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**COMMUNICATION GAP AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS DISPUTE IN
NIGERIA: A BARRIER TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how communication gap between different ethnic groups in Nigeria has facilitated several ethno-religious crises predominantly in the northern region which caused significant loss of lives and properties. The increasing trends of ethno-religious disputes in Nigeria do not only constitute a major threat to the corporate existence of the country but are also working against Nigeria's development and its sustainability. The present study aimed at discovering the causes of ethno-religious disputes as well as identifying the effects of communication gap on ethno-religious dispute in the country. It also aimed at determining the role of the government in addressing the problem of communication gap between different ethnic groups. To ensure a complete analysis of data, the study adopted a qualitative methodology. This involved in-depth interviews with 10 respondents whose responses were coded into themes based on the objectives of the study. A semi structured face to face interviews was conducted using an interview schedule. The findings of the study show that the causes of ethno-religious disputes include intolerance, injustice and partiality of leaders, indigene/settler's dichotomy, struggle for power and resources, poverty and unemployment. Furthermore, the results reveal that the effects of communication gap on ethno-religious dispute are misinformation, spreading of rumours, distortion of truth, unfair judgement and taking law into one's hand. Therefore, the government has a critical role to play in tackling the challenges of communication which retard national cohesion.

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Keywords: Communication gap, Ethno-religious disputes, Sustainable development

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1. Introduction

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa; it is composed of more than 250 ethnic groups. The most populous and politically influential ethnic groups are Hausa and Fulani 29 percent, Yoruba 21 percent, Igbo 18 and the remaining minority ethnic groups constitute 32 percent (Adeyemi, 2006). Nigeria is a religious nation, and it is oversupplied with several religions which assisted in accentuating regional ethnic distinctions in the country (Adamu, 2001)

Nigeria is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multicultural society with enormous potential for economic, social, and democratic development. However, intense ethno-religious crises have retarded development and progress of the country. Nigeria is usually characterized as a deeply divided state in which major political issues are vigorously contested along the lines of complex ethnic, religious, and regional divisions. The causes of these conflicts may not be unconnected with the communication gap between different ethnic groups, particularly misunderstanding and mistrust between the followers of various religious and ethnic groups (Ayinla et al., 2006).

It is against this background that the paper will examine the causes of ethno-religious disputes as well as identifying the effects of communication gap on ethno-religious dispute in the country. Similarly, the paper determines the role of the government in addressing the problem of communication gap between different ethnic groups.

2. Problem Statement

Communication gap that exists between different ethnic groups, particularly in the northern part of Nigeria has enabled the outbreak of numerous ethno-religious crises that has produced a substantial loss of lives and properties. Tolerance among different ethnic and religious groups is almost absent or unavailable in the country.

The leaders and political office holders were accused of bias, especially, in the distribution of social and economic resources as well as providing employments to the teeming unemployed youths. Similarly, indigene-settler's dichotomy and lack of clear elaboration on their rights by the Nigerian constitution to attain a reliable status worth having generates a serious problem.

People are in the habit of spreading rumours just to cause apprehension among citizens and they also in the habit of taking the laws into their hands. They don't allow the criminal justice system to intervene in ensuring peace and stability in the country. Therefore, these problems necessitate the need to conduct an empirical study.

3. Research Questions

The fundamental questions that require investigation are:

- What the causes of ethno-religious disputes in the country?
- What the consequences of ethno-religious disputes towards national cohesion?
- What is the role of the government in tackling the problem of ethno-religious disputes?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purposes of the study are as follows:

- To find out the causes of ethno-religious disputes in the country
- To discover how communication gap increases ethno-religious disputes
- To determine the role of the government in tackling the problem of ethno-religious disputes

5. Research Methods

The paper utilized a face to face interview with respondents from different ethnic groups in some states like Kano, Kaduna, Bauchi, Plateau, Benue, Taraba, Lagos and Enugu States. The researchers employed the service of the research assistants to help in coordinating the respondents for the interview as well as translating the views of the respondents from their local language to English.

The paper employed a qualitative research design as the suitable method in this study, because it requires people's knowledge, understandings, views, interpretations, experiences and interactions. The study was also made flexible in order to maximize the collection of intensive and high-quality information for the success of the study.

The interview technique was adopted by the researcher to collect data from the respondents. Therefore, in-depth interviews are considered to be the best to describe and understand the respondents' views on the effects of communication gap on ethno-religious dispute in the country. This is in line with Schatzman and Strauss (1973) who assert that the interview must be used to provide context and meaning. Their justification of the interview as a critical qualitative tool is pertinent to this study.

For this study, a semi structured face to face interviews was conducted using an interview schedule provided by Sekaran (2003) in which the topic and questions are notified in advance before the actual interview sessions take place.

A sample of ten respondents was chosen for the study. They were randomly selected from different ethnic groups in the country. The justification for these choices was to explore the challenges of communication between different ethnic groups in Nigeria which bring setback to national unity. Time and budget constraints did not allow for a larger sample size.

The respondents consist of both males and females. And the data collected was interpreted using the thematic analysis method. That is to say the interview responses were transcribed by a researcher, and then followed by ordering, studying, coding and separating the transcripts into chunks. A researcher confirms the responses of the respondents by re-listening to the audio record of the interview to validate and verify the responses. A researcher read the transcripts several times to gain a deep understanding of the information and record the current, relevant information as categories. The data with evidence of the categories were continually collected from the interview transcripts and sorted into concepts. Themes reflecting recurring patterns of the concepts emerged into codes. From the codes, the themes were generated and the data are interpreted by making comparisons between the findings and the literature. Therefore, the researchers organise and gather all the results into a descriptive form. By doing so, the researcher obtained the required data on the problems of communication gap between different ethnic groups in Nigeria.

6. Findings

The findings of the study are based on the data collected from the interview of the respondents. The views of the respondents were examined and discussed as follows:

6.1. The Causes of Ethno-Religious Disputes:

The respondents gave their opinions on the causes of ethno-religious disputes. The themes that emerged from the respondent's explanation for the causes of ethno-religious disputes include intolerance, injustice and partiality of leaders, indigene/settler's dichotomy, struggle for power and resources, poverty and unemployment.

On intolerance, one of the respondents mentions that due to intolerance, people refused or are unwilling to tolerate the beliefs and opinions of others contrary to their own beliefs or opinions. He further stated that:

"The greatest danger to our collective security as citizens lies in the peril of ethnic and religious intolerance. These twin evils, if not checked, are capable of threatening our corporate existence as one sovereign and indivisible nation" ... This is a serious social problem that affects the corporates existence of the country."

On the issue of injustice, one of the respondents insists that injustice is a lack of fairness and people from various ethnic groups or religious affiliations are treated very unfairly and not given their rights. He added that:

"Injustice is the cause of ethno-religious dispute in the country and became one of the major challenges to national development with consequences manifesting in the economic welfare, social stability and human dignity of the people."

According to one of the respondents, the partiality of leaders involves favouritism in terms of preferential treatment of one ethnic group over another; it may be in the form of appointments, employment, awarding of contracts, execution of projects etc. He further elaborates as follows:

"Wherever leaders give preferential treatment of one ethnic or religious group over another, it may lead to chaos, dissension, hurt and distrust can definitely lead to crises. However, when bias is recognized and consciously set aside, unity, trust, forgiveness and commitment will flourish."

The respondents believe that the struggle for power and resources cause ethno-religious dispute. The struggle for power led to intense competition for influence between different ethnic groups. Correspondingly, different ethnic or religious groups fight for the control of resources available in their areas. One of the respondents expressed his concerns as follows:

"The people of Niger Delta spend more than thirty years struggling for the control of resources available in their area. The people of that region felt that they are marginalized and neglected by other region despite their contribution in the development of the country. No doubt, this cause ethno-religious dispute in Nigeria."

The study also found that poverty and unemployment among teeming population facilitate ethno-religious disputes in the country. Poverty and unemployment in Nigeria seriously undermine peace and national security. One of the respondents reiterated that:

“The increasing number of people trapped in the web of poverty and unemployment has now creatively engaged them in armed robbery, prostitution, drug trafficking, advance fee fraud, hostage taking, and vandalization of oil pipelines among other criminal activities constitute strains on our stability and national economy.”

Similarly, respondents believe that indigene/settler’s dichotomy is a serious problem that led to ethno-religious dispute. The recurring ethno-religious conflicts made average Nigerians to identify themselves with tribe, clan, chiefdoms or religion and they have placed ascriptions above achievements in our societies. One of the respondents confirmed that:

“The misunderstanding and division between ‘indigenes’ and ‘settlers’ in different communities in Nigeria create serious difficulties for common people in Nigeria, especially since the ‘settlers’ might even feel that their cultural and religious rights are under danger. This led to ethno-religious dispute among different ethnic groups in the country.”

6.2. Effect of communication gap on Ethno-Religious Disputes:

The themes that emerged from the respondent's explanation on the effect of communication gap on ethno-religious disputes include misinformation, spreading of rumours, and distortion of truth, unfair judgement and taking law into one’s hand.

The study revealed that one of the effects of communication gap on ethno-religious disputes is misinformation; misinformation is part of the communication gap that caused ethno-religious dispute among different ethnic groups in the country. Some people spread false, misleading and inaccurate information against another tribe or religion regardless of the consequences. The misinformation, particularly on social media deliberately leads to confusion and apprehension among law abiding citizens in the country. One of the respondents described his experience:

“When Boko Haram insurgents attack our Christians community in the North eastern state of Borno, it was circulated in social media that all people in our community were killed. I feel dejected and I couldn’t come back to check my family. I was later informed that nobody was killed and the earlier information given was fake.”

The respondents believe that the spreading of rumours is one the effect of communication gap that could lead to ethno-religious dispute among diverse ethnic groups. It is a dissemination of unkind gossip and people that spread the rumours intimidate members of one ethnic group against the other ethnic groups as a form of victimization, hatred or xenophobia. One of the respondents narrated his experience as follows:

“I am among the Fulani ethnic group of origin, who lives in the southern part of plateau state in central Nigeria. We were extremely hated by other tribes in the region because of our dependence on cattle rearing, tribal background and religion...”

The study also found that the distortion of truth is an important communication gap that could lead to ethno-religious dispute in the country. It is the act of twisting or altering something out of its natural or original state. People like to distort information in order to set up other people to take the blame for things which aren't their fault. One of the respondents narrated her experience as follows:

“A lot of people in this country like to tell lies against others, particularly when they did not belong to their tribal group. Hate speeches are going round everywhere, if care is not taken, it can lead to tribal war.”

The study discovered that unfair judgement is one the effect of communication gap. People make decision subjectively or un-authoritatively so as to bring injury or damage to other ethnic groups in detriment to their legal rights. One of the respondents gave his own experience as follows:

“The Hausa people living in the southern part of Nigeria were treated unfairly as a result of communication gap. Igbo tribe treats us unfairly; whatever happens, especially nasty things they will say it is Hausa people that do it. They never give us the benefit of the doubt even for a single day.”

The respondents believe that taking the law in one’s hand is another effect of communication gap. People punish other ethnic group living in their area according to their own idea of justice and without consideration for the role of law enforcement authorities. One of the respondents gave his own experience as follows:

“Whenever, there is a religious or ethnic crisis in one region or state in the country, and affect members of another region or state. Members of that particular tribe will decide to take the law into their hands by carrying out reprisal attacks against innocent ethnic groups living in their area as a result of communication gap. If the security agents did not act quickly the crises will escalate and lead to loss of lives and properties.”

7. Conclusion

In all parts of northern Nigeria, ethno-religious disputes have assumed alarming rates. It has occurred in places like Kano, Bauchi, Nassarawa, Jos, Taraba, Kaduna, Niger, Borno, Maiduguri, and Benue State respectively. These ethno-religious identities have become disintegrative and disparaging social rudiments menacing the peace, stability and security in Nigeria. The frequent and persistent ethnic conflicts and religious clashes between the two dominant religions (Islam and Christianity) is a major security challenge that confronts Nigeria. Since independence, Nigeria appears to have been bedevilled with ethno-religious conflicts. The culture of intolerance that leads to alienation of some parts of the country and their denial to equal treatment has made those affected to think and believe that striving for national interest is a pervasion. In contrast, they believe that fighting for individuals’ and the group’s interests is “an acceptable norm” Therefore, ethnocentric politics, sectional solidarity and primordial interests have become prominent features in the country’s political system. Sectional and individual virtues and interests rather than collective virtues and national unity are advanced and exalted (Owutu, 2012). The quest for nation building and national integration in this scenario, however, becomes a mirage. Ethnicity and religion continue to be clogged in the wheel of progress in terms of Nigeria achieving national unity where all will have a sense of belonging and commitment not minding their ethnic or religious affiliation (Omotola, 2010).

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