Conflicts Management in the Administration of Local Government Councils in Cross River State, Nigeria

Ushie, E. M. [1], Igbaji, P. M.[2], Agba, A.M. Ogaboh [3]

[1, 3] Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Calabar,
[2] Department of Business Administration,Cross River University of Technology, Cross River State, NIGERIA.

[1] mondayushies@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines conflicts management in the administration of local government councils in the Northern Senatorial District of Cross River State, Nigeria. It identifies, analyse, and discuss the causes, as well as effects of conflicts on council's performance. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. The result of data analyses revealed that staffs who have less conflict in their work setting perform better or are more productive than their counterparts with high level of conflict; a significant negative relationship exists between the presence of conflict and setting of staff welfare and that local government administrators are not properly trained on conflict management. The study also revealed that the administration of local government councils has been hampered by incessant conflicts. The paper suggested among others that proactive strategies and dialogues should be adopted to manage conflicts to forestall abysmal performance and low productivity in the local government areas.

Keywords: Conflicts, management, Administration, Councils

INTRODUCTION

Every work setting is usually made up of workers and their employers. The relationship between these two categories of persons is expected to be cordial or void of discord if the goals and objectives of such organization must be attained with all efficiency and effectiveness. In the work setting of our present society, conflict is gaining prominence and has become almost synonymous with the existence of human organizations the world over. This reality is somewhat paradoxical when one considers the enormous amount of energy and resources expended by organizations world-wide to prevent and or resolve conflicts. Flippo (1980) volunteered an explanation with a remark that a total absence of conflict would be unbelievable, boring and a strong indication that conflicts are being suppressed. The inevitability of conflict is further underscored by Kerzner (1998), who argues that conflict is part of change and therefore inevitable. It is therefore not unusual to expect conflicts in the administration of local government councils in Cross River State. As a reality of management and organization behaviour, conflict is an inherent feature of organizations, which is induced in part by the very structure of the organization. However, the benefits to be derived from a work setting with less conflict in terms of efficiency and effectiveness in production cannot be less stated (Ushie, 2002).

The nature and types of conflicts that are prevalent in local government administration vary from one council to another. The common types of conflicts usually occur between the executives and legislative, National Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) and Local Government Service Commission (the government), and Career Civil Servants and

political appointees. Other forms include conflict between Nigeria union of Teachers (NUT), and state government, and interpersonal conflict among staff in the councils.

This study is particularly relevant at a time of lingering crisis between teachers and the government over the implementation of Teachers Salary Scale (TSS) approved by the Federal Government. The ability of the state government to implement the TSS to teachers in full particularly in the primary schools became a potential source of industrial conflict in the sector. An investigation into the nature of conflicts, their causes, as well as their effects on local government performance is important to ensure harmony in the area councils. This will facilitate higher productivity and the delivery of democratic dividends to the rural populace.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEMS

The global economic crisis (meltdown) and its attendant effect on the Nigerian economy in recent time have led to poor fortunes of workers with the resultant agitation for introduction of a new minimum wage. The attendant disparity in incomes of staff of the unified local government system and political appointees and inflation has generated dissatisfactions among Nigeria workers (Agba & Ushie, 2013). Often, this has resulted in agitations, disputes, and disagreements in almost every work community especially in the local government areas in Cross River State. The issues have become a major concern for local government administrators who can no longer enjoy the commitment and loyalty of their staff.

Specifically, workers in the local government area in the Northern Senatorial District of Cross River State are dissatisfied with their poor incomes and conditions of services. They helplessly witness how political appointees' share and cart away money meant for the development of rural communities. Their morale are dampened by the disparity in salaries and remunerations between career civil servants in the councils and political office holders.

Agitations by local government employees under NULGE for improved conditions have often been neglected and suppressed. This has affected their performances. It is unhealthy productivity –wise, to accumulate a series of conflicts without devising appropriate means of managing them. UNICEF (1995) warns that conflicts when not dealt with constructively often explode into violence.

Attitudes of local government administrators in the Senatorial District have not helped matter because some of the conflicts centered on their personality, administrative and leadership styles. This situation is further compound by the seeming distrust between council executives and legislatures over issues such as disbursement of funds, location and execution of projects, employment and award of contracts.

The significance of this study is anchored on the need for a peaceful atmosphere conducive for productivity in the area councils. It is against this scenario that this paper attempts to address the following research questions; that further gave rise to hypotheses.

How do conflicts in organizations affect performance and productivity?

  i.   What relationship exists between conflicts and staff welfare in local government administration?

 ii.   How equipped are local government administrators in conflict management?

iii.   What is the role of the Local Government Service Commission in conflict management and resolution in the unified local government system in Cross River State?

iv.   What strategies can council administrators employed for effective conflict management in their areas councils?

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of relevant literature on management and organizational conflicts will serve as a usual background and theoretical perspectives to this study. Sisk and William (1981), sees management as a process of coordinating all resources through the processes of planning, organizing, leading and controlling in order to attain stated objectives. From this perspective, management becomes very crucial for the success or failure of a business. It is further observed that management, as a purposive coordinative process is universal to all forms of group endeavour. In essence, management is not only restricted to business enterprise but embraces every goals directed activity through group efforts.

Duncan (1975) asserts that effective coordination does not just happen; rather it is brought about by individuals who possess the knowledge and skills to synchronize the actions of numerous people and channel those actions towards common goals. This view is corroborated by Bartol and Martin (1995), Mullins (1996), Fajana (2002) and Armstrong (2006). It means that management consists of all organizational activities that involves formation of goals; attainment of the goals, approval of performance and the development of mechanisms that will ensure the growth and survival of the organization within the larger social system.

Conflicts, when poorly managed affect the accomplishment of organizational goals due to their attendant stress, hostilities, and other undesirable outcomes (Agba, Ushie & Agba, 2009). The issue of conflict management thus becomes paramount for goals accomplishment. A variety of meanings is associated with the concept conflict depending on usage and the context. Rahim (1992) contends that conflict as an interactive process is manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or difference within or between social entities (that is, individual groups, organizations etc). Rahim's position ties neatly with the view of Dahrendorf (1959) that the term refers to tension within the organizational system. Arguing further Rahim added that one may observe such tension by paying attention to possible incompatibilities among staff members or employees, to complexities of communication network and even to organizational structure itself.

In the view of Mullins (1996:723) conflicts as a product of opposing behaviours based on incompatibility of goals is "behaviour intended to obstruct the achievement of some other person's goals". Gardiner and Simnions (1992) defined the concept as any divergence of interest, objectives, or priorities between individuals groups or organizations or non-conformity to requirements of a task activity or process. Ihejiamaizu (1996:149) associates conflict with "An overt behaviour that results when an individual or group of individuals thinks a perceived need or needs of the individual or groups of individual has been frustrated or is about to be frustrated".

DeCenzo (1997) on the other hand submitted that whenever two people come together, there are bound to be disagreements at times. Sometimes, these differences can grow to enormous proportion where they become detrimental to the parties involved and the organizations. When that occurs, conflict is present. He added that organizational conflicts can take the following forms: horizontal conflict, vertical conflict and role confusion/conflict.

According to Ivancevich (1996), three factors are known to contribute to conflicts. These are work interdependence, differences in perceptions, and increase demand for specialists. The tendency by some people to equate conflict with violence is pervasive. In a reaction, UNICEF (1995), states that conflicts are not necessarily synonymous with violence and that conflict occur not only in situation of violence but inevitably occur between people over ideas, values, positions and perspectives on a range of issues.

The potentials of conflict to manifest both positive and negative characteristics were highlighted by Thanhain and Whilemon (1974). They stated that conflict is defined as the behaviour of an individual, a group, or an organization which impedes or restricts (at least temporarily) another party from attaining its deserved goals. This potential not withstanding they added, the consequences may be beneficial if they produce new information which in turn enhances the decision-making process and overall performance of a system. The contrasting view of conflicts is highlighted by Mullins (1996) who argues that to associate conflict with negative features and situations, which give rise to inefficiency, ineffectiveness, or dysfunctional consequences, is the traditional view of conflict. Arguing further, he held that conflict is not necessarily a bad thing especially when well managed; constructive conflict can be a catalyst for improvement in an organization. It implies from the submissions above that conflicts have both positive and negative outcomes on an organization depending on how it is handled by management.

When conflict management is poor in an organization, the outcome is abysmal performance and inefficiency. This revelation was made by Okotoni and Okotoni (2003), after examining conflict management in secondary schools in Osun State, Nigeria. Their study revealed amongst other things that inadequate welfare package for workers, retrenchment of workers, administrative incompetence, personality clashes, role conflicts etc, accounted for the cause of conflicts in Osun State. The tempo of conflicts they added, is heightens by the schools administrators' lack of knowledge in conflict management and absence of laid down procedures for conflict management.

Igbaji (2005) sets out to unearth the impact of industrial conflict on the goals achievement of Tertiary Institutions in Cross River State, Nigeria. The result amongst others, indicate a significant relationship between incessant work stoppages and students' academic performance. When workers in the universities engage in occasional job actions, academic calendars and semesters are abridged, course contents are not adequately covered while students resort to all forms of malpractices during examination to make up for lost time. By implication, the overall effect of a conflict-ridden university system in the long run is poor quality graduates.

It will suffice to anchor this review with the contribution of Zikmann (1992), that effectively managed conflicts can help identify previously undetected problems and attitudes; it can help clarify uncertainties and improve overall cooperation in a social system. Hypocrisy, suppression, or pretense as alternative strategies of conflict management may never augur well for any system as far as their performance and survival are concerned.

METHODOLOGY

This study covers the five (5) local government councils that constitute Northern Senatorial District of Cross River State. Namely, Ogoja, Yala, Bekwarra, Obudu and Obanliku Local Government Areas. Subject for the study include Chairmen and Vice Chairmen of councils, secretaries, heads of department/units, leaders of legislatures, supervisors, councillors and some staff including union officials. Data for the study comprises both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were generated from questionnaires, interviews, and observations while official documentations serve as secondary data.

Questionnaires were considered particularly relevant for this study because of the positions of anonymity and neutrality expected of public officials in the discharge of their official duties. It helped respondents to maintain some degree of anonymity while giving information, which was believed to have increased the level of objectivity. Out of a total staff strength of 2750, a

morphology of political appointees, carrier civil servants excluding primary school teachers, a sample of 325 respondents was selected for the study. This comprised twenty officials and forty-five staff from each local government area.

Two sampling techniques were employed in this study. These are the purposive and simple random sampling techniques. The selection of chairmen and vice chairmen, secretaries, heads of departments, leaders of legislatures, education secretaries and official of National Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) was through purposive sampling. These categories of officials in the councils were purposively chosen because of their involvement in the administration of their councils, departments, units, etc. Union officials are also purposively selected because they are considered knowledgeable about conflicts and the problems of their members. Some staff in the various departments on the other hand were randomly selected.

Personal interviews were also conducted with some principal officers in each local government council. This was combined with the keen observation of the various actors and activities in the five council's premises.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

From the five research questions posed to guide the investigation, three null hypotheses were drawn from the first three. There are analysed as follows:

Hypothesis One

The presence of conflict in organizations does not exert any significant effect on performance and productivity. The categorization of the responses obtained showed that two levels of conflicts exist (high and low). The performance or productivity of these two groups of respondents, which was measured continuously, was compared using an appropriate test statistic (independent t-test) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Independent t-test analysis of the influence of conflict on organizational performance and productivity

Level of conflict	N	X	SD	T-value
High conflict	220	67.70	8.39	
Low conflict	105	32.30	9.22	33.31*

*P<0.5, df=323, critical t-1.96

As presented in Table 1, the observed difference in performance or productivity between the two groups (those who have high conflict and those who have low conflict) is represented by a calculated t-value of 33.31. Since this figure is greater than the critical t-value of 1.96 at .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. The interpretation of this is that conflict exert significant influence or effect on organization performance or productivity.

Hypothesis Two

There is no significant relationship between the presence of conflict and the welfare of staff in local government administration. To test this hypothesis, continuous data obtained on the two variables involved were correlated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistic as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation analysis of the relationship between the presence of conflict and staff welfare in local government administration

Variable	X	SD	$\dfrac{\sum X}{\sum Y}$	$\dfrac{\sum X^2}{\sum Y^2}$	$\sum XY$	RXY
High conflict	67.08	6.53	1828	33124		
Low conflict	56.92	7.81	2177	47089	30090	-.65*

*P<0.5, df=323, critical t-.113

In Table 2, the calculated r-value representing the observed relationship between the presence of conflict and staff welfare is -.65. Since this value in absolute terms is greater than the critical r-value of .113 at .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is to be rejected while the alternate is retained. This is interpreted to mean that there is a negative relationship between the presence of conflict and staff welfare in local government administration. In other words, the higher the level of conflict, the lower the measure of staff welfare and vice – versa.

Hypothesis Three

The extent to which local government administrators are trained in conflict management is not significantly high. Continuous data was obtained to test this hypothesis which was seen to contain one uncategorized variable. Thus, population t-test was used for its analysis as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Population t-test analysis of the extent to which local government administrators are trained in conflict management

Variable	N	X	SD	T-value
Extent of training	325	24.61	5.64	
Population means score	=		25.00	1.25

*P<0.5, df=324,critical t-1.96

As presented in Table 3, the extent to which local government administrators are exposed to training in conflict management is depicted by the calculated t-value of 1.25. This was found to be less than the critical t-value of 1.96 at .05 level of significant with 324 degree of freedom. On the basis of this, the null hypothesis is hereby retained. This therefore means that the extent to which local government administrators are trained or undergoing training in the management of conflict is not significantly high enough compared to an ideal setting.

Further details of the results showed that government intervention in conflict management in the study area is inadequate. Government supervises the local government councils through the local Government Service Commission and the Ministry of Local Government. However, these management personnel have not had the opportunity to attend conflict management courses. Data collected also shows that there were several types of conflicts within the council areas. These include inter-union conflicts, inter-personal conflicts, labour and government, management and staff, executive and legislature, etc. In the same regard, major causes of conflict within the local government system include the following:

1. Poor conditions of service.

2. Partial implementation of minimum wage and teachers salary scale (TSS) approval by the federal government.

3. Revenue sharing and contract awards between executives and legislature.

4. Sitting of projects within the councils.

5. Administrative incompetence of some principal officers.

6. Misappropriation and embezzlement of council funds.

7. Personality clashes.

8. Role conflicts.

9. Favoritism.

10. Disparity between career civil servants and politicians.

Staff poor conditions of services rank highest among these factors, followed by State inability to fully implement federal government approved packages such as minimum wage and recently, teachers salary structure (TSS). The procedures for conflict management is quite disturbing as only 15.25 per cent of the respondent admitted that there are laid down procedures and mechanisms for managing conflict in their councils.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Local government administration in the Northern Senatorial District of Cross River State has been adversely affected by ineffective conflict management. Council administrators including some chairmen and secretaries are not knowledgeable in conflict management procedures and strategies. Staff morale has been dampened by poor conditions of service. Although literature available, Thanhium and Whilemon (1974), Mullins (1996), etc suggest that conflict can also bring positive outcomes, proactive conflict management strategies and dialogue should be employed to stall the poor performance and low productivity that is already taking its toll on local government councils in Cross River State in particular, and Nigeria in general.

Given the enormity of problems associated with different forms of conflicts in the five local government areas covered in this study and by extension, local government administration in the state, the following have been recommended to sanitize the situation:

a. Government should consider seriously the issue of staff welfare and conditions of service to stem the tide of further job actions by workers.

b. There should be clear role definition between the executives and legislatures in local government councils to prevent further antagonisms between them.

c. Principal officers and political appointees should regularly be exposed to courses on conflict management and resolution. Emphasis should not only be laid on inter-council conflicts or communal crises but conflicts within the council administration.

d. Political appointees who are recruited fresh, should be exposed to seminars, conferences and symposia on management and human relations to fine-tune them for their new roles.

e. Council staff through their union should be seen as partners in progress in local government administration.

f. Accountability and transparency should be institutionalized in councils administration in Cross River State.

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g.   Due process should be followed in the award of contracts while the principles of equity should be followed in the selection of projects for execution.

h.   As much as possible, government should address with all amount of seriousness the disparity in emoluments between council's staff and political office holders in order to regenerate staff morale that is now moribund.

i.   There should be clear-cut procedures and strategies for conflict management in the local government areas.

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