particular importance to the success of DDR programmes, especially the reintegration phase, is the degree to which communities, employers, and society writ large are willing and able to accept ex-combatants and the efforts they expend in making this a realistic possibility. Thus, this principle recognises the place of the community as both the victim of cultism and eventual recipient of repentant cultists.

Partnership: The unique role diverse actors can play needs to be recognised, along with the successes possible if they all collaborate and optimise their comparative advantages. Reintegration of militants and cultists is a complex, long-term process with economic, social, psychological, political, security, and humanitarian dimensions. To facilitate and sustain this process, many actors or stakeholders have a role to play, including the government, politicians, local leaders, faith-based organisations, civil society, and international partners—as well as ex-cultists and their families, and the communities accepting them.

Coordination: Integrating the activities of diverse stakeholders into a unified framework can have a crucial role in the achievement of a common aim. Previous attempts at disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration did not succeed due partly to the absence of a coordinating body. There is the need for a coordinating structure that is trusted by all parties, independent, and authorised by the government—similar to the role of conflict mediator, but with the capacity to manage stakeholders and implementation frameworks from start to finish.

6.2 Purpose of the model

Despite legal, security, political, and sensitisation interventions by the federal government and some state governments, cultism is still a serious issue in the Niger Delta. Its persistence suggests the need for a paradigm shift from the DDR model adopted by state and non-state actors in the region. In view of this,

a more integrated, sustainable, and multi-stakeholder model is proposed. The overarching aim of the proposed DDR model is to achieve measurable levels of community violence reduction in the region—particularly violence linked to cult groups. The model's specific objectives include long-term impacts that make membership of violent cult groups unattractive and ensure significant a reduction in the level of access and circulation of illicit SALWS.

The goal of the model is the institutionalisation of a robust and well-structured intervention that is less transactional and politicised, and more transformational and humanised in conception and delivery, for enhanced reduction in violent cultism in the region. A distinguishing feature of this model from what has been practiced previously in the region, or elsewhere in Nigeria, is its modular and scalable nature. It can be implemented at different levels: community, state, and regional. Thus, it can be executed in a modular fashion, focusing on one community, state, or scaled up to run as a region-wide intervention. Unlike the PAP initiative that was largely oriented to addressing resource-based conflict waged by groups that opposed the government, this model is primarily designed to arrest violence associated with criminal gangs that oppose their rivals rather than the government, but whose activities undermine community safety and security. The prospect for the proposed model's success, in contrast with previous efforts, is enhanced by its anchorage on a multi-stakeholder fulcrum with a robust Coordinating Committee designed to be insulated from political manipulation.

The model proceeds from the fundamental principle that nobody is born a criminal, cultist, or militant. Thus, through the conscious effort of robust programming, some ex-offenders can be successfully rehabilitated and reintegrated into society. It considers disarmament crucial because the use of weapons is central to the activities of the targeted cult groups or their members. Demobilisation is necessary in that membership of the group is often formalised through oath-taking, and there is equally some level of command and control structure within the group that should be broken. Finally, it assumes that offenders can be accepted back in the communities if genuine measures are taken to address grievances and harm. Thus, the model offers an alternative pathway for targeted participants to exit violent cultism in a way that is not transactional.

6.3 Components of the model

In the model, a set of interconnected processes and activities are designed to deliver comprehensive transformation of the offender and facilitate genuine community reception. It operates by admitting cultists and militants as an input, who will be subjected to disengagement, disassociation, transition, and transformation processes to bring about fundamental behavioural change, before being released back into society as the output.

From the diagram below, the complex interrelatedness of elements in the programmed quartet is evident. Each quartet comprises a minimum number of critical activities, without which the effective transformation of former cultists would be made exceptionally more difficult or unattainable.

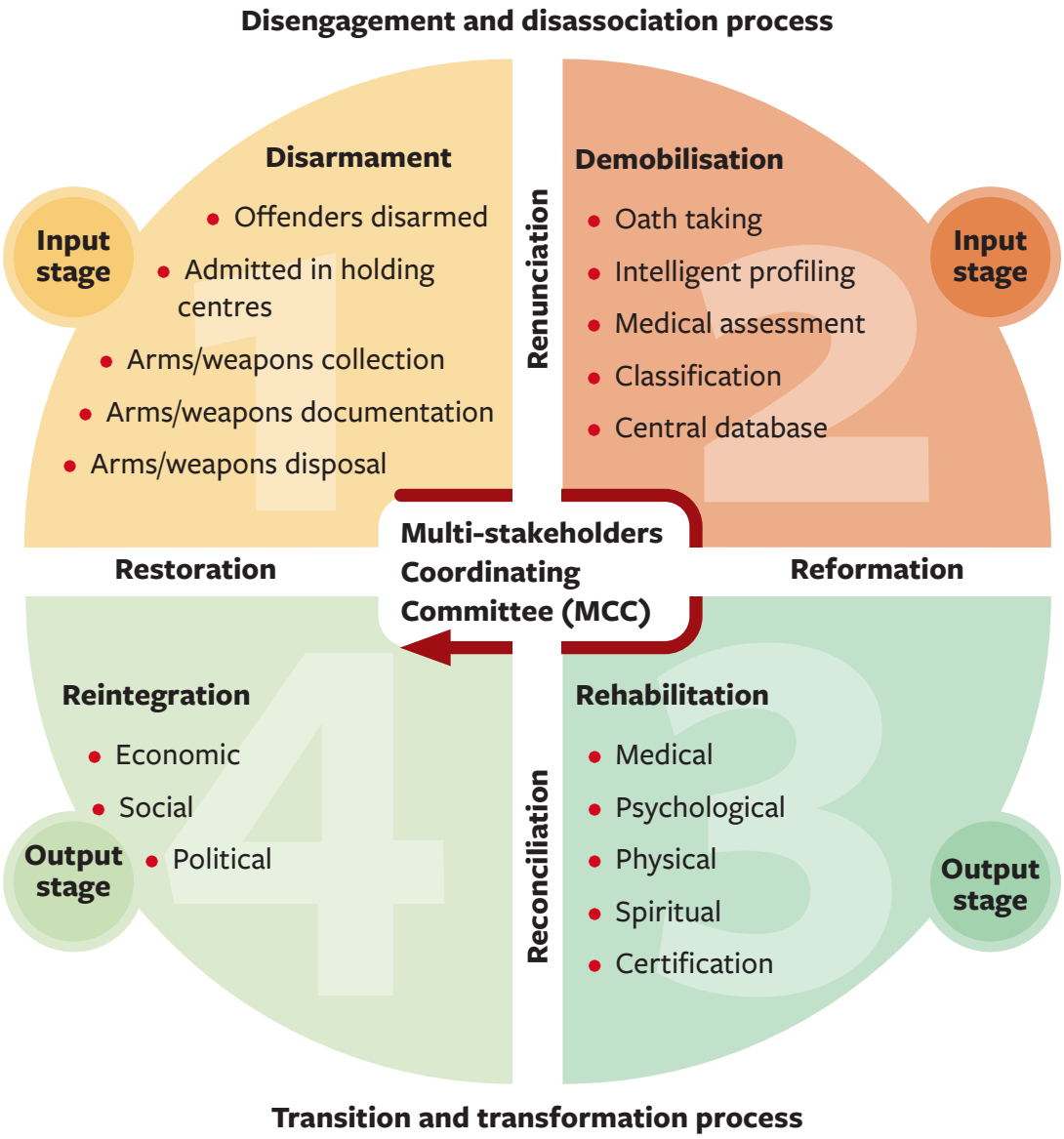

Figure 9: Proposed DDRR model to curb cultism in the Niger Delta

Preparation activities

Community engagement and context analysis: Before the commencement of the programme, there is the need for extensive community sensitisation, robust assessment of the context, and proper documentation of processes and people of influence for the successful roll out of the programme (participatory stakeholder analysis). It equally requires careful deliberation and agreement on eligibility criteria, particularly for the targeted enrolees. The eligibility criteria will be determined by the terms of references at entry point, or within the compact or peace agreement, which has to be tied to the policy framework or legal mandate that underpins the intervention, and be supported by stakeholders.

Establish the co-ordinating structure: Effective implementation requires the existence of a coordinating structure made up of state and non-state actors to oversee and coordinate the project—coined the Multi-stakeholder Coordinating Committee (MCC). The MCC would be tasked with the responsibility of ensuring overall coordination of DDR interventions and other relevant liaison and networking engagements that facilitate the success of the programme. The coordinating structure will be composed of three critical committees:

1. Technical Committee—design and manage programme implementation.
2. Oversight Committee—supervise the programme to ensure commitment to programme interventions and quality assurance in service delivery.
3. Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Committee—evaluate the various interventions to determine their impact or effectiveness, to identify areas that need improvement, recommend programme modifications, and provide an informed basis for decision-making and planning.

The MCC will work closely with all relevant stakeholders—international actors (development agencies, donors, and diplomatic outposts), federal and state institutions, and civil society—to ensure effective the delivery of interventions. Members of the MCC should be tenured, selected to serve at least a one-year renewable term. They should be paid by the international donors, or via an independent fund, to insulate them from political manipulation and pressure. This will equally help to avoid the recruitment or selection of prospective members on the basis of political patronage or cronyism. The rationale for entrenching such safeguards is informed by the understanding that government and politicians are major enablers and sponsors of cult groups. Selection or appointment into the MCC should, therefore, be guided by strong consideration for proven integrity, competence, and experience (DDR practices).

The MCC is expected to support conducting a scoping study, or baseline survey, to map the nature and dynamics of violent cultism in the region as well as facilitate a robust mechanism for measurement and evaluation of the programme. It is envisaged that carrying out this discreet study before the actual rollout of the intervention will help generate relevant and useful data that would inform logistical and programmatic approaches to the DDR intervention.

1 Disarmament programming

The first quartet of the Proposed DDRR model depicted above deals with the disarming of ex-cultists who have voluntarily opted for admission into the programme. Other methods to encourage enrolment in the programme is through coercive and deterrence-based interventions, including forcible disarmament campaigns, short-term amnesties, and the introduction and enforcement of severe legislative penalties to compel subscription. The disarmament is composed of two parts: physical and psychological. The physical is meant to remove arms from cultists and militants, while the psychological is to unhook harmful thoughts and attachments in the mind through cognitive 'diffusion'. This dimension will be boosted during the rehabilitation stage.

A well-structured disarmament process would be undertaken in a properly secured and resourced facility established for that purpose. Such disarmament facilities (sites, camps, or cantonment) may be located across select states in the region. The construction and arrangement of the camps should take into consideration vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as women, children, people living with addictions, and people living with disability (PLWD). This may require the creation of separate or segregated camps, and the provision of special support services and facilities for PLWD.

Once an offender is admitted into a holding centre (camp), a preliminary assessment to determine if they meet the specification defined in the eligibility criteria. If the criteria is met, registration will be conducted for inclusion as a potential enrolee. The next step would involve the collection and documentation of surrendered weapons. Once arms and weapons collection is complete, documented, and stored (this could be done on a rolling basis), it should be followed up with a transparent process of weapons transfer,

management, or destruction in the presence of major stakeholders. The existing arrangement between the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) and the 82 Division of the Nigerian Army in the management of illicit weapons collected from non-state actors offers a good opportunity for institutionalising a transparent process for destroying weapons collected from ex-offenders. As mentioned in this report, NGOs in the region that are engaged in community level disarmament programmes report deep suspicion of improper management of weapons collected by the police.

2 Demobilisation programming

Based on a well-defined timing and sequencing of the demobilisation process, potential enrolees will be admitted into this phase in conformity with established eligibility criteria that take into account the needs of different groups. This will be followed by a thorough screening, registration, and profiling of the enrolee. The profiling of participants and eligibility criteria, therefore, must be culturally and gender sensitive to address the different roles these groups performed during conflicts and to design programmes to meet their different needs. This phase offers the opportunity for programme implementers to deal with the issue of amnesty for crimes, including through dialogue and reflection, signing of renunciation forms, administering oaths or codes of good conduct, and conducting comprehensive medical assessments. Lifestyle attributes of all enrolees must be carefully profiled, to inform interventions in the form of non-violence training, career counselling, life skills, and peacebuilding and assessment. It will equally shape the imperative and nature of peacebuilding and reconciliation activities, especially victim-offender mediation. Wrong or inaccurate profiling and diagnosis in each case could undermine future progress of individuals or the group, and jeopardise the safety of enrolees and support staff.

Such comprehensive profiling of enrolees will be fed into a reliable, centralised database or electronic register for the programme, with individual classification as well. The centralised database will serve several purposes in the lifecycle of the DDR process for the enrolees, such as identification details, payment of stipends, deployment for training and therapy, consideration for job placements, compiling data and results for monitoring and evaluating progress, and even prosecution in case of recidivism. It will equally inform the kind of package or transition assistance to be provided in the form of reinsertion, and continue to be referenced while tracking reintegration. In addition, it creates data that can help improve the implementers' understanding of the effectiveness of the different approaches administered, and continually improve approaches based on different classifications of ex-offenders. These, and other crucial activities, will prepare the ground for graduation into the third phase the programme—rehabilitation.

3 Rehabilitation programming

Violent life associated with cultism impacts not only the affected community, but also the individual offenders. Cult life often exposes members to risky behaviour such as indulging in drug and substance abuse, gang rape, robbery, and killing. These experiences have physical, mental, and social effects on both the victims and perpetrators. Subjecting enrolees (ex-cultists) to rehabilitation interventions is vitally important in preparing them for the reintegration process. Based on the outcome of careful assessment, screening, and profiling, enrolees will be subjected to different forms of rehabilitation—medical, psychosocial, physical, and spiritual—through tailored services provided by experts. This will require the input of diverse experts in providing clinical, re-orientation, counselling, and referral services.

Depending on the individual case and capacity, the rehabilitation process may run alongside reintegration interventions in the form of training and capacity building initiatives.

While undergoing rehabilitation that offers new orientation and values, enrolees will also be exposed to the reconciliation process to pave the way for community (re-)entry. This exposure may include family or inter-family reconciliation talks, community dialogues, and spiritual healing processes, facilitated by faith-based groups, religious influencers, or community leaders. Such reconciliation activities "may take place at family and community levels with reunion meetings, sports festivals, and community service projects among others".[42] In this phase, community support frameworks and transitional justice mechanisms would be leveraged to facilitate re-entry. To be more effective, such interventions may require adapting a community indigenous justice system/mechanism into the transitional justice system.

To enhance the chances of success, psycho-social therapy and healing processes should not be provided solely to ex-offenders, but also to victims of cult violence or the communities to which they return. Informed by community dialogues, reconciliation and re-entry need to be accompanied by awareness campaigns among the receiving communities to help them understand who they are accepting back, how, and why. Disclosure, truth-telling, and face-to-face processes have a role to play in creating a platform for community reconciliation (handshake) and facilitating acceptance. A locally-owned reconciliation process may also help to overcome some forms of grievances caused by harm or depredation inflicted as a result of cult activities. Traditional, religious, and community leaders, and women should be mobilised as important vectors of reconciliation and peacebuilding, with support from government, FBOs, and NGOs. Vocational training and job-creation opportunities informed by community-based needs assessments also need to be rolled out among receiving communities to mitigate resentment and reinforce a collective effort. Such resentment will grow if those who became associated with cultism benefit from education, training, and jobs, while the victims (individuals and communities impacted) continue to live in worse conditions, without the same opportunities.

4 Reintegration programming

It is clear that a successful reintegration of ex-offenders would require a robust aftercare programme. In the case of candidates with a history of drug and substance abuse, they may relapse without longer-term structured care, so their aftercare programme may require operating a facility such as a halfway house. This would be supervised and provide access to a 'safe space' with the aim of monitoring and providing follow-up services. A halfway house is a kind of transitional facility that allows people with physical, mental, and emotional disabilities, or those with criminal backgrounds, to learn (or relearn) the necessary skills or muster the emotional stamina to re-integrate into society and better support and care for themselves.

The reintegration phase should be preceded with a clear assessment of reintegration opportunities (or needs assessment) and community absorption capacities before the re-entry of ex-offenders into society. Such an assessment intervention will estimate the relevance and sustainability of reintegration programmes, by adapting reintegration measures to different contexts and the profiles of enrolees. This needs to be carefully aligned with the broader economic recovery and development processes in the region. The reintegration enablers could involve the provision of basic or higher education, vocational training, agricultural internships, and starter kits based on enrolees' strengths, skills, and backgrounds.

Effective delivery of such services will demand the provision of adequate facilities for professional training. In addition, a focus on the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups (women, children, young, people, people living with addictions, and PLWD) needs to be incorporated in the conception, design, and delivery of reintegration initiatives, consistent with key provisions of relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR)—especially UNSCR 1325 on women in peace and security, and UNSCR 2250 on youth, rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction—and the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups.

Such economic reintegration efforts should align with, and support, the intended social reintegration objectives of the programme, the community, and, more broadly, the government. Upon the return of ex-cultists or ex-militants to their community, or their entry into a new community, the social reintegration of enrolees essentially depends on a trust-building process that begins with their micro group, particularly the family. As trust is established within the immediate family, it gradually increases to include the neighbourhood network through sustained exchange and social interactions.[43] As Bowd and Özerdem noted, this takes place over a period of time during which the trust that develops between ex-offenders and their families and neighbourhood networks expands further still, as the community in general becomes used to their presence within the community as a whole, and in particular, the various associations and community activities they engage in. With time, some elements of economic reintegration may facilitate or reinforce social and political reintegration and vice versa in the community.

A possible scenario could be that the enrolee (ex-offender) has formed a new and settled lifestyle such as a tailor, mechanic, mason, trader, or plumber. As the individual plies his or her trade, the immediate community will be the primary market for their socioeconomic services. This engagement could eventually facilitate a situation of full reintegration of the ex-offenders, both at family and community levels. In turn, the mutually beneficial nature of economic and social exchanges, community development activities, and community events, serve to increase civic mindedness and eventually support the political reintegration of the ex-offender. Conceivably, the reintegration can be carried out in the community of origin or community of residence. For effective resettlement in a different community of relocation, this will take a relatively longer time.

The various interactions that occur within the process of reintegration combine to assist in the rebuilding of trust, communication, and cooperation that foster social cohesion in the long-term. The rate of successful reintegration will differ from one enrolee to another, hinging on the extent to which empowerment of the community of interest is factored into the design and delivery of the DDR programme. A 'community of interest' in this model's context could be hosts, impacted communities, or access communities. There is the need to match interventions that focus on the treatment of enrolees with interventions or projects that empower the community of interest; empowering at-risk individuals (children and young people) or solving basic challenges of the community—such as access to safe water, schools, and healthcare—will serve as reparation for the harm suffered as a result of cultism, in ways that promote reconciliation and social cohesion.

6.4 Mapping the stakeholders and their roles in the programme

As noted, the model is built on the participation of various stakeholders. The buy-in and effective participation or support of these diverse stakeholders are vitally important for the success and sustainability of the intervention. The data in table 1 summarises the diverse stakeholders and their envisaged roles in the project

While these stakeholders are critical to the success of the initiative, certain factors need to be considered prior to its full commencement. These factors include, among others, piloting of the model on a small scale with any community, creation of a database of experts, mapping all low-scale activities done or ongoing in the Niger Delta, undertaking of evidence-based research to reveal the cost of cultism, sensitisation of the public about the initiative through advocacy (workshops), and conducting targeted training for specialists in the diverse components. Other factors include streamlining of the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, building institutional partnerships with academia, and articulation of an exit strategy.

Table I: Key stakeholders in the programme for ex-cultists

Stakeholders	Roles
Federal Government	• Approval and gazetting of amnesty • Weapons management (destruction)
State Government	• Granting of amnesty • Enactment of legal/policy framework • Coordinate the development of DDR Strategic Plan • Administration of oath-taking • Support with funding • Providing space for camps • Establishment of camps/facilities
Local Government	• Support with funding • Supply of some documentary evidence (Place of Origin)
Donors and development agencies	• Provide technical expertise and support • Assistance with funding
Security agents	• Provision of adequate security arrangements • Arrest and referral of offenders • Collection, documentation, and disposal of weapons • Screening and profiling of enrolees
Private sector	• Support with funding and logistics • Supply services/engage in programme implementation
Civil society organisations	• Advocacy and community sensitisation • Referral of repentant cultists to camps • Facilitate reconciliation

Stakeholders	Roles
Faith-based organisations	• Referral of willing/repentant offenders • Organising community dialogues • Provide spiritual revival or counselling
Communities	• Referral of willing and repentant offenders • Activating transitional justice mechanisms • Promoting forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation
Politicians	• Promotion of reconciliation and elite consensus • Mobilisation of support for the programme • Disbanding affiliated groups
Family	• Acceptance and reintegration of ex-offenders • Provision of immediate care • Facilitating genuine reconciliation
Ex-Combatants	• Present themselves as enrolees

6.5 Mitigating potential risks

The implementation of DDR programmes is fraught with risk. It is envisaged that the implementation of the proposed model will be exposed to similar levels of risk. Some of the possible risks to the programme, as well as proposed measures for mitigating them, are highlighted in table 2.

Table 2: Envisaged implementation risks and proposed mitigation strategies

Risks	Proposed mitigation strategies
Insufficient funding	• Legislated allocation of fund for the programme, possibly from a certain percentage of internally generated revenue. • Establishment of mechanisms for transparency and accountability in the managements of funds. • Setting up of a Trust Fund Committee made up of people meeting a criteria of trustworthiness and independence.
Development assistance fatigue	• Explore funding opportunities from the private and donor sector • Utilise evidence-based research (capturing the financial, human, and governance costs of cultism in the Niger Delta) as an advocacy tool to secure funding. • Exploit funding opportunities available in the Security Trust Fund and Security Vote. • Partnership with the Niger-Delta Development Commission, in line with provisions of Part II of its establishment Act.

Risks	Proposed mitigation strategies
Corruption	• Adoption of full-disclosure principles in programme implementation. • Adoption of electronic or cashless policy to impose a limit on transactions that could be conducted using cash. • Regularly publish programme results and financial reports. • Thorough stakeholder analysis at the early stages to identify potential spoilers that may divert resources for personal benefit.
Weapons diversion	• Adoption of consensus by all parties and other key stakeholders on what to do with collected weapons and ammunition before starting the disarmament process. • Entrenching a standard operating procedure for public collection, documentation, and disposal of surrendered weapons.
Entitlement mentality	• Adoption of a strategic communication approach for expectation management. • De-emphasise the attachment of monetary value to weapons as a means of encouraging their surrender. • Robust truth-telling phase and reconciliation where enrolees understand the magnitude of their crimes and genuinely repent. • Ensuring the signing of code of conduct by all enrolees.
Retaliatory attacks	• Extensive consultation with communities in framing and undertaking reconciliation and dialogue. • Conduct a community perception survey prior to return of enrolees. • Possible relocation of enrolee depending of the gravity of offences. • Sensitisation by security agents, media, and civil society of legal consequences of retributive attacks. • Keep communities updated about the programme. • Undertaking of continuous risk assessment and establishment of early warning systems.
Stigmatisation	• Coordinated advocacy by the media, NGOs, FBOs, and CBOs. • Timely transition from supporting individuals to supporting communities.
Politicisation	• Encouraging the signing of bonds of non-interference by politicians. • Sustained vigilance and monitoring by civil society of the activities of politicians in relation to the programme. • Diligent investigation and prosecution of those sabotaging the process. • Diversify funding streams to minimise dependence on government funding that would otherwise create potential for undue interference.
Recidivism	• Sustenance of a robust aftercare and follow-up services. • Putting in place effective mentoring structures. • Vigorous prosecution of offenders to serve as a deterrence to others.

Risks	Proposed mitigation strategies
Sustainability	• Pilot the scheme or model before scaling up or full implementation. • Prioritise measurement and evaluation to identify gaps, challenges, risks, and lessons learned at critical points in the programme. • Ensure the buy-in of all stakeholders. • Develop structures that help build confidence and minimise friction among stakeholders.

In order to mitigate the risks associated with DDR for ex-cultists, there is the need to create the necessary links between organisations working on stopping cultism, securing the commitment of security agencies to protecting repentant cultists from reprisal attacks, and provision of trauma healing for victims and repentant cultists. It will also require providing alternative means of livelihoods for the repentant cultists, and helping to deliver community driven projects that promote reconciliation and social cohesion.

7. Conclusion

The frequency and intensity with which cultism is spreading in the region in the face of security responses calls for the consideration of other measures to stem the tide. The proclamation of amnesties with elements of DDR for ex-militants and ex-cultists, is gaining traction in the Niger Delta. But design and implementation of effective DDR interventions lag behind the political rhetoric. Designing, planning, and implementing a DDR model that is 'fit for purpose' for ex-cultists in the region has become imperative.

The model proposed in this report is a promising alternative, differing from previous efforts in its multi-stakeholder approach, informed by the understanding that no single actor has the financial, political, and technical capacity to carry out DDR on its own. Integration and coordination is therefore critical.

This integrated DDR intervention would serve as a tool for achieving peace and stability in the region, not only by removing the tools of violence—weapons and ammunition—from the cultists and the civilian population, but by drying the pool from where overzealous politicians recruit thugs and assassins. For the proposed DDR framework to be successful, clear political anchorage of it in a legal mandate must be followed up by operational coherence delivered in a secure context. Without the political will to drive the DDR process, and a coordinating framework to implement it, the prospects for success are minimal.

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