The Roles of Religious Organizations in Flood Management in the Niger Delta Region for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria, is frequently plagued by flood disasters, which disrupt lives, livelihoods, the environment and oftentimes render human beings homeless. In view of the above assertion, this paper focuses on the role of religious organizations in disaster management in the Niger Delta region. The authors employ interviews with religious leaders, community members, and disaster management officials. The Findings suggest that religious organizations are pivotal in mobilizing community resources, providing immediate relief, and offering psychosocial support during disasters. Religious leaders may act as trusted intermediaries between the government and the populace, facilitating the dissemination of vital information and fostering community cohesion. Moreover, religious teachings and practices could enhance environmental stewardship and resilience, encouraging sustainable living practices that mitigate flood risks. Recommendations include formalizing partnerships between religious institutions and government agencies, integrating religious perspectives into disaster management policies, and training religious leaders in disaster response and recovery strategies.

Keywords: Disaster management, Environment, Flood, Niger Delta, Stewardship

Introduction

The Niger Delta, is one of the most ecologically sensitive regions in Nigeria, characterized by a network of rivers, creeks, and mangrove swamps. According to Ebisemiju (2016) this unique geography makes it particularly susceptible to flooding, a recurrent phenomenon that disrupts communities, damages infrastructure, and hampers socio-economic development. Floods in the Niger Delta particularly Bayelsa and Rivers States are primarily driven by heavy rainfall, poor drainage systems, and the complex hydrological dynamics of the delta, often exacerbated by climate change and unsustainable human activities such as deforestation, urbanization, and oil exploration. As rightly observed, flood disaster is a persistent and escalating threat in the Niger Delta region, particularly in Bayelsa and Rivers states. These flood events cause significant damage to infrastructure, displace populations, and disrupt economic activities, exacerbating poverty and vulnerability among affected communities. Despite ongoing efforts by governmental and non-governmental organizations to mitigate and manage this disaster, the frequency and impact of floods continue to rise, highlighting the need for more effective and holistic approaches to disaster management (Adebayo and Oni, 2017). Historically, the people of Bayelsa and Rivers states have relied on traditional knowledge and practices to cope with flood events.

Igwe (2019) an African scholar pointed out some indigenous strategies, such as the construction of elevated houses and the cultivation of flood-resistant crops, have been integral to their resilience. However, the increasing frequency and intensity of floods in recent years have overwhelmed these traditional coping mechanisms, necessitating more comprehensive and coordinated disaster management approaches. Similarly, in the recent past, religious institutions have been observed to be involved in flood disaster management through various means. They provide immediate relief in the form of food, shelter, and medical care to affected individuals. Additionally, they offer psychosocial support, helping the affected members communities cope with the trauma and stress associated with flood events. Despite the present evident contributions of religious institutions, there is a paucity of systematic research exploring their role in flood disaster management in the Niger Delta thus this study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the roles of

religious organizations in flood management in the Niger Delta region. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how religion can contribute to building resilient communities capable of withstanding and recovering from flood disasters. It hopes to inform policy and practice, advocating for the inclusion of religious institutions in formal disaster management frameworks and highlighting their potential to foster sustainable development in the Niger Delta.

Concept of Flood Disaster

Flooding is among the most frequent and costly natural disasters in recent times. Flooding often occurs following a hurricane, thawing snow, or several days of sustained rain (Aliyu 2015). Here in Africa, scholars have identified that Flash floods occur suddenly, due to rapidly rising water along a stream or low-lying area as a result of notable increase in the amount of rainfall (Emereibeole, 2015, Drabek, 2019, and Igwe, 2019). Flood Disasters are considered the most frequent type of natural disaster that occur most likely when there is an overflow of water which submerges a portion of land that is usually dry. Flooding in most part of the earth is generally caused by heavy rainfall, rapid snowmelt or a storm surge from a tropical cyclone or tsunami in some coastal areas. In views of Drabek, and Evans (2019) flooding is classified to be a disaster when an event of flooding and the resultant effects exceeds the coping capacity of the affected people. According to this duo, when the flooding exceeds the coping capacity of the people to the extent that victims will resort to seek for external support for survival and recovery, it is then seen as disaster. By implication and application not every flooding event is considered a disaster, only those flooding events which exceed the resilience of a people are classified as disasters.

Types of Flooding

Inland Floods

Inland flooding, according to Tiffany Means (2018), is the technical name for ordinary flooding that occurs in inland areas, hundreds of miles from the coast. Flash flooding, river flooding, and pretty much every type of flooding except coastal can be categorized as an inland flood.

Common causes of inland flooding include:
Persistent rainfall (if it rains quicker than anticipated in the canal, water levels will rise);

Runoff (if the ground becomes saturated or rain runs down mountains and steep hills);

Slow-moving tropical cyclones;
Rapid snowmelt (the melting of snowpack -- layers of deep snow that accumulate overwinter in the northern tier states and mountainous regions of the U.S.);

Ice jams (chunks of ice that build up in rivers and lakes, creating a dam. After the ice breaks apart, it releases a sudden surge of water downstream).

Flash Floods
Flash floods are caused by heavy rain or the sudden release of water over a short period of time. The name "flash" refers to their fast occurrence (typically within minutes to hours after the heavy rain event) and also to their raging torrents of water that move with great speed. While the majority of flash floods are triggered by torrential rain falling within a short amount of time (like during intense thunderstorms), they can also occur even if no rain has fallen. The sudden release of water from levee and dam breaks or by a debris or ice jam can all lead to flash flooding.

Because of their sudden onset, flash floods tend to be thought of as more dangerous than ordinary floods.

River Floods
River flooding occurs when water levels in rivers, lakes, and streams rise and overflow onto the surrounding banks, shores, and neighboring land.

The water level rise could be due to excessive rain from tropical cyclones, snowmelt, or ice jams.

One tool in predicting river floods is the monitoring of flood stage. All major rivers in the Niger Delta area have a flood stage – water level at which that particular body of water begins to threaten the travel, property, and lives of those nearby. The NOAA National Weather Service and River Forecast Centers recognize 4 flood stage levels:

At **Action stage** (yellow), water levels are near the top of river banks.
At **Minor flood stage** (orange), minor flooding of nearby roadways occurs.
At **Moderate flood stage** (red), expect flooding of nearby buildings and the closure of roadways.
At **Major flood stage** (purple), extensive and often life-threatening flooding is expected, including the complete inundation of low-lying areas.

Coastal Floods
Coastal flooding is the inundation of land areas along the coast by seawater. Common causes of coastal flooding include:
High tide; Tsunamis (large ocean waves generated by underwater earthquakes that move inland);

Storm surge (an ocean swells that "piles up" due to a tropical cyclone's winds and low pressure which push water out ahead of the storm, then comes ashore).

Coastal flooding will only worsen as our planet warms. For one, warming oceans lead to a rise in sea level (as oceans warm, they expand, plus melt icebergs and glaciers). Higher "normal" sea height means it will take less to trigger floods and they will happen more often. According to a recent study by *Climate Central*, the number of days Cities in Bayelsa and Rivers States experienced coastal flooding have already risen to more than double since the 1980

Urban Flood
Urban flooding occurs when there is a lack of effective drainage in an urban (city) area.

What happens is that water that would otherwise soak into the soil cannot travel through paved surfaces, and so it is redirected into city sewage and storm drain

systems. When the amount of water flowing into these drainage systems overwhelms them, flooding results.

Flooding in the Niger Delta

Flooding in the Niger Delta Region is caused by various factors which include: poor drainage systems; poor urbanization process and management. Being part of the low-lying Niger Delta Region with an intricate network of rivers and creeks, Bayelsa and Rivers States have, over the years, experienced recurrent flooding until 2023, when the Region experienced little respite in terms of the severity of the phenomenon. It is observed that flooding in the Region is often exacerbated by various factors including heavy rainfall, poor drainage systems, deforestation, and climate change. The Niger Delta is, making it particularly susceptible to flooding. It is observed, from an oral survey conducted, that flooding in the two states mostly affects the freshwater coastlines while the areas with saltwater experience very insignificant flooding. Examples of freshwater areas which experience flooding include: The whole of Ogbia and Yenagoa Local Government Areas, part of Kolokuma-Opokuma, Southern-Ijaw, and Sagbama Local Government Areas of Bayelsa States. During flood in these areas, which had almost become an annual event, often submerge the entire communities, including churches, shrines, walkways, etc. The impact varies between different communities. While in some cases, the water, after it overflows the river banks, submerges the roads and most parts of the communities. Sometimes it gets to an extent where people use canoe and other river crafts as the only means of transportation within such communities. This scenario may be considered milder compared to those where entire communities were submerged to the roof top levels. In such situations, it has become characteristic of residents to relocate to refugee camps or other communities where they could be accommodated. In Rivers State, it is Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni, Ahoada East, Oyigbo-West, Ahoada West and Abua/Odual and parts of other local government areas that bore the brunt of the several floods over the years. In contrast, communities that are located on somewhat higher landscapes and those closer to the Atlantic Ocean were very insignificantly or not affected at all by the floods. This may be partially due to the fact that all water channels are emptied into the oceans from the tributaries of the Rivers Benue and Niger. Some of the Communities that were not affected by the floodings in the study area include: Brass and some major parts of Nembe Local Government

Areas of Bayelsa State, Bonny and Okrika Local Government Areas of Rivers State, etc. It is worthy of note, however, that though flooding in these areas are insignificant, the volume of water during flow tide is usually bigger in flood seasons than in the dry seasons when there is no flood surge of flood.

Disaster Management Culture in Africa

African continent has not been spared of the various natural and man-made disasters which have caused significant destruction, loss of lives and other valuables throughout human history. Disaster is not a new phenomenon in the continent but in recent times the continent has witnessed a new dimension of natural and manmade disasters in the forms repeated flooding and pandemics as examples of natural while the likes terrorism and wars are examples of manmade. The increasing rates of these identified natural disasters could be attributed to climate change, industrialization, and other human activities while manmade disaster is fuelled by globalization of arms trade and other related factors (Aliyu 2015). This development has contributed significantly to rapid escalation of communal and ethnic conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa regions resulting in complex emergencies and destruction of socioeconomic structures. Complex emergencies are also on the increase since the Rwandan crisis in 1994. DRC civil War, the Nigerian struggles with terrorism led by the deadliest terror group named *Boko Haram* and series of terrorist's attacks in Kenya by the *Al-qaeda* terror groups are few pockets of evidences of manmade emergences in African continent. Impacts of these events on Africans have overstretched and overwhelmed the existing health care system which to an extent lacks the adequate preparedness to cope with the magnitude of the challenge and also effectively deliver normal services. The major concern here is what could be the prevailing culture of Africans in general in response to and management of disasters especially the natural disaster like flooding, in the midst of the underdeveloped or developing nature of continent and the socio-cultural and economical disposition of the African States.

Religious Organization and Flood Management

Christianity is the main religion in Bayelsa State, with a majority of the population identifying as Protestant (43.8%) or Catholic (23.5%). The state also has a significant number of mainline Protestant denominations such as Anglicanism and Methodism (Ozigi, 2015). In Rivers State, Christianity is also the dominant

religion, with a majority of the population identifying as Protestant (45.1%) or Catholic (25.3%). The state also has a significant number of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches (Ojo, 2007). Islam is a minority religion in both states, with a smaller percentage of the population identifying as Muslim (Otuh, 2018; Nwosu, 2017). During the 2012 flood that swept across many states in Nigeria, many churches and other religious organization were involved in rescuing of victims. Most survivors were thankful to the religious agents who came to their rescue before the arrival of NEMA officials. Although the religious groups moved to flood disaster scene primarily with compassion to search for ways of rescuing their faithful followers within the flood disaster affected areas, but being ever compelled by their faith widely assisted everyone reachable at the scene by not limiting their efforts to their original target (Wokama, 2018). Churches such as the Omega Power Ministries (OPM) started the OPM foundation, Salvation Ministry via the David Ibiyeomie foundation, the Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion, The Catholics and The Seventh Day Adventist Church to state but a few, all made prominent efforts to aid the victims of flood disaster in Bayelsa and Rivers States. The background of churches involvement to flood disaster rescue can be linked to several biblical injunctions demanding the religious persons to be mindful of helping those in need and combating life challenges at all times (Matt. 25:35-39, James 1:27).

The Islamic religion is not left out as their presence is also felt in this regard though not as prominent may due to the fact that the number of their devotees is still small when compared to other religions practiced in Bayelsa and Rivers States. Religion in Bayelsa and Rivers States therefore has been actively involved in helping flood disaster victims but we shall now concern our labour with how religion does this and the different approaches employed across these two major religions we are studying. Churches have played a significant role in flood disaster management in Bayelsa and Rivers States, providing spiritual support and resources to affected communities (Ojo, 2007). Mosques have also played a crucial role in flood disaster preparedness, providing shelter and relief materials to affected communities (Nwosu, 2017). Churches and Mosques, have collaborated to provide a coordinated response to flood disasters, demonstrating the importance of interfaith collaboration in disaster preparedness (Otuh, 2018). The role of religious leaders in flood disaster preparedness cannot be overstated, as they provide

spiritual guidance and support to affected communities (Kukah, 2013). Overall, the role of Churches and Mosques in flood disaster preparedness in Bayelsa and Rivers States is crucial, and their collaboration is essential for effective disaster preparedness and response. Religious leaders play a significant role in community education and awareness before flood disasters, providing spiritual guidance and practical advice to prepare communities for potential floods (Ojo, 2007). During flood disasters, religious leaders provide emotional and spiritual support to affected communities, helping to alleviate stress and trauma (Nwosu, 2017). After flood disasters, religious leaders are involved in community rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts, providing resources and support for rebuilding and recovery (Otuh, 2018). Religious leaders have a significant influence on community behaviour and decision-making, and their involvement in flood disaster education and awareness is crucial for effective disaster risk reduction (Kukah, 2013).

The trust and respect accorded to religious leaders in Bayelsa and Rivers States makes them effective communicators of flood disaster risk reduction messages (Ozigi, 2015). Overall, the influence and involvement of religious leaders in community education and awareness before, during, and after flood disasters is essential for building resilient communities in Bayelsa and Rivers States. The Catholic Church in Bayelsa State has established a flood disaster response team, providing relief materials and spiritual support to affected communities. The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Omega Power Ministries OPM, the Seventh Day Adventist just to state but a few in Rivers State have engaged in several programs ranging from building rehabilitation centers for flood disaster victims, provisions of aids, established a flood disaster risk reduction program, providing special education and awareness to communities on flood risk reduction (Ojo, 2007). Faith-based organizations played a significant role in providing humanitarian aid during the 2012 flood in Nigeria (Onifade *et al.*, 2014). For instance, the Redeemed Christian Church of God provided relief materials to affected communities in Bayelsa and Rivers States (Ojo, 2007). During the 2022 flood in Bayelsa State, faith-based organizations such as the Catholic Church and the Nigerian Muslim Council provided flood-related support to affected communities (Umar *et al*., 2022). Faith-based volunteerism and charity have been instrumental in filling the gaps in government response to flood disasters in

Bayelsa and Rivers States (Ajayi, 2012). The role of faith-based organizations in flood disaster response in Bayelsa and Rivers States has been characterized as crucial, particularly in providing emotional and spiritual support to affected communities (Komolafe *et al*., 2015).

Benefits and Challenges of Inter-Faith Initiatives in Flood Management

Benefits: Inter-faith initiatives promote collective action and coordination among different religious groups, leading to more effective flood disaster management (Ozigi, 2015). Inter-faith collaboration helps to build trust and promote social cohesion among diverse religious communities, enhancing flood disaster response and recovery (Nwosu, 2020). Inter-faith initiatives facilitate the sharing of resources, expertise, and knowledge among different religious groups, leading to more efficient flood disaster management (Ojo, 2007).

Challenges: Inter-faith initiatives may face challenges related to theological and doctrinal differences among religious groups, which can hinder collaboration (Kukah, 2013). Power imbalances and competition for resources and influence may arise among religious groups, threatening the effectiveness of inter-faith initiatives (Otuh, 2018). Inter-faith initiatives may require significant time and effort to build trust and overcome historical conflicts and tensions among religious groups (Ajayi, 2012).

Religious Messaging and Communication

Use of religious platforms for disseminating flood disaster related information to the people of Bayelsa and Rivers States. Religious platforms have been effectively used to disseminate flood disaster related information to communities in Bayelsa and Rivers States (Ozigi, 2015).The Catholic Church in Bayelsa State has used its platforms to raise awareness on flood risk reduction and management (Ojo, 2007).The Nigerian Muslim Council in Rivers State has utilized its Friday sermons to disseminate flood disaster related information and promote preparedness among Muslims (Nwosu, 2020).The Redeemed Christian Church of God in Bayelsa State has employed its media outlets to broadcast flood disaster related information and provide updates on response efforts (Ojo, 2007).The use of religious platforms for disseminating flood disaster related information has been

identified as a best practice in disaster risk reduction in Bayelsa and Rivers States (Ajayi, 2012).

Recommendations

The work on the roles of religious organizations in flood disaster management in the Niger Delta regions for sustainable development provides several key recommendations for enhancing disaster response and resilience through religious organizations:

Formalizing Partnerships: The study recommends formalizing partnerships between religious institutions and government agencies. This formalization can ensure better coordination and utilization of resources during flood disasters. Religious organizations often have extensive networks and community trust, which can be leveraged for more effective disaster response and management.

Integrating Religious Perspectives into Policies: Integrating religious perspectives into disaster management policies is crucial. By acknowledging the influence of religious beliefs and practices, policymakers can develop more culturally sensitive and effective strategies for flood disaster management. This integration can also foster greater community buy-in and adherence to disaster preparedness and response measures.

Training Religious Leaders: Training religious leaders in disaster response and recovery strategies is vital. These leaders often act as intermediaries between the government and the community. Equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge can enhance their effectiveness in mobilizing resources, disseminating information, and providing psychosocial support during disasters**.**

Leveraging Religious Networks: The study highlights the potential of leveraging religious networks for disaster management. Religious organizations can mobilize community resources, provide immediate relief, and support long-term recovery efforts. These networks can also play a role in environmental stewardship and promoting sustainable living practices that mitigate flood risks.

Community Education and Awareness: Religious organizations should be involved in community education and awareness campaigns about disaster preparedness and risk reduction. Religious teachings can be used to promote environmental stewardship and resilience, encouraging practices that reduce the impact of floods.

Psychosocial Support: Providing psychosocial support through religious organizations is essential. During disasters, religious leaders and institutions can offer emotional and spiritual support, which is crucial for the mental well-being of affected individuals. This support helps in maintaining community cohesion and morale (FIJ, 2023).

These recommendations underscore the importance of a holistic and inclusive approach to disaster management, where religious organizations play a central role in enhancing community resilience and ensuring effective disaster response.

Conclusion

The study concludes that religious organizations in the Niger Delta play a critical role in managing flood disasters. Christianity and Islam each contributes uniquely to disaster response and community resilience. The work highlights that religious bodies are instrumental in mobilizing community resources, providing immediate relief, and offering psychosocial support during floods. Religious leaders serve as trusted intermediaries between the government and the populace, facilitating vital information dissemination and fostering community cohesion. The findings suggest that religious teachings and practices enhance environmental stewardship and resilience, promoting sustainable living practices that mitigate flood risks. The study underscores the potential of leveraging religious networks for more effective flood disaster management in the Niger Delta. The findings further reveals that formalizing partnerships between religious institutions and government agencies, integrating religious perspectives into disaster management policies, and training religious leaders as professional chaplains in disaster response and recovery strategies will enhance the progress achieved in disaster management. By recognizing and utilizing the influence of religion, policymakers and practitioners can improve the resilience of vulnerable communities, ensuring a more holistic and inclusive approach to disaster management.

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