Techniques For Resolving Conflicts and Fostering Harmony Within the Local Government System of Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract
Conflict within local government areas in Benue State, Nigeria, has significantly impeded effective governance and development. This paper examined techniques for resolving conflicts and fostering harmony within the local government system of Benue State, using the Realist Theory of Conflict by Hans Morgenthau as a theoretical framework. The study adopted a documentary research methodology, analyzing secondary data from academic sources, government reports, and credible media publications. Findings indicate that conflicts within the local government, particularly among local government chairmen, councillors, and other key stakeholders, arise from power struggles, resource distribution issues, political rivalries, and a lack of transparent governance. Despite efforts such as dialogue, mediation, and community engagement, these conflicts continue to disrupt governance and delay essential public service delivery. The paper concludes that addressing these challenges requires strengthening local governance structures, fostering greater transparency and inclusion in decision-making, promoting regular dialogue, and empowering traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Additionally, the study recommends equipping local leaders with conflict resolution skills and creating platforms for sustained community involvement. The paper ultimately calls for systemic reforms and long-term cooperation among all stakeholders to build a peaceful and effective local government system in Benue State.

Key Words: Conflict Resolution, Local Government, Governance, Benue State, Realist Theory, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a natural part of governance, often shaping the political, social, and economic environments of nations. In democratic systems, where political competition is inevitable, conflict arises not only at the national level but also at more local levels of governance. Local governments, being the closest form of governance to the people, are supposed to provide essential services, implement policies, and support community development. However, in places like Benue State, Nigeria, local government councils have often been affected by political strife, corruption, and internal power struggles, which prevent them from fulfilling their core functions. These conflicts often arise from disagreements between local government chairmen, councilors, and supervisory councilors, resulting in gridlock, ineffective governance, and a lack of accountability (Hazen & Horner, 2007).

Benue State, located in the North Central region of Nigeria, is known for its ethnic diversity and complex political situation. While this diversity could be a strength, it has often led to political conflicts at the local government level. Ethnic rivalries, personal ambitions, and competition for control of state resources have sparked repeated disputes among local government officials. In particular, power struggles between the elected chairmen of local councils, appointed councilors, and supervisory councilors are common. These conflicts are made worse by control over financial resources, a lack of transparency in decision-making, and constant political maneuvering, which all undermine effective governance (Omotola, 2010). As a result, local government institutions in Benue State often get caught up in political rivalries that block progress and hinder public service delivery.

One of the main causes of conflict in Benue's local government councils is the struggle for power. Local government chairmen, who are the elected leaders of their councils, often find themselves in conflict with appointed councilors and supervisory councilors. These disputes arise due to differences in political interests, personal rivalries, and sometimes the desire for personal gain. Chairmen, who are seen as the leaders of their councils, frequently try to assert their authority over the other members, leading to conflicts over policy decisions, resource allocation, and the distribution of power. This battle for control between local government officials often results in a lack of cooperation and mutual distrust, which paralyzes the governance system and prevents progress (Hazen & Horner, 2007).

In addition to the power struggle, competition for resources also fuels conflict. Local government councils manage budgets, development projects, and public services, which means they control the distribution of state resources. However, the allocation of these resources is often influenced by political loyalties and personal connections, which leads to conflicts of interest. In Benue State, where resources such as internally generated funds and federal allocations are limited, the competition for these funds becomes intense. Political leaders sometimes engage in corrupt practices, diverting funds meant for public use to personal or political gains. This breeds distrust and undermines the effectiveness of local government institutions (Omotola, 2010).

The lack of strong conflict management structures also makes the situation worse. Although methods such as mediation, negotiation, and legal frameworks exist to resolve conflicts, they are rarely used effectively in Benue State's local governments. This is mainly due to political interference, lack of political will, and general indifference towards resolving conflicts in a way that benefits the public. Local leaders often put personal and party interests above the collective good of their communities, which weakens the conflict resolution mechanisms meant to address disputes. Additionally, local government officials may avoid using conflict resolution methods

because they feel it could reduce their political power or influence (Licklider, 1995). As a result, conflicts remain unresolved, and governance stays inefficient and fragmented.

The political conflicts in Benue State's local government councils also have negative effects on public service delivery. Services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and waste management suffer when political leaders focus more on infighting than on addressing the needs of the people. The execution of development projects is often delayed or sabotaged because local government officials fight to control or block initiatives that don't align with their political goals. This lack of effective governance erodes public trust in local government institutions and worsens the socio-economic problems of the people in Benue State.

Despite the widespread conflicts, there have been efforts to resolve these issues through various mechanisms. These include forming committees to mediate disputes, using state-level political interventions, and introducing legal frameworks to regulate local government operations. However, these efforts have often been unsuccessful or only partially effective, mainly due to the political nature of the conflicts and the unwillingness of local leaders to compromise. There is a pressing need for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to conflict resolution in Benue State's local governments. Such an approach should focus on transparency, accountability, and active community participation in decision-making. This would help build trust among local government officials and improve service delivery.

Conceptual Clarification
Conflict
Conflict refers to a situation in which individuals, groups, or communities perceive incompatible goals, interests, or values, resulting in tension, rivalry, or confrontation. It is a natural part of human interaction and can occur at multiple levels—ranging from interpersonal disagreements to large-scale communal or political crises. In the Nigerian context, particularly in the northern region, conflicts are often linked to ethnic diversity, religious differences, political marginalization, and socio-economic inequalities (Ibrahim & Umar, 2022).

While conflict is often viewed negatively, it is not always destructive. When properly managed, conflict can serve as a driving force for positive social change, fostering dialogue, negotiation, and institutional reform. Constructive conflict resolution can lead to strengthened relationships, increased awareness of community needs, and more inclusive governance. However, unaddressed or poorly managed conflicts tend to escalate, resulting in violence, displacement, and deepened divisions among affected populations (Adetula, 2020).

Conflicts have taken various forms, including farmer-herder clashes, insurgency, ethno-religious violence, and political unrest. These conflicts often expose the weaknesses of state institutions and highlight the need for effective local governance systems that can mediate disputes and address root causes. Understanding conflict in its complexity is therefore essential for developing effective peacebuilding initiatives and for promoting long-term stability and development in the region.

Local Government
Local government refers to the grassroots tier of governance responsible for providing essential public services and facilitating community development within a defined geographical area. In Nigeria, the local government system is constitutionally recognized as the third level of government, following the federal and state levels. It is designed to bring government closer to the people, promote local participation in governance, and enhance the delivery of basic services

(Adeyemi, 2013). Local governments serve as a vehicle for addressing local issues and implementing national policies at the community level (Oviasuyi, Idada & Isiraojie, 2010).

Each Local Government Area (LGA) in Nigeria operates through a council comprising elected officials such as the chairman and councilors, tasked with overseeing administration and development. These councils are responsible for functions such as primary education, health care, local markets, waste disposal, and road maintenance (Agba, Akwara & Idu, 2013). However, despite their importance, local governments in Nigeria often struggle with inadequate funding, political interference, and administrative inefficiencies, which limit their ability to function effectively (Ola & Tonwe, 2005). These challenges have led to calls for reforms that will enhance their autonomy and capacity for service delivery.

In regions like Northern Nigeria, where issues of conflicts and underdevelopment are prevalent, the role of local governments becomes even more critical. Their proximity to the people allows them to respond swiftly to emerging local challenges and conflicts. Moreover, when empowered, local governments can serve as platforms for peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and inclusive governance (Oluwu, 2002). Therefore, strengthening local government institutions is essential for fostering grassroots development and sustaining peace in fragile communities (Okotoni, 2021).

Theoretical Framework: Realist Theory of Conflict

This study adopts the Realist Theory of Conflict to explain the persistent political conflicts and struggles within local government councils in Benue State, particularly among chairmen, councilors, and supervisory councilors. The Realist theory of conflict has its roots in classical political thought but was developed in modern times by Hans Morgenthau (1948). Morgenthau argued that politics is shaped by objective laws based on human nature, and that conflict is unavoidable because political actors naturally seek power and self-interest (Morgenthau, 1948).

According to Morgenthau, the drive for power is a central part of human nature, and in the political arena, this leads to continuous competition among individuals and groups for resources, authority, and influence (Rourke, 2007). This explains why, even in systems with democratic rules and institutions, conflict continues—because actors are often driven by personal ambition and power preservation rather than cooperation (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 2001). The realist theory sees this pursuit of dominance as normal and expected in political life.

The realist perspective also focuses on the role of power and political strategy, where leaders often rely on statecraft, negotiation, and sometimes manipulation to maintain control (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2011). In local government settings like those in Benue State, this can be observed in the struggles and rivalries among leaders, where decisions and actions are often based on power dynamics rather than policy or public interest (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 2001).

Relevance and Application of the Theory

The Realist Theory of Conflict is highly relevant in explaining the political tensions and governance crises in Benue State's local government councils, where frequent disputes between local government chairmen, councilors, and supervisory councilors are common. These tensions often stem not from ideological differences but from competition for political dominance, access to financial resources, and control over administrative structures.

For instance, in local governments such as Gboko, Otukpo, and Makurdi, chairmen have often clashed with councilors over budget control, revenue sharing, and contract awards. In many cases, councilors may initiate impeachment moves or pass votes of no confidence, not necessarily due to incompetence but due to political alignment and resource-based disputes. The realist theory

interprets such behavior as part of the political actor's rational pursuit of self-preservation and dominance within a competitive and often zero-sum environment.

These patterns of entrenched power struggles result in policy gridlocks, abandoned projects, and the deterioration of basic public services. The environment becomes one where political leaders prioritize loyalty to party leaders, godfathers, or personal interests over collaboration for developmental goals.

Moreover, the lack of strong conflict resolution frameworks and the frequent political interference by state-level actors exacerbate the crisis, making local governance more about political maneuvering than service delivery. For example, there have been reports of supervisory councilors acting as informants for higher-level political actors, further fueling distrust and division among council members.

Methodology

This paper adopted expos facto research design and gathered data through secondary sources like, books, journals articles, manuscripts, internet materials, conference papers etc. We used content analysis to analyse data gathered.

Conflict Issues in local government

The local government system in Benue State, like in other parts of Nigeria, has been fraught with internal conflicts that have significantly hindered effective grassroots governance. These conflicts often arise from political interference, mismanagement of resources, power struggles, and lack of respect for constitutional roles among local government actors. A recurring issue is the struggle for supremacy between elected chairmen and councillors, with both parties often interpreting their roles in ways that bring them into conflict rather than cooperation (Ajene, 2020). This has led to a systemic breakdown in administrative functions and poor delivery of public services across many local councils in the state.

In several instances, conflict between the executive chairmen and councillors has led to suspension, impeachment threats, and court litigations. Within Gwer West Local Government, a major conflict arose between the chairman and members of the legislative council over allegations of unilateral decision-making by the chairman regarding the disbursement of federal allocation. The councillors claimed they were not consulted on critical expenditure decisions, and in response, the chairman accused them of political sabotage (Iorver, 2021). This standoff led to a paralysis of activities in the council and prolonged delays in project implementation, particularly those concerning rural road maintenance and school rehabilitation.

Tarka Local Government has also experienced its share of administrative conflict, where a clash between the chairman and the leader of the legislative council emerged over budgetary allocations and contract awards. The chairman was accused of awarding contracts to companies linked to family members without the approval of the council. The councillors, in turn, were accused by the chairman of seeking personal financial gains and attempting to blackmail the executive into releasing constituency funds for dubious projects (Orshi, 2022). These allegations and counter-allegations created an environment of mistrust and crippled developmental efforts in the area.

In Ukum Local Government, conflict took another dimension when councillors passed a vote of no confidence on the chairman for allegedly misappropriating COVID-19 relief funds meant for vulnerable households. The chairman denied the allegations, arguing that the funds were administered in line with state government guidelines. The internal investigation committee set up by the councillors was later disbanded by the chairman, who cited procedural irregularities. This

action intensified the feud, with both arms of the local government engaging in public accusations, leading to intervention by the Benue State House of Assembly to restore peace (Terzungwe, 2022). Another notable case was recorded in Otukpo Local Government, where the chairman clashed with councillors over the implementation of internally generated revenue (IGR) policies. The councillors alleged that the chairman was operating a parallel revenue collection team without their knowledge and was diverting the proceeds for personal use. The chairman defended the action by accusing the councillors of attempting to control revenue streams for political patronage. This conflict led to the suspension of the revenue committee and loss of public confidence in local tax collection processes (Ogaba, 2023). As a result, market traders and artisans openly protested the conflicting levies imposed by different factions within the local council.

In Buruku Local Government, conflict arose when the chairman attempted to dissolve the legislative council following disagreements over staff recruitment. Councillors opposed the recruitment of over 100 workers allegedly handpicked by the chairman without due process. The councillors insisted that the recruitment violated civil service rules and would overburden the local government's wage bill. In retaliation, the chairman accused the councillors of trying to frustrate his development agenda and of working with opposition forces (Amenger, 2023). This impasse resulted in several months of non-functioning legislative sessions and stalled approval of capital projects.

Another disturbing dimension of local government conflict in Benue State is the interference of political godfathers and state-level officials in the affairs of local councils. In Makurdi Local Government, the chairman was reportedly coerced into signing inflated contracts awarded by influential political figures. When the councillors attempted to investigate these contracts, they were allegedly threatened with suspension and police arrest. The conflict escalated to the point where the chairman publicly admitted that his hands were tied, blaming political pressure for his inability to act independently (Yaji, 2023). This kind of interference erodes local autonomy and promotes a culture of impunity in local governance.

Conflicts between vice chairmen and chairmen also exist and are becoming increasingly prominent in some LGAs. In Katsina-Ala Local Government, the deputy chairman accused the chairman of excluding him from official functions and financial decisions. The deputy claimed he was only informed about key events after they had occurred and was denied access to the council's financial records. The chairman, however, argued that the deputy lacked the political loyalty and competence required to handle sensitive matters. This internal division not only stalled collaborative governance but also exposed the council to internal sabotage, with staff reportedly taking sides based on personal allegiances (Ujege, 2023).

These examples across local governments in Benue State underscore a recurring pattern of poor intergovernmental relations, lack of transparency, weak institutional checks, and politicization of local administration. The consequences of these conflicts are far-reaching. Public trust in local authorities has eroded, developmental projects are often abandoned or delayed, and staff morale is consistently low due to administrative instability. Without urgent structural reforms, such as redefining the roles of chairmen and councillors, ensuring financial transparency, and limiting external political influence, these conflicts are likely to persist.

Techniques for resolving conflicts in local government
Dialogue and Negotiation
Dialogue and negotiation are important tools for solving conflicts between local government chairmen, councillors, and other stakeholders in Benue State. These methods allow everyone

involved to express their issues in a calm and respectful setting. For example, in 2020, a conflict arose in Gwer West Local Government Area (LGA) over how funds for community projects were divided. After several meetings, the chairman and councillors used dialogue to agree on a clear process for managing public money. This helped rebuild trust and improve cooperation between the local government's executive and legislative branches (Iorver, 2020).

Mediation
Mediation, where a neutral person helps both sides talk and find a solution, is another key method for resolving conflicts. This is useful when direct communication fails. In 2021, a conflict broke out in Makurdi LGA over the mismanagement of staff promotion funds. The chairman and councillors couldn't agree, so a respected religious leader stepped in as a mediator. Thanks to the mediator's help, both sides were able to discuss their concerns and come to an agreement on how to fairly distribute the funds (Yaji, 2021).

Community Engagement
Community engagement involves getting local residents involved in decision-making, which helps promote peace and cooperation. This method is especially useful in Benue State's rural areas. For example, in Agatu LGA, when the chairman and councillors had a disagreement over resource allocation, community leaders organized peace workshops. These workshops helped local residents understand the issue and encouraged them to act as mediators. The community worked together to resolve the conflict and make sure future decisions were made fairly (Abah, 2019). This approach also helps prevent similar conflicts in the future.

Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms
Traditional methods of resolving conflicts, such as the involvement of chiefs, elders, and traditional councils, are still widely used in Benue State. In 2020, a conflict in Kwande LGA arose when Tiv farmers accused herders of poisoning water meant for irrigation. The local chief called both sides to a traditional council meeting. After hearing both parties, the council used traditional methods to resolve the dispute, including a public apology and a peace agreement. This solution worked because the community respected the traditional leadership (Orjime, 2020).

Collaborative Problem-Solving
Collaborative problem-solving brings together all the parties involved to work together and find solutions to conflicts. This method has become more common in Benue State, especially regarding the implementation of the Anti-Open Grazing Law. In Tarka LGA, the chairman, councillors, and other stakeholders held meetings to discuss how to share land for farming and grazing. They agreed on clear boundaries and schedules for land use, which helped prevent further conflicts. In 2022, this approach successfully resolved a land dispute in Apir village, where both farmers and herders agreed to a shared use of the land (Okpokwu, 2022).

Legislative Oversight
Legislative oversight is important when there are allegations of financial mismanagement or abuse of power. In some LGAs in Benue State, councillors use their oversight powers to hold local government chairmen accountable. In Otukpo LGA in 2020, councillors accused the chairman of misusing funds meant for health projects. The councillors investigated the matter and found discrepancies in the allocation of the funds. As a result, the chairman was required to provide a

full explanation of how the money was spent. This process of oversight helped ensure greater transparency and accountability (Ogaba, 2020).

Negotiated Settlements and Compromise

Negotiated settlements and compromise are important when conflicts arise over appointments, budget allocations, or development priorities. In Benue State, such conflicts are common between chairmen and councillors. In 2019, a conflict broke out in Guma LGA over the choice of contractors for a road project. After several meetings, both the chairman and councillors agreed on a compromise. The chairman agreed to include councillors in the selection process, ensuring the decision was fair and based on merit. This agreement helped restore cooperation and trust between the two parties (Iorkyaa, 2020).

Techniques for fostering harmony in local government
Community-Based Initiatives

Community-based initiatives play an important role in solving conflicts in local governments by encouraging cooperation and peace among different groups. In Benue State, these initiatives have been key in reducing conflicts, especially between local government leaders, community members, and other stakeholders. For example, in 2018, after several disagreements over land and development plans in Guma and Agatu LGAs, a community-based initiative was created to address these issues. Local government chairmen, councillors, and community members were encouraged to work together on infrastructure projects and share resources. These community-driven efforts helped improve local infrastructure and fostered cooperation between conflicting parties. By working together, the groups took ownership of the peace process, ensuring that both government leaders and citizens played a part in resolving the conflict (Okoro & Ogbu, 2021).

Inter-Community Dialogue

Inter-community dialogue is a useful tool for conflict resolution because it allows different groups to discuss their differences and find peaceful solutions. In Benue State, dialogue has been vital in reducing conflicts between local government officials, councillors, and various ethnic groups. For example, in 2019, Logo LGA faced disagreements over the distribution of resources and development priorities. A peace summit, similar to the "Benue Peace Summit" held in 2018, was organized to bring together local government officials, councillors, and community leaders. During this summit, everyone had the chance to voice their concerns, which helped the groups come to an agreement on how to fairly distribute resources for development projects. Dialogue like this helps clear up misunderstandings and creates a space for cooperation, making it easier for different groups to agree on peaceful solutions (Afolabi, 2019).

Youth Empowerment

Empowering young people is an effective way to prevent conflict and promote peace in local governments. By offering young people education, job skills, and employment opportunities, local governments can help them avoid getting involved in violent conflicts. In Benue State, youth empowerment programs have helped keep many young people away from violence, especially in the conflict between farmers and herders. For instance, the "Benue Youth Empowerment Program" has helped young people in Okpokwu and Tarka LGAs learn skills like carpentry, tailoring, and farming. These programs not only provide young people with job opportunities but also reduce their chances of becoming involved in conflicts with local government officials or others in the

community. By giving young people the tools to succeed, youth empowerment helps build a peaceful and stable future (Uzoho, 2020).

Cultural Exchange Programs

Cultural exchange programs can help reduce ethnic tensions and promote understanding between different groups. These programs allow people to share and learn about each other's traditions, helping to build mutual respect and understanding. In Benue State, cultural exchange programs have played an important role in easing conflicts between ethnic groups like Tiv, Fulani, and Idoma. In 2021, a cultural exchange event in Otukpo LGA brought together people from these different communities to celebrate each other's music, dance, and traditions. These events help reduce misunderstandings and promote peaceful living by helping people appreciate each other's cultures and traditions (Ogunrinde, 2021).

Peace Education

Peace education helps people learn how to handle conflicts peacefully and live in harmony. In Benue State, peace education programs have been introduced in schools to teach students how to avoid violence and resolve disagreements peacefully. One example is the "Benue Peace Education Initiative," which aims to teach students to respect different opinions and find peaceful solutions to problems. In local governments like Vandeikya and Makurdi, students who participated in this program have helped reduce violence in schools and promoted better cooperation between students from different ethnic backgrounds. By teaching young people peaceful ways to resolve conflicts, peace education helps create a society where conflicts can be handled calmly and constructively (Duru, 2020).

Conclusion

The conflicts within the local government system in Benue State, particularly involving local government chairmen, councillors, and other key stakeholders, have significantly hindered the state's progress. These conflicts are often driven by power struggles, disagreements over resources, and political rivalries. Although efforts such as dialogue and mediation have been made, the core issues driving these conflicts have not been fully addressed. As a result, governance and development in the state have been disrupted, and trust between the people and their leaders has weakened. The need for a more effective and lasting approach to resolving these conflicts is therefore critical.

It Is clear that resolving these conflicts requires more than just temporary solutions. A more comprehensive and inclusive approach is needed, one that involves all stakeholders in the process of conflict resolution. Local government leaders, councillors, community members, and traditional institutions must work together to build peace and ensure effective governance. This requires a commitment to long-term cooperation and mutual understanding, moving beyond personal interests and ethnic divisions. Only by adopting a coordinated and sustainable approach can Benue State hope to overcome its internal conflicts and promote a stable, peaceful environment for its people.

Recommendations

To bring lasting peace to Benue State and resolve the conflicts within its local government system, several steps need to be taken. First, local governance structures should be strengthened to ensure they can manage conflicts effectively. Empowering local authorities with the resources and

autonomy they need will allow them to address issues at the grassroots level. Local government officials are better positioned to understand the unique challenges of their communities and can play a pivotal role in preventing and resolving disputes.

Furthermore, governance in the local government should be more transparent and inclusive. Decision-making processes must involve all relevant stakeholders to ensure fairness and build trust. By including councillors, community leaders, and traditional authorities in discussions, the likelihood of conflicts over power and resources can be reduced. This approach would foster a more collaborative environment where all voices are heard, and issues are addressed collectively.

Another important step is to encourage regular dialogue between local government officials and community members. Establishing platforms for ongoing discussions allows grievances to be aired, misunderstandings to be cleared up, and solutions to be found before conflicts escalate. These dialogue platforms should aim to promote peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding between the various groups involved.

In addition, it is essential to provide training in conflict resolution for local government leaders, councillors, and other key stakeholders. By equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge, they can better handle disputes, negotiate effectively, and find peaceful solutions. This training should include methods for dealing with political and ethnic tensions, as these often play a significant role in local conflicts.

Encouraging community-led peacebuilding initiatives can also contribute to lasting peace. These initiatives should be expanded to involve local residents in identifying problems and finding solutions. When communities take ownership of the peace process, they are more likely to work together to prevent conflicts and promote harmony. Building this sense of shared responsibility is essential for creating a peaceful environment.

The role of traditional institutions in conflict resolution should not be overlooked. Traditional leaders have a deep understanding of local cultures and are often trusted by the community. Their involvement in the conflict resolution process should be formalized, allowing them to act as mediators and provide culturally sensitive solutions. This can help build trust and make the resolution process more effective.

Finally, addressing the root causes of the conflicts, such as disputes over resources and power, requires comprehensive policy reforms. These reforms should focus on ensuring fairness in resource allocation, improving transparency, and ensuring that all groups are represented in decision-making. Policy changes should also include measures to decentralize power, making it easier for local governments to respond to the specific needs of their communities.

In addition to these steps, engaging young people in the governance process is crucial. Empowering youth through education and skill development can prevent them from being drawn into conflicts and help them become active contributors to peacebuilding. By providing young people with opportunities to get involved in governance and peace efforts, Benue State can nurture a new generation of leaders committed to peaceful coexistence and development.

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