

Appraisal of Dialogue as a Strategic Conflict Management Tool for Promoting Peace in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study is a critical appraisal of dialogue as a strategic tool for resolving social conflicts and promoting peace in Nigeria. It was motivated by the intractable social conflicts and crises that have characterized the country in the past ten years, adversely affecting businesses, farming and inter-tribal trades amongst Nigerians. The specific objective of the study was to ascertain the extent dialogue can serve as a strategic tool to reduce the crises and promote peace in the country. Survey design was adopted in the study. The main instrument was structured questionnaire. Data were sourced from middle-class and lower-class Nigerians, mainly affected by the social crises. A sample size of 240 was judgmentally determined. The data procured were analyzed in Likert's 5-points scale. Results obtained show that majority of Nigerians strongly believed that dialogue can serve as a strategic tool to significantly reduce conflicts and promote peace in the country. It was then recommended that periodic social research, stakeholders' meetings, multi-media marketing communications, use of dialogue and equitable income distribution should be used in preventing and managing conflicts in the country.

Keywords: Dialogue, political strategy, marketing communications, conflict resolution, peace, Nigeria.

1. Introductory Overview

Over the years, religious and ethnic conflicts have been threatening the fragile peace of Nigerian communities. This has, however, worsened in recent time with the advent of ethnic militia groups like the Boko Haram, Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Odua People's Congress (OPC), and many more into the country's landscape, destroying its social peace and inhibiting people who survived their onslaughts from going about their normal businesses (Thisdaylive, 2012; Ibaba, 2009; Akinyele, 2001; Oluwaniyi, 2010). The emergence of Boko Haram into the arena has however ballooned the social crisis out of every imaginable proportion unprecedented in the country's history (Nigeriaworld, 2007; Alao et al, 2015; Crisisgroup, 2014). With massive killings, bombings, kidnappings and open engagement of the Nigerian military, being a daily occurrence (Amadi, 2011), the sect has been classified a terrorist group by concerned international community (Okoli & Iortyer, 2014; Adesoji, 2010).

All these pose great hindrances to the social peace of the nation and inimical to its meaningful socio-economic development. This is because, over the years, inter-ethnic trades had flourished between the major tribes in the country, serving as veritable sources of livelihood and sustenance to the people (Brinkel, 2012). For instance, the Muslim North have been serving as key suppliers of cattle, yam, millet, sorghum, onions, tomatoes and beans to the Southern parts of the country, in return for palm oil, cocoa, fish and even petroleum resources. But under the present climate of social and religiously dis-coloured conflicts, farm produce from one part of the country to another are viewed with fears, suspicion, distrust and sometimes dangerous rumours. The people have been fed with rumours of poisoned oranges, poisoned suya, poisoned tomatoes and many more, all at grave economic losses to the farmers and the nation (Legendsrumors, 2011; Vanguardnewspaper, 2011, Cameroonmirror, 2012). Some social commentators are of the opinion that this problem whittles down the already poor standard of living index of the people, thereby increasing the incidence of suffering and penury in society. This paper appraises the extent dialogue can be used as a strategic tool for resolving conflicts and promoting peace in Nigeria.

2. Statement of the Problem

Ethnic and religious militancy and crises in Nigeria have seriously affected the fortunes of businesses especially farmers and traders in the country. It has in some places drastically reduced the incomes of the farmers whose farmlands, livestock, farm produce and goods have been either abandoned or massively destroyed, thus negatively reversing the economic development of those farmers, while other businesses have been forced to

close down in parts of the country. Some of the able bodied men or farm-hands have also been despatched to their untimely deaths. In Nigeria, like other African countries, women constitute a greater percentage of the farm-hands, artisans and petty traders. Hence, whether as petty traders who are being denied regular supply of produce as before from other parts of the country, or as farmers whose farmlands are destroyed, the women are the worst hit by the crises, from the riverine fishing areas up to the northern hinterlands. The losses are heavier on the business and economies of these women cum family-supporters than others in the country (Ajayi, 2012; Inyama et. al, 2012). The youths of the country who are equally being denied employment from the companies that are folding up due to these social crises are amongst the worst hit too.

3. Objective of the Study

The specific objective of the study was:

- i. To ascertain the extent dialogue can serve as a strategic tool to reduce conflicts and promoting peace in Nigeria

4. Research Questions

The following research question served as guide in the study:

- i. Can dialogue serve as a strategic tool to significantly reduce conflicts and promote peace in Nigeria.

5. Research Hypothesis

The following null-hypothesis was tested in the study:

- i. Dialogue cannot serve as a strategic tool to significantly reduce conflicts and promote peace in Nigeria.

6. Review of Related Literature

6.1 Dimensions of the Major Social Conflicts in Nigeria

Boko Haram, a group alleged to be campaigning for the imposition of Sharia law on some states of the Nigerian federation, blames western education, unemployment and political injustices as being behind their actions. Their actions include: sporadic attacks on police stations, churches, kidnapping or killing of innocent people, bombings which the United Nation's building bombing in Abuja typifies.

The Niger Delta militancy with special interests in the kidnapping of whites and oil workers is yet another one that drew great international attention. According to Okonta and Douglas (2001:2), it started due to tensions between the foreign oil corporations and some Niger-Delta minority ethnic groups who felt they were being unjustly exploited, because despite the vast wealth from petroleum, the benefits have been slow to trickle down to the majority of the population, whose agricultural lands and aquatic culture have been largely destroyed by oil spillages and environmental pollutions.

The Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), claim that since after the Nigerian-Biafra civil war that ended in 1970, the Igbos have been marginalized and relegated to the background socially, economically and politically. They perceive the state and its rulers as being largely unjust to them in the dispensing of political offices, federal presence and other accruals of government, citing the dilapidated states of roads in the South-East as a good example. Thus, they feel the best answer is to take up arms against the government.

Many other groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), the Odua People's Congress (OPC), the Arewa Peoples' Front (APF), the Egbesu, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC), the Niger Delta Peoples' Volunteer Force (NDPVF), the Niger Delta Vigilante group (NDV), just to mention a few, had sprung up at one time or the other in the nation's history, unsettling the peace of the country under the cover of one grievances or the other. What is the better way forward out of this crisis? This paper tries to find answer to that.

6.2 Causes of Social Conflicts/Crisis in Nigeria

Angaye (2003:1) reports that compounding the problem of underdevelopment in poor countries like Nigeria is micro nationalism, ethnic, religious and communal conflicts which pose great threat to peace, security and progress. In every nation there is no complete agreement on how to share wealth, power and status among individuals and groups, and how to effect necessary changes and reforms. Since different groups and individuals have diverse interests, the aims of some groups will conflict with those of others. Effective conflict management is therefore needed for peaceful co-existence of the people.

The divisive interplay of politics, ethnicism and religion in Nigeria has led to rising nationalism and militancy of various ethnic movements, seeking self-determination, local autonomy, separate identity and true federalism. The existence of artificial and arbitrary boundaries that split ethnic groups among different local government areas (LGAs) and states has resulted in boundary disputes and demands for re-unification or separation, (Angaye, 2003:1).

Accusations and allegations of neglect, oppression, domination, exploitation, victimization, discrimination, marginalisation, nepotism and bigotry are common, Angaye (2003:2) observed. Today, struggles for the control of power at the centre have become a major cause of social crisis up to a terrorism dimension in the country. However, Emeagwali (2000:16) says the roots of the present crisis stems in a lack of understanding of the Nigerian constitution and the peoples' poor appreciation of nationhood enshrined in the constitution. Hence, ethnic cleavages take precedence over the spirit of nationhood. Kukah (2007:5) blames greed, unbridled quest for power and a culture of materialism for the crisis.

6.3 Conflict Management

This refers to the long-term management of intractable conflicts in society, organization, institution, community or family. The form of conflict management option or strategy to be adopted is determined by the social structure or social geometry of the case. But the functional-conflict school of thought believes that when conflict is handled in a respectful and positive way, it provides an opportunity for growth, ultimately strengthening the bond between people. Dysfunctional conflicts, like the ones in Nigeria today, are destructive and cause loss of lives, property, man-hours, investment opportunities, hunger and starvation, open violence, wars and other forms of social disruptions. On the other hand, functional or creative conflicts are constructive and reflect the differences and variety of human opinions and activity which exists in any free society. If creative conflicts between groups which are major sources of innovation, new ideas, institutions and social change are suppressed altogether, a nation becomes stagnant and static, (Nwosu, 1996:11; Nkamnebe, 2001).

7. Methodology

Survey design was adopted in the study. The main instrument was structured questionnaire. Data were sourced from middle-class and lower-class Nigerians, mainly affected by the social crises. A sample size of 240 was judgmentally determined. The data procured were analyzed in Likert's 5-points scale.

8. Data Presentation and Analysis

8.1 Respondents' Demographic Data

The respondents' demographic data indicate that 57% were male, while 43% were female; 30% were from the voting age of 18years to 25 years, 36% in the age range of 26 to 35 years; 19% in the age bracket of 36 to 45 years, while the remaining 15% were 46 years or above. 60% had only O'Levels qualifications, 28.67% had National Diplomas or equivalents, while the remaining 11.33% had Higher National Diplomas or 1st Degrees.

8.2. Presentation and Analysis of Data Based on Likert 5-Points Scale

In the test table, Strongly Agree is represented by (SA) and weighted 5-points, Agree (A) is 4-points, Undecided (Und) is 3-points, Disagree (D) is 2-points, while Strongly Disagree (SD) is 1-point.

Decision Rule:

If Mean < 2.5, the Respondents Disagree (If Mean is less than 2.5, the respondents disagree).

If 3.5 < Mean < 2.5, the Respondents are Undecided (If Mean is less than 3.5 but equal/greater than 2.5, respondents are undecided).

If Mean > 3.5, the Respondents Agree (If Mean is greater than or equals to 3.5, respondents agree).

Test Table 1: Respondents' Opinion on the use of dialogue for reducing social conflicts in Nigeria

| S/N | Questions | SA | A | Und | D | SD | Mean | Decision |
|-----|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1 | Dialogue can be used by Nigerians to build and cement friendship amongst each other | 81 (405) | 97 (388) | 23 (69) | 19 (38) | 20 (20) | 3.83 | Agreed |
| 2 | The government can use dialogue to dissuade militant groups in Nigeria to drop the resort to violence | 73 (365) | 91 (364) | 39 (117) | 21 (42) | 16 (16) | 3.77 | Agreed |
| | Grand Total | | | | | | 3.82 | Agreed |

Result Interpretation

With a Mean score of 3.83, majority of the respondents agreed that dialogue can be used by Nigerians to build and cement friendship amongst each other. A Mean score of 3.77 also indicates strong agreement from the public that the government can use dialogue to dissuade militant groups in Nigeria to drop the resort to violence. All these gave a Grand Mean of 3.82, which indicates that cumulatively majority of Nigerians agree that dialogue can serve as a strategic tool to significantly reduce conflicts and promote peace in the country.

9. Conclusion

The existence of social peace is a sine qua non for development in any society. Violence is an evil wind that blows to anyone no good. This study has revealed the mindset of majority of Nigerians that the use of dialogue could help to significantly tame the hydra-headed monster of acts of violence and militancy in the country, in order to promote social peace and development.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is hereby recommended:

1. That periodic social research must be initiated by the government to track issues that are likely to balloon into conflicts and nip such in their buds.
2. That periodic stakeholders' meetings should be held at both national, states, local governments and community levels to sieve the feelings and opinions of the populace. These harvests of opinions will then be factored by policy makers into their social and security plans for the nation.
3. Integrated multi-media marketing communications approach should be employed by the government in enlightening Nigerians on the dangers of violence and the need to shun such ignoble acts.
4. A governmental agency or the Ministry of Internal Affairs should be made to use dialogue instead of force in dealing with any militant group that is open to dialogue.
5. The problem of inequalities in the distribution of wealth must be addressed in the country, as a major source of conflicts in the land today.

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