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Perceived Impact of Conflicts and Survival of Children in Benue State - Nigeria: The Role of Faith-Based Organisations

Favour C. Uroko[1]

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Abstract

This article examines children as victims of violence in Benue State, Nigeria. The conflict is primarily said to be driven by the struggle for water, farmland and grazing areas in the state. Children no doubt have been at the receiving end in this escalating conflict. The conflict has forced thousands of children to be displaced and placed in internally displaced people camps. It was discovered that there is a high level of humanitarian crises due to the reported cases of physical and sexual abuse of children, child trafficking, child prostitution, and the use of displaced children for stealing from unsuspecting individuals and houses. Many of the victims go silent due to the threat of relocation, ejection or eviction from the IDP camp by the aggressors. There are diversions and hoarding of relief materials and food meant for the children. This study engages FBOs towards finding lasting solutions to the plight of children in the various IDP camps in Benue State. This is because a knowledge gap exists on the economic and social roles of FBOs in the present humanitarian crisis in Benue State. The phenomenological method of research was employed.

1. Introduction

Conflicts emanate in the pursuit of incompatible goals and needs. In Benue State- Nigeria, violent confrontations between farmers and Fulani herders have become a defining feature of inter-group relations (Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2019). It is believed that this confrontation is fuelled by environmental degradation, Boko Haram insurgency and climatic change. The conflicts between Fulani herdsmen and farmers in Benue state have affected the state politically, economically, and socio-culturally and infrastructure-wise. The Fulani herdsmen are the primary pastoral group in Nigeria have a population of probably 15.3 million (Majekodunmi, Fajinmi, Dongkum, Shaw, &

[1] *Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Faculty Of The Social Sciences- University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.*
Email: favour.uroko@unn.edu.ng

Welburn, 2014). Benue state is majorly made up of Tiv, Idoma, Igede, and Etulo, among others. Their major means of survival is agriculture. The article assesses the impact of the religious conflicts between the Benue indigenes and the Hausa and Fulani population and its impacts on the lives of the children during and after the conflicts.

Benue State has been an enclave that has come under serious claims by a significant number of Fulani inhabitants. The state which was created on 3rd February 1976 has the Tiv, Idoma, Igede, Etilo, Jukun, and Hausa. The Tiv and the Jukun have been very hostile to themselves, due to fighting over geographical landmass. The Tiv were also engaged in a violent conflict with the Jukun in 2001 over politics and control of land and sadly Zaki Biam in Benue State was destroyed by soldiers in retaliation for the kidnapping and killing of their colleagues (Ukiwo, 1999). Scholars attested that the rampaging soldiers supported the Jukun against the Tiv people (Human Rights Watch, 2019). More than 300 children and women were killed (Vanguard, 2011; Ejembi, 2019).

One would think that the dark days for Benue were over, however from 2015-2018, there have been bloodshed and destruction of property. These conflicts have been between the Benue indigenes and the Fulani pastoralists or herdsmen (Majekodunmi, Fajinmi, Dongkum, Shaw, & Welburn, 2014) . According to Amnesty International, over 1,105 people have lost their lives from 1 January 2018 to 30 June 2018. The report of Amnesty International also reveals that Benue recorded the highest number of killings in the middle belt region with over 378 fatalities, followed by Plateau with 340 victims (Relief Web, 2018). Many people in the middle belt of Nigeria see the conflicts affecting them as a pogrom of ethnic and religious cleansing designed to dispossess them of their lands (Relief, 2018). Scholars reveal that the conflicts have a religious undertone. Abdulrazak and Ibrahim (2013) indict religious institutions for failing to call their followers to order. It could be said that religion and ethnicity compounded the Fulani herdsmen and the Benue farmers' conflicts. Gbaka (2014) mentioned that the increase in violent clashes in Benue State is mostly due to the influx of herdsmen and their cattle from Niger, Cameroon and Chad through the northeast to the middle belt of Nigeria, of which Benue state is part and parcel. Little wonder, the rate at which the herdsmen kill and lack of sympathy in the destruction of property and maiming of children born and unborn.

From several instances, herdsmen often own sophisticated weapons (Gbaka, 2014) with which they used in carrying out their nefarious activities. The jostle for green land caused by environmental scarcity by both Fulani nomads and the Benue farmers explains why the conflict has continued to escalate (Obioha, 2008). Notwithstanding whatever cause, the sad news is that there was an unprecedented loss of lives and property. The year 2018 recorded the highest in the number of death rates and property destroyed by the Fulani pastoralists. More than 163 (Ndujihe & Udochukwu, 2018) have lost their lives to Fulani herdsmen in 2018 alone. Most literature has focus on climatic change, and environmental degradation as prime movers of the farmers and Fulani herdsmen crises in Benue State. This article would take go a step further in arguing that religion is part of the motivating factors between the indigenes (farmers) and settlers (herdsmen) in Benue State. Internally displaced people camps have been created to cater for the displaced children. It is worrisome that children are continuously being abused in these IDP camps. There are reports of deaths, rape, and the malnutrition of children in IDP camps. There are gory stories of child rape caused by lapses in security (Omeje, 2008) and the rapists pretending to be one of the IDPs, among others.

The government (federal or state) has done what it can to ameliorate the plight of the victims of violence—the children. The federal government's proposal of establishing colonies for cattle herders, in line with the global best practices (Duru & Agbakwuru, 2018) has been rejected by the state government. This essay will be looking at the plight of children as the victims of Fulani herdsmen and farmers conflicts in Benue State. With the failure of all the strategies taken to ameliorate the plight of the displaced, what are the enduring roles or the place of faith and

community-based development organisations towards providing succour to children in IDP camps across Benue state?

First, discusses the conflicts in Benue State between the indigenes and the herdsmen. Second, it argues why the conflicts in Benue State could be likened to a religious conflict. Third, it explains how children became victims of violence especially in IDP camps. Fourth, it explains the role of faith and community-based development organisations towards ameliorating the plights of the traumatised children.

2. Materials and Method

The study adopted the phenomenological methodology. The phenomenological method of research is the direct investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced by people living those experiences which were conducted through the use of in-depth interviews of small samples of participants (Centre for Innovation in Research and Teaching, n.d). Sources of data include personal observations, focused group discussion, archives, newspapers, journals, and textbooks.

3. Results and Discussion

Prolegomenon to the Conflicts in Benue State

In order to understand the genesis of the conflicts in Benue State, it is important to understand the nexus between religion and conflicts in Benue State. Religion is a double-age sword. It has the positive and the negative side. When the positive side is used there is unity, growth, development, love, justice, tolerance, among others. But when the negative side is used, there is hate, intolerance which leads to conflict. Conflicts arise when there is a pursuit of incompatible interest. This interest may be subjective or objective. Subjective conflict is the type of conflict that arises when there is a perceived intimation and harassment of group A against group B and group B feels that group A does not deserve the opportunity and moral to carry out the intimidation. Group B uses violence or any means to actualise her belief. In an objective conflict situation, Group B is being harassed by Group A, and Group A knows that she is being harassed due to relative deprivation which group B anticipates. Conflict means the incompatibility of subject positions (Diez, 2006). Conflict is a struggle, dispute, competition or fight or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals. In Nigeria, the conflict that has been brewing between the Fulani herdsmen and farmers is the simple scarcity conflicts. These are conflicts over scarce resources such as grazing land, green grasses and water which are essential for human and animal survival (Homer-Dixon, 1991).

If a conflict situation is not monitored and solved it could lead to civil war or interstate conflict. Civil war is "any armed conflict that involves (a) military action internal to the metropole (b) the active participation of the national government, and (c) effective resistance by both sides" (Small and Singer, 1982) A very good example is the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-1970. Inter-state conflicts arise when a state feels threatened by other states, which most times are environmental conflicts. For example, the Bakassi peninsula resorted to a cold war between Nigeria and Cameroun. To avoid an outbreak of war (Ajaja, 2016) the peninsula was transferred to Cameroon on 14 August 2008.

In the context of this article, children are individuals within 1-17 years of age. They comprise the teenage class. Children are human beings as adults (Archard, 2014). Unfortunately, in most conflicts, they are particularly vulnerable to disaster (Disaster Risk Management for Health, 2019) that is, they are the victims of violence. They are prone to be injured, lost, physically and sexually

abused, unable to access help or health care, or exposed to greater danger through separation from their families or caregivers (Disaster Risk Management for Health, 2019). This is mostly the case during and after arm struggle or in violent conflicts situations.

As a geographic entity, Benue state is conventionally referred to as the food basket of the nation, and practically it is. This is due to a large number of farm produce from the state to other states of the federation; and agricultural produce is cheap. Benue State enjoys fertile arable land, abundant human resource and raw materials which provide the State with the opportunity to produce most of the crops in Nigeria middle belt area and also in Nigeria (Akaakohol & Aye, 2014).

In order to maintain their place as the food basket of the nation, and to increase their economic profits, the farmers in Benue State decided to enlarge their farming lands. This led to the encroachment of formally fallowed land. These fallowed lands provided space and opportunity for the farmers to increase the yields. The goal of this agricultural intensification Benue state has been to produce more food to accommodate the growing demand for food and improve Nigerian citizens (Terdoo, Gyang, and Iorlamen, 2016). During the dry season, when there is a decrease in grass in the northeast and northwest of Nigeria, Fulani herdsmen migrate to the north central of Nigeria with their cattle looking for grasses. Fulani is a tribe known for the business of cattle rearing (Shehu, 2017) in West Africa. It is part of their heritage as a tribe to rear cattle. Kennedy noted that:

A symbiotic relationship existed between the Benue farmers and the herdsmen from Fulani caliphate. When the later would pass with their cattle, not destroying farmer's crops, these farmers derived organic manure from cow dungs and protein from the beef and dairy product while the nomads relied on the farm product for food. Hitherto, disputes between pastoralists and farmers were settled amicably by farming community leaders and Fulani ardos under arrangements which disallowed resort to violence but mutual understanding. However, today's nomads, usually ignorant of such dispute resolution mechanism are often too quick in resorting to violence during disagreements. This has caused Nigeria to witness series of violent communal clashes over land arising from the activities of nomads who move about on a daily basis with their cattle in search of water and green pasture (Ubwa, 2018).

The formally fallowed land which the Fulani herdsmen depend upon for feeding their livestock is been cultivated for agricultural produce by farmers in Benue State. Hence, there is the encroachment of farming land by the herdsmen which most times results between the farmers and Fulani herdsmen in Benue State. Land scarcity at this point makes feasible the day to day confrontation between the herdsmen and the Fulani indigenes (Terdoo, Gyang, and Iorlamen, 2016). Benue State is one of the preferred destinations for the Fulani herdsmen because of the state's climate that guarantees the production of fruit crops, grain crops, and tuber crops and the growth of sparse grasses and numerous species of scattered trees (Terdoo, Gyang, and Iorlamen, 2016).

The stage became set for confrontations between the herdsmen and the Benue State indigenes. The shrinking ecological space creates an atmosphere of eco-scarcity which raises the stakes and premium on the available resources (Shehu, 2017) . Unfortunately, designated livestock routes have disappeared due to the reason of land shortage and encroachment (Gbaka, 2014).Thus, the struggle to annex these scarce resources, has resorted to conflicts between herdsmen who are majorly the Fulani and farmers in Benue State. There were reported cases of destruction of farmlands, maiming and killing of indigenes by herdsmen, and the seizure of lands by the Fulani herdsmen. Over 726 people in Benue state have lost their lives to the conflicts which mark out the state as the most affected in the farmers-herders clashes in the middle Belt (Ojekunle, 2018). Other states affected include Nassarawa, Plateau, Taraba, and Niger, among others.

Due to the escalation of the conflicts, over 62,000 people have been displaced with the extensive loss of crops and cattle in an area considered to be the "food basket" of Nigeria (Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin, 2019). Over three thousand, six hundred and forty-one deaths occurred in 2018 in Benue State and other north-central states (Amnesty International, 2019). From January to

September 2018, over 560 people were killed in Benue State, and areas of the state were hijacked (Charles 2018). The Fulani herdsmen unleashed havoc on farm produce such as yam barns in addition to the wanton destruction of lives –human and animals (Gever and Essien, 2017). According to Adamu and Ben, farmlands have been abandoned for fear of attacks by the herdsmen (Adamu and Ben, 2017). The farmers have travelled away from their villages to safer areas. This conflict between Benue farmers and Fulani herders in Nigeria especially Benue Valley, usually has resulted in the loss of lives and property (Tenuche and Ifatimehin, 2009).

Contents of Religion in the herders-farmers conflicts

The conflict in Benue State is seen as a religious conflict between Fulani herdsmen who are majorly Muslims and the Benue state indigenes who are Christians. For the indigenes, the herdsmen are trying to displace them geographically, by enforcing their religious heritage on the communities conquered. It is believed that these increasing attacks were aimed at reducing the population of the Christian population (Ahmed-Gamgum, 2018). Some scholars have revealed that the climatic change being used as an excuse by the Fulani herdsmen for invading Benue state is just mere propaganda (Nte, 2016). This is because there is the tendency of groups bound together by religion to gang up against followers of other religions. Adamu and Ben (2016) revealed that the extent of damage of this attack seems to be beyond the issue of struggle over scarce land resources, but includes a design plan to evict and occupy most communities and villages populated by Christians. Adamu and Ben from their statement insist on the religious motivation of the conflict in Benue state.

The conflicts between herders and the indigenes were seen as a religious conflict due to the fact that the Muslims. Fulani herdsmen who were initially peaceful and friendly, have become brutal and a foe to Benue farmers. When they carry out their cattle to the farmlands of the Benue people, and encounter any resistance they kill at will. There have been escalations of reported attacks by Fulani herdsmen who brutally kill natives of the invaded farming communities including women and children in various states across the country (Rotimi, 2014).

Wegh revealed that what happened in Benue was ethnic cleansing and genocide (Wegh, 2016; Okoh, 2019) with the view of establishing Islam as the dominant religion in Benue State. This is the reason that after killing the indigenes, the Fulani herdsmen set up a settlement in the captured land without fear of intimidation or arrest from the federal government. It could be recalled that on January 13, 2018, the Fulani Nationality Movement after their meeting in Kano gave a statement reiterating the earlier conceived notion of Islamisation of the state. Accordingly, they stated that what was happening in the State was a continuation of the 1804 Jihad of Usman dan Fodio when recalcitrant Benue indigenes stopped them in their quest to dip the Qur'an in the sea (Ogunmade and Okoh, 2019). They laid emphasis that they were militarily and politically equipped to deal accordingly with Benue indigenes in their expansionist strategy. In fact, a NorthWest University Kano, Professor Umar Labdo Muhammad lucidly said that "Benue State belongs to the Fulani by right of conquest . . . half of Benue State is part of the Bauchi Emirate and also half of the Adamawa Emirate" (Opejobi, 2018) This type of hate speech shows that the Fulani herdsmen have religious motives have the backing and protection of highly placed persons in Nigerian society.

Children as victims of violence in Benue State

Children are the most affected by the conflicts between the Fulani herdsmen and Benue indigenes (Azad, Crawford, and Kaila, 2018). Most children have been made orphans. The lucky ones may be said to have just a parent alive. Furthermore, the education of the children has been tampered with due to the destruction of schools and lack of security to protect places of schooling in

mostly rural areas in Benue state. Over 90 per cent of adolescent girls who live in affected areas in Benue State were more likely to drop from schooling (Charles, 2018). Furthermore, Benue State government estimated that some 102,000 children are out of school due to the conflict, and 80,450 children have their schools turned into IDP camps (Unah, 2018). Most schools have been closed due to the Benue State crises (Okere, 2018). This is so because 60 per cent of those displaced are children of school age and they have not been able to return to school (Babajide, 2018). Thus, even after normalcy is restored in the affected areas, there is the very likelihood that most children would not be back to school, on the basis of their migration from the village to other geographic areas.

The aftermath of this was that many children have been displaced. The state government has played their part in ensuring the provision of temporal shelter for displaced persons. This is traditionally known as an internally displaced people's camp. One would expect that life may be better for children in the IDP camps, but the reverse is the case. There are high cases of sexual and physical violence against children, rape, child marriage, children trafficking for prostitution, robbery, political thugs (Charles, 2018) and a host of other irregularities in the IDP camps provided by the government. Most of the abuse against children is carried out in IDP camps. Duru (2018) pointed that on March 1, 2018, no fewer than 80,450 children is currently trapped in eight Internally Displaced Persons, IDPs, camps established by the Benue state government to cater for victims of herdsmen incursions in the state. The high level of dishonesty with regards to the situation in IDP camps is alarming (Nwaoga, Anuli, and Uroko, 2017), where there is the blatant abuse of powers by those who were empowered to protect the displaced persons.

According to D'Cunha (2002), the girl child is prone to physical abuse, exploitation, rape and human trafficking due to their defenceless nature. This includes harassment and intimidation which is used to carry out sexual exploitation of the girl child. Adamu and Ben corroborate the fact that female children are the major victims of violence (Adamu and Ben, 2016). Ironically, this blatant and obscene act is carried out by government officials and the security agencies in charge of the camp. Furthermore, a victim of sexual abuse in one of the camps in Benue who prefers anonymity mentions that girls are coerced to perform all sorts of sexual acts and some of them are deceived into carrying out unprotected sex with the promise of marriage. Some of the girls in the camp become pregnant and they are abandoned by their aggressors. In fact, their aggressors who are the security men in charge of the camp usually threaten to kill them if they report their state to anyone (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Furthermore, the security of life in IDP camps is not guaranteed. Sadly, children in internally displaced people's camps are daily exposed to bandits, robbers, kidnappers, and rapists, as well as the elements. May 27, 2018 (Goodness, 2018). It is reported that some individuals troop into the camp at night in the name of bringing relief materials to the victims displaced by the conflicts but end up sexually molesting some of the homeless female victims (Daily Post Staff, 2017). The Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA) describes the situation as the "worst case of human rights violations that exist in Nigeria" (Sahara Reporters, 2018).

There are high cases of death caused by malnutrition, diseases, and death caused by the unhealthy environment and lack of access to proper medical care in many IDP camps in Benue State. The camps are overpopulated by both displaced persons and mosquitoes (DailyTrust, 2019). IDPs lack good drinking water, toilet facilities, and a ventilated environment. Malaria, cold, cough and diarrhoea are prevalent in the camp and as a result of these shortages; they are left to source traditional treatment elsewhere except when donors or good-spirited individuals visit the camp with aid (DailyTrust, 2019). For instance in IDP camps in Daudu many IDPs were infected with malaria and diarrhoea, which led to the death of twelve displaced persons in September 2018 (SaharaReporters, 2018). Children in IDP camps in Benue state are not eating well (Duru, 2019).Part of the reason is the diversion of food items that were meant to be distributed to the IDPs. Egwu (2019) gave an insight into the fact that these organisations saddled with the responsibility of

distributing these items hoard the food in their stores and warehouses (Egwu, 2019). Little wonder, rapists and sexual perverts are taking advantage of the situation to inflict sexual assault on children. According to Duru (2019), this is due to the fact that the "resources of the state government are already overstretched because the state government provides the bulk of the needs of these people."Due to the harsh life and assault children in IDP are undergoing, some of them have decided to run out of the camp to find solace. Abah (2018) reported that five children were crushed to death by a truck while running away from Abegana camp in Benue State.

Faith-Based Organisations

Faith-based organisations refer to those organisations which are non-profit in nature associated with or are inspired by religion or religious beliefs (Banda, 2006). They promote the physical wellbeing of the depressed, they promote the mental wellbeing of victims of violence, and they encourage morality, ethics, principles and justice. Furthermore, a faith-based organisation may be seen as a group of individuals united on the basis of religious or spiritual beliefs who direct their efforts towards the spiritual, social, and cultural needs of their members through the discouragement of illegal or reckless behaviour (Carver and Reinert, 2002). Faith-based communities contribute to peace, progress and overall development of the society. Bielefeld and Cleveland see FBOs as the expression of religion that is used to connect through relationships which are unanimously described as approached with dignity, respect, compassion, empathy, hospitality, and unconditional positive regard (Bielefeld, and Cleveland, 2013). Religious groups are generally primarily concerned with the spiritual well-being of their members, while FBOs are interested in addressing the physical well-being (Clarke and Ware, 2015).

The role of faith-based organisations in the community and society cannot be overemphasised. They meet a wide range of needs in the community by filling in the gap between supply of and demand for welfare provisions (Vodo, 2016). Leveraging on their growing importance in the provision of social services, they have shown increasing political, social, and economic impact on communities. FBOs provide a broad range of social welfare services and use their influence in policy making for the socially excluded groups (Göçmen, 2013). Faith-based organizations have also assumed a role in helping promote housing and community development with particular prominence in providing food, clothing, and shelter to people in need (Vidal, n.d).

4. Conclusion

The place of FBOs towards ameliorating the plight of displaced children in Benue State cannot be underemphasised. They provide social and economic benefits to children. Children are the most affected in the Fulani herdsmen and farmers conflict in Benue State. The conflict according to Azad, Crawford, and Kaila (2018) emanated due to the climatic change, desert encroachment, and Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast which unfortunately has reduced the grazing land available to Fulani herdsmen. The conflicts became compounded due to the influence of religion. The Fulani herdsmen are Muslim while the indigenes are mostly Christians. Thus, the method with which the Fulani herdsmen used in dispossessing farmers of their lands is seen as an expansionists strategy aimed at making Benue State which the group sympathizers have not denied (Njeuma, 2012). The provocation, confrontation, and conflict have led to the death of so many children, destruction of school environment of many children, increase in the number of orphans, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of children. These atrocities were discovered to be more pronounced in IDP camps in Benue State carried out mostly by security agencies and vigilante groups saddled with the responsibility of protecting the displaced children. FBOs are discipline in carrying out their duties

due to the fact it is part of their practical theology. It is believed that religious communities, community development organisations, policy makers, and leaders, among others will find the role of FBOs worth engaging.

FBOs and Children (victims of violence) in Benue State

Religion is a common characteristic of all humans. This is owing to the fact that "80 percent of the world's population profess religious faith" (Clarke and Ware, 2015) Thus, FBOs social and economic impacts in the lives of displaced children, faced with life-threatening issues, should be felt through the following strategies.

1. Religious communities have the obligation of ensuring that their various FBOs engage children who are suffering in the different IDP camps in Benue State. This should be seen as part of their practical theology and humanitarian strategies
2. FBOs should maintain egalitarianism in the distribution of relief materials needed to meet the needs of the displaced children.
3. Furthermore, FBOs should provide financial and legal services in the prosecution of any security personnel or anyone caught in the act of sexual and physical abuse of the displaced children.
4. FBOs in liaison with their religious communities should provide skill acquisition programmes, which in the long run would economically strengthen the displaced children and keep them busy from going into crime or prostitution.
5. There is the need for proper supervision of the distribution process of these relief materials, to ensure that they are not diverted to 'black market' or hoarded.
6. FBOs could employ teachers and also establish school centres in the camps as short term measures.
7. Faith-motivated individuals could work with the FBOs and other community development organisations to foster to quick relocation of the displaced children and their households to communities.

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