

Empowering Traditional Leaders for Sustainable Peace-building in Bekwarra LGA of Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the critical role of traditional leaders in fostering sustainable peace in Bekwarra Local Government Area (LGA) of Northern Cross River State, Nigeria. Recognising the unique position and influence these leaders hold within their communities, the research aims to understand how their empowerment can contribute to long-term peacebuilding efforts in a local government characterised by communal conflicts. Through a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with community leaders and stakeholders and quantitative surveys of local residents, the study identifies the mechanisms through which traditional leaders can effectively mediate conflicts, mobilise community resources for peace, and facilitate dialogue among conflicting parties. The findings highlight the importance of incorporating indigenous knowledge systems and leadership structures into formal peacebuilding processes. Additionally, the research underscores the need for capacity building and support for traditional leaders to enhance their conflict resolution skills, legitimacy, and ability to collaborate with governmental and non-governmental organisations in peace initiatives. By situating traditional leaders at the heart of peacebuilding strategies, this study contributes to a growing body of literature advocating for a more localised and culturally sensitive approach to conflict resolution and peace maintenance. The implications of this research are significant, suggesting that empowering traditional leaders can lead to more resilient and peaceful communities, not only in Bekwarra LGA but also in other conflict-prone areas of Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords: Traditional, Leaders, Sustainable, Peace-building, Bekwarra

Introduction

Globally, the role of traditional leaders in peace building and conflict resolution has garnered significant attention as it intersects with the broader goals of sustainable development and community resilience. The United Nations, through its various agencies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 16, emphasises the importance of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable institutions at all levels (United Nations, 2015). The global discourse acknowledges the unique position of traditional leaders who, rooted in their communities, possess the authority and respect needed to mediate conflicts, foster community cohesion, and facilitate dialogues that lead to sustainable peace

(Mac Ginty, 2015).

In Africa, the African Union's Agenda 2063 outlines a vision for an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena. This vision recognises the pivotal role of African cultures and heritages, and, by extension, traditional leadership systems, in achieving peace and stability across the continent. Studies across various African contexts have shown how traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution and leadership play a crucial role in peacebuilding efforts. For example, in Ethiopia and Somalia, the Gadaa and Xeer systems, respectively, serve not only as traditional governance systems but also as effective means for conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Abbink, 2011; Farah & Lewis, 1993).

Nigeria, with its complex mosaic of ethnicities, languages, and cultures, presents a unique context where traditional leadership plays a vital role in governance and conflict resolution. The country has faced numerous challenges, ranging from ethnic conflicts to religious insurgencies, which have threatened its unity and development. In this context, traditional leaders, who are deeply entrenched in the sociocultural fabric of their communities, emerge as critical actors in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Their role is particularly obvious in rural areas, where the state's presence is minimal and communities predominantly rely on traditional systems of governance.

Bekwarra Local Government Area (LGA) in Northern Cross River State is a microcosm of Nigeria's broader challenges and opportunities in peacebuilding. The area has experienced its share of communal conflicts, often rooted in land disputes, political tensions, and ethnic rivalries. Traditional leaders in Bekwarra, including chiefs and clan heads, have historically played a role in mediating these conflicts, leveraging their authority, local knowledge, and moral sway to negotiate peace agreements and foster reconciliation (Agbor, 2019).

Empowering these traditional leaders through capacity building, recognition in formal governance structures, and support in implementing community-based peace initiatives can significantly enhance sustainable peacebuilding in Bekwarra. This approach aligns with the broader movement towards hybrid peace governance models, which advocate for integrating traditional conflict resolution mechanisms with formal peacebuilding efforts to achieve lasting peace (MacGinty and Richmond, 2013).

Globally, the role of traditional leadership in peacebuilding and conflict resolution has been increasingly acknowledged as pivotal. Various scholars and international bodies have pointed out the unique position of traditional leaders in maintaining peace within communities. For instance, the United Nations has

emphasised the significance of engaging local and traditional practices in peacebuilding efforts to ensure sustainability and cultural sensitivity (United Nations, 2020). Despite the global recognition of their roles, traditional leaders often face challenges related to lack of formal recognition, limited resources, and insufficient capacity building, which hinder their effectiveness in sustaining peace (Mac Ginty, 2015).

In Africa, the contribution of traditional leaders to peacebuilding cannot be overstated. Their deep-rooted authority and profound understanding of their communities place them in a unique position to mediate conflicts and foster reconciliation. However, the African continent, with its diverse cultures and histories, presents complex challenges that affect the capacity of traditional leaders to act effectively. Studies have shown that, in many African countries, the integration of traditional leadership in formal peacebuilding processes remains minimal, and their potential is underutilised due to political, social, and economic barriers (Murithi, 2009; Boege, 2006).

In Nigeria, the context of peacebuilding and the role of traditional leaders exhibit both unique challenges and opportunities. The country's rich ethnic diversity and complex history of communal conflicts necessitate localised approaches to peacebuilding. The Bekwarra Local Government Area (LGA) in Northern Cross River State exemplifies a region where empowering traditional leaders could significantly impact sustainable peace efforts. Traditional leaders in Bekwarra, like in many parts of Nigeria, are deeply respected and are custodians of customs and traditions. However, their potential in peacebuilding has been inadequately leveraged due to factors such as lack of formal recognition in the national peacebuilding framework, insufficient capacity building, and challenges in collaborating with modern state institutions (Ukiwo, 2007; Ibrahim, 2016).

The disconnect between traditional peacebuilding mechanisms and modern

state-led efforts has often resulted in ineffective peace processes that fail to address the root causes of conflicts or to achieve sustainable peace. This situation underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that empowers traditional leaders, enhancing their capabilities to mediate conflicts effectively and to collaborate with government institutions and non-governmental organisations in peacebuilding initiatives. Therefore, there is a pressing need to explore how the empowerment of traditional leaders can contribute to sustainable peacebuilding efforts. This region, Bekwarra, which is characterised by its rich cultural heritage and traditional governance systems, has faced various challenges that undermine peace and development, including communal conflicts, resource-based disputes, and the marginalisation of indigenous governance systems in the face of modern state structures and interventions (Adejumobi, 2018; Okoro, 2018).

Despite the critical role traditional leaders could play in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the systematic empowerment strategies for these leaders within the Bekwarra context. Empowerment in this sense encompasses capacity building, legal recognition, and the integration of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms into the formal peacebuilding processes (Bello, 2019; Ukeje & Ibeanu, 2001). The existing research often overlooks the nuanced understanding of traditional leadership dynamics in Bekwarra and how these can be leveraged for more effective, sustainable peacebuilding outcomes (Nwankwo, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

One relevant theory that can be applied to the study of empowering traditional leaders for sustainable peacebuilding in Bekwarra LGA in Northern Cross River State, Nigeria, is the "Social Identity Theory" (SIT). This theory, initially developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s, provides a robust framework for understanding how social identities

influence group behaviour and intergroup relations, which are critical aspects of peacebuilding efforts in ethnically diverse and conflict-affected areas like Bekwarra LGA.

SIT suggests that an individual's self-concept is partly derived from perceived membership in social groups, such as ethnic, religious, or cultural communities. This identification can significantly influence individuals' attitudes and behaviours towards members of their own group (ingroup) and those of other groups (outgroups).

Henri Tajfel and John Turner created the Social Identity Theory (SIT), which is based on a number of fundamental presumptions about how people see themselves and other people in social contexts. These assumptions are fundamental to understanding how social identities influence group behaviour and intergroup relations:

Individuals categorise themselves and others into various social groups (e.g., ethnic, national, religious, etc.). These categorizations not only simplify the social world but also form the basis for social identities.

Individuals associate themselves with certain groups (ingroups) and, through this identification, adopt the identity of the group. This process includes assimilating the group's norms, values, and behaviours into their self-concept.

After identifying with a group, individuals compare their group with other groups (outgroups). To maintain a positive social identity, we are making this comparison. The positive distinctiveness of the ingroup relative to outgroups is crucial for self-esteem.

Members of a group seek to achieve and maintain a positive self-concept. This leads to a bias in favour of the ingroup (ingroup favouritism) and can result in discrimination against or negative attitudes towards outgroups (outgroup derogation) to enhance the ingroup's status.

The theory posits that differences in social status, the legitimacy of status differences, and the permeability of group

boundaries influence intergroup behavior. When group status differences are perceived as illegitimate or unstable and group boundaries are perceived as impermeable (i.e., individuals cannot move from one group to another), it can lead to intergroup conflict.

The salience of social identities is context-dependent. Depending on the situation, different social identities (e.g., ethnic, professional, or gender) may become more prominent, influencing behaviour and intergroup relations accordingly.

The basic assumptions of Social Identity Theory highlight the significance of group memberships in shaping individuals' self-concepts, attitudes, and behaviors. This framework is particularly useful in understanding the dynamics of intergroup relations, including conflict and cooperation, making it a valuable tool for analysing and addressing social issues across diverse contexts.

Applying SIT to peacebuilding in Bekwarra LGA involves recognising and leveraging the roles that traditional leaders play in shaping social identities and intergroup dynamics. Traditional leaders, deeply rooted in the social fabric of their communities, can be instrumental in fostering a sense of inclusive identity that transcends ethnic or communal lines, which is crucial for sustainable peace.

By applying the Social Identity Theory within the context of Bekwarra LGA's

peacebuilding efforts, the role of traditional leaders can be strategically enhanced to cultivate a more cohesive and peaceful community. This approach not only acknowledges the significance of identity in conflict dynamics but also leverages it towards building sustainable peace.

Methodology

This is a survey involving the use of a set of questionnaire as instruments of data collection. The population of the study includes the entire Bekwarra Local Government Area residents, which is the geographical scope of the study. According to the 2006 Nigerian census, the Bekwarra population is approximately 105,822 (NPC, 2006) However, more recent estimates put their population at around 160,700 (NPC, 2022) web. Hence, the study population will be 160,700.

A sample size of 400 was adopted using the Slovia formula with the assumption of a 5 percent expected margin of error and a 95 percent confidence interval. However, only 400 community, village and traditional elders were adequately captured for the study. The formula was given as:

$$n_0 = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

n is the sample size without bearing in mind the finite population correction factor; e = 0.05; and N is the total number of observations.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: What are the current roles and capacities of traditional leaders in peacebuilding within Bekwarra LGA?

| Actions | Agreement Frequency/percentage | Undecided Frequency/percentage | Disagreement Frequency/Percentage |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Traditional leaders possess the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively engage in peacebuilding activities within the community. | 188 54.7% | 52 15.1% | 104 30.2% |
| The involvement of traditional leaders in peacebuilding significantly contributes to the reduction of communal conflicts in Bekwarra LGA. | 215(62.5%) | 41(12%) | 88 (25.6%) |
| Traditional leaders collaborate effectively with local government officials and NGOs to promote peace and reconciliation in Bekwarra LGA. | 206 60% | 41 12% | 97 28.2% |
| The youth in Bekwarra LGA feel represented and included in peacebuilding initiatives led by traditional leaders. | 155 45.1% | 78 22.7% | 111 32.3% |

Source: Field survey, 2024

Based on the obtained data regarding the roles and capacities of traditional leaders in peacebuilding within Bekwarra Local Government Area (LGA), and how these leaders are perceived in their efforts to maintain peace and resolve conflicts. The data revealed responses in terms of agreement, undecided, and disagreement percentages for key actions associated with traditional leaders' peacebuilding roles.

Responses on traditional leaders' knowledge and skills revealed A majority (54.7%) of respondents agree that traditional leaders possess the necessary knowledge and skills to engage in peacebuilding activities, indicating a strong foundation for leadership in peace efforts. While a smaller segment (15.1%) remains neutral, possibly suggesting some uncertainty or lack of visibility regarding

these skills and 30.2% disagree, highlighting a significant portion of the community that perceives a gap in traditional leaders' capabilities or effectiveness in peacebuilding.

Responses on traditional leaders contribution to conflict reduction revealed, a larger majority (62.5%) recognizes the significant contribution of traditional leaders to the reduction of communal conflicts, suggesting that their involvement is valued and deemed impactful. While a small portion (12%) is undecided, indicating some level of uncertainty about the extent of this contribution, and 25.6% disagreeing, there's a notable concern or perception that their contribution could be improved or is not sufficient.

Responses on collaboration with Local Government and NGOs revealed 60% of

respondents agree that there is effective collaboration, showcasing a positive view of traditional leaders working alongside other entities for peace and reconciliation, again, 12% are undecided, reflecting uncertainty or a lack of knowledge about these collaborative efforts and 28.2% disagree, pointing towards a perceived need for improvement in collaboration or communication about these efforts.

Responses on youth inclusion in peacebuilding initiatives revealed that less than half (45.1%) agree that youth feel represented and included, suggesting that while there is some level of inclusion, there is significant room for improvement, while

a relatively high percentage (22.7%) is undecided, indicating a substantial uncertainty or variability in how youth inclusion is perceived and 32.3% disagree, emphasizing concerns about the adequacy of youth engagement and representation in peacebuilding processes.

Overall, while the foundation for effective peacebuilding by traditional leaders in Bekwarra LGA is strong, concerted efforts to address the identified gaps and enhance inclusivity, collaboration, and capacity can further solidify their role and effectiveness in maintaining peace and resolving conflicts within the community.

Table 2: How can traditional leaders be effectively empowered (through training, resources, legal frameworks, etc.) to play a more significant role in sustainable peacebuilding in Bekwarra LGA?

| Characterisation | Agreement Frequency/percentage | Undecided Frequency/percentage | Disagreement Frequency/Percentage |
|---|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Traditional leaders receiving conflict resolution and peacebuilding training will significantly improve their effectiveness in sustaining peace in Bekwarra LGA | 223 64.8% | 54 15.7% | 67 19.5% |
| Providing traditional leaders with the necessary resources (e.g., financial support, communication tools) is crucial for their active participation in peacebuilding initiatives. | 199 57.8% | 18 5.2% | 127 37% |
| Involving traditional leaders in the decision-making processes related to peacebuilding projects will lead to more sustainable peace efforts in Bekwarra LGA conflicts | 205 59.6% | 54 15.7% | 85 24.7% |
| Encouraging collaboration between traditional leaders, the government, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is key to achieving lasting peace in Bekwarra LGA. | 225 65.4% | 44 12.8% | 75 21.8% |
| Establishing clear legal frameworks that recognize and empower traditional leaders' roles in peacebuilding will enhance their contributions to peace in Bekwarra LGA. | 215 62.5% | 46 13.4% | 83 24.1% |

Source: Field survey, 2024

Analysis of Survey on Empowering Traditional Leaders for Sustainable Peacebuilding in Bekwarra LGA

The survey aimed to gauge community opinions on various strategies for

empowering traditional leaders to play a more significant role in sustainable peacebuilding in Bekwarra LGA. The results indicate a general agreement across all propositions, with the highest level of

agreement focusing on the need for collaboration between traditional leaders, the government, and NGOs (65.4% agreement), and the importance of providing conflict resolution and peacebuilding training to traditional leaders (64.8% agreement). These areas are perceived as critical leverage points for enhancing the effectiveness of traditional leaders in peacebuilding efforts.

The strong agreement (64.8%) on the importance of training and education in conflict resolution and peacebuilding for traditional leaders underscores the recognition of capacity building as foundational to effective leadership in peace processes. The relatively low disagreement rate (19.5%) suggests a broad consensus on this approach.

Opinions on providing traditional leaders with necessary resources showed a majority in agreement (57.8%), though with a notably higher disagreement rate (37%) compared to other areas. This indicates a significant concern or skepticism about resource allocation, perhaps reflecting concerns about misuse, accountability, or prioritization.

The proposition regarding the involvement of traditional leaders in decision-making processes related to peacebuilding projects received a 59.6% agreement rate. This reflects a strong belief in the importance of including traditional leaders in planning and executing peace initiatives, recognizing their influence and knowledge of local contexts.

The highest agreement rate (65.4%) was observed for the statement on encouraging collaboration between traditional leaders, government, and NGOs. This highlights a widely held view that partnership and cooperative efforts are essential for achieving lasting peace, acknowledging that multi-stakeholder engagement enriches peacebuilding processes.

Establishing clear legal frameworks that empower traditional leaders in peacebuilding was supported by 62.5% of respondents, indicating a strong consensus on the need for formal recognition and empowerment of traditional leaders' roles.

The legal acknowledgment is seen as a crucial step in legitimizing and enhancing their contributions to peace efforts.

The survey results from Bekwarra LGA indicate a clear community consensus on the importance of empowering traditional leaders through training, resources, legal frameworks, and collaborative efforts for sustainable peacebuilding. The relatively high agreement rates across all areas suggest a broad acknowledgment of the potential impact of traditional leaders in peace processes when adequately supported. However, the notable disagreement, especially concerning the provision of resources, points to underlying concerns that need to be addressed, such as ensuring transparency, accountability, and effective use of resources. Moving forward, stakeholders in Bekwarra LGA's peacebuilding efforts should prioritize these areas, focusing on capacity building, inclusive decision-making processes, and multi-stakeholder collaborations, while also addressing concerns related to resource allocation to optimize the contributions of traditional leaders to lasting peace.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of survey data regarding the roles and capacities of traditional leaders in peacebuilding within Bekwarra LGA provides insightful perspectives on their current involvement and areas for enhancement. The findings revealed a generally positive view of traditional leaders' contributions to peace efforts, though they also highlighted critical areas needing attention to optimise their effectiveness and impact.

The majority agreement (54.7%) on traditional leaders possessing the necessary knowledge and skills for peacebuilding suggests a foundational respect for and confidence in their capabilities. However, the significant disagreement (30.2%) points towards a perceived gap by a considerable portion of the community. This discrepancy underscores the importance of continuous capacity building and transparent demonstration of skills to build broader confidence in their abilities.

The data reflects a strong community belief (62.5% agreement) in the traditional leaders' contributions to reducing communal conflicts. This underscores their pivotal role in maintaining peace and stability. The presence of disagreement (25.6%), however, signals a need for traditional leaders to perhaps communicate more effectively about their contributions or enhance their strategies in conflict resolution to address the concerns of the dissenting population.

With 60% agreeing on effective collaboration between traditional leaders and external bodies, it's evident that there is a positive perception of inter-organisational cooperation. The 28.2% disagreement, however, highlights a call for improving these collaborations or enhancing visibility around such efforts to ensure broader community acknowledgment and support.

The less than half agreement (45.1%) regarding youth feeling represented in peace initiatives signals a critical area for improvement. Youth engagement and representation are essential for sustainable peacebuilding, suggesting that traditional leaders need to develop more inclusive strategies that actively involve younger demographics.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The survey data from Bekwarra LGA highlights a generally positive perception of traditional leaders in peacebuilding, with notable areas for improvement. By addressing the identified gaps especially in capacity building, communication, collaboration, and inclusivity traditional leaders can enhance their effectiveness and impact in fostering sustainable peace within the community. These efforts require a concerted approach, involving not just the traditional leaders themselves but also local government, NGOs, and the community at large, including its youth.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proffered

- i. There's a clear need for ongoing training and development programmes for traditional leaders to

enhance their peacebuilding knowledge and skills. Addressing this can help diminish the perceived gaps and build wider community trust in their capabilities.

- ii. Traditional leaders should seek to improve how they communicate their contributions and successes in peacebuilding to the community. Greater transparency and more effective communication strategies could reduce skepticism and build stronger community support.
- iii. Efforts should be made to not only enhance collaboration between traditional leaders, local government, and NGOs but also to make these partnerships more visible to the community. This can help address perceptions of ineffective collaboration and underscore collective efforts in peacebuilding.
- iv. Developing targeted initiatives to involve youth more actively in peacebuilding processes is crucial. This could involve establishing youth councils, mentorship programmes, and including youth voices in decision-making processes related to peace initiatives.

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