A Conflict Prevention Approach To Public Policy And Vice Versa: The Case Of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

West Africa and indeed Nigeria continues to be plagued by fragility, conflict and violence. Faced with these challenges, which range from the spread of Boko Haram and other Islamic radical groups across the Sahel region, to humanitarian crisis such as forced displacements, exacerbating effect of climate change on food insecurity, and an increasingly unemployed youth bulge amongst others, it is not be misplaced to interrogate the impact of conflict prevention on public policy and vice versa. Seeing that public policies are frameworks created by governments in response to problems that have arisen in the public sphere, it is therefore important to create the nexus between the propensity of these policies to achieve national ideals such as peace, security and development. There is also no gainsaying that, the public policy realm is saturated with policies to drive these essentials, however, taking into consideration, the number of violent conflicts that have embroiled most African countries, one may argue that, public policies have failed to meet their expected results and therefore, governments have to marshal significant resources to address the structural, institutional and operational gaps that allow for these failures. This paper presents the profoundness of the nexus between public policy and conflict prevention, in formulation and in practice, while also analyzing some of the factors that may be created for this connection to be successful and sustainable. Looking at the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria, its history of past conflicts and the transnational dynamics of Africa's contemporary violent conflicts, the paper argued that public policies can inversely lead to effective conflict prevention and vice versa. Using content analysis, the paper is of the view that, good governance is felt through positive public policy, and governments must own up to the responsibility of dealing with conflict and contradictions.

KEY WORDS: Nigeria, Public Policy, Conflict Prevention, Peace, Security

I. INTRODUCTION

The costs of conflicts are high and rising, with the most visible cost being human life and health as the number of civilian deaths from conflicts doubled between 2005 and 2016 and the number of forcibly displaced persons increased fivefold between 2010 and 2016.[1] There are several interlinked reasons why most of these numbers emanate from Africa, including the failure of public policy(s) to prevent and mitigate them, as against its indicative purpose of building and enshrining sustainable peace within the society. Even isolated incidents like natural disasters which are similarly alluded to happen as a result of climate change and non-human interactions, are actually preventable[2] therefore, the control and management of these incidents still fall within the purview of policymakers and shapers. Therefore, the opinion of this paper is that most of the conflicts that have occurredin Africa and indeed Nigeria, have been preventable.

The reflection of Nigeria's strength and position on any international stage is often gauged through its diversity and human resources, that is, its population and how these two variables are exploited for national growth and development. Therefore, we cannot engage in any far-reaching and grounded discourse of public policy and its nexus with conflict prevention without first interrogating the character of Nigeria in terms of its heterogeneity. Simply put, its origin, people, human interactions, politics and economy, and the potentialities of these elements to influence the course of violent conflicts. Likewise, taking into cognizance, its transnational security environment and its attendant implications onregional peace, the suggestion for well-directed public policy that influences and informs conflict prevention and vice versa iscritical. This is because, the essential strength of public policy is hinged on consensus building that reflects diversity, variety of opinions and views, context and needs, and thus should be designed and implemented in such a way that it ameliorates triggers which exacerbate immense human suffering and or violent conflict.

Against this backdrop, what can be done to mainstream conflict prevention into public policy and vice versa in order to ensure a more peaceful and developed Nigeria? This essay is divided into five segments. The first part presents the structural causes of Nigeria's fragility dating from the 1967 Civil War to the present democratic dispensation. It explains the regressive efforts at national unity that have dominated the Nigerian political scene for two decades. The preceding section conceptualizes public policy and conflict prevention andestablishes the interconnectedness of both concepts in order to establish the versatility of public policy as a solution to preventable conflict. It dovetails into the third section which examines the changing nature and dynamics of the security situation in Nigeria. To achieve this, this section traces the increasing reoccurrence and trends of violent conflicts in Nigeria from independence to present-day, bringing to fore, the complex political emergencies, that are fueling conflicts in Nigeria and Africa. The fourth part maps the connection between public policy and conflict prevention in Nigeria. It particularly highlights this mapping along the lines of history as well as the heterogeneity of the country, both of which are rarely unpacked in the processes and cycles of policymaking. Recommendations and conclusion form the fifth and final part. Listed among recommendations is the need for reforms to economic and social policies as well as the conceptualization and implementation of national and regional peace policies.The closing statement of the paper argues that establishing the nexus between public policy and conflict prevention is pertinent, in order to forestall, prevent or manage violent conflicts. This it proposes can be achieved through a retrospective consideration of the history of a country, its heterogeneity, and a thorough conflict analysis of any development and public policy.

Historical Backdrop

Nigeria comprises of 250 ethnic groups with no common language;[3] however, there are three dominant ethnic groups, namely, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, which have over time, constituted a tripod and some of their interactions have posed serious implications for the socio-economic management and political organization of the country. Given its history as an aggregation of British colonial conquest, Nigeria's unresolved inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic tensions, enmity and suspicions of domination, overlooked by the colonial government and inherited by the new Nigeria government, set the stage for the Biafran Civil War of 1967-1970, which resulted in the killing of over 2.5 million people, including civilians and military casualties.[4] In the post-Civil War era, the struggle to maintain peace and national unity has only gotten tedious as the unresolved trauma, scars of war and strife still in living memory, continue to serve as a basis for continued anxiety, fear and discord between the major ethnic groups who are now perpetually suspicious of motives and intentions of one another, and other groups who struggle for resources. These conflict relationships have played out over decades and even culminated into a series of coup and counter coups and disrupted attempts at legitimizing democracy in Nigeria. Often with ethno-religious and political undertones which ultimately shape alliances, these colonial and post-colonial developments have together, combined in shaping the mode of governance in Nigeria.

Since 1999 and with the power of elect and dismiss now in the hands of the population, there was a renewed sense of hope and optimism, that ordinary Nigerians who have been empowered by the ballot will shape public policy and leadership to reflect the motto "Unity Faith, Peace and Progress" as well as, reduce the prospects of the resurgence of another civil war or violent conflicts. However, what has happened since then has been the same political dynamics, that is, disunity, ethnocentrism, suspicious and volatility, fully manifesting and dominating the democratic process, just in a different government system. Telling, evolving democratically and changing the government system in Nigeria, has done very little in strengthening peace and national development. The reasons for this can be broadly argued as the failure to mainstream conflict prevention into public policy, the absence of peace politics and national peace policy(s). In the decades following independence, there has been almost no comprehensive effort to address the suspicions, rivalry, tensions and distrust between the ethnic groups, specifically with hindsight about the impact of the Civil War on the inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic dynamics of the major ethnic groups. Nigeria's public policy has been poor, in that it has shied away from addressing root causes of tensions and suspicious, including its numerous attempted national conferences to seek solutions to the internal geopolitical issues, having produced recommendations that have been generally ignored. Notable amongst the recommendations are the proceedings from the 2014 National Conference, which emphasized the need for a structural approach to national peacebuilding, reconciliation and conflict transformation programming.[5] It therefore goes without saying that, participants at this National Conference recognize the role of public policy in conflict prevention, and not just the deployment and utilization of security agencies to manage threats or douse the fire of violence after it has been lit.

Unresolved trauma from the 1967 Civil War amongst many other conflicts that have ensued Nigeria, continue to fuel ethnic sentiments across Nigeria and for public policy to succeed in preventing conflict or violence, it must pay special attention to root causes of conflict, systemic drivers of conflict, structural violence perceived or real in order to transform the conflict situation. Good governance is felt through public policy, and if it aims to produce peace, security and development, public policy must own up to the responsibility of dealing with conflict and contradictions that exist within the society. There is also no denying that, the developmental goals of any society can be achieved through the implementation of effective public policies and as thus,

societies, especially those prone to or emerging from violent conflict, require public policies, often designed with components of conflict prevention and peacebuilding as essentials for achieving and sustaining stability and development. It is however important to stress that in Nigeria, like many other African countries, there is no dearth in the design of public policies, nevertheless, many of these policies have marred the prospects of achieving peace and security. Hence, it is obvious, but not at all trite to say that, the policy environment in Nigeria has either failed to accommodate or appreciate its history, heterogeneity and diversity or and, that there is a lack or weakened political will to address and drive structural change.

Contextualizing public policy and conflict prevention

A body of literature and political ideologies have interpreted public policy from different angles. Politicians like Woodrow Wilson discuss public policy as law and statutes constituted by politicians and implemented by administrators[6] while scholars like Wayne Parsons argued that, public policy is the decision of public domain[7]. Other scholars like Dye, Howlett and Ramesh's opine that public policy is, at its most simple, a choice made by a government to undertake some course of action.[8] To situate Wilson's definition of public policy in a democratic context, the role of other critical stakeholders in its conceptualization and implementation is almost non-existent, as his discussion fails to acknowledge that public policy is borne out of multi-stakeholder relations and diplomacy.

To further expand the discourse by Dye, Howlett and Ramesh, Stone argues that the definitions of policy in terms of choice, or an action calculated to achieve a desired objective are premised on a 'classical view' of policy as the result of a rational process [9] and this is almost impossible, taking into consideration the combination of interests and interrelated decisions in the process. Stone's perspective looks at the non-linear and more realistic context of public policy, especially in complex political emergencies like most African countries. Further opined by Hogwood and Gunn, policy is about choice: the choice of objectives; the choice of reasons for (in)action; the choice of policy instruments; the choice of how to respond to the consequences of policy outputs. He also subjects these choices to consequences, and phases of uncertainty when explored. In expounding on their earlier submission, Hogwood and Gunn also envisage the phases of public policy making as a cycle of decision making events and activities, which include issue search or agenda setting; issue filtration; issue definition; forecasting; setting objectives and priorities; options analysis; policy implementation; evaluation and review; and policy maintenance, succession or termination.[10] This mix of events and activities often comprises of a series of connected decisions made by different actors and stakeholders within the polity. These actors could include a mix of government representatives, civil society, pressure groups, community-based organizations, interest groups, professional organizations etc. Public policies are also reflective of existing policies in need of reform or new social problems that need solutions. It is important to note that, policies have outcomes that may or may not have been foreseen and also involve both actions and inactions. Public policies are subjectively defined, and may be defined retrospectively; policies extend beyond the formal records of decisions; and policies need resources and action to be differentiated from political rhetoric.[11] The emergence of public policy is rooted in the legacy of the past with the anticipation that it will influence the unknown future. In articulating the intrinsic purpose and dynamics of public policy, it can therefore be argued that public policy is in the business of problem solving. By this, public policy is the conscious identification through choices of social problem(s) and the opportunity for proffering simultaneous processes and strategies to address these problems. Public policy should therefore not be seen as merely a tool of political rationality, but a tool to solve social problems. As described by Parsons, the existence of a public policy, conveys a claim to an understanding of a problem and a solution.[12]

With the increasing spate of globalization, inequality and proliferation of trends such as terrorism, environmental degradation, climate change, population growth, chronic poverty,[13] the underlined global capacity of continental and regional organizations such as the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), African Union (AU) and other Regional Economic Communities (REC's) increased. Consequently, these organizations have sought to prevent or ameliorate human suffering through public policies that are legally binding and ratified by its members. One of such policies is conflict prevention. Now peddled as an official policy in the UN, EU, the G-8 and many others,[14] conflict prevention is seen as prudent option to preventing the escalation of tensions and ward off future conflicts. Indicative of its initial progression into an official public policy at the international level, conflict prevention has been an age long practice of many civilizations, devised to avert violent manifestations of conflicts. Taking different methodologies, conflict prevention is a combination of deliberate actions by different stakeholders to reduce risks.

Therefore, as a tool to strengthen the security – development – human security – human rights nexus, conflict prevention must be mainstreamed into public policy as mitigating actions that take into cognizance the heterogeneity of the county, the history of its past violent conflicts, the trends and dynamics of its current strife's and the ability to provide early solution or response to the unforeseen but foretold peace and security threats. Bringing conflict prevention into the realm of active policy process will heighten the proactive nature of response against the conventional intervention model, that occurs late into a conflict situation. Furthermore, a

non-partisan and inclusive public policy process has the propensity to drive a progressive agenda of sustainable peace and national development. Compared to the huge cost of violent conflicts, the cost of prevention is dramatically less.[15] Moreover, statistical research on third party diplomacy also supports the belief that acting before high levels of conflict intensity, is better than to end them.[16]

Importantly, with the interconnectedness of present-day social challenges, the role, scale and range of public policy must be expanded to look beyond responding to a specific need, but to see the spiral effect and impact of its ability to solve multiple social problems. For instance, a public policy that relates to feeding school children for free, in a developing country, has the propensity to increase school enrollment especially for girls, improve nutrition of the children, support poor families, keep children off the streets, provide or enhance sources of livelihood for service providers, while also increasing tax for the country. Flipping the positive impact of this public policy the opposite way, will ultimately produce factors that could trigger violent conflict.

The changing nature of the security environment in Nigeria

Though conflicts predate Nigeria's independence, post-independent Nigeria has witnessed an increasing reoccurrence of sub-state violent crisis, ranging from homegrown insurgency, political violence and crisis, militancy and banditry to conflicts between ethnic, religious and communal groups, among others. Additionally, transnational conflicts which happen as a result of climate change, movements along the Sahel Region and international crime and terrorism, also have an attendant spill-over impact on Nigeria's peace and security.With the capacity to impair national development and cohesion, violent conflicts domestically and internationally, seem to be the pathway to poverty and major challenges to the development of Nigeria, as poverty and unemployment have acted as the mainstay for various ethno-religious conflicts. With its crisis cycle mutating between the Biafran Civil War of 1960, which has singlehandedly recorded the highest number of deaths, to the recent threats of terrorism and armed banditry, Nigeria continues to witness a rapid increase in the number of conflicts. This section aims to examine the trends of violent conflicts since independence, in an attempt to explain the complexities and changing security environment of modern-day Nigeria.

Nigeria's human and natural resources have failed to translate to exponential growth,[17] peace and development. Further compounded by its present-day security scenario, the heighted increase and frequency of crises perpetuated by state and non-state actors, which has left scores dead and communities ravaged,[18] further portends the government's ability to fulfil the basic rights of providing security for its citizens. Following independence and the Biafran Civil War, the unresolved issues and deep divisions which caused major issues to be vigorously and violently contested along ethnic, religious and regional lines, continue to feature in the Nigerian state. These issues have lingered, threatening the essential fabric for its existence and the validity of the country.

Nigeria gained its independence in 1960 and in these 61 years of independence, a combination of civilian governments and military administration have exercised political and military power over Nigeria. Since 1960, Nigeria has grappled with the problem of ethnicity on one hand, and religious conflicts on the other hand.[19] These divisions which are often manipulated by political elites, has also limited the government's ability to provide basic amenities for the diverse groups and as a result, there is a perceived imbalance in resource distribution and struggle for scarce resources. As alluded by Harris and Reilly, the perceived imbalance in distribution of economic, political and social resources is one of the factors that give rise to conflicts within states, with attendant impact on identity-based factors like race, religion, culture, language.[20] and this is illustrative of the Nigerian context.

While broadly speaking, violent conflicts in Nigeria, have expressed themselves along geo-political, ethic, religious and regional lines. According to Elaigwu,17 major violent conflicts have been identified in Nigeria from May 1985 to May 1st, 1999 and from May 31, 1999 to June 2005, at least 121 cases of conflicts in Nigeria. In expatiating his findings, Elaigwu attributes the sudden increase in violent conflict in the country to the following factors, a strong central government; popular agitation for decentralized structure; dissatisfaction with the distribution of available resources; communal conflicts and demands by some sub-national groups for greater self- determination.[21] Ibeanu in his study on oil and environments, states that between 2003 and early 2004, over 30,000 people died in election-related violence in the Niger-Delta and this violence was perpetuated by youths[22]. Also, according to Nwanolue & Onuoha, since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, there has been over 90 violent ethno-religious conflict in the country, with over 100,000 lives lost in the process.[23] In more contemporary update, Boko Haram remains one of Nigeria's deadliest conflicts, despite national and regional military offensive and support from the international community. Since 2009, extremist group Boko Haram has killed about 35,000 people, and according to the recent UNDP Report,[24] approximately 350,0000 have indirectly died because of the insurgency – 10 times more from disease and poverty. The insurgency has also displaced over 3.2 million people, with at least 2.9 million internally displaced within northeast Nigeria.[25]Since 2011, intercommunal violence and armed banditry attacks has killed and displaced thousands, hindered socioeconomic development and threatened democratic governance. The 2018 International Crisis Group Report[26] argues that the rising conflict between herders and farmers in

Nigeria is already six times deadlier than the BH insurgency, anda 2020 Amnesty International Report[27] states that more than 1,500 people have died in inter-communal violence and bandit attacks in the northcentral and northwest. These numbers could even be ten times more, as Nigeria's lack of accurate and reliable data is such that no one even knows the country's population size. Furthermore, the country's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) highlights that 40% of Nigerias populationlive below the country's poverty line of 137,430 naira ($381.75) per year.[28]

The transnational potential for violent conflict is also a grave security concern in Nigeria. The porous nature of Nigeria's borders and the growing aridity in the Sahel Region has not only increased desertification, but decreased the availability of grazing land, increased poverty and criminality. Cattle herders, who because of this extreme weather move along the region seeking pasture, engage in struggle for resources and this often results in violent manifestation of conflicts.

The most commonplace argument for democracy is that it is a panacea to violent conflict and according to the UN, democracy is recommended as one of the post-conflict rebuilding efforts in war torn countries.[29] The UN, other regional organizations and the international community have also prescribed the conduct of elections, rule of law and human rights, and security sector reforms as accompanying components and prerequisites for the attainment of democracy. However and going by this, it is expected that Nigeria's transition to democracy will ultimately translate to peace, but this is not the case, as the democratic experience in Nigeria has been ridden with violence.[30] This study has realized that despite this transition, the required dividends for peace which democracy professes to offer, have been thorny. In all these threats to national peace and security, it has also been observed that governments response has been more reactionary rather than seeking to tackle root and structural causes, so as to ensure that there is no resurgence and the sustainability of peacebuilding efforts.

Mapping the Connection between Public Policy and Conflict Prevention in Nigeria
Though many argue that public policy is becoming difficult to implement, especially in contexts that are prone to or recovering from conflict, the manifestations of the need for and connections between public policy and conflict prevention is highly irresistible and are also the easiest to map. This assertion is made bearing in mind, the following settings: that the attendant impact of violent conflict is as a result of the absence of or weakened conflict prevention measures; that early warning signals are inherently evident but often ignored; that human and material costs from conflict are tangible, and lastly, that conflicts are explicitly connected to the roles played by political elites who are otherwise known as policy shapers in the narrow sense of it, as described in the earlier part of this essay. Additionally, many public policy issues emerge from the way they are conceptualized, and primary examples include the political framing, securitization and mobilization of collective identities related to ethnicity, religion and political affiliation, and the Nigeria is case in point. With the Nigerian background in mind, it is therefore easy to connect the obstinate conflicts, of which, most of them happen from differences in religious, political, regional and ethnic identities, to the way policy issues are constructed and decision making is made.

In the wake of democracy and the increasing emphasis on (good) governance coupled with the changing peace and security environment, contemporary policymaking in Nigeria reflects a confluence of issues that originate in two juxtaposing forces: policy and heterogeneity and policy and progressive ideas/strategies. There is no denying that Nigeria is replete with brilliant, impeccable and well written policies, visions and reforms agenda, but this often ends up as paper-work rubbished by insincere implementation.[31] Moreover, the policy process in Nigeria is further confounded by the lack of institutional support and resilience, as well as the absence of robust consultation and inclusion of relevant stakeholders. In exploring the connection between these confluences, one is further forced to expound the discourse along the lines of history, as well as the heterogeneity of the country, both of which are rarely unpacked in the processes and cycles of policymaking. In this regard, policymakers and shapers in Nigeria, have failed to either comprehend and map the role of Nigeria's history of disunity, suspicion, deep-seated fear and its diversity, which are often the reasons for policy problems, with well-constructed polices and adaptive strategies. It is therefore instructive to say that, policy has to be both retrospective and transformative in nature and agenda, in the sense that, its conceptualization, design and strategies for implementation must not only be progressive but must be reflective of the context in and for which it was conceived. Another distinctive feature and failure of public policymaking in Nigeria is the absence of conflict analysis to gauge the ability of the policy(s) to instigate, mitigate or escalate conflicts. Though touted as a conflict resolution tool, conflict analysis is a progressive developmental assessment, that provides a better understanding of the dynamics of relationships, and how these relationships are stoked to instigate or mitigate conflicts. As earlier stated, policy conceptualization is also a function of framing in order to appeal to legislation, implementers and beneficiaries. One is therefore forced to say rhetorically, that some policymakers prefer to define problems in ways that it distorts implementation. From these perspectives, the 'failure' of the Nigerian policymakers and indeed African political elites to enact public policies that are not only inclusive, but recognizes the diversity and history of the people, has resulted in the lack of national integration and has

enshrined underdevelopment. This has in turn led to the rise of communal, ethnic and religious conflicts that are characteristic features of the Nigerian state.

The case for a correlation between conflict prevention and public policy is hereby made from the statements above. For instance, public policy that relates to grazing rights for cattle herders, which has actually been a source of conflict in contemporary Nigeria and most of the countries along the Sahel Region, must feature elements of conflict analysis to understand the positions, needs and interests of all beneficiaries, innovation to reform cattle management practices and land access. It must also include components to strengthen mechanisms for conflict resolution, peacebuilding and justice, in order to support communities affected by this crisis. This public policy must also provide precise scales and frameworks to measure it effectiveness, so as to ensure continuity or change.

Key recommendations and conclusion

In conflict prevention, failure is far easier to measure than success and political actors have a huge role to play in implementing a good conflict prevention strategy through the public policy decisions they make. In this vein, the paper identifies the following recommendations for policy makers to ensure peace maintenance and national development. Firstly, there is the need for ownership in every political and peace process: Nigerians have a major role to play in ensuring that policymakers and shapers conceptualize, design and implement policies for the betterment of the generality of the people. The core of democracy is felt through this empowerment, that is, the people elect into positions either at state or local government levels, people of impeccable character and they, (the people) must at all-time, ask questions, demand explanation and monitor their representatives. As a follow-up to ownership of policy processes, representatives of the people should periodically sensitize their constituents on proposals for policy design, transfer or change, to allow for accountability, inclusiveness and public participation. Secondly, there must be a robust engagement with civil society organizations, who should with vigor, advance enlightenment and advocacy programmes for the general populace and government representatives. Also, there must be renewed efforts to develop and support national and regional public policy institutions through increased funding for research and development, while regional organizations must adopt objective criteria, that have implications on transnational peace and security. Such objective criteria could be in the form of national and regional peace policies, which will institutionalize the mainstreaming of conflict prevention in all policies of national governments and member-states. There must be a conscious effort to conduct peace politics as a practice, in the sense that the practice and education of peace should feature in all democratic activities of the countryand must be reflective of the society and feature all stakeholders and groups. Lastly, there must be a reform and design of economic friendly and social policies, that allow for wealth accumulation, poverty reduction and national development

In closing, this paper, which has taken into context, the contemporary peace and security environment in Nigeria, has examined the connection between public policy and conflict prevention, and vice versa. In its argument, it establishes that the absence of a conflict prevention perspective to public-policy conceptualization and implementation is at the root of structural conflicts in Africa and indeed, Nigeria. In elaboration, it states that, this nexus is pertinent, not only to policy scholars but most importantly, to policy shapers and therefore, a retrospective consideration of the history of a country, its heterogeneity, and a thorough conflict analysis of any development policy, should be considered as vital prerequisites and elements of public-policy legislation and decision-making. Furthermore, and as a matter of fact and urgency, the transnational dynamics and nature of present-day conflicts in Africa coupled with its spill-over capacity and implications, is enough onus for expanding and institutionalizing this discourse assertively. Another core objective of this essay was to stress the need for a more systematic and progressive look at this broad connection of conflict prevention from a public-policy standpoint. Arising from this broad conclusion, the paper has further identified the need for and connections between public policy and conflict prevention, as essential and also the easiest to map, based on the tangibility of impacts from preventable violent conflict in the society. In its recommendation, the paper advocates for national and regional peace polices, assertive security, economic and social policies, and the increased support to funding for research and development related to conflict prevention. The resulting implications for these recommendations can be summarized as more peaceful and tolerant societies.

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