

Coronavirus: The Role of Religio-Cultural Conspiracy Theories Toward Containment Efforts in Nigeria

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Abstract: Project stakeholders in construction as well as in public sector projects are playing a vibrant role in successful deliverance of project. Several research studies in stakeholder management believe that project stakeholder is a bilateral approach that helps in managing stakeholders in public sector projects. The purpose of this study is to assess the level of stakeholder engagement in Keenjhar Lake Water Project, Thatta, Sindh, Pakistan. Survey questionnaire were distributed amongst the respondents. Data was collected through questionnaire survey forms and were analyzed using statistical tools to establish the relationship between the variables. Findings of study reveal that several stakeholders have been identified. Level of stakeholder engagement has been measured in five (5) parameters: Interview, Negotiations, Meetings, Workshops, Seminars and Social Contacts. However, all these levels depicts that other project stakeholders could be approached through different methods and convinced all partners to engage with stakeholders that help in achieving project objectives successfully. Similarly, stakeholder engagement approaches are keystone that helps in managing stakeholders and understanding stakeholder's concerns in construction projects which can be a supportive mechanism in building relationships among stakeholders. This study help academics, project managers, construction and consulting firms to understand the dynamics of stakeholder management in adopting proactive strategies to handle the challenges depending on the nature of issues and its impact on the projects.

Keywords: Public Sector, Building Relationship, Successful Deliverance, Level of Engagement, Engagement Approaches, Proactive Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Wuhan, in Hubei Province of China and indeed the world at large will not forget 31 December 2019 in a hurry. This is because on this day, Wuhan was greeted with a strange viral disease that was later identified as Coronavirus. Since its outbreak, the disease has caused untold hardships, crumbled economies, crippled social interactions and has affected every facet of human endeavour. Meanwhile, the disease has thus far defied the solutions marshalled out by experts. According to World Health Organisation, WHO, (2020), evidences demonstrate that coronavirus is link to bats, specifically those of the rhinolophus sub-species. These sub-species are abundant and widely present in Southern China. World Health Organisation, WHO, (2020) further reveals that recent studies indicate that more than 500 CoVs have been identified in bats in China. Specifically, serological studies conducted in rural population living close to bats natural habitat in caves revealed a 2.9% bat-CoV seroprevalence, demonstrating that human exposure to bat-CoVs might be common and indeed responsible for Covid- 19. Generally, virus is tiny particle made of genetic materials that are wrapped in a layer of proteins and fats. It has no metabolism and thus cannot replicate without causing an infection. Coronavirus does this by effecting cells in human lungs in order to replicate, thereby damaging the lungs and also causing harmful immune reaction in the process. Different countries of the world have different dates that they were confronted with the novel coronavirus. For instance, in Nigeria the first index case of the disease was recorded in Lagos city of Lagos state on 20th February 2020. Ehinare (2020) reveals that the case was that of an

Italian citizen who works in Nigeria and had just returned from Milan. Since then, the spread of the disease has been on steady increase with growing number of casualties. This informed the Federal government to declare total lockdown for initial period of 14 days in the states of Lagos and Ogun as well as Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) with effect from 11pm of 31 March 2020. This was subsequently extended for another 14 days. Before this development, the Kaduna State Government had declared 24 hours curfew due to Covid-19. Many other states have cue in.

In an attempt to curtail the spread of Covid-19, all public gatherings for social as well as religious reasons were banned. Furthermore, social distancing was encouraged just as regular washing of hands with soap as well as the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers. All these measures are geared towards containing the spread of Covid-19 as recommended by WHO. While egg heads in medical and pharmaceutical industries are busy on how to find cure for Covid-19, it is disheartening that some religious leaders are not only ignoring the ban on religious gatherings but are also encouraging their followers to disregard the good counsel on no-shaking-of-hands and observance of social, now changed to physical distancing. One of such is the spiritual leader of Jamma'atu Izalatil Bid'a Waikamatis Sunnah (JIBWIS), Sheikh Yahaya Jingir, whose video encouraging his followers to disregard the caution on shaking of hands went viral. He did this at a Juma'at congregational prayer in Jos on Friday 27th march 2020 despite its ban. Dyikuk (2020) says that just after the prayers youths started shouting mallam ya ce ba corona (mallam says there is no corona. This underscore the cultic influence religious leaders have on their followers in Nigeria. This is very worrisome considering the grave consequences. Shiekh Jingir is not the only one doing this. For instance, Olufemi (2020) reports that two Islamic clerics were arrested for holding Juma'at prayers amidst coronavirus lockdown in a mosque situated at Lamodi area, Adeleke road in Offa, Kwara state with scores of worshippers in attendance. In a related development, Sahara Reporters (2020) reveals that the General Overseer of Jesus Reign Family Church, Apo in Abuja, Pastor U. Udem was also arrested by the FCT Coronavirus Enforcement Team for violating the ban on congregational worship imposed by the FCT minister, Mohammed Bello. There are also some prominent religious leaders who have even denied the existence of covid-19, describing the lockdown order of the federal government as a hoax. For instance, Akinkuotu (2020) quotes the founder and president of LoveWorld Incorporated, also known as Christ Embassy, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome as saying that what killed people in Wuhan, China was not the virus but the 5G. He added that this is the biggest deception in the world and you cannot hide from a virus by staying at home. In reaction to Oyakhilome's claims, the Nigerian Communication Commission has clarified that 5G has no connection whatsoever with covid-19. In order to further educate the masses on 5G, Ogala (2020) reveals that just like the other Gs before it, 5G is not a technology. Rather, it is a set of requirements describing standards mobile service providers must meet to be considered contemporary. Even though Covid-19 has become a buzz word with life threatening effect, the public space in Nigeria is simply saturated with conspiracy theories that undermine containing intent and efforts towards Covid-19. For instance, there has been a trending narrative that high temperature in Nigeria is unbearable for the coronavirus to survive. This is very misleading and not true. The reason is that scientific evidence shows that the virus can only die when the temperature is above 56 degree centigrade. While the covid-19 lasts, there are political as well as racial exploitation of the sad reality. For example, the public space in Nigeria entertained the pseudo argument that the Negro (black race) gene is hard knot for the virus to crack. This narrative remained unchallenged till recently when molecular virologist Okeke (2020) countered that there is no evidence to support that Africans have some immunity to covid-19. Rather, he reveals that risk factors of covid-19 such as diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma etc. are very common in Nigeria and African communities around the world. He buttresses his point by showing that in USA, states such as Louisiana where black Americans constitute 30% of the population, this same group has account for 70% of the total fatalities. As sound as these arguments are, they are not amplified. From field work conducted in Abuja suburbs of Tunga-Maje, Anagada and Giri (all in Gwagwalada Area Council) there has not been counter narratives discrediting the claim that high temperature in Nigeria

will not allow the virus to exist, let alone to thrive. In a related development, focal group discussions in Jikwoi and Akko in Abuja Municipal Council reveal same high temperature conspiracy theory. The foregoing informed why the framework of conspiracy narratives is used for this study.

ON THE CONCEPT OF CONSPIRACY THEORY

According to Eghagha (2020), there have always been conspiracy theories in society in all recorded history. People or groups always try to peep beyond the given. The assumption is that governments or people in power never tell the truth. Conspiracy theories fill that gap. In Christian theology, the first conspiracy theory was when Satan convinced Eve that it was because God did not want her and Adam to gain full insight into things that he commanded them not to eat of the forbidden fruit. About the Messiah himself there were conspiracy theories too. Some said he did not resurrect from the grave and going to heaven is fetish or romantic imagination. His disciples spirited his body away from the grave and that's the reason others met an empty grave that Sunday morning. Conspiracy theory has a long history. For instance, Eghagha (2020) reveals that the phrase 'conspiracy theory' was first used in 1871. Since then, there have been some great theories in the past. For example, the consensus has been that at the end of the Second World War, Hitler committed suicide. Yet conspiracy theorists swear that the scoundrel escaped to Latin America where he lived on for many years. There are still people who believe that American President John F. Kennedy (JFK) was killed by the American military establishment because he was opposed to some policies of the military. The CIA, the Mafia, Fidel Castro, and the KGB have been mentioned in connection with the assassination. The lone gun man who shot JFK did not act alone they believe. Over one thousand books have been written about the Kennedy assassination. Indeed, the Kennedy assassination has been termed the 'the mother of all conspiracies. Conspiracy theory is no trivial phrase. The reason, according to Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen (2017), is because the use of the concept of conspiracy theory already implies a demarcation between legitimate, rational knowledge and illegitimate, irrational non-sense. It is against this background of that Lewandowsky and Cook (2020) observe that typically, conspiracy theories are not supported by evidence that withstands scrutiny but this doesn't stop them from blossoming. Van Prooijen and Vugt (2018) reveal that a conspiracy theory contains at least five critical ingredients. First, conspiracy theories make an assumption of how people, objects, or events are causally interconnected. Put differently, a conspiracy theory always involves a hypothesized pattern (see Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Second, conspiracy theories stipulate that the plans of alleged conspirators are deliberate. Conspiracy theories thus ascribe intentionality to the actions of conspirators, implying agency (Douglas, Sutton, Callan, Dawtry, & Harvey, 2016). Third, a conspiracy theory always involves a coalition, or group, of actors working in conjunction. An act of one individual, a lone wolf, does not fit the definition of a conspiracy theory (van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014). Fourth, conspiracy theories always contain an element of threat such that the alleged goals of the conspirators are harmful or deceptive (Hofstadter, 1966). Sometimes, people may suspect others to conspire toward benevolent goals (e.g., secretly preparing a surprise party), but that is not how conspiracy theories are commonly conceptualized. Fifth, and finally, a conspiracy theory always carries an element of secrecy and is therefore often difficult to invalidate. Conspiracy theories that turn out true—such as Watergate or the Iran-Contra scandal—are no longer conspiracy "theories." Hence, in judging the validity of conspiracy theories, there is always room for error. Douglas et al (2019) say a number of factors can contribute to people believing and sharing conspiracy theories. People who feel powerless or vulnerable are more likely to endorse and spread conspiracy theories (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). It is very likely that this scenario is playing itself out with the recent online videos on Coronavirus. But far more than this, conspiracy theories act as a coping mechanism to help people handle uncertainty. Conspiracy theories are used to dispute mainstream political interpretations. Mere exposure to a conspiracy theory may have adverse consequences, even among people who don't subscribe to the conspiracy theory. To illustrate, exposure to a conspiracy theory about the political manipulation of unemployment data reduced trust in government services and institutions, including those unconnected to the conspiratorial allegations, such as local

schools or the Food and Drug Administration. Conspiracies typically attempt to usurp established agreements such as the guidelines on staying safe from coronavirus, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions. In the case of covid-19 such institutions will be health related agencies. Conspiracy theories can accuse any group perceived as powerful and malevolent. For instance, conspiracy theories about the 9/11 terror attacks accuse the Bush administration, the Saudi Government, corporations, the financial industry, and the Jews.

Furthermore, conspiracy theories about climate change accuse scientists, communists, the United Nations, Democrats, the government, and the oil industry among others. While a conspiracy refers to a true causal chain of events, a conspiracy theory refers to an allegation of conspiracy that may or may not be true. The fact remains that conspiracy theories will always exist. This arises from our penchant for the mysterious, the things not seen. But it also thrives on ignorance. It promotes a cult, a counter narrative and counterculture. It is an industry that feeds on itself.

RELIGION AND THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON COVID-19

Religious institutions have shaped Nigerian social and political approaches—notably in health and education—and they play major political and economic roles, both within Nigeria and internationally. Nigerians look to religious leaders for moral direction and practical support, especially as Nigeria confronts conflict and poor governance. Fragmented engagement, both among religious actors and with the Nigerian government and its international supporters, can undermine potentially positive contributions; examples include failure to learn from experience, missed opportunities to engage local religious communities, and misinterpreting the motivations of religious actors and organizations (World Faiths Development Dialogue, 2018). As a matter of fact, long-standing perception of neglect by the Nigerian government has resulted in a lack of trust within different communities. In order to make sure that this vacuum is filled, there is an increased trust in religious leaders. For instance, 33.33% of respondents on survey monkey strongly agree while 61.11% agree that religious leaders have great influence on their followers. Similarly, in a study conducted by Ehrhardt (2016) in Kano shows that over 90 % of the survey respondents profess to have some or considerable trust in religious leaders and clerics. Just as Ehrhardt, Ferret (2005) conducted a similar study and the findings reveal that in Nigeria 85% of those questioned trusted religious leaders and a similar proportion were willing to give them more power. This is indicative of the fact that there is high trust in religious leaders and the intimate interactions between religious leaders and their followers suggest that these leaders can have a considerable impact on what their followers think (their 'discursive frames'). In same study, Ferret (2005) discloses that when asked which was the most important in defining themselves, a majority of Africans put religion above any other factor. Again, this underscores the dominant role of religion in Africa, Nigeria inclusive. World Faiths Development Dialogue (2018) warns that ignoring or minimizing religious factors can detract from development programs, while more positive and informed engagement has the potential to contribute to virtually any development endeavour. Religious actors are significant for nearly every development challenge that Nigeria faces, from governance structures to gender relations, regional balance to community resilience, and educational curricula to climate change. Religious beliefs and institutions are integral parts of national and community life, with positive and less positive facets. For example, many attribute Nigerians' resilience in the face of adversity to faith, even as Nigeria's complex conflicts are accentuated by religious divides.

FINDINGS ON RELIGIO-CULTURAL CONSPIRACY THEORIES OF COVID 19 IN NIGERIA

Apart from religious leaders of mainline religious groups such as Catholic Church and the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs led by the Sultan of Sokoto, other religious leaders such as Sheikh Yahaya Jingir of JIBWIS and Pastor Chris Oyakhilome have clearly acted or made statements that

undermine containment efforts towards curbing the calamitous effect of covid-19. Survey monkey conducted for this study reveal that 33.33% and 61.11% of the respondents strongly agree and agree respectively that the comments of some religious leaders are counterproductive towards containment efforts of covid-19. While 5.56% disagree with this view, none strongly disagreed with the assertion. Thus, participants in a FGD held in Tunga-Maje bemoan the lackadaisical attitudes of religious leaders towards educating their followers to observe precautionary protocols as released by WHO. They further expressed concern that the northern part of the country is the worse culprit of disregarding WHO's precautionary protocols.

Government agencies such as the Federal Ministry Health and National Orientation Agency have not done enough to educate people on covid-19, especially in the rural areas. Findings from survey monkey reveal that 38.89% and 41.44% of respondents strongly agree and agree respectively that concerned government agencies have not done enough to educate the populace on covid-19, despite its catastrophic impact. It is the lack of rightful information regarding covid-19 that has given birth to conspiracy theories. One of such conspiracies making the rounds is the refusal to make use of alcoholic-based hand sanitizers by some clerics, claiming that it is haram (sinful). This theory was criticised in a Focal Group Discussion (FGD) organised in Akko, Abuja. According to the participants, the underlying logic of allowing the use of alcohol for therapeutic means should be counsel enough to allow for the use of alcohol based hand sanitizers. Still on the how responsive government agencies have been towards covid-19, a marginal 16.67% of respondents on survey monkey are of the view that there is enough information and education on covid-19 from government agencies. However, this position is challenged by participants of FGD in Jikwoi who observe that there are no or very few jingles on covid-19, especially in local dialects, which would have benefited majority of the rural populace. The obvious lack of amplifying the precautionary measures by some religious leaders and social entertainers has negatively impacted on containment of covid-19. 22.22% as well as 61.11 % of respondents on survey monkey have strongly agreed and agreed that religious leaders and social entertainers are not amplifying precautionary measures against covid-19. One of such social entertainers known as Aboki wire-wire in his conversational comedy between coronavirus and Ebola sends the message that Nigeria is not a place for coronavirus to survive. There are many of such comedies, especially on the social media that neither educate the people on precautionary measures nor tell about the signs and symptoms. Participants in a FGD harangue social media entertainers in Nigeria for downplaying the reality of covid-19. They worry that if the required measures are not taken and the media is not constructively engaged, the global epidemic of covid-19 will leave a deadly blow on Nigeria. It was canvassed that WHO pre-cautionary protocols are known to rural communities. This is evident even in the abuse of protocols such as physical distancing as well as washing of hands with soap. Participants also worry covid-19 is been made to look like sickness for the elites in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

Conspiracy theory seems to be the defining character of covid-19. This is because even the origin of the disease is shrouded in conspiracy and controversy. For instance, while some argue that the disease originated from a laboratory in Wuhan Institute of Virology, others dispute this claim, arguing that the US military imported the virus during the military games of 2019. However, there is a narrative from Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, when he appeared on a television programme called Verdict. The programme went viral on the social media reveals much on these conspiracies. Senator Cruz, who also doubles as an expert on public policy insists that USA government has been funding studies of viruses, especially in Wuhan. According to him, 76,301 US dollar of tax payers' money was spent funding studies of viruses in 2019. This amount is part of the project that will take as much as 3.7 million dollars in similar studies in other parts of the world as confirmed by US National Institute for Health. Revelations from USA National Investigative Agency (NIA) shows that US was funding studies in virus diversity in animals including in

bats reservoirs, invitro and inviva virus categorization, coronavirus screening and virus pathogenesis among others. The goal is to establish which new virus poses the greatest threat to humans, what are the means of infection as well as means of transmission. From the foregoing, USA and China cannot completely deny any knowledge of covid-19. The crucial question therefore is for China to tell if the virus that was been studied at Wuhan Institute of Virology escaped, thus spreading and causing the world this huge catastrophe. Probably in a bid to cover the truth regarding the origin of coronavirus, Daily Trust (2020) discloses that China has imposed restrictions on the publication of academic research on the origin of the novel coronavirus. The new directive by the Chinese government insists that all academic papers on covid-19 will be subjected to extra vetting before being submitted for publication. This researcher opines that this kind of posture is counter-productive and leaves much to be desired; especially that covid-19 is still ranging and killing more lives than ever. While, the conspiracies on the origin of covid-19 are at best diversionary. It will therefore be double tragedy if socio-cultural and religious-space conspiracy theories continue to divert attention from WHO precautionary protocols. The right thing to do is for religious leaders as well as social entertainers to amplify the precautionary protocols. In this connection, I would have applauded a viral video by Channel Badawa TV, in which the social entertainers amplified the precautionary protocols against covid-19. However, the video ended up another conspiracy theory that seems to suggest that the cause of coronavirus is world's sins against God. This is very misleading. Therefore, the Nigerian government, as a matter of urgency, should do all it takes to ensure that there is adequate access to covid-19 fact-sheet, which should be translated in local dialects. In order to survive the covid-19 pandemic, there should be a conscientious effort to shun conspiracies.

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