



An Assessment of the Role of African Diaspora in Peace-Building in Nigeria's Niger Delta and Tiv Area, 1999-2002

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Abstract

The role of transnational migrant groups in peace processes is a particular area of field research within the broad area of studies on migration. This article examines the contribution of the African Diaspora of Nigerian origin to peace-building in Nigeria. The paper argues and demonstrates that, contrary to recent findings in the literature that African Diaspora had a negative impact on peace processes, the diaspora communities are a potential force for peace-building initiatives in their home country. The paper concludes that although peace-building poses challenge far beyond the diasporas' capacity, however well-meaning they might be, diaspora groups or members influence the situation in their homeland in different ways that engenders enduring peace. Essentially, the paper adopts a historical cum qualitative method of analysis, employing descriptive tools to arrive at a conclusion.

Keywords: African Diaspora, Migrant Groups, Peacebuilding, Nigeria

Introduction

Worldwide, the quest for sustainable peace and security has continued to bother the minds of all stakeholders, including international organizations, governments, security agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and grassroots organizations, among several others.¹ It should be stressed that Nigeria has had numerous conflicts and presently the problem is not abated but rather on the increase. This has caused untold suffering for the people and also taken a huge toll on the development of the country. Nigeria, particularly the northeast region, has become locations for some of the deadliest and most protracted conflicts. This calls for appropriate research in this area to provide lasting solutions to the problem.

Over the last decade, researchers have paid increasing attention to studying Diasporas as a source of largely untapped potential. Their transnational nature and peculiar position as non-state actors linking host and home countries have been identified as an important basis for engagement. Vorrath asserts that the growing interest in Diasporas is also an expression of larger trends in research and policy-making: (a) the emphasis on transnational processes and groups in a post-national, globalised era, and (b) the shift from a state-centred view to a stronger focus on civil society as an actor, especially in the context of state fragility.²

¹ I. Abdulrahman and U.A. Tar "Conflict Management and Peace building in Africa: The Role of State and Non-State Agencies" in *Information, Society and Justice*, Vol.1, No.2, 2008, p.185.

² J. Vorrath "Engaging African Diasporas for Peace: Cornerstones for an Emerging EU Agenda" European Union: Institute for Security Studies Occasional Paper, July 2021, p.7.



Suffice it to say that Diaspora groups from Nigeria are not only a relevant force but come from a homeland that has experienced or are still facing armed conflict. Against this background, this article interrogates the place of the African Diaspora in peacebuilding in Nigeria and how the European Union can engage with African Diasporas in the field of peace and security. In order to achieve this aim, the paper is divided into six sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two is the conceptual overview of the two concepts, African Diaspora and peacebuilding, used in the study. Section three attempts a historical analysis of peacebuilding initiatives in Nigeria, while section four interrogates the role of the African Diaspora in peacebuilding in Nigeria, specifically referencing the Niger-Delta and Tiv areas of Nigeria. Section five discusses and concludes the issue under scrutiny.

African Diaspora and Peace Building: A Conceptual Analysis

The concepts used in this paper that deserve in-depth clarification are the concepts of African Diaspora and peacebuilding. According to Oucho, the term “African Diaspora” was first used in 1965 at the International Congress of African History held at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, when George Shepperson drew two important parallels of the dispersal of Africans caused by slavery and imperialism to the experience of the Jews. Shepperson underlined the movement of enslaved people to Europe before the Atlantic and Islamic slave trade and the dispersal of Africans inside their continent due to the slave trade and imperialism, respectively.³

Definitions and characterization of Diaspora vary by disciplines and by the Diaspora’s expectations, on the one hand and the identified homeland on the other. A world-renowned diaspora scholar provides a taxonomy consisting of nine features: (i) dispersed (often traumatic) from the homeland; (ii) self-exiles in search of work, trade or colonial ambitions; (iii) a collective memory and myth concerning the homeland; (iv) an idealization of the homeland; (v) a return movement; (vi) a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a period of time; (vii) an uneasy relationship with the “host” society; (viii) a sense of solidarity with co-members of the in other states; and (ix) the possibility of a positive experience in the host country.⁴ Arising from the backdrop of the foregoing, the term diaspora is used in this study to mean people of African descent residing outside Africa or in countries other than their own within Africa as citizens and permanent or temporary residents engaging in circulation as well as transnational lifestyles.⁵

The concept of peace-building, on the other hand, has been variously described and defined by scholars of conflict and peace studies resulting in the emergence of different perspectives. Elsewhere,⁶ it has been argued that one of the greatest shortcomings of contemporary peace processes is that they often fail to address the bitterness, including the memories and images and the sources that generate it thereby making the idea concept of peace-building contentious. While some see peace-building as post-conflict reconstruction, others view it as a programme initiated by governments, individuals and/or non-governmental organizations in order to bring lasting peace to a warring country. Nevertheless, we will not allow much debate on the concept of peace-building to

³ J.O. Oucho “The ethnic factor in internal displacement of population in sub-Saharan Africa” in *African Journal of Political Science* 2 (2), 1997, p.104.

⁴ R. Cohen *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: University College London Press), 1997, p.180.

⁵ J.O. Oucho “The African Diaspora and Homeland Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Sub-Saharan Africa” Conference on African Transnational and Return Migration in the Context of North-South Relations at the University of Warwick, United Kingdom on 29 - 30 June 2009, p.5

⁶ M.I. Gawerc “Peace-Building: Theoretical and Concrete Perspectives” in *Peace and Change*, 2006, p. 437



detain us here. Rather, we will adopt a workable definition of peace-building that will help us understand the problem statement. As such, peace-building is conceptualized here to mean specific tasks that might derive from a comprehensive peace agreement, such as helping to disarm the parties and repatriating refugees through far broader and less tangible objectives, such as the restoration of order and advancing efforts to protect human rights. It also includes the various concurrent and integrated actions undertaken at the end of a conflict in order to consolidate and prevent a recurrence of armed confrontation.

Overview of Peace-Building Initiatives in Nigeria

Conflicts took different forms in Nigeria. First, coup d'état took place, leaving in its wake counter-overthrows of government; civil war and ethno-religious conflicts, and in recent times, terrorism, farmers/herders conflicts, and banditry, among others. The state functions as a conflict manager in managing the diversity of these conflicts and human needs and putting in place mechanism for managing disputes. In line with this development, several programmes and policies are deployed by the Nigerian government with a view to managing potential conflict amongst groups seeking access to the state resources and power. The following are some of the government action plans for peace being used over the years since the end of the civil war in Nigeria as captured by Abdulrahman and Tar:

- Administrative units were created after the civil war by splitting the four regions in Nigeria (North, East, West and Mid-Western regions) into twelve states to make administration closer to the people. Since then, the government has employed that as a strategy for peace by creating more states, local governments, districts and wards. This strategy has tended to be negative in a number of cases where such a decision turned to cause conflict within or between communities.
- The introduction of the National Youths Service Scheme for young graduates not older than thirty years is a programme that was well intended to promote peaceful coexistence through cross-cultural knowledge and appreciation of the geographical dynamics of the country. Corps members are posted to states for service other than theirs. This programme, in some cases, has led to corps members having to live in other parts of the country to work and marry from other ethnic groups. Through this programme, a number of beneficiaries have modified their basis against other ethnic groups.
- The establishment of Federal Unity Colleges aims to promote national integration and cross-cultural orientation among young Nigerians.
- The introduction of a geopolitical quota system and federal character criteria for government employment to reduce the risk of domination and create room for representation.
- The establishment of Federal Ministries in all state capitals to promote a mix grills of ethnic and cultural groups. Staff from salary grade level seven is employed from any part of the country.
- The representational spread of federal establishments such as universities, federal civil service offices, military barracks, etc, to bring government and its services close to the people.
- Peace and security committees are established at the federal, state and local government levels.⁷

The above and several other initiatives at peacebuilding both by individuals, civil society organizations, religious and socio-cultural organizations, non-governmental organizations, and the

⁷ I. Abdulrahman and U.A. Tar "Conflict Management and Peace-building in Africa: The Role of State and Non-state Agencies" in *Information, Society and Justice*, Vol.1, No.2, 2008, pp.191 - 192.



internal community, have been put in place to ensure sustained peace in Nigeria. Be that as it may, whether these efforts have yielded fruitful results or not are not within the purview of this study and cannot be considered here. Our concern here is to mention these peace-building initiatives put in place by different platforms to give us a clue to investigate the role of the African diaspora, if any, as a transnational civil society in building peace in Nigeria. There is a caveat here: the peace-building initiatives in Nigeria as examined above are not by any means exhaustive. The ones expound is only to serve as a guide for us to investigate peace-building initiatives in Nigeria, especially by the African diaspora.

African Diaspora and Peace Building in Nigeria's Niger-Delta and Tiv Areas, 1999-2002

The Nigeria's Niger-Delta region is inundated with a series of crises orchestrated by militancy. Since the discovery of petroleum oil in the region and perceived government neglect of the peoples of the region in terms of development, crises of marginalization manifest in militancy resonates in the region for the umpteenth time making the region volatile. Blanchard and Husted argue that despite extensive petroleum resources, its human development indicators are among the world's lowest, and a majority of the population faces extreme poverty. In the south, social unrest, criminality, and corruption in the oil-producing Niger Delta have hindered oil production and contributed to piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. Thus, perceived government neglect and economic marginalization have fueled resentment in the area.⁸This crisis has taken a toll on the country's oil region which most often threatens the corporate existence of the country. Militants in the region organize themselves in solidarity groups and most often master-mind bunkering, kidnappings and several other uncivilized actions with the aim of attracting government attention in the region. These actions usually result in a crisis of catastrophic dimensions witnessed over time. In fact, it is no longer news that the Niger-Delta region of the country has become a theatre of raging conflict over the years. The crisis in the region has attracted attention from both the national government and the international community, thus attracting intervention from the Nigerians in the diaspora, as will be examined soon.

In the Tiv area of Benue state, although the area has been peaceful until fairly recently following the Zaki-Ibiam massacre of 2001. This was following the incessant crisis involving the Juku ethnic group in Taraba state and the Tiv people of Benue state, informing military intervention that led to Zaki-Ibiam massacre by the Nigerian military in 2001. The crisis, apart from displacing a large number of Tiv population, led to the destruction of lives and properties worth millions of naira. This gruesome attack on the Tiv ethnic group by the Nigerian military witnessed wide condemnation from concerned civil society groups within and outside Nigeria. It was on the basis of its condemnation that Nigerians in the diaspora, especially the association of Tiv people in North America under the auspices of Mutual Union of Tiv in America (MUTA) reacted to ensure lasting peace after the crisis.

These types of conflicts, as pointed out, are complex problems that the post-conflict government tries to resolve in cooperation with development partners and other well-wishers, and in which Diasporas tend to be heavily involved. Post-conflict reconstruction bears features of peace, justice and reconciliation where their opposite numbers had reigned and is a process that unfolds at different paces in equally different settings. A country's nationals involved in post-conflict

⁸LP. Blanchard and T.F. Husted "Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy" in Congressional Research Service, 2019, p.1. retrieved online from <https://crsreports.congress.gov>



reconstructions include those in the homeland vis-à-vis the Diasporas, former perpetrators of violence and their victims, ex-combatants turned peace-setters and those who, though never part of the foregoing, feel obliged to change fortunes in their homeland. Given the diversity, orientation and challenges facing, as well as opportunities for, the African Diasporas in post-conflict reconstruction, it is prudent to provide but samples of such engagement. Mohamoud identifies four critical areas through which they interact with their homeland including the dynamics of policy interest, namely remittance and conflict in the homeland, political involvement in the homeland, civic-oriented involvement in the homeland and lobbying in the host country.⁹ In this connection, Ionesco views Diasporas not just as development partners but as manifold capital for both countries of origin and countries of destination.¹⁰

Evidence abounds on the African diaspora's contribution to peace-building in home countries. For example, the Washington DC Peace Conference on the Warri Crisis was convened by U.S.-based Nigerian scholars with ethnic affinity to the three warring ethnic groups involved in the Warri crisis, namely, Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo. The Conference took place at Howard University, Washington DC, on July 24, 1999. The trigger for the conference was the eruption of violence between the Ijaws and the Itsekiri communities in Warri, in mid-1999. While the matter of Local Government creation in the city was the immediate cause of the violent confrontation between these two groups, it was realized that any peace initiative must embrace the Urhobos, the other major claimant to the ownership of Warri, but not involved in the particular crisis when it erupted.¹¹ Although, this laudable initiative to find a solution to an inter-communal war in the country of origin through an inter-communal conference made up of delegates from the Diaspora, it is said, did not achieve much success due to the inability to transcend the paradigms on which the conflict had been interpreted by the contending ethnic groups.¹² While the Washington DC Conference on the Warri crisis failed to meet its set objective in this regard, it, however, offers some useful ideas on how Diaspora groups approach the inter-communal crisis in their homelands.

In the Tiv area of Benue State, Ambe-Uva¹³ captures another effort by Diaspora communities in the peace-building process in Nigeria. In the analysis, the author captures the contribution of diaspora of the Tiv ethnic group in the USA under the umbrella organization (Mutual Union of Tiv in America) to peace-building in Nigeria. The author reveals that the Mutual Union of the Tiv in America (MUTA), a Tiv-diaspora organization. Registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit and non-partisan organization, MUTA is the umbrella organization for the Tiv diaspora, with over 200 Tiv residing in North America, which provides a forum where members can assemble and discuss issues concerning their people across the world, but especially back in Nigeria.¹⁴ Although MUTA does not explicitly have peace-building as its main objective, it got involved in peace processes, especially during the Zaki-Biam Massacre of 2001 perpetrated by the Nigerian military.

⁹ A.A. Mohamoud "African Diaspora and Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Africa", DIIS Brief. Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark, February 2006, p.4.

¹⁰ D. Ionescu *Engaging Diasporas as Development Partners for Home and Destination Countries: Challenges for Policymakers* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration), 2006, p.40.

¹¹ M. Abutudu and C. Emuedo "The Diaspora and Conflicts" in ECOWAS and the Dynamics of Conflict and Peace-Building: ECOWAS.pmd, 2011, pp.125-127.

¹² M. Abutudu and C. Emuedo "The Diaspora and Conflicts"...2011, p.25.

¹³ T. Ambe-Uva "Looking Beyond Conflict: The Involvement of Tiv Diaspora in Peacebuilding in Nigeria" in *Journal of Conflictology*, Vol.2, Issue 1, 2011, pp.1-9

¹⁴ T. Ambe-Uva "Looking Beyond Conflict: The Involvement of Tiv Diaspora in Peacebuilding in Nigeria"...2011, p.5.



The response of the Tiv diaspora community to the military incursion into Benue State stemmed from the long-held belief of the Tiv and other groups that the ethnic group was a victim of state-sponsored violence. While reaffirming their support for the Federal Republic of Nigeria, based on the current ethnic crises involving Tiv and Jukun people that informed the military invasion of the Zaki-Baki axis of the Tiv area, the MUTA issued a categorical statement that the Tiv were peace-loving and law-abiding people, wanting to live peacefully with all their neighbours.¹⁵ In a memorandum submitted to the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the Inter-communal Conflicts in Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba States, in March 2002, the Tiv diaspora group argued that a fair and unbiased verdict of the Commission would *inter-alia* protect and enforce the fundamental and inalienable rights of citizenship, lives and property of the Tiv people. The diaspora acknowledged that certain issues had to be addressed, to find lasting and fair solutions to the crises in these states, related to citizenship rights, the role of the Army/Security forces in the crises, marginalization of Tiv populations, and the illegal build-up of arms in the rural areas and the role of the Federal Government in the crises. On many occasions, the Tiv diaspora has called on the Tiv nation to positively and purposively engage both the Jukun and the Federal Government in establishing longstanding peace, as well as participating itself in peace processes, democratization and development initiatives in Nigeria.¹⁶ This contributed to bringing a solution to the age-long conflict in the Tiv area, especially with their Jukunneighbours.

From the few examples given in this analysis, it is clear to stress the potential of the diaspora communities in contributing to peace processes in Nigeria. Arising from the above, therefore, there is a need to tap into the intellectual resources, information, innovative ideas, networks, and human capital of the Nigerian diaspora for the promotion of peace and stability in Nigeria. It must be mentioned in passing that, for peace between the three parties, there is a need for the diaspora community to insist on an integrated approach linking peace-building with the democratisation of power for better governance in Nigeria the near future. This strategy is very important as this will increase the effectiveness of the intervention.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Peace-building poses challenges far beyond the diasporas' capacity, however well-meaning they might be. Vorrath¹⁷ suggests that diaspora groups or members can try to influence the situation in the homeland in different ways. Their activities may be political, economic, or socio-cultural and are directed mostly at the host or the home country. For example, fundraising, remittance transfers, investments, trade, information sharing and exchange via websites, knowledge transfer, training, 'social remittances', mediation, advocacy and lobbying, promotion of public (international) opinion, campaigning, protests, etc. These activities have a transfer or bridging function and can be pursued either individually or collectively via informal or formal organizations.

In the present globalized world, diaspora communities have the resources and knowledge needed to build social, economic and political bridges through transnational networks. Accordingly, as can be seen from the analysis, the Tiv diaspora, a constituent of the Nigerian diaspora, can be a bridge-builder between conflicting members of Nigerian society. As such, these groups must have a proactive role in ensuring that sustainable peace and development pervades their nation. For example, because of being in the USA and Canada and in EU countries, the Nigerian Diasporas can

¹⁵ T. Ijir "Terrorism and Ethnic Cleansing Against the Tiv in Nigeria". in *Vanguard*, 28 November 2001, p.3

¹⁶ Ambe-Uva "Looking Beyond Conflict: The Involvement of Tiv Diaspora in Peacebuilding in Nigeria"...2011, p.6.

¹⁷ J. Vorrath "Engaging African Diasporas for Peace: Cornerstones for an Emerging EU Agenda"...2021, p.13.



build up and tap the benefits from vast transnational social, economic and political networks. There are three areas where the Nigerian Diasporas can contribute to shaping a viable Nigeria in the short, medium and long terms. These are the promotion of peace, the inculcation of democratic political habits and development.

Arising from the above analysis, this paper proposes that the seemingly increasing wave of violent conflicts in Nigeria does not indicate the lack of structure or human agency to address them. Governmental and Non-governmental Organizations and networks are responding to the conflict issues, even though there is a lack of synergy between Government and Non-Governmental Organizations. In the context of this research, this disconnect may partly result from government suspicion of, and adversarial approach towards an increasingly vibrant NGO sector. It is, therefore, pertinent that government should liaise with its people in the diaspora on issues of peace-building and bringing lasting solutions to conflicting issues in the country.