

APPRAISAL OF STRATEGIC CONFLICT MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS AND CUSTOMERS' COMPLAINTS RESOLUTIONS IN THE NIGERIAN BANKING INDUSTRY

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Abstract

In this study, we undertook a critical appraisal of the strategic conflict management mechanisms for customers' complaints resolutions by select old and new generation banks in Nigeria. The objectives were to ascertain the level of existence of banking ethics and professionalism, suggestion boxes, complaints' hotlines and mediation offices, and customers' fora as media/tools for customers' complaints resolutions by banks in Nigeria. For the research methodology, we adopted opinion survey techniques, where primary data for the study came through questionnaires and personal interviews. The data were analysed through the chi-square (X^2) statistical techniques. The results reveal that there is a low level of existence of banking ethics and professionalism, suggestion boxes, complaints' hotlines, mediation offices, and customers' fora as media/tools for customers' complaints resolutions by banks in Nigeria. Based on these outcomes, it was recommended that banks in Nigeria should as a matter of urgency establish in their various branches suggestion boxes, complaints' hotlines, mediation offices, and customers' fora as customers' complaints resolutions mechanism in the Nigerian banking industry.

1.1 Introduction

It is the belief of management and financial experts that for any bank to survive in the long run, it must have in place very functional customers' complaints resolution mechanisms, all through its branches (Olubunmi, Agbetuyi & Adeyemo, 2022). This is one of the vital strategic management tools for a wholesome corporate governance in any bank (Payne & Frow, 2013). Traditionally, the role of banks whether in a developed or developing economy, consists of financial intermediation, provision of an efficient payments system and serving as conduit for the implementation of monetary policies (Lassar, Manolis & Lassar, 2005). It has been postulated that for these functions to be efficiently carried out, there must be peace and cordial relationship between customers and staff in banks. That's the only way banks would be able to win the customers' trusts and mobilize meaningful level of saving deposits from them. The role

of banks in economic development has been richly articulated by Schumpeter (2004) who asserted that financial institutions are necessary conditions for economic development in any nation. This view has been variously corroborated by other scholars like Kotler and Keller (2016).

In view of the importance of the banking sector in economic development and the imperfections of the market mechanism, the operators do manage the sector in such a way as to avoid conflicts and crisis which is a major precondition for enhanced organizational performance (Afsar et al., 2010). In addition, the nature of banking business, being highly geared and conducted with greater secrecy when compared with other real sector businesses, provides added reason for a conflict-free management (Uppal, 2010). Hence, the top management constantly beam search-lights on the sector's activities with a view to ensuring that operators play by the rules of the game and imbibe sound and safe ethical banking practices that will make customers happy, by attending promptly to customers complaints and providing them the needed mechanisms to ventilate their feelings and opinions (European Investment Bank, 2022). Furthermore, such an oversight is intended to assist supervisory authorities in timely identification of deterioration in bank financial conditions before it degenerates to threaten the stability of the banking system or even the economy (World Bank, 2024).

Nwakoby (2004:156) reported that there have been strong accusation among Nigerians that the banks discriminate against low-income Nigerians and their businesses, by denying them access to loans and other incentives. This sometimes bring about agitations and ill-feelings from the established micro, small and medium-scale indigenous business owners. Again, some poor Nigerian depositors had been reported to have committed suicide at the liquidation/closure of distressed banks, while others died gradually in their homes at the pains of such financial losses. All these send negative shockwaves and fears among the banking community, and scare some potential customers away. Even though, the Central Bank of Nigeria has tried to checkmate this through the 'Banking Consolidation policy' by raising the liquidity ratio of a bank in Nigeria to ₦25 billion and thus squeezing out the crowd of many sick and distressed banks, recent revelations by the Central Bank shows there is still more cause for worry (Sanusi, 2020). According to his findings, the Nigerian banking industry is riddled with high-level corruption, mismanagement of depositors' funds and falsehood in annual reports. That some bank directors are actually feeding fat on depositors' funds through some wicked boardroom manipulations and shady deals.

However, our focus in this study is to empirically assess the effect of application of strategic management practices on Nigerian banks' conflicts resolution mechanisms, in order to still remain solvent and optimize their corporate performance. To do this effectively, we have isolated two old generation banks and two new generation banks for the analysis. They are the First Bank of Nigeria Plc, Union Bank Nigeria Plc, Zenith Bank Plc and Access Bank Plc, respectively.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The rate at which some indigenous banks in Nigeria are suddenly announced to go into distress have been causing grave concern to many Nigerian bank customers. Innocent citizens of the country, especially poor depositors are usually thrown into untold turmoil and confusion when this happened. It is reported that some of the banks mask their shaky financial positions, until it has been made clear. Some cast aside the banking ethics of integrity that would have shored up customers confidence.

So, financial and management experts argue that if Nigerian banks could imbibe a wholistic strategic management practices in their operations, it will help them to solve the problems of conflicts and crisis that dampen customers' confidence in the banks. But the target of such strategic management must be in banking ethics, professionalism, suggestion boxes, complaints' hotlines, mediation offices, and customers' fora as tools for conflicts resolutions in the banks.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research therefore include:

- i. To ascertain the extent of application of banking ethics and professionalism as strategic management tools for conflict resolutions in the banks.
- ii. To determine the extent suggestion boxes as strategic management tools can help checkmate conflicts and crisis in banks in Nigeria.
- iii. To examine the effect of complaints' hotlines mediation offices as strategic management tools for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.
- iv. To ascertain the extent customers' fora can serve as strategic management tools for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian bank.

1.4 Research Questions

The following hypotheses were tested in this study:

- i. To what extent has the application of banking ethics and professionalism as strategic management tools enhanced conflict resolutions in the banks?
- ii. To what extent have suggestion boxes as strategic management tool help to checkmate conflicts and crisis in banks in Nigeria?
- iii. What's the effect of complaints' hotlines and mediation offices as strategic management tools for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks?
- iv. To what extent has customers' fora served as a strategic management tool for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian bank?

1.5 Research Hypotheses

- i. The application of banking ethics and professionalism as strategic management tools has not significantly enhanced conflict resolutions in the banks.
- ii. Suggestion boxes as strategic management tool has not significantly helped to checkmate conflicts and crisis in banks in Nigeria.
- iii. Complaints' hotlines and mediation offices has not significantly served as strategic management tools for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.
- iv. Customers' fora have not significantly served as a strategic management tool for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian bank.

1.6 Review of Related Literature

1.6.1 Concept of Strategy

The word strategy is a military term used for describing the grand plan for winning a war. However, today, business firms and other organizations have adopted the term and it has become of common usage among managers. The World Bank Group (2017), defines it as the firm's overall plan for dealing with an existing problem in its environment. Applied to business organizations, we can state that strategy is the science or art of employing the economic forces of an organization or group of organizations to afford the maximum support to adopted policies of the organization or group of organizations. Aliyu, Adekunle and Abbah (2022), define strategy as the management action plan for achieving the chosen objectives of the enterprise. Alnawas and Abu (2020) define strategy as the basic pattern of purposes and policies that define the firm and its business. Alosani, Yusoff and Al-Dhaafri (2020) simply stated that a strategy is

the determination of the long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise and the adoption of course of action and the allocation of resources necessary to carry out these goals. An organization's strategy revolves around specific programmes of action that are capable of meeting competition as well as fulfilling organizational goals and objectives (Aliyu, Adekunle & Abbah, 2022).

1.6.2 Strategic Planning and Banking Services

Alosani, Yusoff and Al-Dhaafri (2020) say strategic planning is the process of selecting an organization's goals determining the policies and strategic programmes necessary to achieve specific objectives on route to the goals; and establishing the methods necessary to ensure that the policies and strategic programmes are implemented. Strategic planning is also the formalized, long-range planning process used to define and achieve organizational goals (Aliyu, Adekunle & Abbah, 2022). Strategic planning aims at defining how a company competes successfully within its environment (Alnawas & Abu, 2020). A good strategic plan defines the organization's business, the customers, and the framework for its day-to-day managerial decisions (Alosani, Yusoff & Al-Dhaafri, 2020). It involves a longer time frame than other types of planning, and provides a sense of coherence and momentum to an organization's actions and decisions over time. It is a top level activity in the sense that top management must be actively involved (Alosani, Yusoff & Al-Dhaafri, 2020).

Talking about the correlation between strategic planning and conflicts/crisis in the banking industry, you can agree with us that stability in the banking system of any country is a sine qua non to the stability of the overall economy (Sanusi, 2014). This is because the financial system of the banking industry is a part of the nervous system of any country's economy (Sanusi, 2012). According to Olanrewaju, Aremo and Oladipo (2015), the financial system serves as the economic nervous system of a country, while the banking industry is the nucleus of the financial system.

All over the world, banks are known to be the most hazardous economic institution when compared to other sectors. It is an intrinsically fragile institution to manage, and often subject to human shortcomings, socio-economic stress and temptations (World Bank Group, 2017). For instance, if all depositors suddenly decide to withdraw their money at once as their contract with the bank entitles them to, the bank cannot meet the demand for funds, and will eventually run into stress (Government of Canada, 2013).

Hence, the success of any bank is contingent upon the professional integrity of its directors, managers and staff, which brings about customers' confidence, without which failure will set in for the bank. Bank failure could cause damage not just to depositors, but much more widely across the economy (Financial Services Authority of Indonesia, 2014). Banks are needed, after all not just for intermediation between lenders and borrowers but also to oil the economy. Unethical banking practices can have widespread repercussions, to the point of threatening the financial structure of the economy (World Bank Group, 2017). If the banking system collapses, the infrastructure for making and receiving payments collapses too, and the rest of the economy will follow closely behind (Ghaemi-Zadeh & Eghbali-Zarch, 2024).

1.7 Research Design and Methodology

The study adopted descriptive research design, which was used to unravel the essential elements and assess the validity of pursuing certain areas of inquiry. The primary data for the study came through questionnaire. In designing the questionnaire, care was taken to ensure that the respondents had the opportunities to make choices and comments, freely. For the reliability, this was done through test-retest method, where the measuring instrument was pre-tested thrice through pilot

surveys. In the course of this, some anomalies and respondents' apathy to some questions were discovered. Hence, the instrument was then restructured to appropriately address those problems, hence, conferring a high level of reliability to the instruments, and minimizing the error variance. The level of confidence is therefore 95%, while the margin of error is 5%.

The population of the study is all the major stakeholders in the licensed commercial banks in Nigeria. These include the bank management and staff, customers and regulators. That gave us a conservative estimate of 5 million people. Cluster and random sampling technique were used in the selection of respondents for this study, where every element in the sample population was given a fair chance. A sample size of 350 was statistically determined. The data presentation and analysis was through inferential statistics, and tests of hypotheses with the chi-square (X^2) statistical technique

1.8 Data Presentations, Analysis and Results

The respondents were selected from Kano State from the North, Lagos State from the Southwest and Enugu State from the East. 54.17% of them were males, while 42.86% were females. They were aged from 15 years or above. Their educational levels range from secondary school certificates to doctoral degrees.

Table 1: Assessment of the level of corporate accountability in the banks' management as tools for checkmating conflicts/crises

Options	Frequency	Percentage
High level of accountability	164	46.86%
Low level of accountability	166	47.52%
No Accountability At all	20	5.71%
Total	350	100%

From table 1, we could see clearly that 46.86% of the respondents believe that Nigerian banks management and directors maintain a high level of corporate accountability. 47.52% of the respondents said they exhibit low level of corporate accountability. While the remaining 20% said they don't know what obtains here.

Table 2: Assessment of The Level of banking ethics and professionalism existence.

OPTIONS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Ethics of Honesty	115	32.85%
Ethics of Integrity	117	33.42%
Ethics of Transparency	99	28.28%
Not Certain	19	5.43%
Total	350	100%

Regarding the level of banking professional ethics that exist in the banks as tools for managing conflicts/crisis, 32.85% believe there is ethics of honesty amongst the staff, 33.42% believes there is ethics of integrity, 28.28% believes there is ethics of transparency, while the remaining 5.43% were not certain what obtains.

Table 3: Assessment of the existence of suggestion boxes as strategic media/tools for customers' complaints resolutions by banks in Nigeria.

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Existence of suggestion boxes	145	30.00%
Non-Existence of suggestion boxes	205	62.86%
Don't Know	0	0%

Total	350	100%
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From data on table 3, 30% of the respondents reported that suggestion boxes exist in the banks as strategic management tools for customers' complaints resolutions. 62.86% of the respondents reported they have not seen such suggestion boxes in the banks. While 7.14% were not quite sure.

Table 4: Assessment of the existence of complaints' hotlines and mediation offices

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Existence of hotlines/offices	150	44.29%
Non-Existence of hotlines	200	55.71%
Don't Know	0	0%
Total	350	100%

From table 4, 44.29% of the respondents reported the existence of complaint hotlines and conflict-mediation offices in the banks' customer management systems in Nigeria. On the contrary, 55.71% maintained there is no such complaint hotlines and conflict-mediation offices in their own banks. While none declined to comment here.

Table 5: Assessment of the existence of customers' fora as media/tools for customers' complaints resolutions by banks in Nigeria

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Customers' fora exists	130	37.14%
No Customers' fora exists	180	51.43%
Don't Know	40	11.43%
Total	350	100%

The data displayed on table 5 reveal that 37.14% of the respondents reported the existence of customers' fora as media/tools for customers' complaints resolutions by banks in Nigeria. 51.43% said no such customers' fora exist in the banks to the best of their knowledge. While 11.43% said they're not sure.

Test of Hypothesis One

H₀₁: The application of banking ethics and professionalism as strategic management tools has not significantly enhanced conflict resolutions in the banks.

H_{a1}: The application of banking ethics and professionalism as strategic management tools has significantly enhanced conflict resolutions in the banks.

Test of Statistics = Chi – Square (X^2)

$$X^2 = \frac{\sum(O-E)^2}{E}$$

$$E = \frac{\text{Row Total} \times \text{Column total}}{\text{Overall Total}}$$

Level of Significance = 95 percent

Table 6

Options	O	E	O	E	Total
High Level Accountability	164	57	115	58	115
Low Level Accountability	166	285	117	285	570
No Accountability	20	7	99	8	15

Total	350	350	350	350	700
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Adapted from tables 1 and 2.

$$\text{Degree of Freedom} = (C-1) (R-1)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Where } R &= \text{No of Columns} \\ &= \text{No of Rows} \\ &= (2-1) (3-1) \\ &= 1 \times 2 = 2 \end{aligned}$$

$$\therefore \text{Critical Chi - Square} = 5.991$$

Decision Rule

Reject Ho if the computed Chi-Square is greater than the critical Chi-Square. Otherwise, accept.

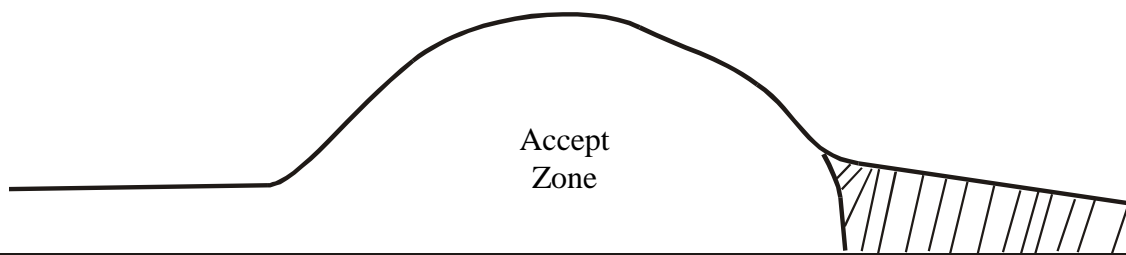


Fig. 1: X² Acceptance and rejection zones.

Reject Zone

$$\begin{aligned} X^2 &= \frac{(164 - 57)^2}{57} + \frac{(166 - 285)^2}{285} + \frac{(20 - 7)^2}{7} \\ &+ \frac{(115 - 58)^2}{58} + \frac{(117 - 285)^2}{285} + \frac{(99 - 8)^2}{8} \\ &= 200.8 + 29.69 + 24.14 + 56 + 99 + 1,035 \\ &= 1443.96 \end{aligned}$$

Result: Since the computed Chi-Square is greater than the critical Chi-square, we hereby reject the Ho, and accept the alternative hypothesis (Ha₁), which says that the application of banking ethics and professionalism as strategic management tools has significantly enhanced conflict resolutions in Nigerian banks.

Test of Hypothesis Two

Ho₂: The use of suggestion boxes as strategic management tool has not significantly helped to checkmate conflicts and crisis in banks in Nigeria.

Ha₂: The use of suggestion boxes as strategic management tool has significantly helped to checkmate conflicts and crisis in banks in Nigeria.

Test of statistics = Chi Square (X²)

$$X^2 = \sum \frac{(O-E)^2}{E}$$

$$E = \frac{\text{Row total} \times \text{Column Total}}{\text{Overall Total}}$$

Level of Significance = 95 percent

Table 7

Options	O	E	O	E	Total
Suggestion Boxes	145	150	155	156	300
No Suggestion Boxes	205	200	195	200	400
Don't Know At All	0	0	0	0	0

Total	350	350	350	350	700
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Adapted from tables 2 and 3.

$$\begin{aligned}
 X^2 &= \frac{(145 - 150)^2}{150} + \frac{(205 - 200)^2}{200} + \frac{(0 - 0)^2}{0} \\
 &+ \frac{(155 - 156)^2}{150} + \frac{(195 - 200)^2}{200} + \frac{(0-0)^2}{0} \\
 &= 0.17 + 0.13 + 0 + 0.006 + 0.13 + 0 \\
 &= 0.307
 \end{aligned}$$

Result: Since the computed Chi-Square is less than the critical chi-square we hereby accept the Ho which says that “the use of suggestion boxes as strategic management tool has not significantly helped to checkmate conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.”

Test of Hypothesis three

Ho3: The use of complaints’ hotlines and mediation offices has not significantly served as strategic management tools for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.

Ha3: The use of complaints’ hotlines and mediation offices has significantly served as strategic management tools for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.

Table 8

Options	O	E	O	E	Total
Existence of hotlines/offices	150	142	130	143	285
Non-Existence of hotlines	200	207	180	208	415
Don’t Know	0	0	40	20	20
Total	350	350	350	350	720

Adapted from tables 4 and 5.

$$\begin{aligned}
 X^2 &= \frac{(150 - 142)^2}{142} + \frac{(200 - 207)^2}{207} + \frac{(0 - 0)^2}{0} \\
 &+ \frac{(130 - 145)^2}{143} + \frac{(180 - 208)^2}{208} + \frac{(40 - 20)^2}{20} \\
 &= 0.45 + 0.24 + 0 + 1.57 + 3.77 + 20 \\
 &= 26.03
 \end{aligned}$$

Result: Since the computed chi-Square is greater than the critical chi-square, we hereby reject the Ho3, and accept the Ha3 which says that “the use of complaints’ hotlines and mediation offices has significantly served as strategic management tools for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.”

Test of Hypothesis Four

Ho4: The use of Customers’ fora has not significantly served as a strategic management tool for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.

Ha4: The use of Customers’ fora has significantly served as a strategic management tool for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.

Table 9

Options	O	E	O	E	Total
Use of Customers For a	130	142	130	143	285
Non-Use of Customers Fora	180	207	180	208	415
Don’t Know	40	0	40	20	20
Total	350	350	350	350	720

Adapted from tables 4 and 5.

$$\begin{aligned} X^2 &= \frac{(130 - 142)^2}{142} + \frac{(180 - 207)^2}{207} + \frac{(40 - 0)^2}{0} \\ &= \frac{(130 - 143)^2}{143} + \frac{(180 - 208)^2}{208} + \frac{(40 - 20)^2}{20} \\ &= 1.01 + 3.52 + 0 + 1.0 + 3.50 + 20 \\ &= 29.03 \end{aligned}$$

Result: Since the computed chi-Square is greater than the critical chi-square, we hereby reject the H_{04} , and accept the H_{a4} which says that “the use of Customers’ fora has significantly served as a strategic management tool for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.”

1.9 Summary of Findings

- i. The use of suggestion boxes as strategic management tool has not significantly helped to checkmate conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.
- ii. The use of complaints’ hotlines and mediation offices has significantly served as strategic management tools for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.
- iii. The use of Customers’ fora has significantly served as a strategic management tool for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.

1.10 Discussion of Findings

Result number one reveals that the application of banking ethics and professionalism as strategic management tools has significantly enhanced conflict resolutions in Nigerian banks. This result agrees with the findings by Chauhan, Ali and Munawar, (2019), that corporate performance could be built through transformational leadership. Other studies that support this result include Ghaemi-Zadeh & Eghbali-Zarch(2024); Alshagawi and Mabkhot (2024); Frau and Cabiddu (2016). Hence, every bank’s life, survival, profitability and growth depend on the level of public confidence on the bank as attested by the World Bank Group (2017). Public confidence on itself is a function of the level of credibility which the bank commands, while the credibility on the other hand is a function of the level of corporate accountability, honesty and integrity that the bank’s staff, management and directors exhibit (World Bank Group, 2017; World Bank, 2024). Shafique, Ahmad and Kalyar (2019), in their study, also found that ethical leadership influences creativity and innovations in organizations.

Result number two shows that the use of suggestion boxes as strategic management tool has not significantly helped to checkmate conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks. This result is a big surprise, and contradicts previous research outcomes on this like Alshagawi and Mabkhot (2024); Donkor et al. (2018); Frau and Cabiddu (2016). Again, even more worrisome is the result’s finding that many Nigerian banks are not using suggestion boxes as strategic crisis management tools. How can they track the opinion of their customers, ascertain those that are aggrieved, and proactively nip crisis in their buds. No commercial bank can survive in the long-run without efficient and optimal tracking of customers’ opinion through public relations research. No wonder then, there is a high rate of customers’ distress within the ranks of Nigerian bank customers.

Result number 3 indicates that the use of complaints’ hotlines and mediation offices has significantly served as strategic management tools for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks. This is cheery news, because complaints’ hotlines and mediation offices give bank customers the opportunity to ventilate the feelings and opinions to the banks. It also serves as viable communication feedback tool in the hands of the banks. This result is buttressed by the

findings of Itohan, John-Igbiele & Olayinka (2024), that effective strategic management practices is fundamental to the achievement of organizational performances.

From number four result we can learn that the use of Customers' fora significantly served as a strategic management tool for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks. Previous studies buttressed this result that periodic organizational-customers' meetings helps to cement relationships and forestall conflicts and crises.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we hereby recommend as follows:

- i. That stricter sanctions should be meted to any bank found guilty of not adhering strictly to bank's professional ethics and code of conduct.
- ii. To shore up the ebbing public confidence in some Nigerian commercial banks, the Central Bank of Nigeria should step up monitoring teams to regulatory and checkmate compliance to professional ethics and code of conduct in Nigerian banks.
- iii. The Central Bank of Nigeria should also make the use of complaints' hotlines and mediation offices compulsory in all commercial banks in the country, as vital strategic management tools for checkmating conflicts and crisis in the banks.
- iv. The use of Customers' fora has significantly served as a strategic management tool for checkmating conflicts and crisis in Nigerian banks.
- iv. Finally, banks should factor-in suggestion boxes into their strategic management plans, in order to encourage customers' feedback which is another key proactively effective crisis management corporate weapon.
- v. Finally, every bank in Nigeria should be mandated to submit its strategic management plans to the CBN for vetting on behalf of the Nigerian public, as a way of checkmating conflicts and crisis.

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