

Indigenous Communities and Community Development Principles in South-East Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract:

Indigenous communities have fallen victims of underdevelopment arising from the remote nature of their environment coupled with public/private concentration on the urban areas for meaningful infrastructural and super-structural development. This situation has deprived most of these indigenous communities in Nigeria of unleashing their potentials and maximum utilization of their human and non-human resources for socio-economic development in their environment. This paper is motivated by this scenario to look for ways of improving the course of indigenous communities through optimal use of their unharnessed potentials for socio-economic development. The paper discussed the principles of community development, its challenges and prospects for socio-economic growth and sustenance of indigenous communities in Nigeria. This will function as a catalyst for empowering indigenous communities towards socio-economic and sustainable development.

Keywords: Indigenous communities, community development, principles, challenges and prospects, sustainability.

Introduction

Bensman (1996) sees indigenous community as a relatively small town with stable population and isolated with minimal socio economic services, but with people communally living together. Such communal living and isolation is characterized with personal intimacy, cohesiveness and continuity amongst members. They live dependently in most cases with someone's life embedded in common interest (Maclver, 1936). The understanding of indigenous community in the African system may sometimes differ from what is obtainable in the western world where reasonable development has deprived people of qualities mentioned above as prominent features of indigenous community. This is owing to the fact that in the African system, people still hold tenaciously the indigenous value system regardless of the frequent aid of westernization attempting to blow off this indigenous value system that has sustained brotherly love and communal living amongst Africans since inception of the continent more especially those of them isolated in the remote villages or rural areas. In a further understanding of the concept of indigenous community, Anyanwu (1992) listed some charismatic features that are peculiar to indigenous communities in Africa. They include shared learning, shared beliefs, shared bonds of fellowship, set standards or patterns of behavior, common culture and common administration (Anyanwu, 1992). Indigenous communities can be seen from the above understanding as a people communally living in an isolated area with common interest, unique value systems and socio-cultural attributes.

However, amongst the major impediments to the comfort of these indigenous communities in their various enclaves is underdevelopment with minimal availability of basic social amenities and infrastructural development. Limited attention has been extended to these indigenous communities from both public and private sectors of the economy not minding the irreplaceable roles of indigenous communities to national cohesion, integrity and development owing to agriculture, propagation of indigenous value system, etc. Most of these indigenous communities have minimal basic infrastructural development to meet up with their counterparts in the urban areas, hence the continued practice of rural-urban migration which is amongst the banes for national economic planning and development. Hitherto, the members of indigenous communities "are often directly dependent on natural or cultural resources for their livelihood" (Global Heritage Fund, 2009:7). This is a discouragement to some members of those who migrate out of the community to seek for greener pastures thereby depriving the community the privilege of unleashing their industrial and collective potentials for the good of the community. In most cases, this scenario has left so many indigenous communities in Nigeria in a state of darkness, backwardness and stagnation; hence their ever hopefulness in the external intervention in their plights. Most of the indigenous communities who have sat back in the past waiting for external intervention through either public or private sector do not always actualize their expectations owing to the fact that urban

areas have already been misconceived as the economic backbone of a nation. Consequently, there exist investments and reinvestments in these urban areas and other useful developmental projects from both the public and private sector of the economy. This has greatly worsened the living conditions in those indigenous communities through redundancy owing to their failure to promote individual and collective initiatives to maximize their environmental potentials for their sustainable living.



Fig.I: Orié Ohodo, A typical traditional market in the study area.
(Source: Isiwu, 2013)

The implication is that the contribution of this indigenous communities to national growth and productivity mostly in the areas of agriculture, etc, is fast declining. Hence poor agricultural supplies from these communities and poor availability and high cost of food items in the so called urban areas. Does it mean that members of this indigenous communities lack the initiative to sustain their communities? Or that there are no potentials to be maximized for the good of the community? Or that their great environmental potentials are leveraged by ignorance and redundancy? These amongst others are the issues this paper tended to address with the objective of sorting out ways of improving living condition indigenous communities through the application of principle of community development; look at the possible challenges that may arise from the application of these principles of community development and visible solutions to arrest the situation. Finally the paper will consider the prospects of principles of community development in indigenous communities. It is highly expected that at the end, the study may have functioned as a vehicle to drive indigenous communities to sustainable living and growth in their localities.

Methodology

This is the articulated and detailed description of research plan which is aimed at guiding implementation of a given research (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert and Wanhil, 2005). It is a process or articulated strategy of collection and arrangement of data for research purposes. Considering the nature of the research, ethnography was found more useful, although with a complement from documentary sources. Ethnography enabled for field visitation, observation, participation and articulate recording of data via manual and electronic means. The study area (South-Eastern Nigeria) has approximately one thousand, one hundred (1100) urban and rural areas across the five states of the region i.e. Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. With the understanding of indigenous communities as noted initially, approximately eight hundred (800) indigenous communities were in the region. The study population included youths and adults from the study area with the exception of youths below the age of thirty (30 yrs). This made the study population to be approximated at nine million (9000000) judging from 2006 Nigerian National Population Census (Nigerian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). With the aid of purposive sampling technique, five indigenous communities (i.e. Ndiowu [Anambra], Inyinshi [Imo], Nru [Enugu], Ozziza [Ebonyi] and Umudike [Abia]) were sampled as sample representatives from other indigenous communities in the study area. Ten informants, two from each of the five sampled indigenous communities were selected for in-depth interviews with the aid of purposive sampling technique. However, considering the nature

of the research, research instruments used include: interview guide, electronic materials, field notes, documented materials etc. ArcGIS 9.3 Extension tool was used in locating the study samples from the study on the map of the region under study. Finally, descriptive and narrative methods of data analysis were used to analyze both the soft and hard data sourced from the field.

Brief note on the study area



Fig. II: Map of the South-eastern Nigeria showing the study areas

Southeastern Nigeria is one of the geo-political entities that made up the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria. The zone is made up of five states i.e. Anambra, Abia, Imo, Ebonyi and Enugu states. Climatically, the zone is situated at the tropical rain forest with thick vegetation. The zone is notable for two major climates, wet (March-October) and dry (November-February) seasons, with other minor climatic conditions subsumed under the two major ones. Demographically, the zone has a total population size of sixteen million, three hundred and eighty-one thousand, seven hundred and twenty nine (16,381,729) which is approximately twelve percent(12%) of the entire population of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, judging from the 2006 National Population Census in Nigeria. The zone is the heart of the Igbo culture area of Nigeria where Igbo language and culture dominates other minor but similar cultural attributes in the region. The choice of the study area is owing to its availability of many indigenous communities coupled with its proximity in distance and knowledge to the researchers.

Findings

With emphasis on the five sampled indigenous communities in the study area, the major findings were based on the socio economic situation of the sampled indigenous communities as at May, 2013. These communities which were representatives of the entire indigenous communities in the region were socio-economically deprived judging from their net economic contribution to the region and Nigeria as a nation. For instance, the backbone of the economy of these communities were the various indigenous industries that are ongoing from garri (product of cassava) processing, cassava processing , palm wine tapping, farming, fishing, palm oil processing, traditional arts and crafts , cashew nut processing , etc with the traditional four-day market (Eke, Ori, Afor and Nkwo). Most of these economic bases have great economic potentials but unharnessed owing to the attitude of the communities and public/private sectors. A good percentage of informants attributed the poor state of socio-economic aspects of the community and poor living standard to the ignorance and neglect of these communities by the public and private sectors of the nation's economy through deprival of meaningful socio-economic development. Most of the communities visited lack cohesion in the socio-economic articulations and development of the area, hence the principles of 'Igwe bu Ike' (meaning population is the strength of a community) which the region is originally known for during their pre-colonial and colonial era in Nigeria, has been neglected and flouted to the detriment of the people.



Fig. III : Vegetation and agricultural potentialities of the South-Eastern Nigeria

Close observation on the major economic activities of the indigenous communities as mentioned earlier and overall living standard of the people, revealed that most of these indigenous communities have not completely harnessed the great potentials of their environment owing to their ignorance to the role of principles of community development in meaningful socio-economic development of indigenous communities. Some of the amenities that had experienced these principles could not maximize the potentials of these principles to community development due to lack of cohesion, rural urban migration and poor overall appreciation of the implications of socio-economic development to the future of these indigenous communities. Tenets of these principles of community development include:

The principle of self help- The premise of this principle is that "... Members of the community should cooperate and come together to solve their problems through joint- action with little or no assistance from external bodies. People in the community should aspire to develop their community by joining forces to confront various needs of the community" (Abiona, 2009:24). This principle discourages redundancy, and motivates communities to answer and manipulate available potentials in their environment for meaningful socio-economic development without necessarily waiting for external interventions. It motivates various individuals and socio-cultural groups to pull their efforts together to better their communities.



Fig. IV: Palm oil processing is amongst indigenous practices in the study area.
(Source: Isiwu, 2013)

The principle of felt need- This principle is of the opinion that people living in a given indigenous community should be able to identify their vital needs in their environments so as to achieve a desired socio-economic development. Owing to the fact that they live in the environment, they should be able to come together to identify various obstacles to their socio-economic development. Such identifications are always effective when done by the members of the community.

The principle of citizen participation- This principle is focused on the individual and collective participation of every member of the community in developmental programmes in the communities or in implementation of indigenous policies and directives which are aimed at improving the standard of living of people in the community. “The principle of citizen participation is deeply inherent in the very concept of community development which enjoins that whatever is done to improve the welfare of a people must endeavor to elicit the enthusiasm and whole-hearted participation of such a people” (Anyanwu, 1992:66).

The principle of self growth- The major premise of this principle is that communities should not be stagnant or feel satisfied or fulfilled on a particular stage of their socio-economic development programmes rather they should strive to grow from one stage of development to another, growing sustainably in their socio-economic lives in their environment. The community “... has to be able through constant practice, to diagnose its own problems, and to initiate action towards finding solutions to such problems. In this process, the community should strive to rely, as such as possible, on its own resources” (Anyanwu, 1992:69). In that process, external initiatives and assistance can be accommodated towards attaining a sustainable socio-economic development.



Fig. V: The sustainability of Principles of Community Development in Indigenous Communities

The principle of self reliance- this principle encourages indigenous communities to be self reliant, utilizing available resources in their environment to improve their socio-economic standard without necessarily waiting for external help from other public or private sectors. The principle promotes greater cohesiveness and total commitment to the course of the community and communal articulations and actions towards the sustainable growth of the socio-economic aspects of the community. “Its widespread acceptance in the development planning of most African countries and has the tendency to give greater stimulus and cohesiveness to community development in these countries (African countries). The principle promotes innovativeness and offers the psychological condition that is fundamental to self improvement” (Anyanwu, 1992:72).

The principle of self direction- this principle is of the view that people living in a given community should be motivated internally to initiate and implement developmental projects that would enhance economic viabilities of their community. “It states that mobilization towards participation should be internalized. People themselves are the vanguard of the developmental processes and they have the capacity to effect positive attitude towards the community. Self direction is dynamic in nature. It is progressive and static. It fosters the community towards greater level of development” (Abiona,2009:30-31). The above analysis of the principle of self direction by Abiona has expatiated more on the role of the principle to the socio-economic development and sustainability of indigenous communities.

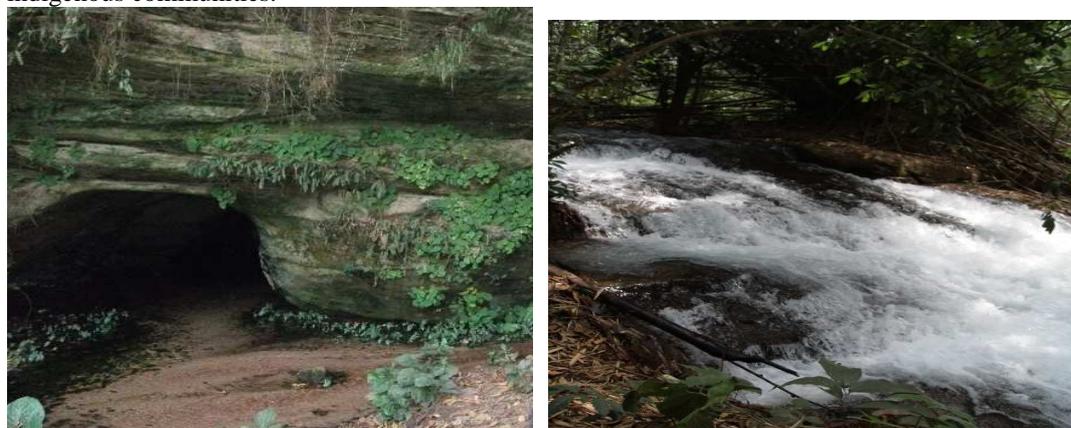


Fig. VI: Caves and Waterfalls as amongst the unharnessed tourism potentials of the region

The above listed principles of community development have shown their individual and collective contributions to the socio-economic development of indigenous communities in the South-Eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria and other indigenous communities in Nigeria and Africa at large. The major premise of these principles is motivating the members of the indigenous communities to collectively harness their enumerated resources for socio-economic development in their various communities without necessarily sitting back and waiting for external agencies before meaningful development can take place in their communities.

Challenges and Prospects

A closer look at the dilapidated socio-economic standards of the indigenous communities of the study area which is applicable to indigenous communities within the continent of Africa has revealed great unharnessed potentials of these communities waiting for communal cohesion, initiatives and actions to cause meaningful developments in these indigenous communities. Despite the tendencies of principles of community development to lift the value and standard of living of those studied indigenous communities, the application of these principles will be faced with some challenge owing to the observations in the field and responses from informants. For instance, the members of a community may have imitations and developmental plans to develop their communities but lack of funds owing to the poor economic standard of their community. This was noted by one of the informants at Nru in Enugu state, who affirmed that they came together, identified their felt-needs, articulated meaningful developmental initiatives but they lack the required resources to execute the plans. One of the articulated plans was the digging of bore hole to supply water to every part of the community. To avert this challenge of limited resources, these indigenous communities should adopt progressive development strategy which states that development starts from micro to macro stages, by articulating minimal projects that are within their limited resources so as to avert possible encroachment from discouragement. Also, external bodies can be sort for to contribute meaningful and unconditional assistance. Another possible challenge is the disintegration and attitudinal factors amongst members of the indigenous communities. An informant at one of the sampled indigenous communities (Inyishi-Imo State) lamented that lack of collective ideology in articulations of development strategies for the community was amongst the factors that are depriving the community of total maximization of their enumerated potentials for the good of the community. Some indigenous communities like Ndiowu in Anambra State, lack cohesion in ideologies. Attitudinal individualism had depressed the spirit of attitudinal collectivism. In such situation, the application of principles of community development may not thrive. The heads of such communities are expected to invite community development professionals to work on the psych of the members of the community to arouse the spirit of attitudinal collectivism. The leaders of such communities should focus on initiatives and plans that will bring together members of the community to share collective articulations and initiatives. Another challenge is poor enlightenment/awareness creation amongst members of these indigenous communities. A close observation has revealed that a greater percentage (about 80%) of living members of these indigenous communities did not attain average level of education and are in most of the time, engulfed in the web of ignorance when development initiatives are being proposed in the community. This particular challenge has over the years, halted many development programmes unconsciously. In this case, the few enlightened ones in the communities, and enlightened members of the community who do not reside in the community may be out numbered when making communal decisions.



Fig. VI: Traditional cassava/garri processing in Nru Community, Enugu State.

Moreover, despite these few challenges of application of community development principles in the indigenous communities of south eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria, there are also some prospects pointing towards the successful application of these principles for socio-economic and sustainable development of these indigenous communities. For instance, the availability of many vibrant socio-cultural groups i.e. age grade system (Otu-ogbo), community youths (Umu-okoro), daughters of the community (Umu-ada), girls-guild (Umu-agbogho), married-women (Alutaradi), etc, would aid in facilitating meaningful development in these indigenous communities. Communicating with these socio-cultural groups through their various heads would help to facilitate development initiatives because of the high esteem these socio-cultural groups are held in the traditional Igbo society.

Conclusion

Community development has been identified as a progressive intervention which enables indigenous communities to identify their felt-needs and collectively work together towards addressing their common concerns that will improve their living standards (Seebohm and Gilchrist, 2008). Many indigenous communities have not been able to maximize their various resources in their environment to achieve or fulfill their enumerated concerns. This study focused on the maximum use of principles of community development to address socio-economic needs of the indigenous communities in the south eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria, subsequently making these communities less reliant on external agencies and more reliant on themselves and their environmental resources towards achieving meaningful socio-economic development. To achieve these, there should be planned programme; members of the community should be encouraged for self-help, availability of relevant technical assistance, and integration of various specialties. Also, previous studies (i.e. Omoruji, 2001) have identified that it is economically beneficial and advantageous to work within a group instead of individuals in community development programmes. Although considering the nature of the programme which may be alien to the people's life style, they may resist change (Batten, 1957) yet initial conscientisation, information and involvement may serve as tools to bridge the gap between the proposing project and members of the indigenous community. Imhabekhai asserted that for community development to succeed, "...the social, physical, political and technological environment must be conducive. The change agent must make effort to identify all the environmental factors that can facilitate or hinder the attainment of ...development objectives to the fullest in the community" (Imhabekhai, 2009:6). In the case of indigenous communities in the study area, programmes like farmers cooperatives, women cooperatives, borehole programmes, road maintenance projects, construction of churches, civic centres and meeting halls, upgrading the primary and post primary schools, scholarship schemes to deserving members to attain tertiary institutions, rural electrification projects, etc, can be proposed and achieved. It is believed that community development principles as discussed in this paper would go along way in bringing socio-economic development to the indigenous communities in the study area and some other areas within Nigeria and Africa in general. The community members should collectively work to achieve meaningful development in their environment. Experts could be invited where necessary. Likewise, public and private sectors interventions can be sort for to augment the efforts of the members of these indigenous communities.

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