



Maintaining Peaceful Co-existence amidst Separatist Agitations in Nigeria: Social Workers' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Ever since independence, Nigeria has grappled with several separatist agitations. These agitations most times lead to colossal loss of lives and property with serious consequences on the peaceful co-existence among the various ethnic groups inhabiting the country. This brings to the front burner the role of social workers as change agent in promoting peaceful co-existence in a multi-ethnic/cultural environment. Eighteen social workers across the six geo-political zones in Nigeria were purposively selected and interviewed via zoom. Findings show that the participants believe that mistrust among the different ethnic groups that make up the country, lack of justice, fairness and equity are major cause of separatist agitations. To promote peaceful co-existence amidst separatist agitations, the participants believe that social workers through their various interventive engagements should build trust and promote justice, fairness and equity among all citizens irrespective of political, economic, religious or ethnic affiliations. To this end, the study recommends the need for social workers to mainstream peaceful co-existence in their various programmes.

Keywords: *Peaceful co-existence, separatist agitations, social workers, role, maintain, multi-ethnic*

Introduction

Ever since independence, Nigeria has grappled with several separatist agitations (Adangor, 2017). These agitations most times lead to colossal loss of lives and property with serious consequences on the peaceful co-existence among the multi-ethnic groups inhabiting the country. However, the point need to be made that separatist agitations is not only a Nigerian factor as can be seen in the 300-year-old Scottish separatism movement and the long-time Quebec separatism in Canada and other separatist agitations in some African countries (Adibe, 2017).

A cursory look at Nigeria's checkered history starting from the amalgamation of 1914 reveal that different ethnic groups have at one point or the other called for a nation of their own. Ayoade (2010) confirms this position when he stated that, "the Northern Region, considered "big, strong and reliable", had issued an "Eight-Point Programme" threatening withdrawal in 1953. Similarly, the West had also threatened to withdraw in 1953 on the state of Lagos" (Aremu and Buhari, 2017). Another example of a secessionist group is that of the Ijaws led by Isaac Adaka Boro who mobilized a sizeable number of his Ijaw people to wage war against the Nigerian government under the leadership of Late General Aguiyi Ironsi in 1960 (Awofeso, 2017).

As stated by Ikenga (2017), Isaac Adaka Boro's major reason was to establish a republic that was independent for his Ijaw people of the Niger Delta but was not as lucky as his soldiers met with defeat and Boro together with his lieutenants faced trial for treason and were convicted. The first call for secession from the eastern part of Nigeria came from the then Premier of the region, Michael Okpara, who openly threatened to cause a secession of the Eastern region from Nigeria as a result of the circumstances surrounding the federal elections of December 1964. However, the main secessionist bid that rocked the entire federation came in 1967 when the Eastern region, under the leadership of Lt. Col. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, launched a massive attempt to break away from Nigeria which culminated in three years civil war with monumental loss of human and material resources (Achebe, 2012; Madiebo, 1980).

In modern Nigeria, threat for secession is not new, different groups in the country have fought in different ways as they continue to struggle for self-determination. This is supported by Akanji (2012) when he argued that some ethnic militias such as the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and others alike from the period of the late 1990s have put in place ethnic and sub-ethnic militant groups in the political landscape of Nigeria. Asaji and Egberi (2015) align with the statement when they argue that rivalry exists among different groups with regard to sharing of what he called 'national cake', which is another way of sharing illicit public wealth to the detriment of the people. It is the outcome of fear of not getting one's fair share or one's desire where one is entitled to enjoy some privileges in society that sometimes leads to such agitations and rebellions. Secession has indeed been a powerful instrument used in political negotiation in Nigeria (Aremu and Buhari 2017).

According to Malachy (2012) there have been concerted efforts to remove existing fear of discrimination through the introduction of certain policies. These policies include: the introduction of unity schools and Federal Government secondary schools in 1966, abolition of regional structures and the creation of states in 1967, the introduction of the National Youth Services Corps (NYSC) in 1973, the subdivision of the country or the old southern and northern divide into six geopolitical zones in 1993, the establishment of the Federal Character Commission (FCC) in 1995 and the introduction of the principle of 'rotational presidency' or power shift in 1997 (Malachy, 2012). However, it seems the more efforts are made to remove existing fear of discrimination and promote peaceful co-existence, the more the people are divided along ethnic and religious lines

This brings to the front burner the role of social workers as change agent in promoting peaceful co-existence in a multi-ethnic/cultural environment. As social engineers, the services of social workers are highly needed

during social upheavals (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2020). Consequently, social workers should not be found lagging behind during national emergencies like separatist agitations considering the number of trained or professional social workers in Nigeria. Social workers can play several important roles in promoting peaceful co-existence. They can use social media platforms to promote messages that unites the people, advocate for fair and just distribution of resources and sensitize and educate the public about adverse effects of separatist agitations. From another perspective, social workers can join forces with other stakeholders in conflict management in intelligence gathering on how to nip separatist agitations and other sources of conflict in the bud. They can provide psycho-social support to victims of separatist agitations and genuinely work towards proper and full integration of all citizens and ensure fair treatment for all irrespective of ethnic, political and religious background.

Frequent separatist agitations have no doubt exposed nepotistic politics as well as inadequacies of social work practice at macro level in Nigeria (Amadasun, 2020). According to Amadasun (2020), the method of social work education in Nigeria is inadequate as it prepares practitioners to respond to micro or casework-allied problems while leaving them disempowered and overwhelmed in the face of macro social problems. This may explain why social workers in Nigeria feel powerless or disillusioned in promoting peaceful existence in a multi-ethnic Nigeria. In the views of Amadasun (2020) unless social workers respond to the world's major challenges, the relevance of social work profession will continue to be called into question. To avoid a scenario of this nature, this study looked at social workers' perspective in promoting peaceful co-existence amidst separatist agitations in Nigeria in a bid to identify challenges facing social workers in promoting peaceful co-existence and outline strategies that can help them address the challenges so that they can be better equipped in promoting peaceful co-existence and consequently reduce the incidents of separatist agitations in a multi-cultural/ethnic Nigeria.

METHOD

Participants

Eighteen social workers with at least first degree in social work across the six geo-political zones in Nigeria (3 per geopolitical zone) were purposively selected for the study. The rationale behind the use of the social workers with at least first degree is because of their expected knowledge in responding to the subject matter.

Material and procedure

Zoom interviews were adopted as the method for collecting data as a result of the large scope for the study. Given the sensitivity of the topic, respondents were assured that their identities will be protected. The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and were conducted at the convenience of the respondents only. Data were analyzed thematically after it has been transcribed in English language. The responses were arranged into major themes. The themes are presented below:

Results

Our conversation with the respondents was structured around separatist agitations and promoting peaceful co-existence.

Causes of Separatist agitations

On the causes of separatist agitations, some of the respondents agreed that mistrust among the different ethnic groups that make up the country, lack of justice, fairness and equity are major causes of separatist agitations. To buttress this point, one of the respondents stated, "I believe that if there is good governance and people are treated fairly as equal citizens, this issue of separatist agitations will not be occurring at the rate it is occurring". Some social workers also believed that separatist agitations are means groups use to draw attention to

themselves once they feel they are not getting what they are supposed to get. Going historical, another respondent tried to explain it this way,

“if you take a look at the history of separatist agitations in Nigeria, you will observe that whenever any group feels marginalized or obscured from the scheme of things; they will start agitating for separation. This can be seen in the agitations by Emir of Zaria in 1950, Awolowo in 1953, Adaka Boro in 1960s’, Odumegwu Ojukwu in 1967 and presently by IPoB led by Nnamdi Kanu and Oduduwa Nation by Sunday Igboho”.

Other social workers blamed the non-uniformity of the judicial system in the country as causes of separatist agitations in the country. A social worker succinctly put it this way, “a look at the country judicial system showed discrepancy in the administration of justice in northern and southern Nigeria. it therefore seems that there are two different laws for one people in one nation”. Another social worker stated “a situation where criminal code is implemented in southern Nigeria while penal code is implemented in northern Nigeria give the impression that the law is a respecter of persons. This should not be in a secular state like ours and that is why some people feel marginalized and always threaten secession”

Effects of Separatist agitations

The respondents were asked the effects of separatist agitations. The social workers noted that there are grave consequences associated with separatist agitations such as economic, infrastructural and human losses but were unanimous in stating that measuring the exact effects cannot be achieved. One of the respondents succinctly put it this way,

“measuring the effects of separatist agitation is like measuring the effects of Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic. You know, the government only give us the number of people that died as a result of COVID-19 complications without giving us data of those who died of other illness as a result of inability to access health services due to lockdown or those who are unable to afford their routine drugs due to dwindling income as a result of the outbreak of the pandemic. The same goes with the effects of separatist agitations. While data of those who died as a result of government crackdown or confrontation of agitators with the military can be obtained, we cannot do that for those who died at home because they cannot access medical care”.

Another social worker responded this way, “if we take the south east where there is sit at home order every Monday as an example, the effect cannot be measured. Do we talk of those who rely on daily income to feed their family who go hungry every Monday because they cannot go out in search of what to do or those whose goods (such as vegetables, fruits, etc.) perished as a result of not being able to access the market as a result of sit at home order given by IPoB in the south east”” Another social worker was of the view that although economic and infrastructural losses can be measured, the psychological effects cannot be measured. He queried “if you quantify structures that are destroyed and resources (both human and material) committed in quelling the agitators can you quantify the trauma people pass through or the general feeling of insecurity that follow these agitations?”

In all these narratives, what is obvious is that separatist agitation is associated with consequences of unimaginable proportion. Hence, all hands must be on desk in tackling the root cause of separatist agitations

Social work curriculum and promoting peaceful co-existence in a multi-plural state

The social workers noted that although their training were adequate in promoting peaceful co-existence at micro and mezzo level, there is need for improvement in the curriculum to address peaceful co-existence at the macro level. Some of the respondents suggested the inclusion of courses on peaceful co-existence while others noted the need to expose student social workers to agencies that specialize in peace building and peaceful co-existence

during their practicum experience. According to one of the respondents who took a swipe at social work trainers, he stated that,

“peaceful co-existence in a multi-cultural society in our curriculum is like government rhetoric to fulfill all righteousness as those who train us become ethnic champion when issues of national interest are discussed. There is no genuine effort by those who trained us in equipping us with necessary skills to deal with peaceful co-existence in multi-cultural environment”.

Another respondent declared,

“I remember throughout my years in the university, our practicum is mainly in hospitals, schools, social welfare and other agencies where issues of peace building or peaceful co-existence at macro are rarely discussed or placed in the front burner. What we do most times is teach people how to co-exist peacefully in the family or at best in the work place. This is why many people see social workers as those who specialize in settling family dispute(s).”

Another social worker emphasized

“in Nigeria, the area of specialization for many social workers are in medical social work, gerontology, school social work, child welfare with little or no interest in conflict management or the aspect of social work that promote peaceful co-existence at macro level and this may explain why government most times don’t include social workers in peace building processes anytime there is outbreak of major conflict. For example, the herders/farmers clash, ethnic and religious crisis, Boko Haram insurgency and other social upheaval are where the services of social workers are needed but they will never be called upon”.

Still on the issue of curriculum, one of the social workers said,

“throughout my undergraduate days in the university, I did not take a course in peaceful co-existence. The closest to my exposure in peaceful co-existence is during my master’s degree when I took only one course on conflict management”. He then queried “if our curriculum and practicum experience does not prepare us to take on such challenge, how can we claim competence in dealing with such a delicate matter?”.

He then concluded, “that is why I think our training did not prepare us to take on the challenges of addressing peaceful co-existence in multi-cultural society like Nigeria”.

Government Interventions on addressing peaceful co-existence and responding to separatist agitations

On the conversation around government interventions in addressing peaceful co-existence and responding to separatist agitations, the participants unanimously agreed that the federal government have robust programmes and policies in promoting peaceful co-existence but picked very serious hole in sincerity and dedication in implementing the policies as well as punctured military actions against separatist agitators. One of the social workers stated “look at the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) programme, Unity schools, Federal Character Commission, etc. They are wonderful initiatives but their existence has not meaningfully promoted peaceful co-existence. As more programmes are introduced, the more the people are divided.” Another respondent declared “in my opinion, I think the policies are mere formalities. If not, why will we be having lopsided appointments at this stage of our national life.”

On the military crackdown, on separatist agitators they noted that the government will achieve more by engaging them the more instead of cracking down on them. A respondent puts it this way “if military action or crackdown is a solution, with what we witnessed in the civil war with its monumental loss of human and material resources; am sure separatist agitation would have died with the civil war. However, what we now see

is that the more the military action, the more emboldened the agitators become.” Another respondent went philosophical. He stated, “The government is like a father to all and no responsible father wields the big hammer when the offspring erred. So government should exhaust non-violent options first before applying kinetic option. What we see most times is that government will always apply force before going to negotiating table. This should not be so.”

Social Workers role in promoting peaceful co-existence

The participants unanimously agreed that social workers have enormous responsibility in promoting peaceful co-existence. In clear terms one of the respondents stated “Social workers interact with the low and mighty, the rich the poor, vulnerable and neglected people. In fact, with people from all works of life. This rich background of the social worker provide opportunity for social workers to initiate channels of communications among different groups where their grievances and conditions for existence and staying together can be discussed.” Another respondent stated “social workers can go a step further by using our diversity as a source of strength instead of a tool for disintegration by leveraging on opportunities provided by various interventions they provide to mainstream peaceful co-existence through their programmes”. For example, I am aware that social workers engage in different programmes such as gender based violence, child protection, community mobilization, capacity building at different levels among other countless activities social workers undertake. All these programmes and activities are low hanging fruits for social workers to promote peaceful existence without incurring any cost.

Some respondents also believe that social workers also have roles in dispelling fake news and discouraging hate speech among the citizens. A participant noted, “fake news and hate speech have been used severally by separatist agitators to spread fear, hate and mistrust among the people. Consequently, social workers can use opportunity provided by social media to promote messages that unites the people instead of the ones that divide the people. The social media can also be used by social workers to dispel fake news.”

Discussion

Indications show that separatist agitation is not a Nigerian factor as can be seen in the 300-year-old Scottish separatism movement and the long-time Quebec separatism in Canada and other separatist agitations in some African countries (Adibe, 2017). Rather, a trend in multi-ethnic, and multicultural societies (Adibe, 2017). In Nigeria, these agitations had however led to monumental loss of lives and resources (Achebe, 2012; Ademoyega, 1981); Madiebo, 1980; Forsyth, 1977).

The researchers examined social workers’ perspectives in maintaining peaceful co-existence amidst separatist agitations. The themes that were explored during the study include: causes separatist agitations, the effects separatist agitations, social work curriculum in promoting peaceful co-existence in a multi-plural state, government interventions in promoting peaceful co-existence and responding to separatist agitations as well as opinions on roles of social workers in promoting peaceful co-existence among the multi-ethnic groups in Nigeria.

On the causes of separatist agitations, the participants stated that mistrust among the different ethnic groups that make up the country, lack of justice, fairness and equity are factors fueling separatist agitations in the country. They cited nepotism and marginalization as examples of lack of justice and fairness. On the effects of separatist agitations, the respondents noted that although there are grave consequences associated with separatist agitations but measuring the exact effects cannot be achieved as the effects are not only economical nor physical but emotional and psychological which can rarely be measured.

The social workers noted that although their training were adequate in promoting peaceful co-existence at micro and mezzo level, there is need for improvement in the curriculum to address peaceful co-existence at the macro

level and expose students to agencies that promote peaceful co-existence during their practicum. Baines (2010) and Badwall (2015) have stated the importance of rich course contents in the curriculum and training a social worker received as it shapes the direction of his/her practice.

On the conversation around government interventions in addressing peaceful co-existence and responding to separatist agitations, the participants were of the opinion that the federal government have strong programmes and policies in promoting peaceful co-existence but identified very serious loophole in sincerity and dedication in implementing the policies as well as questioned military crackdown against separatist agitators. Consequently, they advocated for non-violent engagements with the separatist agitators.

Finally, the participants unanimously agreed that social workers have enormous responsibility in promoting peaceful co-existence. This they can do by initiating channels of communications among different groups as well as incorporating more content rich in peaceful existence and conflict management into the curriculum of social work students and exposing student social workers to agencies where peace building and peaceful co-existence are placed in the front burner.

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