

Conflict Management Strategies and their Impact on Service Delivery in the Nigerian Local Government System: An Analysis

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Abstract: The Nigerian local government system plays a critical role in delivering essential services to citizens at the grassroots level. However, conflicts within the system pose significant challenges to effective service delivery. This research explored conflict management strategies within the Nigerian local government setup and their impact on service provision. The study identifies both non-structural and structural causes of conflicts, including differences in background, values, personal traits, perceptions, poor communication skills, work interdependence, differences in unit orientation and goals, differences in performance criteria and reward systems, mutual dependence on limited resources, and differences in status. By understanding these causes, stakeholders can implement appropriate conflict resolution mechanisms. Various conflict management strategies prevalent in the Nigerian local government system are examined, including avoidance, diffusion, containment, and confrontation. Each strategy has its strengths and limitations, and their effectiveness depends on the specific context and nature of the conflict. To improve service delivery, stakeholders are encouraged to employ collaborative, compromising, and accommodating approaches to find mutually beneficial solutions. Open communication, empathy, and understanding are emphasized as key elements in successful conflict resolution. The research concludes that continuous adaptation of conflict resolution approaches is crucial to address the changing dynamics within Nigerian society. Staying up-to-date with the latest research and understanding the evolving societal, economic, and political landscape will enable more effective conflict management in the local government system, leading to improved service delivery and overall development.

Keywords: Conflict Management Strategies, Service Delivery, Local Government System, Conflict Resolution.

1. INTRODUCTION

Providing efficient and effective public services is a cornerstone of any well-functioning government system. In the Nigerian context, the local government system plays a critical role in delivering essential services to citizens at the grassroots level (Agbodike et al., 2014). However, like many administrative structures worldwide, the Nigerian local government system faces its fair share of challenges, including the management of conflicts that arise within its framework. The effective resolution of conflicts is crucial for maintaining stability and ensuring the smooth delivery of services to the populace. Nigeria, a diverse and populous nation in West Africa, has a three-tiered government system consisting of the federal, state, and local levels (Issa et al., 2014). At the grassroots, the local government system functions as the primary unit of governance, responsible for delivering crucial services like education, healthcare, sanitation, infrastructure development, and social welfare to its residents (Majekodunmi, 2012). The local government's proximity to the people makes it an essential institution for addressing the specific needs and concerns of the community. However, over the years, the Nigerian local

government system has been grappling with various challenges, and conflicts within the system have emerged as significant impediments to effective governance (Monday and Wijayaj, 2022).

The Nigerian local government system comprises elected officials, civil servants, and various stakeholders who may have different priorities, interests, and perspectives on how resources should be allocated and services delivered (Agbodike et al., 2014). For instance, disagreements between elected representatives and civil servants regarding policy implementation can result in bureaucratic bottlenecks that delay or derail essential projects. Furthermore, external factors such as political interference, limited financial resources, bureaucratic red tape, and security issues also contribute to the complexities of conflict management within the local government setup. When conflicts are not appropriately addressed, they can escalate, leading to administrative paralysis, diminished public trust, and a decline in service delivery quality (Ushie et al., 2015). Consequently, citizens are left to bear the brunt of these inefficiencies, exacerbating social inequalities and hampering overall development. In the face of unresolved conflicts, citizens may lose confidence in the government's ability to meet their needs, potentially leading to unrest and further exacerbating existing tensions.

Efforts have been made in the past to address the challenges of conflict management in the Nigerian local government system. Previous studies have explored issues related to decentralization, power dynamics, resource allocation, and administrative capacity (Bolatito, and Ibrahim, 2012; Yagboyaju and Akinola, 2019; Amah, 2018). While these studies have contributed significantly to our understanding of the complexities within the system, there remains a noticeable gap in research specifically focusing on conflict management strategies and their impact on service delivery. Moreover, the evolving nature of conflicts and the changing dynamics within Nigerian society necessitate continuous investigation into this field. Societal, economic, and political changes may give rise to new sources of conflicts or alter the ways in which existing conflicts manifest within the local government system. Therefore, staying up-to-date with the latest developments and challenges is essential for developing effective conflict resolution mechanisms that resonate with the current realities faced by local governments. This research aims to explore conflict management strategies employed within the Nigerian local government system and analyze their impact on service delivery. By doing so, we can gain valuable insights into how conflicts are addressed and their effects on the provision of vital services that impact the lives of millions of Nigerians.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conflict is an inevitable and multifaceted aspect of human interactions, manifesting in social settings as a clash of ideas, values, or emotions. It encompasses both substantive disputes arising from differing opinions on important matters and emotional tensions that fuel animosity between people or groups. Such conflicts may arise due to varying perspectives, interests, or experiences, leading to friction and potential challenges in achieving mutual understanding or cooperation. While conflict can be disruptive, it also presents opportunities for growth, learning, and the development of more robust relationships when managed constructively and with empathy (Schermerhorn, 2005).

Conflict management is a multifaceted and dynamic process that aims to address disagreements and tensions in a constructive manner, with the ultimate goal of minimizing the negative consequences of conflict while maximizing its potential benefits (Osabiya, 2015). This approach recognizes that conflict, though often seen as detrimental, can also be a catalyst for positive change and growth in various contexts, such as interpersonal relationships, organizations, or societies. Tedeschi et al. (1973) present a middle-ground perspective on conflict by characterizing it as an "interactive state." Within this context, conflict arises when the actions or objectives of one individual or group are to some extent incongruent with those of other actors involved. This definition highlights the dynamic and relational nature of conflict, emphasizing that it occurs when there is a clash between the interests, actions, or goals of different parties. By taking this approach, Tedeschi and colleagues acknowledge the multifaceted nature of conflicts, providing a framework that recognizes the complexities and nuances involved in analyzing and resolving such situations.

Pondy (1967) proposed a compelling perspective that illuminates organizational conflict as a dynamic process intricately woven into the fabric of organizational behavior. Rather than viewing conflict as isolated incidents or mere disruptions, Pondy's insight emphasizes its inherent fluidity and constant presence within organizational interactions. By recognizing conflict as a dynamic force, managers and researchers can delve deeper into its origins, evolution, and consequences. This lens enables a more comprehensive understanding of how conflicts emerge, escalate, and eventually find resolution, shedding light on the complex interplay of individual and group dynamics that shape organizational functioning. In embracing Pondy's perspective, organizations can proactively address conflicts, harness their potential for positive change,

and foster a more harmonious and productive work environment. Conflict management is a comprehensive and structured approach aimed at addressing and mitigating disputes to foster positive behavioral changes. It involves a systematic and multifaceted strategy to tackle the root causes, visible symptoms, underlying dynamics, and potential transformation of conflicts. Through containment, settlement, and resolution techniques, conflict management endeavors to create a harmonious and cooperative environment, enabling individuals and groups to collaborate effectively and achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. By promoting open communication, empathy, and understanding, conflict management facilitates a constructive and productive path towards resolving conflicts and fostering positive relationships.

According to Nico and Ophillia (cited in Nwokike et al., 2021), service delivery per se entails the multifaceted process of efficiently and effectively providing services and products to the intended target customers, clients, or citizens. This intricate operation involves a series of interconnected stages, each playing a crucial role in ensuring that the needs and expectations of the recipients are met with utmost satisfaction. The first fundamental aspect of service delivery is meticulous planning and strategizing. By gaining a deep understanding of their demands and desires, service providers can tailor their offerings to cater precisely to those needs, thereby enhancing the overall customer experience. This requires a well-coordinated effort from various teams and departments working collaboratively to deliver the services and products seamlessly. Effective communication and synchronization are key to ensure that each element of the service delivery process aligns harmoniously, minimizing any potential disruptions and maximizing efficiency. In parallel with implementation, service providers must prioritize quality assurance. Rigorous quality checks and standards are put in place to guarantee that the delivered services and products consistently adhere to the highest levels of excellence. This not only ensures customer satisfaction but also builds trust and credibility for the service provider, leading to long-term loyalty and positive word-of-mouth referrals. Moreover, the timeliness of service delivery holds significant importance. Punctuality and meeting promised deadlines are crucial in demonstrating reliability and respect for the customers' time. Efficient delivery timelines can often be the differentiating factor between satisfied customers and disgruntled ones, making it a paramount consideration for service providers. Furthermore, exceptional customer service plays a pivotal role in the service delivery process. Beyond merely providing the core products or services, going the extra mile to address customer inquiries, concerns, and feedback is essential. Effective communication channels and attentive customer support foster a sense of care and attentiveness, reinforcing a positive relationship between the service provider and its clientele. In the era of digitalization, technology has become an integral part of modern service delivery. Integrating innovative solutions and digital platforms can streamline processes, enhance accessibility, and offer personalized experiences to customers. Embracing automation, data analytics, and artificial intelligence can significantly optimize service delivery, making it more agile and adaptive to ever-changing customer demands. Lastly, continuous improvement is vital in the realm of service delivery. Regular assessments and evaluations of the entire process allow for identifying areas of improvement and addressing potential shortcomings. By adopting a growth mindset and being open to refining their approaches, service providers can stay competitive and maintain their edge in the dynamic market landscape.

3. CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN NIGERIA PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

Conflict is a common phenomenon in public organizations, and understanding its causes is crucial for effective management and resolution. This discussion explores the various causes of conflict in Nigeria's public organizations (including Local government), categorizing them into non-structural and structural factors. Non-Structural Causes of Organizational Conflict: Non-structural causes refer to sources of conflict within an organization that are not directly related to its formal structure or authority relationships. Several factors fall under this category. Osabiya (2015) identified five possible causes of conflict in the Nigeria local government system as thus:

1. Differences in Background: One significant source of conflict arises from differences in employees' backgrounds, including age, education level, work experience, and social relations. These disparities can lead to interpersonal and inter-group conflicts, as individuals may find it challenging to collaborate effectively due to their varying characteristics. Employees from diverse backgrounds bring unique perspectives and experiences to the table, which can enrich problem-solving and creativity within an organization. However, when not properly managed, these differences can also become a source of tension and misunderstanding. For instance, younger employees might be more tech-savvy and open to innovative ideas, while older employees might rely on their experience and traditional methods. This generation gap can lead to conflicts over the adoption of new technologies or work practices. Moreover, employees with different education levels may have distinct approaches to analyzing and solving problems, which can cause clashes in decision-making processes.

Work experience can also play a role, as seasoned employees might be resistant to change, while newer employees might be more receptive to fresh ideas. These divergent attitudes can create friction during periods of organizational change or when implementing new strategies. Furthermore, differences in social relations, such as personal friendships or cliques within the workplace, can lead to favoritism or exclusion, resulting in resentment and hostility among employees. It is essential for leaders and managers to foster an inclusive and cohesive work environment, where diversity is celebrated, and individual strengths are leveraged to create a harmonious and productive atmosphere.

2. Difference in Values: Values deeply influence individuals' thoughts and actions. When conflicting values exist among employees, especially between professionals and bureaucratic staff, it can create tensions within the organization. Within an organization, conflicts may arise when employees' values clash with the organization's mission or with each other. For instance, professionals who prioritize creativity, innovation, and autonomy might clash with bureaucratic staff who emphasize rules, regulations, and adherence to established procedures. These value conflicts can lead to disputes over how tasks are performed, the allocation of resources, or even the overall direction the organization should take. It can also result in a lack of commitment to common goals and a breakdown in cooperation, hindering the organization's ability to achieve its objectives effectively.

3. Difference in Personal Traits/Behavior: Individuals within an organization may possess distinct 3. personality traits such as authoritarianism, dogmatism, aggressiveness, or distrust. These personality differences can contribute to conflicts, particularly when certain individuals are predisposed to oppose others on every issue. Conflicts may arise when employees with contrasting personality traits are required to work closely together or make joint decisions. For instance, an authoritarian individual who prefers strict control and order might clash with a more laid-back and easygoing coworker, leading to power struggles and communication breakdowns. Additionally, dogmatic individuals who are unwilling to consider alternative viewpoints may hinder constructive discussions and prevent innovative ideas from being explored. Aggressiveness in communication can lead to hostility and a toxic work environment, while high levels of distrust between colleagues can erode teamwork and create an atmosphere of suspicion.

4. Difference in Perceptions: Differing perceptions of reality among individuals and groups can be a significant source of interpersonal or inter-group conflict. When people perceive the same events or situations differently, it creates a gap in understanding and can lead to misinterpretations and clashes of opinions. Each person's unique experiences, beliefs, cultural background, and cognitive biases contribute to their individual lens through which they view the world. In interpersonal relationships, such differences in perceptions may give rise to conflicts over seemingly trivial matters, as each person's emotional responses and reactions are based on their own understanding of the situation. Moreover, in larger societal or organizational contexts, divergent perceptions between groups can fuel tension, competition, and mistrust. These conflicts stemming from varied perceptions hinder cooperation and joint decision-making. Without a shared understanding of the issues at hand, finding common ground or reaching mutually beneficial solutions becomes challenging. It may lead to a breakdown in communication and an escalation of conflicts, as each party struggles to make their viewpoint prevail.

5. Poor Communication Skills: Communication problems, including misunderstandings due to semantic differences or inadequate articulation of positions, can lead to conflicts between individuals or groups within an organization. Effective communication is the lifeblood of any successful relationship, whether personal or professional, and breakdowns in this process can have far-reaching consequences. Semantic differences, where different parties attach distinct meanings to the same words or phrases, can lead to confusion and misinterpretation. As a result, what one person intends to convey may not align with how the message is perceived by others. This can lead to unintended conflicts and frustration as the parties talk past each other, rather than arriving at a shared understanding. Furthermore, when individuals lack the necessary communication skills to express their thoughts and feelings clearly, their ideas may not receive the attention or consideration they deserve. This can breed a sense of being undervalued or unheard, creating resentment and discord among team members or stakeholders.

However, structural causes of conflict relate to the formal design and organization of tasks and authority relationships within an organization.

1. Work Interdependence: Organizational divisions of labor and task specialization often create interdependence among different units, meaning that the success and efficiency of one unit can be contingent on the smooth functioning of others. This interconnectedness can lead to both positive collaborative outcomes and potential conflicts. When units depend on one

another to complete their respective tasks, conflicts may arise due to differences in work approaches or timelines. For instance, if Unit A requires inputs from Unit B to meet a deadline, but Unit B faces delays or adopts a different approach, it can create friction and hinder overall productivity. Effective communication and coordination between units are crucial to managing such interdependence and resolving conflicts constructively.

2. Difference in Unit Orientation and Goals: In any organization, distinct units or departments often develop their specific goals and orientations as a result of differentiation and specialization. While this autonomy allows units to focus on their core responsibilities, it can also lead to conflicts between units, especially when their objectives diverge. For example, Marketing and Finance departments might clash when Marketing aims to invest more in aggressive advertising campaigns to boost short-term sales, while Finance prioritizes long-term financial stability. Such goal misalignment can cause tension and hinder cooperation. It becomes essential for the leadership to align the overall organizational mission and vision to ensure that individual unit goals are harmonious and contribute to the larger strategic objectives.

3. Difference in Performance Criteria and Reward System: Conflicts may arise if departments' work activities are evaluated based on different criteria or if the reward system disproportionately emphasizes individual departmental performance rather than collective organizational success. For instance, if the Sales team is solely rewarded based on revenue generation, they may focus on short-term gains without considering the implications for customer satisfaction or the long-term reputation of the organization. This could lead to conflicts with other departments, such as Customer Service, which may prioritize customer retention and loyalty over immediate sales figures. To mitigate such conflicts, organizations need to design performance evaluation systems that encourage collaboration and align individual objectives with the broader organizational goals. Reward structures should recognize both individual and cross-functional achievements, promoting a shared sense of success and fostering teamwork.

4. Mutual Dependence on Limited Resources: In the dynamic landscape of organizational environments, the availability of resources is often constrained, making resource allocation a critical challenge for managers and leaders. Whether it's financial capital, human resources, time, or even access to technology, these resources must be distributed among various departments to ensure the smooth functioning and achievement of organizational goals. However, the inherent scarcity of these resources can give rise to conflicts as different sub-units within the organization compete for a more substantial share to fulfill their respective objectives. Amidst this competition for limited resources, conflicts may arise due to differing priorities and preferences of departments. Each unit may argue that their projects or functions deserve priority over others, leading to tensions and potential disputes. The conflict can be exacerbated when departments perceive their objectives as being hindered or compromised by resource constraints, leading to an atmosphere of rivalry and discord.

5. Differences in Status: Within any organization, the division of labor and the inherent specialization of various units can lead to the emergence of differing status levels among these entities (Aggyris, 1994). Some departments may be perceived as more critical, influential, or prestigious than others, either due to the nature of their responsibilities or their direct impact on the organization's overall performance. The existence of such status disparities can become a potential trigger for conflicts between units. Departments with higher status might seek to maintain their dominance and secure a more significant share of resources, which could be viewed as unfair by those with lower status. Moreover, lower-status units may feel undervalued and underappreciated, leading to feelings of resentment and a desire to challenge the status quo.

Prevalent conflict management strategies utilized within the Nigerian local government system

Within the Nigerian local government system, conflict management strategies can play a crucial role in maintaining stability and promoting cooperation among various groups. Arnold (cited in Osabiya, 2015), identified four major types of conflict management strategies that can be utilized in the context of Nigerian public sectors.

1. **Avoidance:** This strategy involves attempting to prevent conflicts from surfacing altogether. It can be achieved by either ignoring the conflict or imposing a solution to suppress it. Avoidance may be appropriate for trivial conflicts or when quick action is needed to prevent a potentially serious conflict. However, the major problem with this technique is that the underlying issues are not addressed, and the conflict may resurface in the future. Repeated avoidance can lead to a buildup of unresolved issues, which might eventually explode into a more significant crisis. In the Nigerian context, this strategy could be used for minor disputes that can be quickly resolved without causing much disruption.

2. **Diffusion:** The diffusion strategy aims to deactivate conflicts by cooling off emotions and hostilities among the involved parties. This can be done by downplaying the importance of the conflict or emphasizing common goals that require cooperation from conflicting groups. This approach is suitable for temporary measures or when the conflicting parties share a mutually important goal. However, the risk with this technique is that unresolved issues may continue to simmer and eventually escalate into a major crisis. In Nigeria, this strategy might be applied in situations where tensions are high, and a temporary truce is needed to prevent further escalation.

3. **Containment:** Containment involves allowing some level of conflict to surface while carefully controlling the issues to be discussed and the resolution process. The problems and procedures may be structured, and representatives from the conflicting parties negotiate within the established framework. This approach is appropriate when open discussions have failed and when the conflicting groups are relatively equal in power. However, one drawback of containment is that it can result in one group consistently being at a disadvantage, even after a problem appears to be resolved. In the Nigerian local government system, containment could be employed when there is a need for structured negotiations between equal-power groups to find a middle ground.

4. **Confrontation:** At the other end of the conflict management continuum from avoidance, confrontation involves bringing all the issues into the open and directly confronting them to find a mutually satisfactory solution. This approach requires a minimum level of trust between the conflicting parties, ample time for resolution, and a shared understanding of the need for cooperation to achieve common goals effectively. In Nigeria, confrontation might be employed in more complex and deep-rooted conflicts, where direct engagement and problem-solving are necessary for sustainable resolution.

Alper et al., (cited in Omene, 2021) equally discussed various conflict management strategies that can be employed to address conflicts that may arise in Nigeria local government system.

1. **Accommodating:** The accommodating strategy is used when one party decides to give in to the demands or desires of the other party. This approach is often employed when maintaining peace and harmony is essential, or the issue at hand is considered minor. In the context of the Nigerian local government system, accommodating may occur when a local government official or department yields to the demands of another to prevent further escalation. For instance, if there is a dispute over the allocation of resources between two departments, one department may accommodate the other to maintain a cooperative atmosphere.

2. **Avoiding:** The avoiding strategy involves postponing or ignoring the conflict with the hope that it will resolve itself without direct confrontation. This strategy might be employed when the parties involved lack the power or confidence to address the issue directly. In the Nigerian local government system, avoiding conflict may occur when officials or stakeholders are hesitant to address controversial matters that could lead to political tension or adverse consequences. However, this strategy should be used judiciously, as long-term avoidance can lead to unresolved tensions and further complications.

3. **Collaborating:** Collaboration is a conflict resolution approach that emphasizes finding a mutually agreeable solution by integrating ideas from multiple parties. In the context of the Nigerian local government system, collaboration might be utilized during the formulation of policies, development projects, or resolving community-related issues. For example, if there is a disagreement between different community groups over the location of a public facility, collaborative efforts can bring all stakeholders together to reach a consensus.

4. **Compromising:** The compromising strategy involves both parties making concessions to reach a middle ground, where neither side gets everything they want, but both gain something. This approach is effective when the parties have relatively equal power and can negotiate on specific points. In the Nigerian local government system, compromising might be used during budget discussions, where different departments have competing needs, and a balanced budget must be agreed upon.

5. **Competing:** Competition is a conflict resolution strategy where one party's interests are pursued at the expense of the other party's interests. It is a win-lose approach and is often used in situations of emergencies or when quick, authoritative decisions are required. Within the Nigerian local government system, the competitive strategy might be employed during crisis management, where immediate action is needed to address an urgent issue that affects the well-being of the community.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The Nigerian local government system plays a crucial role in delivering essential services to citizens at the grassroots level. However, the effective delivery of services is hindered by various challenges, among which conflicts within the system stand out as significant impediments. This research has explored conflict management strategies employed within the Nigerian local government system and their impact on service delivery. The study identified several causes of conflicts in the Nigerian local government system, both non-structural and structural. Non-structural factors include differences in background, values, personal traits/behavior, perceptions, and poor communication skills. Structural factors encompass work interdependence, differences in unit orientation and goals, differences in performance criteria and reward systems, mutual dependence on limited resources, and differences in status. Understanding these underlying causes is crucial for implementing effective conflict resolution mechanisms. Various conflict management strategies prevalent within the Nigerian local government system were also examined. These strategies include avoidance, diffusion, containment, and confrontation. Each strategy has its strengths and limitations, and their effectiveness may vary depending on the specific context and nature of the conflict.

To improve service delivery in the Nigerian local government system, it is essential to address conflicts constructively and proactively. By implementing conflict management strategies such as collaboration, compromising, and accommodating, stakeholders can work together to find mutually beneficial solutions. Open communication, empathy, and understanding play key roles in successful conflict resolution. Furthermore, it is vital for the Nigerian local government system to continuously adapt conflict resolution approaches to the changing dynamics within society. As new challenges emerge, addressing conflicts will require up-to-date research and an understanding of the evolving societal, economic, and political landscape.

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