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Diversity Management in Industrial Relations and The Challenges of National Development - *The Nigerian Experience*

*Olufemi Adeyeye

Abstract

This paper examines the interface between diversity and industrial relations and how this impinges on the development of the country, Nigeria. Underlying the magnitude of the problems and the challenges in managing diversity in work environment, the paper highlights some of the sources of diversity and industrial relations and human resource implications of diversity. The paper explores the risk of managing diversity and how to minimize the attendant effects of diversity in a multi-ethnic work environment. The paper concludes that diversity is legitimate and that if well harnessed, it can be used in channeling energies towards positive distribution of national development and service delivery.

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Introduction

In a recent effort, diversity is viewed as the uniqueness of all individuals which encompasses different personal attributes, values and organizational roles. It is regarded as the mix of differences and similarities at all levels of the organisation. Diversity is the differences in abilities, age, culture, ethnicity, physical characteristics, sexual orientation, values et cetera. It is an arithmetic of unlike terms.

The sources of diversity in an organizational setting, that is work environment inclusive,

could be primary or secondary. The primary category includes age, gender, ethnicity, physical ability and physical characteristics. The secondary source on the other hand, is defined to include income, education, marital status, religious belief and geographical location. Thus in simple terms, diversity is the condition of being diverse. Diversity is the presence of a wide range of variation in the quantities or attributes under discussion. In the context of industrial relations, the term refers to, the presence in the workforce of a wide variety of culture, opinions, ethnic groups, gender, socio-economic backgrounds et cetera.

In the Nigerian context, diversity has become so multi-faceted that it is now the central focus of the nation-wide debate on the national question. It incorporates what White (1985: 2-3) describes as "cultural/ancestral or ethnic nationality" and "political/territorial nationality." Cultural/ancestral nationality, implies a feeling on the part of a people that they "are related, descendants of remote common ancestors and that their relationship sets them apart from groups of different ancestry" (Ibid). Political/territorial nationality on the other hand suggests "the recognition of the interests common to the people of a particular territory, whatever their ethnicity, and of rivalry between the people of their territory and outsiders" (Ibid). It follows from the above that Nigeria is a nation of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and even territorial diversity. It is a multi-ethnic society, characterized equally by deep-seated social inequality, uneven territorial development and a variety of other forms of potentially destabilizing popular identity, including, especially religious identities. (Olukoshi and Agbu, 1996:77).

The history of Nigeria's creation reflects the manipulation of differences among the people by the British colonial power as a strategy of divide and rule. Indeed, the British in 1914 welded together different nationalities into a single territory that was later named Nigeria. This created a situation where competing ethnic nationalities, regional groupings and religious identities were merged together without an accompanying mechanism to manage them. When Nigeria became an independent nation in 1960, these competing centers of power had a perception of one another that was coloured by ethnic, regional and religious considerations as they struggle for access to and control of power and resources. (Ibid). It becomes inevitable that diversity remains an issue even in industrial relations. The struggle at the work place must therefore incorporate the formulation of strategies by trade unions could cope with problems associated with diversity. For example trade unions must take cognizance of gender cultural and religious concerns in their agitation especially in a context where women are marginalized in the political and economic sectors of life and people of different socio-cultural backgrounds cohabitate within the same work environment.

Apparently, diversity exists at the work place and in trade unions as much as it exists at the national level. The effect of diversity on industrial relations would be determined by the manner in which trade unions respond to the challenges pose by the concept.

Diversity and Industrial Relations in Nigeria

Industrial relations is basically concerned with the systematic study of all aspects of the employment relationship (Fajana, 2000). This suggests that Industrial Relations is about the relationship between the employer and employee as stipulated in the contract of employment and other allied legislations. The above definition agrees with Yesufu's definition of industrial relations as "the whole web of human interactions to work, which is predicated upon, and arises out of the employment contract" (Yesufu, 1982). It is necessary to state at this point that industrial relations is underscored by the nature of the class divisions in the society. This explains why Hyman (1975) defines it, as the processes of control over work relations and among these processes are those involving collective worker organisation and action. Industrial relations must therefore be seen within the overall context of the struggle within the society, for control over work relations and other critical issues between workers and employers (Fajana 2000). In a capitalist society like Nigeria (although of the dependent type), there are two broad classes of people involved in industrial relations. These are the classes of those who own property and control the means of production and who also control the policy making process as a result of their access to political power. The second category consists of those who do not own property but who sell their labour power in return for wages or salaries. This is the category to which workers belong. While workers call for the humanization of the conditions of work, the capitalists/employers are more concerned with how much profit they can make. This creates a situation in which the two classes have diametrically opposed interests in the work place. This also explains why the capitalist state seeks to control and regulate the activities of workers and trade unions so as to create an atmosphere conducive for exploitation and profit maximization. In this game, all is fair, as far as the capitalist state is concerned. Intimidation, blackmail, name-calling, divide and rule, are strategies that have been frequently used by the owners of capital to divide the working class. The state, which has become an instrument of domination of the subordinate classes by the dominant capitalist class, is often used to implement the agenda of this dominant class in industry. The Trade Union Amendment Bill (2004) presents a classic example of how the state can seek to divide labour in order to perpetuate its exploitative agenda.

In a dependent, neo-colonial and plural society like Nigeria, the interface between industrial relations and diversity comes into bold relief. Employers, especially government (the largest employer of labour) adopt divisive strategies to paralyse workers' opposition to their oppressive and exploitative policies. For example, they often seek to make a distinction between a "political" and "industrial" struggle while insisting that any struggle by labour which is not related directly to the conditions of work of its members, in industry, is "political" and to that extent "subversive" and confrontational. Indeed, government in its justification for proposing a labour reform bill recently gave this reason as one of its motivations for asking that existing trade union legislations be amended. The fact however is that political decisions have a profound influence on industries in particular and the economy at large.

Diversity, if properly harnessed, can be a source of strength for a nation. However, where it is denied, frozen or manipulated, conflicts amongst groups and mutual distrust between one nationality or the other becomes pronounced. The state in Nigeria has been adept at manipulating differences among the people to undermine labour and implement inherently anti-people policies. For examples, in some periods when the labour movement called its members out on strike, government has been known to infiltrate the ranks of labour through the manipulation of regional, religious and ethnic differences. Even state councils of industrial unions have at one time or the other opposed decisions taken by the Nigerian Labour Congress (the umbrella body of the Nigerian Labour Movement). It is therefore important that labour, particularly now that government allows for formation of trade unions that may

or may not recognize the leadership of Labour Union Executives, must transcend narrow economic issues so that it can fully appreciate the different dimensions of political manipulation and economic exploitation perpetuated by the capitalist state. It becomes more critical in our environment where years of wrong-headed economic and political experimentation have led to the dismantling of the "developmentalist" or "welfare" state Babawale (2004).

Problems and Challenges in Managing Diversity

The following are some of the glimpses of what may constitute problems and challenges in managing diversity in our organizations.

- Staff speaking different languages "parapo" factor.
- Resistance to working with members of another ethnic, religious or cultural group.
- Miscommunication due to differences in accents.
- Ethnic or racial jokes.
- Charges of discrimination in promotion, pay, performance reviews, imputed motives as a function of differences in backgrounds.
- Large coefficients of lack of interaction between members of different groups, "asymmetrical of cooperation between members of the workforce.
- Recruitment and retention difficulties, evidences of lack of attraction between "like poles"
- Discontent due to perceived favouritism.
- Negative comments about the work habits of members of other groups Sheikh (2005).

The above listed challenges or problems require development of larger repertoire of managerial strategies and skills to capitalize on the pluralistic work force. The point being made is that diverse workforce poses both challenges and opportunities. It can offer an organization creativity, energy, and new approaches to solving problems. However differences in backgrounds, values, and norms can also result in conflict, disruption, and loss of productivity. The outcome that results depends largely on how a workforce is managed. This defines the essence of diversity management.

Managing Diversity

In managing diversity, it would do the manager a lot of good, if he took time in looking at:

- a. the mind set of an organization
- b. the culture of an organization; and
- c. the different perspectives people brought, to an organization due to race, workplace styles, gender, disabilities, and the differences, thus creating organizational environment that welcome and include everyone while diminishing and excluding no one.

Thus managing diversity connotes a comprehensive managerial process for developing an environment that works for all employees. The essence is to make diversity an asset within the organization. More precisely in terms of personnel practices and management, diversity management is the planning, developing and managing human resources while acknowledging and valuing the similarities and differences all employees bring to the workforce. The basic question then becomes what mix of differences and similarities at all levels of the organization can draw strength from the differences and build on the similarities that?

- a. Creates a positive environment?
- b. Promotes personal and professional development?
- c. Empowers all people to reach their full potential?

d. Attracts talent that reflect what we are as Nigerian?

e. Removes barriers that are saboteurs to productivity.

Obviously, managing diversity is good management and good business. But, evolving an organizational culture from one that has been less inclusive to one that is more inclusive, requires a committed efforts to change workplace behaviours.

Diversity and Industrial Relations: The challenges for National Development

As much as diversity exists in regional, geographical, gender, ethnic and religious composition of a state, so also does it exist at the level of availability of natural resources. The country can boast of abundant reservoir of oil. The Niger Delta region is in custody of most of the oil deposits that Nigeria has. Crude oil, though good, it has created natural hazards for workers and the host communities. Trade unions and workers in general must collectively advocate for adequate compensation for oil workers and oil-producing communities. The interest of one group of workers must be seen as the interest of all workers irrespective of language, culture, socioeconomic backgrounds, religious etcetera.

More importantly, the labour movement must use its strength and strategic role in the economy to support the call for adequate compensation for the oil-producing communities, which has suffered tremendous ecological damage as a result of oil exploration. This would reduce the level of uneven development across the country, and also reduce the level of violence that have become characteristic of the agitation emanating from the Niger Delta. This is one way to promote the overall development of the country Adeyeye (1995). We must debunk the argument canvassed by some groups, especially from the majority ethnic groups in Nigeria that "since the minorities of the Delta, did not put oil in the ground, and do not tend the oil and gas the way you tend crops, like cocoa, cattle or groundnuts, they cannot claims ownership of the oil, which "legally" belongs to the Federal Government and all Nigerians". (Obi, 2001: 12).

We noted earlier that diversity incorporates gender differences. This invariably suggests that issue of gender relations especially socially constructed and culturally embedded discriminatory practices, must be challenged at the work place. A female worker, must be seen as a worker with rights and privileges that are comparable with those enjoyed by her male counterparts. Issues of reproductive and parenting rights must be of concern to the labour movement. There is no doubt that industrial relations can be used to effectuate the positive aspects of diversity to enhance national development. Ethnic and religious identities are not inherently negative. They are also not dysfunctional to nation building or harmful to national integration. What is important is for the labour movement to use those identities and differences as instruments for forging a more united front of the working class, contrary to the wishes and strategies of the capitalist ruling class. These identities must be re-claimed and re-defined within the context of a strong and united labour front. Only a united labour movement can play the historic role of transforming the Nigerian State from its present condition of economic stagnation to prosperity.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the critical issues of diversity, natural resources and industrial relations in the Nigerian context. It explored the interface between diversity and industrial relations and how this impinges on national development. It has been shown clearly that diversity exists at the work place as much as it exists at the national level. However, while the state and its agents manipulate diversity to divide the workers and infiltrate their

ranks, labour can use diversity to strengthen its own unit and promote national development. Labour equally has a duty to pay attention to differences among its members with a view to addressing the peculiar needs of its members that arise from those differences (ethnic, religious, regional, gender etc). There is a need for awareness creation and advocacy about the imperative of diversity management in Nigeria, because of its relevance to our heterogeneous work environment, Matanmi (2005).

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