

Community-Based Conflict Resolution Mechanisms and the Role of Social Work in Obio/Akpor LGA in Rivers State

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Abstract

This paper examined community-based conflict-resolution processes and the role of social work in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area (LGA) in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study aimed at establishing the different local conflict-resolution practices; to ascertain how social work helps the community to engage in these practices and to assess the impact of social work in enhancing the results of the traditional dispute-resolution systems. The study is based on the Systems Theory. The research design was descriptive; a structured questionnaire was administered to 400 respondents selected randomly in four purposively sampled communities in the LGA. Multi-stage sampling was done to represent the community leaders, elderly, youth and simple residents who were involved in dispute resolution. The analysis was conducted with the help of the descriptive statistics, which included frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. The results showed that the key community conflicts, such as land battles, marriage disputes, inheritance issues, youth struggles, and leadership conflicts, are usually mediated by the elders, family councils, customary courts, and community meetings. The social workers were found to enable the community to participate either through coordinating meetings, education of the residents on their rights, and inclusion of vulnerable groups. Moreover, social workers increased the fairness, sustainability, and acceptability of traditional dispute-resolution procedures through the incorporation of contemporary conflict-management methods. Based on these findings, the research suggested that community-based practices should be formally recognized by the local government, capacity building programmes of social workers should be conducted, and the interrelationship between social workers and traditional leaders should also be strengthened to enhance conflict-management procedures.

Keywords: Community-based conflict resolution, Social work, Obio/Akpor LGA, Rivers State, Systems Theory, Traditional dispute resolution, Mediation.

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an unavoidable condition of a human society; there is no denying that people and groups have divergent interests, values, and access to resources. Social, political, and economic inequalities continue to prevail across the globe and this tends to give rise to conflicts that should be managed and resolved through effective mechanisms (Okoli & Nnaemeka, 2019). Coser and Ralf Dahrendorf are early conflict theorists who believed that conflict is a normal social process caused by structural differences and the struggle over limited resources (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959). In most societies, especially in developing nations, formal judicial systems are usually inadequate in solving conflicts at the community level. Consequently, communities often turn to less formal and culturally integrative conflict resolution systems, which are closer, inclusive, and sensitive to local conditions. The community-based conflict resolution mechanisms are

focused on dialogue, mediation, reconciliation and collective decision-making processes which encourage social harmony and not punitive justice.

According to Lederach, peaceful solutions are sustainable as long as the processes are based on the local culture, relationships and involvement of the community, in contrast to the processes that are involved in the formal legal framework is used. The conflict transformation theory, as presented by Lederach, argues that long-term peace is maintained by addressing the relationships and social constructs under which conflict occurs. This can be achieved by means of dialogue and community involvement (Lederach, 1997; Zartman, 2000).

Traditionally, the African community uses indigenous institutions and traditional authorities as means of handling conflicts between families and

communities. These are community-based systems such as mediation, customary courts, family councils and community assemblies that emphasize on reconciliation and restoration of social harmony and less on punitive justice. According to Zartman (2000), these traditional dispute resolution systems have a high level of legitimacy since they are based on the culture and values of the people. In most African cultures, the elders and traditional leaders serve as intermediaries who help bring dialogue, negotiation, and consensus between conflicting parties with the aim of healing relationships and keeping the society together. Nganje (2020) states that indigenous conflict resolution systems are highly acceptable as they are based on reconciliation and collective involvement, which is less formal and more fitting to cultural aspects compared to formal legal systems.

In Nigeria, the traditional methods of conflict resolution have been instigated through institutions like councils of chiefs, village assemblies, age-grade systems, and family heads that address conflicts involving land ownership, inheritance, marital arguments, and community leadership (Ajayi, 2014). These processes give more focus to dialogue, restorative justice, and social reconciliation, which contributes to ensuring social order and avoiding the development of conflicts. Nevertheless, urbanization, population increment and socio-economic stress in urbanizing settings like Rivers state have increased the prevalence of community conflicts. This is why the professional intervention is necessary to enhance the already existing community-based mechanisms. Helping professions such as social workers have a significant role in the mediation process, mobilization of community and empowering vulnerable populations to engage in the conflict resolution processes (Okoye, 2013). By working together with the community leaders and the local institutions, social workers can facilitate more effectively the existing dispute resolution systems through the introduction of participatory approaches and conflict management skills that would facilitate the development of sustainable peace in communities.

Statement of the problem

The problem of community conflicts has been a social challenge since the inception of Rivers State where issues of land ownership, political influence, succession of chieftaincy and control of resources often spiral out of control into violence and lack of social order. Rivers state has in the past, had a history of frequent communal conflicts that have interfered with social bonds and development activities in various communities. The number of communal conflicts that happened in various portions of Rivers State between 1999 and 2014 is over sixty, most of which led to loss of life, property, and displacement (Okoli & Nnaemeka, 2019).

According to Alemika (2018) and Akinwale (2020), the persistence of conflict is caused by the failure of formal judicial systems to deal effectively with grassroots conflicts alone. For this reason, a significant number of residents see formal legal processes as costly and slow. This has led to the use of informal and community-based conflict resolution systems in local communities. Communal conflicts has become one of the key social issues within numerous Nigerian communities, which in most cases leads to severe socio-economic and developmental outcomes. The communities that are affected by frequent ethnic conflicts often suffer in terms of education, economic, and social cohesion and the public infrastructure and livelihood is adversely impacted. Indicatively, reports indicate that in Rivers State, communal violence has resulted in the destruction of governmental facilities and the derailment of school operations and families have been displaced (Nwankwo & Okeke, 2021).

At the national scale, National Bureau of Statistics statistics show that between 2015 and 2020, violent conflicts, such as communal conflicts, caused more than 16,000 deaths due to conflicts in Nigeria (NBS, 2021). Historically, the Nigerian societies used indigenous institutions like councils of chiefs, family elders, and the community development committees to attend to issues of land, marriage, inheritance, and leadership (Ajayi, 2014). Nevertheless, rapid urbanization, population explosion and socio-economic change has undermined the performance of some of these traditional institutions, especially in the fast-growing regions like Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, where land issues, inter-generational youth rivalry and political contests have compounded the nature and prevalence of community conflicts. Irrespective of these, community-based conflict resolution mechanisms still exist, and more sophisticated nature of conflicts and the inability to involve professional supporting systems. Social work as a profession focuses on mediation, community empowerment, and participatory problem solving, it can be considered a significant player in grassroots conflict management and peacebuilding (Akinwale, 2020; Nwolise, 2017).

The application of social workers facilitating a dialogue, reinforcing the local institutions and encouraging inclusive involvement in the conflict resolution process is possible. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence shows that professional social workers continue to have little influence in the community dispute resolution in Nigeria because most of the conflict management procedures continue to be controlled by traditional leaders and informal representatives of the community (Okoye, 2019; Chukwuemeka, 2021). Such partial assimilation of the social work experience makes traditional mechanisms less effective and minimizes the chances of involving

everyone in community participation. Thus, this leads to the insufficient empirical data on community-based conflict resolution mechanisms in Obio/Akpor and the degree to which social work can help them participate in the community, and enhance their outcomes, hence the need for the current study.

Objectives of the study

This study examined community-based conflict resolution mechanisms and the role of social work in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area (LGA) of Rivers State, Nigeria. The following objectives guided the study

- i. To identify the types of community-based conflict resolution mechanisms used in Obio/Akpor LGA.
- ii. To determine how social work facilitates community participation in conflict resolution activities.
- iii. To evaluate the influence of social work on improving the outcomes of traditional dispute resolution mechanisms

Significance of the study

- i. The research will add to the existing body of literature because it will serve as an empirical investigation on community based conflict resolution processes and the role of social work in grassroot peacebuilding, especially in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers state.
- ii. This study will thus contribute to the literature in the field of social work, conflict studies, as well as community development because it provides context-specific information on the way traditional conflict resolution structures are applied and also how the same can be enhanced to facilitate sustainable peace.
- iii. The research will also be valuable to government bodies and institutions charged with the responsibility of controlling interpersonal disputes in the community. The study will form a valuable source of information, which can help in guiding policy making and conflict management approaches by determining the processes involved by communities in settling disputes and understanding how the social work practice can enhance these methods.
- iv. The results can also be used to guide local government authorities in formulating community-based peacebuilding interventions that will enhance cooperation between traditional institutions and the professional social workers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURES

Community-based conflict resolution approaches.

These are all locally constructed means, structures, and practices by which a community manages

and resolves disputes collectively, by employing culturally-recognised norms, values and institutions. These are the mechanisms where dialogue, mediation, reconciliation and consensus building is prioritised over formal adjudication by the law. Scholars define them as participative and culturally integrated strategies that are based on the participation of local actors like the elders, traditional leaders, family heads, religious leaders and community development committees (Lederach, 1997; Zartman, 2000). Akinwale (2020) opined that these mechanisms are informally based and do not necessitate the official judicial system but still are legitimate since they are based on the community traditions and social organization. Ajayi (2014) provides further explanation that the way community-based conflict resolution works is based on the existing social relations and common norms that govern members of the community on how to resolve disputes and regain peace.

Practically, the establishment of village assemblies, family mediation, traditional councils, and customary courts promote the process of negotiation and reconciliation, focusing on the restoration of the relationship, preserving the cohesion of societal unity, and avoiding the clashes between the parties (Nwolise, 2017; Ibaba, 2018). According to Lederach (1997), the success of these mechanisms lies in the fact that they promote inclusiveness, dialogue, as well as paying attention to the relational aspects of conflicts instead of emphasizing only on punitive interventions.

In addition to being culturally legitimate, mechanisms of community-based conflict resolution are important in enhancing the community involvement and social stability, particularly where the formal justice system is inaccessible and unsuccessful. Research shows that in many developing societies, informal conflict resolutions have greater availability, quicker and more culturally aligned than formal courts (Alemika, 2018; Okoye, 2019). According to Zartman (2000), restorative justice is a concept that is mostly focused on by traditional institutions through ensuring the mutually acceptable agreements that lead to reconciliation and peace. These systems also promote the involvement of more people in a community, making them more collectively responsible in keeping peace (Nwolise, 2017; Akinwale, 2020).

In Nigeria, the practices serve to solve land ownership issues, marriage disputes, inheritance and leadership of a community. Nevertheless, researchers observe that modernization, urbanization, and erosion of traditional institutions contemplate the efficacy of these processes, especially in quickly expanding cities (Ibaba, 2018; Obi, 2020). In spite of these, community-based conflict resolution systems continue to play a very critical role as the means of controlling grassroots conflict, enhancing social cohesion as well as ensuring that peace can be sustained in African societies.

The concept of conflict

Conflict is broadly perceived as a state where people, organizations or institutions find incompatibility in their interests, aspirations or even access to resources. Conflict is an inevitable and natural part of social interaction since human interests, beliefs, and expectations are different (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2016; Jeong, 2017). It can manifest in the community as interpersonal conflicts, family fights, intercommunity conflicts, or political conflicts, which in most cases occur as a result of competition over the limited resources including land, economic opportunities and political power (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2019; Wallensteen, 2018). Structural inequalities, governance issues, and socio-economic pressures accelerate conflicts in developing societies like Nigeria (Ramsbotham *et al.*, 2016; Wallensteen, 2018).

The process of conflict is also dynamic, which can get out of control, peradventure it is not managed properly, due to misunderstandings, conflicting interests, unequal allocation of resources, or a sense of injustice (Fisher, Abdi, Ludin, Smith, Williams & Williams, 2020). Conflicts over land, power, resources and cultural belonging have continued to take away lives and destroy properties in most African societies (Akinwale, 2020; Okoli & Nnaemeka, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2021; Obi, 2020). Nevertheless, the application of dialogue, negotiation, and conflict resolution mechanisms may result in increased social reform, enhanced relationships, and institutional change (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2019; Jeong, 2017). The dynamics are therefore important in understanding how to come up with effective strategies that will enhance the peaceful coexistence and sustainable social development in the communities.

The role of social workers in community-based conflict resolution strategies

Social workers play a critical role in community-based conflict resolution strategies in that they encourage dialogue, reinforce social cohesion and promote participatory problem resolving to communities. Their practice is based on mediation, advocacy, and community empowerment as the tools of dealing with social issues and repairing the relationships (Okoye, 2013; Akinwale, 2020). As a part of community conflict resolution, social workers work with traditional leaders, elders, family heads, and local institutions to make sure that conflict-resolution mechanisms are inclusive, culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of all parties involved, including vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and youth (Chukwuemeka, 2021; Nwolise, 2017). In Nigeria, research has also shown that social workers can contribute to the gap existing between the formal conflict-management systems and the indigenous systems by introducing structured ways of handling conflicts in terms of negotiation, restorative justice, and reconciliation, which enhances the

legitimacy and efficacy of the local dispute-resolution practices (Okoye, 2019; Healy, 2017). Social workers help to avert the intensification of conflicts and promote sustainable peace in communities by mobilizing communities, overseeing consensus-building, and offering professional advice (Akinwale, 2020; Nwolise, 2017).

In addition to mediation and facilitation, social workers have strategic roles in capacity building and empowerment of the local institutions to cope with conflicts independently. They also empower community leaders and people by training, creating awareness, and planning their courses on conflict analysis, communication, and negotiation, thus assisting the communities to deal with conflicts in advance (Payne, 2014; Chukwuemeka, 2021). Social-work interventions are also directed at correction of the social, economic, and relational factors of the conflicts underlying it (competition over the available resources, marginalization, social inequalities, etc.), consequently lowering the risk of the re-occurrence (Akinwale, 2020; Okoye, 2013). Besides, social workers perform the role of promoting inclusive participation, where marginalized groups can participate in decision-making and the results of the dispute resolution can be fair and acceptable to the culture (Healy, 2017; Nwolise, 2017). In all, the combination of social work roles with community-based strategies of conflict-resolution raises the effectiveness, sustainability, and equity of the mechanisms. This reconciles the merits of conservative traditions with the principles of professional approaches to managing conflicts.

Theoretical Framework Systems Theory

Systems Theory is a theoretical base to social-work practice that considers persons, families, and communities as systems, where interactive changes in a part have an impact on the entire system. According to the theory, which was furthered by Betty Neuman and Gerald Caplan, no social problem can be completely comprehended and solved alone, but has to be viewed through the prism of a social, cultural, and environmental system in which it takes place (Payne, 2014; Healy, 2017). In this respect, conflicts can emerge in the form of unequal resource distribution, social inequalities, and structural stressors that influence the stability of the system. Systems Theory focuses on the idea that intervention should consider holistic strategies that focusses only not on conflict at hand but also examine other underlying aspects that support it such as social, economic and relational factors (Turner, 2017; Okoye, 2013). One of the main Systems Theory postulations is the idea that all the relevant sub-systems like families, leaders, and institutions should be involved in developing coordinated interventions that would facilitate communication, collaboration, and problem-

solving as the sole means to achieve sustainable resolution of social issues (Payne, 2014; Healy, 2017).

Social workers implement this theory in the community-based conflict resolution to restore balance to the community by facilitating dialogue, mediating conflicts, and empowering vulnerable groups to take part in the decision-making process (Akinwale, 2020; Chukwuemeka, 2021). Social workers adopt preventive and restorative strategies to assist communities in recognizing risk factors of conflict, enhance coping skills, and develop social support networks that lower the chance of conflict in future (Okoye, 2019; Nwolise, 2017). Through incorporating the Systems Theory in addressing community conflicts, social workers will ensure that, besides addressing short-term conflicts, interventions will change the relationships positively in the long run.

METHODOLOGY

The research design used in the study was a descriptive research design. Based on the National Population Commission (2021), the total population of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area is about 464,789. From the population, the number of respondents for the study was 400 using the formula of Taro Yamane to determine the sample-size. Multi-stage sampling method

was used to minimize the chances of non-representative selection of the respondents. During the initial phase, four communities were sampled purposely in the LGA according to population size, diversity and the rate of community conflicts being experienced and one of them was urban area and the other semi-urban. The second stage involved a random selection of the households in every selected community through systematic sampling and an adult member of the household (18 years and above) who possessed knowledge about local conflict-resolution mechanisms was identified. The respondents were community leaders, and elders, representatives of the youth, as well as community members who are actively involved in addressing the conflict. The Alpha coefficient of Cronbach was calculated to test the reliability and the result was the overall reliability coefficient 0.78, which is high in internal consistency of the instrument. The questionnaire validity was reached by means of evaluating the questionnaire by social-work and conflict-studies scholars to make sure that the items represented the constructs of community-based conflict resolution mechanisms and social-work involvement sufficiently. The data were analysed with descriptive statistics where the frequency counts, percentages, means and standard deviations have were used. Only 294 out of the 400 questionnaires were retrieved.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Frequency = 294	Percentage = 100
Gender:		
Male	186	63.3
Female	108	36.7
Age:		
18-25	30	10.2
26-35	105	35.7
36-45	69	23.5
46 and above	90	30.6
Marital Status:		
Married	163	55.4
Single	89	30.3
Divorce/separated	14	4.8
Widow	28	9.5
Educational qualification:		
No formal education	93	31.6
Primary	54	18.4
Secondary	75	25.5
Tertiary	72	24.5
Job position:		
Traditional roles	105	35.7
Formal employment	70	23.8
Informal employment	59	20.1
Unemployed	20	6.8
Others	40	13.6

Source: Field Work (2026)

In table 1, out of the 294 responses, 186 (63.3) were male and 108 (36.7) were female. This dispersion

shows that the study population is mainly composed of men and are more active in community affairs. The

surveyed cohort was fairly balanced in the age distribution. The biggest group was made up of respondents aged 26 -35 years 105 (35.7), then 46 years and above 90(30.6), then 36-45 years 69 (23.5) and finally 18 -25 years, 30 (10.2). With regards to marital status, the majority of the people sampled were married with 163 people representing 55.4% of the sample population, 89(30.3%) indicated being single, 14(4.8%) indicated being divorced/separated, and 28 people (9.5%) indicated being widowed. Through this distribution, we can identify a community where marital and family set-ups can either impact the participation in the dispute-resolution activities, since people who are married tend to be more committed to family and communal activities.

In terms of educational levels, the biggest group was of tertiary level 93 (31.6%). These were succeeded by the respondents who had obtained secondary

education, 75(25.5%), those who had no formal education, 72(24.5%), and lastly, those who had primary education, 54(18.4%). These numbers indicate that a large level of the population is formally educated, which may have an influence on their perceptions of (as well as their acceptance of) both conventional and socially facilitated mechanisms of conflict-resolution.

Analysis of the employment variable indicates that: 105 respondents (35.7) of the sample had traditional roles that include elders or community leaders; 70 respondents (23.8) were formally employed; 59 respondents (20.1) were informally employed; 20 respondents (6.8) were unemployed and 40 respondents (13.6) occupied other jobs. Such distribution shows that the study included the participants that represented a great diversity of occupational backgrounds so that people with different influence, economic power, and community participation were present.

Table 2: The types of community-based conflict resolution mechanisms used in Obio/Akpor LGA

Variable	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{x} (StD)
Land disputes within families or between community members are usually resolved through mediation by elders or family councils	135(45.9)	97(33.0)	26(8.8)	36(12.2)	3.125(1.012)
Marital conflicts are addressed through family councils, elders, or community mediation processes	90(30.6)	123(41.8)	45(15.3)	36(12.2)	2.908(0.971)
Inheritance disputes among family members are resolved using traditional assemblies or customary courts	24(8.2)	192(65.3)	40(13.6)	38(12.9)	2.687(0.799)
Youth rivalry, conflicts among community groups, or disputes over social resources are settled through negotiations by village assemblies	51(17.3)	114(38.8)	105(35.7)	24(8.2)	3.020(0.927)
Disagreements over chieftaincy, community leadership, or political representation are resolved through conciliation by traditional councils.	45(15.3)	189(64.3)	15(5.1)	45(15.3)	2.795(0.881)

Source: Field Work (2026)

The initial statement in table 2, which is land disputes in families or between individuals in a community are often resolved by elders or family councils is strongly supported by 135 respondents (45.9%), and agreed by 97 respondents (33.0%), and disagreed only by 26 respondents (8.8%), and strongly disagreed only by 36 respondents (12.2%). The average of 3.125 and the standard deviation of 1.012 show that the respondents have a rather high perception that elder mediation is effective in land disputes. This observation indicates that mediatory services by the elderly and family councils are generally accepted as reliable processes of land dispute settlement in Obio/Akpor LGA.

When it comes to marital conflicts, 90 respondents (30.6) and 123 respondents (41.8) strongly agreed and agreed, respectively, that such conflicts are resolved in family councils, the elders, or community mediation processes. Only a smaller percentage, 45(15.3) disagreed and 36(12.2) strongly disagreed,

which produced a mean score of 2.908 (SD=0.971). This implies that there is a moderate consensus among the respondents that community-based mechanisms can be used successfully to address marital disputes. In the same vein, inheritance disputes are mainly seen to be resolved in traditional assemblies or customary courts, with 192 respondents (65.3%) agreeing to this proposal, yet only a quarter of that number (24) strongly agreed with the proposal. The average of 2.687 (SD=0.799) indicates that the perceived effectiveness level is favourable but slightly less than that of land and marital conflicts, and thus, it is possible that inheritance conflicts will need more formal mediation or community intervention.

As regards youth rivalry and disagreement over social resources, 51 respondents (17.3%) strongly agreed, and 114 respondents (38.8%) agreed that village assemblies settle such disputes, whereas 105 respondents (35.7%) disagreed, and 24 respondents (8.2%) strongly disagreed. The average score of 3.020 (SD 0.927) means that there is a moderate level of awareness of village

assemblies as a tool in the management of youth and group conflicts, but a considerable percentage of the participants are unsure or in opposition to it.

Lastly, conflicts over chieftaincy, leadership of the community or in the representation of the community are mainly solved by conciliation by the traditional councils, with 45 respondents (15.3) strongly agreeing

and 189 respondents (64.3) agreeing, 15(5.1%) disagreeing and 45 (15.3%) strongly disagreeing, with a mean score of 2.795 (SD=.881). This indicates that there is a high dependency on traditional councils in governing leadership disputes, and that is an indication of the legitimacy and the authority of the local leadership in Obio/Akpor communities.

Table 3: Social work and community participation in conflict resolution activities.

Variable	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{x} (StD)
Social workers organize community meetings and forums to encourage residents to participate in conflict resolution processes	105(35.7)	94(32.0)	59(20.1)	36(12.2.)	2.207(1.061)
Social workers educate community members about their rights and responsibilities in resolving disputes collectively	92(31.3)	82(27.9)	60(20.4)	60(20.4)	2.700(1.117)
Social workers involve vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, and the elderly, in community-based conflict resolution activities	204(69.4)	25(8.5)	26(8.8)	39(13.3)	2.874(0.739)
Social workers collaborate with traditional leaders, elders, and community development committees to ensure inclusive participation in dispute settlement	12(4.1)	150(51.0)	82(27.9)	50(17.0)	2.421(0.817)
Social workers use participatory techniques, such as dialogue, consensus-building, and mediation, to strengthen community engagement in conflict resolution	131(44.6)	60(20.4)	15(5.1)	88(29.9)	2.993(0.842)

Source: Field Work (2026)

According to the results of the survey, 105 respondents (35.73) strongly agreed and 94 respondents (32.00) agreed that social workers arrange community meetings to promote involvement in resolving conflicts. In contrast, 59 respondents (20.1%) disagreed and 36 respondents (12.2%) strongly disagreed, with a mean of 2.207 (SD= 1.061). These results indicate that there is a moderate level of awareness of the role of social workers in forums, and still some percentage of the respondents are still doubtful or have no idea. On the issue of education of the residents on their rights and responsibilities, 92 (31.3) strongly agreed and 82(27.9) agreed. At the same time, 60 (20.4) disagreed and another 60(20.4) strongly disagreed, generating a mean of 2.700 (SD=1.117).

With regards to the third question, 204 respondents (69.4%) strongly agreed and 25 respondents (8.5%) agreed, but only 26 respondents (8.8%) disagreed, and 39 respondents (13.3%) strongly disagreed. The average of 2.874 (SD = 0.739) shows a general recognition of the fact that social workers are actively engaging vulnerable groups in the process of

conflict resolution. It highlights the inclusiveness and empowerment of the profession in the community-based interventions.

Regarding the partnership with traditional leaders, elders and community development committees, 12 respondents (4.1) strongly agreed and 150(51.0) agreed, and 82 respondents (27.9) disagreed and 50 respondents (17.0) strongly disagreed. The average value of 2.421 (SD 0.817) is moderate. Even though it seems that social workers are working with local authorities, a considerable number of the respondents do not perceive the collaborative work as being steady and efficient throughout the community. On the use of participatory methods - dialogue, consensus-building, and mediation - 131 respondents (44.64) strongly agreed and 60 respondents (20.4) agreed; 15 respondents (5.1) disagreed and 88 respondents (29.9) strongly disagreed which made a mean of 2.993 (SD=0.842). The statistics indicate that, although most people acknowledge the use of participatory methods by social workers, almost a third of them report a lapse in constant practice or inability to achieve community involvement.

Table 4: The influence of social work on improving the outcomes of traditional dispute resolution mechanisms

Variable	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{x} (StD)
Social workers ensure fairness in traditional dispute resolutions	159(54.1)	30(10.2)	30(10.2)	75(25.5)	2.949(0.874)
Social workers help reduce repeated conflicts after resolutions	105(35.7)	62(21.1)	40(13.6)	87(29.6)	2.530(1.110)
Social workers integrate modern conflict management into traditional processes	146(49.7)	99(33.7)	24(8.2)	25(8.5)	1.911(0.861)
Social workers monitor and follow up on resolutions to improve outcomes	88(29.9)	86(29.3)	75(25.5)	45(15.3)	2.738(1.049)
Social workers build trust between disputing parties and traditional leaders	105(35.7)	40(13.6)	62(21.1)	87(29.6)	2.261(1.100)

Source: Field Work (2026)

In Table 4, the first segment shows that 159 (54.1%) strongly agreed that social workers are fair when traditional dispute resolutions are made, 30(10.2%) agreed, 30(10.2%) disagreed and 75 respondents (25.5%) strongly disagreed. The mean and SD were determined as 2.949 and 0.874, respectively, which highlights that most of the respondents believe that social workers have a major role to play in ensuring equity in conventional processes, but a significant proportion of the population feels unconvinced or doubtful of the role played by such professionals. About the mitigation of recurrent conflicts, 105(35.7%) strongly agreed, and 62 (21.1%) agreed that the social workers can assist in avoiding recurrent conflicts, whereas 40(13.6%) did not agree, and 87 (29.6%) strongly disagreed. The average of 2.530 (SD 1.110) represents a moderate consensus, but the percentage of disagreement is relatively high, implying that not all respondents always witness follow-up or preventive measures by the social workers during the traditional dispute resolution process.

On integrating modern conflict-management methods into traditional processes, 146(49.7%) strongly agreed, 99 (33.7%) agreed, 24 respondents (8.2%) disagreed, and 25 respondents (8.5%) strongly disagreed. The general understanding points to the fact that social workers are recognized to have brought new methods that improved the traditional ways of dealing with disputes, i.e., introduction of the modern methods, i.e., mediation, negotiation and structured follow-ups. On the issue of monitoring and follow-up, 88 respondents (29.9%) strongly agreed and 86 respondents (29.3%) agreed that social workers document the results of dispute resolutions, and 75 respondents (25.5%) disagreed and 45 respondents (15.3%) strongly disagreed. The average (2.738) and standard deviation (SD 1.049) represent moderate recognition of social workers' contribution in terms of maintaining sustainability and compliance in customary resolutions.

Lastly, when it came to trust-building, 105(35.7) strongly agreed and 40 respondents (13.6) agreed to the question that social workers build confidence between conflicting parties and traditional authorities. Conversely, 62(21.1 2%) disagreed, and 87

(29.6%) strongly disagreed. These findings suggest that, although a significant number of respondents acknowledge the role of social workers in building trust, a significant percentage of them do not know or doubt the uniformity and effectiveness of such interventions.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study examined community-based conflict resolution mechanisms and the role of social work in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area (LGA) of Rivers State, Nigeria. The first objective identified the types of community-based conflict resolution mechanisms used in Obio/Akpor LGA. Land disputes, marriage issues, inheritance disputes, youth rivalries, and chieftaincy or leadership disputes are major issues that are resolved by mediation by the elders, family councils, customary courts, and village or community meetings. These mechanisms focus on dialogue, negotiation, reconciliation and consensus-building and hence reflect a restorative approach to conflict resolution as opposed to a punitive approach. They also highlight the long-standing trust and legitimacy that members of the community place in these indigenous structures, implying that cultural familiarity and well-known social authority are at the heart of their performance. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Ajayi (2014), who reported that conventional organizations in Nigerian communities are vital in addressing entitlement issues on land, family, and leadership among group members using social relations, shared norms, and joint decision-making to maintain peace and prevent the further development of conflicts.

The second objective was to determine how social work facilitates community participation in conflict resolution activities. The results reveal that social workers are important players in initiating community involvement in conflict-resolution efforts in Obio/Akpor LGA. Through community meetings, forums, and awareness programmes, social workers provide avenues through which residents can hold discussions, air their grievances and make contributions towards resolving disputes. They also take an active role in teaching the community members on their rights and responsibilities and ensure that the vulnerable members

of the population, including women, youth, and the elderly, are not left out in the process. Through these initiatives, inclusivity is reinforced, and communal problem-solving is promoted among the residents. The results are in line with the findings of Akinwale (2020), who mentioned that social-work intervention in Nigerian societies encourages the development of grassroots engagement, empowerment of marginalized populations, and the legitimacy and efficiency of local conflict-resolution efforts.

Concerning the impacts of social work with conventional dispute-resolution processes, the results indicate that social workers play significant roles in improving community-based dispute-resolution systems in terms of fairness, sustainability and acceptability. Social workers contribute to effective and quality decision-making by suggesting the introduction of modern conflict-management skills, overseeing resolutions and assisting in communication between conflicting sides and traditional leaders. They also help in building trust between members of the society, and their resolutions are such that they lead to the integration of the society and discourage the eruption of conflicts in the future. This supports the claim by Okoye (2013) that professional social-work interventions are complementary to traditional systems because they improve transparency, accountability, and repairing relationships in the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. As a recommendation, the Obio/Akpor Local Government Council should formally document and support the existing community-based conflict-resolution processes, such as elders, family councils and customary assemblies' mediation. This will make them sustainable, give guidelines for consistency and increase the trust of the community in such processes.
- ii. The Ministry of Social Welfare and Community Development in Rivers State should invest in training and capacity-building programmes for social workers to improve their knowledge in holding forums, educating inhabitants, and proactively engaging vulnerable communities in conflict management. In so doing, the social workers will become more prepared to enhance inclusiveness, community participation, and participatory decision-making in conflict management.
- iii. The conventional authorities and community leaders must work with professional social workers closely to incorporate the contemporary conflict-management skills, follow-up procedures and trust-building programs into the traditional dispute-resolution methodologies. Such collaboration will promote the legitimacy, openness, and sustainability of solutions, so that the conventional mechanisms

are not outdated and useless in conflict management in the community.

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