



## Assessing the Role of Information Gatekeepers in Conflict Prevention in Nasarawa State

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**Abstract:** This study explores the role of gatekeepers in conflict prevention in Nasarawa State. To achieve this, the study raised two main objectives: identification of how gatekeepers help in the prevention of conflicts in Nasarawa state, ascertaining the perception of community members on their gatekeepers. The research used the network gatekeeping theory and a qualitative approach, a case study method was used to investigate the phenomena, with the study purposively selecting five (5) gatekeepers (community/opinion leaders) from each of the five communities and two (2) gated (community members) from each of the five communities. Data was collected with the help of a semi semi-structured and coded using qualitative research software Nvivo. The findings of the study reveal that: Time and immediacy of actions were considered by gatekeepers as paramount in conflicts prevention. It also shows that some community members view their leaders as prejudiced, selfish and not having their concerns at heart. it was concluded that Government should de-emphasize the over-dependence on gatekeepers, and reach out to these newly empowered gatekeepers (gated) also leaders (gatekeepers) should endeavor to accept technology and learn to use it in the information production and dissemination process, with active interactions with the members of their community particularly the youth. Free flow of accurate and timely

information within the community should be encouraged as this curtails and reduces false information and rumors which has been identified as a source of conflict within the community.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Information control, gated, gatekeeper, prevention, and community

## **Introduction**

Where nations abide and commune for business and other trade relations, there are bound to be disagreements, these disagreements if not properly managed can progress into conflicts. Wilmot and Hocker (2001) stated that conflict is “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from others in achieving their goals. Conflicts result in huge loss of lives and property as a result of persistent conflicts between communities in Nasarawa State. The understanding and conceptualization of conflict have led to a multiplicity of definitions and explanations of what really constitutes conflicts.

Therefore, as societies and people interact, conflicts develop, and so are definitions and explanations. Pankhurst (2003), explains that Conflict is a word often used loosely to mean many different things despite its long history in Social Science. Most types of social, political, and economic changes involve a conflict of some sort, and one could argue that many of the positive changes in world history have occurred as a result of the conflict. The main idea of conflict is that it is an intrinsic and inevitable aspect of social change. At the cultural level, conflicts occur between members of different cultures and members of the same culture who feel that cultural rules or norms are being violated.

To reduce the prevalence of conflicts and their associated consequences, studies were conducted. Chukwuma and Atelhe (2014) they explored the problem from ethnic sentiments and recommended the sensitization of stakeholders on the need for mutual co-existence; (Bhavnani, Eichinger, Martini 2009; Blench, 2004) discussed conflicts as rooted in poverty and the individual struggle for survival and their recommendations bordered around effective resource sharing policies; while Serneels and Verpoorten, (2012) and Cerra and Saxena, (2008) identify emotional factors as responsible for conflicts. One of the many ways identified for preventing and resolving conflicts is the use of gatekeepers. Many Scholars have stressed the role of community leaders as gatekeepers in the resolution of conflicts (Natsir and Hum, 2014).

## **Statement of Problem**

Nasarawa State has witnessed incessant communal conflicts, where several communities’ picked up arms against each other in a bid to further pursue their interests. This has resulted in the loss of lives and properties. Successive governments in Nasarawa State have taken measures aimed at addressing the challenges of communal conflicts but these killings have continued unabated (Abdul 2013; Chukwuma and Atelhe 2014). To reduce the killings and destructions of properties scholars have buttressed the importance of information control through gatekeepers. However, the traditional rulers, ethnic and opinion

leaders (gatekeepers) whom the government relied on as negotiator/facilitators for conflict prevention seem to have failed. The gatekeepers are conceptualized as proxies of their communities hence they can decide what information should move to a group and what information should not for conflict prevention. The study was aimed at exploring the view and opinions of the communities about their gatekeepers and how effective they are in the prevention of conflicts in Nasarawa State. These formed the research objectives for the study. To better understand the opinions of community members and how effective they are for conflict prevention, the Network gatekeeping salience theory was adopted as a framework.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To identify how gatekeepers, help in the prevention of conflicts in Nasarawa State.
2. To ascertain the perception of community members on their gatekeepers.

### **Literature Review**

The network gatekeeping salience theory owes its roots to the theory of gatekeeping. Gatekeeping is fundamentally a descriptive theory, with a normative bend that offers little if any predictive power. Its chief value comes in summarizing the various forces that come into play as people make decisions about what messages will be selected to present to their audiences (Lewin 1947, Shoemaker 1991). Network Gatekeeping Salience (the degree to which gatekeepers give priority to competing gated claims) is a normative theory to understand the interactions among gatekeepers and between gatekeepers and gated which

is built on the bases of the Network Identification. It provides an opportunity for the theory of Network Gatekeeping Identification to move forward by showing the interaction between power and information, Barzilai-Nahon (2008).

### **Previous Studies on the Network Gatekeeping Theory**

Agada (1999) carried out a study on the information use environment of African-American gatekeepers in Harambee. The study discovered that the Information User Environment of gatekeepers in this study is broadly shaped by the inner-city setting, socioeconomic status as well as African-American culture. The specific information behaviours of gatekeepers are however defined by social norms, personal and contextual factors. The strategic role played by the gatekeepers in their community call for their use by the neighbourhood public library and media houses as gateways to access the larger population in marketing and testing new programs and service

Bui (2010) studied “How Online Gatekeepers Guard Our View –News Portals’ Inclusion and Ranking of Media and Events”. This study examines two news portals, Google News and Yahoo News, the study tests three hypotheses on the relationship between the dominance of the news media, the proximity of news events to the U.S. interests, and position of the news links on portals’ front pages and result pages. The findings of the study advance the understanding of the traditional gatekeeping notion in the Internet context and also challenge the network gatekeeping theory regarding the role of the gated relative to the gatekeeper, and caution against any

sweeping generalization about news portals as a single entity.

In a study titled “Gatekeeper or Peacekeeper: The Decision-Making Authority of Public Relations Practitioners”, Ruth-McSwain (2011) investigates the external communication function of the organizational gatekeeper, specifically in their communication with the mass media. One main research question was formulated and two qualitative data collection methods were used to achieve the purpose of the present study: interviews and online focus groups using a snowball sample of public relations practitioners. Twelve semi-structured interviews, varying in length from 30 to 55 minutes, were conducted over the telephone and tape-recorded. The most significant finding reveals that the public relations professional had advisory authority in that they serve as a technician in the gatekeeping process by carrying out the decisions that are made by management.

Similarly, DeJuliis (2011) in his thesis titled “The Social Dynamics of Network gatekeeping” aimed at exploring news sharing and consumption on social networks and collaborative web portals. It had 5 research questions which were answered with the use of a collective case study design with a total of 15 in-depth interviews. Some of the major findings of the study include: heavy, masterful users of Digg.com see themselves more as hierarchical gatekeepers than members of a communal and collaborative editorial effort; trust is strongest between users who reliably ‘Digg’ each other’s submissions, but the degree to which the quality of those submissions plays

a role remains ambiguous; network gatekeepers believe that their comprehensive interests make them correspondingly qualified to be gatekeepers, regardless of their level of journalistic training; and the profiles of news outlets are the most credible, but regular people can also become credible by demonstrating a prolonged expertise on a single subject. DeJuliis (2011) concludes that the Web poses paradigmatic challenges not only to news production and consumption, but also traditional notions of gatekeeping. He further asserts that the seemingly egalitarian, communal and democratic nature of social networks allows for more open and diverse exchange of news, but depending on the confidence users have in each other’s gatekeeping, it could also push social news toward the precipice of tabloidization.

Odigie and Gbaje (2017) investigated the perception of network gatekeepers on bandwidth and online video streams in Ahmadu Bello University Nigeria. The study was guided by three objectives and used a qualitative research methodology and a case study design seek answers from its participants (network managers). The findings indicated a strained relationship between parties involved as restrictions were undertaken to curb the abuse of available internet facilities.

### **Research Method Adopted and Design**

The research paper adopted a qualitative research methodology and a case study design the use of these methods and designs help explore the perception of community members on their gatekeepers in their traditional settings. The population of the study comprised of two (2) members of the

five conflicting communities and their gatekeepers/traditional rulers. The sampling strategy was done purposively as it allowed for the collection of data from participants

that had a direct bearing on the topic under study. The table 1 below highlights the sampled communities according to their local government and districts.

Table 1: Sampled Conflicting communities

| S/N   | Local Govt. Area | Communities                            | Senatorial District |
|-------|------------------|--|---------------------|
| 1     | Lafia            | Alago and Eggon (Assakio)              | South               |
| 2     | Toto             | Egburra and Bassa                      | West                |
| 3     | Nasarawa         | Udeni-gida, Toto                       | West                |
| 4     | Obi              | Migili and Eggon (Agyaragu)            | South               |
| 5     | Nasarawa-Eggon   | Ambane-Egga, Ladi-Endeh (Mada station) | North               |
| Total | 5                | 5                                      | 3                   |

The study made use of interview for the collection of data, the interviews were in-depth in nature, and involved the researcher personally interviewing members of the conflict-prone communities, based on a structured set of questions that were prepared before the interview. This enables the researcher elaborate more on questions that were not well understood by the participants and thus tap into the participants to view and knowledge of conflict prevention and opinions.

**Data Analysis and Discussion of Results**

The study used a thematic content analysis (TCA). TCA made it possible to make sense of data generated (Miles and Huberman, 2003). It involved inspecting data for emerging themes, coding the data, developing categories and interpretation of data. The data generated from the interview sessions were recorded and transcribed in detail. The data which was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews (using the study’s interview guide) with a digital recorder lasted

approximately 8 hours, 45 minutes and 11 seconds in total. The data collected from 14 interview sessions were examined and transcribed verbatim, particularly due to the language differences retranslation and transcription was necessary. The transcribed interviews were re-read and further cross-checked against the audio recordings to retain originality and speech context and lastly imported into qualitative research coding software (Nvivo) for the coding process. The coding was an iterative process of reading and re-reading the transcript in order to obtain pertinent or relevant codes, which were highlighted giving a total of one hundred and ninety-eight (198) codes. Subsequently, categorization of these free nodes or open codes was done with the aim of grouping together all codes which answered the research question into themes, categories and sub-categories. The categorization aided the answering of the research objectives.

**How Gatekeepers help in the Prevention of Conflict in Nasarawa State.**

The emerging categories and subcategories that provide answers to how gatekeeper’s help in the prevention of conflict are depicted in figure 1 below;



***Receives Information about Potential Crises Situations:***

The Early and timely response to intelligence report on the possibility of a conflict was noted as a very important component in the prevention of conflicts. The above category depicts narratives on what was considered pertinent for gatekeepers in their bid for conflict prevention. The category had six sub-categories; “Mai-Angwa (traditional leader) first point of call on any crisis information”: It is expected that the gatekeepers (traditional leaders) actively seek out information and be aware of potential conflict situations. Data collected indicate that the participants had become wearied by the incessant conflicts. As responses obtained indicate that gatekeepers responded hastily to any piece of information relating to the crisis. They subcategories Mai-Angwa first point

of call on any crisis information indicated that participants of the study believed that someone needed to take charge and control of happening. A general consensus is a role played by the head of the community, that is, ‘mai-angwa’ – the district head. Responses further showed that subjects reported directly and constantly to the traditional leader on potential crises situations in the community and they used this as a tool to maintaining the law and order and also solving disputes. As noted by a participant “when we have any problem, like land disputes, ownership of properties, farmers/herders issue or anything that could cause a fight in the community we have to report to the Mai-angwa first. Other subcategories highlight that acting promptly on potential crisis situations was another means by which gatekeepers aided in the prevention of conflict. Participants believed that

before conflict disintegrates to an uncontrollable form, it starts with little sparks which if not quickly handled could easily escalate. A participant stated that “once we have information on time before it escalates to the crisis we come together to iron it out on time”. Emphasis on the quick identification of crisis situations as these conflicts are time sensitive and in most cases become full-blown when the required action is not taken in time.

**Always Communicate with Subjects:** Communication is a very important element in conflict prevention. Many conflicts have their roots in misinformation, absence of information, rumor, and poor understanding of information passed, and so on. To prevent these conflicts then, it is pertinent that community leaders keep a constant channel of communication. Participants were asked some ways community leaders (gatekeepers) help in conflict prevention. From the responses it was ascertained that constant communication and dialogue was a means adopted by the gatekeepers in curbing crisis. Regular enlightenment of their subjects on a variety of issues was a method the community leaders adopt. A participant (gatekeeper) praised their effort stating, “We as leaders try our best, we call them together and show them the importance of peace within a society like ours, we show them the benefit of living in peace”. Further enquiries into viable means to preventing the eruption of crisis reveal Invitation of security and government operatives in crises situations was another measure used by gatekeepers to maintain law and order. The responses from this subcategory indicate that the leaders

(gatekeepers) used the services of security operatives in the prevention of conflicts. However, the success of their usage has been put to debate. Though some participants still have confidence in the government and its agencies in securing the lives and properties of the members of these communities. Judging from the participant’s comment: “we still look onto security men to prevent issues”. Other narratives show that using youth peer group leaders was another way gatekeepers prevented conflict in their environs since youth have always been the chief actors in most cases of conflict. However, giving the youth responsibility has been used to great effect in other places to reduce conflicts ( United Nations 2004). This sub-category shows narratives which depict youth in the state being allowed to obtain and manage leadership roles. Such decisions free up the elderly and better allow for the management of crisis as youth better identify with their peers and are able to gather information from the grassroots and other means faster. Some of the means that the youth use in their capacities as leaders, include social media group pages. Narratives show examples of this as reported by participants “in social media, we have a group that we created like Ta’al campaign organization”, a social page for instance, where the youth endeavour to keep and maintain peaceful coexistence.

**Caution Youth on Behaviour:** Youth restiveness and in some cases uncultured attitudes have been a source of concern. They indulge in many vices that make them willing hands for destruction. Drugs, cultism, and armed banditry are some of the

attitudes they indulge in. This subcategory portrays narratives which show actions taken by gatekeepers (leaders) to curb the excesses of the youth in the society. However, from the responses, it is obvious that not all the actions taken by the leaders are wholesomely accepted, as a participant (gatekeeper) stated that “we usually draw their attention and caution them that what they are doing is not good, it will not move us forward. Some will agree, some will not agree”. The response indicates an information gap between the gated and gatekeepers, as such actions only slow down crisis as evident through the constant crisis in

the community. Other such disciplinary actions taken by the gatekeepers were the imposition of fines on any community member that was found wanting, this, however, was not a lasting remedy also as crisis still emanated frequently in the society.

The perception of the community members on opinion leaders as information gatekeepers.

#### Category Four: Influence of Community Leaders

An explanation of the perception of community members on their opinion leaders as information gatekeepers is depicted in figure 2 below;

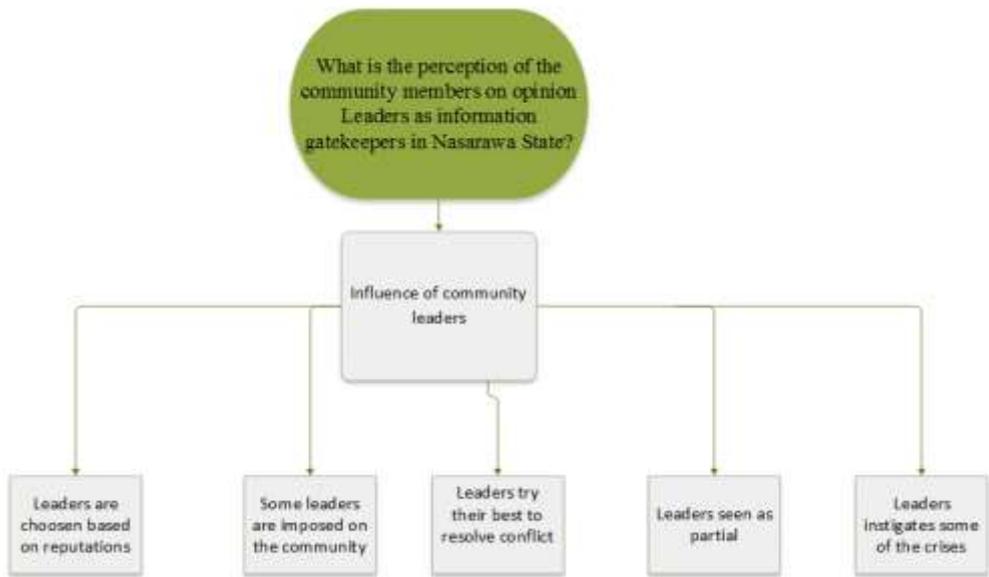


Figure 2: Perception of the Community Members on Opinion Leaders as Information gatekeepers

Fig two shows one category which reveals narratives related to how the gated perceive their leaders. This is captured in their comments which are both positive and negative. The narratives depict the ways the community members understand the roles and usefulness of gatekeepers

within the community. Some evaluate the leaders in a positive light, while some have negative perceptions of the leaders. The category has four sub-categories: 1) leaders are chosen based on reputation; 2) leaders try to do their best to resolve conflicts; 3) leaders are seen as partial; and 4) Conflict is

instigated for political gain. The issues are discussed below under the following themes.

**Leaders are Chosen Based on Reputation:** Leadership is a fragile mantle to hold. Reputable leaders are those whom the community held in high esteem and they regard their admonition during crises. This sub-category highlights narratives which suggest that some leaders were 46 have a high reputation in the

The close relationship between the leaders and the community are in existence. Some of the gated in the community claim to know their leaders on a personal basis, that is, they know their personalities and can be trusted. For instance, a participant stated that; *“in my own clan anybody can be a leader provided you have clean record regardless of your status and the society is ok with you”*. This perception of the community members assists as edicts and commands were given by such leaders are usually carried out as reported by a participant *“the traditional ruler, Commissioner, the chairman ..., these are the people that when they speak people listen”*.

**Some Leaders are imposed on the Community:** In contrast to the above narratives, however, some participants claim that not all the leaders had immaculate records but that some of these leaders in the community came into power based on their status (Money). Such leaders were frowned upon but because of their material wealth, they still reach the seats as indicated by a participant; *“you see in our community, not every leader is chosen by the people; some buy their way into that seat”*

Due to the persistent conflict recorded the researcher wonder if the

gatekeepers are playing their role or if the members of the community still hold in high esteem the role and views of the gatekeeper in controlling conflict hence the researcher sought to identify or find out the perception of the community members on gatekeepers

**Leaders try their Best to Resolve Conflict:** The sub-category depicts the effort put in by the leaders and how the community members construe the roles played by the leaders as information gatekeepers during conflict situations. From the narratives, it shows that members of the community quite appreciate the efforts of the leaders in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and crisis in their communities. A participant quipped that leaders make their considerable efforts in quenching crises by using all of their powers to stop the dissemination of conflicts instigating information in the community. The leaders went as far as employing the services of pastors and imams for advice on matters in the community. Some responses further revealed that in a bid to resolve conflict, the leaders used third-party options like religious leaders to convince and commute crisis. A participant commented that; *“community leaders often call parties involved in the conflict to pacify them and resolve the fights. Sometimes they succeed and sometimes they don’t”*.

**Leaders Seen as Partial:** Some of the leaders in an unsurprising turn, however, were accused of partiality and bias in the handling of crises in the state. The sub-category highlights narratives on the perception of community members on their leaders. The sub-category reveals that despite

the high regard accorded to some community leaders, some were accused of being one-sided and unfair to some parties during a conflict. A participant stated bluntly that they had issues with some of the leaders; “*we have a lot of problems from our community heads*”, which some attributed to hatred and disregard for each other’s political views and opinions. Some indicated that they “leaders” did not pay attention to the suggestions of others. According to a participant: “*someone brings her own idea the other one will say they should forget it because she is not on our side and it brings a lot of problems*”. Disagreements were common because some of the leaders were accused of being selfish and having personal agendas. From the participants, they sometimes did not listen to their leaders and the decisions reached because some of the decisions passed down were not to their benefit but rather to back political parties. A participant claimed that they were always trying to protect something, which made them suspicious in most cases. He stated that; “*we don’t know which interest they are protecting. Are they protecting the interest of the government? We don’t know*”. The gated accused their leaders of supporting the government against their own (the gated) interests, due to political and financial favours they got from the politicians in government.

#### ***Leaders Instigate some of the Crises:***

This sub-category highlights narratives on the perception of community members on their leaders. The narratives indicated that community members were of the opinion that some crises situations in the community were instigated by their leaders. One of the participants averred

that “*conflicts are instigated by other people for political gain*”. The gated also point fingers at their leaders as colluding with some external forces to cause divisive fractures, so as to gain relevance. They argued that, when there is a crisis in a place, there is the tendency for the government to reach out to the leaders of the place. Some of the responses reveal that the community members believed that some of the crises were used as a means of shifting the attention of the community from other pressing issues. The participant claimed that they wanted to be on their own, by stating that, “*we said we are done with Nasarawa, we will split, and that is why they initiated this fight, these crises*”. The leaders were accused of using the calculated conflicts as a means of rendering them incapable of fighting for what they desired.

#### **Discussion of findings and implication**

The study sought to identify how gatekeepers help in the prevention of conflicts in Nasarawa state, based on the analysis, the study reveals that constant communication and swift actions by gatekeepers were means through which gatekeepers (leaders) in Nasarawa State helped in the prevention of conflict. Gatekeepers also maintained the decorum of the community by granting their youth leadership functions and roles thus breaking down the gatekeeping process. This breakdown of responsibilities was also observed in Ruth-McSwain (2011) study where he investigated the decision-making authority of public relations practitioners. Furthermore, it is in line with the study by Deluliis (2011) who found that gatekeepers on Diggs

platform saw themselves as hierarchical gatekeepers. These sharing actions by the gatekeepers led to the circumvention of the gatekeeping functions by the youth as information was now shared via social media platforms. The implication of this is that a gatekeeper's function whose main objective is information control of his community has been rendered debatable thus explaining why conflicts continually persist.

The study also reveals the perceptions of community members in Nasarawa State about their leaders to be varied. Some members viewed their leaders (gatekeepers) as good (reputable) while others said the leaders were biased and did not have the interest of the masses at heart. This perception is similar to the findings of Odigie and Gbaje (2017) who found that there were mixed reactions as regards the overall gatekeeping process. The study

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further shows that feelings of bias and quarrels over the legitimacy of the rule were likely reasons for constant communal clashes.

## Conclusion

Government should de-emphasize the over-dependence on gatekeepers, and emphasize on gated with carefully thought-out campaigns and awareness programs like town hall meetings on the need to show restraint and be more sensible in their gatekeeping roles and use social media responsibly due to the scale of destruction that might happen when information that is not meant for public consumption becomes public. Community leaders (gatekeepers) should endeavour to accept technology and learn to use it in the information production and dissemination process, with active interactions with the members of their community particularly the youth

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