

The Role of Libraries in Information Dissemination for Conflict Resolution, Peace Promotion and Reconciliation:

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Abstract

Man has continues to live in a world in which the prospects for universal and continuous peace and security remain dark with a plethora of global conflicts involving nations. Consequently, the themes of war, conflict resolution and peace promotion have dominated social science discourse, particularly in sociology, political science and international relations. As a result, peace and conflict research has become one of the cardinal pursuits of human societies and communities. What has remained, in all of this development, is the role of library in disseminating information for conflict resolution. The study highlights various strategies for conflict resolution, causes of conflict, consequences of conflict, information and conflict resolution, conflict resolution through information literacy and library, and conflict resolution. It concludes that libraries have many challenges in meeting up with conflict resolution. Such challenges include inadequate or lack of well equipped ICT laboratories, inadequate funding, inadequate number and right calibre of academic staff, and irregular power from the public power supply.

Introduction

The establishment of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945 (after World War II) was the result of a desire to save succeeding generations of mankind from any major war of global dimension. The architects of this global body desired to work together to prevent the outbreak of new global conflict, as well as build a world of freedom, progress, prosperity and justice for all nations (UN, 2001).

Conflict affects countries at all levels of economic development, but its disproportionate affects least developed countries or countries in economic stagnation. Conflicts vary widely in their nature, extent, duration, range of contributory factors, and the ways in which they impact education. Using the Uppsala data set of armed conflict 1946-2001, the study identified 52 countries or territories that have been affected by war or intermediate conflict since 1990 (World Bank, 2005) and most of these are in Africa.

Conflict can be seen as a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals, which they perceive as being obtainable by one or the other, but not both. This compact definition can be opened up and clarified by saying that there must be at least two parties; one party in mobilizing energy to obtain a goal, a desired objecting or situation, and the other party perceives the other as a barrier or threat to that goal..." quoted in(Michael,1981). From the above definition, conflict resolution is a post conflict negotiation that ends in peaceful agreements.

Collette, et al. (2003) are of the view that shortening conflicts might seem to be the most effective way of building a more peaceful world. However, in isolation such an approach is less effective than it might appear; unless post conflict risks are reduced. Shortening the duration of conflict. This, is of course, worth achieving ,but it should be seen as only part of a broader strategy for conflict reduction.

Montville, writing for the UN (1992), defined two distinct, mutually supportive components of conflict resolution as:

“Training in dispute resolution skills, and political conflict resolution- processes. The widely used negotiation mediation- conciliation approach, concentrated on problem –solving through consensus-building so that the basic interests of all parties could be satisfied; on the other hand, the litigation or power negotiation approach promoted discord, since the “power” side wins while the weak side loses and is determined to seek revenge in the future. Negotiating skills were critically important, and could help resolve deep-rooted ethnic and sectarian conflicts. In fact, conflict resolution could support the evolution of democratic pluralism in civil society.”

Although there is still no consensus on the best strategies for conflict resolution, practitioners, however, agree on the goal of conflict resolution: to move from power-base relations and “win-lose” approaches to conflict, towards the facilitation of communication, confidence-building, problem-solving, voluntary agreement and “win-win” situations. From the above, one can see that researchers have thought about negotiation–mediation–conciliation approaches, including withholding of finance, training in dispute resolution, building positive relationships, etc. as ways of resolving conflict. But none has mentioned information dissemination as a way of resolving conflict. This then is the focus of this study: to explore the different ways libraries can be used to resolve conflict.

In March 2000, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan set up an independent panel to make a clear set of recommendations on how to do better in future in the whole range of United Nations activities in the area of peace and security. Brahimi, Bakhdar (1998), (cited in UN 2003), the former Algerian Foreign Minister in his Report released on 23 August had observed that:

“Without renewed commitment on the part of member states, significant institution change and increased financial support, the United Nations would not be capable of executing the critical peacekeeping and peace-building tasks that are at core of its mission: “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”

The United Nations and its members face a pressing need to establish more effective strategies for conflict prevention. Furthermore, the organisation would continue to face the challenges of having to assist communities and nations in making the transition from war to peace. Conflicts in Africa pose major challenges to the United Nations efforts towards global peace, prosperity and human rights for all. These conflicts, the main aim, increasingly, is the destruction, not just of armies, but of civilians and entire ethnic groups. Preventing such war is no longer a matter of defending states or protecting allies. It is a matter of defending humanity itself (UN, 1998). Since 1970, more than 30 wars have been fought in Africa, the vast majority of them are intra-state. In 1996 alone, 14 of the 53 countries of Africa were afflicted by armed conflicts, accounting for more than half of all war related deaths world wide and resulting in more than 8 million refugees, returnees and displaced persons. However, one believes that some of these conflicts would have been avoided, if there were adequate communication among the warring communities and peace makers before the conflicts broke out. In other words, if there were information channels that are open to everybody, then the conflict would have been contained. Information could be defined as a stimulus that reduces uncertainty and denotes the knowledge communicated, concerning some particular facts subjects or events (Laloo, 2002).

Causes of Conflict

More than three decades after African countries gained their independence; there is a growing recognition among Africans themselves that the continent must look beyond its colonial past for the causes of current conflicts. The major factors identified are political, external, economic motive, and ethnic and religious in nature.

Political Factors

The nature of political power in many African nations, together with the real and perceived consequences of capturing and maintaining power, is a key source of conflict across the continent. It is frequently the case that political victory assumes a winner-takes-all form with respect to wealth and resources patronage, and prestige and prerogatives of office (UN, 1998). Anatolii Karpou, President, Informational Peace Foundation said that “The cause of conflicts in the commonwealth of independent states was, for the most part, not ethnicity but political power. For example, while there was no personal hostility between the people of Georgia and Azerbaijan, they struggled for authority to govern territory” (UN, 1991).

External Factors

During the cold war, external efforts to bolster or undermine African governments were a familiar feature of super-power competition. With the end of the cold war, external intervention has diminished but has not disappeared. In the competition for oil and other precious resources in Africa, interests external to Africa continue to play a large and sometimes decisive role, both in suppressing conflict and in sustaining it. Foreign interventions are not limited, however, to sources beyond Africa. For example, during Sierra Leone civil war, Charles Taylor was interfering by supplying arms and fighters to rebels in exchange for diamond. Likewise, Britain supplied arms to Nigeria against the Biafran rebels during the Nigerian-Biafra crisis (Okeke, 1968).

Economic Factors

Despite the devastation that armed conflicts bring, there are many who profit from chaos and lack of accountability, and who may have little or no interest in stopping a conflict and much interest in prolonging it. Very high on the list of those who profit from conflict in Africa are international arms merchants. Also high on the list, usually are the protagonists themselves (UN, 1998). In Liberia for instance, the control and exploitation of diamonds, timber, and other raw materials was one of the principal objectives of the warring factions. Control over these resources financed the various factors and gave them means to sustain the conflict. In addition to the broader sources of conflict that have been identified, a number of other factors are especially important in particular situations and sub regions which include government policies, development patterns, ethnic/religious factors, and inadequate information dissemination.

Government Policy

The first root cause of war was that most governments used models of economic development that hurt the poor. Such policies had been implemented in countries such as Zimbabwe and the United States, widening the income gap between the rich and the poor. Another important cause of war was the growing intolerance for diversity, especially by people in power. For example, Echezona (2001) explained that the policy of redistributing white owned-lands in Zimbabwe could be a political game play by Robert Mugabe to get rural farmers on his side and, at the same time, a pragmatic policy to “right the wrongs of the past”. Whichever way it is, the success of such a venture has been hinged on

international goodwill, which has, however, allied itself to popular opposition forces against Mugabe. Zimbabwe has since been mired in economic cornucopia, a situation that has arisen due to possible incorrect approaches to development and pressures from donors and foreign concerns. Another example is the transition to civil rule policy of the Babangida regime in Nigeria, which came to an impasse with the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election, that the SDP (Social Democratic party) Presidential candidate, MKO Abiola, was poised to win. Consequently, there was conflict on the street, and eventual loss of lives.

Information Flow and Sharing

Recent studies have noted that lack of adequate or balanced information was the most significant cause of most of the violent conflicts. This seems to be true because without knowledge and information, there is likely to be a conflict. The African continent, witnessed the introduction of “genocide” in the African lexicon in Rwanda in 1994, and evidence points to the negative role of the mass media, especially Radio Mles Colines, in preparing the minds of Hutus against Tutsis. As the apparatus of the Hutu State, the radio station tried to portray Tutsis as demons that must be exterminated from the face of the earth, and in an attempt to wipe the Tutsis out, Hutus themselves suffered one of the worst refugee crises on the African continent (Nnaji, 2001).

Development Patterns

Recent research also shows that development patterns that worsen inequalities, deepen poverty, or slash at the ties that bind societies together –can themselves contribute to the likelihood of conflict and its haunting recurrence (World Bank, 2005). Conflict, which has also been conceptualised as: “development in reverse,” should be analysed in the context of its impact on development (World Bank, 2003), when a development pattern does not make for equity, fairness and justice, it is bound to bring conflict. For example, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, there were series of conflicts, ranging from riots, rampage, kidnapping to murder because the people of the region claimed that the resources that were exploited from their land were not used to enrich them economically or socially, or politically.

Ethnic/Religious factors

Ethnic or religious dominance rather than diversity is also a powerful contributory factor in civil conflicts. Egwu, et al. (2003) in his study on the communal conflicts in Zango Kataf explained that what started as communal crisis between the Hausa and Kataf assumed a religious dimension, when it spread to other towns in Northern Nigeria. He notes that two issues arise from the Zango-Kataf conflict: the need to develop a system of early warning signals, and the challenge of peace-building and consolidation. The consequences are that there was a lack of coordination among the security agencies in the area of information sharing and collaboration aimed at nipping the conflict in the bud. What the situation suggests is that government should, based on the potentially recurrent nature of the crisis, develop an early warning system signals that can carefully anticipate and warn of the outbreak of communal violence.

Consequences of Conflict

Africans have witnessed many civil wars to date: the Liberian internal crisis, the Angolan civil war, the Sierra-Leone political internal strife under Mobutu, in the former Zaire (now Democratic of Republic of Congo –DRC), and the Nigeria-Biafra war, among others. These countries have witnessed negative consequences such as poverty and displacement.. A former defunct OAU Secretary General has this to say:

Conflicts have cast a dark shadow over the prospects for a united, secure and prosperous Africa which we seek to create--- conflicts have caused immense suffering to our people, and in the worst case, death. Men, women and children have been uprooted, dispossessed, deprived of their means of livelihood and thrown into exile as refugees as a result of conflicts.... Conflicts have engendered hate and division among our people and undermined the prospects of the long term stability and unity of our countries and Africa as a whole.” Quoted in (Deng, et al. 1996).

Conflict and poverty are intricately interrelated. It retards economic and social developments and may be conceptualised as “development in reverse” (World Bank, 2003).

In Central Africa, the consequences include the competition for scarce land and water resources in densely populated areas. In Rwanda, for example, multiple waves of displacement have resulted in situation where several families often claim rights to the same piece of land.

Information Dissemination and Conflict Resolution

Information dissemination or communication has been described as a need comparable with other basic human needs. Free flow of information is a right of the people which enables them to participate effectively in the process of economic, social and political activities in the society, and enhances education, knowledge and learning (Laloo, 2002). Therefore, for any nation to make meaningful impact in conflict prevention, peace promotion and conflict resolution, early warning information is needed. Timely alert to potential conflicts is central to an early warning system which, in order to be meaningful, must be complemented by early political action. Such alertness underlines the predictive capability of any early warning system. To that extent, therefore, early warning should not be seen as an end in itself, but rather, as a tool for preparedness, prevention and mitigation of conflicts, the efficiency of which is predicated upon a clear methodology for data collection, analysis and information exchange (Ibok and Nhara, quoted in Yaqub, 2001). Early warning information should be facts on the matter. Some of this early warning information, which could include internet, community radio, television, video conferencing and voice over of Internet protocol (Volp), email, print media, and reference services, are important, in order for people to know the implications of embarking on the conflict. This information can be given first to those who can take constructive action. This generally means government and groups likely to be immediately involved in efforts to prevent the crisis such as the United Nations, UN Security Council, religious and media organizations. The implications could be in the following areas:

Economic Implication

Information dissemination is needed on the potential shortages, production problems, fiscal policies. that affect a larger proportion of the population in a given conflict. A nation about to indulge in a conflict, especially such that could lead to war and all the diverse problems that go with it, should be forewarned by the intelligentsia and information specialists. Of all the economic implications it is bound to cause the people such as shortages of food, water, electricity and money, etc. For instance , during Nigeria- Biafra war, Ojukwu warned the people of the State of Biafra that going to war will

not be an easy task and that even the grass will suffer. The people need to know about these because they are bound to affect the people forcing to retreat or surrender.

Effective information management should be able to inform any nation about to indulge in conflict that sustained conflicts lead to armed struggle. In prolonged conflicts, warring parties often use dangerous weapons that produce substances that are inimical to human health and the environmental and produce air and water pollution, aquatic destruction and oil spillages. A study carried out on the Niger Delta by Ifidon and Ahiauzu (2005) revealed that the local communities lack information about the term of agreement between the federal government and oil companies about development activities and compensation from oil companies, and about the agreements between the oil companies and the representative of the local communities. Likewise, the conflict that broke in Bayelsa State in Nigeria between Ijaws and the Federal Government of Nigeria was caused by environmental degradation. The end result, which brought about, firstly, the murder of policemen who came to make peace in the town, and subsequently to the total destruction of Odi land (Echezona, 2001). Effective information dissemination through libraries and the Internet will put the leaders and the people at alert on facts of potential and conflicts, including their causes, evolution, consequences and solutions.

Information also needs to be disseminated on unemployment and under-employment in all nations and communities. A hungry man and the idle hand is a devil's workshop. Jobless youths have to be informed about the national economic situation, availability of job, and ways of being self employed, without which they would be easy prey to temptations to dangerous life styles and crime which can lead to health problems, social malice, disorientation of young people, prostitution, poverty and death.

A constant assessment should be made of domestic political environments of member's countries and information should be provided in order to gauge the state of democratic practice and respect of the rule of law and the level of adherence to political and human rights. Without adequate information, people are bound to struggle for power or natural resources, etc, which invariably leads conflict, hardship and death. For example, successive governments in Nigeria had refused to honour the agreement reached by Yakubu Gowon of Nigeria and Ahmadu Ahidjo of Cameroon during the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967-1970) concerning the Bakassi Peninsula, which led to the Bakassi conflict that displaced people, claimed lives, and property before it was resolved by the World Court, the UN and the two countries.

Personal Insecurity

People feel insecure, especially in urban areas, where the killings by armed robbers of innocent citizens and even policemen on duty occur on a daily basis. These acts, in the absence of adequate information may engender hatred, frustration and protest from the governed, who are bound to take laws into their hands, because they believe that state can no longer guarantee their safety.

Rural Indicator

Effective information gathering and dissemination at the grassroots level helps to douse inter and intra communal strife, religious crises, the morass of conflict between border towns, villages, and even one countries. It is therefore becomes imperative that a constant information must be given to the people, in order to maintain tranquillity. Community radio can be used to disseminate information to the rural people to alert them of impending crises. Information could be repackaged in a language

the rural people can understand, and such information could also be disseminated cinema, drama, cartoons, and music.

Nigerian governments and the oil companies have so far been unable to resolve conflicts in the Niger Delta region despite at least nine significant initiatives between 1958 and 2003 to understand conflicts in the area. The initiatives includes: Willink' Commission (1958); Niger-Delta Development Board (1960); Niger-Delta Basin Development Authority (1997); Presidential Task Force (1980); the Belgore Commission (1993); the Nigeria-Delta Development Commission (2000); and the abolition of the on-shore/off-shore dichotomy (2003) (Fekemos, study quoted in Ifidon and Ahiazu (2005). All these commissions were constituted to identify, discuss and come out with findings. As one can see, the discussion, meetings and findings are all information, which can be used to resolve conflicts. . Community radio, television, cartoon can be used to alert, inform or resolve conflict in a rural area, while digital information systems such as email, internet chat, web contact, video conferencing, list serve, etc. could be used to resolve conflict.

Conflict Resolution and Information Literacy.

Information literacy is the ability to develop skills, in order to access, decode and use information. Such skills are essential in a growing and complex information society. Literacy in the information society also requires new mental and operational capabilities, enable a person to deal successfully with a highly fluid, evasive and yet strongly structured environment. Information literacy or lack of it is perhaps the most crucial facet of the so- called digital divide (Queau, 2001). The American Library Association defines it as a term "applied to the skills of information problem- solving ,and adds that an information- literate person "must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information"(American Library Association,1996), Hawkins (2002), notes that knowledge and information have become the most important currency for productivity, competitiveness, and increased wealth and prosperity. According to Akintunde (2004), ICT "emphasises the use of the computer and other technologies such as telephone to process, transport, and transfer voice and other data singularly or mixed with least interference or distortion of content." With the above definition, ICT can be used to either propagate or resolve conflict. For instance, the Nazis had made an immense use of the mass media in the Second World War to mobilize the German people (Nnaji,2001).

Libraries and Conflict Resolution

Historically, libraries and librarians have played a major role in creating, accumulating, organising, and disseminating information. Libraries are key players in fostering the information society. The advance in the area of computer hardware and software, as well as breakthrough in the field of communications, brought about a great revolution in the way libraries deliver their information service today. With this revolution of ICT systems such as internet, website, email, teleconferencing, and information super high way, etc, libraries can then play a role in conflict resolution. Libraries can have a web site on conflict resolution to reach potential users, NGO and Government. Internet- based services are a more recent introduction, but already, demands for the services are expanding quickly. Library can do that through the creation of a website, where adequate information on conflict resolution can be discussed, accessed and disseminated to a wider population through email, list serve and teleconferencing. Such information dissemination is needed, in order to succeed with any meaningful conflict resolution or reconciliation.

Eyitayo (2005) has noted that the advent of ICT has provided a bridge for the virtual library patrons, who may be in the comfort of their offices or rooms and in dire need of answers to their questions. In order to remain relevant to this new environment, the library needs to pursue with all vigour the provision of online reference services. This type of service has been referred to as “chat,” “digital”, “email”, “online”, or “virtual” referencing service. Library and information services are key actors in providing unhindered access to essential information resources for economic and cultural advancement. In doing so, they contribute effectively to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom, democratic values, peace and universal civil right (IFLA, 2002). Libraries can clearly play a major role in conflict resolution in the following ways:

Seminar

Ogunkelu (2001) stated that seminars would go a long way in equipping researchers in the techniques of identifying and preventing conflicts at their early stages, as well as manage and resolve them. The library could invite experts on conflict resolution as resource persons and provide them with information materials to back up their discussions. The transcripts of the discussions could be put into pamphlets or on tapes. Reports have shown that countries like Ethiopia, Namibia, Uganda, Somalia and Liberia have mobilised library community resources in innovative ways to prevent and resolve conflicts (World Bank, 1996), cited in World Bank,(2005). Libraries could also organise seminars not only for the purpose of building the capacity of conflict researchers, but also for conscientising members of the public on the importance of peace for meaningful development.

Extension Services and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Libraries increase the value of human intellectual outputs by enhancing access to them through professional information processing, storage and dissemination functions. Public libraries have a solid tradition of outreach. This outreach means taking the library to the people (mobile libraries), so that they would read to illiterates in their communities, translate, interpret, photocopy, ask, and answer questions concerning human rights, causes and consequences of war and other relevant information. Invariably, this information would help to prevent conflicts and wars (Population Reference Bureau, 2004).

Library in Collaboration with NGO

Saunders’ study, (quoted in UN, 2002), suggested five ways to broaden theories of international relations to include not only state and governmental interaction, but also many interaction, that take place within body’ politics. He also stated that “many conflicts such as those arising from identities or differing views of history were not suitable for governmental mediation, but were best handled by NGO’s and libraries”. Personnel from these organisations have visited communities, schools, to give lessons, stimulate discussion, and encourage children and adult in the simple steps to promote peace and resolve conflict. The United Nations has been deeply involved in many of these advances by supporting peace promotion and conflict resolution through sending their publications to the depository libraries all over the world, which the depository libraries invariable made accessible to their clients.

Access to free Information

By delivering high quality services, libraries and information centres have contributed immensely to ensure access to information. Libraries have allowed their users to have access to these resources in

different formats, like CD-ROM, audiovisual and online. Libraries can also document and index books, magazines and newspapers that dealt on how conflicts can be resolved; and can inform their client communities about such information. The library could also provide information using audio-visual materials to the less educated and less privileged individuals so, that they can benefit and understand easily from the discussions (Fayose, 1995). Sturges & Chimesu (1996), are also of the view that essential information in books that dealt with peace and security may be repackaged and played to the hearing of all those meant to benefit from the content.

Conclusion

The development of any nation is undoubtedly impossible in an environment of crises, political instability and insurrection. It therefore becomes imperative for African nations to make meaningful effort in conflict prevention which is a necessary corollary for peace, development and good governance. Everybody therefore has a collective responsibility to help African nations and communities to foster peace and resolve conflicts. Community based organisations could be encouraged to constantly meet, process, review and monitor progress and implementation of information dissemination that would foster peace, and libraries have important role to play in identifying, collating and enhancing access to information for peace making and conflict resolution..

Security agencies also need to redirect their focus from military intervention to early warning information gathering. Peace promotion and conflict resolution cannot be achieved through establishment of permanent standing army, but it can be achieved through information gathering and dissemination.

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