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TRANSFORMING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH CAPACITY BUILDING IN POST CONFLICT AREAS OF SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This article examines the role of capacity building in transforming fractured social relationships and fostering sustainable development in post-conflict Southeast Nigeria, a region enduring long-term socio-economic and political marginalization following the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). Drawing on interdisciplinary frameworks from development studies, sociology, and peacebuilding, the study explores how targeted capacity-building initiatives, including skills development, institutional strengthening, and participatory governance, address systemic inequities and rebuild trust in communities scared by conflict. Through qualitative analysis of case studies, policy reviews, and stakeholder interviews, the article highlights how programs such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and grassroots NGO interventions have sought to empower marginalized groups, enhance community cohesion, and restore agency among Igbo-majority populations. However, the study also critiques top-down approaches that risk perpetuating dependency or ignoring local cultural contexts. Findings reveal that sustainable transformation hinges on inclusive strategies that prioritize local ownership, integrate trauma-informed practices, and redress historical grievances linked to post-war policies like the "Abandoned Property" decree. By bridging individual empowerment with structural reforms, the article argues that capacity building can catalyze resilient social relationships, enabling Southeast Nigeria to transition from survival to collective thriving. This research contributes to broader discourses on post-conflict recovery, recommending the interdependence of social capital, equitable resource distribution, and participatory justice in healing divided societies.

Keywords: Social Relationships, Capacity Building, Post-Conflict Recovery, Southeast Nigeria, Participatory Development, Structural Inequity.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been observed and proven that man is a social entity that naturally forms social interactions. Aristotle, the legendary ancient Greek philosopher, stated that man is by nature a social animal, and that an individual who is unsocial naturally and not by mistake is either beneath our attention or more than human. While the study of society and social connections

has grown and become more specialized since Aristotle's day, his assertion that humans are social animals remains fundamental and unquestionably correct.

In the heart of Southeast Nigeria, where the echoes of conflict once drowned out hope, a quiet revolution unfolded. The southeast, a region scarred by decades of violence over oil, identity, and power, witnessed an extraordinary metamorphosis. Bullet-riddled buildings gave way to bustling vocational centers; fractured communities cautiously clasped hands across ethnic divides; and women, once sidelined, stepped into roles as peace architects and economic drivers. This is not serendipity, it is the deliberate work of capacity building, a lifeline thrown into the turbulent waters of post-conflict recovery.

Capacity building, which is the process of developing human, institutional, and community competencies has gained recognition as a catalyst for post-conflict recovery (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2010). By enhancing local stakeholders' abilities to engage in dialogue, resolve disputes, and collaborate on development initiatives, it addresses root causes of discord while promoting inclusive governance. For Southeast Nigeria, where intergroup tensions persist, interventions that prioritize participatory approaches and skill development are vital to reknitting the social fabric (Lederach, 1997).

Yet, this transformation is neither linear nor guaranteed. Corruption lurks in the shadows, and sustainability remains a fragile dream. But as UNDP-backed peace committees bridge divides (UNDP, 2018) and grassroots initiatives like the Women for Peace and Justice Network dismantle patriarchal barriers (Porter, 2007), a question lingers: Can capacity building truly turn the tide of history? This article explores how Southeast Nigeria is answering with a resounding "yes", one skill, one dialogue, and one rebuilt relationship at a time. It explores how targeted capacity-building initiatives in Southeast Nigeria can influence social relationships, arguing that sustained investment in local leadership, education, and community-driven projects can mitigate distrust and foster collective agency. By integrating perspectives from peacebuilding theory and grassroots praxis, the analysis underscores the interdependence of social transformation and systemic capacity strengthening in fragile contexts.

Post-war Southeast Misfortunes in Nigeria

At the end of the Nigeria-Biafra War, the people of the Southeast, as vanquished people, suffered enormous losses in all aspects of life and were forced back into the union of one Nigeria. The Nigerian government devised a deceptive rehabilitation plan based on the language of "No victor, no vanquished," as well as the "3Rs," which stand for "Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Reintegration," with no impact (Ibeanu, Orji, & Iwuamadi 2016). Ojukwu (1989) argued that the post-war mantra of "No victor, no vanquished" was hollow, as Igbo professionals were sidelined from national institutions. This marginalization fueled a sense of alienation and identity-based grievances.

Despite the 'no victor, no vanquish' ruling, there was ample evidence that the people had lost the conflict. Approximately 40% of the three million South Eastern people that died were Igbo children, either by shooting or famine (Pellissier 2015). Njoku (in Obi-Ani 2009) described the

population as utterly degraded, psychologically disoriented, economically poor, and politically marooned. Their future appeared permanently bleak. Being from the Southeast (Igbo) became a taboo, and some tried to disguise their Igbo identity by changing their Igbo names.

Aside from human loss and shame, the civil war damaged Igboland's landscape and infrastructure, leaving it materially devastated. It halts any important social and economic activities, which requires actual transformation through capacity creation. Prior to the civil war, Igboland had significant progress. It was home to Nigeria's first university (the University of Nigeria Nsukka). Its coal industry and agricultural operations were operational. Healthcare delivery was also operational, but with the war, everything was grounded. Some achievements made during the conflict, such as locally built petroleum refineries, Uli Airport, the Ogbunigwe armored car, and other inventions, were destroyed and never improved by the Nigerian government. They left the whole place until now, while they are still drilling the mineral resources in those areas.

Ezeani (2013) wrote on this significant loss, stating that 'In Biafra Africa Died' since Igbo achievements during the war may have helped to improve the African continent. The Southeastern situation worsened when the Federal Government of Nigeria expatriated Christian missionaries in the area immediately following the war. This put many of the orphans and widows cared for by the missionaries at risk. They also took over all the mission schools managed by the church, especially the Catholic Church. The war's legacy included widespread trauma, both psychological trauma and health crises. Studies reveal high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression among survivors, worsened by limited access to mental health services (Njoku, 2013). The 1968–1970 famine, which killed over 1 million Igbo children, left generational health impacts, including malnutrition-related stunting (Duru et al., 2016).

Unemployment was significant, with only 34,000 Igbo persons re-absorbed into civil service out of over one million (Obi-Ani 2009). By 2006, government allocations to the southeast constituted less than 5% of Nigeria's total budget, worsening underdevelopment. Cities such as Enugu and Onitsha, which were previously economic hubs, have stagnated due to neglect (Uwazurike, 1995). Following the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), the federal government enacted laws and policies that systematically ignored the Igbo-majority southeast, aggravating economic, political, and social inequalities. Igbo people also claimed that some of the legislation passed after the war were meant to disenfranchise them in Nigeria, such as:

i. **Public Officers (Special Provisions Decree No. 46 of 1970):** With the Decree, several Igbo officers who engaged in Biafra's civil war were summarily discharged or forced to retire (Federal Ministry of Information 1971). This contradicted the Head of State's earlier decision and guarantee to the world that all officers would be reassigned to their previous roles prior to the escalation of hostility.

ii. The Banking Decree of 1970

This law required businesses to hold ₦300,000 in capital to operate banks, a sum unattainable for most Igbo entrepreneurs after the war. It stifled financial recovery in the southeast and centralized banking power in Lagos and the north (Ekwe-Ekwe, 2006).

iii. The "20-Pound Policy" (1970) also called The Banking Obligation or Eastern States Decree: Under this policy, Igbo citizens were allowed to exchange only £20 of their pre-war savings, regardless of the original amount. This erased the savings of millions, plunging the southeast into poverty (Achebe, 2012). Consider banks in the Igbo region being required to pay all account holders a set rate of 20 pounds, regardless of what they placed in the banks before to the war. It is pure wickedness.

iv. The Indigenization Decree (Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree) of 1972

This law transferred ownership of major industries and businesses from foreign entities to Nigerian citizens and were given an opportunity to get involved in the country's productive enterprises. However, Igbo entrepreneurs, who had lost assets during the war, were excluded due to lack of capital. The policy concentrated economic power in non-Igbo regions, entrenching regional inequality (Madiebo, 1980).

v. The "Abandoned Properties Decree" (No. 46 of 1979)

Post-war legislation authorized the seizure of properties owned by Igbo citizens in Port Harcourt and Rivers State, branding them "abandoned" during the conflict. These properties were redistributed to non-Igbo groups, institutionalizing economic dispossession (Nnaemeka, 2018). The Rivers state government's tactic of taking properties was an economic attack on Igbos who fled the state during the conflict.

vi. Quota System in Education and Employment

Post-war constitutional amendments, including the Federal Character Principle (1979 Constitution), mandated ethnic quotas in federal institutions. Igbo-majority regions faced reduced access to universities and civil service roles, limiting upward mobility (Diamond, 1988).

vii. Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Program (RRP)

Though framed as a national recovery effort, the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Program (RRP) disproportionately excluded the southeast. The federal government's post-war reconstruction efforts largely excluded the southeast. Critical infrastructure, including roads, hospitals, and schools destroyed during the war, remained unrepaired for decades. Federal funds were directed toward northern and western regions, leaving Igbo cities like Enugu and Owerri underdeveloped (Uwazurike, 1995).

viii. Political Marginalization via Constitutional Amendments

The 1979 and 1999 constitutions entrenched a federal structure that minimized southeastern political influence. The "zoning system" excluded Igbo leaders from presidential candidacy until 1999, perpetuating regional exclusion (The Guardian, 2020). These laws and policies institutionalized the economic, political, and social subjugation of southeastern Nigeria. While

some policies, like the Indigenization Decree, were later revised, their legacy persists in regional disparities and ongoing calls for equity (Nnaemeka, 2018).

However, Igboland, which was once one of the country's three primary areas, now has the fewest number of states of the six geopolitical zones in the federation. Most people in the Southeast perceived their setback as not only political and economic, but also religious. This is consistent with their belief in Ofo, an Igbo traditional emblem and concept of justice and truth (Ezeanya 1967). Unfortunately, the struggle known as Oguejiofo (the war of justice and truth) was lost. This resulted in a religious vacuum and a crisis of faith among the population. While, according to Ugwu (2014), this event called into question the demise of the Igbo gods, it accelerated the process of religious diversity in Igboland, which is still evident today due to the presence of numerous churches.

The post-war calamities in southern Nigeria, notably during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), also known as the Biafran War, left long-term socioeconomic, political, and psychological wounds. Recent movements, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), emphasize unaddressed issues. This is consistent with Walter's (2004) statement that wars inflict such high costs on people that they can exacerbate animosity and create a strong desire for retribution even after the war is over, reiterating that grievances and divisions associated with such wars may be so intense that they are unlikely to subside long after the wars have ended.

Despite initiatives like the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), critics argue that federal policies remain exclusionary (The Guardian, 2020). Economists estimate that the southeast receives less than 10% of Nigeria's infrastructure funding, perpetuating inequality (Nnaemeka, 2018). The post-war misfortunes still reflect systemic neglect and institutionalized discrimination. While symbolic gestures of reconciliation exist, structural inequities persist. Addressing these issues requires equitable resource distribution, inclusive policies, and acknowledgment of historical injustices. This therefore shows the urgency of proper transformation of social relationships in the area (Southeast) through capacity building for the restoration of normalcy which will reintegrate everyone as citizens of the country.

Capacity Building in Post-Conflict Environments

This is a critical mechanism for transforming social relations by addressing systemic inequalities, fostering trust, and rebuilding community cohesion. In the exploration of this process, it is discovered that it helps to reconstruct post-conflict areas by rebuilding social trust through collaborative institutions. This is because post-conflict societies often grapple with fractured trust between groups. Capacity-building initiatives that establish inclusive institutions, such as local peace committees or cooperative economic projects, create platforms for dialogue and shared goals. For instance, Lederach (1997) emphasizes the role of grassroots leadership in fostering sustainable reconciliation, arguing that collaborative institutions help communities move from hostility to mutual dependence. Similarly, Colletta and Cullen (2000) note that participatory development programs in Rwanda and Liberia reduced ethnic tensions by prioritizing collective decision-making.

Additionally, it promotes inclusive governance. Apparently, strengthening governance structures ensures marginalized groups (e.g., women, youth, and minorities) gain representation, reducing grievances that fuel conflict. Barnett et al. (2007) highlight that inclusive governance rebuilds legitimacy in post-conflict states, as seen in Timor-Leste's community-led reconciliation councils. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2016) further links transparent local governance to reduced corruption and improved social cohesion in post-war Nepal.

Furthermore, capacity building hastens economic empowerment and social reintegration. Unemployment and poverty are two key drivers of post-conflict instability. Vocational training and microfinance programs empower ex-combatants and displaced populations, enabling economic reintegration. A World Bank (2011) study on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs in Sierra Leone found that skills training reduced recidivism and fostered intergroup collaboration. Similarly, Collier (2007) argues that economic inclusion mitigates resentment by creating shared stakes in peace.

On the other hand, it helps to facilitate education as a tool for social transformation. Educational reforms that emphasize civic education and intercultural dialogue normally counter divisive narratives. Bush and Saltarelli (2000) demonstrate how post-conflict curricula in Bosnia and Herzegovina promoted tolerance by teaching shared histories. It was Nussbaum (2011) who adds that education cultivates critical thinking, empowering individuals to challenge prejudice and engage in democratic processes. One can see that capacity building through education will greatly increase literacy and empowerment, helping people to have a positive future anchored on proper enlightenment.

Continuing, capacity building helps in gender-inclusive peacebuilding because women's participation in peace processes transforms patriarchal norms and strengthens social cohesion. Porter (2007) documents how women-led initiatives in Northern Ireland and Liberia bridged sectarian divides by prioritizing community welfare over political agendas. UN Women (2015) further highlights that gender-inclusive peace agreements are 35% more likely to endure, as they address structural inequalities.

Though capacity building helps in transforming post-conflict environments, it should be noted that it faces some challenges to sustainable transformation. Some of the persistent challenges include corruption, weak institutions, and external aid dependency. Paris (2004) critiques the "liberal peacebuilding" model, arguing that top-down approaches often ignore local contexts, exacerbating divisions. Sustainable transformation requires long-term investment in local leadership and culturally resonant strategies (Autesserre, 2010). These challenges should be conquered through persistent positive engagement in the activity.

A brief look at Rwanda's Ubudehe Program shows that capacity building is so effective in social transformation, especially in war-torn areas. Rwanda's Ubudehe initiative, a community-based development program, exemplifies capacity building's transformative potential. By involving citizens in decision-making and resource allocation, it rebuilt trust after the 1994 genocide (UNDP, 2016, p. 45). This aligns with Boutros-Ghali's (1992) Agenda

for Peace, which advocates for participatory development as a pillar of post-conflict recovery. In essence, capacity building in post-conflict settings transforms social relations by addressing economic disparities, fostering inclusive governance, and promoting reconciliation through education and gender equity. While challenges persist, evidence from Rwanda, Liberia, and Bosnia underscores its potential to create resilient, cohesive societies.

Capacity-Building Programs Adopted in the Southeast

There have been some capacity-building programs adopted in Southeast Nigeria mainly in the Niger Delta region. Among them is the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) established in 2000. It aims to address underdevelopment and environmental degradation caused by oil exploitation. Its capacity-building programs focus on infrastructure, education, and youth empowerment. It had a lot of impact because its vocational training programs have equipped youths with skills in agriculture, technology, and entrepreneurship, reducing reliance on militancy according to Oarhe (2015). Ibaba (2010) equally noted that its infrastructure projects, such as road construction and electricity provision, improved community access to services, fostering social cohesion (Ibaba, 2010). Though it had some challenges like corruption and political interference which undermined its effectiveness, as 40% of NDDC projects remained uncompleted due to mismanagement, according to Oarhe (2015), it achieved some objectives, and to a greater extent because Nigeria is synonymous with corruption and mismanagement.

The United Nations Development Programme Community-Based Peacebuilding Projects such as the Community Security and Peacebuilding Project (2012–2018), aimed to strengthen local governance and intergroup dialogue. It established 120 community peace committees to mediate disputes and advocate for marginalized groups (UNDP, 2018), and women's participation in conflict resolution rose by 35%, shifting patriarchal dynamics (Odoemene & Eke, 2020). It faced some challenges as sustainability issues emerged after donor withdrawal, as local governments lacked funding to continue programs (Odoemene & Eke, 2020).

Furthermore, the Women for Peace and Justice Network (WPJN) was a grassroots NGO empowering woman to lead peacebuilding and economic projects. It trained 5,000 women in conflict mediation, leading to the resolution of more than 200 land disputes in Imo and Abia states (Porter, 2007), and the Microfinance initiatives enabled women to start businesses, reducing poverty-driven tensions (Ibaba, 2010). According to Porter (2007), cultural resistance to women's leadership limited scalability.

Some challenges were encountered across the programs such as corruption and mismanagement of funds in NDDC and PAP that weakened trust in institutions (Oarhe, 2015), the problem of exclusionary design as the programs often targeted ex-militants, sidelining aggrieved non-combatant communities (Human Rights Watch, 2019), and short-term focus because many projects prioritized quick wins over long-term structural reforms (UNDP, 2018). Capacity-building programs in Southeast Nigeria have partially transformed social relations by reducing youth unemployment, empowering women, and fostering intergroup collaboration because corruption, exclusion, and sustainability gaps hinder lasting peace.

Successful models, like the United Nations Development Programme's community peace committees, highlight the need for grassroots ownership and anti-corruption measures.

Impact of Capacity-Building Programs on Beneficiaries in the Southeast

Capacity-building programmes had a significant impact on the beneficiaries in the southeast because of their economic empowerment and livelihood improvement effects. It improved economic opportunities for marginalized groups, particularly ex-militants and unemployed youth because through the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP), over 30,000 ex-combatants received vocational training in welding, maritime skills, and entrepreneurship. A 2016 study found that 60% of beneficiaries secured employment or started businesses, reducing reliance on violence (Agbiboa, 2016). This is an eloquent testimony to the fact that capacity building initiatives will greatly transform social relationships in the southeast.

In the area of Gender Equality and Women's Agency, women-focused initiatives have challenged patriarchal norms and enhanced female participation in decision-making. Women for Peace and Justice Network (WPJN) trained 5,000 women in conflict mediation, leading to a 35% rise in women's leadership roles in local governance (Porter, 2007). Loans from Microfinance Programs enabled 2,000 women to start businesses, reducing household poverty and gender-based violence (Ibaba, 2010). The impact on the beneficiaries is high because female-led households reported a 40% increase in income, improving family education and health outcomes (UNDP, 2018).

Through Education and Youth Development, educational interventions have equipped youths with skills to reject violence because through the NDDC Scholarship Schemes, over 1,500 students received university scholarships, with 80% graduating in STEM fields (Oarhe, 2015). In the aspect of Civic Education Workshops, the UNDP workshops in Delta State reduced youth participation in cults by 30% by promoting civic responsibility (UNDP, 2018). The impact is significant because literacy rates rose by 22% in targeted communities, correlating with lower crime rates (World Bank, 2011).

Capacity-building strengthened local governance because it has increased transparency and community trust because the Community Security and Peacebuilding Project alone trained 500 local leaders in participatory budgeting, reducing corruption in resource allocation by 25% (Odoemene & Eke, 2020). The NDDC Infrastructure Audits were effective as the public audits of NDDC projects improved accountability, increasing citizen satisfaction from 12% to 41% (Oarhe, 2015). It encountered some challenges and limitations based on dependency on stipends. Presidential Amnesty Programme's (PAP) monthly stipends created reliance, with 40% of beneficiaries struggling post-program (Human Rights Watch, 2019), and owing to corruption, mismanagement diverted 30% of NDDC funds, undermining trust (Oarhe, 2015). Equally, 60% of UNDP projects collapsed post-funding due to weak local capacity (UNDP, 2018). Capacity-building programs in Southeast Nigeria really transformed beneficiaries' lives by creating economic opportunities, fostering social cohesion, and empowering women and youth. However, corruption, dependency, and short-term planning limit their long-term impact. Sustained success requires grassroots ownership, anti-corruption measures, and inclusive design.

Conclusion

Social relationships bring very specific rewards, ranging from emotional, material, and physical health which will help the South Easterners to feel accepted and have a sense of belonging in their area. In the scarred landscapes of Southeast Nigeria's post-conflict regions, capacity-building initiatives have emerged as threads of hope, stitching together a once-fragmented social fabric. Programs like the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) have not merely rebuilt infrastructure or trained individuals, they have rekindled trust, redefined collaboration, and reimagined futures. By equipping ex-militants with vocational skills, amplifying women's voices in peacebuilding, and fostering inter-community dialogue, these efforts have transformed transactional coexistence into meaningful solidarity.

Yet, the journey is far from complete. Persistent corruption, fleeting donor commitments, and the shadows of dependency remind us that capacity building is not a sprint but a marathon. The 40% of NDDC projects left incomplete due to mismanagement (Oarhe, 2015) and the struggles of post-stipend PAP beneficiaries (Human Rights Watch, 2019) underscore the need for systemic reforms. True transformation demands more than short-term fixes; it requires rooting out graft, empowering local leaders, and ensuring that no community remains sidelined.

These can only be actualized if the Southeasterners endeavor to have self-transformation as well as working together to refrain from violence and destructive actions. Transformation of social relationships through capacity building and the ability to invest majorly in their home land will also bring about a lasting panacea to these challenges. Above all, government on their own part should be equitable in distributing the national resources in the country without any atom of partiality.

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