Mapping out the historical role of food in conflict resolution: an African perspective 1994 – 2000

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Abstract

Objective: This paper takes a historical examination of the role of food in conflict resolution, using the Nsobo/Ikwo communal dispute from 1994-2004.
Methods: Mankind has used various methods both mechanized and un-mechanized methods in getting food for survival. Various methods of getting food and adverse effects of conflict on food abundance for man are discussed here.
Findings: In African localities, food induced conflicts have increased astronomically than conflicts caused by other factors. Ironically, some of these conflicts were resolved using food as the only means of negotiation. Conflict caused by the scarcity of food has the likelihood of degenerating into violent conflict with high proportion of internally displaced persons, refugeeism, and instability on political system, government programs and policies.
Application: This work suggest that food or food related factors have caused several wars fought within the African horns due to tribal politics, ethnic cleansing, bad leadership, weak political system drought, famine and poor agricultural harvests. Basically, these threats can lead to war, malnutrition and refugeeism that spurred the international community to quickly give a helping hand and therefore introduced World Emergence Food Programme in order to ameliorate these food related crises.
Keywords: Food, Conflict, Africa, War and Man.

1. Introduction

Over the years, food has become an essential part of life and human existence. The importance of food to man justifies the axiom that "food is life" and therefore, mankind needs food to continue his/her existence. The invasion of Africa by the Europeans in the early period of the 15th century was to exploit the African resources and develop Europe while attempts on this exploitation led to colonial wars. Again the German invasion of Poland and the attempt on Sovietization of Eastern Europe had economic implications that led to the outbreak of Second World War because when you invade an area, you conquer its people and establish authority over them and manage their resources. In Africa, we have had records of land disputes that turned to all out wars. In 1993, there was a land dispute between Aguleri and Umuleri over the ownership of Otuocha land in Anambra East Local Government of Anambra State. Hence, M. Abada opines that the struggle for the exclusive ownership of Otuocha land led to the violent clashes between Aguleri and Umuleri communities [1]. As posited by E. Isichei that the role of land dispute is very much marked in the history of those wars. Much value was not attached to Otuocha land by any of the two communities of Aguleri and Umuleri at the initial stage, but as the 20th century progressed, each community began to value the area and efforts intensified to claim the ownership of the area [2].

In 1983 – 1985, the food crises that hit Ethiopia in the 1980s claimed hundreds of thousands of lives due to high rate of famines witnessed in the country [3]. In 2005, there was a failed harvests caused by drought in 2005 Malawian food crisis in the South-eastern African country of Malawi. Between 2005 and 2006, failed harvests resulted in food insecurity in many regions of West Africa, while Niger was hit the most. The 2005-2006 Niger food crises were caused by a combination of drought and pest infestation which resulted in poor harvests and dry pastures [3]. The crisis affected about 3.3 million people with more than 800,000 suffering from severe food shortage.

Within the Horn of Africa, the 2006 Horn of Africa food crisis saw Ethiopia and the neighboring countries of Somalia, Kenya and Djibouti experienced severe drought that caused serious shortage of food. The crisis was further worsened by military conflict in the area which increased insecurity and prevented the humanitarian aid from reaching the most affected regions [3]. In other words, the 2006 Horn of Africa food crisis was estimated to have affected over 11 million people. Moreover, in 2010, the drought that occurred in the Sahel region affecting Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger caused one of the severest food shortages in the region in the last few decades. Thus, about 10 million people were affected by hunger as a result of high food price. In 2011, the populations of Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and Djibouti were again affected by shortage of food caused by famine. The effects of the famine were said to be worst than 2006 Horn of Africa food crisis. Therefore, it is to the extent to which food related issues have caused intrastate and interstates conflicts that this paper strives to unravel. For instance, in Somalia there were records of mass exodus of people seeking refuge in neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia following a low rate of food available to their population. As noted by Bryony Jones: A number of issues-long term drought, conflict, a succession of poor harvests and rising food and fuel prices have combined to spark a flood of refugees from Somalia into neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia [4].

2.   Conceptualizing conflict: a contending perspective

The concept of conflict is a very difficult one to pin down to a strait-jacket definition essentially because the term or concept has come to refer to a gamut of inter locking variables and trends so much so that once the term is mentioned, it evokes a lot of emotion and passion. In this way, people conceptualize conflict both in negative and positive angles. These perceptions are at once, about the causes of conflict, kinds or types and nature of the conflicts. Whereas the dominant perception of conflict in the radical orientation is the existence of its vast opportunities for socio-economic development and significant contributions to improving people's living condition, the liberal school's perception of conflict is that of dangerous process that collapses the societal structures for development and increases destructive capabilities of unity and cooperation. Therefore, whichever way we approach conflict, its meaning goes beyond the state of destruction, violent exchange of fire arms and anything capable of taking lives to include stress, fear, anxiety and state of unrest. To this extent, one can understand that conflict is not a static phenomenon, but elastic. In this way, it becomes apparently clear that civil unrest can elasticize and transform to violent conflict while a violent conflict can bring cooperation, transformation and development thus bringing confusion within the realm of its meaning, nature and interpretation. Although, a common trend both to the scholars and students of social conflict is to perceive conflict in the negative terms. This explains why conflict is generally viewed as a vice. For these scholars and students conflict is viewed from this negative angle because of the interest destructive capacity of social conflicts especially the violent conflict in modern society [5]. Basically, not every conflict is destructive; there are conflicts that are also constructive. For J. Burton: Conflict like sex, is an essential creative element in human relationship. It is the means to change, the means to our social values of the welfare, security, justice and opportunities for personal development can be achieved, if suppressed society become static [6]. By this, conflict is neither to be depreciated nor feared. It perhaps precludes human progression. In other words conflict like sex is to be enjoyed. Conflict generally is an intrinsic and inevitable part of human existence. What this mean however is that, human activities are characterized with conflict. This implies that man is born with conflict and grew up in a conflict environment; therefore it is the nature of his environment that provides the basis for the inherent conflictual nature of man's social relations. Conflict generally arises as a result of the pursuit of incompatible interests and goals by different groups or individuals [7]. It represents the totality of the disagreement or the clash of interest among individuals or groups as they pursue divergent interests. What this means is that, it is the incompatibility in the interest possessed by individuals or groups that basically provides the explanation for why man is always ready for war. Therefore, conflict is part of everyday human interactions.

3.   Cause of conflict

Conflicts all over the globe are caused by some many factors. It is these factors that constitute the background to any conflict situation. This is based on the assumption that every conflict has a specific context, history and background [8]. Therefore, this implies that the parties and the issues are emerging from

somewhere and from given historical, cultural, political and social context. The background of conflict provides the explanation to the contextual outbreak of conflict. By background, we refer to the remote factors that prelude the context (immediate) to which conflict is allowed to occur. These background factors have long-term ranges on political, economic, mismanagement, cultural exclusiveness, religious-ethnic disparity and racial discrimination. Indeed, the political factor as a cause of conflict is construed in terms of political instability, corruption and weakness of the leadership of the country. By this, conflict occurs because of the inability of the leaders to tackle political problems such as corruption, poverty, injustice, marginalization and weak political system to reel their heads into government Ministries, Commission and Parastatal thereby allowing violence, hatred, bribery and demonstration to criss-cross government Institutions and Agencies. However, the economic factors as sources of conflict are found on the high rate of poverty, hunger and unemployment faced by the citizens. This is because people in most cases are ready to engage those they found to be responsible to their suffering and starvation into war once their economic needs are denied from them. These economic variables are defined in terms of availability of mineral resources, land, money and food. For instance, the Niger Delta Avengers' face-off with the federal government has economic implications. Their operations were geared towards salvaging the economic hardship which they believe to be caused by the activities of the Multinational Corporations and Nigerian government negligence to the plights of the Niger Delta people. Though, we have earlier mentioned the economy and economic factors as causes and sources of conflict in the world today, economic conflicts are geared towards changing government policies and satisfying human wants. Among all the causes of conflict, the economy seems most important. This is because of the double role it plays in conflict situation. Firstly, the economy of a state determines the duration of the war and secondly it is used as the weapon of war. By this, the money to purchase weapons of war and food to sustain soldiers at battle ground are all encapsulated in the economic factors of a state. Among all these economic factors, we look at food as the most vulnerable to the outbreak of conflict. Food is very essential in sustaining life on earth whether plants or animals because it helps them to grow and repair their body. It is what people and animal eat or plants absorb to keep them alive.

4. Food as a source of conflict

One notable fact about conflict is that each conflict has its own unique characteristic. A study of the world's civil wars since 1960s showed that the most important risk factors were poverty, low economic growth and high dependence on natural resources [4]. Development in all parts of Africa is regularly threatened by the persistence of poverty. This in turn creates insecurity with respect to decent livelihood and human survival. Thus poverty has not only reduced the ability of people to lead productive live in Africa but also exacerbated identity conflicts along ethnic, religious and regional line [9]. For example, poverty has continued to aggravate tension in the relationship between the indigenes of Nigeria where the citizenship question and "settlers' question" have degenerated into incessant conflicts. In Africa's Horn, accessibility of food is quite low because of the persistence drought and famine. Food security which simply refers to access by all people, at all times, to sufficient food for a healthy and productive life can be disrupted resulting to food insecurity. Thus, food insecurity can occur due to the disruption or damage to the food productive system which may be as a result of occurrence of drought, war, famine, social conflict, socio-economic, and socio-political circumstances [9]. Beyond the images of "Africa's starving millions" and starving villages" mostly projected by the Western media, there is a genuine food crisis in Africa which can be linked with the incidences of conflicts among other things. In 2002, the World Emergency Food Programme (WPE) complained about the growing demand for emergency food aid around the world including Africa and attributed the surge in new needs to weather-related disasters and HIV/AIDS. In the case of Africa, while, WPE identified other causes of food emergency such as natural causes, it admitted that there are food crisis due to wars recently ended or still going on. Within local communities, there is food induced community–community conflicts. In 1988 to 1994, there was food conflict between Ofunika of Ikwo Local Government Area and Nsobo of Obubra, and between Ndiagu Echara and Nsobo both in Ikwo Local Government of Ebonyi State and Obubra LGA of Cross River State respectively. The war broke out with the people of Ofenikpa and Echara accusing the Nsobo of harvesting their rice in one of the most fertile land being contested by the two parties. The war which started on 18th March 1988 lasted for 7 years with both parties losing human souls and properties worth millions of naira. In Ishielu local government, the contention

over Eguechara land between the Ezza-Ezzilo and Ezzilo in what they believe to be a struggle for land and its natural resources dovetailed to violent conflict [10]. The effects of the war were seen on the number of causalities recorded therein and properties worth millions of naira that were destroyed during the war despite, people seeing it as a mere inter-communal misunderstanding. However, after three (3) months of its outbreak; May 10, 2008, the government of Ebonyi State began to mobilize resources to assist those that were already affected by the outcome of the war [10]. Therefore, food historically is a double-edged sword- it is sometimes used as the instrument of fermenting trouble while at some other times used as a means of conflict resolution. In fact, there is generally no conflict that had occurred today without having food or food related factors as its primary indicators. To this extent, Aja-akpuru, Aja holds that peace can be threatened by factors such as poverty, corruption, illiteracy, bad governance, environmental changes, food crises, religious intolerance and extreme forms of nationalism [11]. The importance of food in human existence has galvanized the international community into signing a protocol to alleviate poverty related cases in the world. Thus, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESRR) recognized the "right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food" as well as the fundamental right to be free from hunger [3].

Therefore, food has served as a primary driver of conflicts with several examples found in Taraba State between Tiv and Jukun, Mangu/Bokko in Plateau State and between the Maw-maw and the white in Kenya. In other words, it has often been said that lack of food endangers humans' co-existence and thus making people vulnerable to different kinds of diseases. By this, we can add that famine stunts the development of people, saps their strength and cripples their immune system for instance, in the worst affected countries; a new born child has a life expectancy of 38 years, compared to the more than 70 in wealthier nations. The implication of this assertion goes to show that one in seven children born into countries where hunger is most common will die before reaching the age of five. Therefore, they suffer from micro nutrient malnutrition: their diets supply inadequate amounts of vitamins A, and C, Iron, Iodine and Zinc which are essential nutrients for human growth and development [12]. Many commentators of conflict resolution have affirmed their consents on the need to grow food in order to reduce food related problems or lack of access to food. According to them, "we do not have excuses for not growing enough food or that we do not know enough about how to eliminate hunger [12]. By this, Jacques Diouf, the FAO Director General stresses that "what remains to be proven is that we will no longer accept and ignore the suffering of hungry people or the daily death toll of 25,000 victims of hunger and poverty". Obviously, conflict is one of the most common causes of food insecurity. In 2001 and 2002, wars and civil strife were the major causes of food emergencies in fifteen African countries. These countries have witnessed weak political system, destruction on government infrastructural facilities, protest and attempted secession. Therefore, the overall impact of armed conflict on food security disrupts food production and economic activity by displacing rural populations within a county and across border. At the household level, the displaced are no longer able to produce for themselves or their families and therefore become totally dependent on food assistance or become malnourished and eventually die of starvation or disease related to malnutrition. At the national level, scarce resources in a poor country are diverted to the conflict (armaments, expanded armies and so forth), leaving the country unable to import food to meet basic requirements. In this way, the country becomes dependent on food aid which will invariable escalate death toll within the country.

5. The role of food in conflict resolution: an african experience

Apart from food being a driving force for conflict, food is a very relevant tool in the resolution of conflict and maintenance of peace. There are conflicts ordinarily, that can be settled on diners which are therefore neglected by those involved and thus resulted to wars and destruction. We have seen cases where food has been used to wage war in the world; but it is more often used as a vehicle for discussion other than wars. In other words, S. Norton opines that breaking bread with someone suggests dialogue, communication and peace, it is also referred to sharing important gossips, sealing of business deals and celebrations like Christmas, Easter, Birthday, Passover, Eid and Thanksgiving, [13]. The implication shows, that there are crises that could ordinarily be settled through breaking of kola and eating together that were allowed to escalate to violent conflict. In other words, food becomes the basic means through which friendly relations, peace and stability in the society can be ensured.

Over the years, the importance of food as a weapon of war and as instrument for conflict resolution has led to the establishment of food diplomacy. Today, Food diplomacy initiatives are increasingly being recognized as a successful means to open up a new avenue to pursue peace dialogue. Thus, it has been used to rescue and save lives at places where there is famine as a result of conflict. To this extent, many organizations have been mobilized to supply food to warring states, disaster victims and refugees so as to mitigate food related problems. It is on this background that the United States food for peace program has been seen to have provided food assistance around the world for more than fifty years. However, in Nigeria, the policy to cut the supply of relief materials from the Red Cross Society and the adoption of food crisis and starvation by Nigerian government over the Biafrans during the Nigerian civil war was quintessential to the end of the war. By this, A. Madiebo holds that perhaps the greatest disaster attendant upon the loss of Abakaliki was the fact that it was by far the greatest food – producing area of Biafra [14]. The implication was that, the Biafrans lost the war immediately Abakaliki which was the hub of Biafran food supply was captured by the Nigerian troops. The Nigerian government used starvation to force the Biafrans to surrender to the federal government troops. This was followed with the federal government's declaration of an embargo and blockade on Biafra from humanitarian assistance such that the precious commodities such as salt, meat and fish (staples of the Nigerian diet) were kept out. The blockade was a Nigerian government war policy to keep the co-operate existence of Nigeria following the declaration of the sovereign state of Biafra. This policy was a by-product of the British, who failed to rectify the resolution of loose confederation agreed in Aburi, Ghana. Again the outbreak of the war was fanned by the British government who hesitantly accorded recognition on a regime government (Gowon) fraught with anxiety and crisis.

However, the Biafrans' starvation was deliberately executed, thus it was an integral part of the Federal government war policy on the one hand, while on the other hand a mish-mash of Commonwealth office in London to protect the British interest in Nigeria. By this, F. Forsyth holds that all the "offers" put forward by the Nigerian government often after joint consultation with the British High Commission and usually accepted and welcomed in good faith by the ingenious British parliament, press and public, were revealed on examination to contain the largest tactical and strategic perspectives in favor of the Nigerian army [15]. However, in a sharp patriotism to British government, the Nigerian Foreign Minister, Mr. Okoi Arikpo was on 8 July held a press conference in Lagos in which he proposed a land corridor as a means of supplying relief materials to the Biafrans. According to him, food would be brought by ship into Lagos. From there it would be airlifted to Enugu, safely in Nigerian hands, and then conveyed by road to a point south of Agwu, captured the previous month by Federal forces. There, the food would be left on the road in the hopes that the "rebels" would come and take it [15]. The policy was a deliberate attempt to poison the food so that as many as Biafrans that eat it would die.

Aside this, food has been demonstrated to be a strong indicator for resolving conflict. By this, most NGOs have often presented themselves during post-conflict situations to be delivering relief materials, help resettling refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP) who have often been forcefully removed from resource-rich areas to become prone to human rights violation. A good example of this could be found during civil unrest in Burundi, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Togo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Zaire, Angola, Mozambique, Algeria and Ghana. It is usually expected that governments of these various countries take the responsibilities of providing adequate health facilities in line with the UN protocol on refugees' programme by ensuring that internally displaced persons are provided with food, drugs, shelter and electricity.

6. Conclusion

The increase in the search for growing and producing food has assumed great significance all over the globe. Within African localities, food induced conflicts have increased astronomically than conflicts caused by other factors. Ironically some of these conflicts were resolved using food as the only means of negotiation. Conflict caused by the scarcity of food has the likelihood of degenerating into violent conflict with high proportion of internally displaced persons, refugeeism, and instability on political system, government programmers and policies. Additionally, the motivations to conflicts by conflict entrepreneurs, and the other theories of conflict that tend to spiral into violent conflict- frustration-aggression theory, relative deprivation theory, human needs theory, power theory are inextricably discussed in this work. Therefore, it is the opinion of this work that food or

food related factors have caused several wars fought within the African horns due to tribal politics, ethnic cleansing, bad leadership, weak political system drought, famine and poor agricultural harvests. Basically, the threats of above factors have far-reaching implications on civilian populations with cataclysmic eruption of war, malnutrition and refugeeism that spurred the international community to quickly give a helping hand and therefore introduced World Emergence Food Programme in order to ameliorate food related crises.

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