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EXPLORING COMMUNITY-BASED COUNSELLING APPROACHES IN COMBATING COMMUNAL CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The recurrence of communal conflict in Nigeria has remained one of the serious problems confronting national integration and sustainable development. Hence, it must be stamped out. It is against this background that this paper argued that everybody including Nigerian adult educators and counselors must contribute to the restoration of peace in our communities. The paper therefore, examined incidents of communal conflict and factors responsible for it in Nigeria. The paper concludes that through exploration of community-based counselling approaches such as empowerment of local communities, socioeconomic recovery, community-based environmental forum, community dialogue initiative, traditional justice and reconciliation, community-based security forum and community-based counselling mediation team, tolerance education, communal conflict can be combated. The paper recommends among others that counsellors and adult educators should popularize community-based counselling approaches in conflict management among Nigerian communities with the view for communities to explore them in resolving conflicts.

Introduction

Conflict is a global human phenomenon. There is hardly any community in the world which has not been involved in one conflict or the other. This is because; human society is characterized by clashes of interests which usually lead to conflict. Conflict itself is not totally bad as it helps sometimes in maintaining orderliness in the society. It turns other way round when it becomes violent in which its consequences may be devastating. Alimba (2014) reported that the historical antecedent of the post colonial Africa is tinted with the menaces of violent conflicts. According to Oji, Eme, and Nwoba (2015) communal conflicts in Nigeria are as a result of competition over access to land and other natural resources in different parts of the country. These conflicts, apart from crippling its socio-economic development, had redefined the

fate of the continent to be known as a very good laboratory for the study of violent conflict and its attendant effects (Alimba, 2014).

Lending credence to the above, Albert (2001) enunciated that since Nigeria transited from military dictatorship to multi-party democracy on 29 May, 1999, the country has been bedeviled by various forms of violent social conflicts. Thousands of people lost their lives; others were maimed or displaced from their communities as a result of these problems. While some of the conflicts had their roots in the past historical circumstances of the concerned communities, some others were manufactured by the elites, seeking to stretch the liberty inherent in the new democratic process in Nigeria to a breaking, if not absurd point. Alimba (2014) remarked that of all conflicts in Nigeria, communal conflict has manifested itself as the most pandemic issue next to ethno-religious conflict in the democratic era in the country. The major problem is not just about the ubiquity of conflicts as it is already a reality of our social system. What is rather disturbing is that these inter/intra conflicts involve massive destruction of lives and properties as well as disruption of social, political and economic lives of the larger population. This is especially so when these conflicts are between supposed "brothers and sisters" (Oji, Eme, & Nwoba, 2015). Moreover, in spite of all government efforts at the resolution of the conflicts, they appear to have become intractable.

The fundamental problems in conflict according to Ekpenyong (2011) are the religious beliefs and practices, ethnicity, boundary disputes, land ownership and resource competition, poverty, marginalization, unemployment and underdevelopment. The argument of this paper therefore is that counseling services, counselors and adult educators have the potential to manage and resolve communal conflicts in Nigeria through community-based and counseling approaches which are rooted in the principles of community development and are participatory, empowering, collectivity, brotherhood, justice and fairness. It is against this backdrop that the paper advocated for the exploration of community-based counseling approaches in resolving communal conflicts in Nigeria.

Meaning of Communal Conflict

Conflict is a common phenomenon in social relations. It often occurs in social organizations and assemblies of people. Conflict according to Fernandez cited in Ekpenyong (2011) can be viewed as a difference in perspectives: what one sees, thinks, feels, and believes may be different from what another sees, thinks, feels, and believes. Conflict is also described as a state of incompatibility. In this sense, Darling and Fogliasso (1999) described conflict as a situation in which the concerns of two or more individuals operating within the unit appear to be incompatible. Incompatibility breeds conflict because it is a psychological state in which people cannot get along with one another in an organization. Hellriegel and Slocum (1996) posited that conflict is an opposition arising from disagreement about goals, thoughts, or emotions with or among individuals, teams, departments, or organizations. Opposition is all about blocking an individual or a group from achieving set goals, and this leads to

conflict because of the instant over reaction that will be put up by the party being blocked.

Communal relates particularly to groups, and it involves things commonly used, shared or experienced by a group in a society. Such things can be resources or conflict. When it is conflict, it is known as communal conflict (Alimba, 2014). Oboh and Hyande (2006) described communal conflict as involving two or more communities engaging themselves in disagreement or act of violence over issues such as claims for land ownership, religious and political difference leading to loss of lives and destruction of properties. Communal conflicts are those in which the participants are communal groups. A communal group according to Oji, Eme & Nwoba (2015) is one in which primary identity prevails. Membership of the group is not attained but ascribed. Within the communal group the individual self is defined wholistically. In such groups, there is a collective sense of belonging, as well as self-realization and self-affirmation within the collectivity. Thus, individuals are very sensitive to matters of communal symbolism. Any action or thought that seems to threaten or undermine communal group identity evokes very holistic response. Such actions include those that diminish group status, worth and legitimacy in the eyes of its members (Horowitz, 1985). Where the communal group members have the fear of loss of status, worth, subjugation and extermination ensures that communal groups make radical demands and escalate their conflicts through the use of violence.

According to Albert (2001), communal conflict often manifests in terms of host-stranger face-offs in which a section of the community tags itself as the host (owners of the community) and some other groups as strangers (that is, those who migrated into the community at a date later than the coming of the owners of the community). The consequences of these conflicts are usually devastating claiming lives and properties. Thus, there is need to combating communal conflict in order to repositioning our socio-economic lives.

Community-based Counselling Approaches

Community-Based Approaches (CBA) seek to empower local community groups and institutions by giving the community direct control over investment decisions, project planning execution and monitoring, through a process that emphasizes inclusive participation and management. The basic premise for community-based approaches is that local communities are better placed to identify their shared needs and the actions necessary to meet them. Taking charge of these processes contributes to a sense of community ownership, which can contribute to the sustainability of interventions. It can be an effective approach to peace building as it provides range of measures necessary to transform conflict towards sustainable, peaceful relations and outcomes (Lederach, 1995).

Counseling has been described as a helping profession. In this sense, Omoegun (2009) sees counseling as the process of helping people with problems. This process involves one person (the counselor) assisting another person (client/counselee) in a manner that is convenient. According to Idowu (1986) counseling is a process in which an

individual or group of individuals with problems are led by a professional guidance counselor to have insight into their behavoiur so that, they may know the cause(s) of their problems, try to deal with problems so that they can function effectively in the world around them. Since our communities are full of conflict with its attendant problems effort must be made to resolve them. Consequently, community-based counseling, one of the important counseling strategies has capacity as a problem-solving mechanism to resolve our communal conflict in Nigeria. Community counseling according to Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, and D'Andrea (2011) is a comprehensive helping framework that is grounded in multicultural competence and oriented toward social justice. It involves helping communities as they try to bridge the gaps between the lives they are currently living and the lives they seek.

Incidents of Communal Conflicts in Nigeria.

Since the attainment of independence in 1960, many parts of Nigeria have become theatres of war, characterized by an increasing number of ethnic and religious crisis (Yusuf & Mayanchi, 2014). Lending credence to this Usman (2011) reported that community clashes in Ife and Modakeke in the South-West; the Ijaw/ Urhobo/ Itsekiri in the Niger Delta region; and Umuleri and Aguleri in the South-East are few examples of communal crises that have affected negatively the development of Nigeria. Some of the other communal conflicts include July 1999 Oro conflict in Shagamu in Ogun state where a Hausa woman was accused of coming out when the cultist were outside with their Gnome. This led to some altercations, which eventually led to full blown crisis. Many people from the two conflicting, parties lost their lives. This crisis spilled over to Kano and Lagos over time which claimed a number of valuable lives and properties (Fawole & Bello, 2011).

Additionally, Alimba (2014) reported that in Akwa Ibom State, Eyo Abasi and Idua have been experiencing communal crisis over oil rich parcel of land located at the boundary of their localities while Eleme-Okrika communal crisis centred on the creation of state and local government, unclear boundaries and clash over ownership of oil fields, farmlands and waterways; the Ijaw-Ilaje conflict in Ondo over ownership of land reputed to be rich in oil reserve are other prominent communal conflicts in Nigeria.

In the Northern part of Nigeria, communal conflicts are reoccurring decimal to the extent that their occurrences have imposed insecurity in communities where they exist. Examples of communal conflicts abound in Northern Nigeria. In Tiv area of Benue State in various local government areas between 1988 and 2004, 29 communal conflicts were recorded by the Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affair as having occurred in the state. Within the periods, some of the conflicts reoccurred two to three times (Alimba, 2014). The Tiv-Jukun in Wukari which has to do with the case of Indigene/settler; the Chamba-Kuteb Chieftancy tussles over selection process; the Basa-Egbura in Nassarawa; the Hausa/Fulani-Sawaya in Bauchi; Fulani-Irigwe and Yelwa-Shendam, both in Plateau State. Communal conflicts also

exist in Nasarawa State, for instance, in Assakio, Obi and Odobu communities in Lafia Local Government Area, the clashes of communal war between these groups are ongoing in the state. Tiv farmers and nomadic Fulani in Benue and Nasarawa States and the Tiv in Guma and Gwer West are also embroiled in a conflict. Even in Abuja, communal conflict between Fulani pastoralists and Gwari farmers in Gwako village in Gwagwalada Area Council is ravaging the place (Alimba, 2014).

We can go on and on to mentioning the various communal conflicts in Nigeria, but what is worrisome is that the consequences of these conflicts are so enormous that the generation yet unborn will suffer their effects. Since communal conflicts are highly destructive in nature, hence, the need to understand some of the factors responsible for communal conflict with the view to restoring peace back to our communities.

Factors Responsible for Communal Conflict in Nigeria

A number of factors have been identified to have contributed to the recurrent communal violence and conflicts in Nigeria. Some of these factors are:

Economic Factors

Economic factors manifest in the forms of competition for inadequate resources such as land and its content; problems of distribution of available resources; unemployment and poverty (Alimba, 2014). For example, farmers and pastoralists, fishermen and pond owners, foresters and timber loggers clash throughout Nigeria often over disputed uses and exploitation of land and water resources

(Ekpenyong, 2011). In Nigeria where poverty is accommodated and crowned as a king, courtesy of bad managers of the country's abundant resources, the bitterness it arouses in the people has made the country vulnerable to communal violent eruptions with enormous costs in terms of lives and property (Ideyi, 2011). Unemployment is very high among Nigerian youth which has prompted many of them into formfitting trouble. An idle mind they say is a devil workshop.

Disputed Jurisdictions of Traditional Rulers and Chiefs

Disputed authority of traditional rulers and chiefs has triggered a lot of communal conflicts in Nigeria. This happens when a king of one ethnic or sub-ethnic group claims ruler-ship over peoples belonging to another ethnic group, his action often generates conflicts. In substantiating this point Ekpenyong, (2011) gave the town of Warri as an example. Here, the Olu (king) of the Itsekiri ethnic group is labelled Olu of the whole of Warri in Delta State, owned and inhabited by members of Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo ethnic groups. The situation arose when the Delta State government enacted edict no 1 of 1999 (Traditional Council and Chiefs Edict 1998 vol. 9) and appointed three other Traditional Rulers of equal status in Warri, two for the Urhobo Kingdoms of Okere and Agbassa (Agbarha-ame) and the third for Ijaw of Warri. Violent conflicts followed and many people lost their lives.

Prestige and Jealousy

It is a common phenomenon that prestige of one individual or group is often

followed with the loss of prestige of one other individual or group. In the same vein, individual or group that has great reputation is often a victim of jealousy. This is because other persons or groups need not be prestigious, honourable, powerful or feared as rivals in the same society. The consequence is that, either they must be destroyed or absorbed or weakened or made useless (Ekpenyong, 2011). There is no doubt that these jealous and selfish tendencies give rise to conflict between two or more prominent persons in a given community. In this conflict, the society is torn apart each time the important office falls vacant in a given traditional institution, social institution or political constituency. It is in this context that prestige and jealousy are major sources of conflict.

Prejudice, Hatred and Discrimination

This is also a major source of conflict. These tendencies of division and separation are seen in all racial relations in cultural, social, economic, political and religious institutions. These often result in conflict between major racial groups and minor ethnic groups, each crying against discrimination and marginalization in economic and political affairs. In politics, the highest office in the land is contested for, but emphasis is on a racial group's ambition for the presidency. This creates division among the numerous racial groups in the country. From there, a normal political contest turns into a political conflict between two or more racial groups in the country (Ekpenyoung, 2011). The 2007 post election violence is a good example which divided the nation along tribal sentiments and also threatened the peaceful co-existence of Nigerian communities.

Environmental Pollution

Environmental pollution has also been identified as one of the causes of communal conflict. According to Ekpenyoung (2011) environmental pollution induces conflict, especially in the communities where they explore and exploit natural resources such as crude oil are carried out. In these communities, the means of livelihood are destroyed by industrial activities. Farmlands, water resources and forests are polluted, depleted, degraded and wasted. In such communities, ecological benefits are altogether damaged or destroyed and thereby making the people in such communities to suffer from lack of good water, housing, clothing, food, health services, education and other necessities of life. Niger Delta crisis is a perfect example in this case.

Injustice

For justice says all must share what belongs to all. But injustice says might is right (Ideyi, 2011). Injustice upholds survival of the fittest and panders to the interests of the powerful and makes a burn fire of the interest of the weak and needy. Injustice destroys social web of human relations and sows seeds of bitterness, rebellion and war. It is the fundamental source of violence. It is understood that any action or thought that seems to threaten or undermine communal group identity evokes very holistic response. Such actions include those that diminish group status, worth and legitimacy in the eyes of its members (Horowitz, 1985). Where the communal group members have the fear of loss of status, worth, subjugation, extermination and act of

injustice ensures that communal groups make radical demands and escalate their conflicts through the use of violence.

Misconception of Religion

Inadequate depth of understanding of both Christianity and Islam within and without these two religions has been identified to have contributed to the misunderstandings that do occur between the followers of the two faiths. Lack of knowledge and information on a popular level, particularly in local languages, of the scriptural-based condemnations of violence and terrorism in both Christianity and Islam has further made some Nigerians to condemn one another on the basis of religion difference. Religious intolerance and extremism which stems from wrong perception of the religion of others and orientation of followers, the level of illiteracy of followers, selfishness on the part of some religious leaders, external influences, manipulation of religion for a selfish end (Bulus, 2005) continue to make the followers of the two dominant religions in Nigeria to see themselves as enemies.

Having established factors responsible for communal conflicts and its destructive nature efforts must be made to address the problem. It is on this note that community-based counselling approaches for managing communal conflicts shall be examined.

Community-based Counselling Approaches in Resolving Communal Conflicts

Counselling and adult education have been seen as helping professions by scholars (Courtney, 1989; Omoegun, 2009; Usman, 2011 & Shitu, 2013). Counselling for example is aimed at helping people in solving their problems using professional skills in a more convenient manner. Adult Education is an intervention that restore lost enabling environment in the community with the view to enabling individuals achieve independence, social integration, emotional balance, economic empowerment, a better quality of life and self-actualization in a participatory and friendly manner. Cousellors and adult educators over the years have recognized the importance of involving the target community in a bid to actualizing the objectives of their programmes. This philosophy is the basis of using community-based approaches in many of their programmes. These approaches are explored in communal conflict resolution as follows.

Empowerment of Local Communities

Empowering the community economically especially youths can go a long way to restrain them from fomenting violence since poverty and unemployment have been identified as important factors that do trigger communal conflict. There are a number of Nigerian youths and adults who do not have any literacy and occupational skill. Functional literacy and vocational skills embedded in empowerment programmes will afford them opportunities to acquire the skills that will fetch them economic resources. When they are engaged in productive activity of this kind they can eschew violence.

Socioeconomic Recovery

Socioeconomic recovery is an important activity in conflict resolution. Through community-based approach

where brotherhood sharing and assistance spirit is promoted the lost socioeconomic resources of the community to conflict can be regained. Health and education facilities, infrastructure, natural resource and environmental management, livelihoods and employment generation for example through the formation of cooperatives and hardworking can be recovered. These initiatives can be put in place to fostering social capital, cooperation across divides, and the foundation for reintegration and reconciliatory processes.

Community Dialogue Initiative

Dialogue is referred to as a conversation or a discussion between two groups where issues are clarified when the participants alternatively speak and listen to each other. It provides the framework that helps in addressing quarrels and disputes; it breeds understanding, peace and unity. This process requires constituting a community-based dialogue committee where respected people in the community are members. Respected religious members of the communities, members of community-based organizations, trusted elders among others can form the members of the committee whose roles is to engage the disputed parties in a serious and unbiased discussion in order to resolve the conflict. The members of this committee must respond effectively to the community calling by using their power of persuasion to persuade all

Traditional Justice and Reconciliation

The issue of injustice is usually cited as one of the factors triggering communal conflict where one community feels she has been cheated or marginalized by the other. It

is important therefore when resolving conflict to address the issue of social justice appropriately. Social justice involves promoting access and equity to ensure full participation in the life of a society, particularly for those who have been systematically excluded on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender, age, physical or mental disability, education, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics of background or group membership. Social justice is based on a belief that all people have a right to equitable treatment, support for their human rights, and a fair allocation of societal resources (Lee, 2007). Restoration of justice is an integral step in healing community relationships.

Community-based Environmental Forum

This is a community-based forum where members of the same community come together to help the community in addressing environmental problems within the community with active participation of the community members. The forum can champion activities such as environmental assessment and environmental education. These may require studying community residents' attitude to filthy environment and discussing environmental issues with people emphasizing the awakening of the consciousness of the people to their environmental problems with a view to addressing the problems. Since environmental pollution has been identified as one of the factors responsible for communal conflict this forum will serve the community in advocating for individuals, private groups, multinational

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companies and governmental agencies to develop positive attitude to environment. This will go a long way to reduce conflicts which might have come through negative attitude to environment.

Community-based Security Forum

Community-based security forum is a forum that brings together the police, civil society and local communities to jointly take responsibility for and develop solutions to local safety and security. The forum can help to check the excesses of parties with the view to prevent the escalation of the trouble.

Community based Counselling Mediation Team

Mediation as a method of resolving conflict involves a group member not currently involved in the dispute intervening in developing a solution to a disagreement. As a community counselling group the members of the team should be drawn from the neutral community where professional counsellors, respected elders and religious leaders serve as mediators. The team should open avenues for communication between group members in conflict. They should allow members to express their opinions and request clarification of other member's standpoints while the mediator acts as a form of protection against any shame or "loss of face" that either disputant may experience. In communal conflict resolution, counselling mediation team can approach their mediation through understanding the causes of the conflicts and mediating in such a manner that the causes are addressed.

Tolerance Education

As social animals, human beings behave and reason differently. In fact we cannot expect everyone in Nigeria to believe in the same God and worship same way and reason or doing things the same way. Our differences on the basis of belief systems, tribes, ideologies, religions among others must be tolerated and respected. Understanding and appreciating other peoples' belief systems and religion practices preached by the tolerance education will go a long way for instil the spirit of endurance and forgiveness in the members of the community. This programme will ensure social harmony peaceful coexistence among people of different religions.

Conclusion

The recurrence of communal conflict in Nigeria unabated is a threat to sustainable community development. Hence, all hands must be on deck to restore peace to our communities. Adult educators and counsellors among other social workers need to showcase the capacity of community-based and counselling approaches to conflict resolution with the view to creating peaceful and sustainable community development.

Recommendations

Based on the above conclusion, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Counsellors and adult educators should popularize community-based counselling approaches and their efficacy in conflict management among Nigerian communities with the view for communities to exploring them in

resolving conflicts. This can be done through writing and public enlightenment for people to be informed of its capacity in conflict resolution.

2. Community-based Counselling should be included in the undergraduate and postgraduate Guidance and Counselling degree programmes of Nigeria universities as a course of its own to enable graduates acquire relevant theories, skills, techniques, philosophy, principles of community-based counselling in order to serve the community better.

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