**Community Development and Conflict Resolution: A Dialectical Approach**

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**Abstract**

Development and conflict are inextricably linked at different levels and in different ways. When human communities are embroiled in any form of conflict, the process of development is not only slowed down, but in most cases reversed. On the other hand, when there is peace harmony and cooperation among members of any community, development is accelerated and sustained. However where conflict has erupted or is imminent, developing the community could to a large extent mitigate the devastating impacts of conflict. This paper examines the role of community development in conflict resolution in communities in Cross River State. The paper examines the causes and types of conflict, while suggesting various ways through the development of human and material capital can engender peace among communities in Cross River State.
*Keywords: Community development, community conflict, conflict resolution, peace, harmony, consensus.*

**Introduction**

Development is both a natural and learned phenomenom, affecting individuals, families, groups, communities and nations. Several theorists and schools (like the evolutionists) believe that development comes naturally, whether it is sought for, desired or planned. Other theorists believe that it (development) is not only a learned activity but a deliberately planned one aimed at improving the natural state of man (Betiang, 2017). We would directly attempt to clarify certain concepts that are both expressed and implied in this discourse. We would attempt to respond for instance to the … questions, what is community? What is development? What is conflict resolution? The answer to these fundamental questions should provide us with the pedestal for identifying the nexus between community development and conflict resolution which is the main focus of this paper.

**Concept of community**

Traditionally, a community has been defined as a group of people living in the same place or having the same characteristics in common (Wikipedia, 2018). Related to the sense of community are concepts like group, section, body, set, circle, clique, ring, faction, etc. Anyanwu ( 2001), conceives of community as a group of people gathered together in any geographical area, whether large of small and united by common interest. This view of community, though limited expresses key fundamental features of shared space, interest, beliefs world view, and challenges.

Other authors like Warren in Akande (2016), say that a community is a small or large social unit that has something in common, such as norms, religion, values or identity. In this context, it is

argued that a community often shares a sense of place that is situated in a given geographical area, example a country, village (Okambi), town (Obudu) or neighbourhood (Ekorenium), or in virtual space through communication platforms (facebook, whatsup, palmchat, etc). Conceived this way, it is to be understood that durable relations that extend beyond genealogical ties also often creates a sense of community, hence providing such classifications as micro and macro communities such as national communities, international communities and virtual communities. Warren argues further that a community is better understood as the organisation of social activities, which involves among other things; production and distribution of goods, socialisation, social control, social participation and mutual support. In a study by McMillan and Chavis (1986), four elements of a sense of community were identified. These were:

1. Membership (of the group)
2. Influence (in and within the group)
3. Integration and fulfilment of needs
4. Shared emotional connection (with community).

**Concept of development**

Development is conceived by different people based on the peculiarity of their trade, vocation or occupation, and training. For the architect for instance, development will connote a situation where the improvement on the natural environment is done methodically, in an orderly manner, paying attention to maintaining the aesthetic equilibrium of the environment. For lawyers and judges development happens when society has reached a stage where there is strict adherence to rules and regulations. A point when society is being governed by the rule of law in such a manner that no man is above the law. Again for engineers, development is when structures are erected in accordance with extant rules of building, including town planning rules. Same goes for the economists who will see development as an improvement in the productive capacity of an economy, with attendant rise in Gross Demotic Product (GDP) and Per-Capita Income (PCI).

In all of these perspectives, it is important to identify one or two strings that tend to run through them all- 'change'. Development connotes change, it connotes improvement, it connotes growth. Little wonder we often hear of growth and development used together as if they meant the same thing. Although they do not, one comes as a result of the other. If development therefore connotes all of the above-mentioned, it would be right to aver that it also means a movement, a shift from one state of being or state of affairs to another, e.g from poverty to sufficiency, from bad health to good health, from ignorance to enlightenment, from dependency to self-reliance, from acrimony, strife, conflict to peaceful co-existence, from rural setting to urbanity, from individualism to co-operation, collaboration and team work. That is what development connotes. It can be seen

therefore that development can also be said to mean personal, social, economic, political cultural as well as physical change as a result of planned, deliberate and positive activities.

**Conflict resolution**

Conflict refers to some form of disagreement, discord or dispute arising from the divergence in perception, understanding, views and opinions between or among two or more individuals. According to Collins English Dictionary (2019), conflict is a serious and argument about something important. It can occur between members of the same group (intra group conflict) or it can occur between members of two or more groups and involve violence, interpersonal discord, etc. Conflict may occur within group or between groups arising from differences in opinion, ideologies or beliefs, or scarcity of resources. At this point, the group is no longer united, and may slip into factions or coalitions. As Baron (1990) sums up, there are four major elements of conflict.

These are indicated as follows:

-There are recognized opposing interests between parties in a zero-sum situation.

-There must be belief by each side that the other one is acting or will act against them

-This belief is likely to be justified by actions taken.

-Conflict is a process, having developed from their past interactions.

Based on these, Rahim (2010) defines conflict as an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities. Conflict resolution would therefore mean a process of attempting to unravel and untangle the inconsistency between wishes and actions of parties involved. Nicolson, (1992) avers that it refers to the methods and processed involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict and retribution. Often, the term dispute resolution is used interchangeably with conflict resolution to encompass all activities – including arbitration and litigation as non-violent means of bringing to an end divergence between and among parties. These activities may be formal, informal non-formal, institutional and non-institutional, personal or group – based.

**Community development and conflict resolution: the nexus.**

We have attempted in preceding paragraphs to highlight the generic meanings of conflict, community, development and conflict resolution. However, it is important to reemphasize the meaning of community development with a view to identifying any roles (if any) it could play in conflict resolution. Community development maybe defined as a process by which members of a given community (geographical, interest, virtual) are enabled to identify their common and shared problems with a view to finding solutions to such challenges using the resources available by that community, (Betiang, 2017). The United Nations defines community development as a process

whereby community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems. It is a broad term given to practices of civic leaders, activists, citizens and professionals to improve various aspects of communities, typically aiming to build stronger and more resilient local communities. In addition to this, the International Association for Community Development (IACD) which is a global network of community development practitioners and scholars defines it (CD) as "a practice based profession ... that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organization, education and empowerment of people within their communities, whether they be locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings.

From the foregoing, we realize that in Nigeria, and perhaps other parts of Africa, we have been engaged in rural development under the guise of community development. One may wonder what difference there is between the two. Simply, whereas community development as has been demonstrated by the foregoing definitions focus on the people (community) as the centre of the development activities, rural development focuses on resources. While community development is participatory, self-initiated and needs-driven, rural development is top – bottom executed, expert based and often exclusionary in nature initiated and driven by governments and agencies outside the community. Rural development tends to alienate the beneficiary communities from the processes of development, hence doing little - most times - to meet the felt needs and aspirations of the community. Being what it is therefore, community development can be seen as a process that begins with the people, focuses on the people, works with the people for the benefit of the people. How then can community development help in conflict resolution in our communities?

These are presumptions in this topic that conflict are already existing in the community for which community development is intended to resolve. A second presupposition is that of the preventive role of community development in preventing conflicts. In both forms, it is important to highlight some causes of conflict within communities as a way of identifying the measure(s) that could be adopted in resolving such conflicts. Among several other ones, the causes of conflict in communities may include:

1. **Economic Inequalities**:
    The struggle for scarce resources has been at the centre of human struggle. It is no coincidence that right from Biblical history, man has always been locked in the struggle for economic resources. Often tied inextricably to natural resources, such struggles, often than not when poorly handled escalate into conflict between individual, groups and communities.

2. **Social Inequalities**:

The stratification of society into social classes in itself carries with it elements of conflicts. When Karl Max talked about class struggle he refers to this constant underlying tensions that define the very foundation of society. Such social inequalities, if left unmanaged or poorly managed they could degenerate into full blown conflicts.

3. **Historic Ethnic Conflicts**:

There are conflicts within communities, between communities, and even between nations that are historical in nature such conflicts transcend and the present generation as they are rooted in age long feuds that have remained largely unresolved, poorly resolved, or unsatisfactorily resolved. Fuelled by ego, pride and the need for revenge, such conflicts take on the garb of perennial events which occur in an identified pattern and at certain times or seasons of the year.

4. **Political Differences:**

Politics is not the evil game that some players and actors would make us believe. It is all about the acquisition, distribution and redistribution of power and authority, following laid down rules. Unfortunately, where such rules are ignored, flouted, or twisted with impunity by the actors, conflicts become inevitable.

5. **Ethnic, Religious, Cultural and Ideological Inequalities**:

As it has been mentioned elsewhere in this paper, naturally ascribed differences along the lines of race, colour, religion, culture and ideology exists constantly in society. Down playing those differences often does not help to prevent conflict, just like blowing them out of proportion does not. However, mismanaging such differences could create serious situations of conflict.

6. **Exclusionary Policies**:

The politics and economics of exclusion is a serious source of conflict in communities. As Ajimobi (2012) noted such exclusion may be manifested in the inequitable distribution of community resources, non – inclusion in decision-making, for instance in politics and other sensitive areas of community life, divisive politics and the elitist disposition of superiority complex among the ruling class.

7. **Illiteracy**:

Of all the causes of conflict in communities, perhaps the most dangerous and most damaging is illiteracy. Illiteracy here is construed to mean the lack of a formal education

which enables one to read, write and count. It is the lack of a non-formal education which equips one with knowledge, skills and a competency to function in a trade or vocation from which livelihood is derived. Originally, mutual suspicion constantly exists between so called "educated" people and the "illiterate" ones. In an age-grade or family meeting for instance, you hear of such remarks like "*the book people have spoken*" or "*they want to cheat us because we are blind (illiterate)*". Among several other causes, conflicts that escalate out of proportion are usually traced to one or more of the highlighted causes. How then may community development help in mitigating this situation?

The following community development initiatives maybe undertaken:

1. **Building stronger and more integrated communities and groups within communities**:
   Direct effort at working with community members and community based organizations like "***Aten", "Bebuabe", "bengilibe***", "***clubs"*** and others across communities may not sound like a great idea, but it does go a very long way in reducing the tensions that often lead to conflicts, especially in age- old ones. Building bridges through and with the parties across whatever divides is a potent way of achieving lasting peace. Such activities must be transparent, sincere, and inclusive for all parties, from planning to execution. Creating opportunities for the contending groups to socialise and interact on neutral grounds is a good way of achieving peace.

2. **Building Local Productive Capacity**:
   In highlighting the causes of conflict, we had noted that struggle for scarce economic resources sits at the top of the many causes of conflict. The reality of the economic situation in our local communities is that the fixed resources are hardly able to cater for the needs of the grown local population, hence the escalation in conflicts arising from the use of those resources. To mitigate these trend community development activities should be refocused on the building of productive capacity among community members. This can be done by way promoting skills acquisition schemes, trades, craft, vocations, etc. Strong vocational training centres should be prefered over the building of town halls and civic centres which add little or no value to the local Gross Domestic Product.
   When local competencies are built, there is going to less reliance on natural resources, and hence less conflict of interest. Osagie, Funmilayo, and Fred ( 2010) demonstrated in a research conducted in the Niger Delta region that when people are self reliant, the feeling of inferiority and economic insecurity is dramatically reduced.

3. **Assets Based Community Development**:

Known as ABCD, this activity is also recognised as an approach to community development which is based on the premise that every community has assets, both human and material. Identifying and harnessing these assets forms a good starting point for bringing development to the community. Because every member of the community is an asset, it means that involving everyone mobilizing these assets mean utilizing what you already have to work towards what you do not have.

4. **Community engagement:** women/youth self help groups, social capital formation, large groups, social capital formation; large group capacitation are some of processes associated with groups dynamics which could predispose the community to averting conflict. Where conflict already exists, building social capital through direct engagement with women/youth groups can never be over emphasized. All these activities are done with a view to shifting attention from the conflict enhancing situations towards building enduring  peace. It goes without saying that the youth population is the most volatile group, hence, measures that aim to mitigate conflicts must deliberately target them.

5. **Encouraging the Provision of Education**.

 It has been demonstrated elsewhere in the paper that the value of education in development can never be measured, considering the inherent value and multiplier effect education can have in the citizenry. Engaging in the provision of direct and indirect input to education for and in the community is a good way to eliminate ignorance and illiteracy.  Research has shown a high correlation between level of education of people and willingness to participate in development activities, between education and standard of living; and between education and other positive aspects of livelihood. When education is designed deliberately for young people not only in the formal mode, but also on other forms of education like community education -which incorporates aspects of civic/political education, value re-orientation need for tolerance and peaceful co-existence, developing a sense of self worth among the citizenry- it will help to reduce existing conflicts while preventing the future occurrence of new ones.

6.  **Sustainable Development**:

 This refers to development which caters to the needs of the present generation without compromising the capacity of future generations to also survive. In conducting community development activities therefore, we must be conscious of the need to obviate future conflicts arising from our current activities, surface to say that most conflicts that exists today are products of previous actions or omissions. It is important therefore to engage in

community development activities that are sustainable, be they economic, political, social, educational or physical development.

The bottom line in all such activities is to ensure all inclusiveness, participation, justice, fair play and the need to recognize the primacy of the people in all developmental efforts. This way, our community developments activities may not only help in resolving conflicts, but also in preventing future ones.

**Conclusion:**

This paper has focused on the relationship between community development and conflict resolution. It highlighted the meaning of community, development, conflict and conflict resolution. The role of community development in conflicts resolution was identified while discussing the causes of conflict in communities. It was concluded that if community development seeks to build consensus, enhance peoples' worth and self confidence through provision of skills training and social enlightenment programmes, conflict could not only be resolved, but also altogether be avoided.

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