

THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT, INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT AND FOOD CRISIS IN BENUE STATE: THE UKPIAM IDP CAMP EXPERIENCE

Gowon Ama DOKI

and

Sesugh Emmanuel MAYANGE

Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts,
Benue State University Makurdi, Nigeria

Emails: sirdoks@yahoo.com, sesughter06@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3746-2564>

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1843-2028>

Abstract

In recent years, population displacement has been topical in discourses across disciplines. This worrisome trend that has affected livelihoods and peaceful co-existence in the country is caused mainly by armed farmers/herders' conflicts and banditry, among other factors. In Benue State, the farmers/herders' crisis has been the major cause of displacement which has sacked farmers from their sources of livelihood. Consequently, food shortage prevails in the state and the nation at large, given the fact that Benue State whose massive population is displaced, is considered the food basket of the nation. Through a qualitative research approach, this paper investigates other issues that are associated with this displacement. The paper found out that if nothing sustainable is done to checkmate this ugly trend, the entire country might be plunged into food crisis in the long run. It, therefore, recommends the theatre for development (TfD) approach as an enduring strategy towards resolving this hydra-headed problem. As evidenced in the UkpiaM TfD workshop under study, this people-centred form of theatre has been proven over the years in various experiments to trigger actionable solutions to community problems and jolt relevant government agencies and other policymakers to enact policies that offer lasting solutions to issues identified.

Keywords: Food crisis, Population displacement, TfD, UkpiaM IDP camp.

Introduction

Nigeria has continued to grapple with myriads of challenges that hamper its sustainable development pursuit. The issues range from social and political unrest to insurgency, ethnic and religious crises, which have had innumerable negative effects on the citizenry, leading to massive displacement, wanton destruction of lives and properties and food shortage. This ugly trend has become dominant, especially in the northern states of the country, which are known to be the major suppliers of food. The United Nations report of January 2023 sheds light on this, stating that:

Continued conflict, climate change, inflation and rising food prices are key drivers to this alarming trend. Food access has been affected by persistent violence... armed banditry [not excluding farmers- herders' crises] and kidnapping in states such as Katsina, Sokoto, Kaduna, Benue, and Niger. [*Addition ours*] (2)

This trend as cited above is not limited to the aforementioned states and its effects which include, but are not limited to displacement, have become graver and more inimical to Nigeria's development than one can imagine. Broadly speaking, the International Medical Corps (IMC) claims that internal displacement is caused by various incidences such as religious persecution, armed communal conflicts, natural disasters such as earthquakes and eruptions. However, the focus of this paper is displacement in Benue State that is caused by the farmers-herders' conflict.

Benue is one of the states in the north central region of Nigeria. It has twenty-three (23) local government areas. It lies within the lower River Benue trough in the middle belt region of the country. According to the 2006 Population Census, Benue has a population of 4,253,641 and occupies a landmass of 32,518 square kilometres. The Tiv are the dominant ethnic group, occupying fourteen (14) local government areas, while the Idoma and Igede occupy the remaining nine local government areas.

In Benue State particularly, indigenes who are predominantly farmers have witnessed climatic and weather shifts which are known to affect farm yield over the years and thus is also a point of concern. However, the horrendous insurgence of armed herdsmen in the state has sacked these farmers from their original homes. While their farms have become permanent grazing reserves for cows, internally displaced persons (IDP) camps scattered across the state have become permanent abodes for farmers. This is a bone of contention and needs urgent attention since the acclaimed food basket of the nation has been thrown into starvation itself and can no longer boast of catering for the nation's nutrition needs. This study, therefore, serves as a key contributor to salvage this worrisome drift as it espouses on the prospects of the theatre to substantiate previous efforts in this regard.

Internal Displacement in Benue State

The twenty-first century has been tough and challenging for Nigeria, especially the north central and Benue State to be precise. This is because the security of lives and properties has become a topical problem as the greater part of stories of people in these areas has in recent years been woven around violent conflicts orchestrated by conflicting interests of cultural, social and political groups. Heassly aptly captures this when he says that: "one of the most significant challenges facing the citizens of the world in the 21st century is how to live and work peacefully with others in all spheres of personal and public life" (83). Perhaps, this observation explains the plight of the Benue people who have been victims of armed attacks by herdsmen for over a decade and counting. The problem stems from the continuous clamour for arable land for farming and grazing.

Over the years, the depletion of arable land for subsistence farming largely as a result of increasing urbanization and the adverse effects of climate change, especially along the Lake Chad basin have caused increased struggle between farmers and herdsmen. While farmers clamour for land to cultivate crops, herdsmen seek pastures for grazing purposes. These clashes of interests, therefore, build up to confrontations that have become unhealthy to the peaceful coexistence of both groups. It is these confrontations, attacks and counterattacks that have been the causes of continued

unrests in states such as Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau, among others. Since 2010, Benue State has become a war zone because of the activities of herders which usually result to violent clashes with farmers. The height of these violent conflicts was the attack on residents of Guma Local Government Area on New Year's Day in 2018 where over 70 farmers were murdered and tons of valuable properties destroyed. Since then, these attacks have continued unabated across the 23 local government areas in the state.

The attacks on Benue farmers oftentimes appear to be largely coordinated and spontaneous, mostly leaving immeasurable marks, particularly in local government areas such as Guma, Logo, Katsina-Ala, Makurdi, Agatu, Gwer West and Kwande. Ikpanor and Sambe observe that the attacks are: characterised by large-scale destruction of lives, farmlands, and properties, rape, abduction, and displacement of farmers, an operation clearly suggests a clearly orchestrated plan to evict the farmers from their ancestral homeland (48). One could not agree less with the fact that the incessant attacks on Benue farmers are consciously planned and sponsored. Victims of such coordinated attacks often are sacked from their original homes and forced to seek refuge in IDP camps that are scattered across the state. These camps continually increase as long as the Benue people continue being displaced by the activities of the herders.

Sadly, farmlands have been deserted for years since they have become danger zones and the expected results of this massive displacement of farmers is hunger and increased food crisis that have engulfed Benue State and Nigeria generally. The Benue population that was one time acclaimed as 'feeders of the nation' have been reduced depending on government, donor agencies and individuals for feeding and other basic necessities such as shelter at IDP camps. This, therefore, calls for urgent steps to augment the existing efforts of individuals and groups to tackle the causes of displacement and alleviate the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs) resident at the temporary camps across the state. The researchers see the need to explore a new dimension, using theatre for development (TfD) as a means of addressing the towering menace of displacement and food crisis in Benue State.

Theatre for Development

In Africa, the performative culture of the people is known to manifest through various art forms such as music, dance, storytelling and other folklorist traditions which abound in the numerous festivals and ritual activities that uniquely characterise communities and ethnicities across the continent. Tracing the roots of theatre practices in Africa, Adeseke claims that theatre in Africa was started by the people to appease the gods for survival and success in their occupations such as farming, hunting, wine tapping and the rest. Theatre in Africa later metamorphosed into ceremonies and festivals used to commemorate occasions like childbirth, housewarming, marriage and other festivities (192).

These performative art forms later progressed and transcended mere entertainment to play crucial roles of information, cultural propagation, and socio-political transformation. One key function of African theatre is its potency in

preserving the authentic culture of the African people as it forms a totality of the lifestyles and encompasses both material and non-material culture of the people. However, several factors such as colonisation and western education have redefined the practice of theatre in Africa. To a large extent, theatre in the past decades, has experienced a shift from cultural preservation and promotion to include a participatory art form that seeks for actionable solutions to the problems of communities. This form of theatre is recorded to have emanated from the inspirations and experiments of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educationist and theatre practitioner. According to Boh:

Freire assumed that the people (especially those who were oppressed and marginalized) obtain knowledge through their own life experience, but are persuaded by the oppressor to believe that knowledge is relevant and they themselves are ignorant. (45-46)

The above assertion was a response of Freire to an educational system which he termed as the 'banking system' where teachers and theatre practitioners were seen as the custodians of knowledge in a setting where community members were meant to accept views and whatever solutions offered for their own problems hook, line and sinker as their opinions would not count (Boh 46). Consequently, Freire's approach of participatory drama that puts first the opinions and suggestions of community members did not end with his experimental activities in South America, but has gradually culminated into what is known world over today as theatre for development (TfD). In Africa, this theatre form has progressed and evolved through the years with nomenclatures such as popular theatre, community theatre, and theatre for rural development, among others (Omoera 45).

Theatre for development as it is today, transcends the ideology of having theatre practitioners serving as researchers in communities and members of host communities serving as providers of information in the research process. Rather, it bridges the gap between the practitioners and community members and places both parties in an avenue of dialogue where issues are raised, debated upon and actionable solutions are advanced with community members serving as the frontliners because they are the custodians of such issues and have the best solutions to them. It is, therefore, not out of place to state that this form of theatre offers members of rural communities the opportunity to participate actively in development of their community and by extension, their country.

It is important to observe at this point that, while TfD practice creates avenues for interaction between theatre practitioners and members of host communities in a participatory dialogue, it also attracts the attention of third parties in the long run such as government, non-government organizations and other donor agencies. This is possible when suggestions advanced in the process of TfD are put into practice. It proves to the world the level of commitment of the people towards self-dependence in seeking solutions to prevailing issues. Thus, one could be right to state that the success of any TfD workshop can only be established when the suggestions advanced during the post-performance discussions are put into practice by those who pledge responsibility in the community.

TfD, Internal Displacement and Food Crises in Benue State

Theatre for development (TfD) as a practice has been widely embraced and utilised as a catalyst to providing lasting solutions, especially in rural communities where populations are unaware of their problem-solving potential. Its potency has remained unwavering even in the era of digitization in which electronic media enjoy prominence. In fact, because the new media is still far-fetched to rural dwellers in Africa, TfD remains useful in providing entertainment, participatory education and empowerment. In Benue State, this form of theatre practice has been variously utilised by academic theatres of tertiary institutions to serve the dual purposes of training would-be practitioners and to engender rural development. It is, therefore, pertinent to employ the services of this theatre practice which has been proven over the years to trigger answers to difficult problems, to mitigate the prevailing challenges of internal displacement and food crisis in Benue State.

The Ukpia IDP Camp Experience

This experiment was carried out in October 2022 with the aim of utilising TfD as a tool for solution-finding to the challenge of internal displacement and food crisis in Benue State. *Brief Profile of Ukpia IDP Camp*. Ukpia camp is situated along Daudu-Gbajimba road and is about 10 kilometres away from Daudu town in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State. According to the chairman of the camp, the camp which has an estimated number of about 2,722 internally displaced persons (IDPs) was established by the Benue State government on the 29 November 2020. It houses IDPs who have been displaced from various communities including Tse Unande, Asange Abaa, Angur and Amua, all in Guma Local Government.

Methodology

Data was collected using the theatre for development methodology. The researchers used instruments such as focus group discussions (FGDs), oral interviews and direct observation methods. For the FGDs, members of the camp were segmented into younger men, older men, younger women and older women. The oral interview instrument was majorly adopted to gather data from the camp officials and management which included the camp chairman and his executive members, and block leaders. The researchers also keenly observed respondents and participants in the research process. After a thorough data collection exercise using the aforementioned instruments, the following constituted the issues surrounding internal displacement in the state:

Cause of Displacement: The major cause of displacement was identified to be the incessant farmers-herders' crisis that has overwhelmed Benue communities in the past decade.

Effects of Displacement: Members identified effects of displacement to include diseases, hunger and poverty, lack of shelter, and ultimately, death of displaced persons. In his explanation, Mr Terwase Kwaghtser, in the focus group discussion with older men, lamented that no one wishes to leave the comfort of their homes to settle in strange homes such as IDP camps and when this becomes the case, such persons tend

to get disillusioned about life. In a separate comment, another youth also lamented on how energetic youths are rendered helpless and idle in IDP camps, thereby being at the mercy of government, non-governmental organisations and well-meaning individuals for survival.

Drama Scenario

The issues relating to displacement as raised by the participants in the data collection phase, were collated and formulated into drama episodes after a prioritisation was done by community members with the researchers serving as guides. The following drama scenarios were formulated as the intervention drama:

Episode One: The scene opens at a farm where two Tiv women are weeding. Shortly, some Fulani men lead their cows as they trespass and enter the farm, eating and destroying crops. This displeases the Tiv women who complain but in response, the Fulani men threaten them with cutlasses and they run for their lives while the cows continue to feed on the crops. Moments later, the Tiv women return with their husbands who are seriously angered at the sight of the destruction caused by the Fulani men and their cows. This leads to an intense disagreement that results in fierce crisis where the Fulani overpower the Tiv people, killing some while others flee with injuries.

Episode Two: The now displaced persons are seen helpless at the IDP camp. They lament bitterly about the lack of amenities at the camp such as shelter, food and health facilities. One of the IDPs out of desperation decides that he would go out to his farm to get food but is reminded and discouraged by the others that the place he intends to go out to is a death zone, having been overtaken by the herdsmen.

Episode Three: Some members of the camp are seen expressing hunger while others are sick including children. IDPs lament that for months, they have not received support from anyone including NGOs that used to support them with food in the past years. They reveal that even when a few persons bring support to them, it is largely insufficient due to how it is shared and given the large population in the camp. Out of desperation, some of the IDPs decide to go out in search of food from their farms where the herdsmen have taken over. They express awareness of the dangers involved but also conclude that it is better to take such chances than remain in the camp where hunger can also lead to death. Despite concerns, and fear of death, some of them decide to go out to source for food.

Episode Four: At the camp the next day, while IDPs are seated discussing, a young man enters amidst tears to break the news of massacre of those who went out earlier to search for food by the armed herdsmen. There is mixed reaction as most people blame the sad event on hunger and desperation.

Drama Performance, Discussion and Analysis

After the aforementioned activities, the researchers liaised with camp members, intimated them on the next step and some members volunteered to take up acting roles in the drama. During the rehearsals, members were allowed to make reasonable input in the drama, to enhance better comprehension of the issues and scenarios. On Saturday 29th October, 2022, the drama was staged to an audience of over 100 persons,

comprising camp members and members of the host community. After the performance, the audience was engaged in a post-performance discussion anchored by the facilitators who used Tiv language as the communication medium since all members of the camp could comprehend and communicate more effectively in Tiv than with any other language. The facilitators of the intervention drama, prompted discussions from community members. Through questions, the facilitators were able to uncover what the audience deduced from the drama. Firstly, members chorused that issues portrayed in the drama were prevailing issues among camp dwellers. They, therefore, identified the following issues in the drama: displacement as a result of armed herders-farmers crisis; vulnerability and hunger among IDPs; and desperation among displaced persons which leads them to danger zones in search for food.

The facilitator also sought to know what camp members were willing to do or suggest as actionable solutions to the issues identified. In response, the leader of Block A in the camp, called on the government to find lasting solutions to displacement, which is to resettle IDPs back to their original homes. This view received several affirmative choruses as Mrs. Mimidoo Awuna added that IDPs lack the capacity to end the crisis and guarantee lasting security and resettlement of IDPs. Therefore, the onus lies on the government and other relevant bodies. Also, the representative of the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) to the camp, enjoined members of the host community at the event to consider IDPs by offering them pieces of land where they (IDPs) can farm and produce food for sustenance. He also advised IDPs not to make themselves more vulnerable by being idle but to go out and do menial labour at nearby farms, construction sites and even markets to enhance their livelihood. The camp chairman also advised IDPs to embrace unity and see themselves as one family at the camp. That way, the feeling of vulnerability will be reduced.

Key Findings

Consequent upon analysis of data collected from the research site, the following findings were made: Finding solutions to displacement in Benue communities is a task that is beyond the capacity of IDPs. Therefore, the government and other agencies with the capacity to quell the incessant crises and ensure lasting security of life and property are heavily relied upon in this regard. Most IDPs in these camps specialised in various handiwork prior to their displacement. However, they fail to harness these unique skills for the personal and general advantage of their camps, probably due to the regular assistance they receive from external bodies such as NGOs and well-meaning individuals. Instead of finding lasting solutions to displacement occasioned by the farmers-herders' crisis, the government and other donor agencies are more focused on offering assistance to displaced persons in IDP camps. This makes such interventions appear as though they are efforts in futility due to the increasing number of displaced persons on a frequent basis.

Importantly, we must reiterate that internal displacement in Benue State occasioned by the massive attacks of armed herdsmen has rendered farmers homeless and farmlands deserted. Because the crisis continued unabated, one may rightly observe that sustainable development goal 2 (SDG 2) in Nigeria, which aims at ending

hunger, achieving food security, improving nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture by 2030 is on the brink of total defeat (Uza, Alamveabee, Onah-Ugbem and Nwafor 51). Internal displacement as a formidable threat to peaceful coexistence and economic development, greatly affects sustainable livelihood of agrarian communities such as those in Benue State. Not only has this displacement of rural farmers limited food production and increased food losses, it has also denied the Benue and Nigerian populace access to food and availability of food supply in the right proportion as it ought to be. Owing to this fact, prices of food items soar higher by the day across the country and are expected to continue as long as the root cause lasts, especially in line with the current inflation and recession in the country. This is, therefore, an identified need for organisations as well as well-meaning individuals to focus attention on the causes of displacement rather than expending energies on alleviating the plight of displaced persons who seek refuge in IDP camps.

In the area of theatre, it can be observed that the practice over the years has been preoccupied with other socio-cultural, political and economic issues such as nutrition, environmental sanitation, among other issues. However, the issue of food crisis and internal displacement which is a national issue, still calls for attention from theatre practitioners, especially with its potential of engendering sustainable solutions. This paper, therefore, is a call for the attention of theatre practitioners to utilise the necessary paraphernalia of theatre in engendering peace and finding lasting solutions to displacement in Benue State and Nigeria at large for enhanced food security and peaceful relations among both indigenes and settlers.

Conclusion

The paper concludes with optimism that if the theatre practice discussed above has been effective in engendering positive dialogues and finding solutions towards challenging issues beginning from Freire's experiments, the improved practice as it is in contemporary society will suffice as a catalyst towards peaceful relations among Nigerians and most of all, finding lasting solutions to internal displacement in Benue State and Nigeria at large. Therefore, the paper suggests increased subscription of theatre practitioners in this process which includes research into community issues using the theatre for development methodology; analysis and synthesis of issues identified, drama formation, performance and post-performance discussion forum where parties involved interface and dialogue to device better ways of finding solutions to identified problems. It is, therefore, our suggestion that the post-performance discussions should feature not just community members and catalyst teams, but also organisations both government and non-government bodies capable of enacting policies that will checkmate the root causes of displacement. The validity of this suggestion lies in the fact that since the major cause of displacement in Benue State is armed herdsmen attacks on farmers, community members are to a large extent, limited in their capacity to curb the current security situation in their communities.

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