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Role of Libraries in Conflict Resolution: The Niger Delta Case

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Introduction

“Some amazing paradoxes have come from the development of the Niger Delta region. Ordinarily, the Niger Delta should be a gigantic economic reservoir of national and international importance. Its rich endowments of oil and gas resources feed methodically into the international economic system, in exchange for massive revenues that carry the promise of rapid socio-economic transformation within the delta itself. In reality, the Niger Delta is a region suffering from administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructure and service, high unemployment, social deprivation, abject poverty, filth and squalor and endemic conflict” (UNDP, 2006:9).

The Niger Delta Region

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria extends from the Calabar River to the Benin River, with a coastal area and a hinterland. The hinterland is watered by rivers and streams that flow through the coastal delta to the sea. A vast expanse of rivers, creeks, and mangrove swamps, the Niger Delta is where the River Niger finally meets the Atlantic Ocean after a 4,200 kilometre journey from Guinea. The terrain is difficult, criss-crossed by rivers and streams (Ikime, 2006: 218). The region has many ethnic groups, including Ijo, Isoko, Urhobo, Ijebu, Ogoni, and Itsekiri peoples (Anderson and Peak 2002: 12). The area is often referred to as the South-South geo-political zone. Even though the South-South geo-political zone is not conterminous with the Niger Delta, all of the delta belongs to this zone.

According to Alamiyeseigha, (2005:65), “for decades, it (the Niger Delta region) has been the wellspring of Nigeria’s main source of revenue, thanks to the discovery of huge oil deposit. But far from enriching the lives of the 29 million people who live there, it has had a negligible impact. Most live in abject poverty and what constitutes the basic necessities of live, electricity, sanitation, running water, health care, education, - are regarded as luxury.” Oil exploration and production in the Niger Delta region have degraded the environment, devastating fish stocks and farm lands, the principal sources of local income. Widespread pollution has damaged people’s health, reducing life expectancy. Many youngsters who would have gone into farming or fishing are discouraged because of diminished yields. They also notice that the bulk of oil industry management jobs go to expatriates or Nigerians from other parts of the country. All this has led to widespread unrest against the oil multinationals and successive governments. Ikimi (2006:224) is of the opinion that the Governor’s call (Delta State of Nigeria) for states to control the natural resources within their territories is really a call for the practice of true federalism.

Conflict and Conflict Resolution

Chaplin (1979:109) defines conflict as “the simultaneous occurrence of two or more mutually antagonistic impulses or motives,” while Wilson and Hanna (1990:225) describe it as “a struggle involving ideas, values, and or limited resources.” For Deutsch (1973), conflict exists “wherever incompatible activities occur.” Forsyth (1990) asserts that conflict occurs when “the actions or beliefs of one or more members of a group are unacceptable to and hence are resisted by one or more groups or members”. Pruitt and Rubin (1986) define conflict as a “perceived divergence of interest or beliefs that the parties’ current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously.” Nwolise (2003) states that conflict is a “clash, confrontation, battle or struggle.” In the opinion of Dokun-Oyeshola (2005:106), “essentially, conflict concerns disagreement, dispute or controversy in ideas or viewpoints held by two or more individuals or groups.” Conflict is a relationship between two or more parties who believe they have incompatible goals or interests. It is a misunderstanding that involves negotiable interest. Conflict might be as a result of religious, social, political, or economic misunderstanding.

Otite and Albert (1999:1) see conflict as a dynamic phenomenon which is part of life. It is an engine of progress. Conflict may arise from the largest affairs of international politics to everyday matters of work and family life. It consists of stages such as initiation, escalation, controlled maintenance, abatement, and termination or resolution (Sandole, 1993:6) and in this process peace is the ultimate target or result of conflict or even violence. The aim of an individual or group might not be achieved but it may be subdued through negotiated settlement.

Conflict resolution is a range of processes aimed at alleviating or eliminating sources of conflict. The term "conflict resolution" is sometimes used interchangeably with the term dispute resolution or alternative dispute resolution. Processes of conflict resolution generally include negotiation, mediation and diplomacy ("Conflict Resolution" 2008).

For the purpose of this paper, arbitration and mediation, two of the foremost Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) processes, will be used to illustrate how conflict can be resolved without resorting to litigation. As individuals we seek ways to resolve dispute to make life easier and tolerable and also to help us make our own way. As a result, a body of knowledge has developed relating to resolution. ADR is a general term encompassing a wide variety of dispute resolution processes.

Arbitration is a process whereby a dispute arising between two or more parties is settled by a tribunal chosen by them. Orojo and Ajomo (1999:37). It is a process for the settlement of disputes under which the parties agree to be bound by the decision of an arbitrator whose decision is in general final and legally binding on both parties. Laws of the Federation, (2004:A18), the Arbitration and Conciliation Act is the law regulating Arbitration practice and procedure in Nigeria. Apart from Arbitration, Conciliation and Mediation are also well known methods in conflict resolution other than the conventional litigation method. While Arbitration is mainly used in commercial transactions, Mediation can be employed in resolving any type of conflict/dispute.

Mediation is the most common form of a body of dispute resolution techniques referred to as Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). The term is internationally accepted in the business and legal worlds. The outcome of any mediation is determined by the will of the parties. It is a process whereby the parties agree on the resolution or settlement of their dispute/conflict by an independent, neutral and impartial third party assisting the parties to their solution unlike arbitration which is applied mainly in commercial transactions, mediation has established four main streams in the United Kingdom such as commercial, family, community and environmental which are also applicable in Nigeria.

Mediation is usually voluntary based on consensus of the parties who decide on the mediator. It is informal and parties are free to bare their minds on any aspect of the conflict. They are free to choose how and when to present evidence. Arguments and interests are often focused on the future in a constant

bid to heal relationship rather than adversary. The outcome is often a mutually acceptable agreement held in private where parties present are free to be fully engaged in the process. It is a win-win affair.

Burton (1993) argues that though conflict resolution has been part of human experience for centuries, the concept is comparatively recent in academic discourse so is Alternative Dispute Resolution process. Conflict Resolution is essentially aimed at intervention to change or facilitate the course of conflict. In general, conflict resolution provides an opportunity to interact with the parties concerned, with the hope of at least reducing the scope, intensity and effects of conflict. During formal and informal meetings conflict resolution exercises permit a reassessment of views and claims and counterclaims as a basis for finding options to the crisis and to divergent points of view in arriving at solutions to the conflict.

Conflict resolution performs a healing function in societies. It provides opportunity for the examinations of alternative pay offs in a situation of positioned disagreements, and restores normalcy in societies, by facilitating discussions and placing parties in conflict in situations in which they can choose alternative positive decisions to resolve differences.

In summary, mediation assists parties in their negotiation, changing the focus away from the event of the past, into the reality of the present and towards the needs of the future. The mediator helps the parties use the best negotiation techniques to achieve settlement.

Why the Niger Delta Conflict

Trouble began soon after the discovery of oil in the Ijaw Community of Oloibiri in Bayelsa State in 1956. It became apparent that the oil companies operating in the area had little regard for the well being of the local people, who already felt marginalized in a country dominated by the “big three” ethnic groups. It was these two factors that led a student activist called Isaac Boro to agitate for change in the 1960s. Boro, a Chemistry student at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka is now referred to as an extremist Ijaw revolutionary.

Writing on “Alternative Development Strategy in Nigeria: Implications for Sustainable Development in Niger Delta Region”, Ekuerhure (2008:2) states that “the Niger Delta has been characterized by a history of resistance and rebellion... Since the 19th Century, a complex interplay of factors and forces has provoked sometimes volatile responses to the pressures for the control and distribution of resources. Underlining this volatility has been a feeling among the peoples of the Niger Delta of injustice. A few instances can be mentioned to illustrate this point. From 1894 to 1895 King William Koko of Nembe resisted the Royal Niger Company's attempt to shut out the Nembe people from the lucrative trade in palm oil. Isaac Adaka Boro in 1966 and Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1993 to 1995 put up similar resistance...”

In the Daily Sun of Thursday April 2, 2009, page 38, the Executive Governor of Rivers State of Nigeria, the Rt. Honourable Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi highlighted why the Niger Delta crises persist is because the Federal Government both past and present have not made any sincere and practical steps towards resolving it. According to him “the truth is that successive administrations have paid lip service or done nothing to the situation. It is this prevalent state of affairs that stimulated the genuine demand for redress which later developed from peaceful to violent agitation, and more regrettably its contamination with criminality which appears to have overwhelmed an unarguably justified agitation.”

He went further to state that “it is important to note that, it is the resources from oil that Abuja the Capital of Nigeria and other major cities in Nigeria were built and developed yet the Niger Delta is left undeveloped. It is also from the resources from oil that the salaries of soldiers and traditional rulers are paid.” In his view, the Federal Government should embark on investing in the education of the people of the Region.

Stages of Struggle

The historical development of the resistance by prominent people of the Niger Delta region can be said to have started from the Akassa raid led by King William Koko of Nembe to protect the rights of his subjects during the colonial era when Sir George Goldie was the Governor of the Oil Protectorate. Also King Jaja of Opobo, Nana of Itshekiri, Oba of Benin and many others, most prominent among whom was Major Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro who declared the Niger Delta republic in 1966. He was crushed and conscripted into the Nigerian Army where he eventually died in 1968 fighting for the Nigerian course to keep Nigeria one.

In 1990, the Ogonis, a small ethnic group of about 500,000 people living in Rivers State formed the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni people (MOSOP) in protest against oil industry damage. Through peaceful agitation, MOSOP succeeded in forcing Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) to temporarily suspend prospecting oil in the area. To his admirers, MOSOP's leader, the writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa, a diminutive but courageous man with a keen intellect and a mighty voice, was akin to a saint. He drew the world's attention to the Ogoni people's plight – a tiny ethnic group pitted in an unequal struggle against a corrupt military dictatorship and an uncaring multinational oil company Karl Maier (2000,p.81). Saro-wiwa called on the Ogoni to re-assert themselves side-by-side with all other nationalities in the Nigerian federation when he stated

“we cannot let this opportunity slip pass us. If we do, posterity shall not forgive us, and we shall disappear as a people from the face of the earth.” Ken Saro-Wiwa (1995, P. 52-54).

Unfortunately, on November 10, 1995 Saro-Wiwa and 8 other MOSOP leaders were executed following the alleged murder of four pro-government Ogoni prominent men. The execution described by the then British Prime Minister John Major as “Judicial murder” was widely condemned in Nigeria and abroad. Nigeria was suspended by the Commonwealth and in the process became a pariah nation. But as Karl Maier (2000.76) wrote, the struggle of the Niger Delta people was now known to the wider world.

Saro-Wiwa (1990) foresaw the persistent rebellion of the youths against the exploitative tendencies of the oil companies in one of his articles the Coming War in the Delta when he went further to demand that the government must:

“pay royalties to the landlords for oil mined from their lands and the revenue allocation formula must be reviewed to emphasize derivation. Citizens from the oil bearing areas must be presented on the boards of directors of oil companies prospecting for oil in particular areas; and communities in the oil bearing areas should have equity participation in the oil companies operating therein. Finally, the Delta people must be allowed to join in the lucrative sale of crude oil... ?”

As the unequal share-out of oil wealth continued, so did the unrest. In 1998, militant youths from the Delta's populous Ijaw community disrupted oil company operations, kidnapped oil workers and damaged pipelines and facilities. On December 11, 1998, hundreds of Ijaws said to represent 500 communities and Ijaw clans, gathered at the coastal town of Kaiama to declare:

“All oil companies must stop all exploration and exploitation activities in the Ijaw area. We are tired of gas flaring; oil spills, blowouts and being labeled saboteurs and terrorists. It is a case of preparing noose for our hanging. We reject this labeling. Hence, we advise all oil companies' staff and contractors to withdraw from Ijaw territories by December, 30 1998 pending the resolution of the issue of resource ownership and control in the Ijaw area of the Niger Delta.”

By the December 30 deadline, hundreds of Ijaw youths had taken to the streets of Yenagoa and other towns to put the Declaration into action. This culminated in a week of violence, which according to

the Niger Delta Human and Environmental Rights Organisation (ND-HERO), resulted in the killings of dozens of people. The Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), emerged from the Kaiama Declaration, which set out a new trend in youth nationalism and led to Ijaws in Europe and North America founding groups to support the cause.

At the beginning of the Fourth Republic, violence in the Niger Delta continued and presented President Olusegun Obasanjo one of his biggest challenges which led to the establishment of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2002. One factor characterizing militant groups across Nigeria is their ethnic make-up and while they may have clear political objectives, elements within them have degenerated into criminal vigilante gangs.

In 2008, the Ministry of Niger Delta was created by the Federal Government in an attempt to douse the tension in the Niger Delta and very recently, an unconditional amnesty has been granted the militants with a promise of 50billion Naira for their rehabilitation. Tell, July 6, 2009:23 No.27.

The Library in Conflict Resolution

Ifidon and Ahiauzu (2006) are of the opinion that information and knowledge help to maintain attitudes of collaborative and cooperative intent and change the dynamics of negotiation from mistrust to trust. In her personal opinion Ahiauzu (2007:15) states that the need for libraries and information in the developmental efforts of any society is basically the need for survival. Batubo (1986) decried the gross inadequacy of public libraries in the then Rivers State (now Bayelsa and Rivers States) and appealed to government to establish libraries especially in the rural areas. However, it is surprising to note that after more than two decades the situation has not changed much.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Education is the bedrock of national development and no educational system can thrive without good library services. Of a truth, libraries are to any educational system what blood is to our body systems. It is in recognition of the importance of libraries to education that we call on government and other key players in the region to establish libraries in every nook and cranny.

We concur with the opinions expressed by Utomi (2008) and Comrade Oshiomhole (2009), to empower the youths in the Niger Delta region and invest more in education and libraries in the region in line with President Yar'dua's 7 point Agenda. Once more we call on the Federal and State governments particularly those of Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers and other stakeholders to build concrete, purposeful and well equipped public libraries to facilitate, sensitize and stimulate reading culture among the youths in line with the amnesty granted all militants by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Hitherto, librarians have not been receiving training in conflict resolution, henceforth; they should make concerted efforts to attend courses or workshops on Peace and Conflict Resolution to keep pace with National Universities Commission's decision for Nigerian universities to include Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies in their curriculum.

In planning new library structures, librarians should take into consideration the following:

- Conference halls and meeting rooms
- Exhibition areas
- Lectures and film shows
- A robust collection development policy to include conflict resolution materials in conventional and digital formats.
- Ways increase awareness of information networks among their clients.

- Capacity building and competency
- Enlightenment campaigns

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