

Economic Empowerment Programmes and Women Participation in Community Development in Rivers State: A Study of the Empowerment Support Initiative (ESI)

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Abstract

The Study examined Empowerment Programmes and Women Participation in Community Development in Rivers State: A Study of the Empowerment Support Initiative (ESI). The population for the study comprised 4,312 registered members of the 131 registered Community Based Women Associations (CBWAs) in the 6 Local Government Areas under study in Rivers State. A multi-stage sample procedure was adopted, involving the random sampling technique which was used in selecting 2 LGAs from each of the 3 senatorial districts of Rivers State. The six selected LGAs by this process were, Ikwerre, Etche, Akuku-Toru, Ahoada East, Elemo and Opobo/Nkoro. The second stage involved a proportionate sampling technique which was used to select 50% of the registered members of the CBWAs in the 6 LGAs to realize a sample of 2,156. Questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion were adopted as instruments for data collection. Three research questions were posed. They were analyzed with frequencies and weighted means. The study revealed that the extent of implementation of ESI in Rivers State in order to enhance women's participation in Community development is very low. It also revealed that the extent of women's participation in the implementation of the ESI programmes in Rivers State in order to enhance their participation in CD is also very low. The study finds that the extent of influence of ESI on women's participation in CD in Rivers State is very low. Based on the findings, the researcher recommended amongst others that ESI should create offices in all LGAs in Rivers State to properly co ordinate the programmes at the grassroots and competently trained community development workers should be trained to manage the programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the Nigerian Government has advanced various programmes for Community Development as well as to assist the Nigerian woman. This is as a result of a perceived gender imbalance in our society that has led to the low socio-economic status of women as manifested in low literacy rates, poverty, low employment rates and low self esteem.

Alozie(2011) observed that regressive traditional practices and attitudes have drastically limited women from avenues for self realization and access to education. The inevitable consequence of the situation, according to him, is that women's potentials are grossly under-utilized with far reaching implications for the communities, state and nation.

It needs be noted that the quest for gender equity in social, economic, political and decision making processes are on the increase; and have in fact yielded positive results. Women are now better appreciated and efforts are on-going to empower them to contribute maximally to community and national development.

However, Onyeozu (2007) maintains that a lot still need to be done to improve the socio-economic status of women so that they can contribute more meaningfully to the overall development of the society and contribute to CD. For development to be sustainable, all facets of the society, including women, must be developed.

Empowerment refers to increasing the political, social or economic strengths of individuals and Communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in his or her capacities (Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, 2007). Empowerment has been defined by Slocum et al., (1995) as a "process through which individuals, local groups and communities, identify and shape their lives and the society in which they live". It is a measure of people's capacity to bring about change, which is concerned with analyzing and addressing the dynamics of oppression and assisting groups and individuals to play an active role in the decisions which affect their lives. (Eade and Williams, 1995).

Akugbue (2002) defines empowerment as a process of strengthening an existing situation, meaning that such a situation already exists that needs additional strengthening. It involves the provision of an enabling environment for productive and intellectual abilities to be realized.

Empowerment is a social process, since it occurs in relationship with others. One important implication of this definition of empowerment is that the individual and community are fundamentally connected. Empowerment according to the World Bank (2007) is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process

are actions which both build individual and collective assets, and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets.

Fadeye and Olanegan (2001) viewed women empowerment as a process of enabling women to develop the capacity to actualize their potentials and that women should be looked at as individuals who possess some hidden potentials for greatness and so should be encouraged to develop such to the fullest.

The concept of participation as empowerment has many nuances. Some development agencies see it basically as access to and control over resources, or as a way of releasing human energies and enlarging talents and potential (FAO 1990, Uphoff 1992). It has also been linked to democratisation, good governance, equality, equity, and human rights (FAO 1990, Rudqvist and Woodford-Berger 1996).

Participation in development projects and programmes is widely seen as both a means and an end. While many development agencies give equal weight to both, some emphasize one or the other aspect of participation (Rudqvist and Woodford-Berger 1996).

As a means, participation is a process in which people and communities cooperate and collaborate in development projects and programmes (Clayton et al 1998). In this view, participation, sponsored by an external agency, is a way to support the progress of a project or programme and a means to ensure the successful outcome of activities. As an end, participation is seen as the empowerment of individuals and communities in terms of acquiring skills, knowledge and experience, leading to greater self-reliance (Clayton et al 1998). Participation is an instrument to break poor people's exclusion and lack of access to and control over resources needed to sustain and improve their lives. It is intended to empower them to take more control over their lives (Clayton et al 1998).

From the above exposition one can easily observe the importance of the involvement of the participants in all the processes of the empowerment and development programmes. The socio-economic improvement in the quality of life of people's productive agent must be the essential objective of empowerment and development programmes. Concerning the roles of human capital in the development enterprise, very little attention has been given to the place of women in the development process.

However among the most recent efforts is the Empowerment Support Initiative (ESI); an initiative of the Wife of the Governor of Rivers State, Judith Amaechi, committed to empowering women and youths of Rivers State with skills for wealth creation through basic education and capacity in modern techniques, skills acquisition which includes the training of lady cab drivers and to build relevant institutional capacities and networks to enhance opportunities and address the needs of target groups. The programmes of the initiative include but not limited to the following:

ESI's Milestone: This is a training programme that seeks to foster greater awareness and total well-being of women. Its programmes include: Agricultural wealth empowerment (AWEP) to equip farmers with the right skills to boost food production in their communities, the training of teachers to be employed in ESI pre-schools, skills acquisition training, international seminar on literacy education. Women are also trained to organize campaigns on health related matters (breast cancer, high blood pressure, contraceptive methods, sterilizers, diabetes, malaria, alcoholism, drug addiction, proper nutrition etc).

Enterprise Centre: The activities of enterprise centre are to facilitate the creation and promotion of sustainable livelihood initiatives that are economically viable, technically feasible and culturally acceptable. In spite of this programme, women have however been encouraged to engage themselves in meaningful activities that will strengthen local capacity and contribute to poverty reduction thereby promoting sustainable Community development.

ESI Lady Cabbies: This is a savings and credit initiative. It is aimed at giving women equal opportunity as their male counterparts. Women are sponsored to train in driving skills and are empowered with taxis at the end of the training to engage in public transportation.

ESI Business Initiative: Women are advised and encouraged to start profitable business to generate income and improve their standard of living. Business seminars are organized to boost their self esteem and confidence and loans are given to women to start up their own businesses.

ESI More Projects: This is a grass root capacity building programme with critical importance in empowering local people on how to plan, implement, and monitor sustainable Community development initiatives/projects. It facilitates actions and interventions at the grassroots level.

These programmes are conceptualized to benefit women in Rivers State and are expected to enhance their participation in Community Development. The ESI is designed to avail the women with opportunities for economic independence and poverty alleviation, enhanced literacy, self-esteem and general improved standard of living. The involvement of the women in projects such as the lady cabbies avails them equal opportunities as their male counterparts without discrimination against their gender. It is the objective of the ESI to mobilize women in the state in order to improve their socio-economic status to contribute meaningfully to the development of communities in the state and the nation at large.

The Problem

In spite of these programmes, there are many who insist that women in Rivers State are still under-developed. They are still surrounded by regressive traditions, poverty and disease, ignorance, illiteracy and unemployment. The situation therefore raises questions which demand urgent answers. Are the programmes living up to expectation and achieving their stated objectives or are there constraints or areas that need to be strengthened for optimum performance of the programmes?

The researcher therefore saw the need to examine the effectiveness of the implementation of ESI; the extent of women participation in the implementation of ESI programmes and the impact of these development programmes on women's participation in Community development in Rivers state.

Therefore the provision of adequate information based on empirical evidence, to enhance the effectiveness of the ESI, towards achieving the women's socio-economic development and as a consequence enhances their participation in Community development is the problem of this study.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent have the ESI programmes been implemented in Rivers State to enhance women's participation in Community development?
2. To what extent do women participate in the implementation of ESI programmes in Rivers State to enhance their participation in Community development?
3. What is the influence of the ESI programmes on women's participation in Community development in Rivers State?

Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprises the 4,312 registered members of the 131 registered Community Based Women Associations (CBWAs) in the six Local Government Areas under study in Rivers State. (Ikwerre, sampling procedure. The first stage was the random sampling of two Local Governments Areas from each of the senatorial districts of Rivers State. The second stage involved a 50% proportionate sampling of the registered members of the CBWAs in the six LGAs. This was applied to realize a sample size of 2,156. Two instruments were used for data collection. They are: The ESI Assessment Questionnaire (ESIAQ) and Focus Group Discussion. The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire is 0.96. The data collected were analysed with percentages and weighted mean.

Results

Research Question 1: What is extent of implementation of the ESI programmes in Rivers State to enhance women's participation in Community development?

Table1: Showing the extent of implementation of ESI programmes in Rivers State to enhance women's participation in Community development.

ITEMS	VHE	HE	LE	VLE	TOTAL	Mean \bar{X}	REMARKS
To what extent, in your opinion, has the ESI programs been implemented in your community.	129 (516)	298 (894)	742 (1482)	987 (987)	3879	1.80	REJECT
How would you rate the extent of monitoring/evaluation of the ESI programs in your LGA.	108 (432)	302 (906)	765 (1530)	981 (981)	3849	1.78	REJECT
To what extent has the ESI achieved the objectives of empowering many of the women to enhance their participation in CD.	95 (380)	304 (906)	773 (1546)	984 (984)	3818	1.77	REJECT

Table 1 presents the analysis of the extent of implementation of ESI Programmes in Rivers State to enhance women's participation in Community development.

The options on the extent of implementation of ESI programs in the community; the extent of monitoring/evaluation of the ESI programs in your LGA; and the extent ESI achieved the objectives of empowering many of the women to enhance their participation in CD showed very low extent.

Each of these items (1.80, 1.78 and 1.77 respectively) has a mean that is less than 2.50 – the criterion

mean.

Research Question 2

To what extent do women participate in the implementation of ESI programmes in Rivers State to enhance their participation in Community development?

Table 2: Showing the extent of women participation in the implementation of ESI programmes in Rivers State to enhance their participation in Community development.

ITEMS	VHE	HE	LE	VLE	TOTAL	Mean \bar{X}	REMARKS
To what extent are the women involved in the planning of the ESI program.	126 (504)	294 (882)	746 (1492)	990 (990)	3868	1.79	REJECT
How would you rate the extent of women's involvement in decision making in the ESI program.	95 (380)	310 (930)	768 (1536)	983 (983)	3829	1.77	REJECT
To what extent are the women's needs, opinion and ideas sought during the implementation of the ESI programs.	91 (364)	299 (897)	782 (1564)	984 (984)	3809	1.76	REJECT

Table 2 shows responses on the extent of women participation in the implementation of ESI programmes in Rivers State. The options on the extent of women involvement in the planning of the ESI program; the extent of women's involvement in decision making in the ESI program; and the extent women's needs, opinion and ideas sought during the implementation of the ESI programs showed very low extent. Each of these items (1.79, 1.77 and 1.76 respectively) has a mean that is less than 2.50 – the criterion mean.

Research Question 3: What is the influence of the ESI programmes on women's participation in Community development in Rivers State?

Table 3: Showing the influence of ESI programmes in women participation in Community development.

ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	TOTAL	Mean \bar{X}	REMARKS
Women's involvement in ESI programs have enhanced their ability to mobilize resources for community development in your community	92 (368)	297 (891)	786 (1572)	981 (981)	3812	1.77	REJECT
Women's involvement in ESI programs have increased their participation in decision-making for community development in your LGA	109 (436)	301 (903)	766 (1532)	980 (980)	3851	1.78	REJECT
Involvement of women in ESI programs have improved women's participation in monitoring and evaluation in community development in your LGA	96 (384)	309 (927)	748 (1496)	988 (988)	3795	1.76	REJECT

Table 3 shows that the options suggesting that: Women's involvement in ESI programs have enhanced their ability to mobilize resources for community development in your community; Women's involvement in ESI programs have increased their participation in decision-making for community development in your LGA; Involvement of women in ESI programs have improved women's participation in monitoring and evaluation in community development in your LGA were rejected by the respondents. Each of their means 1.77, 1.78 and 1.78 respectively is less than the criterion mean.

FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Focus Group discussions were organized in nine (9) Community Based Women Associations within the Local Government Areas used for the study.

In each of these Associations, ten women which included executive members and patrons were purposively sampled and used for the Focus Group discussions in each of the meetings. The Researcher tried to steer up some reactions from the discussants on pertinent issues surrounding their current state of ESI programmes, their participation in the ESI programmes and the influence of the programmes on their participation in Community development.

The discussants talked freely on the extent to which ESI programmes has been implemented in their various Communities to enhance their participation in Community development and their knowledge about the ESI programme. The discussants revealed that the implementation of programmes in order to enhance their participation in Community development were at a very low extent. In fact only a few of them had knowledge of the existence of ESI while the majority had no prior knowledge of its existence in their Communities at all.

On the extent of women's participation in implementation of ESI programmes in Rivers State in order to enhance their participation in Community development. The discussants were of the opinion that women were not involved in the implementation of the ESI programmes and that the major challenge they were actually facing generally was accessibility to the empowerment programmes and questioned the criteria adopted in the selection of beneficiaries. Many discussants supported the view and brought in the possibility of a political undertone in the whole arrangement, citing cases where those who are supposed to be running the programmes turn out to become major beneficiaries as well.

The discussants were unanimous in the claim that women do not participate effectively in the implementation process.

On the extent of influence of ESI programmes on women's participation in Community development in Rivers State. Some discussants were of the view that their involvement in the decision-making process in Community development was greatly insignificant as decisions were majorly taken by the programme planners/organizers. The women had little or nothing at all to contribute in this regard. The same is the case in the mobilization of resources. The discussants pointed out that the officials in the Empowerment Support Initiative (ESI), do not encourage the women to participate in the mobilization of resources. When further probed, they disclosed that monitoring and evaluation was carried out by the personnel/Officials of the empowerment Programmes.

One of the discussants stated that she had once witnessed after a particular training session of the ESI, training materials which were supposed to be shared among the Participants were taken away by those working with the empowerment programmes. She went further to add that this was discouraging as the benefits acted as a source of incentive to the women. Adding, she said this could also be counted as one of the measures to be adopted to make women empowerment programmes in Rivers State more effective and requires that the Government should make arrangements for different forms of incentives which could be both material and non-material to spur the women on.

Discussants generally believed that the ESI and other women empowerment Programmes in Rivers State had tried to tackle some challenges of the women, it has however not been successful in alleviating the poverty level of the women.

She further argued that as a measure to ensure the effectiveness of the programmes, the responsibility should not be left for the Government alone. All hands must be on deck to ensure that the empowerment of Women in Rivers State is achieved. This should begin from the grassroots and then transcend to the state and federal levels.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Respondents used for the study are either participants or non-participants of the ESI programmes. They are also either educated or uneducated. It is presumed that women in this category are the ones mostly affected by the socio-economic problems that have been the subject of this research. They are also primarily the group targeted by the programme studied.

Ugochukwu (2006) agrees to this view when he stressed the need for women to be specially targeted in the efforts to generate development through the transformation of rural areas. It is only when women are genuinely motivated, through the elimination of all cultural barriers, and properly organized for productive activity, within the context of freedom, equity and social justice that a solid foundation can be laid for genuine economic development.

The study revealed that a few participants have benefitted from the ESI programmes. It also showed that women do not participate en masse in the implementation of ESI Programmes in Rivers State.

The study also revealed that the extent of the implementation of ESI programmes in Rivers State in order to enhance women's participation in Community development has been very low. This may account for the

low literacy level still noticeable among the women. The low literacy level is therefore reflected on their occupation and quality of life. USAID (2015) agrees that although education is a fundamental right of all, it has not reached the unreached, because to millions of people, especially women, remained an empty promise. Education promotes change in behavior, attitude and values; gives one a greater sense on how to reduce risks in life, live a better and healthier life.

Davis (2000) supporting the above view, remarked that with good education, women will earn a higher income to take care of themselves, their family and would be in a better position to participate in Community development.

The respondents were unanimous in the disagreement of the options that suggest women's participation in the implementation of ESI programmes in Rivers State has enhanced their participation in Community development. The consequence of the above is that the women do not feel any sense of ownership of the programmes. They see it more as one of those Government programmes set to patronize some persons or groups.

This finding contrasts with Oyebamiji and Adekola (2008) who stressed that the principle of community participation, which stipulates that people should take part in the planning, execution, utilization and assessment of developmental projects designed to improve their welfare. It fulfils the need for a sense of belonging. It is the fulfillment of this need that gives the people the pride of ownership of projects undertaken.

The study revealed that most of the ESI programmes are not accessible to many of the women. The respondents noted for instance that the taxi cabs provided by the ESI were given to only a few women who are mostly based in the city. Majority of the women, especially those who reside in the rural areas had no access to the scheme. They argued that for any programme aimed at empowering women socially and economically to be successful, the rural women should be involved in its implementation. They noted that the physical, psychological, emotional and economic circumstances and conditions of the women affect their contributions to and participation in Community development.

Moreover, the discussants feel that Government should do more in terms of organisation, involving the people at all stages of the programmes and funding to ensure that the women socio-economic empowerment programmes meet their objectives. The study revealed that there is no significant difference between the mean responses of women who participated and non-participants in the socio-economic empowerment programmes on the extent of the participation in Community development in Rivers State.

Discussants felt that more would have been achieved had the organizers involved more of the women in the programme's decision-making, mobilization of resources, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Women, irrespective of their level of education, feel the pains of the high spread of poverty and would want a change in the prevailing circumstance. Virtually, every human problem, including the issue of women and their socio-economic empowerment, need effort to dismantle. It will require well articulated and well managed intervention programmes and calls for commitment, patience, sincerity and concerted actions in many fronts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and implications above, the researcher made the following recommendations:

1. The main components of the ESI and other intervention programmes aimed at empowering women to enhance their participation in Community development should be aimed at: strengthening already existing women socio-economic empowerment programmes; improving the socio-economic status of women through strengthening adult literacy services with a high component of formal, non-formal or informal education to develop and build skills for income generating activities and creating Community awareness through culturally sensitive information, education and communication (IEC) for behavioural changes.
2. ESI should create offices in all the Local Government Areas to properly co ordinate the programmes at the grassroots.
3. There should be competently trained community development workers employed to manage socio-economic empowerment programmes.
4. The need for monitoring and evaluation and a proper follow-up plan cannot be over emphasized. This is required to enhance and sustain initiated projects. Every initiated programme should be result oriented.

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