



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Communication Strategies for Managing Conflicts and Insecurity in Nigeria

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Abstract:

Nigeria as a nation has her own share of conflicts which can be described as tribal, religious and socio-cultural. The participants in the conflicts can be grouped into Yorubas-Hausas-Igbos, Christians-Muslims, indigenes-settlers and herdsmen-farmers. Reactive and military approaches used in resolving various conflicts in Nigeria have only promoted pathological hatred among the participants. This paper is an attempt to consider proactive and civil approaches to managing conflicts and insecurity in Nigeria. It discusses communication strategies for managing conflicts and insecurity in Nigeria and argues that adequate security is unattainable where conflicts are not well managed. Unmanaged conflicts pose security challenges. For its theoretical thrust the paper relies on Woods' Transactional Model of Communication and Kilmann-Thomas' Conflict Model. The paper concludes by suggesting the application of five communication strategies (avoidance, competition, compromise, accommodation and collaboration) to managing conflicts and insecurity in Nigeria.

Keywords: Communication, Conflict, Insecurity, Communication strategies, Conflict management

1. Introduction

Conflict has been a part of our human existence. No decade of post-independent Nigeria has been conflict free. On 15 January 1966 a group of five military officers (mostly Easterners) struck having become displeased with the political class and the growing dysfunctionality of tribal politics. It was a very bloody insurrection in which no principal officer of government from Igbo extraction was killed. The coup was tagged an igbo coup. The Northerners retaliated with a bloodier reprisal coup in July 1966 which flagged off what many historians would call, short of genocide. The Igbos living in Northern Nigeria were very many times singled out and butchered from that time warranting Governor Odimegwu Ojukwu's request that they return own for safety. Decrying the treatment meted the Igbo people, Ojukwu announced secession from Nigeria in May 1967 and on 6 July, 1967 and a civil war broke out. Many claim that tribal interests played a major role in the defeat of the Igbos. Even in today's Nigeria, so many ethnocentric sentiments are whipped up by politicians and divisive elements to sway electoral votes particularly at national executive level. The recent tribal conflict in Nigeria is the declaration by Northern youth leaders on 5 June, 2017 demanding that the Igbos living in the North should leave the region on or before 30 September, 2017 (within three months). This declaration was predicated upon the agitation for secession of Southeastern Nigeria by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) organization led by Nnamdi Kanu.

Another area of conflict in Nigeria is religion. From as far back as one can remember, religious intolerance has been a source of prolonged and conflagrated conflict particularly between Christians and Muslims. The Kano Riot of 1 May 1953 was the beginning of a series of violence against non-Muslims inspired by bigotry. Though closely linked with the misgivings of political leaders from time to time, religious intolerance has over the years been the fundamental cause of conflicts in Nigeria. Christians have also been known to instigate attacks particularly in Jos which has won the reputation for bloody conflict between both religions since the early 1990s. The country has also witnessed the rise of the radical groups like the Maitatsine, Darul Islam and Boko Haram movements over the last four decades.

The yearning to control resources locally as against the current federal manner in which resources are administered has been another source of conflict in Nigeria. Nine Ogoni activists lost their lives in the quest for resource control on 10 November, 1995 causing Nigeria's suspensions from the Commonwealth of Nations. In 2001, Alhaji Muhaji Asari Dokubo under the auspices of the Ijaw youth Council began to clamour for "Resource Control or Self-Determination by Any Means", and then, he took to armed struggle, founding the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, and eventually started an evolution of several splinter groups in the region, all fighting for resource control. The chaos lasted till 26 June 26, 2009 when President Umaru Yaradua announced the granting of an unconditional 60-day amnesty from 6 August, 2009 to 4 October 2009. The 60 day period package offered the unconditional surrender of arms and ammunition in exchange for training and rehabilitation by government. Resource control remains a highly controversial issue in the Nigerian polity, especially in answering the constitutional questions of what the federalism means in the Nigerian context.

Land matters have also caused a lot of conflicts across the country. The communities of Aguleri and Umuleri in Anambra State, the Brass and Nembe communities of Bayelsa and Rivers States are typical examples of fratricidal conflicts emanating from prolonged boundary disputes that ensue between these neighbours. Most communal clashes were caused by land disputes. The recent disputes between herdsmen and farmers which led to loss of many lives and properties were as a result of the quest for land for grazing or farming.

Nigerian conflicts can therefore be classified into tribal (intra and inter), religious and social cultural. The participants include Hausas, Igbos and Yoruba, Christians and Muslims, indigenes and settlers and herdsmen and farmers. Several attempts have been made by governments to resolve the conflicts in Nigeria. Most of these attempts have been reactive. There have been various military approaches to managing Nigerian conflicts. These approaches, instead of achieving lasting solutions, have only resulted into pathological hatred among the participants. Communication experts and scholars have worked on communication strategies for conflict management but no work has been done in applying communication strategies to managing Nigerian conflicts. This paper, however, considers civil and proactive approaches to conflict management in Nigeria. It discusses communication strategies for managing Nigeria conflicts as a strategic approach to security and sustainable developments.

2. Communication

Scholars over the years have modeled their ideas in incremental ways in defining and explaining the concept of communication (Lasswell (1949), Shannon & Weaver (1949), Schramm (1954), West and Turner (2007), Wood (2008). They started with the linear model of communication and later move to interactional model of communication and now on the transactional models of communication. The linear model of communication is the earliest representation of the process of communication by scholars who taught of communication as one person exerting, influencing or sending messages through some channels to a receiver who is at the end of the communication process. The linear or actional model of communication is commonly referred to the Lasswellian formula of who says what, to whom, in what channel, and with what effect? This idea only suggests that communication is the transmission of information from one person to another who acts on the information as in the military parlance, "obey the last order". Communication experience has shown that the linear model of communication is simplistic, incomplete and unrepresentative of communication process.

The concept of noise was later introduced to the linear model of communication by Shannon and Weaver while working on telephone as a channel of communication. The concepts of source, message, receiver and channel were also used to identify elements in the linear model of communication. Shannon and Weaver diagrammed their idea how the telephone system worked. They identified the **source** of communication as the one who sends a message to the receiver, the **message** as the stimulus which is sent, the **receiver** as the one who receives the message sent by the source, **channel** as the conduit for sending and receiving messages, and **noise** or interference which is experienced in the process of sending and receiving messages.

The interactional model of communication views communication as the sharing of meaning with feedback that links the source and the receiver (West and Turnel, 2007). The idea of feedback suggests that communication is not a one way street but a two way street. Inserting feedback into this model, Schramm (1954) suggests that communication is an on-going circular process that may not necessarily terminate at either end of the motion. Feedback may be verbal or non-verbal. Feedback, according to the interactional model of communication, takes place after the message has been received by the receiver who reacts to the message. This idea suggests turn-taking, a situation where the source sends a message to the receiver who takes his turn to send back his response to the source after receiving the message sent. Until the message is received there is no feedback. The idea of identifying the source or sender as performing a separate and different role from the receiver in the communication process has been seen as the major shortcoming of the interactional model. This shortcoming is addressed in the transactional model of communication.

The transactional model of communication presents a situation where both the sender and the receiver are sending and receiving messages all at once. The idea of a transaction suggests that communication is a cooperative process whereby the sender and the receiver are mutually responsible for the effect and the effectiveness of communication (West and Turner, 2007). The transactional model of communication captures and represents communication process completely. Communication is a collaborative effort between the speaker and the receiver where they both send and receive messages simultaneously. The speaker delivers his verbal message in addition with other non-verbal messages (intended or not intended) to the receiver who does not only receive the messages but equally and simultaneously gives feedback (verbally or non-verbally) to the speaker. The speaker often reacts to the receiver's signals and adjusts his message. The receiver doesn't have to wait for the speaker to finish his speech before he reacts to it. The receiver reacts (most times non-verbally) to the speaker's message during the delivery of the message. The receiver's reaction may either encourage or discourage the speaker to continue his message. Communication is not just actional and interactional but transactional. This idea is adopted and maintained throughout this paper.

3. Conflict

Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from others in achieving their goals(Wilmot and Hocker, 1998). Conflict must be expressed verbally or non-verbally; otherwise, there is no conflict. The parties to a conflict must be aware of the contention or disagreement between them may be through a warning, or a rolling of eyes. Conflict occurs between parties who are interdependent. As long as people are interdependent conflict will always occur. Conflict is therefore inevitable in interpersonal relationships. Conflicts in interpersonal relationships usually occur because parties pursue incompatible goals. Goals are incompatible when they are mutually exclusive, for one party to achieve his goal the other will have to lose his. An example is a situation where two friends fall in love with the same girl. This produces win-lose

situation. Competitions for perceived scarce resources such as time, money, land, etc usually result to conflicts. Conflicts often occur when people interfere or stand in the way of others to accomplish their goals. Nigeria as a country is a conglomeration of interdependent nations which include the three major tribes: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba and several other minor tribes which struggle and compete for the perceived scarce resources in the country. In a country like Nigeria, therefore, conflict is normal and expected.

Verderber, Verderber and Pitts (2010) identify conflicts types as pseudo, fact or simple, value, policy, ego and meta. Pseudo conflict occurs when there is a difference in the perceptions of an issue, event, or idea between parties. Pseudo conflict is not deep rooted and easily resolved because it is based on perceptions which are known to be fallible, biased and that can be corrected. Fact or simple conflict occurs when there is a disagreement on a fact. The conflict is simple because facts are verifiable and undeniable. The conflict becomes resolved when the fact is established. Conflicts that arise from value differences are deep-rooted and may not be easily resolvable because of their cultural, traditional and religious undertone. Policy conflict is a disagreement over an action taken or a course of action proposed. Policy conflict is deep-rooted also because of its long time effect on the affected party. Ego conflict is an expression of the need to feel superior to the other, to be more entitled than the other. Meta conflict is the conflict that results from conflict process. It is conflict that results from the process of communicating about the conflict at hand.

Nigerian conflicts are not simple but deep-rooted. They can be classified as value, policy ego and meta conflicts. Most religious conflicts in Nigeria are based on differences in values and beliefs. Religious intolerance is the reason a set wants to impose its values, beliefs and ideas on others. The introduction of Sharia laws in the 1990 was an attempt to resolve religious conflicts in Nigeria. The recent cry for restructuring in Nigeria is because some people feel marginalised and are dissatisfied with the governmental policies which seem to favour some regions more than others. Most tribal conflicts in Nigeria are ego based. Some tribes feel superior to others and want to assert themselves. Some simple conflicts degenerate into meta conflicts because of the way conflicts are communicated. Hate speeches are example of meta conflicts. A very serious meta conflict in Nigeria is the recent declaration by the Northern youths in Kaduna that the Igbos living in the Northern region should vacate the region on or before 30 September, 2017. If all these conflicts are not well managed, they will pose security challenges and threaten developments. This paper, therefore considers how communication strategies can be employed to manage the various conflicts in Nigeria.

4. Communication Strategies for Managing Conflicts in Nigeria

Kilmann and Thomas (1975) in their model identified and developed five communication strategies for resolving conflicts which are avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration. Avoidance as a strategy for conflict management has been greatly criticized by those who believe that conflict is not a bad thing in relationship. They are of the opinion that relationship grows when the interdependence of the parties has been tested by conflicts that allow the areas of tensions to be articulated and discussed. Conflicts signal a need for change and allow for growth of relationships. Conflict is, therefore, something not to be avoided but to be understood and resolved. It is, however, suggested that not all conflicts can be confronted. When attempts have been made towards reconciliation, and parties seem recalcitrant, the best way is to apply avoidance strategy to resolve the conflict. Avoiding tactics include avoiding certain discussion topics, changing the topic of discussion, reducing conversations to jovial matters, and physically withdrawing from the venue of interaction in order to avoid having to deal with the conflict. Seiler and Beal (2008) seem to support this position when they note that withdrawal can be a useful strategy, but it is also limited in its ability to resolve the conflict itself.

Accommodating tactics according to Sillars and Wilmot (1994) include giving up or giving in, disengagement, denial of needs, or a desire to get along. Accommodation is a good strategy to manage conflict if it is not motivated by incapacitation but by willingness to make sacrifice for others. Sometimes an accommodating party is willing to strengthen the relationship by genuinely yielding to the other person for the sake of the relationship. But, if the motive is not a genuine act of love, generosity, or magnanimity, then, it is not considered a good way to resolve conflicts.

Competing tactics used to achieve an edge of the other in a relationship include faulting, hostile questioning, hostile joking, presumptive attribution, avoiding responsibility and prescription (Sillars, 1986). To point to the fault of another person is to personally criticize. Presumptive attribution is making statements that attribute to the other person's feelings, thoughts, or motives that he or she does not acknowledge (Tubbs and Moss 2006). This is saying someone feels one way because of a particular reason that may not be true. The prescription strategy of competitive conflict management involves issuing threats, demands, or arguing for a prescribed behavior, without which some consequences are also prescribed.

Awodiya (2013) observes that competition in a relationship is not always a bad thing. In competitive situations partners can bring out the best in each other that can lead to a measure of regard among them, thereby enhancing their relationship. This is why Trenholm and Jensen (2008) believe that conflict is beneficial. Conflict according to them suggests interdependence and the resolution of which will lead to further cohesion in relationship. Conflict signals a need for change; it is an opportunity to become more adaptable and creative. Conflict allows problem diagnosis; it is a safety valve that allows problems to be aired.

Compromise is being able to yield some of one's expectations, desires and goals such that each party in a relationship gains some and lose some. Compromise as a conflict resolution method is usually not the first option for contending parties, but may be the workable solution in many cases of conflict, especially when the parties involved wield equal power. It could be more satisfying if deep values are not compromised (Awodiya, 2013).

Collaborating is the ideal method of resolving conflicts. When parties of different needs and desires collaborate rather than compete, the result is the maximization of their potentials. The focus of collaborators is not on their individual goals, but the respect for and satisfaction of each other's goals. Parties in a collaborative relationship would feel a sense of equality and respect which are two elements that promote healthy relationships(Awodiya, 2013). Ultimately, different situations, relationships, goals and the persons involved in a relationship will call for different styles of conflict resolution. One method does not fit all problems with all people, and

in all situations. There is value in each of the methods discussed here and, at times, they can be combined to achieve the best results possible for the unique problems that people may have. In the following table, Wilmot and Hocker (2010) enumerate which factor to consider when choosing the most appropriate conflict style.

<p>Avoiding (Lose-lose)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When the issue is of little importance 2. When the costs of confrontation outweigh the benefits 3. To cool down and gain perspective
<p>Accommodating (Lose-Win)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When you discover you are wrong 2. When the issue is more important to the other person than it is to you 3. When the long term cost of winning isn't worth the short-term gain 4. To build up credits for later conflicts
<p>Competing (Win-Lose)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When there is not enough time to seek a win-win outcome 2. When the issue is not important enough to negotiate at length 3. When the other person is not willing to cooperate 4. When you are convinced that your position is right and necessary 5. To protect yourself against a person who takes advantage of noncompetitive people
<p>Compromising (Partial Lose-Lose)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To achieve quick, temporary solutions to complex problems 2. When opponents are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals 3. When the issues are moderately important but not enough for a stalemate 4. As a backup mode when collaboration doesn't work.
<p>Collaborating (Win-Win)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When the issue is too important for a compromise 2. When long-term relationship between you and the other person is important 3. To merge insights with someone who has a different perspective on the problem 4. To develop a relationship by showing commitment to the concerns of both parties. 5. To come up with creative and unique solutions to the problems

*Table 1: When to Choose the Most Appropriate Conflict Style
Adapted from Wilmot and Hocker (2010)*

5. Conclusion

Communication strategies identified in this paper are avoidance, competition, compromise, accommodation and collaboration. It is suggested that one strategy does not fit all the Nigerian conflicts identified in this paper. There is value in each of the strategies discussed, and at times, they can be combined to achieve the best results possible for the unique conflicts that people may have. It should be noted that some communication strategies used in the past to manage conflicts have been found to produce better results than the military approaches adopted. For instance, former President Umaru Yaradua adopted collaboration strategy to manage resource control conflict when he introduced amnesty from 6 August, 2009 to 4 October 2009. Also, former President Olusegun Obasanjo adopted accommodation strategy to manage religious conflict in the 90s when he introduced the Sharia law. The Indigenous People of Biafra group led by Nnamdi Kanu employs competition strategy to express their agitations. But, unfortunately, the conflict which begins as policy conflict has degenerated to ego and meta conflicts brought about the quit notice serve on the Igbos. It is suggested that this particular conflict can be managed by applying communication strategies of accommodation and collaboration. And, if these strategies fail, an alternative will be to apply avoidance strategy by conducting referendum in the affected region, for the people to decide if they want to break away. It is by applying the communication strategies suggested here that the country can avoid the second civil war.

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