

Rural Farmers' Perception of Conflict Resolution as a Strategic Tool for Grassroot Development in Imo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

No meaningful development will take place in an atmosphere of conflict and civil disturbances. Development can only be achieved in an atmosphere of peace and unity. This paper posits that resolution of conflict is the only panacea to grassroot development. A total of 300 rural farmers affected by conflict in the state were purposively selected. Data were elicited by use of questionnaire and analyzed descriptively using percentages, mean and standard deviation presented in tables. Results showed the following conflict resolution institutions; traditional rulers (M=2.90), town unions (M=2.52), council of elder (M= 2.37), women group/umuada (M=2.34), The conflict resolution strategies used included imposing a curfew on the area (M=2.23), settings up of judicial committee (M=2.74), traditional oath taking (M=2.40), mediation (M=2.00), dialogue (M=2.64). The above indicates that peaceful co-existence is a must for all which showed why there are institutions for peace making and the adoption of various strategies to ensure peace in the area. Conflict resolution can aid grassroot development in following ways: reduction of death of children (M=2.59), reduction in destruction of social/economic infrastructure (M=2.420), improves climate for rural investment (M=2.57), improves access to clean, safe water sources (M=2.34), reduction of death of family heads (M=2.64), reduces rate of unemployment (M=2.45) and promotion of local production exchanges (M= 2.34) among others. These are development indices which comes through collective efforts of the people, neglect of which would lead to disaster in the area. It is recommended that policies aimed at peaceful co-existence be put in place such policy will include proper land use planning since land is primary source of communal clashes in the rural area.

Key words: conflict resolution, grass-root development, Nigeria, Rural dwellers

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a struggle over claims, values and scarce resources. It is inevitable among individuals and in organizations because of the nature of human beings who differ in value orientation, attitudes and levels of understanding. Conflicts have become part of human organizations the world over (Abolo and Oguntoye, 2011). It has been considered by Oguntomisin (2004) that the various communities in pre-colonial Nigeria had varied conventions aimed at mitigating inter-human and intra and inter communal conflicts. These conventions were not without being backed by taboo which must be observed for peaceful regulation of human activities such as co-habitation, relationship between husband and wife, father and children, one community and the other among others. However, pre-colonial African societies are reputed to hold secrets of peacemaking and conflict resolution embedded in their customs and traditions before the disruptive activities brought about by colonization (Zartman, 2000). This can be seen in the principle of *Ubuntu* (Ohiochoya, 2008), a concept that demonstrates the fact that Africans had, over the years, developed and tested varied methods of

conflict resolution. This is an all-embracing African interpretation of both negative and positive peace (Francis, 2006). The concept of *Ubuntu* was also widely applied in the resolution of conflicts among the peoples of East-Central and Southern Africa. It is also found in varied form in different communities in other parts of Africa. The term is known to be a humanistic and holistic in the conception of peace which states that human beings are one in their relationships with one another. The pre- Igbo societies had well defined social political institutions that helped to facilitate conflict resolution. The basic political organization that existed throughout pre-colonial Igbo societies was what Elizabeth Isichei (1976 - 1981), describes as village democracy - a system of government that gave everyone – old and young – certain roles to play in the society. The mechanisms for conflict resolution in pre-colonial Igbo society were embedded in the traditional and culture of the people.

Consequently, conflicts and disputes were resolved in Igbo society mainly by mediation. The management of conflicts

amongst pre-colonial Igbo as in other African societies according to Alagoa (2001) involved the following six principles: First, the principle of impartiality of the manager of conflict. Rulers in all Igbo society were expected to behave impartially in their office. Second, the principle of fairness, that is, the poor and weak should receive a fair deal as well as the rich and powerful. Third, the principle of accommodation, compromise and a disposition for reconciliation, as opposed to the principle of “winner takes all” or the “zero sum game”.... Fourth, the principle of reciprocity. The spirit of accommodation must be mutual and reciprocal to be effective.... Fifth, the principle of moderation and of measured action and response. It was this principle that informed the deliberate limitation of the level of violence in conflicts within Nigerian communities in the past... Sixth, the principle of incompatibility or separation. That is where the parties to a conflict cannot be reconciled, the best policy would be to separate them. What this means is that efficient and effective management of conflicts is fundamental to the development of any society.

Igbo society in the pre-colonial period was not at all times peaceful. There were moments, as we witness today, when tensions and open physical conflicts ensued (Ugochukwu, 2006). Examination of human affairs has in many cases showed that interactions among human beings are sometimes characterized by intolerance which in turn engenders tensions and conflicts. In other words, as long as human beings exist and interact, conflicts are bound to ensue amongst them. In pre-colonial period, some of the issues that sparked off conflicts among individuals, communities and states have remained basically the same as at today. These include issues arising from marriages, inheritance, religion, land, boundaries among others. It is important to understand the fact that conflicts, though may cause division and enmity, would always occur so long as human beings live and interact with one another in a given society. Today, land is the most common cause of conflicts in every agrarian society anywhere in the world, Nigeria and Imo State inclusive.

The vital importance of land issues to social and economic development in Africa is unquestionable. Land resource is very crucial in any production within a society whereby equitable and secure access to land is a critical factor for the development. It provides a sense of security in contexts where formal employment opportunities and access to resources are limited. Land resources continue to have major historical, cultural and spiritual significance (Odgaard (2006, Allaby, 2008). In Africa and the study area, land plays a big role in sustainable economic development whereby large population depends on it in industry, urban life and agricultural livelihood. It remains the fundamental importance to large majority of people. Land provides the means of existence that is in food production and without it, man is poor (Gulliver, 2013).

This is also true for Nigeria whereby to a large extent majority (about 80 per cent) of her population depends on land for agriculture (Akinsanmi, 2005; Nwajiuba, 2012). The remaining 20% of people use land for other activities such as industries, forestry, and fishery to mention but few (Navuri, 2011). Although new generation seemed to favor cash crop cultivation over animal keeping, the main problem again is land shortage. The other problems are that, while population is growing fast land resources is stagnant and thus makes it obvious for conflict to arise.

However, despite the importance of land, it has posed many challenges and become a source of conflict in Africa. A study done by Yamano (2005) revealed that, land is increasingly becoming a source of conflicts in Africa, where land access had traditionally been characterized as relatively egalitarian. Conflict is defined as a difference in preferred outcomes in a bargaining situation. It is a disagreement between two or more parties in search of a particular interest such as social structural, religious sentiments racial or ethnic differences (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2006). In Nigeria, recently land conflict is not a new phenomenon. Nigeria remains relatively comfortable with arable tract land estimated at 98.3 million hectares, of which only 71.2 million hectares are cultivable. Only 34.2 million hectares (about 48 per cent of the cultivable area) are actually being cultivated, and less than 1 per cent of the arable land is irrigated (Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2001), the country is not free from land related conflicts. The country has been experiencing an increasing magnitude of conflict among land-users particularly between the cultivators and pastoralists. This argument is supported by Williams (1999) that, conflicts often erupt between herders and farmers over access to land and water resources. This situation happens due to the farmers' expansion into marginal lands resulting into competition between livestock and crop production. Also, poor distribution of people engaged in farming has always created problems and sometimes leading to deadly conflicts. Land dispute is a common problem in Igbo land and other parts of the country. The impact has left so many communities, villages and homes in ruins and serious enmity. So many families have also killed each other because of it.

Conflict resolution is a complex field of endeavor with many interdependent kinds of activities. Their causes and destructive consequences of conflicts imply that, pragmatic steps must be employed to resolve these conflicts regardless of the level and nature of conflict. Conflict resolution is the situation where by the conflicting parties enter into an agreement that solves their central incompatibilities, accept each other's continued existence as parties and cease all violent actions against each other (Wallenstein,2002). Despite the efforts of resolving the conflicts, there have been the tendencies of re-occurrence of the conflicts. Land

conflicts like any other conflict, do not disappear simply through the invisible hand of God. Therefore, there is a gap on the developmental benefits of conflicts resolution to the rural populace in Imo State. This paper tries to fill the gap by examining the mechanisms in resolving land conflict among rural dwellers in Imo State and the developmental benefits. The specific objectives were to identify institutions effective in resolving conflicts in the study area; examine perceived conflict resolution strategies employed by the various institutions in the area; and ascertain perceived effects of conflicts resolution on grassroots development.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

Imo State, located in south eastern Nigeria, with [Owerri](#) as its capital and largest city, is one of the thirty - six states in Nigeria. The state is named after Imo River, which course from the Okigwe/Awka upland. Imo state has “given birth” to Abia in 1991 and by extension Ebonyi states which was carved out of Abia state. Imo State covers an area of 5,530 square kilometers and shares boundaries with Enugu State to the north, Anambra State to the west, Rivers State to the south and Abia states to the east. It lies within latitudes 4°45'N and 7°15'N, and longitude 6°50'E and 7°25'E (IMSG, 2001). According to Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics, Imo state has a projected population of 5.8 million persons in 2017 with a projected growth rate of about 3.0%. According to National Population Commission, 2006, the population of Imo state is made up of 50.32% men and 48.68% female. The population density of the state varies from 230 persons per sq. km. in Oguta/Egbema area, to about 1,400 persons per sq. km. in Mbaise, Orlu, Mbano and Mbaitoli areas. This high population density has led to intensified pressure on land, forests and other natural resources, leading to increasing conflict occurrences and rural poverty. Because of pressure on land, fallow period rarely exceeds two years and in some areas continuous cropping is the rule, leading to low crop yield (more poverty and lower income) while loss of land to erosion have combined to induce people to migrate to urban areas in search of jobs and more income.

Method of Data Collection

Multi-stage (3-stage) sampling technique was adopted in the process of sample selection. The first stage was the purposive selection of the Local Government Areas of the state where cases of land-related conflicts have occurred and were reported. Ohaji/Egbema, Owerri West, and Okigwe Local Government Areas were chosen. The second stage involved the purposive selection of three communities in the Local Government Areas, where conflicts have occurred Awarra (Ohaji/Egbema), Irete (Owerri West) and Ihube (Okigwe) communities were

selected. The third stage involved the purposive selection of 105 farmers from a total of 1050 affected farmers from Ihube, 69 farmers from a total of 695 farmers in Irete and a selection of 126 affected farmers from a total of 1260 affected farmers from Awarra. This gave a total sample size of 300 crop farmers selected from the household lists of 3,005 farmers affected by the conflicts obtained from the community heads. Both primary and secondary data sources were used. The primary data were collected through questionnaire (survey), observation, and interview schedule. Descriptive statistical tools such as mean and standard deviation were used to achieve all the objectives of the study. Mean was also computed for the objective which looked at conflict resolution institutions using a list of 9 category institutions on a 3 point Likert type rating scale of very effective, effective and not effective assigned values of 3,2,1. The values were added and divided by 3 to obtain a discriminating mean value of 2.0. Any value with mean equal to or greater than 2.0 was considered very effective and vice versa. Mean was computed on 21 statements, 4-point Likert type rating scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree assigned weight of 4,3,2,1 to capture conflicts resolution strategies. The values were added and divided by 4 to get the discriminating mean value of 2.5. Any mean value equal to or above 2.5 was considered very effective strategy and vice versa. Also, mean was computed on 19 statements, 4 – point Likert type rating scale of very serious, serious, less serious and not serious assigned weight of 4, 3, 2,1 used to rate the effects of conflicts on grassroots development. The values were added and divided by 4 to get the discriminating mean value of 2.5. Any mean value equal to or above 2.5 was regarded as a very serious effect of conflict on the respondents, while values less than 2.5 were regarded as not serious effect.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Institutions for Conflict Resolution

There are several institutions for resolving conflicts in the study as shown in Table 1. Traditional rulers are the major arbitrators of conflict in the study area with a mean (M) response of 2.90. They are followed by religious leaders (M=2.37), town unions (M=2.52), council of elders (M=2.45), and women group (Umuada) (M=2.10). Africans place great emphasis on peaceful resolution of disputes so as to restore social harmony to the conflicting parties, and families, while the principles of equity and justice entrenched, in their customs and traditions are maintained. Among many African societies, it was strongly upheld that disputes should be settled amicable by persuasion rather than the resort of force or coercion (Agbu and Bolarinwa 2006). This system did not condone killings and violence in resolving conflict. Among the Oromo people of East Africa, there was the “Gada” system.

Institutions were set up to prevent violent conflicts but where there is an outbreak of violence, they were quickly checked before escalation. Conflicts were resolved through the establishment of truth, a just and honourable verdict given for the restoration of social harmony in the community. In Nigeria, the indigenous institutions for peace include: family, elders (within a lineage), clan, females born in a family or village, council of elders, village or town assembly, king-in-council, masquerade system, age grades, hunters association, oracles and deities etc. All these serve as institutions for the maintenance of peace and the resolution of conflict (Agbu and Bolarinwa 2006).

Table 1: Institutions for managing conflicts in the study area

| Institutions | Mean | SD |
|--------------------|------|------|
| Traditional rulers | 2.9 | 0.35 |
| Religious leaders | 2.37 | 0.66 |
| Town union | 2.52 | 0.5 |
| Police | 1.35 | 0.51 |
| Courts | 1.15 | 0.44 |
| Military | 1.37 | 0.55 |
| Vigilantees | 1.43 | 0.55 |
| Council of elders | 2.45 | 0.67 |
| Women group/umuada | 2.1 | 0.59 |

Source: field data, 2016

Table 2: Perceived conflict resolution strategies used in study area

| Conflict Resolution Strategies | Mean | SD |
|--|------|------|
| Imposing a curfew on the area | 2.53 | 0.52 |
| Use of propaganda | 2.89 | 0.38 |
| Setting up of judicial committee of enquiry | 2.79 | 0.48 |
| Use of agents to monitor conflict occurrence | 2.58 | 0.64 |
| Compensation and or punishment | 2.58 | 0.65 |
| Traditional oath taking | 2.5 | 0.64 |
| Rewards | 1.68 | 0.5 |
| Informal settlements | 1.57 | 0.53 |
| Mediation by elders | 2.5 | 0.67 |
| Dialogue/convening a meeting | 2.64 | 0.53 |
| Reconciling both parties | 2.54 | 0.78 |
| Tendering apology/use of negotiation | 2.34 | 0.52 |
| Persuasion of actors | 2.67 | 0.8 |
| Inculcation of myths | 2.51 | 0.73 |
| Ritual treaties/blood covenant | 2.57 | 0.65 |
| Use of sanctions | 2.53 | 0.45 |
| Good governance | 3.34 | 0.74 |
| Use of marriages | 2.6 | 0.54 |
| Peace education/teaching | 2.67 | 0.68 |
| Checks and balances | 2.6 | 0.53 |
| Effective communication | 2.57 | 0.57 |

Source: field data, 2016

Conflict Resolution Strategies Used in the Study Area

Table 2 showed the conflict resolution strategies used in the study area. The strategies used to resolve conflicts in the study area are many and varied. They are imposing of curfew in the area with mean response of (M=2.53). When curfew is imposed, people are not allowed to move about from a certain time to prevent the outbreak of hostility, use of propaganda (M=2.85), where certain informations are passed to influence peoples' thinking, setting up of Judicial Committee of enquiry (M=2.79), made up of men and women of high moral character to ascertain the actual causes and opinion of people involved in the conflict, compensation and punishment (M=2.58), people who lost property and valuables are given money to help offset their sufferings, traditional oath taking (M=2.50), a practice used to establish truth and guilt and discourage dishonest attitude. This takes place at the shrine of a powerful deity, mediation by elders (M=2.50), dialogue/Convening of meeting (M=2.64), tendering apology/use of negotiation (M=2.54), persuasion of actors (M=2.67). Other strategies included inculcation of myths (M=2.51), which means using proverbs, idioms, and songs to describe the nature of human existence and the need to live in peace, ritual treaties/blood covenant (M=2.57), used to remove fear and engender trust, bind families to avoid war, use of sanctions (M=2.53), these were imposed on families and individuals who contradict the customs and traditions of the people, use of marriages (M=2.60), these were done to reduce inter and intra-tribal wars as children born here have mixed blood and people now know that their blood are in the other camp and no need to fight them, peace education (M=2.67), checks and balances (M=2.60), effective communication (M=2.57), and use of agents to monitor conflict occurrences (M=2.58), good governance (M=3.34).

Effects of Conflict Resolution on Grassroot Development

A well-managed and resolved conflict situation fosters growth and development to the benefits of all rural dwellers and inhabitants. Table 3 showed that conflicts resolution leads to reduction of infant deaths with a mean (M) response of 2.59. This means that since deaths occur during and continues to occur if conflicts are not resolved and managed, stoppage/reduction of deaths will take place if conflicts are resolved. Other benefits of conflict resolution in grassroot development are promotion of educational opportunity (M=2.69), reduction in destruction of social infrastructures (M=2.52), improves climate for rural investment (M=2.57), improve access to clean, safe water services (M=2.54), improve access to health care services (M=2.28), leads to efficient economic exchange (M=2.79), promotion of socialization and interaction (M=2.45), protection of social order (M=2.64), reduction of deaths of bread winners/youths (M=2.64), reduces rate of

unemployment (M=2.65), increase rural of rural farm and non-farm investment (M=2.72), reduces poverty level of rural dwellers (M=2.58), reduces malnutrition and illness (M=2.60), promotion of local production exchanges (M=2.53) and reduced economic vulnerability (M=2.52). Conflict resolution provides an opportunity to interact with the parties concerned, with the hope of at least reducing the scope, intensity and effects of conflicts. During formal and informal meetings, conflict resolution exercises permit a reassessment of views and claims as a basis for finding options to crisis and to divergent points of view. Those who organize conflict resolution exercises or meetings usually constitute the third party in a triangular arrangement and consist of traditional rulers (King, Chiefs, etc).

Table 3: Perceived effects of conflicts resolution on grassroots development

| Effects of conflict resolution on development | Mean | SD |
|--|------|------|
| Reduction of infant deaths | 2.59 | 0.75 |
| Promotion of educational opportunities in the area | 2.69 | 0.88 |
| Reduction in destruction of social infrastructures | 2.52 | 0.74 |
| Improves climate for rural investment | 2.57 | 0.73 |
| Improved access to clean, safe water services | 2.54 | 0.52 |
| Improves access to healthcare services | 2.28 | 0.81 |
| Leads to efficient economic exchange | 2.79 | 0.71 |
| Promotion of socialization and interaction | 2.78 | 0.46 |
| Protection of social order | 2.64 | 0.53 |
| Reduces death of breadwinners and youths | 2.64 | 0.48 |
| Reduces rate of unemployment | 2.65 | 0.49 |
| Increase rural farm and non-farm investment | 2.72 | 0.44 |
| Reduces poverty level of rural dwellers | 2.58 | 0.81 |
| Reduces malnutrition and illnesses | 2.6 | 0.52 |
| Promotion of local production exchanges | 2.53 | 0.47 |
| Increase rural credit and insurance market | 2.63 | 0.74 |
| Reduced economic vulnerability | 2.52 | 0.58 |

Source: field data, 2016

Conflict resolution performs a healing function in African societies. It provides opportunity for the examinations of alternative positive decision to resolve differences. Failure to resolve conflict over access to commonly valued scarce resources, and over divergent perceptions of socio-political situations, has the high potential of degenerating into genocide or fratricide as it occurred among Ife-Modakeke

in Yorubaland and Tis-Jumen of Nigeria, and the Hutu-Tutsi of Burundi and Rwanda (Punier, 1995).

Conflict resolution promotes consensus-building, social bridge reconstructions, and the re-enactment of order in society. Conflicts hardly break up societies (Otite, 2001). For conflict resolution, the obvious implication is to view conflicts as non-isolated events in its social context. Such perspective is not narrowly focused on a conflict and its resolution. It takes into account the cultural setting and the social context. It looks at the history of preceding events which have led to the conflict concerned. And while concentrating on the conflict itself and process of resolving it, it takes possible implications for the future seriously.

CONCLUSION

Land holds a critical importance to sustainable growth, good governance and economic opportunities for poor people, especially in rural areas. Therefore, conflicts over land constitute a major obstacle against development and their occurrence may generate long-lasting effects able to strangle the possibility to escape from poverty. For this reason, solving land grievances and conflicts is critical to achieve a sustainable peace and so, strategies for land conflict prevention and mitigation should be considered of primary interest by government and international aid community

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