INTERROGATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN BURUKU COMMUNITY OF BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

It has been observed that many conflicts are unresolved because of the inability of state and non-state actors to facilitate active participation and full community involvement in addressing conflicts through a participatory communication process. In a sample representation of an estimated 203,721 populations in the Buruku community of Benue State, North-Central Zone adopted as a case study, the study examined the effectiveness of participatory communication in conflict resolution. Using participatory communication theory and primary sources of data gathering and analysis methods through Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), the study found that participatory communication facilitates active participation and full community involvement in addressing conflicts impacting them through the communication process. Also, the study established that conflict resolution initiatives that deployed participatory communication were more successful when compared to those that did not. Therefore, the study concluded that participatory communication is the most appropriate tool to address conflicts in pastoral community. This is because it enables all strategic community stakeholders and parties to be actively involved in dialogue, and negotiations, and proffering homegrown solutions in addressing conflicts impacting them. Hence, the study recommended that state and non-state actors should deploy participatory communication in all interventions seeking conflict resolution among communities and individuals.

Keywords: Communication, Community, Conflict, Participatory, Resolution

Introduction

The thrust of participatory communication is to facilitate dialogue beyond information dissemination and establish a process that allows different parties to share ideas and opinions that will empower community members. It goes beyond information sharing to empowering community members to share old and new knowledge, and apply them to solving issues impacting them (Porio, 1990; Tufte and Mefalopulos, 2009). The participatory communication approach has proven that stakeholders' involvement in intervention design and implementation from the beginning to the end not only brings a significant contribution to addressing the targeted problem(s) but also empowers the people by giving them a voice to actively participate in decision making on issues impacting them which leads to success and sustainability (Tufte and Mefalopulos, 2009).

Bloomfield and Reilly (1998), see conflict resolution as constructing approaches of bringing the parties involved together in a cooperative process in a well-designed intervention that will lead to an amicable resolution and management of the conflicts. Conflict resolution also involves adequate studying of the factors responsible for conflict with appropriate intervention to address the issues in a way that all parties will peace (Gumuselli and Hacifazlioglu, 2009).

Aki (2019) sees a community as a collection of persons who share a common geographical location and historical-cultural identity and have common interests and goals that they pursue using social interaction and relationships. The Bukuru community area of Benue State has been impacted by conflicts arising from farmers and herders' clashes leading to a breakdown of peaceful co-existence among inhabitants. The conflict led to mistrust and suspicion among the inhabitants, particularly among the religious and ethnic groups. It led to escalating hostility among community members requiring conflict management and solutions that will restore peace among the people.

The conflict in Buruku aligns with Mavalla, (2016), assertion that conflict is inevitable among humans as a result of divergent opinions and that it plays a key role in societal

development in redefining the society for the better. According to Ugwumba (2018), individuals and groups struggle for survival often leads to violent conflict. Therefore, the conflicts among farmers and herders in Buruku can be linked to their struggle for survival. In addition, Ugwumba (2018), posits that the competition and struggle over land for cattle grazing has over the years led to conflicts among farmers and herders. Ahmadu, (2011), argues that conflicts over scarce resources and the desperation for survival will be on the increase as a result of population increase and the movement of farmers in search of a better place to farm.

Osumah, (2018), points out that poverty, Climate Change, and rapid urbanization, have heightened competition and struggle for survival and further escalating conflicts among farmers and herders with communities in Benue being the most hit. However, the consequences of conflicts among farmers and herders in the Buruku community and other communities in Benue state are huge. This has destroyed lives, and properties, and the displacement of a huge population. The conflicts have negatively impacted livelihoods, economy, and social cohesion and have brought huge distrust among community inhabitants (Adedokun, O., Suleiman, A., and Yusuf, S. 2020).

As conflicts among herders and farmers in Benue state continue, state and non-state actors continue to design and implement interventions targeted at bringing peace and reconciling communities affected by conflicts. For instance, the Nigerian state created Operation Whirl Stroke (OPWS), a military operation targeted at checkmating conflicts such as banditry, kidnapping, and intercommunal conflicts in Benue state. Also leveraging legislation, the Benue state government, enacted the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law targeted at mitigating famers-herders' conflicts.

Stan (2023), argues that many conflicts are unresolved in Benue communities because of the inability of state and non-state actors to facilitate active community involvement in addressing conflicts through a participatory communication process. He added that a fundamental approach to conflict resolution is the ability of the state and non-state actors to mobilize members of the community to be part of the conflict resolution through an effective

participatory communication process. Corroborating the above position, Mawa (2024), points out that community involvement in finding solutions to issues affecting them through participatory communication offers them the opportunity to resolve problems affecting them through dialogue and negotiations.

Nonetheless, non-state actors are playing a key role in addressing conflicts across communities in Benue State through participatory dialogue and negotiations. However, despite their efforts, sustainable conflict resolution continues to be a challenge in communities experiencing conflicts in Benue State. It is against this background that the study's objective is to examine the role participatory communication plays in resoling conflict between herders and farmers in Buruku community of Benue State. Therefore, within the context of the study, it is expected that interventions targeted at conflict resolution in Benue communities and other parts of Nigeria should make participatory communication a priority. This will go a long way in enabling the targeted parties and strategic holders to be actively and fully involved in making decisions on issues affecting them. Also, a better understanding of the issues through a participatory communication process will stem and guide community participation in the issues impacting them. Key lessons from the Buruku community will provide a footprint analysis in Nigeria on the role of participatory communication in conflict resolution.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Participatory Communication Theory as a framework of analysis. The theory supports the active participation of persons in dialogue and negotiation on issues affecting them in the search for solutions that will improve their lives. In his analysis of Participatory Communication Theory, Freire (1973) posits that it facilitates dialogue as a means of empowering people to participate in issues affecting them through the communication process. Also, Anaeto, Onabajo, and Osifeso (2008), point out that the theory facilitates effective knowledge diffusion that allows community members to birth homegrown solutions that are suitable to solve problems impacting them. It does not allow the imposition of external remedies on the people on issues impacting them.

Mishra (2017), explaining participatory communication theory, asserts that it facilitates the active participation of people on issues affecting them through consultation and dialogue. Additionally, Mefalopulos (2008), points out that participatory communication theory considers people a major priority in development, and that development should come from the perspectives of the people, especially the locals. Also, development should be about empowering the people to actualize their rights through active engagement and participation. Therefore, it is based on theory support for the active participation of people on issues affecting them through the communication process that is adopted as a framework of analysis.

Conceptual Analysis of Participatory Communication

According to Okwor (2009), communication is conveying messages from one individual to another. However, Schramm (1983), sees communication as a negotiation that facilitates the active involvement of people on issues affecting them through information sharing. It is on a similar premise that Salomon (1981), asserts that communication facilitates people's participation in community development and drives their perception and basis over the community development agenda.

Onah (2015), points out that communication is a mechanism to achieve human mobilization and coordination in society. It also means people are mobilized to effectively participate in the pursuit of a common agenda targeted at addressing issues impacting them through the communication process. Furthermore, Salomon (1981), postulates that communication facilitates means by which persons influence one another by disseminating information and ideas that guide their actions. Mody (1991), sees participatory communication as a collaborative process of putting messages together among groups targeted at empowering them to change their situation or social formation. Furthermore, Karl (1995), sees participatory communication as a process of empowering people to actively participate in choice-making over issues that impact them. Piotrow et al (1997); and White (1994), explained participatory communication to be the process of educating people to improve their knowledge to actively

participate in addressing issues impacting them.

According to Freire (1973), participatory communication facilitates empowerment, and trust-building, eliminates social inequality among the community and their leaders, and creates room for knowledge sharing on issues impacting them. It facilitates active community participation in making decisions and proffering solutions to issues affecting them. Mawa (2024), asserts that participatory communication facilitates knowledge sharing that empowers citizens to actively participate in issues affecting them. Also, when effectively facilitated, it builds trust among community members, strengthens their commitment to the pursuit of developmental issues, and guarantees sustainability. Many unresolved conflicts across communities in Nigeria and other development-related issues are linked to the inability of the state and non-state actors to effectively facilitate participatory communication that will create room for sincere and truthful dialogue (Akpan 2023). According to Akpan, communities where participatory communication was effectively facilitated have recorded success in conflict resolution compared to those where the state resorted to the use of force as a means of conflict resolution. He added that the use of force by the state as a conflict resolution mechanism without participatory communication only yields short-term results. And in the future the same unresolved conflict resurfaces.

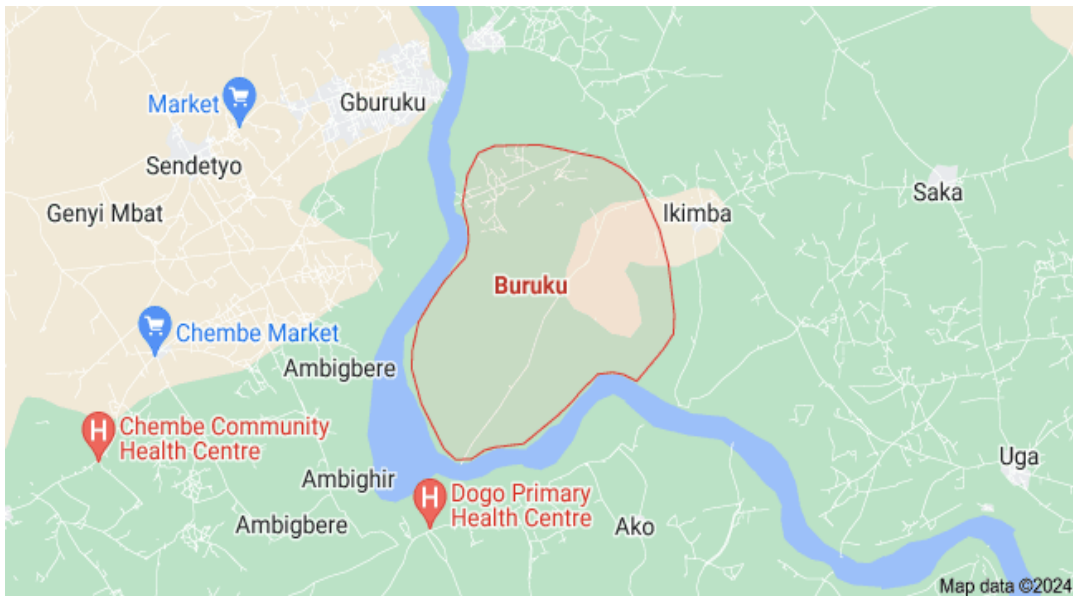**Conceptual Analysis of Conflict Resolution**

According to Benson (2022), conflict resolution are approach and process for bringing conflict to an end through effective and sustainable dispute resolution. In a similar position, Herrity (2022), asserts that conflict resolution approaches facilitate processes that bring parties involved in disagreement together in search of a solution that guarantees peace among them. In addition, Hilal (2011), sees conflict resolution as a tool for peacebuilding targeted at achieving peaceful co-existence and preventing conflicts in the future.

Cohen (2010), asserts that since conflict happens among individuals or groups, efforts targeted at resolving it must ensure that the parties involved give their cooperation and agree to the resolution mechanisms. Interventions targeted at effective conflict resolution processes must

prioritize adequate studying of the conflict to identify the major underlying factors triggers of the conflicts. Thereafter, proper facilitation of communication and dialogue among parties will lead to negotiation and compromise that will give way to peace (Murerwa and Guantai, 2019). However, Stan (2023), asserts that to achieve sustainable conflict resolution, the underlying causes and triggers of conflict must be identified and addressed and the parties encouraged to embrace behaviours that will not result in conflicts anymore.

Materials and Methods for the Research

The study adopted Buruku community located in the Buruku Local Government Area of Benue State along the riverine area of the Katsina-Ala River Basin as a case study. Qualitative methods involving Focused Group Discussion (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were used for data gathering and analysis. The FGDs and KIIs discussions were focused on how effective is participatory communication to conflict resolution in line with the study objectives.

Figure 1: The Study Area

Study Sample

Bukuru has an estimated population of about 203,721 covering an area of 1,246 kilometres of land mass. The study held Focused Group Discussions among 33 participants from the community, 11 women, 11 men, and 11 youth. Key Informant Interviews among 10 members of the community, 10 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), 10 journalists, 5 security personnel, and 3 local government officials. Overall, 71 participants took part in the study.

Results and Discussion

Although the case study, Buruku community, North-Central Zone is not a full representation of Benue State and Nigeria, results from the study gives an understanding of primary accounts of how participatory communication plays a key role in conflict resolution.

40 out of the 43 participants in the Buruku community, said participatory communication played a central role in resolving farmers-herders conflicts in their area. They explained how the Jemgbah Development Association (a socio-cultural group) has deployed participatory communication to resolve conflicts in Buruku, Gboko, and Tarka areas of Benue State. According to them the 14 district heads in Buruku working with Ter Buruku the most ranked traditional ruler, had relied on participatory communication to resolve conflicts in the community. 23 participants gave an example of how CLEEN Foundation (a Non-Governmental organization) deployed participatory communication using a "community resilience project" to resolve farmers-herders conflicts that impacted the community for over three years. According to them, CLEEN Foundation achieved that by facilitating participatory communication that enabled all parties and stakeholders to participate in a sincere and truthful dialogue. 40 participants, agreed that communities where participatory communication has been deployed as a tool for conflict resolution made more progress in conflict resolution when compared to communities where force was used as a tool for conflict resolution.

All 10 Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) representatives in the study, agree that participatory communication is the best approach for conflict resolution. According to them, it builds trust, empowers the community, promotes learning and dialogue, and a deeper understanding of the issues that will lead to genuine conflict resolution. Also, it facilitates a

process that allows all parties to actively participate in the conflict resolution process which births solutions that are acceptable to all parties in the conflict. For them, the inability of the state and non-state actors to facilitate sincere participatory communication is largely a reason for unresolved conflicts in many communities in Nigeria and Africa. They explained and gave examples of how participatory communication has been deployed as a tool for conflict resolution in communities. Two out of the 10 participants, gave examples of how Community Links and Human Empowerment Initiative (NGO) has deployed participatory communication to address long-time conflicts over a fish pond in the Agatu area of Benue state and conflicts among the Jukum and Tiv people in Fiidi community area of Benue over land dispute. Two out of the 10 participants, pointed out how the International Organization for Peace-Building and Social Justice (NGO) has leveraged participatory communication to resolve farmers-herders conflicts in Mangu and Bokos areas of Plateau state. Three out of the 10 participants, gave examples of how COMPPART Foundation for Justice and Peacebuilding (NGO) has deployed participatory communication for conflict resolution over chieftaincy title and gender inheritance in Ikot Akpan Etedu, Edem Anwa, and Ikot Ukpong Eren areas of Akwa Ibom state.

One out of the 10 participants, explained how the deployment of participatory communication led to the resolution of the Dagbon Chieftaincy Dispute in Ghana. According to him, it facilitated a sincere dialogue among parties in Abudu and Andani royal families that led to the resolution of the chieftaincy conflict. All 10 NGO representatives agree that the state and non-state actors should deploy participatory communication as a tool for conflict resolution. According to them, the use of force as a tool for conflict resolution rather than a participatory community approach that will facilitate a sincere dialogue is a result of ignorance of those who do not know the significant role participatory communication plays in conflict resolution. However, they pointed out that its success is largely dependent on how it is facilitated. For them successful participatory communication, requires a strong commitment to fairness and inclusivity. To achieve that, the facilitators must ensure that all parties and

strategic stakeholders are adequately represented, their voices heard and respected, and the processes are transparent and impartial. The above finding supports the research theoretical which advocates for community involvement in addressing issues impacting them through the participatory communication process, and also, the research objective which focuses on giving insight into the importance of participatory communication plays a significant role in conflict resolution.

Eight out of the 10 Journalists who participated in the study agree that participatory communication facilitates inclusivity, trust, and mutual understanding that plays a significant role in conflict resolution. According to them, it facilitates a process that allows for sincere dialogue among all parties and allows them to discuss all grievances. In the end, a reconcilable resolution is generally agreed upon through dialogue and becomes acceptable by all parties. One of them explained how community leaders deployed participatory communication to mobilize people and facilitate a sincere discussion that built trust and understanding which led to an amicable resolution of a conflict that arose over the construction of drainage in the Kubwa area of Abuja, Nigeria's capital city. Three of them gave examples of how they had written stories of events where participatory communication was deployed as a tool for conflict resolution in Bokos and Dolari communities located in Plateau and Borno States respectively. This finding shows a justification of the research theoretical framework and the research object. Community involvement in addressing issues impacting them through the participatory communication process, and shows the importance of participatory communication in conflict resolution.

All five security personnel who participated in the study identified participatory communication as a powerful tool for conflict resolution. For them, it is the only way to understand conflicts and tackle them from the root. According to them, even when a state deploys force for conflict resolution, it only suppresses the situation and does not lead to sustainable peace. They added that even when the state had deployed force as a tool for conflict resolution, she had to leverage participatory communication for guaranteed and sustainable

conflict resolution mechanisms. One of the police officers explained how the "community resilience project" implemented by the CLEEN Foundation facilitated participatory communication that led to the reduction of conflicts in Buruku. According to him, the number of cases reported to the police station by residents drastically reduced, he added that in some instances, in one month, no case is reported to the police station. Three out of the five warned that the use of force by either the state or non-state actors as a tool for conflict resolution instead of participatory communication should be stopped. They say the use of force often backfires making the conflicts worse and difficult to handle. One of them gave an example of how police personnel are leveraging participatory communication and working with community members for conflict resolution in the Apa area of Benue state. The personnel, however, warned that participatory communication must be truthful, sincere, inclusive, and devoid of bias by the facilitators for it to play a successful role in conflict resolution. This result aligns with the research's theoretical framework that favours active people involvement in addressing issues impacting them through a communication process that will facilitate dialogue and negotiation. Also, the research objective that examined the role of participatory communication in conflict resolution.

All three local government officials who participated in the study, perceived participatory communication as the best approach for conflict resolution. According to them, participatory communication has played a critical role in conflict resolution in Burruku and other communities in Benue State. They explained how the local government and other non-state actors have leveraged participatory communication for conflict resolution with farmers-herders' conflicts being the most prominent. Affirming its importance, the officials say communities that enjoy sustainable peace achieved it through a participatory communication approach that was effectively and efficiently conducted with all parties actively involved. They, however, appealed to the state and non-state actors to ensure that effective participatory communication is deployed as a tool for all conflict resolution among individuals and communities in Benue and all other parts of Nigeria. This shows the accuracy of the theoretical

framework adopted in the research which allows for community participation in addressing problems impacting them through communication and the importance of participatory communication in conflict resolution, which the research examined as its objective.

Conclusion

The study was carried out with the objective of providing an understanding of the role of participatory communication in conflict resolution using the Buruku community in Benue State as a case study. The study found that active community involvement through the communication process plays a significant role in conflict resolution. Also, conflict resolution that facilitated a participatory communication approach was more successful when compared to those that did not. Furthermore, many conflicts are unresolved because of the inability of state and non-state actors to facilitate active community involvement in addressing conflicts through a participatory communication process. Participatory communication facilitates a process that enables community members to be actively involved in dialogue, and negotiations, and to proffer generally acceptable solutions in addressing conflicts impacting them. It also empowers communities and individuals through collective dialogue and negotiation, to reach solutions that will be acceptable to all.

However, for participatory communication to play a successful role in conflict resolution, it requires a strong commitment to sincerity, fairness, and inclusivity. To achieve that, the facilitators must ensure that all strategic stakeholders and parties involved are adequately represented, their voices heard and respected, and the processes are transparent and impartial.

Recommendations

In the light of the foregoing discourse, the study provides the following recommendations:

i.   State and non-state actors should ensure that participatory communication is deployed as a tool in dealing with conflict resolution among communities or individuals. This

will allow them to effectively participate in the negotiation and dialogue that will lead to amicable resolution of conflicts among them.

ii.   The use of force by either state or non-state actors as a tool for conflict resolution should be stopped. This is because it will only suppress the issue making it worse to handle when it resurfaces in the future.

iii. Participatory communication should be facilitated in a way that ensures all strategic stakeholders and parties involved are adequately represented, their voices heard and respected, and the processes are transparent and impartial.

iv.   State and non-state actors should ensure that participatory communication is facilitated by experts with practical experience, in that way desired success will be achieved.

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