ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND UTILIZATION AS PANACEA FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN STATES WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO NIGERIA

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Abstract
The study highlights the role of information in the overall development of man and the society and emphasized its potency in conflict resolution if the generality of the populace has free access to information and adequate infrastructure is put in place. It focused on access to information and utilization, information repackaging and needed infrastructure for current, adequate and useful information for conflict resolution and sustainable
development. The study also noted that information is an essential and indispensable commodity for development. It also stressed the need for information to be made accessible and available in the most appropriate and suitable manner to the general populace since information is seen as necessary ingredient or tool for resolving conflict. It concludes by recommending how accessibility and utilization of timely and adequate information can serve as panacea to conflict resolution and economic development of African states, with particular reference to Nigeria.

For any problem-solving process or project to be successful, an effective information service is very important arguably because such service serves as a necessary tool for resolving conflict among the hostile parties. Hence, the term “information” according to the New Encyclopedia Britanica (2005), refers to facts and opinions provided and received during the course of daily life. According to the Encyclopedia, one obtains information directly from other living beings, from mass media, from electronic data banks, and from all sorts of observable phenomena in the surrounding environment. A person using such facts and opinions generates more information, some of which is communicated to others during discourse, by instructions, in letters and documents and through other media. Information organised according to some logical relationships is referred to as a body of knowledge, to be acquired by systematic exposure or study.

An information system is a set of resources; men, materials and procedures designed to attain informational goals within a particular socio-economic environment which produces and utilizes the system as a tool for peace and development. In any given society, there are various classes and shades of people with varying degree of interests, goals and objectives, and their aim is to achieve such set goals which can only be carried out successfully through peaceful co-existence devoid of conflicts (Olaotan, Ogunleye & Adedeji, 2009).

However, Jimoh (2006), observes that human society is dynamic and that yesterday’s solution to a problem may not be sufficient in answering today’s question. Of course, change is therefore inevitable and when those who have to bring it about are insensitive to the dynamic of social and economic forces, a conflict situation is created. Conflict resolution management therefore requires adequate and timely information and efforts should be made to map out solutions and strategies aim at restoring piece and eradicating conflict. Hence, the stakeholders need accurate information to guide the decision-making process.
Conflict and Its Causes

Webne-Behman (1998) defines conflict as a disagreement through which the parties involved perceived a threat to their needs, interests or concerns. Within this simple definition, according to him are several important understandings that emerge which are:

(i) **Disagreement**: This happens when there is some level of difference in the positions of the two or more parties involved in the conflict. But the true disagreement versus the perceived disagreement may be quite different from one another. In fact, conflict tends to be accompanied by significant levels of misunderstanding that exaggerate the perceived disagreement considerably. If we can understand the true areas of disagreement according to Webne-Behman (1998), this will help us solve the right problems and manage the true needs of the parties.

(ii) **Parties involved**: There are often disparities in our sense of who is involved in the conflict. People are influenced to participate in the dispute, whether they would personally be able to define the situation or not and thus, people readily “take side” based upon current perceptions of the issues, past issues and relationship, roles within the society, organisation and other factors.

(iii) **Perceived threat**: People respond to the perceived threat, rather than the true threat facing them. Thus, while perception doesn’t become reality per se, people’s behaviour, feelings and ongoing responses become modified by that evolving sense of the threat they confront. If we can work to understand the true threat (issues) and develop strategies (solutions) that manage it (agreement), we are acting constructively to manage the conflict.

(iv) **Needs, interest or concerns**: Simply stated, there are always procedural needs and psychological needs to be addressed within the conflicts, in addition to the substantive needs that are generally presented. Conflicts occur when people perceived that as a consequence of disagreement, there is a threat to their needs, interests or concerns.

Since conflict is accepted as an inevitable recurrent of life due to differences in human natures, Saliu (2006) observes that conflicts sometimes arise when new policies or legislation are introduced by government without regards to existing realities and when various parties or group pursue their self interest ironically to their collective detriment.

Value system based conflict is another major cause of conflicts in our society. Such value includes faith or belief, self esteem, freedom, etc. Saliu (2006), opines that
value system based conflicts are usually difficult to resolve. This is because value systems according to him are characterized by human belief and principles which are very important to man just as blood is to individual. Hence, government and leaders at various levels of administration need accurate information, facts and data to formulate policies and strategies and refine decision making to help the affected parties resolve the conflicts or their differences. The examples of groups that are responsible for major conflicts in Nigeria are the Boko Haram insurgents, the Niger Delta militants; movement for the emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), etc.

The Need for Access to Information

Further to the definition of information given earlier, Chambers Encyclopedia English Dictionary (1994) defines “information” as “knowledge gained or given facts, news…” while Oyegade (2000) sees information as “knowledge communicated or received in relation to a particular subject”. He further viewed information as the most important singular variable which differentiate and determine whether a country is in the first or second, third or fourth world (Olaotan and Adesina, 2011). The difference between a rich man and a poor man according to Peter (2013) is information. He further argued that with valid and useful information, one could create a unique path, develop oneself and be better in one’s service delivery.

Unquestionably therefore, information, whether in the raw form of empirical data, or in the highly process form we call “knowledge”, has come to be regarded as a national resource as critical to the nation’s well-being and security as any natural resources, such as water, oil, etc. In advanced societies, a substantial part of the culture is handed down to successive generations in the form of recorded knowledge. This resources consist of books, journals, and other text; of audio and visual materials; and of small units of information or data that can be separately manipulated, as by a computer or even our handsets that uses mobile networks and current the internet.

Users of information according to Trezza (2010) are individuals, each with unique informational, educational, psychological, and social needs. A person may need practical knowledge to solve immediate problems in his daily life and work. There may be a need for professional knowledge to further his continuing education. Or there may be a need for intellectual knowledge the kind that furthers his understanding of the arts, humanities and sciences, and which enriches the individual’s personal life. Reading for pleasure, pursuing an innovative idea, or exploring knowledge just to satisfy one’s innate curiosity, are other valid motives for reading, listening or looking. In addition, people feel the need for ethnical, religious and philosophical insights.

Organisations, like individuals, need information and knowledge; business organisations need facts and data to forecast a market, develop a new product, or adapt
a new technology; schools need information to improve and extend the learning process; research organisations need information to synthesize new data with known facts as part of the creative process; government needs information at every level of formulate plans, policies, refine decision-making, and help government workers to anticipate and resolve problems (Trezza, 2010).

From the foregoing, it is clear that the need for access to adequate information could be summed up in what Imran (2011) stated as:

(i) a guarantee to effective government;
(ii) achieving ideological re-orientation;
(iii) aid formulation of policy and decision-making;
(iv) aid conflict resolution/management;
(v) promote image of the government.

The Challenge to Information Accessibility

Ready access to information and knowledge is indispensable to individual advancement as well as to national growth. The right information provided when it is needed, where it is needed, and in the form in which it is needed, improves the ability of an individual, a business, a government agency, or some other kind of organisation, to make informed decisions and achieve particular goals. Unfortunately, Nigeria has an abundance of recorded information, not a shortage. However, this precious resource is concentrated in relatively few locations, often virtually inaccessible to millions of people, and is lying largely untapped.

For instance, Udende and Azeez (2010) carried out an empirical study on “internet access and use among students of the University of Ilorin, Nigeria”, findings of the study show that “many users have some deficiency and structural inadequacies in the use of the internet”. On this basis, the study recommends that universities should provide adequate internet facilities and enabling environment for student users at universities. In another study, Stanley and Mojaye (2012) revealed that the Nigerian constitution restricts the activities of the press. The study also found that the various military regimes in Nigeria, especially the regimes of Generals Babangida and Abacha severely censored the press through various draconian decrees, restrictions, and outright censorship. The study recommends that the Nigerian constitution should be reviewed to eradicate ambiguities, multiple interpretations and provide adequate protection for freedom of expression and freedom and freedom of the press.

To buttress the above recommendation, Azeez (2009), posits that one of the major functions of the mass media is the provision of adequate information about ongoing or current events in society as a way of serving what the public need to know. The news media, in particular according to him serve this basic human needs by
providing information on what, who, why and where of a particular event, which the media consider worthy of relaying to the public. Indeed, it is possible to argue that there is no particular time the public is more in need of information from the media than when the safety, or even the survival of the public is threatened. In other words, the public is in greater need of more extensive information during a current danger in order to reduce uncertainty about the danger. No wonder then that the news media, particularly the broadcast media, become rallying point of the public when terrorists strike (Azeez, 2009).

It is in the light of these submissions that the Freedom of Information Act (2011) states in parts:

An Act to make public records and information more freely available, provide for public access to public record and information, protect public records and information to the extent consistent with the public interest and the protection of personal privacy, protect serving public serving officers from adverse consequences of disclosing certain kinds of official information without authorization and establish procedures for the achievement of those purposes and; for related matters

With the enactment of this law by the National Assembly and signed into law on 28th day of May, 2011 by the President, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan GCFR, it is hoped that access to relevant and adequate information would be readily available. Although information and knowledge exist in prodigious quantity in our country, they are unevenly distributed, and we often do not have the means to move relevant information to those who need it at the time they need it. The nation must take steps now to strengthen and organised these resources into coherent nationwide system, or it may soon face a form of information chaos which will sap the nation’s intellectual energy and weaken its educational structure.

Conflict Resolution Process through Access to Information

Webne-Behman (1998) suggests five steps that could be taken in this process. **Step 1: Set the Scene.** Make sure that people understand that the conflict may be a mutual problem, which may be best resolved through discussion and negotiation rather than through raw aggression. To buttress this option Agwai (2013) had this to say: “In my studies of conflict resolution, you must address the root causes. If you don’t, no amount of intimidation, actions can solve the problem”. He further hinted: “my advice is that we must all come together and talk. Book Haram is not a military problem. It is not a police problem”. (Lt. Gen Martin Luther Agwai was a former Chief of Defence Staff, Nigeria).
Step 2: Gather Information. Try to get the underlying interests, needs, and concerns. Ask for the other person’s viewpoint and confirm that you respect his/her opinions and need his/her cooperation to solve the problem. Try to understand his/her motivation and goals, and see how your actions may be affecting these. Also try to understand the conflict in object terms.

Step 3: Agree the Problem. You will need to agree the problem that you are trying to solve before you will find a mutually acceptable solution. Sometimes different people will see different but interlocking problems – if you can’t reach a common perception of the problem, then at the very best, you need to understand what the other person sees as the problem.

Step 4: Brainstorm Possible Solution. If everyone is going to feel satisfied with the resolution, it will help if everyone has had fair input in generating solutions. Brainstorm possible solutions, and be open to all ideas, including ones you never consider before.

Step 5: Negotiate Solution. By this stage, the conflict may be resolved. This, of course might be what President Goodluck Jonathan (GCFR) had in mind when in his Nationwide broadcast on October 1, 2013 to mark the nation’s 53rd independence anniversary, announced the setting up of a 13-Member Advisory Committee to establish modalities for a national conference aimed at resolving issues that currently cause friction in the polity (Vanguard, October 2, 2013).

In supporting the setting up of the national conference/dialogue, Uduaghan (2013) says “national dialogue will strengthen national unity”. He affirmed: “That is what I’m saying, the bottom line should be discussion. If an area said I don’t want to be part of Nigeria, it will be discussed and an agreement will be reached”, while Okurounmu (2013) was of the opinion that the “National Conference won’t break up Nigeria”. According to him, “we shall have a country where everybody will be happy and no one will feel cheated or marginalized”.

Another step that could be adopted in resolving conflict is “Information Repackaging” which serves as a saving tool and a systematic and selective sorter of useful information. It also serves as a means for the prompt delivery of relevant information and thus, it is like a map in the world of information overload (Mohsin, 2010); (Sethi, 2012) and (Engdahl, 2012).

Conclusion
As in any problem, conflicts contain substantiate, procedural and psychological dimensions to be negotiated, and that conflicts are normal experiences within an heterogeneous and complex society like Nigeria. They are also, to a large degree,
predictable and expectable situations that naturally arose as we go about managing complex and stressful projects in which we are significantly invested. Hence, free access to information and utilization is of paramount importance to national development and cohesion.

**Recommendation**

It is clear that information needs are felt at all levels of society, regardless of an individual’s location, social condition, or level of intellectual achievement. Therefore, to promote good government and ensure public service run smoothly without hindrance and that people in all parts of the country have free access to useful information, there must be some institutional machineries by which there is exchange of information between the government and the public.

New networks can be developed where required and existing ones can be extended to allow requisite information to be moved to individuals and groups, some of whom can scarcely be expected to travel to the established information resources available today.

Regular national broadcast and briefing from the government to the public to enable them aware of on-goings, developments and challenges will go a long way in dousing tensions and agitations.

When there are demands and agitations, listening to what is felt as well as said is very important. When we listen, we connect more deeply to our own needs and emotions, and to those of other people. Listening also strengthens us, inform us, and makes it easier for others to hear us when it’s our turn to speak.

Make conflict resolution the priority rather than wining or “being right”, maintaining and strengthening the relationship, rather than wining the argument should always be our priority.

If this is done, the nation’s ability to adapt to changing environmental, societal and political condition’s and to find solutions to major problems would be realized.

**References**


