

IMPACT OF COMMUNAL CONFLICT ON THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

TOR-ANYIIN, S. APEON PhD

Abstract

This paper examined the impact of communal conflict on early childhood (the toddlers and the preschool) development in Nigeria. The position of the paper is that communal conflicts in their various dimensions, inter and intra religious, socio-political and socio-cultural have actually impacted negatively on the social, psychological and physical development of the early childhood. The author was also convinced from reviewed literature that the mental and physical health of the toddlers and preschools are affected by communal conflicts as the growing child is denied opportunities of acquiring social skills for the socio-political development of the country, Nigeria. Though the toddlers and preschools do not contribute to the executing of the conflicts the impact felt by them as the adolescents and the adults. This paper therefore recommends among other things that counsellors and government and non governmental agencies should never relent in advocating and campaigning for peace among the citizenry in any forum available to them. Group and individual counselling is recommended for children to enable them forget the atrocities of the hostilities. Perpetrators of violence should never be left to go scot free because to initiate a communal conflict is the worst crime to a nation and humanity in general.

Introduction

The Nigerian society is dominated by high level of insecurity from communal conflicts, which are violent clashes between and within inter and intra religious, cultural, and socio-political groups. No part of the nation can claim to be free from communal conflicts in the past three years. These days' people are killed in their homes, farms, markets, and roads, places of worship, social gatherings and even schools. Lives have been lost and materials worth billions of Naira destroyed. The communal conflicts are usually characterised by fighting, destruction and killings resulting to permanent separation, relocation and displacement, all of which have serious impact on the social security of Nigeria.

The survivals including men, women and children flee for their dear lives to other safe places with some internalise feelings, which affect their social, physical and emotional /psychological feelings culminating to psycho-social effects (Tor-Anyiin, 2005). Though everybody is usually affected, the plight of the children is more pathetic; because they are not fully aware of the causes of the conflict but are made to suffer the consequences even more than the adults. It is the pathetic nature of the children that resulted to the world seminar for children in September 1991, when about 70 states declared that they would work carefully to protect children from the scourge of war and they pledge to prevent further armed conflict ... to give children everywhere a peaceful and secured future (Jacobs, 1991). Hence, children need special protection in situation of armed conflict.

Children are vulnerable because they witness direct attack and disruption of food supplies. They are witness to the murder of their family members and break up of their families. They also witness and experience displacement and protracted stay in refugee camps, which rob them of peaceful early positive emotional and social development and subject them throughout their growing years to insecurity, fear, abuse, breakdown of parental control and lack of future prospects. The socio-political insecurity created by the communal conflicts denies the children their immediate needs of love, food, shelter,

water, warmth, belongingness and acceptance, security, safety, and future self-actualization. This means therefore that communal conflict is very likely to have impact on the development of early childhood, which involves a series of cognitive, physical, emotional/psychological and social changes. In this paper, childhood development refers to children from birth to the age of six years, identified generally as toddlers 1-3 years and preschool 3-6 years. It is these two categories of children that this paper examines the impact of communal conflicts on their social, psychological and emotional changes as they grow to adolescence.

Childhood development according to Thompson and Ruldoph (1993: 92) involves “tasks of achieving independence, learning to relate to peers, developing confidence in self, coping with ever changing body, forming of basic values and mastering new ways of thinking and new information.” All these tasks are developmental as such the experience of communal conflicts with the killings, maiming, and displacement are likely to affect the cognitive aspect of the growing child. One can therefore suggest that communal conflict actually denies this category of children the opportunity of staying in a free, and safe social, psychological and physical environment to enable them acquire the necessary traits to prepare them for a good future life. Obviously a good future is achieved with a good environment; because it is only within it that the needs as stated by Maslow (1970) can be attained.

Human needs and early childhood

According to Maslow (1970) every human being has needs, which are in a hierarchical order. According to him, the physiological needs are at the base of the psychological hierarchical needs which comprise food, water and shelter; next is the safety need, then love and belongingness, esteem and at the apex self actualization, which only a few are likely to reach. Discussing about the physiological need, Santrock (2005) observed that feeding and eating habits are very important aspects of early childhood development. This can however be disrupted by communal conflict, which can cause displacement. The disruption may likely deny the children the nutritional needs; for instance the fleeing and refugee status may deny the families adequate meat and vegetables and is very likely to cause iron deficiency anaemia. According to Odeyinka (2011) iron deficiency reduces Intelligent Quotient (IQ) by 1.73 point and affects 20-30% of children. Earlier Wikipedia (2010) observed that malnutrition reduces IQ by 6-13% points and affects 25-30% of children. The contradictions notwithstanding, it confirms the effect of nutrition on intelligence.

Also included in the physiological need is water (H₂O), which is an essential component and need of the human body, the human brain contains 75% water, lungs 90% and the blood contains 84% of water. All these help in the digestion, circulation and waste removal from the body (Odeyinka, 2011). It goes without saying that any havoc done to water may affects the consumers' health; just like inadequate (less than 1.3kgs within 24 hours) intake of water is a health risk to the individual as it causes dehydration with its consequences of headache, back pains, stress, weight pain, asthma, high blood pressure, allergies and Alzheimer disease (Althuler and Ruble, 2011). It is therefore very important to note that water enhances living; unfortunately, communal conflicts destroy not only the quantity of water intake but also the quality of water. This may result from the deliberate poisoning and dropping of corpses in drinking wells and waters. The inadequate intake of water by children due to displacement from communal conflict jeopardises their future health.

Shelter is the sleeping abode of every living thing including human beings. Cultural groups have been identified with given geographical areas so, once they are displaced from there as a result of communal conflict, their shelter is tempered with. This is because the fleeing people with the children travel long distances for fear of the attackers. Before they reach the safety locations they start experiencing stress and anxiety of why the long walk. Following this, they are very likely to experience sleep problems, which at this age include nightmares, night terrors -sleepwalking and sleep talking (Society for research in children Development). Santrock (2005) strongly believes that children who experience more nightmares have higher levels of anxiety than those who do not have nightmares. As refugees therefore, shelter, food, and water are in short supply and poor quality. The destruction of house contents of certain families may create some emotional challenges and even mental health problems for some children.

To Seligma (1995) mental health is an individual's ability to enjoy life, bounce back from hard times, judge many aspects of one's life positively, self actualise, be flexible to feel and express a range of emotions of life like others. Being able to solve problem and feel better. It implies absence of stress and anxiety. Unfortunately anxiety, about insecurity creates the feeling of a threat phenomenon. This affects the lives of the children as the conflict touches on the early childhood happiness, excitement and causes sadness or emotional imbalance. This implies that Children, particularly the pre-school, fleeing from communal conflicts with their parents are not free from anxiety and stress.

Protracted stay in camps robs the early childhood happiness and subjects them throughout their growing years to insecurity, fear, abuse, breakdown of parental control and lack of future prospects. Incidentally, Erikson (1950) identifies this period as the stage of initiative versus guilt and so need adequate and comfortable opportunity and good experiences for better psychological development. It is likely that significant number of children will develop the sense of guilt and Posttraumatic stress Disorder (PSTD.) (www.melkssainstitute.org/doc/effects_of_war.pdt). Responding to trauma is normal and it is not uncommon for severely traumatized children to appear stunned, numb, unresponsive, mute, hyper vigilante, hyperactive and frantic. Responses will vary by degree of experience, degree of damage, and degree of understanding by the child as well as other previous traumatic experiences. Those age 3-6 pre- school are very sensitive and so the belief that bad things will happen produces night mares,' fearfulness, vigilance, sensitive to visual images or horror play showing trauma themes.

Indeed, the destruction of farms, food barns and houses as well as the poisoning of water during communal conflict implies that the communal conflict has impact on the physiological needs of the people and most importantly the growing child who needs these most. This has much impact on the child because according to Liu, Raine, Venables, Dalais and Medick (2003) malnutrition is directly linked to cognitive deficits because of the negative effects on the brain.

The Physical health of the toddler and pre-school is also impacted upon as a result of communal conflict. This results from poor quality water and so the likely cause of diarrhoea, typhoid fever, chlorella, hypertatis, and dehydration; all these can cause headache, back pains, stress, weight pain, and asthmas high bloody pressure, allergies and Alzheimer disease (Musa and Ozoh, 2009). This is worsening with inadequate health facilities together with sleeping problems. Exhibition of fear signs like headache, stomach pain, pain in the arms and legs eating problems, tics and sleep disturbances in the refugee camps by the toddlers and preschool indicate that communal conflict can have impact on

their physical health. Infants are the least likely to survive as malnutrition and attendant diseases affect the community during conflicts. During and after communal conflict food is rationed because of its shortage hence poor nutrition. Mothers may find it difficult to properly breastfeed their infants. Thus, toddlers and preschool are starved and are malnourished resulting to physical health and brain malfunction and ultimately mental retardation.

Safety is next to the physiological needs as identified by Maslow (1970). Safety is freedom from fear and experience of good social relationship with neighbours. This is the first need that communal conflict has impact upon as the gun shots, house burning and the killing create fear and social insecurity and send families and entire community being attacked fleeing in their thousands with the children hurriedly carried about to other places considered safe. Places considered safe whether refugee camps (schools or open spaces) or other people's houses, are very frustrating to the children as they are looked upon as very distant strangers who have come to disturb their peace. This frustration is worsen as sleeping time approaches; because the children sleeping arrangement in refugee camps is not ideal and of course does not allow the children to have adequate sleep, which they are expected to have at their age.

Maslow's next on the hierarchical needs is the need for self esteem. This is the feeling of worthiness. Under communal conflict, this need of the children is relegated as the entire out group children and their elders are made to regard flee group as inferior and worthless and so could be killed at will by the out-group. To emphasise their worthlessness, there are stereotypes and derogatory remarks, which the children at times use in their plays unconsciously. In fact communal conflicts initiate cruel and thoughtless remarks that affect the self respect and confidence not only of the adults but also of the children who watch their parents and significant others react by exhibition of negative emotions.

Following the destruction of physical materials, including their playing toys, separation of the child from the loved ones, as well as the familiar physical and social environment causes anxiety, depression and other psychological challenges. Before the communal conflicts some children stay in warm, decent homes with love, care and affection but with the communal conflict this psychological perspective is dismantled. This implies that the destruction of house contents of certain families may create some emotional challenges to some children and even create mental health problem. Communal conflict therefore is very likely to have impact on some aspects of early childhood development.

Communal Conflicts and Children' Emotional Development

Emotional development is the process of maturation of an individual to be able to control the negative emotions, which include fear, worry, anxiety, guilt, sorrow, hatred and jealousy. Of course even the excess of pleasant or positive emotions, which include joy, love, affection, pleasure and smile or laughter, does not help for a good social interaction. It is the however the "ability to demonstrate a well balance emotional behaviour" Mangal (2007), that indicate development. Both negative and positive emotional development is dependent on an individual's environment, which provides the training and learning because at birth a child does not show the presence of any special emotions (Mangal (2007). This indicates that a communal conflict dominated environment may likely facilitate the excess development of any of these emotions.

Emotions are described as a person's innermost thoughts and feelings which can be expressed in sudden outbursts of human experience and so not restricted to the adults.

Children also express emotions and sense significant others' emotional reaction and feelings. Children also have emotions and are so bound to express them in the situation they have found themselves. Baby smiles (Society for research in child development, 2010) first occur at between 6-10 weeks (social smile). Children experience happiness, sadness, and anger a few months as toddlers. By 8-12 months they go through a fairly rapid change and become fearful of perceived or real threats. They exhibit these fear and insecurity by constant complain of headache, stomach pain, pains in the arms and legs, eating problems, tics and sleep disturbances.

Emotional states noticeable among children include happiness, joy, love, fear, sadness and anger among others. Anger for instance can be expressed through crying, shouting, hitting, either oneself or object and kicking which is termed temper tantrums, and expressed by all children when tired, frustrated impatient or angry. Accordingly, Kolo (2010) observed that at ages 1-3, toddlers' feelings are intense and changeable and openly expressed and can easily be distracted too. It should be noted that toddlers are also self centred since they want adults to pay attention to them as they want their feelings attended to immediately. At the preschool years 3-6, children shift from intense emotion to another and back again. They have not learnt how to modify their emotions according to prevailing situations. According to Santrock (2005) emotions of pride, shame and guilt first appear at about two and a half years of age. That they are new in the refugee camp fleeing from so and so fill them with anger and shame and they are demoralised. Santrock continued that may be internalised and have the child grow with it.

Communal Conflict and Social Development

Social development is the ability of an individual to be able to accept not only members of his/her family like siblings and parents but also the willingness to accept peers from the school, place of worship and the neighbourhood. A family without adequate social skills will not be able to inculcate such social skills. It is obvious that a communal conflict dominated area will not allow families to have such social skills to inculcate to the children, hence poor social development.

Crying children are always threatened that they would be handed over to the enemies. Thus if they are made to know that handing them to the neighbour who kills they will grow to hate such person or group. These statements go to restricting his social interaction and affecting his social development. The children are made to imbibe the derogatory remarks against the out-group. Their vocabulary is centred on the stereotype and instil hatred of the out group members. The point is that even after the conflict, the wounds are never quickly healed and social integration becomes very difficult among neighbours as the children had been brought to the enmity, which affects their peer group membership.

Communal conflict also impact on the children's feeling to be loved and to belong and be accepted. Every human being including the toddlers and pre-school children are social beings and so need to be accepted where they belong. This explains why they prefer to disrupt play and games when they are not considered as participants. The children lose not only their parents but also some of their play mates or peers. Those that move to the camps experience a new life. Movements are restricted and plays are no longer elaborate; due to hunger or fear that the fighters will also attack. Communal conflicts, which take the children outside their areas for safety, inform them that they cannot belong anywhere and be accepted. They are reminded that friendship is to be restricted to the in-group since

the out- group does not accept them. This is the beginning of their idea of discrimination, which is one of the major cause conflicts. Early childhood's general feeling of love, belonging and acceptance, which parents need to inculcate to the children, is disorganized by pains of communal conflict.

Parents are expected to take good care of their offspring providing them their social and psychological needs. Unfortunately, communal conflicts deny many children such care as some parents are killed and others maimed and dislocated. When parents or significant others are killed, maimed, relocated or displaced with all material things burnt, the children are left at the mercy of philanthropists or significant others. The new guardians who are mostly not better off to provide the needed psychosocial needs. The children are therefore very likely to develop some psychological challenges like loneliness, guilt, anger, depression, unhealthy self esteem and suicide thoughts among others. Some families after conflict are under one single parenting. This is very likely to affect the discipline of such that siblings'. Rivalry is may become a rule rather than an exception. With this background many of the children will grow to imbibe hatred of the society to have denied them opportunity of enjoying good parenting.

Communal Conflicts and Children Rights

A right is a special privilege or freedom given to any individual by virtue of his/ her membership of a group. In a country, it is given by the constitution of his country. Children rights therefore are the special privileges or freedom/liberties given to children as human beings to enable them live and contribute meaningfully to development. Unfortunately communal conflict also has impact on the child rights as formulated by United Nations and the respective members. Children's right as guaranteed by the UN in 1979 include the right to love and understand, adequate food and health care, free education, play and identity and special attention if handicapped regardless of race, colour, sex, religion, national and social origin. These rights do not exist nor are they respected during communal conflict. During this period, food stuff are destroyed, as well as educational institutions. One cannot guarantee the safety and security of any of the children's rights.

Communal conflicts are caused by differences between the in and out groups. To high light these differences to warrant violent attack where surviving children are left to struggle to make ends meet implies that communal conflicts under any disguise violates all the rights of children as advocated by the 1979 United Nation declaration on the rights of the child including the early child hood under the age of 6 years.

Communal Conflict and Inculcation of Social Values

A study by Astshuler and Ruble (2011) found that young children are less likely to help a person after seeing that person harm or intend to harm someone else. The study placed 100 German 3 years in scenarios where they observed an adult intend to harm or accidently harm another. The children were less likely to subsequently help that adult in a game if the adult had harmed or intend to harm another person in the initial scenario. If during the flight children are reminded of the atrocities of the enemies, the stories are never forgotten, and may become a source of worry for life. Negative comments and experiences of communal conflict are very damaging to social relationship of the youths and very critical for their development of self image and formation of self concept. Again as the conflict lasts and the preschool are no longer enjoying their friendship and plays in school, their feelings, beliefs, opinions and judgements of self worthiness as a person is

that of a failure which if care is not taken can be part of their experience throughout life. They are equally given some messages that will let them believe that the out group is bad; hence they are filled with lot of stereotype and discriminatory information, thus at their toddler and pre-school age most Nigerian children are introduced to hatred and distrust of their neighbours because of communal conflict.

The preschool is the period of initiative, creativity and guilt (Erikson, 1950). This is because they draw and are very much interested in what they initiated and drawn. It gives them sense of accomplishment. They are therefore very sad if such initiative is not appreciated; if it is destroyed they hate who ever does it and report to various quarters. They equally feel guilty for failure to meet a standard they set for themselves. Communal conflict destroys the physical and social environments they were very familiar with are put in disarray and the speed which social skills like empathy, cooperation, tolerance and problem solution were being learnt is automatically altered. The peer groups are separated hence it is very likely to cause general separation anxiety. The refugee camp is therefore a new place with its social and psychological challenges for the toddlers and preschool. The improvised environment of war displaced persons presents the youths with opportunities for reflecting on the intrinsic features of actions that harm.

Conclusion

Early child hood development covers children aged from birth to six years; they are also human beings, and as such the incessant communal conflict with the killings, destruction of lives and property affect them as human beings. This is because the communal conflicts touches on every aspect of human life and get it disrupted. Thus, the physical and mental health as well as the cognitive, social and psychological aspects of their growth is affected negatively. Concerned citizens and government are therefore expected to rise up and fight the social menace called communal conflict to enable our children grows in love and practice peace for benefit of society.

Early Child social, emotional/psychological, and cognitive developments are dependent on genetic and environmental factors. Communal conflict being one aspect of the environmental factors, affects early child hood developmental aspects negatively. This is because the experiences affect their physical health, as well as the social, emotional and cognitive perspectives. It is the position of this paper that all communal conflicts have negative impact on early childhood development and ultimately national development.

Recommendations

The fundamental recommendation is that co-operation, tolerance and objectivity should be imbibed. With these social values the toddlers and pre-school learn the social skills to be able to initiate and sustain peace in their respective groupings and ultimately in the society. Provide adequate group activities for the children to vent their energy and emotions. Counsellors in conflict dominated areas or staying in refugee camps are expected on changing the violent mind set of the children and attitude of the children as they grow up. Adults should be encouraged to restrain from negative verbal comments on the out-group.

Stories of mercy, forgiveness, as well as show of co-operation and unity can be inculcated through games and dances that require forgiveness, honesty, and tolerance of others irrespective of background. Adults must express community competence and

resilience to encourage the children towards good neighbourhood. Group and individual counselling is recommended to enable them forget the atrocities of the hostilities.

Extra attention and care should be given to the toddlers and the pre-school to discuss the conflicts but efforts should be made to avoid negative emotions. The power of dialogue and compromise can also be inculcated through plays and games that involve sharing. Discuss the truth but avoid the violence in order to avoid worry.

Our schools should teach positive values and emotions like love, forgiveness, honesty, and truth among others, while the churches and mosques should emphasize messages that will promote peaceful co-existence. Perpetrators of violence should never be left to go scot free because to initiate a communal conflict is the worst crime to a nation and humanity in general.

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