Social Deprivation and Ethnic Tensions in Nigeria

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Abstract

Social deprivation symbolised by acute socio-economic conditions that characterised the lifestyle of the average Nigerian, has been advanced as some of the pertinent causes of the persistent intergroup conflicts experienced in the nation. Identity-based conflicts tend to diminish a sense of collective belonging among Nigerians. The reality of unemployment, acute poverty and relative lack of access to sustainable social services by majority of the populace, tend to ignite ethnic tensions, as political actors take advantage of ethnic solidarity and consciousness that seem to dominate the psyche of most Nigerians. Social deprivation that prevails among the masses has become a time bomb in the hands of ethnic jingoists who manipulate ethnic differences for their vested interests. Relative Deprivation Theory is used as a theoretical framework. This study suggests that access to a more equitable system of social welfare which safeguards the dignity of the majority will go a long way in promoting harmonious intergroup relations in Nigeria.

Keywords: Conflict, Equity, Intergroup, Nation, Poverty, Unemployment

Introduction

Nigeria could best be described as a nation at war with itself, given the divisive nature of socio political development in the country. The ethnic tensions that characterised the nation attest to the fact that Nigeria is highly polarised along primordial line, which indicates a low sense of national belonging. Previous studies have argued that the colonial experience is to a large extent responsible for the present state of affair (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005; Bah, 2004; Nnoli, 1980). These studies have consistently point out the extent of colonial manipulation that, resulted in the feeble national identity exhibited by Nigerians, without emphasising the impact of good governance as a panacea for national unity. This study tries to examine the impact of social deprivation as a cause for ethnic tensions in Nigeria. And further contends that, good governance could be a remedy for the persisting intergroup conflicts in Nigeria.

From the extant literature it could be deduced that, the colonial conception of Nigeria was not meant to develop a united multicultural society, which guaranteed the rights and privileges of the diverse ethnic nationalities that constitute what came to known as Nigeria. The British did all they could to foster animosity among their subjects, this manipulative strategy otherwise known as the divide and rule tactic, was effectively used in controlling and stagnating the evolvement of national identity. Obviously, allowing Nigerians to develop a sense of collective identity, was seen by the colonialist as a threat to their colonial socio-economic interests. Thus, they encouraged and promoted sectional politics, which polarised the colonised and strengthened their exploitative motives.

Based on this situation, ethnic consciousness and separatism gained prominence in Nigeria's socio-political development. To the extent that, identity-based politics tend to dominate political discourse in the nation. This precarious situation that has characterised the nation's polity is inimical to evolvement of national identity and socio-economic development of Nigeria. Given

that intergroup conflicts have become a recurring issue in Nigeria, giving rise to a low sense of collective belonging, which portends a bleak reality for national unity. Indeed, micro-nationalism is becoming an endemic problem that challenges national development and stability of the nation. Pertinently, it could be argued that, the poor socio-economic condition of the masses is being exploited by political actors, fanning the embers of ethnicity. It is not out of place to adduce that social deprivation that characterised majority of the downtrodden, couple with lack of political awareness has become the bane of Nigeria's intergroup tensions.

Social deprivation conceptualised by this paper as low standard of living typified by rising poverty, lack of sustainable income, acute unemployment and other deplorable socio-economic conditions that deny majority of the people access to resources and power which gives them a sense of belonging. The struggle to survive in the midst of this dismal socio-economic situation, tend to create an explosive intergroup interaction. Given that ethnic jingoist seize advantage of the relative political naivety of ethnic members in promoting identity-based competition for resources and power.

According to Evans and Kelikume (2019) Nigeria has been haunted by social problems such as militancy, banditry, unemployment, terrorism, poverty and bad governance. They argued that the persisting violence being experienced in the country has to do with the bad governance that accentuates inequities among the citizens. This scenario is worsened by the existing social structure that entrenches social inequality and deprivation among the masses, which is misconceived by them as a struggle between ethnic nationalities. In essence, instead of conceptualising their plight from a realistic perspective, the masses simply become prey in the hand of ethnic jingoist who pretend to fight on their behalf.

Theoretical Discourse

This study adopts Relative Deprivation Theory as a theoretical explanation for the persistent intergroup conflicts that characterised the Nigeria polity. This theoretical perspective was pioneered by Stouffer (1941) and popularised by the seminal work of Ted Gurr (1970) Why Men Rebel, (as cited in Jacob & Akintola, 2016, p. 3). Gurr (1970) (as cited in Saleh, 2013, p.165) describes relative deprivation as the inconsistency between what people desire and what they truly achieve. It is perceived feeling of deprivation relative to specific individuals or groups. The major point is that, people manifest feelings of dissatisfaction over their existing condition in relation to other groups and not in absolute terms (Guimond & Dube-Simard, 1983, p. 526).

Thus, relative deprivation theory posits that tension and dissatisfaction is generated by social comparison between individuals and groups. Essentially, relative deprivation theory tends to focus on conditions that generate intergroup revolts as an expression of collective dissatisfaction. What could be deduced from the theory is that, in the long run people tend to revolt as a result of frustrations generated by imagined or real feelings of dissatisfaction, which becomes the basis of their deprivation. Saleh (2013) observed that the tendency for upheaval is heightened when individuals become hopeless of achieving their desired objective, and that ethnicity is the foundation of mobilisation against the state. The stronger the discontent the greater the risk for political instability (p. 156). Gurr (2005) emphasised that basic inequality and poverty that exists in nations become the catalyst for extremism and ferocious political organisations (as cited in Agbiboa, 2013, p. 150). The key message of the theory is that, ferocious activities tend to result from feelings of relative deprivation.

The main criticism levelled against relative deprivation theory as pointed out by Guimond and Dube'-Simard (1983) is the argument that the theory is largely not buttressed by existing researches. In other words, the contention among scholars is that, it is not the most deprived individuals that get engaged in protests or revolts. However, given the fact that, the theory tends to focus on groups that are relatively deprived in comparative terms makes it a plausible perspective for analysing intergroup dissatisfactions (p. 526).

In the Nigerian setting, ethnicity has become a weapon used by political actors in the struggle for power and resources. As part of this struggle ethnic members are mobilised and manipulated to visualise their deprivation from the standpoint of ethnicity and other particularistic factors. In other words, relative deprivation is viewed from ethno-regional consideration which becomes the basis for ethnic tensions and conflicts. Scapegoating members of other ethnic groups now becomes an ingrained reality in the mentality of Nigerians, thereby serving as the basis for collective struggle against each other. In essence, the perception of deprivation from an ethno-regional perspective tends to weaken the ability of the state in managing ethnic diversity. In other words, national cohesion is undermined by feelings of deprivation perceived through ethno-regional lens, which tend to dwarf efforts aimed at national development.

Though, the theoretical postulation of relative deprivation tends to depict the reality of intergroup conflicts, given that individuals and groups are more likely to get involved in social upheavals when they strongly believe that, they do not benefit equitably from the existing social structure. Arguably, political manipulation tends to aggravate social tensions between groups. Especially, when socio-economic condition of majority of the people is in dire situation, they are more likely to become depraved. The dismal socio-economic situation in Nigeria has made it a breeding ground for intergroup conflicts. Ethnic clashes have become rampant largely due to the existing socio-economic conditions that alienate large section of the populace. This precarious situation has strengthened the position of political actors who seize the opportunity to heighten ethno-regional tensions for a vested interest. Simply put, the elites project themselves as saviours of members of their ethno-regional interests, thereby, fanning the embers of ethnic polarisation. This is accomplished due to the gullibility of the masses, who perceives their affliction from ethno-regional dimension.

Socio-economic Deprivation and Ethnic Clashes in Nigeria

Intergroup conflicts in Nigeria have been propelled by the worsening socio-economic condition in the country. Rising poverty, unemployment and lack of transparency in governance are key factors responsible for the social deprivation being experienced today in the nation, which has facilitated the persistent ethno-regional tensions that has characterised Nigeria. It is a paradox that majority of the nation's population are classified as being poor and unemployed given the vast human and material resources that the country is endowed with (Ukpong & Ibrahim, 2014). They decried the poverty situation in the country, noting that despite the vast resources and potentialities of the country, yet it is counted among poverty stricken nations. This situation, they attribute to bad leadership. Obviously, the mismanagement of the nation's resources has propelled rising poverty among the masses, which tend to ignite intergroup clashes.

Nnonyelu (2013) posits that the Nigerian state have failed to properly manage the enormous resources of the nation, resulting in the low standard of living, which is not the case in the developed nations. According to him, rising oil revenue have not produced the desired socio-economic changes required to improve the quality of life of the people, largely due to economic

mismanagement by the elites. Oil theft and bunkering has become normative among the elites resulting in wanton environmental problems that stagnates sustainable development. He further notes that, corruption has played a key role in the level of poverty that characterised the nation. Given that the harsh socio-economic conditions that Nigerians experience as a result of bad governance, the country is described as a 'paradox of scarcity in the midst of plenty' (Nnonyelu, 2013, p. 101).

Based on this situation, it could be argued that social deprivation symbolised by poor socio-economic condition tend to create the explosive circumstances exploited by political actors in igniting ethno-regional tensions. This problem is further compounded due to the gullibility of the masses, who are prone to ethno-religious manipulation.

To this end, Nigeria is said to have missed the opportunity of sustainable development given the persisting social problems that characterised the nation's polity such as militancy, political violence, terrorism and endemic bureaucratic corruption. The issue of persisting poverty being responsible for the economic woes of the nation is related to the country's social structure, which tend to emphasise socio-cultural differences at the expense of the social deprivations that do not discriminate between ethnic groups. Poverty, unemployment and other social problems that constitute a challenge to humanity are definitely not responsive to particularistic sentiments, which unfortunately have become the basis of intergroup conflicts in Nigeria.

Fagbadegbo (2007) posits that government in Nigeria is not able to cater for the welfare of the citizens due to bad governance, which reflects the level of corruption in the nation's polity. He is of the opinion that, endemic corruption has led to the social upheavals being experienced in the Niger Delta region, also citing ethnic favouritism being used in political appointments in the country which deviates from due process or the normative procedure. In the same vein, Attoh and Soyombo (2011) opined that merit is relegated in preference of ethnic solidarity due to the competitive and conflictual nature of ethnicity in Nigeria. Thus, the ruling class tend to promote the interest of their ethnic group over and above the national interests. Arguably, this scenario tends to persist due to lack of political consciousness and superordinate values that promote the collective interests of Nigerians. In the absence of a national ideology that help in binding the disparate ethnic nationalities, definitely political actors will take advantage of that void and create social tensions that threatens national cohesions.

Given the reality of unemployment in Nigeria many able youths tend to become foot soldiers of ethnic jingoist thereby increasing the chances of intergroup conflicts. According to Achimugu, Aba-Agboni and Aliyu (2013) given the level of unemployment in Nigeria, and the fact that most industries are operating below capacity, coupled with the crisis of job security which tend to result to loss of jobs by those employed. They further argued that, due to instability of the employment situation in the country, most families are unable to control their offspring thereby leading to their involvement in social upheavals. Onuoha (2014) posits that from the inception of the present democratic dispensation in Nigeria, unemployed youths have been involved in civil strife challenging the stability of the country.

According to Okorie and Anowor (2017) the twin problems of poverty and unemployment in Nigeria have been on the rise. Poverty was projected at 28% with the unemployment rate averaged of 6.4 in 1980. While in 1985, poverty rose to 46% and unemployment slightly shrink to 6.1%. Conversely in the year 2000, poverty skyrocketed to 74% with unemployment also rising significantly from its 1985 rate to 18.1%. The unemployment rate dropped to 11.8% in 2004 and

rose to 21.1% in 2010 and by the end of 2016 it was projected around 25%. They observed that poverty and unemployment have continued to increase with negligible reduction recorded (p. 92). Onodugo *et al* (2017) (as cited in Okorie & Anowor, 2017, p. 92) reported a grim picture of the unemployment situation in Nigeria, indicating that as at 2016, almost 25 million Nigerians out of about 95 million people in the workforce were actually unemployed, a figure which they note was about the size of Mozambique's population projected around 24.9 million.

Going by this statistic, it is evidently clear that, poverty and unemployment affects large section of the Nigerian populace and is inimical to national development. However, this predicament of the downtrodden is not the priority of political actors.

Obviously, if political actors entrusted with the leadership of the nation were concerned with improving the quality of life and standard of living of the masses, most of the intergroup conflicts that now bedevil the country would have been avoided. However, since majority of the citizens are living in deplorable socio-economic condition and apparently lacks the sophistication to properly identify the immediate cause of their plight, ethnic manipulation seems to be the only source of mass mobilisation aimed at rectifying perceived inequities championed by the ruling elites. And by so doing, complicating intergroup relations, which in the long run have given rise to ethnic mistrust and hatred.

Based on this situation, studies such as Nwokafor, Obasi and Ejinwa (2020), Ofili (2016), Ogbonnaya, Omuju and Udefuna (2012) and Egwu (2009) posit that most intergroup conflicts are motivated by competition for economic resources. The incessant conflicts between neighbouring communities, farmers and herders has to do with competition over the control of arable land which has given rise to banditry and other forms criminality (Nwokafor *et al*, 2020; Ofili, 2016). Ogbonnaya *et al* (2012) observed that the Ife/Modakeke and Aguleri/Umuleri intra-ethnic clashes are quite horrifying and becoming the order of the day. The frosty relations between the Tiv and Jukun are attributed to competition over land and political marginalisation (Egwu, 2009). Equally, contestations over land ownership in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been fuelled by perceived marginalisation and competition for social and infrastructural benefits provided by oil firms in the host communities in the region which has not been resolved (Ofili, 2016; Okolo, Akpokighe & Igbowke, 2014; Tonye, Ojo & Aghedo, 2012). What could be deduced is that, competition for economic advantages has been given primordial complexion, thereby pitting ethnic groups against one another due to low sense of collective belonging and national ethos.

Tijani (2012) posits that the ruling elites that took over from the British utilised the colonial divide and rule tactic in polarising Nigerians. The fact is that Nigeria has failed to come up with a patriotic democratic leadership in addition to endemic corruption that characterised the nation's polity point to the fact that bad governance is the bane of the country's predicament (Mbao & Osinibi, 2013). Clearly, it could be argued that elitist manipulation has succeeded in implanting mutual mistrust and suspicion among Nigerians as a means of clinging to power. The agenda of political actors is not oriented towards alleviating the plight of the masses, but an avenue of self-fulfilment.

Conclusion

This study has examined the issue of social deprivation and ethnic tensions in Nigeria. The study findings revealed that inability of the elites in devising means that genuinely promote the interests of the masses couple with ethnic manipulation perpetrated by political actors have given rise to ethnic tensions that characterise Nigeria. Deplorable socio-economic conditions of the masses tend

to make them victims of circumstances in the struggle for social and economic resources. In other words, in trying to improve their socio-economic situation, the masses have had the tendency to make comparison and develop hatred of other groups on the basis of primordial values that help in straining intergroup relations. The implication of this trend is that the need to emphasise superordinate values that aim at improving the quality of life of Nigerians is left out in the scheme of things, due to the primordial complexion that social deprivation is accorded.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made;

    i.   Deliberate efforts should be made in improving good governance practices in Nigeria to serve as a panacea for sectional motivated conflicts.

    ii.   Government and relevant stakeholders should sponsor skills acquisition and entrepreneurship programs which will help in alleviating socioeconomic hardship experienced by the masses.

    iii.   Efforts should be directed towards sensitisation and reorientation of the mind set of Nigerians on the need to imbibe the culture of peaceful coexistences which will enhance harmonious intergroup relations.

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