

CONTRIBUTIONS OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS TOWARDS PEACE BUILDING FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *The paper is focused on the contributions of faith-based organizations in peace building process for sustainable development in Rivers state, Nigeria. The explanatory approach was adopted through secondary research materials to clarify understanding of concepts that formed major sub-headings in the discourse. The various views of researchers on the subject matter were adequately addressed. The key concepts in the study were also x-rayed. Activity areas of Faith-based organizations in peace building are highlighted. The study suggested among others, that the State and development agencies should synergize with faith-based organizations in areas of funding seminars on peaceful co-existence among the people. Also, Faith-based organizations should keep track of making peace among the people. This will enable them to offer early warning signals about conflicts to the government.*

KEYWORDS: faith-based, organizations, peace building sustainable community development, Rivers State, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The issues of peace and security in the state has inundated a serious public discussion in recent time. It has also attracted the interest and sympathy of stakeholders such as the human right activists, analysts and faith-based organizations among others. As a result, several efforts have been made to continue to focus people's attentions on harmony, unity, love and progress as a strategy to ensure that conflicts which is often defined as clashes, contention, confrontation, battle, competition, struggle, argument, disagreement, denial or controversy with one another are minimized in the society (Sunday and Epelle, 2011). This is because peaceful co-existence is a benchmark to progress and development. A community or state without peace cannot, and will not experience meaningful and sustainable development.

The state and communities has continued to witness deterioration in peace and security in different dimensions. According to Ugwu (2019), since after the 2015 general elections, there has been a rise in restive activities especially among the youths in Rivers state. They engaged in cult related activities in every nooks and crannies of the communities constituting insecurity. In some parts of the state this activity result into youths fighting themselves to avert supremacy, kidnapping and raping of women, destructions of lives and properties as well as the displacement of others from their ancestral homes. Some community members, for fear of

death are taking refuge in some neighbouring communities that are less volatile. Some areas in Emohua, Ahoada, Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni, Ikwerre Oyigbo and Gokhana Local Government Areas to mention but a few are still considered unsafe to live in for fear of being kidnapped.

These violent activities have constituted a grave danger towards achieving sustainable socio-economic, political and cultural development in the state. It is also very worrisome to see that the situation has not really changed significantly in some local government areas, despite the adoption of local vigilantes as a strategy in collaboration with the law enforcement agencies for the purpose of strengthen peace and security in the state. Accordingly, the upsurge in violent activities in the state can also be traced to various factors such as injustice, lack of transparency in management of resources by leaders, irresponsible and lack of inclusive decision making process while the generality of the people languish in abject poverty, failure of political leaders to resolve fundamental issues based on their manifesto before being duly elected into political positions and inequitable distribution of natural resources and social amenities (Madumere-Obike and Ukala, 2013 and Ugwu, 2013).

It is therefore in continuation for the search for solution to these problem that non-state actors such as the Faith-based organizations seek ways to improve on peace and security of the State, especially through the preaching and practice of love, forgiveness, peace and reconciliation to address some of the issues raised.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Improving peace and security has become issues of serious concern to the stakeholders in all parts of the State, as a result of the fact that peace and security of live and properties will promote progress and development in the entire State and Nation. Consequently, some Faith-based organizations have continued to synergize with the State to ensure the way forward to improving peace and security. Sad enough, the activities of these Faith organizations had not been brought to light in the State. The focus of this paper, is to showcase commitment or roles of these Faith-based organizations in peace building process in Rivers State.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in the study is the explanatory approach. This method was adopted because it is a non-quantitative research. According to Afolabi (2015) the approach is a social science research method which employs intensive search for information where it is necessary and also the use of secondary research materials available in order to provide an in-depth analysis of variables of the study.

Conceptual clarifications

Faith-Based Organizations

Fundamentally, there seem to be no generally acceptable definition of the concept of faith-based organizations, perhaps this is due to the fact that the tern is ambiguous. However, faith-based organizations are grass-root organizations or groups of people whose activities are based on faith or beliefs. They can also be regarded as agent of social change in any given society. Accordingly, they can also be referred to as religious group with the intention to promote peace and development. Faith-based organizations are non-state actors with a central religious background that is core to their philosophy, membership, or programmatic approach, although they are not simply missionary but derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles within their various teachings and beliefs (Nwokoro,2017). According

to Clarke (2006), Meville and McDonald (2006) and Sider and Unruh (2004) in Nwokoro (2017) there exist different types of faith-based organizations depending on their beliefs, missions and representative status in the civil society sector. These include:

1. Faith Based Representative Organizations: These groups serve as intermediaries between the state, other faith-based organizations.
2. Faith Based Development organizations: They are groups deeply involved in providing humanitarian services to the neglected in the society.
3. Faith Based Socio-Political Organizations: They rally round the necessary political supports for its member and also create the required enlightenment for the political engagement of their members.
4. Faith Based Missionary Organizations – Are deeply involved in the propagation of their belief and persuading people to join their faith. Sometimes they also carry out community development programmes to attract membership.
5. Faith Based Illegal Organizations: These are terrorist organizations hiding under a popular belief system to instill a different ideological mission that is inimical to the overall well-being of the society.
6. Faith Permeated Organizations – These groups uses doctrinal values and principles to structure their programmes.
7. Faith Centered Organizations: These groups allow flexibility of its membership in terms of participating in religious programmes.
8. Faith Affiliated Organizations: These groups draw existence from already existing religious organizations' values and principles.
9. Faith Background Organizations: They are inspired and guided by existing belief system to render developmental services to the people. Most times operating like the secular non-governmental organizations in organized manner.
10. Faith Based Secular Partnership: They work in collaboration with non-religious organizations such as the civil society organizations to form a contemporary organization which can be facilitated and nurtured by other international organizations such as UNFPA and DFID.

Peace building

The philosophy of peace building has been a subject of serious concern to the United Nations for years and other stakeholders, especially during the cold war in order to reduce violent conflicts between and among nations of the world. On this basis, scholars have offered different views about the concept of peace building. Although, it is a process of preventing conflicts by using certain activities that are fundamental to achieving peaceful co-existence. In the views of Comfort (2018) peace building is understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships. It is further stated that the term involves formal self-structural activities which metaphorically, make peace to be seen as not merely a stage in time or a condition rather as a dynamic social construct. According to Adekola and Ezechinnah (2019) it is an intervention designed to prevent the start or resumption of violent conflict by creating a sustainable peace. It depicts the process that addresses the root causes or potential causes of violence, create a societal expectation for peaceful conflict resolution for the stability of the socio-political and economic conditions. The process must also be progressive to attract supports of various stakeholders and openness for reconciliatory efforts. Osemene (2012) posites that it is a means through which political condition that ensure

justice and social stability through formal and informal institutions, practices and norms are maintain. Critical factors for sustainable peace building in any given society as noted by Igbuzor (2011) requires evolving ways through which the root causes of conflicts are addressed using participatory democracy, just and accountable governance, rule of law, respect for human rights, and a balance and equitable distribution of resources, among others.

Accordingly, Enaigbe and Igbinoghene (2016) sees it as a deliberate attempt to live in peace or formation of peaceful habit; and honest attempt to live in peace with others. It entails positive behavioural management by striving to live a friendly, caring lifestyle with others while avoiding offensive behaviours. This implies that bad attitudes and behaviours are avoided while promoting those lifestyles that are considered necessary for peaceful co-existence in the society, and these are things the religious faith based organizations proclaim. Nevertheless, Daniel, Yigal and Rafi (2009) suggested the use of the following strategies to guide early peace building process in the society.

1. Peace building should be community oriented: The community should share together experiences of peace building process through educational means.
2. Peace building is an orientation: it can be regarded as a learning process where views and opinions are evaluated.
3. Peace building should be early: Teaching people, especially the children on peaceful dispositions will help to accumulate knowledge that can suggest possible peaceful co-existence.
4. Peace building should be an open-minded process: It is essential that peace building process involve alternative views in order to properly educate people to adhere to the values of peace.
5. Peace building activity should be relevant: It is very imperative that peace building activities be related to current concerns and issues of society. A relevant approach to the process will show that the people are actually dealing with real-life issues that concern society.
6. Peace building requires experiential learning: This is key to acquisition of values, attitudes, perceptions, skills, and behavioral tendencies that will enhance peace maintenance among the people.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development has become a popular issue in international discus thereby attracting different definitions. A cursory look at the concept suggest that it is a programme of action that has emerged from basic human values, from concerns about the consequences of past exploitation, and from scientific demonstration of the long-term harm inflicted on the environmental and social capital (Flint,2013). According to Emas (2015) the most often used definition of sustainable development is that proposed by the Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment. It defined sustainable development as development that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. Though the Report provided a clear definition of sustainable development, however it lacks the ways of achieving this it.

Explicitly, sustainable development is not a new idea. It has been an existing practice that recognizes the need for harmony between human beings and the environment in the course of carrying out human activities. Sustainable development in the words of Rabie (2016) involves the simultaneous pursuit of environmental quality, economic prosperity, human development, social equity, freedom, human values, and cultural diversity. It is a pursuit that would result to

the protection of the environment, enable all people to meet their basic needs, achieve social justice and peace, and liberate women and men from political and cultural chains that undermine their potential. It is also noteworthy to state that, achieving sustainable development require the integration of all human and material resources, on the other hand, fostering an ideal atmosphere that is necessary for the enhancement of ecological integrity and social equity.

Contributions of faith-based organizations towards peace building in Rivers State

In recent times, scholars have made attempts to fill the gap occasioned by the inattention accorded to the contributions of faith-based organizations in peace building process in the society. Thereby, embracing themselves with the opportunity to provide in-depth analysis of the faith-based organizations as an important instrument that can influence factors responsible for peaceful co-existence among people. According to Wang (2014) the presence of religious body in peace building is a term used to 'describe the range of activities they perform for the purpose of resolving and transforming violent conflicts, with the goal of building social capital and political institutions characterized by an ethos of tolerance and nonviolence. Besides, the immediate roles of the organizations to post violent conflicts areas is to initiate a humanitarian and psychosocial supports for emotional and physical healing of harms inflicted on the victims. Secondly, the preaching of reconciliation among affected areas of operation and also to initiate intra and inter-ethnic dialogue in areas identified as hotspots, efforts geared towards bringing reconciliation among bitterly divided communities (Tenaw, 2018). Thus, the involvement of faith-based actors in the process is capable of facilitating cohesion, protection, and mediation that allows for peaceful co-existence. Haynes (2009) argued that the main contributions of faith-based organizations in peace building process involved the provision of emotional and spiritual supports to war-affected communities; effective mobilisation for peace mediation between conflicting parties; and serving as a conduit in pursuit of reconciliation, dialogue, and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration among others.

As a result, Browne (2014) explained the contributions of faith-based organizations in peace building for sustainable development as those related with the followings:

Early warning: Faith-based organizations provides the early warning signals of worsening peace and security situations in the society as result of their closeness to the people.

Emergency relief and support: Most of the faith-based organizations feel very comfortable providing relief materials to support the victims of violent conflicts and also to offer psychological services during and in the aftermath of conflict situation. For instance, in Nigeria and Rivers State, in many occasions the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has offered to pray, counsel and provided essential items for the relieve of victims of violent conflicts irrespective of their religious backgrounds. Assemblies of God women association and the Catholic women, apart from prayers, also visited warring camps soliciting for peace. This kind of support was also replicated sometimes in the former Yugoslavia and other places.

As Observers: The international Faith based organizations such as the Peace Brigades International usually sends representatives to conflict zones in order to observe the level of human rights abuses. On the other hand, their presence also helps in discouraging abuses and to enable proper documentation of human rights violations among others.

Information and data collection: Documenting the effects of violence is an important first step in resolving conflict. Accordingly, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) established a documentation committee to carry out head counts of Christians and properties negatively

affected by conflicts. The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria and the Ansurul Islam both set up committees to collect data on the impact of violence on their members and several of these organizations are well known to reporting data back to the government for reparations.

Advocacy: Many faith-based organizations sometimes play activism in order to create awareness for the government to pursue after peace. Advocacy is commonly used in international conflicts. It has been used comfortably in Nigeria, Kenya and Nepal among other nations of the world to lobby for peaceful co-existence.

Education and teaching: Religious actors also play some roles in peace building through the education of their members and in ensuring conflict transformation. This is because they have the legitimate position to teach members the value of peace and ways of respecting others religious beliefs.

Convening dialogues: Periodic inter faith dialogue is seen to be very necessary to the building of social capital from the background of other religious bodies for peace and security of lives and properties. This method had facilitated peace in many warring communities or nations of the world. Many faith-based organizations, especially Christian Association of Nigeria in collaboration with other religious bodies had initiated peace building seminars to discourage the dispositions of violence among people.

Mediation: Faith based actors have often mediated to achieve peace between warring parties in a consistent manner that portray their prowess to intervening over conflicts. On this basis most parties in conflicts would always request for the presence of faith-based actors because of their commitment to peace and position in resolving conflicts.

Psychological Healing: They provide counselling services and emotional supports to victims to heal victims of their experiences during violent conflicts.

CONCLUSION

There is a demonstrable evidence based on the available literature to this paper that faith-based organizations adequately contribute to the facilitation of peace building process for sustainable development in the society. Their efforts to making peace in any society cannot be over emphasised. This is because of their commitment to preaching peace among their adherence, providing humanitarian supports to victims, mediating between parties in conflicts and possibly providing early warning signals about conflicts to the state. Thus, the paper in conclusion perceives the contributions as very important instrument that can adequately assist the state in peace building process.

Recommendations

With this revelation in mind, it is necessary to recommend that:

1. Government should synergize with faith-based organizations in areas of funding seminars in order to encourage peaceful co-existence among the people.
2. Faith-based organizations should also show more zeal and commitment to peace building process through strong psychological and materials supports to victims. This will enable the people feel a sense of care, relief and belonging to the society.
3. Faith-based organizations should keep track of making peace between people. This will enable them to provide early warning signals of the deterioration of peace among the people.
4. Peace building should be the concern of every member of the community to avert conflicts.

5. The community should through its structure and organs institute peace building process and enforce it.
6. Other community organizations should emulate the peace activities of the faith based organizations

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Early: Teaching people, especially the children on peaceful dispositions will help to accumulate knowledge that can suggest possible peaceful co-existence.

Peace building should be an open-minded process: It is essential that peace building process involve alternative views in order to properly educate people to adhere to the values of peace.