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Niger Delta Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Social Work Intervention Perspectives

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Abstract

The Niger Delta geo-political zone is confronted by multiple violet conflicts and security challenges overtimes as a result of widespread exploitations of the abundant oil reserves without corresponding development. Many peacebuilding initiatives embarked on have failed to yield the desired sustainable peace resolutions due to non-involvement of professional peace practitioners like social workers. Therefore, this study examines the place of social work intervention in Niger Delta post-conflict peacebuilding as a panacea for national cohesion and development. The methodology employed in the study is quantitative and qualitative research technique using questionnaire and In-depth interview. The questionnaire was used to gather data from 50 social workers employed in institutions in Niger Delta. The in-depth interview was tailored towards eliciting information from 10 key informants such as community chiefs, peace and conflict experts and statesmen in Niger Delta. This study is anchored on conflict transformation theoretical framework due to its significance on understanding and explaining conflict management. The result revealed that 94% of the respondents reported poor design and inadequate implementations of peace and conflict management, and 96% of the respondents have not be involved in peacebuilding process in Niger Delta. Therefore, peacebuilding efforts so far have failed to contribute to national cohesion and development. The study recommended that both the government and other stakeholders should see how to integrate social workers in conflict prevention, management and resolution in the Niger Delta in order to fully maximize their peacebuilding potentials.

Keywords: Conflict, Niger Delta, Peacebuilding, Social work, Perspectives.

Introduction

Violet conflicts have long been a component of international discourse over decades. According to Issifu, (2016), violence of all kinds has occurred in one-third of the world's countries as a result of racism, marginalization, politics, power, ethnicity or other factors. Over the history of its existence, the Niger Delta has had an interesting and substantial trajectory of conflict and crisis. The violet conflicts and their deadly impacts in the Niger delta have served as Nigeria's main test of its capacity to handle cultural differences, secure lasting peace, and foster national integration (Maigari, 2022).

In 1975, Johan Galtung introduced the concept of "peacebuilding" into the political vocabulary of state administration and governance in his groundbreaking book "Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, and Peacebuilding." However, the phrase gained popularity in 1992 after Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the then-United Nations Secretary-General, unveiled his admirable Agenda for Peace initiative. Since then, "peacebuilding" has been a commonly used term, particularly in light of the ongoing threat to the stability and peace of the world.

Peacebuilding is a comprehensive word that includes both short-term conflict management and conflict resolution operations as well as long-term transformative initiatives of the post-war period (Anderson, 2015; Maigari, 2022). Peacebuilding is all social mechanisms a society used to creates and encourage increased understanding and collaboration toward lasting peace (Merdjanova, 2016).

From the 20th to the 21st centuries, various non-governmental organizations, civil societies, and international organizations participated in peacebuilding in various parts of the world by offering various intervention programmes and initiatives to end complex conflicts (Maigari, 2022).

Fundamentally, there have been two basic peacebuilding strategies employed historically and are continuing been used today to alter post-conflict nations are the western or conventional and the indigenous or traditional approaches to peacebuilding (Issifu, 2016). According to Bukari (2013), the conventional strategy is the use of formal and external bodies and structures in attempting to end a conflict. And after violent conflicts, the traditional or indigenous approach to peacebuilding aims to promote a win-win or non-zero-sum game (Issifu, 2015).

The concept of "peace-building" is broad and encompasses a variety of initiatives, such as upholding human rights, eradicating all forms of injustice and inequality, establishing institutional frameworks, encouraging a dialogue-based ethic, and fostering reconciliation (Lombard, 2015; Kafula, 2016). Due to its complexity, it needs the collaboration of many stakeholders, including social workers.

In recent years, there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of social work intervention in post-conflict peacebuilding as a means to address the root causes of conflict, rebuild communities, and promote national cohesion and development. Social work, as a multidisciplinary profession, offers a unique approach to peacebuilding and has been playing an increasingly significant role in fostering lasting peace and development (Justice, *et al*., 2021).

The beliefs and objectives of the social work profession are inherently focused toward promoting peace and development (Kafula, 2016). Social work intervention, with its focus on community development, empowerment, and conflict resolution, can serve as a crucial tool for achieving national cohesion and sustainable development in Niger Delta. By empowering people and advocating for social justice and human rights, social workers can help promote peace and development.

Social work intervention encompasses a range of professional practices aimed at addressing social issues and promoting positive change in individuals, families, communities, and societies. It involves activities such as advocacy, counseling, capacity building, community development, and policy reform. In the context of post-conflict peacebuilding, social work interventions focus on healing and reconciliation, social justice, empowerment, and the restoration of social cohesion. Social work intervention, with its focus on addressing social injustices, empowering individuals and communities, and promoting social change, has the potential to contribute significantly to post-conflict peacebuilding in the region.

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Some of the key areas of social work interventions in post-conflict peace building include community engagement and dialogue, collaboration and partnerships, contextual understanding and cultural sensitivity, psychosocial support and trauma healing, livelihood support and economic empowerment, environmental sustainability and advocacy.

In attempt to address the underlying causes of conflict and promoting community dialogue and engagement, social workers can play a crucial role in reducing violence and militancy in the region, fostered trust and understanding among diverse groups, building a foundation for peaceful coexistence. Social work intervention fosters conflict resolution and mediation by providing a neutral and inclusive space for dialogue and negotiation. social workers help build trust, promote reconciliation, and develop sustainable solutions to underlying grievances. These processes contribute to the reduction of violence and the promotion of peaceful coexistence.

social workers have reduced poverty and dependency on extractive industries, promoting a more diversified and resilient economy through creation of opportunities for income generation

Statement of the problem

The Niger Delta, located in Southern Nigeria, has experienced protracted violet conflicts over decades. The Niger Delta long-standing conflicts are due to issues surrounding oil exploration, environmental degradation, socioeconomic, political marginalization, and ethnic tensions (Adamu, et al., 2020).

These protracted conflicts in Nigeria have not only resulted in the loss of lives and property but have also hindered the social and economic development, contributing to a growing sense of disunity, instability and cohesion of Nigeria as a nation (Alege & Ojoduwa, 2019).

Despite been endowed with vast oil and gas reserves and its significant contribution to Nigeria's revenue, the region has suffered decades of neglect, environmental degradation, and political exclusion, leading to various armed conflicts and unrest. These conflicts have had devastating consequences on the region's development and have posed a significant threat to national unity

The persistent violence has disrupted essential services, undermined investments, and deepened poverty, perpetuating a cycle of grievances and unrest in the region.

On the other side, the United Nations (2015) asserts that equitable distribution of wealth and a decline in income inequality are necessary for long-term inclusive and sustainable economic growth, which is necessary to decrease poverty and provide solid economic foundations for nations.

The aftermath of these conflicts poses significant challenges to peacebuilding efforts and hinders national cohesion and development (Maigari, 2022). It will be wise if decision-makers, donors, and other local, national, and international stakeholders in peacebuilding understand that integrating social workers is necessary for long-term peace.

Literature review

Kafula (2016) study revealed that in an endeavor to create peaceful communities, social work can play a crucial part in fostering individuals' resilience, sense of support, and positive social connections. As a strategy to combat inequality that could lead to poverty among the underprivileged groups, social workers can help welfare agencies. Social workers might shift their efforts to advocate for the marginalized groups in circumstances where there is a substantial reduction in welfare services, which may result in increased inequality between the have and have not. This is done in an effort to preserve social harmony. Additionally, advocacy can support the institutions involved in the defense of human rights.

Popoola (2020) examined civil society organizations and post-conflict reintegration in Niger Delta, Nigeria. She asserts that the social, political, and economic reintegration of former fighters and their families is the focus of post-conflict reintegration, a component of peacebuilding. The research adopted the descriptive-evaluative research design and used a secondary source for data collection. The research findings show that the struggle for resource control between the Nigerian government and indigenes of the Niger Delta is the root source of the conflict. The 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) success was hindered by lots of challenges encountered both from the national government and the ex-combatants. Nonetheless, with the support of civil society organizations, PAP recorded several successes.

Veta (2021). Participation in community development micro projects in Niger Delta region of Nigeria: implications for social work education and practice. This study sought to investigate factors militating against community participation in development projects executed under the Micro Projects Programme and how to reduce such factors to the barest minimum in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted for the study. A questionnaire, an in-depth interview (IDI) guide and a focus group discussion (FGD) guide were used for data collection. Borehole water, generator-house, health centres, staff quarters and markets were the projects executed. Inadequate devolution of power to the grassroots, among others, was the major problem that hindered involvement of community members in the development process of the Micro Projects Programme in the study areas. To enhance active participation of beneficiaries in the development process of the programme, suggestions are proffered.

There have been an alarming recurrent kidnapping and hostage-taking in Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Significant numbers of the members of the society are becoming victims of abductions; armed robbery and small-time crooks have engaged in the seeming lucrative venture of kidnapping. Evidently, the targets were expatriates who were taken by the kidnappers usually on attacks in the energy-rich Niger Delta region. The criminal elements are becoming more interested in kidnapping wealthy locals. The paper examines the origin of kidnapping and hostage taking as it poses serious implication Social Work intervention in Niger Delta. This study adopted descriptive research design with systematic review of literatures. The study made use of secondary data such as newspapers, journal articles and periodicals. The study adopted social learning theory and task centered therapy (model) as the theoretical framework for the study. Finding of the study shows that there is significant psychological traumatic impact of kidnap and hostage taking on victims. The paper recommended multi agency social work practice and collaboration in effort to ameliorate the plight of kidnap victims. The paper also recommended the need for social work proactive counseling and reintegration of kidnap victims with post traumatic.

Theoretical framework

The theory of conflict transformation by Lederach John Paul in 1997 was used to anchor this study as the theoretical framework. The theory of conflict transformation explains the protracted process of going from a state of war to one of peace, which entails the efforts of numerous actors in an effort to carry out a successful peacebuilding operation.

According to Lederach (2003), conflict transformation foresees and responds to the rise and movement of social tensions as a strategy to produce successful transition processes. It is the capacity to avoid taking sides, recognize advantageous outcomes, and develop a fresh framework and plan that reinforces and consolidates the advantages of settling conflict and establishing peace. Peace is viewed as being anchored and centered on the caliber of relationships in conflict transformation.

It is on face-to-face encounters as well as the ways in which our social, political, economic, and cultural relationships are set up fall under this category. In this sense, peace is a "process-structure," a dynamic, adaptable, and evolving phenomena.

It is a prolonged process that requires the participation of numerous parties. In order to effectively transition from violence to peace and maintain it over the long term, the government cannot engage in peacebuilding efforts alone; it needs and requires the help of other parties.

Social workers as change agents are much more effective in peacebuilding. The application of conflict transformation theory in social work intervention provides a valuable framework for peacebuilding efforts. Social workers can contribute to building a more peaceful and just society through facilitating dialogue, empowering communities, addressing structural factors and providing trauma-informed care disorder into the mainstream of their family and the society in general

Methodology

A cross-section survey methodology was employed in the study using quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (in-depth interview) research. The questionnaire was used to gather data from 50 social workers employed in institutions in Niger Delta. The in-depth interview was tailored towards eliciting information from 10 key informants such as community chiefs, peace and conflict experts and statesmen in Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta comprises Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers states. The Niger Delta occupies 85,303 square kilometers (about 8%) of Nigeria's landmass approximately and the largest African continent wetlands (Okwu-Delunzu, Joy, & Chinwe, 2021).

Due to its vast oil and gas deposits, the region provides about 80% of the Federal Government's income and 90% of Nigeria's export revenues (Elisha, 2022). Also, in addition to oil and gas, the region also provides significant natural resources such as silver nitrate, coal, glass sand, timber, kaolin, quartzite, etcetera. It also has huge potential in agriculture and tourism (Victor, 2019).

Result

Socio-demographic variables of respondents

The above table 1 below represents the percentage distribution of some selected socio-demographic variables of respondents. Table shows that

Table 1: *Percentage distribution of respondents on socio-demographic variables*

Socio-demographic variables		Frequency	Percentage
	Male	31	62.00
Sex	**Female**	**19**	**38.00**
	Total	**50**	**100**
	Public/civil servant	**35**	**70.00**
Employment status	Private	15	30.00
	Total	**50**	**100**
	Delta	15	30.00
State of residence	**Cross river**	**20**	**40.00**
	Bayelsa	15	30.00
	Total	**50**	**100**
	Below level 6	10	20.00
Employment level	**Between level 7-11**	**25**	**50.00**
	Level 12 and above	15	30.00
	Total	**50**	**100**

Table2: *Percentage distribution of respondents on their engagement with peacebuilding*

Engagement with peacebuilding	Frequency	Percentage
Never	47	94.00
Sometimes	1	2.00
Always	2	4.00
Total	**50**	**100**

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Table 3: *Percentage distribution of respondents on design and implementations of peacebuilding process*

Design and implementations of peacebuilding process	Frequency	Percentage
Good	3	6.00
Fair	2	4.00
Poor	**45**	**90.00**
Total	**50**	**100**

The result revealed that 94% of the respondents reported poor design and inadequate implementations of peace and conflict management, and of the respondents have not been involved in peacebuilding process in Niger Delta.

Table 4: *Percentage distribution of respondents on roles of social worker in peacebuilding*

Roles of social worker in peacebuilding	Frequency	Percentage
Community engagement and dialogue	3	6.00
Collaboration and partnerships	1	2.00
Contextual understanding and cultural sensitivity	1	2.00
Psychosocial support and trauma healing	3	6.00
Livelihood support and economic empowerment	1	2.00
Environmental sustainability and advocacy	2	4.00
All of the above	**39**	**78.00**
Total	**50**	**100**

Discussion

Many attempts have been made around the world to promote peace when violent conflicts broke out, however majority of these efforts were unsuccessful and ineffective. Thus, the emergence of new violence and the resurgence of old has not been curbed due to the poor participation and non-involvement of social worker in post-conflict peacebuilding.

Conflicts have catastrophic repercussions on the welfare of people and have a significant effect on political, social, and economic development. All developmental gains can be undone by violent war, which exacerbate human misery and poverty (Kafula, 2016). Thus, social work interventions have emerged as a valuable tool in post-conflict peacebuilding and development efforts.

Over the years, various organizations and agencies, including government bodies, NGOs, and international development partners, have engaged in social work interventions to address the root causes of conflict and foster peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. These interventions encompass a wide range of activities, including conflict resolution and mediation, community engagement, capacity building, youth empowerment, and sustainable livelihood initiatives.

Conflict Resolution and Mediation

Social workers have played a crucial role in facilitating dialogues and mediation processes between conflicting parties, including government representatives, oil companies, and local communities. Social workers have also been instrumental in de-escalating tensions and building trust among stakeholders.

Social workers serve as mediators, facilitating dialogue and negotiation between conflicting parties in the Niger Delta. Through conflict resolution strategies, such as alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms, social workers help bridge divides, build trust, and facilitate reconciliation. These interventions contribute to the restoration of social harmony and promote long-term peace.

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Social work practitioners in the Niger Delta have been involved in conflict resolution and mediation processes, facilitating dialogue and negotiations among conflicting parties. These interventions have helped to de-escalate tensions, promote understanding, and find mutually beneficial solutions. For instance, community-based mediation initiatives have been successful in resolving disputes over resource control and land ownership.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is at the core of effective social work interventions. Social workers have actively involved local communities in identifying their needs, aspirations, and priorities. Social workers have fostered a sense of ownership and collective responsibility, enhancing the sustainability of peacebuilding efforts.

Capacity Building and Youth Empowerment

Empowering the youth with education, vocational skills, and entrepreneurship opportunities has been a key focus of social work interventions. These programs have helped to reduce the recruitment of young people into armed groups, promoting a more stable and cohesive society.

Social work interventions in the Niger Delta focus on capacity building and skill development programs. social workers empower communities to overcome poverty, unemployment, and marginalization in equipping individual in vocational skills, and entrepreneurial opportunities,

These interventions contribute to sustainable development, poverty reduction, and social inclusion in post-conflict settings.

Social work interventions have focused on empowering communities affected by the conflict by building their capacity and promoting sustainable development. Through training programs, workshops, and skill-building initiatives, social workers have equipped community members with the necessary tools to improve their socio-economic conditions. This has led to increased self-reliance, reduced poverty, and improved overall well-being in the region.

Sustainable Livelihood Initiatives

Social work interventions have also sought to address the underlying economic grievances in the Niger Delta in promoting sustainable livelihood initiatives such as agriculture, aquaculture, and renewable energy projects, social workers have contributed to improving the economic prospects of the region's communities, reducing their dependence on oil revenues.

Facilitating Reconciliation and Healing

Social work intervention plays a pivotal role in facilitating reconciliation processes in post-conflict settings. It promotes dialogue, truth-telling, and forgiveness among conflicting parties. The Niger Delta region has witnessed several peacebuilding initiatives that have employed social work techniques, such as community dialogue, mediation, and trauma healing workshops, to foster understanding and reconciliation (Okoli, 2018). These interventions have contributed to reducing intergroup tensions and rebuilding trust among communities affected by the conflict.

The Niger Delta conflicts have left deep emotional scars on individuals and communities. Social workers provide psychosocial support services, including counseling, trauma healing, and mental health interventions, to help survivors cope with the aftermath of violence. Social work interventions promote healing, resilience, and reintegration as a means of addressing psychological well-being of individuals and community

The Niger Delta conflict has had a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of individuals and communities. Social work interventions have provided trauma healing and

psychosocial support services, enabling individuals to cope with the effects of violence and displacement. These interventions have included counseling, group therapy, and community support networks, which have contributed to the healing and resilience of affected populations.

Promoting Community Engagement and Participation

Social work intervention emphasizes the importance of community engagement and participation in decision-making processes. (Abonor, Bassey & Eyang, 2024). Social workers ensure that the solutions implemented are contextually relevant and sustainable. Community-driven initiatives, such as community-based conflict resolution mechanisms and community development projects, have been implemented in the Niger Delta to promote inclusive participation and ownership of peacebuilding efforts (Ofuoku, 2017). These initiatives have not only addressed immediate needs but have also fostered a sense of ownership and unity among the community members, contributing to national cohesion.

Empowering Marginalized Groups

Social work intervention places a strong emphasis on empowering marginalized and vulnerable groups. In the Niger Delta, social workers have been instrumental in advocating for the rights and inclusion of marginalized groups such as women, youth, and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Through capacity building programs, skill acquisition training, and advocacy for equal opportunities, social workers have empowered these groups to actively participate in peacebuilding processes and socioeconomic development (Agoha, 2020). By addressing the structural inequalities that perpetuate conflicts, social work intervention promotes social justice and contributes to national cohesion.

Advocating for Policy Reforms

Social workers in the Niger Delta have actively engaged in policy advocacy to address the root causes of conflicts and promote sustainable development. They have played a crucial role in advocating for environmental reforms, equitable resource allocation, and inclusive governance structures. By highlighting the socio-economic and environmental injustices prevalent in the Niger Delta, social workers have influenced policy decisions and fostered a conducive environment for peace and development (Nwalimu, 2019). Through their involvement, social workers have contributed to the formulation and implementation of policies that promote national cohesion and address the region's developmental challenges.

Social workers in the Niger Delta have been at the forefront of advocating for social justice and human rights, particularly in relation to environmental degradation and the exploitation of natural resources. They have raised awareness, engaged in policy advocacy, and mobilized communities to demand accountability from multinational corporations and government agencies. These efforts have led to increased accountability, environmental protection, and the promotion of human rights in the region

Implications for policy making

For a lasting solution to the continuous conflicts in the South-south region, the researchers from social work perspective made the following recommendations for policy formulation and implementation;

1. In the South-south region, social workers can act as a political activist, creating a space for the voices of the vulnerable and marginalised to be heard through nurturing of hope and power in their voices.

2. Social workers should be actively involved in conflict management processes because they work at the coalface, with communities who are oppressed and discriminated against.

Conclusion

Social work interventions in the Niger Delta can be a vital panacea for national cohesion and development. It is imperative that social work interventions continue to be supported, expanded, and integrated into broader peacebuilding strategies in the Niger Delta and beyond, to pave the way for national progress and lasting peace.

Involvement of the profession in peace-building is necessary to increase the effectiveness of social work in promoting peace, respect for human rights, and sustainable development in society. By investing in social work intervention and approaches to post-conflict peacebuilding, Nigeria can pave the way for lasting peace, social justice, and sustainable development in the Niger Delta. Nigeria can harness the potential of the Niger Delta, promote social justice, and build a more inclusive and prosperous nation.

Therefore, this study highlights the impact of social work interventions and identifies key strategies for effective peacebuilding. The findings emphasize the critical role of social work professionals in promoting social justice, community engagement, and holistic well-being, thereby contributing to the overall development and stability of the Niger Delta and Nigeria as a whole. By recognizing the potential of social work as a panacea for sustainable peace and development, policymakers and stakeholders can foster lasting change in the Niger Delta, leading to a more cohesive and prosperous Nigeria.

Recommendations

Further research and investment in social work interventions are necessary to unlock the full potential of this approach in the Niger Delta and beyond.

Recognizing the importance of social workers' contributions, it is crucial to provide them with increased support, resources, and recognition.

Policymakers, government agencies, and development partners should collaborate with social work professionals to further strengthen their capacity and enable them to effectively address the root causes of conflict in the region.

To ensure and sustain these gains of long-term peace, stability, and prosperity in the Niger Delta and Nigeria as a whole, it requires continued commitment from all stakeholders, including government, civil society, and international partners,

further research and investment in social work education, training, and practice are necessary to maximize the impact of these interventions on post-conflict peacebuilding efforts

As part of social action, social workers can engage violent structures in Niger Delta in an effort to fight against hate and oppression which tends to perpetuate violence and underdevelopment.

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