

## **Conflict-Sensitive Communication among Citizens and Journalists as a Means of Facilitating Peace in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Nigeria today is fraught with diverse security challenges that hamper peace in the country. From the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, the agitations for Biafra in the South-East, to bandits and kidnappers across the nation, the country is constantly filled with tension and violence. Tension and violence are also ignited or exacerbated by the incendiary rhetoric of individuals and groups in public. Anchored on the Theory of Change for Peace Building, this paper adopts an interpretive approach and relies on secondary data. It explains what conflict-sensitive communication means and makes a case for its use to ratchet down the national temperature and promote peace. The paper also provides guidelines for the utilisation of conflict-sensitive communication by citizens and journalists, and recommends their training to be able to do this. It further recommends a sincere practice of faith by Nigerians to inculcate in them the love for and pursuit of peace through conflict-sensitive communication. Moreover, it calls for the government to stop its acts of repression, demonstrate political will for peace and enthrone justice/fairplay for all citizens for these efforts to bear lasting fruit.

**Key Words:** Conflict-sensitivity, Communication, Citizens, Journalists, Peace

### **Introduction**

Nigeria is 61 years old, having regained freedom from her British colonisers in 1960. Being a heterogeneous country with three main ethnic groups (Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa) in a total estimated at between 250 to 400; two main religions (Christianity and Islam) and a multiplicity of traditional religions and other faiths; holding the country together has been an arduous task from the outset (Reed & Mbenu, 2015). The constant contentions between her component groups resulted in a 30-month civil war between July 1967 and January 1970 that saw an estimated one to three million citizens killed, especially in the South-East (Korieh, 2012; Dark, 2020).

The lessons from that bloodbath did not lead to a lasting healing of the rifts in the country due primarily to the negation of then Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon's "No Victor, No Vanquished" declaration in actual government business. As a result, Nigeria's unity remains fragile and the country is still devoid of lasting peace over six decades after independence (Nze, 2014; Nwanze, 2020).

Her citizens still identify themselves more by their ethnic groups than as Nigerians and it is common to see one group pouring invectives on and threatening other groups in the media (traditional and new) and in public gatherings. Expectedly, such communications inflame passions and as the cliché goes, "heat up the polity" (Ibrahim, 2014; Ojo, 2021).

In contemporary times, when people are asked to state what they know about Nigeria, they often mention terrorism, farmers-herders attacks, kidnapping, banditry and communal clashes (Johnson, *et. al.*, 2020; Dami, 2021). Travel advisories have also been issued warning foreigners and Nigerians in the diaspora of the dangers they could encounter if they visit the country. These advisories like the one issued by the UK government provide detailed information on recent incidents of crime and unrest, the potential and flashpoints for similar occurrences in the near future plus other challenges travellers may face (Foreign travel advice: Nigeria, 2021). This information is helpful to Nigerians travelling within the country as well.

The prevailing insecurity and conflict in Nigeria are antithetical to the national motto of "Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress" that has been displayed on the country's coat of arms since 1978. No nation can develop substantially in the midst of constant conflict.

Conflict, by definition, is “a clash or struggle between groups (or individuals) that perceive that their needs, goals or strategies are incompatible, mutually exclusive or antagonistic” (Conflict-sensitivity and peacebuilding, 2016, p. 11 [words in brackets, mine]). Conflict has also been described as “parties disagreeing and acting on the basis of perceived incompatibilities” and violent conflict as “resort to psychological or physical force to resolve a disagreement” (Haider, 2014, p. 2). Violent conflict results when signs of conflict are not promptly and properly addressed.

Conflict arises when resources are scarce and unfairly shared, power is exercised unevenly, the parties involved have misconceptions about one another, there are outstanding grievances from the past and there is “little or no communication between the” parties (Howard, 2004, p. 6, emphasis, mine) or hateful and uncompromising communications predominate the interactions between the parties. The importance of the right kind of communication in preventing and resolving conflicts cannot, therefore, be over-emphasised.

Conflict sensitivity means having “an understanding of ... conflict” contexts “to avoid doing harm and exacerbating tensions” (Conflict-sensitivity and peacebuilding, 2016, p. 14). It means having some idea of what can lead to conflicts, what can worsen them in different situations and what can de-escalate or resolve them. According to (Haider, 2014, p. 1):

Conflict sensitivity emerged as a concept and tool to help aid actors to understand the unintended consequences of aid and to act to minimise harm and achieve positive outcomes. Although conflict sensitivity originated in the humanitarian field, it has since been applied in a wide range of development, peacebuilding and statebuilding contexts.

The concept has attracted widespread attention due to the growing cases of conflict around the world and the acknowledgement that interventions in fragile situations can worsen matters if not properly planned and executed.

Ohaja (2021, para. 2) simply defines conflict-sensitive communication as communication that sees or anticipates “what can lead to or aggravate conflict and avoids or restrains it.” She adds that it includes “communication that aids in the resolution of conflict.” It is the kind of message which upholds the development principle, “Do no harm (DNH)” (Haider, 2014, p. 12). In other words, it consciously avoids injuring the parties involved in a conflict. It is thoughtful and mutually beneficial. It does not exclude or disrespect any of the parties in a dispute. It does not coerce or intimidate them either. It is, therefore, the kind of information exchange that is essential for peacebuilding in interpersonal and group relations that ultimately contribute to national stability and cohesion.

Peace, the goal this paper seeks, means, in the words of Albert Einstein, “not merely the absence of war but the presence of justice, of law, of order – in short, of government” (Cited in Vesilind, 2005, p. 43). In other words, there may still be lack of peace in the absence of war. On his part, Johan Galtung, who is regarded as the father of Peace Studies, asserts that, “peace is a relation, between two or more parties. The parties may be inside a person, a state or nation, a region or civilization, pulling in different directions. Peace is not a property of one party alone, but a property of the relation between parties” (Galtung, 2014, para. 1).

He also distinguishes between negative peace – “the absence of violence, like a cease-fire” when the combatants are kept apart and positive peace – “the presence of harmony” (Galtung, 2014, paras. 4 & 5). Certainly, both negative and positive peace are desirable but the latter is preferable.

In the light of the foregoing, this paper aims to make a case for a wider adoption of conflict-sensitive communication in Nigeria, bearing in mind its proven potential for contributing to the attainment of peace. The paper highlights the approaches through which citizens (both the highly-placed and ordinary people) and journalists can engage in conflict-sensitive communication as individuals and organisations to promote harmony in the country. The paper adopts a descriptive and interpretive approach and draws heavily from available literature.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on The Theory of Change for Peacebuilding (TOC). TOC is a construct for formulating and evaluating development interventions that are multi-sectoral. As a result, it is not a single theory but the core assumptions (actions and goals) used in conceptualising, implementing and assessing peacebuilding initiatives.

In its booklet on the subject, CARE International UK explains that:

Peacebuilding programming is built on numerous assumptions, or “theories of change”, about how interventions contribute to peace. In its simplest form a theory of change can be stated as, “We believe that by doing X (action) it will achieve Y (progress towards peace)”. For example, “If we train key leaders in negotiating skills, they will become more effective advocates for their interests through nonviolent means”. Or, “If we generate jobs for unemployed youth, they will be less available to be recruited to violence”

Articulating a theory of change offers a clearer picture of the intended result from an action.... In other words, a well-articulated theory of change represents a testable hypothesis regarding how the planned activities will contribute to achieving the desired results for the programme (Peacebuilding with impact: Defining theories of change, 2012, p. 3).

Similarly, a TOC has been described “as a tool that explains and articulates the process of change, and can be used to design, monitor and evaluate social change initiatives, such as peacebuilding” (Theories of change in peacebuilding: Learning from the experiences of peacebuilding initiatives in Nepal, 2012, p. 3). Ideally, the theory should be used in the context of specific peace projects where the measurability of outcomes is higher but it will suffice for this paper which serves the purpose of knowledge sharing and expanding the discourse towards enhancing the prospects for peace in Nigeria.

TOCs are widely used by United Nations' agencies and other development organisations, particularly in their work in conflict-prone areas. For example, CARE Nepal ran a four-year project between 2008 and 2012 called Women and Youth as Pillars of Sustainable Peace (WYPSP). The project built “the capacity of the poor, vulnerable and socially excluded (PVSE) women and youth” so they could be heard in peacebuilding processes. Its TOC was:

If peace centres are strengthened and the capacities of peace ambassadors, citizen journalists, peace pressure group and mediators are developed to enable them to raise the issues of the PVSE, then peace groups will contribute to local peacebuilding processes. (Theories of change in peace-building: Learning from the experiences of peacebuilding initiatives in Nepal, 2012, p. 15).

The project recorded appreciable progress due to its inclusivity and the input of all affected groups in the peace process.

Peacebuilding is a multi-sectoral endeavour. For instance, between 2012 and 2017, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) funded a programme to end violent conflict and

promote peace and stability in Nigeria. The programme called Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP) worked in four key areas:

- Security and Governance: to make them more effective and accountable
- Economic and Natural Resources: to address grievances on their inequitable distribution and use
- Women and Girls: to lessen violence against them and equip them to contribute more to peacebuilding
- Research, Advocacy and Media: to provide data on conflicts to drive policies to curb them and train the media to report conflicts with greater sensitivity (Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme, n.d).

It is in the last area that this paper is interested. It holds that building the capacity of citizens and journalists to embrace and practise conflict-sensitive communication will go a long way in reducing disagreements and distrust among Nigerians and ushering in peace.

### **Making a Case for Greater Awareness of and Practice of Conflict-sensitive Communication at All Levels in Nigeria**

To buttress the need for the wider application of conflict-sensitive communication in Nigeria, some illustrations that can serve as cautionary tales are hereby presented.

On June 1, 2021, the Office of Nigeria's President, Muhammadu Buhari, issued a statement warning that "a rude shock" awaits "those bent on destroying the country through promoting insurrection, and burning down critical national assets." The statement which was aimed at agitators for Biafra's independence in the South-East further referred to Nigeria's civil war and threatened that, "Those of us in the fields for 30 months, who went through (that) war, will treat them in the language they understand. We are going to be very hard sooner than later" (Akwagiyiram, 2021, paras. 5 & 7).

Although the President's statement was made in response to attacks on policemen and police stations in the South-East, its belligerent tone and the fact that the government has not sought to discuss with the agitators for secession but has unleashed several brutal military operations against them while coddling Islamic insurgents, Fulani herders plus Northern bandits and kidnappers who have perpetrated acts of violence only strengthened the resolve of the combatants he addressed. They have continued with acts of civil disobedience, like lowering the Nigerian flag on public buildings and giving sit-at-home orders every Monday in the South-East.

Similarly, in the build-up to the 2015 elections, the Oba of Lagos, Rilwanu Akiolu, was reported to have released a curse that Igbos who voted for the challenger in the Lagos State governorship elections, Jimi Agbaje of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), rather than the incumbent whom he endorsed, Akinwunmi Ambode, of the All Progressives Congress (APC), would drown in the Lagos Lagoon (Ohaja, 2015). This sparked a huge uproar and an International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation amid fears of violence in parts of Lagos State densely populated with Igbos (Eze, 2015).

In the same vein, South-East Nigeria has become a flashpoint of violence in recent years due to the "inflammatory rhetoric" of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)'s leader, Nnamdi Kanu (Alabi & Ayeloja, 2019, p. 1) and his followers as well as attacks on security personnel and infrastructure in the region. Contributing to the violence is the federal government's practice of "fighting fire with fire and painting everyone in the South East, whether supporters of IPOB or not, with the same brush" (Wodu, 2021, para. 6) and meting out violent reprisals indiscriminately. For instance, in May 2021, Kanu is reported to have tweeted thus:

If you are a commander of troops in the Nigerian Army or police, hear this: That you are wearing a uniform and adorning a rank, it does not make you invincible.

If any #Biafran is killed on your orders, you will be hunted and punished, sooner than later. We are taking stock and bidding our time (Cited in Opejobi, 2021, paras. 5 & 6).

The killings of security personnel that have occurred in the South-East since 2021 have been linked to this and similar utterances and have been met with heavy security presence and retribution in the South-East. Before his arrest in June 2021 by the Nigerian government, Kanu's tendency for incendiary speech on Radio Biafra which he founded in 2009 have brought down the heavy hand of the federal government on the South-East and intermittent retaliation by IPOB and its paramilitary arm, Eastern Security Network (ESN) set up in 2020, and so the cycle of violence continues (Adewole, 2021; Nigeria: At least 115 people killed by security forces in four months in country's Southeast, 2021).

However, it is clear that the South-East has no monopoly on threatening speech. In fact, it can be argued that the emergence of Kanu and IPOB in the South-East and Yoruba rights activist, Sunday Adeyemo, alias Sunday Igboho, in the South-West is reactions to the intimidating rhetoric and oppressive actions of the federal government and some Northerners (Badru, 2021; Wodu, 2021). For example, Miyetti Allah, Arewa Youths and other Northern groups have over the years used fiery and dismissive language to address other parts of the country and now they seem to be pushing back (Ezea, 2017; Lenbang, 2019; Mbah, 2019; Miyetti Allah threatens war with southern Nigeria, vows to acquire land forcefully, 2021).

For peace to reign in the country, Nigerians need to adopt conflict-sensitive communication that sues for peace and quenches the flames of fury and violence, rather than adding fuel to fire through the kinds of communications cited above.

#### **Conflict-sensitive Communications by Individuals as Facilitators of Peace in Nigeria**

Digital technology, particularly the internet and social media, have elevated interpersonal communications to the point where millions of people can be exposed to them in seconds. They thus have far-reaching consequences because people can react to them instantaneously even before they get all the facts of the situation.

Furthermore, it is common to witness "heated conversations where people say mean things to one another" online. "Some are so hurt by these toxic exchanges that they swear off social media for a while. Some interactions online result in deep psychological wounds, both to the aggressors and the victims because ... we injure ourselves too when we inflict pain on others" (Ohaja, 2021, para. 1; May, 2013). As Kaltung (2014)'s definition of peace shows, peace can be within a person and attainment of internal peace results in calmness and civility while a lack of it can manifest in frustration and aggressive conduct which can hamper the peace of the wider society (Fatemi, 2021).

Individuals, therefore, need to carefully weigh what they say to one another in the public space online because these erstwhile interpersonal communications are capable of igniting strife and chaos. It is a mistake to get into squabbles online when they can be avoided because online disagreements can lead to offline violence (Hatzipanagos, 2018). As a result, individuals need to learn how to engage in conflict-sensitive communication for both their interpersonal and wider interactions on and offline.

#### **Guidelines for the Utilisation of Conflict-sensitive Communications by Individuals**

Ohaja (2021, paras. 4-13) offers the following guide to help people identify when their exchanges fail to meet the requirements of this type of communication. Although this blueprint was developed in the context of online communication, its essential principles are applicable outside cyberspace as well.

\*\*\*Do you insist on airing your views on every matter you come across, including those you may have little or no knowledge of?

\*\*\*Do you use a harsh and insulting tone? Do you sound like your view is the only valid one and everyone who thinks differently is a moron?

\*\*\*Do you mount campaigns to cancel those who hold opposing views to you?

\*\*\*Do you share lies, rumours and unsubstantiated negative reports that could harm others and lead to strife?

\*\*\*Do you make accusations without evidence and impute wrong motives to others?

\*\*\*Do you make *ad hominem* attacks on people you discuss with?

\*\*\*Do you threaten and doxx people you disagree with?

\*\*\*Do you keep at a conversation even when it has escalated to a fight? (Insisting on having the last word)

\*\*Do you threaten to block people and report them to the platforms you're on incessantly?

If you answered to the foregoing in the affirmative, start doing the opposite and you will become a conflict-sensitive communicator.

Advice along these lines must be taken seriously by people of different religions, such as Christians and Muslims, if they want to sincerely live out the tenets of their faiths and uphold peace in the process (Bratmeier, Lin & Miller, 2010).

### **Conflict-sensitive Communications by Journalists as Facilitators of Peace in Nigeria**

Journalists play essential roles in society, the most important of which is providing members of the public with news of recent events and interpreting it in a comprehensive manner so that they can understand and make informed decisions based on it (Ohaja, 2005). This duty makes journalists very important to societal stability through how they perform it. In a highly heterogeneous country like Nigeria where the component groups have divergent interests and conflict seems ever present, journalists need to know how to report news in order to make a positive rather than a negative contribution to the country's chances of attaining peace.

This they can do by engaging in conflict-sensitive communication, specifically called conflict-sensitive reporting/journalism. In fact, this type of "Conflict reporting by the media is very important for the development of any society" (Abonyi & Ohaja, 2021, para. 13).

According to a handbook on the subject from Internews, conflict-sensitive reporting means that journalists understand "causes of conflict, the dynamics of conflict escalation and how conflicts can be addressed." It also means that they are aware of how they can help promote peace and how their reporting can worsen conflict. "Inaccurate reports, biased coverage (intentional or not), sensationalism and in some instances outright propaganda can exacerbate conflict and result in loss of life and destruction of property" (Handbook: A conflict sensitive approach to reporting on conflict and violent extremism, 2020, p. 7).

### **Guidelines for the Utilisation of Conflict-sensitive Communications by Journalists**

Howard (2004) identifies specific approaches through which conflict-sensitive journalism can contribute to resolution of conflict:

1. Providing channels for opposing sides to speak to each other and air their grievances, rather than allowing one side to monopolise the media and use them to hurl threatening messages at other parties. Giving opportunities for the parties to vent and interact can arrest the trouble before violence erupts.
2. Educating the various sides on one another's inner politics and difficulties in accepting gestures for reconciliation. Going beyond the statements of leaders to see the underlying interests that are fuelling the conflict which superficial and slapdash measures will not assuage.
3. Building trust between the sides in the dispute by encouraging openness about grievances and burning matters and expressing optimism that reconciliation is possible.
4. Correcting misconceptions that the disputing parties have about one another, thus improving the prospects for conflict resolution.
5. Injecting human interest into stories about conflict, not just focusing on the leaders, but also featuring ordinary people and showing the toll the conflict has had on them. Avoiding the use of derogatory labels is important in doing this. It is best to call each group by the name it calls itself and let its members explain why they are involved in the dispute and what it has cost them.
6. Helping leaders in conflict to explain to their followers that they have not abandoned them when they agree to a compromise because, typically, no party in a conflict gets everything it wants if a consensus must be reached.
7. Searching for and reporting proposals for solutions from the parties involved (leaders and followers alike), mediators and other sources with plausible ideas.

Training journalists in these and other aspects of conflict-sensitive reporting and giving them the liberty to practise it will go a long way in helping Nigeria achieve peace. Conflict-sensitivity training is not only for journalists. During its years of operation, NSRP, in collaboration with the National Orientation Agency (NOA), trained media personnel, politicians and other prominent people, like bloggers and social media influencers in different geopolitical zones on how to engage in conflict-sensitive communication. Such programmes need to be revived and run continually if Nigeria wants to make concerted efforts to achieve peace. These trainings can be stepped down to the rest of the populace through the state and local government offices of NOA, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), schools, churches, media organisations and other capable bodies.

### **The Place of Faith in Engendering Conflict-sensitive Communication for Peacebuilding in Nigeria**

Almost every religion teaches its adherents the importance of seeking and living in peace (Bratmeier *et al.*, 2010). For example, in Christianity's sacred book, The Holy Bible (2015), the Messiah is called the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) and Christians are commanded to pursue peace with everyone (Romans 14:9, Hebrews 12:14). This would make every Christian peace-loving and a peacemaker in today's conflict-ridden world (Titus 3:1-2, Matthew 5:9).

Similarly, Islam is described as the religion of peace (Omar, 2015; Akhter & Qadoos, 2017). In fact, "The word Islam means peace and submission," "Muslims greet each other by saying '*Salaam alaykum*' meaning 'peace be upon you'" and "The Qur'an teaches that Allah wants Muslims to control their aggression and approach others with peace" (What does Islam teach about war and peace, 2022). Although terror groups like Boko Haram and Muslim mobs who lynch non-Muslims on accusations of blasphemy besmirch the image of Islam, when the aforementioned teachings of the religion are upheld,

they enable Muslims to peacefully co-exist with people of other faiths (Teri, 2022; Terrorists 'have given Islam a bad name' –Buhari, 2019).

Communication is central to life and one's beliefs will necessarily be expressed through it. Therefore, a life of faith which cherishes peace will increase the likelihood of one engaging in conflict-sensitive communication on traditional and new media as well as other fora to achieve it. It will also make one more amenable to instruction on such communications and other avenues for seeking peace.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

Conflict and violence tend to multiply after their kind and there is no doubt that communication contributes greatly to this multiplication if improperly handled. Applying the recommendations made so far in this paper will foster a wide application of conflict-sensitive communication in the country and Nigeria will vastly improve the presence of peace within her borders.

These recommendations include the training of citizens and journalists in the application of the suggested guidelines for the utilisation of conflict-sensitive communication and a genuine adherence to the wholesome teachings of their respective faiths by Nigerians.

However, the country requires a demonstration of political will for peace by government and for it to treat every group within her equally. The feeling that some parts of the country are placed above others fuels arrogance among the favoured and anger among the disfavoured, which manifest in how they address one another and breed conflict.

Furthermore, upholding the constitutional provision on freedom of expression, rather than broadly classifying all criticism of government as hate speech and persecuting the sources, is important for the enthronement of lasting peace in the country. It is more helpful than harmful to the polity that citizens air their views and demand accountability of the government. Repression breeds rebellion, just like ethnocentrism and religious bigotry by government officials alienate citizens of other ethnicities and religions, thereby causing animosity that manifests in inflammatory rhetoric and conflict.

On a final note, peace is achievable in Nigeria but the different groups within her need to pursue it sincerely, from those in the highest echelons of power to the ordinary people on the streets.

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