

# **Guiding Principles toward the Resolution of Ethno-religious Conflicts**

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## **Abstract**

Conflict is as old as humanity. It is not necessarily an evil. It can lead to progress and development. It can also lead to the destruction of lives and property. All depends on how it is handled.

The paper is generally concerned with intergroup conflicts within which ethnic conflicts fall. The paper suggests certain principles as mechanisms for conflict resolution in intergroup conflict. Three principles are discussed, namely principles of Analysis, principles of Confrontation and principles of Resolution. The principles of analysis are about the steps to be taken in analyzing a conflict with a view to unearthing the causes and identifying the actors. The principles of confrontation focus on the quality of intergroup interaction and the nature of the problem-solving and negotiating processes as necessary to addressing the conflicts successfully. The principle of resolution engages the transformation process of a conflict toward a mutually acceptable state that is self supporting and self correcting. Finally, the paper suggests that in the resolution of conflicts, the parties involved or the intervenor should focus on interests rather than on positions.

## **1. Introduction**

The modern world is witnessing an increase in conflicts between groups of all kinds. These conflicts could be over resources, power, values or cultural shock. Intergroup conflicts, especially ethnic ones, have become too common especially in what is

considered the "Third World." This has stunted the development of the "Third World" and reduced its people to a life of abject poverty. The fire-brigade approach by governments in the resolution of such conflicts has not helped matters. As such, conflicts keep re-emerging. A sustained and almost painful approach to a near permanent resolution of intergroup conflicts is what the Third World needs if there must be any meaningful development. This paper offers some proposals toward this.

Conflict resolution is the effort to increase co-operation among the parties to a conflict and deepen their relationship by addressing the conditions that led to the dispute, fostering positive attitudes and allaying distrust through reconciliation initiatives, and building or strengthening the institutions and processes through which the parties interact and will continue to interact. Conflict resolution can be used to reduce the chances of violence or to consolidate the cessation of a violent conflict in order to prevent re-escalation.

If there is one thing that saps resources, perpetuates injustice and wrecks horrendous costs on lives and property, it is ethnic conflicts. However, ethnic conflicts fall within the purview of intergroup conflicts. Intergroup conflicts can be between government and labour groups, political parties, associations, organizations, and so on..

Many conflicts always succeed in reemerging, with the monotony of the regularity of a broken record, and often times this is because they were poorly managed. Ethnic conflicts, in particular, have remained intractable in many places. These poorly managed conflicts appear to be one of the world's most serious and costly problems, particularly in Africa. When these conflicts are at their latent or low intensity levels, they express themselves through discrimination, oppression, marginalization, prejudice, nepotism, and so on.. On the other hand, when these conflicts are at manifest or at high-intensity levels, the result is the destruction of life and property.

Generally, conflicts at low or high intensity levels are injurious to

human development and need to be managed in a sustained and scientific manner. The fire-brigade approach to conflict resolution by governments, especially in Nigeria, has been that of cutting the branches of a tree and leaving the roots untouched. It is no wonder that the branches eventually develop, waiting to be cut again.

It must be clear that the causes of intergroup conflicts are nearly always, if not always, rooted in history. Some of these causes might have been there even before the birth of those engaged in the conflict. Deep-seated cleavages, formed over many years, cannot be destroyed easily. To resolve and transform such conflicts will need an enormous amount of time, patience, dialogue, skills, negotiation and so on.

In the attempt to resolve ethnic conflicts, the principle of Conflict Analysis should be considered as a first step.

## **2. Conflict Analysis**

In conflict analysis, the differences that exist between the groups in conflict must be clearly brought out and understood by both parties. Secondly, the sources of the conflict must be identified by both parties involved in the conflict. This will necessarily include its history and the current expressions such a conflict has assumed. The parties should be able to prioritize the essential elements of the conflict in such a way that the prioritization will lead to shared empathic understanding.

The entire process of conflict resolution cannot avoid going through the process of conflict analysis. In conflict analysis, the following principles suggested by Fisher (1982) become very relevant. Their abandonment may lead to the collapse of the process.

Conflict analysis must focus on the sources and types of conflict and processes of interaction and escalation that have brought the conflict to its present state.

Intergroup conflict is rooted in objective and subjective sources. Those involved in such conflicts must have a clear understanding of these determinants. Katz (1965) mentions some objective determinants such as value, economic and power conflicts. The subject elements such as misperception and miscommunication are also to be understood and appreciated by parties in conflict.

Conflict analysis must distinguish needs, values, and positions in relation to the major issues in question.

When parties in a conflict have taken positions, the analyst should endeavour to find out the driving force(s) behind the positions and create a range of flexible and interrelated possibilities for meeting them. This is why Burton (1990b), Azar (1990) have all stressed the necessity of understanding the role of basic human needs in conflict causation and resolution. An effort must be made toward finding out why parties got locked up in the positions they have taken. Unless this is done, it will be extremely difficult to make any progress in the resolution of that conflict.

Conflict analysis must focus on the perceptions, cognitions, needs, fears, and goals of each party and allow for the exchange of clarifications, acknowledgments, assurances, and potential contributions between the parties.

It is always important for parties in conflict to listen with sincerity and understand the reasons behind each other's behaviour. When this happens, it will lead to an understanding of, and clarification of each other's perceptions. The process will help in bringing to the open, the fact that human thinking can fall prey to a variety of bias and errors. This process also helps the parties to articulate their needs, knowing and accepting that their needs are in themselves, legitimate. When this is done a range of satisfiers can be proposed by both sides. During the process of analysis, fears can be unearthed, with the possibility of realizing that those fears were simply and possibly, just hyperbolic – the hyperboles can then be assuaged by the other side in the conflict. Both parties in the conflict can articulate their goals and a variety of modalities toward meeting such goals could be explored in a dialogical way

by both parties. A rich array of conceptual tools for this particular analysis has been proposed (Deutsch, 1973; Fiher 1990a; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Stroebe, Kruglanski, Bartal & Hewstone, 1988).

Conflict analysis requires clear and honest communication in which parties remain sensitive to common errors in perception and cognition and develop empathic understanding of each other.

It is necessary and in fact, a sine qua non for parties in conflict to be open and sincere to each other. Both parties should be frank and accurate in communicating to the other. The parties must actively listen to each other and be free to ask for a clarification of terms used by the other which may be ambiguous. The presence of a mutual empathic understanding should be one of the major goals of the process of analyzing a conflict.

Conflict analysis can be facilitated by a skilled and impartial third-party consultant(s) who enhances motivation, improves communication, regulates the interaction and aids diagnosis by drawing on relevant social science concepts.

It is certainly extremely difficult for those who have engaged themselves in conflict to engage themselves in the process of analyzing that same conflict. This is certainly due to a myriad of perceptual and cognitive biases, which can make it extremely difficult for the parties to engage in a mutual analysis that moves toward the direction of shared objectivity (Deutsch, 1983; Grant 1998; Stroebe et al, 1988). To get around the issues, the services of a third party, sometimes called a mediator or intervenor, should be employed. The third party should be someone or a group of persons acceptable to both sides in the conflict. It is the role of the third party to build up a relationship between the parties engaged in the conflict. The relationship should be toward bringing the parties in the conflict to the process of an objective analysis of the issues.

### 3. Conflict Confrontation Stage

Conflict confrontation builds on conflict analysis. It is the stage whereby the parties in conflict are made to engage themselves in directly focusing on the most contentious issues in the conflict. It is an orientation toward collaborative problem-solving in which the parties search for mutually acceptable mechanisms to de-escalate the conflict and improve their relationship (Fisher, *op. cit.*).

In conflict confrontation, as in conflict analysis, certain principles must be taken into consideration for it to be effective. Blake and Mouton, (1964); Gary, (1989); Thomas, (1976) and Walton, (1976) are agreed that confrontation involves direct interaction in which the parties engage each other, focus on the conflict between them, and work toward mutually acceptable solutions through the process of collaboration and joint problem solving.

The success of the principle of confrontation depends on certain norms, conditions and qualities of integration. Here, the strategies of collaboration and the techniques of integrative bargaining come into play with a view to moving the parties toward a process in which they will mutually create the alternatives needed in the resolution of the conflict. In conflict confrontation then, the following principles should be adhered to:

The parties must engage in face-to face interaction under norms of mutual respect, shared exploration, and commitment to resolution without a fixed agenda but with a progression of topics.

An interaction of this nature helps the parties to understand the psychological elements of the other and paves the way for the possibility of a change in approaching each other (Kelman and Cohen, 1986). The atmosphere for the effectiveness of this principle must be motivational, sincere, open and in congruence with the problem-solving orientation (Fisher, 1972). In conflict confrontation, parties should be moved toward the direction of not only respecting their own interests, but that of the other too.

The exploration here should be that of shared flexibility, leading to the exploration of options that will meet the needs of both parties

Conflict confrontation must take place under the facilitative conditions of intergroup contact, including equal status, high acquaintance potential, positive institutional supports, a cooperative task and reward structure, and the involvement of competent and well-adjusted individuals.

The conditions that increase understanding and respect for each other should be fostered in conflict confrontation. The facilitator should always ensure that the parties see themselves as of equal status in the process of resolving the conflict. The interaction between the parties should be such that they get to know one another better. This will create an avenue for the gradual dismantling of the stereotypes that had existed over the years. Ground rules, jointly agreed on, by the parties, will facilitate and will help in creating an atmosphere for effective interaction. Highly prejudiced individuals in the conflict should be carefully guided to free them of their prejudices. Stephen and Stephen (1985) opine that the facilitative conditions should aim at countering the common elements of inequality, formality, competition, tension, and antagonism that are endemic to intergroup conflict and which can help reduce intergroup anxieties to productive levels.

The interaction must incorporate the qualities of productive intergroup confrontation, including open and accurate representation, recognition of intergroup diversity and gender equality, integration of both parties' knowledge and skills, sensitivity to cultural differences and power imbalances and persistence and discipline to attain mutually acceptable outcomes.

There are scholars who have intervened as third party consultants in conflicts and who have applied the qualities of productive confrontation successfully (Blake et al., 1964; Burton, 1987; Fisher, 1972, 1990a, Kelmon & Cohen, 1986). In confrontation, the parties involved must be represented by an

array of individuals who reflect the diversity of the groups within the group. This is important so that no group will feel shortchanged, and more so, that they can protect their group interest. Attention must be given to historical power imbalances between and even within the groups. Discipline and persistence are essential elements in confrontation because some individuals may deliberately want to stall the negotiation process through behaviours that are frustrating, insulting and escalatory to the other side. Deutsch (1991) urges that when this happens, the offended side should not reciprocate but be urged to remain friendly because the power to be clam and levelheaded can and does resist the power of any noxious behaviour.

Confrontation must follow the strategies of collaboration, including seeing the conflict as a mutual problem to be solved and working to maximize the gains of both parties.

Blake et al., (1964), distinguished this approach to resolving conflicts from that of bargaining which looks for ways to accommodate differences rather than solving the problem. The collaborative approach is one in which the parties have high concern in which behaviour is directed toward a common goal (Blake and Mounon, (1964); Thomas, (1976); Walton, (1976). This is one of the most effective ways of conflict resolution. Gray (1989) emphasizes how collaboration can induce the parties to go beyond their own limited visions and to transform adversarial interactions into a richer appreciation of the problem with a search for solutions that will represent and satisfy multiple interests.

Confrontation must follow the stages and meet the criteria of effective intergroup problem solving and integrative Bargaining.

Stages and criteria to be followed must be laid out. It is what I have referred to above, as "ground rules." A mixing of people from the opposite groups in conflict to form discussion groups and define an issue for presentation at the plenary can bring out agreeable definitions of the conflict and make the resolution of the conflict more collaborative. This process is better than the

power bargaining process or the legal justice mechanism which has characterized much of the management of conflicts.

#### **4. Conflict Resolution Stage**

This principle enumerates the requirements and outcome that are necessary for intergroup conflict to be transformed to a mutually acceptable state which should be self supporting and correcting. It emphasizes the need for decision-making procedures, social policies and structures that are necessary for the transformation of the conflict within the context of a renewed relationship. It determines the mechanisms by which mutually acceptable processes for managing difference can become an integral part of democratic and humanistic social systems.

The following principles of this stage of conflict should be taken into consideration.

Conflict resolution must transform conflicts in an enduring manner, rather than settling disputes or suppressing differences.

It is quite possible, and it has been so in some cases, that conflicts can be resolved, de-escalated or even terminated in a mutually satisfactory way. Many people have become the best of friends thanks to some conflicts. As pointed out earlier, collaborative analysis and problem-solving based on humanistic and democratic values is the key to conflict resolution. Burton (1987, 1990a) suggests that the resolution of complex, multi-issue conflicts, which are hinged on human needs, should be distinguished from the settlement of disputes over tangible negotiable interests.

Conflict resolution requires a range of complementary methods appropriate to the issues and the state of conflict escalation.

Different methods of conflict management are appropriate for different issues and at different levels or points of the escalation.

Through conflict analysis which we have seen, a range of methods could be built into the fabric of the on-going dialogue to facilitate the resolution of tangible and negotiable interests. Third party intervention methods (conciliation, consultation, or problem solving, pure mediation, power mediation, arbitration and peacekeeping) can all be related to different stages of conflict escalation (Fisher and Keashly, 1991). It is possible that each stage of the escalation can be addressed using a particular method or a range of methods.

Conflict resolution must address basic human needs and must build the qualities of sustainable relationship between groups.

Protracted social conflicts are usually caused by the suppression of basic human needs between identity groups (Azar, 1990, Burton, 1990b). Some of the needs are physiological (food, water, shelter etc); safety needs (security); love and belongingness needs and need for esteem (expressed in the desire for respect and recognition); self-actualization needs and aesthetic needs (love of beauty, order, perfection etc). Needs must be identified in a conflict and methods adopted toward the provision of satisfiers.

To make the point clearer, Pettigrew (1971), using the United States of America as an example, maintains that true integration between Blacks and Whites will come only when Black Americans have sufficient autonomy and power that will enable them to enter meaningfully into institutional integration and cross-group friendships with White Americans.

Conflict resolution must be infused into decision-making and policymaking processes so as to prevent the causation and escalation of unnecessary conflict.

The fostering of equality and participation of both parties in a conflict has the potential of eliminating or reducing the possibility of the emergence of a conflict between the parties. This does not mean that every day disputes will completely be eliminated. There are day-to-day issues that may border on ideas, preferences and decisions that are normal and in fact are

constructive aspects of social life and may not necessarily qualify as focus of Conflict Resolution. Alternative Dispute Resolution Centers (ADRCs) are developing, especially in the United States and now in Nigeria, to deal with these everyday issues. Conflict resolution focuses on deeper issues. Any decision making that is interactive, proactive and participative is congruent with planned social change and with democratic political structures

Conflict resolution must create societal structures involving equality among identity groups, multiculturalism, and federalism as appropriate to each situation.

To transform intergroup conflicts to healthy relationships, conflict resolution must aim at, and go beyond, mere changes in perceptions and attitudes to the creation of structures that institutionalize equality, autonomy, and respect among different groups. Legislations and regulations that foster equality of opportunity for individuals and groups and democratic pluralism among groups should be the goal of an enduring conflict resolution mechanism. Structural mechanisms to promote multiculturalism in multiethnic societies are useful in the building of self-respect and confidence within groups (e.g. Berry, 1998).

There are ethnic groups that are segregated by geography but that are historically placed within one state. A wide range of models for federations can be adapted to such particular situations or states, with the goal of providing the different identity groups with the power and resources needed to protect their identity, and determine their future.

Having discussed the basic stages of a sustained conflict resolution strategy, we now turn to the final section of this paper.

## **5. Shifting from Positions to Interests**

In any given conflict, many people take positions. Positions are statements of demands which are often presented as 'the solution' to the problem. There are times that the statements contain some

hidden agenda. Conflicts are difficult to resolve when the bargain is at the level of positions because holding on to positions stifles creativity.

Interests, on the other hand, are people's feelings about what is basically desirable (Rubin 1994). Interests can be expressed over resources such as territory, energy resources, food, money and how they should be distributed. Interests can be over power and on how control and participation in political decision-making are allocated. There could be interests expressed over identity where people believe that they and their traditions should be treated with some modicum of respect and dignity. Interests could also be over values, and so on.

The best way to resolve conflicts is to focus on the interests because it is interests that lead to positions. In an attempt to identify the interest(s) behind a position, the question, "why?" becomes very relevant. The question will trigger an answer that may lead to the identification and understanding of the needs, hopes, fears and desires of the other. When these are identified, the resolution of the conflict is made easier.

## **6. Conclusion**

Conflict is as old as humanity and is a reality of life. Many conflicts that sometimes lead to full blown violence have their causes rooted in history. The resolution of conflicts is not an exercise that should be rushed as this will only create the possibility of its reemergence. There is a range of strategies, models and mechanisms available for the resolution of conflicts. Depending on its stage, different models could be applied to different situations. The lack of expertise, patience, time and money for the exercise that will lead to sustained and durable conflict resolution is responsible for the re-occurrence of conflicts to which we have been witnesses.

We have discussed three main phases of conflict resolution, namely, conflict analysis, confrontation and resolution. In conflict resolution, each of these phases is relevant and should

not be ignored. Collaborative and problem-solving approaches to conflict resolution have been discovered to be more effective than the legalistic approach. The former ends with a win-win solution while the latter ends with a win-lose solution. In Gowon's (1970) words, the former ends with no victor no vanquished.

We have also indicated that all attempts at conflict resolution should focus on interests over positions. It is the interests that are the driving force of the positions taken.

Conflicts that have historical roots (for example, ethnic conflicts) cannot be resolved overnight. Some conflicts may take years of negotiation before they are amicably resolved. The fire brigade approach does not help matters, especially in Nigeria.

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