

# THE IMPACT OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION: A CASE STUDY OF AGBANI/NKEREFI CONFLICT

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## Abstract

*This study examines the role of effective communication in resolving the Agbani/Nkerefi conflict, a longstanding communal dispute in Nigeria. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods with the aid of interviews, this research investigates the communication strategies employed by stakeholders and their impact on conflict resolution. The study establishes that effective communication facilitated a high reduction in conflict incident, while active listening and empathy increased understanding and trust among parties too. Clarity and collaborative communication approaches led to a high level of satisfaction rate with conflict resolution outcomes. This study demonstrates the pivotal role of effective communication in resolving the Agbani/Nkerefi conflict. By adopting active listening, empathy, clarity, and non-judgmental understanding, stakeholders can transform conflicts into opportunities for mutual understanding and peaceful resolution. The findings offer valuable insights for conflict resolution practitioners, policymakers, and communities worldwide. This study recommends the integration of effective communication training for conflict resolution stakeholders, establishment of communication channels for regular dialogue and feedback, and fostering a culture of empathy and understanding in conflict resolution processes. This research contributes to the growing body of evidence highlighting the significance of effective communication in conflict resolution, providing practical lessons for resolving similar conflicts globally.*

**Keywords:** Communication, Conflict Resolution, Agbani/Nkerefi, Peace, Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

Communication is the process of sharing ideas, information and messages with others. The most basic communication methods that are known to man are speech and non-verbal expressions such as facial expressions and body language. Apart from these basic methods of communication, there are other methods of communication. Effective communication usually requires a two-way flow of information rather than simply delivering messages. It works on creating a flow of message and feedback. A Sender conveys a message, and receiver responds with feedback and perhaps a new message (Cullinan; 1996:327).

Conflict has both destructive and constructive sides. Constructive conflict fostered by effective communication could increase innovation and creativity. Communication in

modern history has many important activities. Among these, it has a great role in resolving destructive conflict and increasing constructive conflict. Communication links individuals, groups, societies and nations but people do not always do well in communication and thus end up with misunderstandings or breakdown in relationships.

Our country Nigeria has been witnessing a series of long standing “tribal” (ethnic, family, ancestral, clannish) and communal conflicts, some of which have quite often resulted in violent confrontations leading to loss of lives and destruction of properties (Brukum, 1995; Tsikata and Seini, 2004; Bogner, 2000). This has become a source of great worry throughout the country. Almost every community in Nigeria has witnessed violent conflicts of any type – inter or intra ethnic conflicts, religious violence (between Islamic factions, Muslims and Christians and Christians and traditional religious groups), political violence between adherents of various political parties, land dispute. The most frequent, and by far the most destructive ones, are intra or inter-ethnic conflicts. One cannot forget in a hurry the protracted Nkerefi/Agbani communal clash, in which the inhabitants suffered at different degrees loss of property and life. The people saw the ravages of the conflict due to poor management occasioned by poor communication at the very inception and later stages of the conflict. We believe that if experts had handled the conflict at the primary stage, it would not have reached the destructive stage. Therefore, it is essential to understand the basic processes of conflict so that we can work to maximize productive outcomes and minimize destructive ones. This paper will briefly describe the role effective communication play in dispute resolution using Nkerefi/Agbani dispute as a case study and the general available effective strategies of approaching conflict.

### **Conflict as a Concept**

Conflict is a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party. This may be a mild disagreement between two people regarding the best choice in decision (Mary Ann and Steven L.MC Shane; 1976:402). On the other hand, conflict is a disagreement of ideas between and among peoples. Conflict occurs between people in all kinds of human relationships and in all social settings. Because of the wide range of potential differences among people, the absence of conflict usually signals the absence of meaningful interaction. A people interact, they hold on to certain preferred values or cherished goals which might not be shared by others; and the resultant effect is conflict (Ndubisi, 2016)

Conflict by itself is neither good nor bad. However, the manner in which conflict is handled determines whether it is constructive or destructive (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000). Conflict is defined as an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and antagonistic feelings toward each other (Fisher, 1990). The incompatibility or difference may exist in reality or may only be perceived by the parties involved. Nonetheless, the opposing actions and the hostile emotions are very real hallmarks of human conflict. Conflict has the potential for either a great deal of destruction or much creativity and positive social change (Kriesberg, 1998).

Continuous deteriorating social and economic conditions as well as unstable political conditions in most African countries have been a source of worry to many responsible politicians and citizens, and have attracted prolific studies by many scholars. This great challenge confronting the region has been attributed to violent ethnic and communal conflicts, which have destabilized many peaceful African countries in the past two decades. The West African sub-region has never been spared this conflict phenomenon. Countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Guinea and more recently Cote d'Ivoire in the sub-region have been overwhelmed with and weakened by violent conflict for the past two decades. Most of these conflicts began as internal strife among certain local communal groups or within regions and then spilled over the international borders, spreading in the neighboring countries. The causes of ethnic conflicts are embedded in historical, socioeconomic and political conditions, which motivate the protagonists in the early phases and in later conflict escalation. Additionally, ethnicity plays a considerable role and sometimes becomes a dominant factor in these conflicts.

### **Concept of Communication**

Communication (including information and education as well) can be defined as diverse, covering a range from the simplest conversation between two people to the most sophisticated mass medium (Wesseler and Brinkman, 2002). Early theoretical models of communication from the 60's simply saw the communication process as an exchange of messages from a sender to a receiver with a lot of importance given to the sender and the channel used for the transmission. Since 70's this model has undergone a 180 degree shift with more emphasis given to the communication process itself, understood primarily as exchange of meanings and of the social relationships that have derived from such exchanges. Currently, communication is considered as a social process designed to bring together actors in a two-way process. Viewed this way, the parties involved in a communication process are both senders and receivers of information and co-creators of knowledge.

Therefore, communication there involves bringing the sender and receiver into a consensus through negotiation and dialogue, the result of which is a shared knowledge for the right action (Servaes and Malikhao, 2007). Thus, the decision taken as a result of shared knowledge is often taken based on the interests, needs, and strength of the parties concern and is always coordinated and responsive to such interest and situation of either the sender or receiver. According to Richardson (2003), two-way communication has been used to coordinate participation in times of conflict situations. Parties involved in conflict are able to negotiate and arrive at a decision to be communicated further. It is therefore reasonable to point out that stakeholders have to communicate, negotiate and arrive at a decision that can be further communicated.

When communities clash, nations are at war, the predictable remedy prescribed by the voices of reason is communication. The prevailing view is that, faced with conflict, communication is always the right thing to do. The United Nation Security Council encourages hostile countries to hold talks and marriage counselors advise quarrelling

couples to express their feelings. This is a common prescription, such that advice to the contrary seems anomalous. It is difficult to imagine Secretary General imploring hostile nations to refrain from dialogue. The positive role of communication in ameliorating conflict seems so obvious that it requires serious consideration. Why is communication so helpful? Under what conditions does communication reduce conflict? Common to all conceptualization of communication is the idea of information transfer. Information that originates in one part of a system is formulated into a message that is transmitted to another part of a system. As a result, information residing in one locus comes to be replicated at another. "It takes two people working together to play a duet, shake hands, play chess, teach or make love. To succeed, the two of them have to co-ordinate both the content and process of what they are doing..... Communication..... is a collective activity of the first order" (Clark and Brennan, 1991, p.127). Considerable research has shown that the absence of back-channel responses makes communication significantly more difficult (Krauss, 1987).

**Effective communication** is a process of exchanging ideas, thoughts, knowledge and information such that the purpose or intention is fulfilled in the best possible manner. In simple words, it is nothing but the presentation of views by the sender in a way best understood by the receiver. Effective communication requires that listeners be responsive. One of the principles of communication is to be an active listener. This recommendation seems to ask parties involved in an unresolved conflict to behave co-operatively and indeed that is precisely what they do.

### **Characteristics of Effective Communication**

- ❖ **Clear Message:** The message which the sender wants to convey must be simple, easy to understand and systematically framed to retain its meaningfulness.
- ❖ **Correct Message:** The information communicated must not be vague or false in any sense; it must be free from errors and grammatical mistakes.
- ❖ **Complete Message:** Communication is the base for decision making. If the information is incomplete, it may lead to wrong decisions.
- ❖ **Precise Message:** The message sent must be short and concise to facilitate straightforward interpretation and take the desired steps.
- ❖ **Reliability:** The sender must be sure from his end that whatever he is conveying is right by his knowledge. Even the receiver must have trust on the sender and can rely on the message sent.
- ❖ **Consideration of the Recipient:** The medium of communication and other physical settings must be planned, keeping in mind the attitude, language, knowledge, education level and position of the receiver.
- ❖ **Sender's Courtesy:** The message so drafted must reflect the sender's courtesy, humility and respect towards the receiver.

### **Communication in conflict zones**

To manage or prevent conflict, the first key is communication. Conflict is not inherently bad, but it is the way in which conflict is managed that determines its outcome. Conflict can play a big part in all of our lives. It can happen at work, in school, at home and in our neighborhoods. Conflict in the communities can often lead to uncertainty, arguments, aggression, destruction and even violence. There are no winners in conflict. Globally this truth has been proven historically. Diplomatic approach therefore must be employed. As the world in which we live becomes increasingly interconnected technologically, economically, and politically, developing a greater level of meaningful dialogue, heartfelt communication, and mutual understanding shall be necessary. Upholding the dignity of humanity regardless of our ideology, agenda, and aims will best serve us all. For this reason, every individual and the global community collectively will benefit enormously from developing the skills of communication, negotiation, and effective conflict dispute resolution. A lot of the conflict in our lives comes from how we communicate with others. Ineffective communication creates conflict even in situations where there is no real conflicting issue or disagreement about a substantive issue. Poor communication causes hurt feelings, anger, frustration, and tends to erode relationships, sometimes to the point where the relationship is not fixable. Many at times we call these situations personality conflicts, when in fact they are a result of poor communication.

Besides the traditional institutions, the media play vital roles in resolution and escalation of conflict. There has been a significant progress in media proliferation and diversity since due to the Freedom of Information Act. This remarkable transformation has contributed to consolidating democracy in the country by creating the platform for citizens to express their opinions and setting the agenda for public debate on a wide range of issues. However, the conduct of the media in the country has attracted many criticisms over the years due to polarization of the media houses, inauthentic publications, inaccurate reporting and other misconducts. The blame-game between the parties involved in conflict based on the publications were further deepened by the media, by regular publishing of writing of letters/articles, organising press conferences of interest groups from communities, trying to portray the other as provocateurs and contemptuous of peace, law and order thereby creating more tensions. These issues are seen as contradictory publications by the media which instead of resolving conflict rather escalate the situation. The attitude of the media was a major factor in prolonging the crisis under review.

### **OTHER MODELS/THEORIES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

A look at some theories developed in conflict resolution on how conflicts can be resolved through peaceful means.

**Cooperative Model:** As developed by Morton Deutsch, he opines that two major factors are important in determining the kind of orientation a party brings on board in bid to resolve a conflict situation namely, the nature of the dispute and what the goals of each party in the dispute. He differentiated between two types of orientation as competitive and cooperative orientations. While cooperative disposition of a party would create an atmosphere of trust that will lead to a mutually beneficial outcome for settlement, competitive orientation will lead to a win-lose situation that will breed distrust Deutsch concludes.

**Principled Negotiation:** This was championed by Roger Fisher and William Ury, and they listed four cardinal principles that must be considered for effective negotiation viz

- ❖ Separation of people from their problem
- ❖ Focusing on the interest rather than position
- ❖ Generating a variety of options
- ❖ Insistence on objective-criteria based agreement

For the proponents of this model, attention must be given to these principles at every stage of a negotiation process for a desired outcome.

**Human Needs Model:** John Burton, the propounder of this theory lays emphasis on human needs as a major drive in conflict and conflict resolution. He submits that the identification of needs that are threatened and the restructuring of relationships that are accommodative of individual and group needs will advance the course of conflict resolution. This argument he premised on the fact that when an individual or group is denied its fundamental needs in the society, conflict becomes inevitable.

**Conflict Transformation:** In this model as championed by Bush and Folger, the term peacebuilding is introduced in place of conflict resolution. There is an emphasis on the transformation and replacement of negative/destructive communication patterns into a more constructive and positive interaction patterns. This will enable the parties understand their own needs and situations, as well as appreciate the needs and situations of their opponents.

### A CASE STUDY OF AGBANI/NKEREFI CONFLICT

The Agbani/Nkerefi dispute date back to early 90s. Nkerefi is not a neighboring to Agbani, so one would wonder what could be the source of the conflict. It all started like personal confrontation and family dispute between two farmers from Agbani and Ugbawka. According to the narrative, one a fateful day two men whose farms were at the border of the two towns had a heated argument over encroachment. The man from Agbani alleged that the other overstepped the boundary during the cultivation of the land: an accusation that the man from Ugbawka vehemently refuted. This resulted in a fight in which the latter being the younger and more energetic gave the man from Agbani the beating of his life. The report infuriated the family of man from Agbani, who sought for opportunity to revenge. On a particular day the children of the man of Agbani went to the same farm without their father. They met a man in the opposite farm, who they suspected to be their father's adversary. They summarily pounced on the man, inflicted grievous wounds on him and this eventually resulted to his death. Unfortunately, the dead man was a labourer from Nkerefi. On receiving the sad news, the deceased man's people wanted to deal with the man who hired the deceased but before they could conclude their plan, he sent emissary to Nkerefi to explain the true situation and exonerated himself, thereby indicting Agbani family. Consequently, the grievance was directed to Agbani people whose inhabitants come to every Eke in Nkerefi to purchase food items for domestic and commercial purposes. On one Eke, a group of young men attacked traders from Agbani, who were on their way back

to Agbani, having bought food items as usually. Such barbaric act attracted the attention of the various hamlets in Agbani who mobilized their young men to beat up every inhabitant in Agbani who hails from Nkerefi. According to the report, the rampage started in the early hours of the fateful day. Thus, before the dawn, lots of damages had been incurred and persons inflicted with various degrees of injury. It took the timely intervention of the law enforcement agencies to prevent further break down of law and order. This was followed by apprehension of the culprits and consequent litigation. Of course, the issue now moves from mere boundary dispute to murder charges in which the man from Agbani and three of his sons were standing trial.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

After the administration of 100 questionnaires to 50 participants from Agbani and 50 from Nkerefi to assess their communication styles, conflict resolution strategies and perceptions of effective communication, the following results were gotten:

#### **Communication Styles:**

- Agbani (50 participants):
  - 30% Direct/Assertive
  - 25% Indirect/Passive
  - 20% Diplomatic/Tactful
  - 25% Aggressive/Confrontational
- Nkerefi (50 participants):
  - 40% Direct/Assertive
  - 20% Indirect/Passive
  - 15% Diplomatic/Tactful
  - 25% Aggressive/Confrontational

#### **Conflict Resolution Strategies:**

- Agbani:
  - 40% Avoidance
  - 30% Accommodation
  - 20% Competition
  - 10% Collaboration
- Nkerefi:
  - 30% Avoidance
  - 25% Accommodation
  - 25% Competition
  - 20% Collaboration

#### **Perceptions of Effective Communication:**

- Agbani:

- 80% rated "Clear and concise language" as essential
  - 70% rated "Active listening" as essential
  - 60% rated "Nonverbal communication" as essential
- Nkerefi:
- 85% rated "Clear and concise language" as essential
  - 75% rated "Active listening" as essential
  - 65% rated "Nonverbal communication" as essential

## **FINDINGS**

From the results above, the following findings were made:

- Agbani participants tend to be more indirect and passive in their communication style, while Nkerefi participants are more direct and assertive.
- Both groups prioritize avoidance and accommodation in conflict resolution, but Nkerefi shows a slightly higher tendency towards competition.
- Both groups recognize the importance of clear and concise language, active listening, and nonverbal communication in effective communication.

## **Efforts towards Resolution**

In spite the legal litigation going on in court vestiges of the conflict do surface from time to time. Thus, there was a constant tension between the two communities. Unfortunately, the people from Ugbawka joined ranks with those of Nkerefi against Agbani. As such it became a war of Nkerefi and Ugbawka versus Agbani, so to speak. The resurgence of this conflict escalated in 2005 in football match between secondary school students of Community Secondary School Agbani and their counterpart from Ugbawka. It was reported that the match was brought to an abrupt end when a fight broke out as a result of a rough tackle. On that a student from Ugbawka school: the visiting school was seriously injured. This incident heightened the tension between the warring towns. On getting the report, Local Government Inspectorate of Education, a body in charge of education then at the local government level quickly set up a commission of enquiry to unravel the causes and propose remedies. After a few months the commission reported that the escalation of the event of the football competition was not unconnected with the aforementioned case still in the court. The commission recommended a wholistic resolution of the conflict. Upon the reception of the report, the director presented the recommendation to the Nkanu West Local Government Chairman, who inturn wrote to the commissioner for local government and chieftaincy affairs. In response the commissioner set up a committee which was charged with getting to the root of the problem and bringing about a lasting solution. The committee was constituted from government officials, religious bodies and NGOs who were not indigenes of any of the three communities.

The committee visited the principal families and ascertained the very the root-cause of the problem. Since the government declared their determination to bring about a peaceful resolution at large, the heads and leaders of various communities were involved having obtained the consent of various families.

The first step was to get the elders of Nkerefi and the Catholic priest there to talk to the deceased family towards withdrawal of the murder case in the court. This yielded a positive fruit after a prolonged discussion. Having reached this point, the parties moved to bring the families and leaders of the three communities to dialogue. At this stage, everybody was ready for peace and speaks the language of reconciliation. All the parties were ready to listen to one another.

Since the stage was set for peace, each family and community involved were asked to come up with suggestions on how to bring about true reconciliation. Afterwards, the committee met with each group separately and resolved areas of differences. The areas of convergence were emphasized and strengthened. Eventually, it was agreed that the take-off point should be a befitting burial rite for the deceased young man. Agbani community accepted to take a greater percentage of the financial responsibility.

Furthermore, it was necessary to also compensate those who were grossly affected by the conflict. Nkanu West Local Government authority took the responsibility. Similarly, every other person who was affected was equally pacified.

To get to the root of the matter, the committee waded into the land boundary issue. In order to forestall similar occurrence in future, the committee after much consultation established a common boundary between the two towns: Agbani and Ugbawka. The committee consulted relevant authorities concerned with land issues and a legal stamp was put in the agreement between the two towns.

### **Conflict management strategies**

The two bodies that handled the conflict came to resolution through negotiation, mediation, arbitration, collaboration and reconciliation. According to findings from the interviews, it was found that the use of dialogue, public education, imposition of curfew, the use of the security agencies and the enforcement of the law were among the ways used in dealing with the conflict. At each point, the relevant agencies involved were constantly in touch with conflicting parties during the period of reconciliation.

### **Communication strategies used in the conflict zone.**

It was ascertained that the form of communication strategies used during the conflict situation was the electronic media like the radio, mobile phones; printed media such as the daily newspapers; posters depicting peaceful co-existence; government information van moving from community-to-community, consultations with the parties involved in the conflict; stakeholders meeting; and face-to-face communication with the leaders of various parties. Consequently, a rapport was established with feuding parties whereby mediators listen attentively to both sides and acted impartially. It was also established from the interviews that follow-up meetings were conducted regularly with the leaders of the feuding parties, local vigilante, the police and the committee, responsible for mediating

c o n f l i c t . F o r c o m m u n i c a t i o n to be effective, the government machinery responsible for propagating the message of peace was equipped. It was also noted that another form of communication strategy used to manage the conflict was the verbal invitation by the leaders and elders to the disputed parties. It was also observed that another strategy used was during Yam Festival which is celebrated every year in the affected communities. During the festival, the chiefs and his elders, opinion leaders in the communities, politicians of the various political parties, religious leaders and leaders of youth organizations used the platform to communicate to the gathering.

### **Effects of conflict in the communities**

According to the findings from the interviews, it was noted that conflict has affected the communities greatly. It has created factions, divisions and polarized the community, almost every issue is politicized. During the conflict, economic activities were standstill, farmers could not go to farms, schools were closed down, children could not attend school because of the fear of being attacked, and women could not go to the market because they were afraid of being attacked by their enemies. There were physical assaults, people's properties were destroyed and burnt, human lives were lost and the labour force was reduced because workers were afraid of their life and therefore left the district. There was hunger and joblessness.

### **Preventive Measures of the conflict resolution**

It was noted during the resolution that measures were put in place to reduce conflict in the local government. The local government has established a mediation team called Nkanu Peace Forum (NPF) to mediate in all conflict situations. NPF also organizes public education programmes on the dangers and effects of conflict and the importance of living peacefully. It also organizes public education programmes for the communities especially the youth and the feuding parties. The various religious bodies especially the Christians used their pulpit to preach peace and reconciliation to their members. Traditional rulers and elders according to findings also play a significant role during conflicts. They did this by inviting the leaders of the conflict and asked them to embrace peace. During the mediation process according to a respondent, an agreement was reached because the chief allowed each party the opportunity to give their view of the situation. In some occasions, the mediating team guarantees the conflicting parties' confidentiality and promised that any agreement reached or signed if written down had no legally binding status but was in good faith. It was also noted that because of the measures put in place and the respect the community accord to the leaders and elders, no conflict has been recorded this year.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study on the impact of effective communication in conflict resolution, specifically in the context of the Agbani/Nkerefi conflict, reveals that:

- ❖ Effective communication is crucial in resolving conflicts and improving relationships between the Agbani and Nkerefi communities.
- ❖ The Agbani community tends to be more indirect and passive in their communication style, while the Nkerefi community is more direct and assertive.
- ❖ Both communities prioritize avoidance and accommodation in conflict resolution, but the Nkerefi community shows a slightly higher tendency towards competition.
- ❖ Clear and concise language, active listening, and nonverbal communication are essential components of effective communication in conflict resolution.

Cultural differences and nuances play a significant role in communication and conflict resolution, and should be recognized and respected. Effective communication can help to reduce misunderstandings, build trust, and foster collaborative environments. Training and workshops on effective communication, conflict resolution, and cultural competence can benefit both communities. Establishing clear communication channels, regular feedback, and documentation of conflicts and resolutions can improve conflict resolution outcomes.

By implementing these findings and recommendations, the Agbani and Nkerefi communities can improve their communication skills, resolve conflicts more effectively, and foster a more harmonious relationship. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on conflict resolution and effective communication, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity and community-specific approaches.

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