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EVALUATING THE RIVERS STATE AMNESTY PROGRAMME: IMPACT ON CONFLICT REDUCTION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREAS

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Abstract: This study examined Rivers State amnesty programme and conflict reduction in Local Government Areas in Rivers State. Two specific objectives and two research questions guided the study. Descriptive survey and case study research designs were adopted for the study. The population of the study is made up of the 1,284,010 residents of Ogba/Ebgema/Ndoni Local Government, Ahoada East Local Government Area and Asari Toro Local Government Areas of Rivers State. The sample size for the study consists of 1560 respondents. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample size. Data used for this study were both primary and secondary data. A structured questionnaire items containing 10 items titled: "Rivers State Government Amnesty Programme and Conflict Reduction Questionnaire (RSGAPCRQ)" was used for data collection. The questionnaire was subjected to reliability of internal consistency using Cronbach alpha test for the two clusters of the instrument. The computation gave reliability indexes of 0.72 and 0.76 with mean reliability index of 0.74. This showed that the instrument was reliability. The data gotten from the field was first collated into tables to ease analysis. Descriptive statistics (simple percentage) was used to answer the research questions. The results showed that Rivers State amnesty programme improved political stability by improving youth bodies' politics and governance; reduction of violent political rivalry; increasing youth participation in politics; and improved peaceful functioning of different political groups in the areas. The results also showed that people are of the view that continuous youth empowerment, continuous women empowerment, continuous registration of youth bodies; and establishing database for unemployed persons can be used to prevent the reoccurrence of armed conflict in across the Local Government Areas in Rivers State. Based on the findings and conclusions drawn, it was recommended among others that Rivers State Government should establish a database for unemployed persons in the State and update such frequently. This would enable the government plan well how to empower the idle minds.

Keywords: conflict, political disagreement, amnesty, peace and stability

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Introduction

Conflict is an omnipresent trait of human societies. This is because conflict is inevitable in human life (Luthans, 1998). Prachi (2015) defined conflict as clashes between two or more people arising from difference in thoughts, understanding, interests, and even prejudice. Shonk (2020) opined that conflict has to with struggle or contest between two or more persons with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals. Conflict sometimes starts as small disagreement in belief, idea or goal but when not properly managed or resolved may escalate into larger conflict involving the use of arms such as in cult clashes, tribal, religion, political, and civil war.

Rivers State has experienced conflict consistent for more than two decades. The conflict has always been in the form of armed conflict, kidnapping for ransom, hostage takings, political thuggery, cult related violence and gun violence (The Fund for Peace, 2015; The Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta, 2017). Saale in Kuku (2012) observed that armed conflict or struggle involves confrontation with multi-national oil companies and the Federal Government. Many persons and businesses suffer in the hands of the kidnappers. This social milieu has remained unabated and is now a threat to the sustainability of economic activities in different parts of the nation (Chukuigwen & Albert, 2015).

The effects of conflicts on development especially at the local government level cannot be underestimated. This is because development can only thrive in a peaceful environment. Energy and human resources meant for development are dissipated during conflicts. Resources that should have been used in providing much needed goods and services for the people were used in settling the conflicts and creating an atmosphere peace. Cooperation, that were highly desirable for development becomes absent among the people since hatred, mistrust, and hostility reigned in the community.

In a bid to arrest the ugly situation arising from conflicts, various levels of governments and agencies of the state have applied a number of strategies to bring an end to conflicts especially armed ones. Amnesty is defined as "A pardon extended by the government to a group or class of persons, usually for a political offense; It is an act by which sovereign power, officially forgives certain classes of persons who are subject to trial but have not yet been convicted". It includes; more than pardon, in as much as it obliterates all legal remembrance of the offense. Amnesty is increasingly used to express "freedom" and the time when prisoners can go free. Amnesties which in the United Kingdom may be granted by the crown or by an act of parliament, were formerly given during coronations and similar occasions, but are chiefly exercised toward associations of political criminals, and are sometimes granted absolutely, though more frequently there are certain specified exceptions (Omotoriogun, 2017). Tobor and Odubo (2017) noted that amnesty programme in Nigeria was introduced in 2009 by the Federal government to curb violence in the Niger Delta region by engaging the militants. The Rivers State Government also in the past, had youth bodies of various communities banned, their executives were dissolved and reconstituted. The State Government even went ahead to suspend or changed some of the local government chairmen at various times in a bid to forestall insecurity that may emanate from unresolved conflicts. However, these strategies can only be effective if positively embraced by actors in the conflict.

Rivers State in recent times following the realignment of political interests that characterized fall out of political actors due to misunderstanding between politicians and their sponsors as seen in People Democratic Party (PDP) who won at the Rivers State level and All Progressive Congress (APC) at the federal level, has begun to see some ex-militants and cultists who previously have been contented with the amnesty programme of both the Federal Government and Rivers State government, changing affiliation. This change in affiliation has become a salient

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factor relevant to anyone studying conflict within Rivers State especially as it is capable of spurring conflicts among various loyalists of different political actors. Cult violence may intensify because many cultists are reportedly depended on the goodwill and evil patronages of politicians, who either employ them as informal security or use them to intimidate or potentially kill their opponents (The Fund for Peace, 2016). This notwithstanding the amnesty programmes remains; therefore, the need to assess whether the amnesty programme mitigate conflict among loyalists of political rivals in Rivers State cannot be overemphasized.

A plethora of studies have been conducted to examine one aspect of amnesty granted to armed conflicts' actors or the other. Ajibola (2015) conducted a study on Nigeria's amnesty program: the role of empowerment in achieving peace and development in post-conflict Niger Delta. The results revealed that empowerment of youths contribute significantly to peace and development by diverting their minds from crimes. Ernest and Ikelegbe (2016) conducted another study on amnesty programme in Nigeria: The impact and challenges in the post conflict Niger Delta region. The results showed that amnesty programme's empowering activities impacted on the post conflict era peace in the region. Okonofua (2016) conducted another study to examine the Niger Delta amnesty program: the challenges of the transitioning from peace settlements to long-term peace. The results showed that continuous engagement of youths through economic empowerment programmes broker long-term peace. Tobor and Odubo (2017) also conducted a study on amnesty programme as a peace-building initiative in Niger Delta, Nigeria. The results showed that post amnesty programme experienced peace in the Niger Delta. However, none of these earlier studies to the best of the researcher's knowledge has concentrated on the amnesty programme of the Rivers State government especially as granted to armed conflicts' and conflict reduction in the State. Consequently, the present study was conceived to fill this gap in existing literature.

Statement of the Problem

Peace and unity exist when people live in harmony and co-existence. However, since the realignment of political interests that characterized fall out of political actors due to misunderstanding between politicians and their sponsors as seen in People Democratic Party (PDP) who won at the Rivers State level. In other words, the State is characterized by avoidable political conflicts which are capable of undermining development. The Federal Government interventionist plan has failed to yield the desired political peace and stability.

There is widespread fear that the conflict can affect the safety of the citizens and the economic outlook of the State. With an increasingly volatile operating political environment, there have been reports of some persons being targeted by political thugs, or withdrawing altogether, and deterring new investors. The negative implications of this scenario on the Rivers State economy and unemployment can be seen in the difficulty with which many citizens are unable to meet basic livelihoods (God'swill, Victor, & Monday, 2018). In a recent statement by the Rivers State Investment Forum, they publically urged the government to address the insecurity which they said drives away investments to other states. It is in view of the foregoing problems that the researcher deems it fit to investigate the link between Rivers State Amnesty programme and conflict reduction in Local Government Areas.

Aim and Objectives of the study

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between Rivers State amnesty programme and conflict reduction in Local Government Areas in Rivers State. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

i. Determine the ways by which the Rivers State Amnesty Programme has improved on the political stability around the State.

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ii. Ascertain the peoples' perception on how Rivers State government can prevent the reoccurrence of armed conflict in the State.

Research Questions

i. In what ways has the Rivers State Amnesty Programme improve on the political stability of the State?

ii. What is the peoples' perception on how Rivers State government can prevent the reoccurrence of armed conflict in Rivers State?

Methodology and Research Settings

In this study, both the descriptive survey and case study research designs were adopted. This type of design is relevant because this research involved both the qualitative and quantitative approach of collecting the indigenous people's opinion on the effectiveness of the amnesty programme of the Rivers State Government in conflict reduction. It is deemed case study because it focused on collecting data that are related to the Rivers State amnesty programme that was granted to armed conflict actors arising from political misunderstanding in selected Local Government Areas in the State. According to Baxter and Jack (2008), case study empowers researcher to study a given phenomenon within its defined context. Consequently, the researcher used this design to collect quantitative and qualitative data in order to examine Amnesty Programme that was granted to armed conflict actors within Ogba/Ebgema/Ndoni Local Government, Ahoada East Local Government Area and Asari Toro Local Government Areas of Rivers State. This research designed empowered the researcher to collect data from several stakeholders who were directly or indirectly affected by the armed conflict which necessitated the amnesty on the situation of things.

The population of the study is made up of the 1,284,010 residents of Ogba/Ebgema/Ndoni Local Government, Ahoada East Local Government Area and Asari Toro Local Government Areas of Rivers State (NPC, 2019). The sample size for the study consists of 1560 respondents. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the 1560 persons from the main towns and villages that were most effected by armed conflicts in the study area at 120 per community. These 120 persons selected from each community consisted mostly household-heads and older and matured persons able to understand the subject matter and been able to communicate effectively, having witnessed the crises.

The sample was drawn using purposive sampling technique since the respondents must meet certain characteristics in order to be included as part of the study. The criteria for inclusion into the sample are: (1) the respondent is an indigene of the local government area, (2) the respondent lived in any main towns and villages of the local government area from 2012 to 2023, (3) the respondent must have experienced the armed conflicts emanating from political disagreement within the environment and still lives within the Local Government Area, and (4), the respondent may be one of the repented armed actor. It is pertinent to reiterate here that the choice for Local Government Areas is based on the fact that armed conflicts devastated the entire local government areas due to political actors' conflicts.

Data used for this study were both primary and secondary data. The primary data was gathered through the administration of questionnaire to respondents and through a focus group interviews that involved all the village heads in the local government areas used for the study. Summary of responses from the focus group interviews based on the qualitative approach to the study were used to validate some of the outcome of the data analyzed based on the quantitative approach. The secondary data were collected from documented that were evidences in

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picture format and existing literature. The secondary data in picture form were used to validate the responses of the village heads and those gotten through the administration of the questionnaire items.

A researcher's designed semi structured interview questions were used for the interaction between the researcher and the village heads. A structured questionnaire items containing 10 items titled: "Rivers State Government Amnesty Programme and Conflict Reduction Questionnaire (RSGAPCRQ)" was used for data collection. The questionnaire responses were structured based on four points rating scales of: Strongly Agreed (4) Agreed (3) Disagreed (2), and (1) Strongly Disagreed (SD).

The instruments designed for the study were given to a lecturer of educational measurement and evaluation course and a specialist in Peace and Conflict Resolution from the Faulty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt for face validation. Their corrections were taken into consideration before administering the final designed instruments.

The questionnaire was subjected to reliability of internal consistency with data obtained from 15 respondents from Ahoada West Local Government Area which was also once engulfed with armed conflict crisis but not part of this study. The following reliability indexes of the internal consistency was obtained using Cronbach alpha test for the two clusters of the instruments: 0.72 and 0.76 with mean reliability index of 0.74. This showed that the instrument was reliability.

The data gotten from the field was first collated into tables to ease analysis. Descriptive statistics (simple percentage) was used to answer the research questions which were framed into the research instruments modelled after the four-point likert scale of SA, A, D and SD. The secondary data collected were coded for interpretation based on emerging pattern recognition and themes of the secondary sources. According to Boyatzis (1998), pattern recognition relies on the inherent ability of the researcher to decipher patterns from seemingly random information. Consequently, the researcher decipher patterns based on the key words such as; killings during elections process, cultists conflicts, kidnapping and other form of arm activities in Local Government Areas by non-state actors evidence in presented documents provided by respondents or sourced from available literature (newspaper, magazines and other prints). **Results**

Research Question 1: In what ways has the Rivers State Amnesty Programme improve on the political stability of the State?

Table 1: Political stability in the State after the implementation of Rivers State Amnesty Programme

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Total	%
1.	The disarmament of armed actors has improved youth bodies politics and governance within Local Government Areas.	108	150	110	15	383	24.81
3.	The disarmament of armed youths has reduced violent political rivalry within Local Government Areas	100	187	30	78	395	25.58
4.	Unconditional pardon has increased youth participation in the political structures of Local Government Areas without fear of being attacked.	111	152	96	25	384	24.87
5.	Rehabilitation programme offered improved the peaceful functioning of different political groups in Local Government Areas.	128	142	86	26	382	24.74
	Grand Total	447	631	322	144	1544	

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Percentage	28.95	40.87	20.86	9.32	100%

Source: Researcher's fieldwork and analysis, 2024

Research Question 2: What is the peoples' perception on how Rivers State government can prevent the reoccurrence of armed conflict in Rivers State?

Table 2: Perception on how Rivers State government can prevent the reoccurrence of armed conflict in the State

S/N	Approaches/Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Continuous youth Empowerment	445	28.82
2.	Continuous women Empowerment	307	19.88
3.	Payment of stipends to unemployed youth	115	8
4.	Continuous registration of youth bodies	345	22.35
5.	Establishing database for unemployed persons	332	21.50
	Total	1544	100%

Source: Researcher's fieldwork and analysis, 2024

Interpretation of Data

Table 1 reveals that 24.81% of the responses were for disarmament of armed actors has improved youth bodies politics and governance in the areas; 25.58% for disarmament of armed youths has reduced violent political rivalry within the areas; 24.87% for unconditional pardon has increased youth participation in the political structures in the areas; and 24.74% for rehabilitation programme offered improved the peaceful functioning of different political groups of the area.

In table 2 above, 28.82% of the respondents believed that Rivers State government can prevent the reoccurrence of armed conflict in Local Government Areas through continuous youth empowerment programme. 19.88% said it is through continuous women empowerment programme; 22. 35% believed it is through continuous registration of youth bodies; and 21.5% believed it is best done through establishing database for unemployed person. The unpopular opinion was that of 8% of the respondents who believed stopping reoccurrence of the menace should be done through payment of stipends to unemployed youth.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study are discussed under each of the specific objectives they addressed as follows:

Ways by which the Rivers State Amnesty Programme improved on the political stability of Local Government Areas:

The results related to this aspect of the study show that Rivers State amnesty programme improved political stability by improving youth bodies politics and governance; reduction of violent political rivalry; increasing youth participation in politics; and improved peaceful functioning of different political groups in the area. This is true considering the smooth conduct of the 2019 and 2023 general elections were various youth bodies stayed clear of activities of political thugery, allowing freedom of political association, ensuring political rivalry existed without conflict, ensuring smooth functioning of youth bodies in mobilizing youth for election and allowing groups to express their political interest without being intimidated in the Local Government Areas. It is worth noting that there is no empirical evidence to the best of the researcher's knowledge on the state of political stability after implementation of amnesty programme, hence, the difficulty in supporting the findings in this study.

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Peoples' perception on how Rivers State government can prevent the reoccurrence of armed conflict in Rivers State

The results shows that people are of the view that continuous youth empowerment, continuous women empowerment, continuous registration of youth bodies; and establishing database for unemployed persons can be used to prevent the reoccurrence of armed conflict in across the Local Government Areas in Rivers State. Evidence from existing literature showed that the Rivers State government has taken a bold step to empower the youth by allowing them to be part of the Security Planning and Advisory Committee (SPAC) initiative while they receive little financial support. However, much still needs to be done based on the people's perceived ways of stopping the reoccurrence of armed conflicts in area of the study.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher hereby concludes that the various approaches and strategies by the Rivers State Government's Amnesty Programme has proved to be very effective in helping to reduce conflicts and insecurity in the Local Government Areas as this has brought about relative peace, eliminate cultism, reduce political thurgery and kidnapping, business activities and other social activities has been boosted, people can now walk about without fear of the unknown.

It can also be concluded that the unconditional pardon and disarmament phases of the Rivers State Government Amnesty Programme were effective in promoting peace within the local government areas. This is because the effectiveness of these strategies eliminating visible cultism, political thugery, kidnapping of innocent persons and ensure the smooth running of socio-economic activities within the local government. It is important also not to make the youth idle at any time because only when all minds are busy through engagement in socioeconomic activities as well as internal security can be guarantee the freedom of people to perform their businesses without any form of intimidation. In addition, people in political position and with political ambition need to be given orientation to see the process as a game and not as a 'do or die' affair. This will discourage them from thinking of recruiting youth for political violence. Therefore, it can be concluded that until issues such as those enumerated within this conclusion are addressed the sustenance of peace and internal security within Local Government Areas may be in jeopardy.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are put forward for implementation:

1. Rivers State Government should establish a database for unemployed persons in the State and update such frequently. This would enable the government plan well how to empower the idle minds.

2. Rivers State government should engage youth bodies from time to time on the need for peace and security for sustainable development.

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