
USING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AKWA IBOM STATE



www.akwapolyjournal.org
P-ISSN: 2536-6733 | E-ISSN: 2616-0773



Precious Idongesit Mba

Department of Mass Communication,
Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua
Phone. 08066221876
ipemba2019@gmail.com

Benedette Archibong

Department of Mass Communication,
Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua
Phone. 0703734810
archibongbenedette@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The safeguarding of citizens within a nation is a fundamental obligation of governments globally, achieved through the utilization of state power mechanisms, such as defence and security agencies, supported by legislation. The 1999 Nigerian constitution outlines the government's role and the interrelations among government levels in managing security. Both Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria as a whole have encountered various internal conflicts, including communal crises, kidnappings, and robberies. This research is rooted in structural conflict theory and investigates strategic communication and conflict resolution in Akwa Ibom State. It delves into diverse communication approaches for addressing conflicts and insecurity in Akwa Ibom State and asserts that adequate security is only achievable when conflicts are appropriately managed. Unresolved conflicts pose

security challenges. The study concludes that implementing five communication strategies—avoidance, competition, compromise, accommodation, and collaboration is recommended for addressing conflicts and insecurity in Akwa Ibom State.

Keywords: *Communication, Conflict, Security, Communication strategies, Conflict management*

INTRODUCTION

Conflict has been a pervasive aspect of the history of post-independent Nigeria. Notably, no decade has been devoid of conflict. On 15 January 1966, a faction comprising five military officers, primarily of Eastern origin, staged a coup due to dissatisfaction with the political establishment and the escalating tribal politics. This insurrection resulted in significant bloodshed, during which no senior government official of Igbo descent was killed. Regrettably, the coup was labelled an "Igbo coup."

Subsequently, in July 1966, the Northerners retaliated with a more brutal coup, marking the onset of what many historians have described as a near-genocidal episode. This led to the targeted and violent killings of Igbos residing in Northern Nigeria, prompting Governor Odimegwu Ojukwu to urge their return home

for safety. Ojukwu's announcement of secession from Nigeria in May 1967 and the subsequent outbreak of a civil war on 6 July, 1967 were primarily attributed to the perceived mistreatment of the Igbo people. The defeat of the Igbos was widely believed to have been influenced by tribal interests.

Presently, Nigeria continues to grapple with the manipulation of ethnocentric sentiments by politicians and divisive factions, particularly in the context of national executive elections. This trend also extends to state governments, including that of Akwa Ibom.

The Akwa Ibom region has experienced recurring communal conflicts primarily related to land disputes and criminal activities such as robbery and kidnapping. A recent instance involved a land dispute between the Ette clan in Ikot

Abasi and Ibeno, resulting in tragic loss of life between June and July 2023. Another conflict arose between Nkari and Itu Mbonuso, both in Ini LGA, due to a land dispute, leading to significant disruption in the affected area and resulting in loss of lives and properties.

The Akwa Ibom region has been plagued by recurrent communal conflicts primarily stemming from land disputes and criminal activities such as robbery and kidnapping. A recent incident involved a land dispute between the Ette clan in Ikot Abasi and Ibeno, resulting in tragic loss of life between June and July 2023. Additionally, a conflict arose between Nkari and Itu Mbonuso, both in Ini LGA, due to a land dispute, leading to significant disruption in the affected area and resulting in loss of lives and properties. Providing security to ensure citizens' welfare and rights is a fundamental responsibility of any accountable government world-wide. This is achieved

through utilizing state power, including defence forces and security agencies, both covert and overt, supported by relevant laws and the Constitution. In Nigeria, the

state and its constituent units bear the primary duty of protecting the well-being of their citizens. In fulfilling this mandate, the government typically formulates security-focused policies and programs to bolster safeguarding citizens' lives and property, creating a peaceful and conducive environment for human activities to thrive. The government regularly receives requests from the local population regarding a wide range of law enforcement, defence, and security services. Awodiya (2013) asserted that security has become a prominent concern in Africa due to the prevalence of bloodshed, cruelty, and even genocide resulting from persistent civil conflicts and other forms of violent disputes on the continent, including Nigeria.

Security is a comprehensive term encompassing all actions to identify, evaluate, and mitigate threats from hostile intruders. The concept of security encompasses

the safeguarding of lives and property, as well as the establishment of a peaceful environment conducive to lawful activities. In a narrow sense, security is akin to safety, signifying

the protection of something and its confirmed protection (Treholm and Jenson, 2008). This definition denotes security as being shielded from harm or loss. Broadly, security encompasses defending a nation, property, or individuals from threats and perils. Security operates at both state and national levels.

State security addresses security concerns within a specific locality, involving state and local governments. Conversely, National Security denotes a country's resilience against external threats. The focus of this paper is on the utilization of strategic communication for conflict resolution in Akwa Ibom State. It delves into the communication strategies employed in managing the state's conflicts as a strategic approach to ensuring security and fostering sustainable development.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Akwa Ibom State has grappled with security challenges and conflicts of various dimensions since its establishment in 1987. The recurrence of unresolved conflicts has become a daily occurrence, encompassing criminal activities, communal crises, and disputes that present significant

hurdles to the state government's mandate of safeguarding lives and property. Consequently, effectively managing these conflicts has proven to be a formidable task. This study seeks to evaluate the efficacy of strategic communication initiatives in addressing the state's conflict management.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to determine how strategic communication helps resolve conflict in Akwa Ibom State. However, the subsidiary objectives include:

To examine different communication strategies for managing conflicts in Akwa Ibom State

To find out if conflicts can be managed by applying these communication strategies

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative analysis method, including techniques such as grounded theory, narrative analysis, and ethnography. These methods involve systematically analyzing qualitative data sources such as observations and documents gathered from affected areas in Akwa Ibom State to identify patterns, relationships, and themes to arrive at a vivid conclusion.

COMMUNICATION

Scholars over the years have modelled their ideas in incremental ways in defining and explaining the concept of communication (Lasswell (1949) and Shannon & Weaver (2019), Schramm (2014), West and Turner (2017), Wood (2008). They started with the linear model of communication and later moved to the interactional model of communication and now to the transactional model of communication.

The linear communication model is the earliest representation of the communication process by scholars who thought of communication as one person exerting, influencing, or sending messages through some channels to a receiver at the end of the communication process. The linear or actional communication model is commonly called the Lasswellian formula of who says what, to whom, in what channel, and with what effect. This idea only suggests that communication is transmitting information from one person to another who acts on the information, as in the military parlance, "obey the last order." Communication experience has

shown that the linear communication model needs to be more complex, complete, and representative. The concept of noise was later introduced to the linear communication model by Shannon and Weaver while working on the telephone as a communication channel.

The concepts of source, message, receiver, and channel were also used to identify elements in the linear communication model. Shannon and Weaver diagrammed their idea of how the telephone system worked. They identified the source of communication as the one who sends a message to the receiver, the message as the stimulus that is sent, the receiver as the one who receives the message sent by the source, and the channel as the conduit for sending and receiving messages, and noise or interference which is experienced in the process of sending and receiving messages.

The interactional communication model views communication as sharing meaning with feedback that links the source and the receiver (West and Turnel, 2017). The idea of feedback suggests that communication is not a one-way street but a two-way street.

Inserting feedback into this model, Schramm (2014) suggests that communication is an ongoing circular process that may not necessarily terminate at either end of the motion. Feedback may be verbal or non-verbal. Feedback, according to the interactional model of communication, takes place after the message has been received by the receiver, who reacts to the message.

This idea suggests turn-taking, where the source sends a message to the receiver, who takes his turn to respond to the source after receiving the message sent. Until the message is received, there is no feedback. Identifying the source or sender as performing a separate and different role from the receiver

in the communication process has been seen as the major shortcoming of the interactional model. This shortcoming is addressed in the transactional model of communication. The transactional communication model presents a situation where both the sender and receiver send and receive messages simultaneously. The idea of a transaction suggests that communication is a cooperative

process whereby the sender and the receiver are jointly responsible for the effect and effectiveness of communication (West and Turner, 2017). Ultimately, the transactional communication model captures and represents the communication process.

Communication is a cooperative endeavour involving both the speaker and the receiver, with both parties sending and receiving messages concurrently. The speaker conveys verbal and non-verbal messages to the receiver, who provides verbal or non-verbal feedback. The speaker often responds to the receiver's cues and adjusts their message accordingly. Notably, the receiver is not required to wait for the speaker to

conclude their speech before responding; instead, the receiver reacts, often non-verbally, during the message delivery. This reaction can either encourage or discourage the speaker from continuing. Communication is not just an action or interaction; it is transactional. This concept is embraced and upheld throughout this paper.

CONFLICT

Conflict is a struggle between at least two parties who perceive irreconcilable goals, scarce resources, and intrusion from others in achieving their goals (Wilmot and Hocker, 1998). Conflict must be expressed verbally or non-verbally; otherwise, no conflict exists. The parties to a conflict must be aware of their contention or disagreement, perhaps through a warning or a rolling of eyes. Conflict occurs between parties who are interdependent.

As long as people are interdependent, conflict will always occur. Conflict is, therefore, inevitable in interpersonal relationships. Conflicts in interpersonal relationships usually occur because parties pursue incompatible goals. Goals are incompatible when they are mutually exclusive. For one party to achieve its goal, the other must lose it.

An example is when two friends fall in love with the same girl. This produces a win-lose situation. Competitions for perceived scarce resources, such as time, money, land, etc, usually result in conflicts. Conflicts often occur when people interfere or stand in the way of others to accomplish their goals.

Verderber, Verderber, and Pitts (2010) identify conflict types as pseudo, fact or simple, value, policy, ego, and meta. Pseudo-conflict occurs when there is a difference in the perceptions of an issue, event, or idea between parties. Pseudo-conflict is not deeply rooted and quickly resolved because it is based on fallibly biased perceptions, which can be corrected. Fact or simple conflict occurs when there is a disagreement on a fact. The conflict is simple because facts are verifiable and undeniable.

The conflict becomes resolved when the fact is established. Conflicts that arise from value

differences are deep-rooted and may not be easily resolvable because of their cultural, traditional, and religious undertone. Policy conflict is a disagreement over an action taken or a course of

action proposed. Policy conflict is also deep-rooted because of its longtime effect on the affected party. Ego conflict expresses the need to feel superior to others and

be more entitled. Meta conflict is the conflict that results from the conflict process. The conflict results from the process of communicating

about the conflict at hand. Nigerian conflicts are not simple but deep-rooted.

They can be classified as value, policy ego, and meta conflicts. Most religious conflicts in Nigeria are based on differences in values and beliefs. Religious intolerance is the reason a set wants to impose its values, beliefs, and ideas on others. The introduction of Sharia laws in 1990 attempted to resolve religious conflicts in the Nigerian state. The recent cry for restructuring in Nigeria is because some people feel marginalized and are dissatisfied with the governmental policies that seem to favour some

regions more than others. Most communal conflicts in Akwa Ibom State are ego-based. Some communities feel superior to others and want to assert themselves. Some simple conflicts degenerate into meta-conflicts because of the way conflicts are communicated. Hate speeches are examples of meta-conflicts. If all these conflicts are not well managed, they will pose security challenges and threaten developments. This paper, therefore, considers how communication strategies can be employed to manage the various conflicts in Akwa Ibom State.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING CONFLICTS IN AKWA IBOM STATE

In Wood's (2008) model, five communication strategies for conflict resolution were identified and developed: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration.

Critics argue that avoidance as a conflict management strategy is flawed, as conflict is seen as an opportunity for relationship growth. They posit that conflicts test the interdependence of parties

and allow for the articulation and discussion of areas of tension, signalling a need for change and facilitating relationship growth. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that not all conflicts are amenable to confrontation. In cases where attempts at reconciliation have been made and parties remain unyielding, avoidance may be the most effective strategy for conflict resolution. Avoidance tactics encompass steering clear of specific topics, redirecting discussions, keeping conversations lighthearted, and physically removing oneself from the interaction to avoid addressing the conflict. Seiler and

Beal (2008) support this stance, highlighting withdrawal as a helpful strategy, albeit with limitations in its capacity to directly resolve the conflict.

In their work, Sillars and Wilmot (2014) outlined various accommodation tactics in managing conflicts, including giving up or giving in, disengagement, denial of needs, and a desire to get along. They assert that accommodation can be an effective strategy for conflict resolution when it is driven by a

genuine willingness to sacrifice for others rather than incapacitation. Genuine accommodation can strengthen relationships by demonstrating a sincere willingness to yield to the other party.

However, when accommodation is not motivated by genuine love, generosity, or magnanimity, it may not be considered a constructive approach to conflict resolution. On the other hand, competition tactics aimed at gaining an advantage in a relationship, as noted by Sillars (2016), encompass faulting, hostile questioning, hostile joking, presumptive attribution, avoiding responsibility, and prescription. Faulting involves personal

criticism, while presumptive attribution entails making assumptions about the other party's thoughts, feelings, or motives, which they may not acknowledge. The prescription strategy in competitive conflict management involves issuing threats, demands, or arguing for a prescribed behaviour, with specified consequences if the prescribed behaviour is not followed. Awodiya (2013) highlighted the potential benefits of competition within a relationship in

his work. He noted that in certain instances, competition can inspire partners to bring out the best in each other, ultimately fostering mutual respect and strengthening the relationship. This perspective aligns with Trenholm and Jensen's (2008) assertion that conflict, when managed constructively, can be advantageous. They argue that conflict indicates interdependence, and resolving it can lead to greater cohesion within the relationship. Furthermore, conflict can catalyze change, encouraging adaptability and creativity. It also provides an avenue for identifying and addressing underlying issues.

While compromise may only sometimes be the initial choice for

conflicting parties, it can offer a viable solution, particularly when both parties hold equal influence. However, the satisfaction derived from compromise is contingent on preserving core values (Awodiya, 2013).

Collaboration emerges as the optimal approach for conflict resolution. When parties with divergent needs and desires choose collaboration over competition, it maximizes their potential.

Collaborative efforts prioritize mutual respect and fulfilling each other's goals, fostering a sense of equality and respect within the relationship (Awodiya, 2013).

Recognizing that different conflict resolution styles apply to various situations, relationships, and individuals is essential. No single method universally applies. Each of the discussed approaches holds value, and, at times, a combination of methods may yield the most effective results for unique interpersonal challenges. In their work, Wilmot and Hocker (2010) enumerate the factors that should be considered when selecting the most appropriate conflict resolution style.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts the structural conflict theory to explain the nature of conflicts and their management in contemporary Nigerian societies. The Marxist dialectical school propounded the theory with exponents like Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, V.I. Levim, etc. The theory sees incompatible interests based on competition for resources, which in most cases are assumed to be scarce as being

responsible for social conflicts. The main argument of the structural conflict theory is that conflict is built into the particular ways societies are structured and organized.

The theory focuses on social problems like political and economic exclusion, injustice, poverty, disease, exploitation, inequality, poor governance, etc. as sources of conflict. The structural basis of conflict is a theory that attempts to explain conflict as a product of the tension that arises when groups must compete for scarce resources. For instance, for all the crises in Nigeria, all the above features manifested, causing labour crises, intra and inter-political party crises, religious

crises, ethnic crises, economic crises, boundary conflicts, etc.

The emphasis of this theory is based on how the competing interest of groups ties conflicts directly into social, economic, and political organizations. Thus, when the social, political, and cultural processes are monopolized by a group (Class), they create the condition that makes people adopt an adversarial approach to conflict.

FINDINGS

From the analysis of the documents and observations carried out in the state and the affected areas, these findings were made:

1. Clear communication channels must be established between the government and conflict-prone areas.
2. The communication strategies suitable for conflicts in Akwa Ibom State are avoidance, competition, compromise, accommodation, and collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Communication strategies identified in this paper are avoidance, competition, compromise, accommodation, and collaboration. It is suggested that

one strategy does not fit all of Akwa Ibom's conflicts identified in this paper. There is value in each of the strategies discussed, and at times, they can be combined to achieve the best results possible for the unique conflicts that people may have. It should be noted that some communication strategies used in the past to manage conflicts have been found to produce better results than the military approaches adopted. For instance, former President Umaru Yaradua adopted a collaboration strategy to manage resource control conflict when he introduced amnesty from 6 August 2009 to 4 October 2009. Also, former President Olusegun Obasanjo adopted an accommodation strategy to manage religious conflict in the 90s when

he introduced the Sharia law. The Indigenous People of Biafra group led by Nnamdi Kanu employs a competition strategy to express their agitations; conversely, the collaboration strategy used by Godswill Akpabio led to calmness in most crisis-prone areas during his tenure as governor.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends that accommodation and collaboration

communication strategies be applied to manage conflict. If these strategies fail, an alternative avoidance strategy should be applied, such as conducting a referendum in the affected region for the people to decide what they want. By applying the communication strategies suggested here, the state can avoid the second civil war.

REFERENCES

- Awodiya, D. O. (2013). you & others: Principles and processes of interpersonal communication. Springboard Communications
- Lasswell, H.D. (1949). The Structure and function of communication in society. In `L. Bryson (Eds.). The Communication of Ideas. Happer and Row.
- Schramm, W. L. (1954). The Process and Effects of Mass Communication. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Seiler, W. J. & Beall, M. L. (2008) Communication: Making Connection. (7th ed.) Boston, M. A.: Allyn and Bacon.
- Shannon, C. & Weaver, W (1949). The Mathematical Theory of Communication. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Sillars, A. L & Wilmot, W. W. (1994) “Communication Strategies in Conflicts and Mediation,’ In Communicating strategically: strategies in interpersonal communication (Eds.) Wiemann. J. and Daly, J.A. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Sillars, A. L. (1986). Procedures for coding interpersonal conflict. Department of Communication Studies.
- Treholm, S & Jenson, A. (2008) Interpersonal communication (6th ed). Oxford.
- Tubbs, S. L. & Moss, S. (2006). Human Communication (8th ed). McGraw-Hill.
- Verderber, K. S., Verderber R. F. & Pits, D. D. (2010). Communicate! (!3th ed.). Wadsworth-Cengage Learning.

West, R. & Turner, L. H. (2007).
introducing communication
Theory: Analysis and
application. (3rd ed.).

McGraw Hill.

Wilmot, W. W. & Hocker, J. L.
(1998). International
Conflicts. (7th ed.). McGraw
Hill.

Wilmot, W. W. & Hocker, J. L.
(2010). International Conflicts.
(7th ed.). McGraw Hill.

Wood, J. T. (2008).
Communication mosaics-An
introduction to the field of
communication. (5th ed.).
Thompson.