

THE ROLE OF WOMEN VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS IN RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: AN EVALUATION OF BAYELSA STATE

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Abstract

The people in the rural communities yearn for development in all spheres of life, but its achievements are far from being reached. In direction with the dream of attaining a certain level of development, various researches have been conducted and articles have been written to enlighten the public, policy makers and implementers. For instance, a study conducted, examined the contributions of community women and development towards poverty reduction through its community development programme in Ibadan metropolis. The study revealed that the organization's development programmes have significantly influenced the skill development and income generating activities of the beneficiaries in the study area. The results indicate that women in voluntary associations have contributed to social, economic, physical environment, and political development of the communities. It was also discovered that there were areas of deficiency among women. These may include: financial incapacitation, political apathy and poor educational standards. Based on the above, it was recommended that women organizations and educational training to break free from illiteracy and its associated setback.

Introduction

People have been making careers of stimulating improvement or development of community for generations (Cook, 1994). In Nigeria, successive administrations have made some attempts to develop communities in synergy with human advancement in social, economic, cultural and political development around the world. In this regard, development policies and projects have been implemented.

The pace of government achievement of the development agenda has been rather too slow and most of the development projects have been put in place in urban areas to satisfy the increasing population in these areas. Because of the obvious slow rate at which communities are developing, several attempts have been made by government to encourage individuals and voluntary organizations in carrying out community development at rural levels.

In line with such initiative, government have instituted programmes like Family Support Programmes, and have also stimulated the formation of Community Development Committee (CDCs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to save human beings from living in abject poverty and deplorable living conditions.

Community development is perceived as the provision of social amenities and infrastructures. In a wider scope, community development is defined broadly as a process whereby government organizations, voluntary associations or public-private partnership to ameliorate adversities in a community's economic, political, social, physical environment and to prevent future adversities. Economic community development encourages business and job opportunities; political community development implies effective community improvement associations with broad and active participation. Social development encourages safer streets and more neighbourliness. Environmental community development improves housing conditions, city services, recreational facilities, and helps clean up or prevent toxic or littered sites, and instill pride in one's home and community.

Community development efforts are triggered by economic, political, social and physical environmental adversities. One way that was conceived to solve these adversities and government's inability were to engender private participation in community development activities. It is against this backdrop that the involvement of women voluntary associations becomes necessary, since women have been known to contribute to the development of a country and the future of mankind.

Sen (1983) confirmed that women voluntary associations such as Malaysia's Women Association and Sabah Women Teachers Group have contributed in endeavours such as education, economy, arts, health, religion and law. Activities in these areas are through projects like seminars, workshops and training courses, study tours, art shows, cultural performances, exhibitions, research publications and sports. Other activities include: to provide artificial limbs for physical rehabilitation of the handicapped. For women in the rural areas, projects for the improvement of material and child nutrition as well as home economic have been devised.

In this research, it is believed that women voluntary organizations can play meaningful roles in community development. The study therefore is to examine the role of women voluntary associations have played in the development of communities in Bayelsa State.

Review of Literature

Community: It is necessary to differentiate communities from the classification of social system. There are many ways to define community (Christenson and Robinson, 1980). Each of the standard definitions may be sufficient in most situations, but they vary in terms of the elements included. A community is a particular type of social system distinguished by the following characteristics.

People involved in the system have a sense of recognition of the relationships and areas of common concern with members. The system has longevity, continuity and is expected to persist. Its operation depends considerably on voluntary co-operation with a minimal use (or threat) of sanctions or coercion. It is multifunctional; the system is expected to produce many things and to be attuned to many dimensions of interactions.

The system is complex, dynamic and sufficiently large that instrumental relationships **predominate**. Usually, there is a geographic element associated with its definition and basic boundaries (Osiede, 2001).

Development

Ogunyemi (2001) defined the concept of development as an improvement. It is a certain type of change in a positive direction. While the consequences of efforts to bring about development may not be positive, the objective is always positive. Development efforts that fail to produce positive results may not constitute work intended to bring improvement, but would be unsuccessful in bringing development. In community development, the term development is taken as a reference to a particular type of conscious effort to stimulate improvement. In this sense, all positive changes are not the results of development.

Rural Development

Todaro (1977) states that rural development aims at progressive improvement in levels of living achieved primarily through increases in small farm incomes, output and productivity. He further stressed that the basic conditions essential to its achievement are:

- Modernizing farm structures to meet food demands.
- Creating an effective supporting system.
- Changing the rural environment to improve levels of living.

Data, Methodology and the Study Area

The study is confined to Bayelsa of Nigeria. Bayelsa State is located in the South-South of Nigeria and is one of the 36 States in Nigeria. The State was created on 1st October, 1996, during the regime of Military President, late General Sani Abacha (BYSG, 2001). Bayelsa State derives its name from the three local government areas that constitute Bayelsa West Senatorial District with an acronym Bayelsa meaning Brass, Yenagoa and Sagbama Local Government Areas. Bayelsa was just a pressure group formed by some politicians in the Bayelsa West Senatorial District when the area was under Rivers State. According to the 2006 census figures, Bayelsa State has a population of 1.7

million people. Out of this number, 800,000 are males while 900,000 are females. Using the 2.83 percent National Growth Rate, the projected population of Bayelsa State will reach 2.5 million inhabitants by the year 2012 (NFC, 2006).

The data were collected through the administration of questionnaires and interview guides which sought information on the people's response to the role of women in voluntary associations in rural community developments in Nigeria particularly Bayelsa State of Nigeria. In-depth interviews were held with community members and leaders respectively on their perceptions and attitudes on the roles of women voluntary associations in rural community development in Nigeria.

The sample size for this research work includes all members of the women associations in Bayelsa State of Nigeria. The sample is subjected to 20 women associations representing the eight (8) local government areas in Bayelsa State. The respondents include chair persons, secretaries and six (6) other members. The size of the sample constitutes 160 women. In the area of data presentation and interpretation tables, mean and simple percentages were applied.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical exposition for this study is based on the system theory. The system theory framework involves a process of working towards practical prescription for behaviour supporting community development. This system theory has a number of advantages: description, explanation, predictions and prescriptions can be expressed readily in the system. Placing questions and events theory exposition have the advantage of being used generously in many disciplines ranging from biology to sociology. The system framework has the advantage of being compatible with a holistic approach (Bertalanffy, 1968).

Community as a system do work and perform transformations with inputs. The products of the work are discharge into the environment, outputs. Information about the reaction in the environment may be transmitted back to the system as a form of input. The community system is conceived in relation to the environment.

Findings

The result of the findings on what are the contributions of women voluntary associations to social development of the communities were significant. It reveals that women contributed to social development by providing information dissemination systems, promotion of community policing and empowering of vigilante organizations, as well as, provision of health-care and supply of medical instruments and encouragement of high literacy in the various communities.

The second result of the contributions of women voluntary associations to economic development of the communities in Bayelsa State also shows that women have contributed greatly to community development especially, women were actively involved in activities such as training of people and financing business enterprises, provision of job opportunities, and provision of storage and processing facilities to ameliorate the sufferings of the people in the State.

Finally, the result on what are the contributions of women voluntary associations to political development at the community level reveals that women contributed immensely to the formation of social clubs, campaign against corruption and bad leadership, and educating people on democratic governance.

Policy Thrust and the Way Forward

In order for women to achieve greater participation in community development, they would require the followings:

- (1) **Higher financial empowerment:** This could be done by assisting women associations in the form of subsidized loans so that there could be greater investment in the areas of deficiency.
- (2) They should be trained on political awareness as there seems to be political apathy among the women folk. This is reflecting from the results stated above. Training people on democratic governance was grossly not statistically significant, indicating that they lack human and material resources to do so.
- (3) Most members of the women voluntary organizations were discovered to be poorly educated and therefore require adult education to improve on their educational standard.

Conclusion

The study examined the contributions of women voluntary associations to community development in Bayelsa State. It specifically looked at community development. It was observed that women actually contributed to community development in many areas and they were statistically significant.

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