

Participatory communal conflict resolution (PCCR) – a tale of two Nigerian local communities

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Introduction

Participatory techniques have been used for sustainable conflict resolution in many societies (Rodriguez, 1998; Schotle, *et al.*, 1999). However, reflections on the dynamics of participatory conflict resolution have largely focused on cases of local resistance to governmental programmes. Rodriguez (1998) formulated his experience of using participation in the resolution of conflicts in National Parks in Venezuela, and Paul Schotle and colleagues (1999) focused on another National Parks conflict situation in Cameroon. Although these works have highlighted the potential of participation in conflict situations, there is not yet a published assessment of the dynamics of participation in the sustainable resolution of conflicts between and or within local communities themselves. Yet in many parts of the globe, conflict situations arise daily between local groups and communities, with adverse implications for the current search for sustainability in development efforts. The present paper describes an experience of using participatory procedures to resolve a clash between two local communities in Abia State, Nigeria.

From study site to war front

In March 1999, a regional health NGO, People Against AIDS (PAAIDS), commissioned a study of local knowledge of AIDS amongst rural communities in Abia State, Nigeria. One of the sites for the survey was Ntighauzor Amairi (NA), a rural community of ten patrilineal villages. While the research team was at the study site, a conflict broke out between NA and a neighbouring community, Abala. Abala and NA are Igbo-speaking communities with two different, but mutually comprehensible dialects. The two communities exist under the Obingwa Local Government Area and have lived together for millennia (Oriji, 1972).

Local resources cause war

Abala and NA are both farming communities. They produce cassava, yam, cocoyam, maize, and other food crops. Communally owned and exploited oil palms also abound and are a source of wealth for people in the two communities. However, though Abala has a population of 10,000 persons, it has a landmass approximately half that of NA which has a population of about 12,000. High population pressure has led to serious degradation of

Abala forests and a reduction in the number of oil palms. Currently, Abala has a palm density of 80 to 130 per hectare while NA has a palm density of about 200 to 550 trees per hectare. High level poverty has thus resulted and has pushed some Abala persons into preying on oil palms and other food crops belonging to NA people.

On several occasions, men from the two communities met to find a way of stopping this trend with very little success. On 7 April, a vigilante group from NA killed an Abala youth. They had caught him harvesting oil palms in NA land. This resulted in a bloody clash between the two villages.

Searching for peace

After waiting for four days for peace to return, two members of our team went to meet the ruler of NA and discuss the situation with him. The overall head of NA arranged a meeting between us and the heads of the component villages in his domain. We discussed the crisis, its cause, and ways to initiate peace. We also obtained permission to meet and discuss the situation with members of the community. Individual and group interviews involving guided dialogue techniques were used to probe the cause(s) of the clash, and local people's views on how peace could be achieved. Interviews were conducted with elderly men and women, women leaders, village heads, warriors, young men, and medicine men.

Three delegates also went to Abala. As in the case in NA, they met with the overall head of Abala, who summoned the heads of the villages under him. The meeting lasted long enough for a number of issues to be addressed. The team was also able to obtain permission to chat freely with the villagers. Individual and group discussions were thus held with various categories of persons in Abala too.

Participation reveals useful indigenous values

Our interviews in the two communities yielded a rich body of data about people's perception of the crisis and possible avenues of dispute settlement and resolution. The people were particularly worried that the clash would spoil years of friendship and understanding between the two communities. They made it clear that the war had

persisted simply because no side would want to be called weak. In such a situation, the people observed that a neutral (third) party was needed to make peace initiatives. This probably explains the ease with which our team (as a third party) gained entry into the issue.

Through discussions with the communities, we learnt about the use of the kolanut (*Cola accuminata*) and the fresh palm frond (called locally *omu*) as key instruments of peace negotiation and conflict resolution in Igbo society. Once one community gives these to another, the receiving community is under an obligation to accept them and also to return a similar gift. In a war situation, the kolanuts are shared among the elders while the palm frond will be conspicuously displayed at the boundary of the warring communities.

We were able to persuade the elderly men of NA to present the traditional gift of kolanuts and one fresh palm frond to Abala, and Abala promptly sent their own gift to NA. On the same day, the two palm fronds (one from NA to Abala, and the other from Abala to NA) were put on display. Immediately this happened, all arms were laid down. The cessation of hostilities created the chance for the two communities to meet face to face and talk to each other.

Recognising that the social organisation of the two communities was built around male gerontocracy, we requested the overall head of each community to pick six elderly men to form a negotiating team for their respective communities. As is the tradition, the two negotiating teams met in the house of the oldest man in a neighbouring, neutral community with a third party (us) present. The men met on two occasions but failed to agree on a number of points.

We then decided to exploit another traditional facility for conflict resolution – women's role in war. We had learnt that women could bring a war to an end by staging their famed *ogu-bie* march. Women stage the *ogu-bie* march naked and may well continue until their men lay down arms. However, before the naked march is staged, the women carry out a pre-*ogu-bie* march to warn their husbands to stop fighting. The warning march comes seven days before the real *ogu-bie* parade begins.

We invited women leaders from the two communities to meet, again on neutral ground, in the house of a woman leader in a neighbouring community. The women discussed the situation together and very soon realised how urgent it had become for peace to return. They decided to return home and convince other women of the need to stage the traditional pre-*ogu-bie* protest march. Two days after this meeting, Abala woman staged their pre-*ogubie* march and a day after, NA women followed suit.

Knowing what naturally follows such protest marches, men from the two communities were forced to meet. And

after two of such meetings, they finally resolved the crisis agreeing that each community should:

1. bear the full cost of burying her dead person
2. give a monthly stipend of 2000 (about US\$20) to the direct families of each of the dead persons

It was also resolved that any oil palm thief caught should be fined ten live goats, seven baskets of kolanuts, five bottles of dry gin, and 30 big tubers of yam, or face ostracism in his/her community.

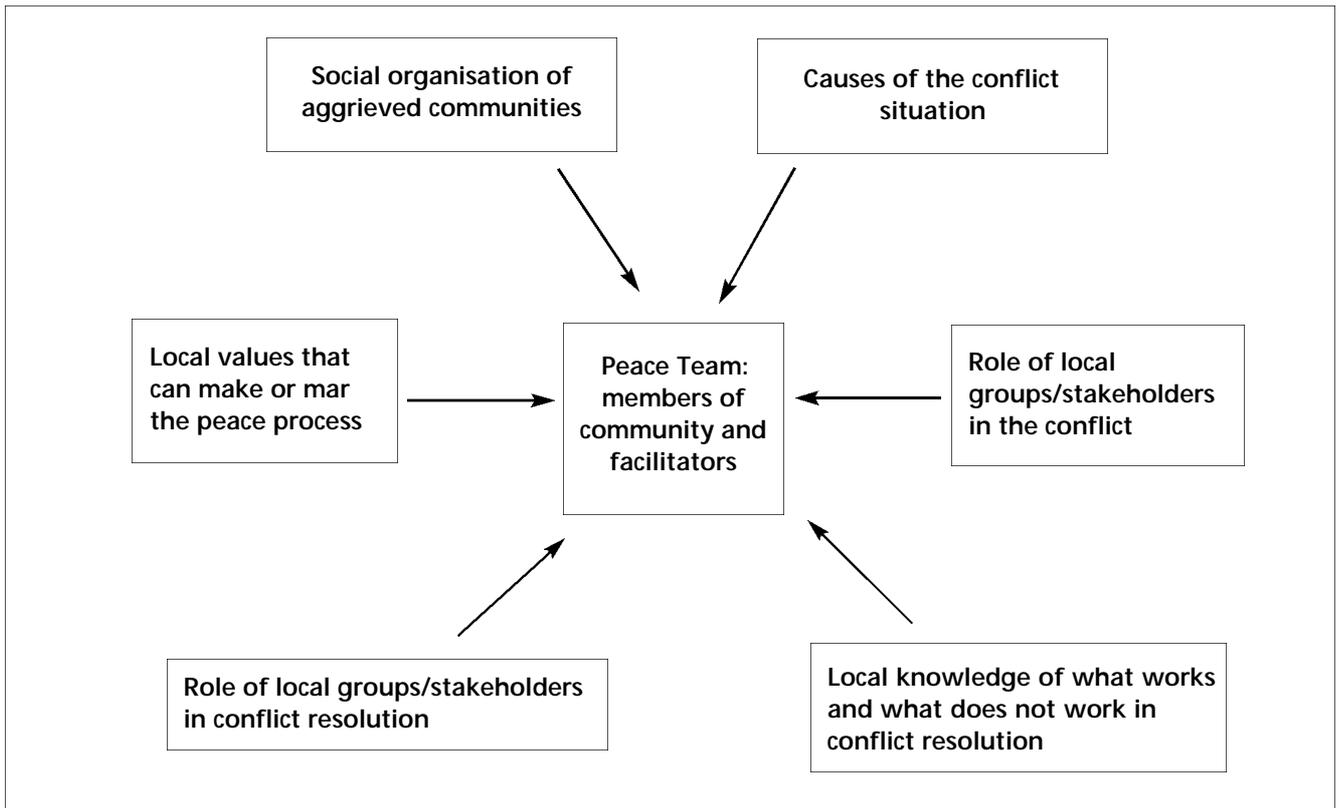
Conclusions

Participation was the golden key that unlocked the door to peace. The process of encouraging the two communities to reflect collectively on their situation opened the mind of facilitators and communities alike to the rich world of indigenous values upon which the search for peace could be anchored. Group and individual discussions with the youth, women, men, medicine men, and leaders in the communities offered various angles on the crisis, providing a pool of information on how to approach peace (Figure 1). Our experience endorses the need for peace efforts to start from where the people are, and what they know and do, if sustainability is to be guaranteed.

It is important to note that the key decisions which led to the truce were collectively arrived at. Although it took time to arrive at them, they proved ultimately binding to all persons in the community. Consultations with different persons helped to build confidence and led to a feeling of responsibility and commitment in the communities. The key learning here is that participation can foster interest harmonisation, promote collective responsibility, and reinforce commitment to agreed goals.

Cases of reported use of participation in facilitating peace in conflict situations have always been carefully planned by facilitators (Rodriguez, 1998; Schotle *et al.*, 1999). We, on the other hand, got involved as peace facilitators under circumstances that did not allow for such initial preparations. Consequently, we had little or no insights of what to expect.

The unexpected nature of the situation did not allow us to gain a systematic and focused understanding of the cultural organisation of the two communities. This sometimes caused problems. A case in point was when one member of our team began to address a meeting while sitting down. This did not go down well with some elderly persons from Abala, among whom it is a sign of disrespect for young persons to speak to the elderly sitting down. So the Abala contingent stood up and wanted to go. We had to explain to them that it was not a deliberate act of disrespect. They fined us the traditional one keg of palm wine, which we provided immediately and deliberations then resumed.

Figure 1 Information needed in a communal conflict situation

We believe we were able to gain the trust of the community because all members of the project team were Igbo and shared insights into the dynamics of Igbo indigenous culture. A complete outsider facilitator thrust into such a situation, with little or no knowledge of local culture and/or no time to investigate local cultural values, may have achieved very little.

Finally, the behaviour of the neutral party is very important. The peace facilitators in a conflict situation must strive as far as possible to be transparently neutral. They must avoid activities and practices that may make the communities suspect their intentions. For example, we were initially working in NA and had developed rapport with the people in this community. When we got involved in the conflict situation, word filtered to the Abala that we had the patronage of NA and were most likely to support them.

It required patient listening, empathy, openness, and constructive reconciliation of diverse ideas and viewpoints to earn the confidence and respect of both the communities. We felt we had succeeded in this when one elderly leader from Abala said:

Thank you very much for helping us resolve our problem with our brothers. It is only a brother that can help two brothers resolve a problem. Strangers cannot and do not. You people have behaved like real brothers to us.

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