

# COMMUNITY PERCEPTION OF THE USE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENTS IN CONTROLLING CONFLICTS IN RURAL RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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**Abstract.** The study investigated community perception of the use of law enforcement agents in controlling conflicts in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area (LGA) of Rivers State, Nigeria. Structured interview schedule was used to elicit information from two hundred and eighteen (218) respondents. Multi stage sampling technique was used to select eighteen (18) communities from the six political blocks in the LGA. Data were presented with descriptive statistics. Findings from the study revealed that cult rivalry, national election, youth leadership, intercommunity, and land claims/boundary dispute conflicts were the types of conflicts in the study area. Perception of the respondents on the reason why LEAs were used to control conflicts were: the response of LEAs in controlling conflict is more prompt than any other method, the use of LEA is a cheaper tool for oil companies and government to exploit, and community leaders do not have what it takes to control community conflicts. LEAs protect the right and dignity of people in the area and they safeguard lives and properties in the area were the effects of the use of LEAs. It is therefore recommended that employers of LEAs should create check and balance between the communities and the LEAs.

**Keywords:** Types, Reasons, Socio-economic Effects of Law Enforcement Agents

## INTRODUCTION

In recent times, there is hardly any community in River State and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area (ONELGA) in particular that has not faced one form of communal crises / conflict or the other. Irrespective of its consequences, conflicts are perceived by people all over the world as part of human existence, which seeks to create the desired change in society. Law enforcement agents (LEAs) are employed in both democratic and autocratic states of the world today, to control federal, state and local community conflicts of all kinds. Law enforcement agency is a term used to describe either an organization that enforces the laws of one or more governing bodies, or an organization that actively and directly assists in the enforcement of laws Zartman (2000). This means that LEA assists the government at the federal, state and local levels including the communities to provide governance for their subjects and maintain social control. Yet there are disagreements about how to enforce the law, hence actions of certain law enforcement agents are questioned by the society Alemika (1999).

Though, conflicts are mostly depicted as negative, it is inevitable and good depending on how it is handled. It can either be constructive or destructive. It is common to come across suggestions that conflicts can be used constructively to explore different solutions to a problem and stimulate creativity by recognizing and sensitively exposing conflicts as a way of bringing emotive and non-rational arguments into the open while deconstructing long-standing tension (Otite, 1999). The negative viewpoint depicts conflict as naturally destructive and used mainly to inflict injuries on, neutralize, or subvert the aspirations of opponents Alemika (1999). ; Boulding, 1977 in Shedrack, (2007). Whatever

the viewpoint, conflicts need to be controlled in a manner that calls for the peaceful co-existence of the inhabitants of a society/community Alemika (1993). Before the emergence of the formal law enforcement agencies, such as Police Force (PF); (MPF) Mobile Police Force; Army (A); Joint Task Forces (JTF); Civil Defense (CD), in ONELGA, there were many informal law enforcement agencies involved in policing and controlling community conflicts for the purpose of peace and maintenance of order in the society. Such informal agencies include; council of chiefs, council of elders, vigilante group, women group, and community task force. In the study area, there is hardly any community that you cannot feel the operational presence of any of the LEA. It is based on this background that this study was initiated, in order to investigate the perception of the people on the involvement of the LEA in policing and controlling community conflicts in ONELGA, Rivers State.

**Literature Review.** Conflicts occur when the interests of two or more parties clash and at least one of the parties strives to assert its interest at the expense of another party's interests [www.ohrd.wisc.edu/./aboutwhatisit.htm](http://www.ohrd.wisc.edu/./aboutwhatisit.htm) (AI, 2000). Otite (1999) in Otite & Albert (2007) observe that conflict arises from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and, or groups in defined social and physical environments. He further averred that, changes in the social environment, such as contestable access to new political position, or perceptions of new resources arising from development in the physical environment were fertile grounds for conflicts involving individuals and groups who were interested in using these new resources to achieve their goals. In every conflicts, there are actors/disputants (example, government departments, private companies and local communities) but may also include other parties, such as the state, which may have an interest in the peaceful resolution of social conflicts. Conflicts can be intra-group (occurring within groups) or inter-group (occurring among groups). Barker, Kathy, Kittie & Robert (1987) identify three basic types of conflicts such as: task conflict, interpersonal conflict, and procedural conflicts. Different conflicts management processes are employed to reduce the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures including the use of LEAs by working with and through the parties involved in that conflict. Ury & Rodger (1981) acknowledged that law enforcement is a society's formal attempt to obtain compliance with the established rules, regulations and the law of that society and without which such a society would cease to exist, since social disorder and chaos may portend the society. The primary role of Law Enforcement Agency (LEA) is policing – securing compliance with existing laws and conformity with precepts of social order. Policing has always been necessary in all societies for the preservation of order, safety and social relations Alemeka & Chukwuma (2008).

**Purpose of the Study.** The general objective of the study was to ascertain the community perception of the use of law enforcement agents in controlling community conflicts in ONELGA of Rivers State. The specific objectives were to: identify the types of conflicts existing in ONELGA; investigate the reasons for the use of the formal LEA in controlling community conflicts in ONELGA; and determine the socio-economic effects of the use of the agencies in controlling community conflicts in ONELGA.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study was conducted in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area (ONELGA) of Rivers State. ONELGA has three major ethnic/culture groups (Ogba, Egbema and Ndoni) speaking distinct but familiar languages with unique and peculiar cultures, which are divided into six (6) political blocks namely: Egi (8communities), Egbema

(5communities), Igburu (7communities), Ndoni (5communities), Usomini (5communities) and Omoku for political convenience Stratified random sampling was used to select eighteen (18) towns/communities -2 from the six political blocks of ONELGA. From the 18 communities, 2 leaders (traditional rulers) were purposively selected because they are few from the 18 communities, giving a total number of 36 traditional leaders. Secondly, four (4) youths, 3 men and 3 women were selected from each of the selected communities using simple random sampling, giving a total of 72 youths, 54 men and 54 women. This gives a total of 216 respondents that were surveyed. Data collected were presented with descriptive statistics such as percentage and mean scores derived from a point Likert type scale with options: Strongly Agreed (4); Agreed (3); Disagreed (2) and Strongly Disagreed (1). The values were added to give 10, which was further divided by 4 to give 2.50. Variables that had 2.50 and above were considered agreed and therefore accepted while variables that scored below 2.50 were considered disagreed and therefore not accepted.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Types of conflicts that is common in ONELGA.** Table 1 shows that in religious conflicts; the dominant conflicts was the conflicts between cult groups (M=4.61). Economic conflicts occurred in: conflicts that relate to employment (M=4.06), contracts (M=3.60) and land/boundary adjustment (M=3.66), while political conflicts identified were: youth leadership (M=4.29); chieftaincy tussle (M=3.83); and national elections (M=3.40) conflicts. Also the study revealed social conflicts such as interpersonal conflicts (M=3.41); inter group conflicts (3.88); and inter community conflicts (M=3.12) occurred in the area. Marriage related conflicts (M=3.41) is the common cultural conflicts that occurred in the area. The environmental conflicts common in the study area were oil companies (M=4.22) and oil spillage (M=3.57). This implies that religious, economic, political, interpersonal and social conflicts were the types of conflicts in the study area. This is contrary to Barker, Kathy, Kittie & Robert (1987) who identified three types of conflicts such as: task conflict, interpersonal conflict, and procedural conflicts as common conflicts in a cultural set up.

Table 1  
Mean Distribution on respondents' perception of types of conflicts common in ONELGA

| Types of Conflicts | Description of Conflicts                              | Leaders<br>N=36<br>Mean | Youths<br>N=72<br>Mean | Men<br>N=54<br>Mean | Women<br>N=54<br>Mean | Grand Mean | Remark |
|--------------------|---|-------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|------------|--------|
| Religious          | Conflicts b/w Christians and Muslim                   | 2.11                    | 2.14                   | 1.96                | 1.87                  | 2.02       | NS     |
|                    | Conflicts b/w Christians and cult groups              | 2.39                    | 2.26                   | 2.31                | 2.26                  | 2.31       | NS     |
|                    | Conflicts b/w cult and cult                           | 4.86                    | 4.53                   | 4.48                | 4.57                  | *4.61      | S      |
| Economic           | Conflicts that relate to employment                   | 4.03                    | 4.10                   | 4.07                | 4.07                  | *4.07      | S      |
|                    | Conflicts that relate to contracts                    | 3.64                    | 3.47                   | 3.33                | 3.96                  | *3.60      | S      |
|                    | Conflicts that relate to land claims/boundary dispute | 3.83                    | 3.64                   | 3.54                | 3.61                  | *3.66      | S      |
| Political          | Conflicts that relate to national election            | 3.50                    | 3.38                   | 3.31                | 3.41                  | *3.40      | S      |
|                    | Conflicts that relate to chieftaincy tussle           | 3.86                    | 3.86                   | 3.87                | 3.72                  | *3.83      | S      |
|                    | Conflicts that relate to youths leadership            | 4.42                    | 4.22                   | 4.22                | 4.30                  | *4.29      | S      |
| Social             | Interpersonal conflicts                               | 3.53                    | 3.44                   | 3.35                | 3.31                  | *3.41      | S      |
|                    | Inter-group conflicts                                 | 3.97                    | 3.49                   | 3.78                | 4.26                  | *3.88      | S      |
| Cultural           | Inter-community conflicts                             | 3.17                    | 3.11                   | 3.06                | 3.13                  | *3.12      | S      |
|                    | Conflicts that relate to marriage                     | 3.14                    | 3.33                   | 3.35                | 3.83                  | *3.41      | S      |

|                    |   |             |             |             |             |       |    |
|--------------------|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------|----|
|                    | Conflicts that relate to festivals      | 2.92        | 2.83        | 2.83        | 2.02        | *2.65 | NS |
|                    | Conflicts that relate to days of works. | 2.72        | 2.69        | 2.67        | 2.74        | *2.71 | NS |
| Environ-<br>mental | Conflicts involving flooding            | 3.03        | 2.80        | 2.85        | 3.26        | *2.99 | NS |
|                    | Conflicts involving oil spillage        | 3.86        | 2.83        | 3.85        | 3.72        | *3.57 | NS |
|                    | Conflicts involving oil companies       | 4.08        | 4.22        | 4.31        | 4.28        | *4.22 | NS |
| Total              |   | 63.01       | 61.34       | 61.14       | 58.49       |       |    |
| Mean(X)            |   | <b>3.50</b> | <b>3.41</b> | <b>3.40</b> | <b>3.25</b> |       |    |

Source: Field Survey, 2012.

Mean score  $\geq 2.50$  is accepted (Significant-S).

Mean score  $< 2.50$  is not accepted (Not Significant-NS).

### **PERCEPTION OF THE REASONS FOR THE USE OF LEAS IN CONTROLLING COMMUNITY CONFLICTS**

The result in Table 2 shows the respondents’ perception of the reasons for the use of LEA in controlling community conflicts in ONELGA. Using a mean score of 2.50 as the decision rule, the respondents were of the view that: traditional methods of controlling conflicts are no more reliable (M=3.35); community leaders (traditional rulers, chiefs and CDCs) do not have what it takes to control community conflicts in ONELGA (M=3.49); most community conflicts in ONELGA emanate from exploitation and sharing of oil dividends (M=4.00); both the State and Federal governments have special interest in ONELGA because of crude oil and gas businesses in the area (M=4.69); the use of LEA is a cheap tool for oil companies and government to exploit (M=3.82); the response of the LEA in controlling conflicts is more prompt than any other method (M=3.66); and that frequency of community conflicts in ONELGA necessitated the use of LEA (M=3.73) were the reasons for the use of LEAs in controlling conflicts in the study area. This implies that communities in ONELGA resulted to the use of LEAs because they do not have the economic and political power to control conflicts in their area especially since the traditional leaders are no longer reliable. Alemeka & Chukwuma (2008) saw LEA as policing that is necessary in all societies for the preservation of order, safety and social relations.

Table 2

| Reasons   | Leaders<br>N=36 Mean | Youths<br>N=72<br>Mean | Men<br>N=54<br>Mean | Women<br>N=54<br>Mean | Grand Mean | Remark |    |
|---|----------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|------------|--------|----|
| Traditional methods of controlling conflicts are no more reliable.  | 3.31                 | 3.25                   | 3.28                | 3.54                  | *3.35      | S      |    |
| Community leaders (traditional rulers, chiefs and CDCs) do not have what it takes to control community conflicts in ONELGA. | 3.53                 | 3.43                   | 3.33                | 3.65                  | *3.49      | S      |    |
| Most community conflicts in ONELGA are state of emergency cases.  | 2.83                 | 2.53                   | 2.50                | 2.65                  | 2.63       | 0.63   | NS |
| Most community conflicts in ONELGA emanate from exploitation and sharing of oil dividends.                                  | 3.86                 | 3.97                   | 4.06                | 4.09                  | *4.00      | 0.57   | S  |
| Both the state and federal governments have special interest in ONELGA because of crude oil and gas business in the area.   | 4.72                 | 4.69                   | 4.70                | 4.65                  | *4.69      |        | S  |
| No rule or procedure is observed when the law enforcement agents are employed to control conflict.                          | 3.39                 | 3.25                   | 3.19                | 3.63                  | *3.37      |        | S  |
| Use of LEA is a cheap tool by oil companies and government to exploit the people and their resources.                       | 3.86                 | 3.82                   | 3.91                | 3.67                  | *3.82      |        | S  |

|   |       |       |       |       |       |    |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----|
| Women are not involved in controlling community conflicts in ONELGA.                                  | 3.31  | 3.14  | 3.17  | 2.89  | *3.13 | S  |
| Response of the LEA in controlling conflicts is more prompt than any other method.                    | 3.61  | 3.67  | 3.63  | 3.72  | *3.66 | S  |
| LEA(s) is the government machinery licensed to kill without query or offense.                         | 2.78  | 3.00  | 3.00  | 3.11  | 2.97  | NS |
| Frequency of community conflicts in ONELGA necessitate the use of LEA.                                | 3.78  | 3.53  | 3.69  | 3.93  | *3.73 | S  |
| Population explosion in ONELGA has out grown the use of civil methods to control community conflicts. | 3.00  | 2.69  | 2.91  | 3.19  | *2.94 | NS |
| Total   | 41.98 | 40.97 | 41.37 | 42.74 |       |    |
| Mean (X)  | 3.50  | 3.41  | 3.45  | 3.56  |       |    |

Source: Field Survey Data, 2012

Mean score  $\geq 2.50$  is accepted (Significant-S).

Mean score  $< 2.50$  is not accepted (Not Significant-NS).

### SOCIAL-ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF USING LEAS IN CONTROLLING CONFLICTS IN ONELGA

Results in Table 3 show the perceptions of the various groups on the socio-economic effects of the use of LEAs in controlling community conflicts in ONELGA. It shows that community gathering for social functions were restricted (M=2.66); youth bodies and functions are restricted in most communities in ONELGA (M=2.80); armed robbery, stealing and cultism have reduced in the area (M=3.16), because of the involvement of the LEAs in community conflicts, there is no freedom of movement and of speech in the area (M=3.08); cost of transportation is very high throughout ONELGA (M=2.88); prices of goods and services are increasingly very high in ONELGA (M=3.16); cost of living in ONELGA is also very high (M=3.19); and kidnapping, oil bunkery and cutting of electric cables which are recent events have reduced (M=3.45).

Table 3

Mean distribution of socio-economic effects of the use of LEA in controlling conflicts in ONELGA

| Effects  | Leaders<br>N=36<br>Mean | Youths<br>N=72<br>Mean | Men N=54<br>Mean | Women<br>N=54<br>Mean | Grand<br>Mean | Remark |
|--|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|---------------|--------|
| Community gathering for social functions is more effective now.            | 2.25                    | 2.75                   | 2.80             | 2.85                  | *2.66         | S      |
| Youth bodies and functions are restricted in most communities in ONELGA.   | 2.83                    | 2.82                   | 2.72             | 2.83                  | *2.80         | S      |
| Youth bodies and functions are very active and effective.                  | 1.75                    | 1.58                   | 1.50             | 1.43                  | 1.57          | NS     |
| Armed robbery, stealing and cultism have reduced or completely eradicated. | 3.13                    | 3.16                   | 3.19             | 3.16                  | *3.16         | S      |
| There is freedom of movement and of speech in the area as expected.        | 1.72                    | 1.76                   | 1.93             | 1.89                  | 1.83          | NS     |
| There is no freedom of movement and of speech in the area.                 | 3.03                    | 3.04                   | 3.04             | 3.19                  | *3.08         | S      |
| Cost of transportation is very low throughout ONELGA.                      | 1.72                    | 1.68                   | 1.76             | 1.76                  | 1.73          | NS     |
| Cost of transportation is very high throughout ONELGA.                     | 2.89                    | 2.86                   | 2.87             | 2.94                  | *2.88         | S      |
| Prices of goods and services are high in ONELGA.                           | 3.17                    | 3.17                   | 3.12             | 3.19                  | *3.16         | S      |
| Prices of goods and services are low in ONELGA.                            | 1.58                    | 1.71                   | 1.85             | 1.93                  | 1.77          | NS     |

|   |       |       |       |       |       |    |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----|
| Matters in contention are settled to the satisfaction of the actors in conflict by the LEA. | 1.17  | 1.21  | 1.09  | 1.09  | 1.14  | NS |
| People are now attracted to sojourn in ONELGA for economic reasons without fear.            | 1.69  | 2.63  | 1.34  | *2.54 | 2.05  | NS |
| Economic resources, life and properties are no longer wasted.                               | 2.25  | 2.14  | 1.60  | 1.76  | 1.94  | NS |
| Kidnapping, oil bunkery and cutting of electric cables have reduced.                        | 3.22  | 3.46  | 3.61  | 3.52  | *3.45 | S  |
| <b>Total</b>  | 35.28 | 45.01 | 35.28 | 45.72 |       |    |
| <b>Mean (X)</b>   | 1.96  | 2.50  | 1.96  | 2.54  |       |    |

Source: Field Survey, 2011

Mean score  $\geq 2.50$  is accepted (Significant-S).

Mean score  $< 2.50$  is not accepted (Not Significant-NS).

## CONCLUSION

The common religious conflicts reported are conflicts between and among cult groups while the major economic conflict is the conflict that is relate to employment and contracts. Traditional methods of controlling conflicts are no more reliable and that community leaders do not have what it takes to control community conflicts in ONELGA, but the bone of contention in conflicts are not addressed to the satisfaction of the disputants, rather they are suppressed by the formal LEAs in the area. Also, the social lives of the people were greatly affected as they no longer have freedom of association, thereby changing the cultural ethics of ONELGA people.

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