Social Interaction and Conflict Between the Ihiagwa Host Community and the Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria

Nwajiuba Chmyere Augusta*

Abstract
The study investigated sources of conflicts between the Ihiagwa host community and the Federal University of Technology Owerri, Imo State. Data were generated through a survey of 450 indigenes selected through simple random sampling technique. Structured questionnaire and in depth interview were employed, and data analyzed using frequency distribution and manual content analysis. Social interaction between workers, students and Ihiagwa indigenes hosting FUTO are in form of cooperation and conflicts. Cooperations are in form of common use of social amenities, worshipping together in religious places, attending festivals and other cultural activities and celebrations in FUTO. Conflicts result through land boundary adjustment issues, abuse of rights and fighting which led to death of students and Ihiagwa indigenes and well as destruction of houses and properties. Formal social control mechanisms such as community police and vigilante groups are majorly used in addressing major social conflicts such as fighting resulting to riots and loss of human lives. Findings further recommend that government should compensate the indigenous populations where necessar}- and find measures to encourage cooperation as well as reduce sources of conflicts.

Background
One common trend in Nigeria has been to establish Universities in rural communities. The vast majority of people especially the poor people in Nigeria live in rural areas and establishing universities in these areas is believed to inject funds and investment, generate employment and livelihood opportunities, reduce trie level of poverty as well as improve the general well being of indigenes. The evidence of positive socio-economic benefit to community hosting universities have been studied in the host community of a private university in Nigeria (Madonna University) located at Elele, a rural community, in Rivers State (Nwajiuba,

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Nwajiuba and Nwordu, 2012). Universities in rural communities have the potential to become strong drivers of growth (Hereshe, 2010, Ojeh and Origho, 2012).

Most times, the social challenges that may arise are not the focus of policymakers and administrators. When academic institutions such as Universities emerge in rural areas, they bring with them huge population increase, an alteration in the demographic conditions. Subsequently there emerges new social dynamics in such rural areas. However, in many cases, the host community are very enthusiastic and receptive of these universities. The major motivation is to attract investment, development and increase income generating activities of members of the community. Despite the benefits, establishment of universities in rural communities could be a source of conflict between the University, the students and workers who come to study and work, and the indigenes of host communities.

Conflicts are processes of opposition. It is inherent in every society or social system and reflected in attitude, behaviour, stereotypes and social distance (Nucci, 1981). Sometimes conflicts is apparently noted when an individual or group seeks to attain its own ends in ways which obstruct the attainment of the same ends by others. The processes of conflict include abhorrence, anonymity, antagonistic, attitude, contempt, enmity, hatred, rivalry and tension. The expression of these may be found in their stereotypic statement as well as in their action such as in maintenance of social distance, rules of inter-dinning and so on. Besides, conflicts also lead to direct confrontation, fight, quarrel, and disagreements.

The first University to be established in Southeast Nigeria was the University of Nigeria Nsukka, which came into being in 1960. That University was located in a rural area, arid has remained the main driver of social and economic events in the area. Since then a number of Universities (Federal, State and Private) have emerged. Among the Federal Universities, the second in the region was the Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO) established in 1980. That University has in the last two decades been at a rural outskirt of Owerri, prominent of which is the Ihiagwa community. Since this period a number of social crises and conflicts have emerged between the university and the host communities. Whether the location of universities in rural areas contributes towards conflicts issues among host communities and university community is not well known. Also, there are gaps in knowledge as to the social interactions that exist between workers, students and Ihiagwa community hosting Federal university, owerri. There is lack of clarity on the mechanisms used in addressing social conflicts if they arise. These are the key knowledge gaps this study seeks to fill.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study is to examine social interaction and conflicts between indigenous population of Ihiagwa community, a host of the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO), Imo State, Nigeria and the University community. Specific objectives include:

1. Ascertaining forms of social interactions that exists between workers, students and Ihiagwa community
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hosting Federal University of Technology, Owerri.
2. Identifying issues of conflicts between the workers, students and Ihiagwa community hosting FUTO, Owerri.
3. Examining mechanisms employed in addressing social conflicts if they arise.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What forms of social interactions exist between workers, students and Ihiagwa community hosting Federal University of Technology, Owerri?
2. What are the issues of conflicts between the workers, students and Ihiagwa community hosting FUTO, Owerri?
3. What mechanisms are used in addressing social conflicts if they arise?

Literature Review

There has been relatively little empirical research concerned specifically with conflicts associated with location of universities in rural areas. Most research that has focused on rural areas has been based on anecdotal evidence backed up by ungrounded theoretical explanations. Where empirical data have been collected, this has mostly been in order to contextualise urban statistics.

Related studies include Ojeh and Origho, (2012) who did a study on the socioeconomic development of rural areas in Nigeria using the growth pole approach in a case study of Delta state university in Abraka. Data for this study was collected using questionnaire from 200 respondents who are indigenes of Abraka. The findings suggests that citing universities in rural institutions in a geographic environment is a stimulus for rapid growth of the area in terms of education, landuse, housing, transportaion, trading and other essential services caused by increased spatial interaction. However, the study focused on the positive developmental strides. No effort was made to examine the negative impact with regard to conflicts.

Nwajiuba, et al, (2012) examined the role of private university initiative in reducing poverty among indigenes of Elele community using a questionnaire. The findings of the study revealed that Madonna university has a positive influence on the well-being of its local residents. The study neglected the adverse social effects of the university on community members especially with regard to forms of social interactions existing between university host community and university community.

Methodology

Population and Sample and Sampling Technique

The population of the study consists of men and women of Ihiagwa community aged 35 years and above, as they are likely to be familiar with the social, cultural and economic conditions of the community prior to the presence of FUTO in 1992.

This is important to have a basis for relating current situation with the situation prior to the location of the University around the Ihiagwa community. These include men and women of different socio-economic statuses. The population of
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Ihiagwa is 10,620 (National population Commission Projection, 2000).

From the list of female and male indigenous in the villages, 5% of indigenous men and women from 35 years and above were selected. Therefore the sample size of the investigation was 531 representing 5% of the total of indigenous population. The sample frame for the selection of respondents was based on a comprehensive list of adult males and females provided by villages heads of the eight villages which make up Ihiagwa community. These villages include Iriamogu, Mboke, Umuokwo, Umuezawula, Nkaramoche, Ishiuzo, Umulem and Umuchima. The list is composed of men and women who are indigenes of Ihiagwa and who participate in community development and social activities. Those selected were men and women who were present at the inception of Federal University of Technology, Owerri in the community.

Method of Data Collection
The study adopted methods triangulation by employing the survey methods, and In-depth interview (IDI). Field work began with the qualitative aspects of research which provided important insights for the investigation of the study area using in-depth interview (EDI).

The survey method used was the structured questionnaire, which consists mostly of open-ended and a few closed-ended questions containing socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, forms of social interactions between the university host community and students/staff of the university. The structured questionnaire was developed after a pilot study. Elicitation of information through the questionnaire started after the pre-test. Administration of the instrument was done face-to-face. Four research assistants were trained to administer the structured questionnaire, three of them were students from FUTO and the remaining one from Ihiagwa community. To minimize error in data collection, research assistants were triangulated.

Questionnaire was administered on 531 respondents. Four hundred and fifty (450) were duly filled and returned, which gave a response rate of 71 percent. This high rate of return was made possible by a combination of factors among which were the diligence and persistence of the researcher and her field assistants.

Method of Data Analysis
Data collected were subjected to analysis using descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequency distributions. They were used to analyse socio-demographic characteristics such as age, types of occupation, educational attainment, income, residence, religion, marital status and forms of social interactions. The qualitative data were collected through IDIs and were analysed using manual content analysis. This was done by transcribing, checking and editing the collected information. Then, the transcribed information was coded.

Results
Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents
Sex composition of the indigenes vary with male population slightly higher than female population Table 1), 50.9 percent of the
respondents are males while 49.9 percent are females. This conforms with the general picture by the census figures by the National Population commission. The average age of the respondents is 57. In other words, 36.6 percent fall with the age range of 51-60. This age range represents indigenous population that were present before the establishment of FUTO in Ihiagwa. Most importantly, this consists of those familiar with the social, cultural and economic conditions of Ihiagwa community prior to the establishment of FUTO in 1992.

Results on the marital status show that 72.9% of the respondents are married. This suggests that more of the indigenous population are married. They are more likely to describe issues concerning conflicts without bias. Results on education level of respondents reveal that 40.6 percent possess bachelors degree, 21.5 percent had post graduate education, 20.6 percent had secondary education, 10.4 possess primary education and 6.6 percent had no formal education. This is indicative of a high literacy level in Ihiagwa. The presence of university with its various degree and with easy access have had positive influence on the indigenous population who took advantage of the programs in the university. Results on occupation show that 20.2 percent of the indigenes are teachers in primary and secondary schools, 19.3 percent are non academic staff of the university, 15.7 percent are artisans, 15.3 percent are drivers/Okada men, 11.1 percent are academic staff, 10.4 percent are farmers, and 7.7 percent are traders. Occupationallly, the majority of the respondents are made up of non-academic staff, teachers of various public and private

owned schools in Ihiagwa. This is followed by artisans, drivers/okada men indicating that there are various socioeconomic activities in the environment. This is a potential driver of growth as well as creates income generating activities for the community (Marshall and Johnson, 2005).

80 percent of the respondents are fully residents and born in the community while 20% are non indigenes. This suggest that information on conflicts and interaction were elicidated from both indigenes and non indigenes. Most of them have been living in Ihiagwa for 16-20 years. On conventional value of religion, 93.3 percent respondents are Christians. However, the study area is predominantly Christians, while very few are not Christians. On estimate of income of respondents per month, 21.5 percent of the respondents earn 20,000 to 40,000, 15.5 percent earn below 20,000, 14.2% earn 41,000 to 60,000, 12.8 percent earn from 61,000 to 80,000, 11.1 percent earn within the range of 81,000 to 100,000, 12 percent earn from 101,000 to 120,000, 6.6 percent earn from 121,000 to 200,000 and 6 percent earn above 200,000. The high percentage respondents on this income bracket is as a result of the artisans, drivers/Okada men and traders. Semi-skilled and non-academic staff fall within this range. Most of the academic staff responds earn 120,000 and above.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of respondents</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Respondents’ Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41.000-60.000</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61.000-80.000</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81.000-100.000</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101.000-120.000</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121.000-200.000</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 200.000</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Forms of social interactions

Results on Table 2 show that 41.1 percent of the respondents identified conflicts as the prevailing form of social interaction between students/workers and Ihiagwa indigenes. 33.6 percent of the respondents identified common use of social amenities in the community, 21.4 percent identified worship together with indigenes of Ihiagwa community, and 20.4 percent of the respondents identified that students and workers of FUTO attend Ihiagwa festivals.

Table 2: Percentage distribution of forms of social Interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of Interaction</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts with land issues, and values.</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common use or social amenities</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship together in church</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend festivals and other cultural activities</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Responses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| The prevailing form of social interaction existing between workers and students and Ihiagwa indigenes is conflicts with land issues which involve encroachment by FUTO into their land as well as the brazen act of
intimidation and deprivation by authorities of FUTO. This confirms the view of Nucci, (1981) who observed that conflicts are inherent in every social system due to social relationships and clashes in values as reflected in behaviours and attitudes. Issues concerning adjustment of land boundaries between the university management and Ihiagwa community are a source of conflict. This has occasionally resulted to problems as Ihiagwa indigenes believed to have lost their lands to FUTO which cannot utilize all the land mass it claims has been given by the federal government. As observed during the FGD, compensations have not been paid. They expressed that they suffer undue deprivations of their land.

Despite these conflicts, indigenes and FUTO staff and students cooperate in some ways which include worshiping together in religious activities, common use of available social amenities such as borehole water and others, and attendance to Ihiagwa festivals and other social events in the community. Ihiagwa indigenes also attend functions in FUTO when invited.

Sources of conflict
About 57.7 percent of the respondents identified the murder of an indigene by students of FUTO as a major source of conflict between Ihiagwa community and the FUTO community (Table 3). 4 percent identified abuse of rights on the part of the staff and students of FUTO, and 11.5 percent identified land boundary adjustment as a source of conflict.

Multiple responses
The single most significant source of conflict was the murder of an indigene by students of FUTO in 2001. The in-depth interviews conducted with the traditional ruler and some members of his cabinet revealed two versions of the story. A member of the traditional ruler’s cabinet who is 56 years old, a trader who owns a shop at the park where the incidence happened reported the first version of the story. According to him:

This happened in March, 27th, 2001. An ITC bus which usually piles Owerri town to Ihiagwa route charges 10 naira per trip while the private commercial buses charge 20 naira for same journey. The students and the other passengers normally rush for the discomfort of motor park touts at the Nkwo-Ukwu Park. The touts felt the ITC was spoiling business for them. For this reason, they always fell out with the ITC drivers. On Monday evening of March. 27 when an ITC bus came to drop passengers at Nkwo-Ukwu Park, the touts swooped on the driver for his recalcitrance. Some FUTO students who alighted from the ITC bus went to rescue the driver and it turned out to be a fight between them and the touts. (IDI with a member of the cabinet: June, 2012.)

A second version of the story was told during IDI with an male indigene of 60 years who is from the village of the murdered youth. According to him:
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A commercial bus driven by an Ihiagwa youth loaded at Owerri at about 8pm. After dropping the passengers at Nkwo-ukwu terminus, three FUTO students who were amongst the passengers told the drivers to go and drop them at their campus. The driver refused because it was too late for him to go there. He refused because many drivers who ventured into the campus in the night usually come back with tales of woe. Students usually disposed them of their daily earnings. When the Ihiagwa boy (driver) refused to move further, the FUTO students pounced on him. His wailing attracted some of his kinsmen who came to his rescue. The students escaped. (IDI with an indegene of Nkolochi: June, 2012.)

The two versions of the story claim that these students ran to the campus to inform their colleagues that they were attacked by Ihiagwa people. IDI with male indegene of 49 years who happens to be a bus driver further narrated what happened later. According to him:

The students regrouped at about 11pm and headed to the market to retaliate. At the market place, they saw Bobo Nzururike, the perceived leader of the ‘agbero’ (touts) who was said to be coming to buy pure water from one of the shops in the community. They shot him on the lap and abducted him. They finally got rid of him. Nzuruike whose wife is nursing a two-month old baby girl also had his family house close to the market burnt. These students also kidnapped two others who were later rescued. After the first attack, the community thinking it was over, went to sleep. But at 1.30am, the students were said to have re-launched another attack on their hosts. This time, they looted and burnt all the lock-up shops at the market place. The youths of Ihiagwa went for a reprisal. They sent all the FUTO students who are residents in their houses packing while killing some and looted their personal belongings. Their elders restrained them from going to turn the university campus into a battle field because doing so will result to fighting against the federal government. The institution was closed down the next day. Ihiagwa youths blocked the students from moving into owerri through the community. They had to pass through Obinze road to Owerri which is more tortuous. So many Ihiagwa indigenes were killed and injured in the clash. A number of students were also killed. Some were arrested by the police. FUTO was closed for six (6) months. (IDI with a male indegene from Nkolochi village in Ihiagwa, May, 2012.)

The issue according to respondents caused so much damage to the community. Since then, the relationship between the university community and ihiagwa community is not very harmonious. In-depth interview with the traditional ruler of Ihiagwa on how the conflict was resolved revealed that certain interventions were made by different people. According to him:

To stop the fight and destruction of lifes of innocent people and property was a thug of war. It took about three days to stop the fight. So many lives were lost and properties of students as well as those in the community including buildings and shops were burnt. It was actually painful. However, the only people that could stop it was the community police. Police intervened with arms and teargas which drove everyone away. This was followed by significant, efforts made by religious leaders who visited houses for prayers and counselling, women associations met regularly with the youths for appeal. My cabinet members, village heads and elders and i met regularly with FUTO management for dialogue and appealed for compensation on damaged houses and murdering of our sons
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and daughters. No compensation till today. (IDI with traditional ruler of Ihiagwa community: June, 2012.)

Various interventions were put in place to stop the violence. This has implications for advocates of university education and government who lobby for the location of universities in their states. Precautions should be taken to eliminate sources of conflicts in such areas.

The major reason for this response is as a result of the murder of Ihiagwa indigene. The outright response of 'not cordial' came from the particular village of the indigene that was killed. They expressed so much pain for the loss of their son and regrets for the presence of FUTO in their community. In-depth interview of an elderly woman of 70 years old of Nkolochi village where the incidence happened describes the feelings of the people. According to her:

We are not happy. Our most generous son is gone. I personally regret the day that university was brought into this community. I feel very bad each time I remember the incidence. Though we have not had any major issue with the FUTO community since then, we, members of Nkolochi village are not happy with the university community. (IDI with a female indigene from Nkolochi: June, 2012.)

Mechanisms Used in Addressing Social Conflicts

Settling major conflicts by police is mostly mentioned as a mechanism for addressing social conflicts between students/staff and Ihiagwa community with 46.6 percent responses (Table 4). 43.1 percent of the respondents mentioned formation and intervention of vigilante group, 38.2 percent identified intervention by the traditional ruler when minor issues occur, 20 percent mentioned community dialogue with stakeholders as a mechanism and 17.7 percent identified the intervention by FUTO management as a mechanism for addressing social conflicts if they arise.

Table 4: Percentage distribution of Mechanisms for addressing social conflicts as perceived by respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanisms</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police settles major conflicts</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formation and intervention of vigilante group</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional ruler (Eze) and village heads settles minor issues</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community dialogue with stakeholders</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention by FUTO management</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Multiple Responses

Results presented in Table 4 above suggest that formal social control mechanisms such as community police and vigilante groups are the major mechanisms used in addressing major social conflicts such as fighting resulting to killing and riots. The minor issues such as farm theft, alcoholism leading to physical damage, and sexual offences, are handled by the traditional ruler (Eze) and village heads. Other conflicts dealing with land issues are handled through community dialogue with stakeholders and FUTO management. This
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supports the views of Williams and McSham, (1999) that is controlled by societal or community reactions. Results of in-depth interviews with village heads on the mechanisms used to control conflict between students/staff and Ihiagwa community revealed that police and vigilante groups are the main strategies to control conflicts when they arise. The response of a 55 years village head explicates the reasons for the use of police and vigilante groups. According to him:

The police and vigilante group are effective because they are armed. They do not spear any offender when caught. Using their arms, they keep bad boys off the streets and protect people. We rely so much on them. The community vigilante group are always available. All they require is our moral and financial support. (IDI with a village head: June, 2012.)

This suggests that the crucial role of the police is to intervene when there is conflict, and prevent that from deteriorating by clamping down on the first signs of undesirable behaviour. This confirms the functionalist theory that agree that social control mechanism such as the police and the courts are necessary to protect social order (Macionis and Plummer, 2005).

Conclusion

Forms of social interaction existing between workers, students and Ihiagwa indigenes hosting FUTO are cooperation and conflicts. Cooperations are in form of common use of social amenities, worshipping together in religious places, attending festivals and other cultural activites and celebrations in FUTO. On the other hand, conflicts result through land boundary adjustment issues, abuse of rights and fighting which led to the killing of students and Ihiagwa indigenes and well as destruction of houses and properties in 2001. The relationship between students/staff resident in Ihiagwa community is described as just cordial.

Recommendations

There exist not very cordial or harmonious relationship between the university community and host community. Efforts should be made by government to encourage cordial relationships. Government should compensate the indigenous populations where necessary and find measures to encourage cooperation as well as reduce sources of conflicts.

References

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