

Self-Help Initiatives and the Development of Rural Communities in Nigeria

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Abstract

Self-help initiatives for developing Nigeria's rural communities are attempts by concerned individuals and groups to bridge the gap between the efforts of governments at overall national development and the near total invisibility of many of these communities. Provided they are demand-driven and environmentally friendly, there are no limits to the range of projects that qualify to be executed in the rural communities through self-help initiatives. The only requirements are institutional capacity and/or the willingness to build one, to support and to manage such projects sustainably. This has to do with the pivotal role of governments in providing the enabling environment and in moderating the forces of culture and ethnicity, as residents of a rural community strive for self-emancipation in order to be able to exert sufficient control over an environment that appears to them as given and unchangeable.

Keywords: Self-Help initiatives, Demand-driven, Environmentally-friendly, Institutional capacity, Rural communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Generally, development efforts seek to improve people's welfare. There is a drive to raise the overall productivity of an economy, to increase available surplus as well as expand its capital base-presumably by forgoing a certain amount of immediate consumption of this surplus in favour of investment. Since men, if left alone will tend to define their self-interests in terms of more and more consumption, the business of development is to attempt to restrain this desire for immediate consumption. The self-help approach seeks to use voluntary grassroots organizations to restrain this desire and to, in a participatory way and outside government budgets, ultimately provide for the people's basic (food and non-food) needs by mobilizing private resources (Ogwumike, 1998).

The self-help strategy connotes a programme of activities involving the concerted efforts of members of a given community aimed at providing some basic amenities in that community. It entails the development of the resources of the community by efforts of members of that community alone, instead of relying on outside initiatives or assistance. It is an inward-looking approach to self or group improvement, which relies solely on own efforts and largely for own benefits (see also Nel and Binns, 1997).

To stimulate and sustain the self-help motive in rural development, it is necessary to mobilize and organize people in affected communities for effective project conception, selection and implementation. The self-help strategy therefore presupposes the existence of like-minded people with initiatives, integrity, and foresightedness; apart from capital and a favourable investment environment. It takes peaceful coexistence as given, as well as the existence of a government that is readily responsive to the needs and aspirations of the governed. It also requires cultural traits that are development-friendly. Apart from being an eloquent repudiation of the 'top-down' strategies of the 1970s-which tilted economic opportunities largely in favour of urban centres, it is also an attempt by concerned individuals and groups to bridge the gap between government developmental efforts and the near total "invisibility" of most rural areas (Otiye, 1990).

Provided they are demand-driven and environmentally friendly there is no limit to the range of projects that can be executed in rural areas through self-help. The only requirements are adequate institutional capacity, and/or willingness to build on, to support and manage the projects and thereafter sustain them. This alludes to the pivotal role of governments in providing the enabling environment and in moderating the forces of culture and ethnicity. The

latter often tend to frustrate self-help development projects aimed at self “emancipation to enable rural people to exert sufficient control over an environment that appears to them as given and unchangeable” (Ntukidem, 1991).

These issues are raised and discussed in the next four sections. In section two we address such conceptual issues as self-help, ruralness in Nigeria, and rural development. Section three is devoted to discussing the various models of rural development, while section four is a critical appraisal of the self-help initiative: its relevance, strengths, the constraints and the way forward. The fifth and last section contains the conclusion.

2. CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

2.1 The Concept of Self-Help

Self-help approach to community development seeks to optimally harness the resources (human and material) of the affected community in order to improve the living standard of members of that community. Community self-help for rural development could be seen as a movement to promote better living for the whole community, with or without external assistance. Ultimately, community self-help for rural development has to do with inducing change in the rural areas for the achievement of an enhanced welfare for rural dwellers.

Self-help is predicated on two major principles: the principle of individual and corporate survival and the principle of societal felt-need. These principles are responsible both for galvanizing communities into pursuing self-help development initiatives, and moderating them as they do so. The principle of individual and corporate survival hangs on the need for security and corporate coexistence. The instinct to survive is strong not only in the individual but also in the community. This causes people to come together especially when societal existence/or survival is threatened. According to this principle, self-help effort is a way of bringing the people in a community together to think and act jointly for the common good of the individual and the community.

The principle of felt-need, on the other hand, assumes that within every community there exist certain needs, which are generally recognized and agreed upon by members of that community as posing a problem and therefore needing a solution. Associated with felt-need in providing an impetus for self-help efforts are:

- The questioning of the status quo and the realization that something can possibly be done;
- An appreciation by the people of their enormous potential resources that could be harnessed to meet felt needs;
- Exposure to external factors, including education, urban life, the energizing role of migrants-indigenous and sons “abroad” which helps to suppress the debilitating options;
- Alienation and neglect (as experienced by rural communities); and
- The understanding that resources are naturally scarce and that how they are used needs to be maximized through co-operation (Ottong, 1997).

Community development through self-help has become a familiar feature in contemporary Nigeria. Self-help groups exist for credits, like the esusu club, which work through the small saver-borrower to make loans readily available. There are also self-help groups for agricultural production, construction of public facilities (roads, bridges, markets, schools, churches, etc.), provision of health-care facilities; social welfare and mutual protection, such as neighbourhood watch associations (CBN, 1999). The message of self-help in rural development is that it is no longer enough to present rural communities with a range of alternative choices as in the “bottom-up” orientation to rural development. Rural communities seek in addition the opportunity to initiate, formulate and implement what they perceive to be their priorities.

2.2 Rural Development

Rural development aims at progressive improvements in living levels achieved primarily through increases in (small) farm income, output and productivity. with agriculture as the major component of any successful rural development programme. Rural development should be viewed in the context of far-reaching transformation of economic and social structures, relationships and process reaching in rural areas (Todaro, 1982). Among its broad goals are:

- The creation of more employment opportunities both on and off farms;
- More equitable access to arable land;
- More equitable distribution of rural income;

- Broadly distributed improvements in health, nutrition, and housing; and
- A broadened access to the kind of formal and non-formal education that will have direct impact and relevance to the needs and aspirations of rural dwellers.

This, no doubt, calls for a development strategy that centres on the “rural man”. his needs, aspirations and available resources.

Offong (1998) sees rural development as a synthesis of human efforts directed at eradicating, within a given rural area, the elements of backwardness, embracing all aspects of human endeavour; economic, social, intellectual, cultural, moral as well as fundamental human rights entrenched in justice, individual rights and peace. The driving philosophy behind rural development is that some consciously designed programmes should make available capital and credit, infrastructure facilities, basic public utilities (water, electricity, basic educational and health care facilities) as well as employment opportunities in rural areas for the purpose of enhancing the welfare of the rural dwellers. Thus, while rural development can still be perceived in the familiar context of growth in per capita income, it should lead to structural transformations in terms of sustained improvements in such indicators of quality of life as reduction in poverty, unemployment, socio-economic inequality, ignorance, hunger, diseases and homelessness. This should culminate into improvements in the material conditions of life (Agiobenebo, 1991). To this end, a more comprehensive agenda, according to Cavaya (2001), involves processes of engagement and partnership that help people act on existing motivation and gain better access to appropriate information and resources.

However, urban bias in the country’s development strategies since the 1970s had been quite pervasive. This has severely aggravated the problem of rural underdevelopment. In particular, the country’s import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) strategy encouraged, among other things, high capital intensity and so had marginal employment benefits, and a high degree of dependence on imports for basic raw materials, machinery and equipment. It also encouraged massive transfer of resources from the rural sector to the urban sector. The consequences on rural development (or underdevelopment) of such transfer have been a depressed agriculture, the loss of energetic manpower to the urban sector through rural-urban drift, and poor rural infrastructure. Fertile land and other resources lie wasted while people drift to the urban centres in search of the “good life”. Even the health of the people is left in the hands of spiritual leaders, native doctors and quacks.

If it is well understood, among other things, that local communities are endowed with enormous resources, skills, and indigenous knowledge which can be invoked in times of crisis; and that in many circumstances, local initiatives constitute the only means of survival for the poor, then local control of resources and initiatives becomes an imperative (see Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, 1992). Rural development, therefore, ought to have engendered the use of the enormous resources in the rural areas of Nigeria to lay a solid foundation for the security, economic and socio-political growth and development of the nation. Growth and development activities of rural areas ought to have been linked with those in the Local Government Areas, the States and the Nation at large. It is through action, participation and contact that the community gains vitality, becomes more able to manage change with stronger networks, organizational ability, skills, leadership and commitment (Cavaya, 2001)

2.3 A Conceptualization of Rural Nigeria

The task of saying what constitutes rural Nigeria is Herculean indeed. Otite (1990) sees the rural sector both as a rural community and as a rural economy, and puts the structure and function of the rural society entirely on the use of land as a basis for economic functions. Moreover, he points out that in Nigeria, the population described as rural does not necessarily coincide with the land area designated as rural. However, a recent school of thought has blamed state and market failures for the existence of rural areas. It is argued that the peasantry in general is excluded from the market and from state policies. States are reluctant to finance start-up costs needed for rural transformation and market forces leave peasants out. This is the problem of social exclusion (see also McIntosh and Vanghan, 1997).

Social exclusion theory seeks to explain productivity stagnation in a peasant economy that operates within a dynamic capitalist economy. It attempts to explain inequality by looking at the performance of institutions (Figueroa, 2000). According to this theory, rural areas are not only made of people whose incomes are low, they are areas poorly endowed with the economic, political and cultural assets of a capitalist society. They are excluded from basic markets. Thus, they make up the hard core of exclusion in a heterogeneous society.

With the exception of those areas which government developmental efforts over time have truly transformed, there are certain areas within the country which have common features – that smack of underdevelopment. With these areas which support about 65 per cent of Nigeria's population, one can readily associate pervasive illiteracy, prostrate attachment to land (broadly defined), subsistence orientation of production, slowly changing technology, rapid population growth, limited or virtual absence of infrastructural facilities and ineffective mobilization and utilization of resources.

The high incidence of illiteracy in rural Nigeria is the most important factor that reinforces the other handicaps of these areas. It is responsible for a pattern of production that is geared exclusively to meeting immediate consumption needs. It tends to narrow the horizons of rural inhabitants, making them suspicious of change and innovation. It makes the opportunity cost of childbearing very low: consider the lack of employment opportunities for women. The role of male illiteracy should also be blamed for the dearth of dedicated and popular leadership in rural areas as well as the prevalence of mutual distrust among the people.

The lack of basic infrastructure such as access roads, markets, health centres, potable water, schools, among other, ensures that rural Nigeria loses men of enterprise and initiatives to the urban centres. Absence of access roads limits agricultural production and sale and makes rural dwellers effectively isolated.

Home to indigenous cultures and social organization of the country's over 400 ethnic groups, rural Nigeria is neither stable, nor static, nor homogeneous. As Otite (1990) rightly observes, the persistence of societal values provides continuity in rural social organization and controls, and to a large extent, the destabilizing effects of the development process (see also Otite and Albert, 2001).

3. MODELS OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural development (RD) has always been part and parcel of a country's overall development strategy. Model of RD are derived from the general theory of development as in many African countries where the famed dualistic model of development has been in vogue. However, making RD a part of the overall development agenda of a country, it has been observed, does not affect the lot of rural areas in any significant way. The depressed conditions that characterize rural communities and economies call for a realistic approach to rural transformation and development. Several approaches, aimed at ameliorating this situation, have been proposed (World Bank, 1990). In this section, we briefly highlight each of these strategies.

3.1 The Urban-Based Development Model

One of the earliest views of national development was in favour of the concentration of development projects in a few urban centres. Development was expected to trickle down from these centres. Trickle down benefits from urban industrial and commercial growth were expected to stimulate growth in the rural areas (Rondinelli, 1978). However, contemporary development experience has completely dashed hopes in the 'trickle-down' doctrine. Developed and developing nations are now convinced that this 'top-down' model is incapable of generating substantial growth let alone economic development in the rural areas (Deng, 1997).

3.2 The Sectoral Model

Within the context of developing economies, this approach is equated to agricultural development. In this strategy, agriculture is expected not only to generate the finance necessary for investment in the industrial sector, but to also release labour for industrial production. In addition to agricultural reform, land reform is seen to be crucial to the success of this model.

However, as must have been seen, the concept of rural development is wider than the concepts of land and agricultural reforms. Apart from being concerned with sectors of the rural economy, it is also concerned more with the welfare of the rural people than with agricultural productivity as an end in itself. Besides, given the near intractable problems of agriculture especially in the Third World, this strategy amounts to expecting too much from agriculture and the largely unskilled labour that any agricultural development efforts may ever release. This is not denying the fact that the approach has significant equity implications since land reform is essential for rural development in developing countries where disparity in access to land and resources is grave (Todaro, 1982).

3.3 Industrial Development Model

Development economists have made a strong case for rural industrialization as a pre-requisite to rural development. It is argued that locating industries in rural areas will affect the rural economies along favourable lines. However, this view appears to ignore the fact that certain industries located along theoretically expected lines in rural areas have failed to make any significant impact on the areas. A typical example is cement manufacturing, an urban-type industry, which is raw-materials oriented. This industry is often located at sites of limestone, its most important raw material, whereas much of the technical skills required are sourced from non-local sources. Sometimes, only unskilled (manual) labour may be sourced from the neighbourhood where the industry is sited.

3.4 Area Development Model

This model of rural development advocates a comprehensive development of unique area units, such as river basins, fertile agricultural lands or mineralized zones. Usually, emphasis is on providing improved varieties and infrastructure to a targeted area within a country. Agriculture, industry, transportation, forestry etc. are developed through a comprehensive development programme formulated and executed by appropriate authorities, often with the aid of the World Bank and other international organizations.

3.5 Integrated Rural Development (IRD) Model

As noted earlier, aggregate growth, which concentrated in a few large urban centres, could filter to majority of the rural poor. In the same way, the poor do not benefit from economic growth which results from undivided attention to the maximization of employment opportunities, promotion of social development, and equitable distribution of income and wealth (Ekpo, 1991).

The IRD strategy is anchored on the premise that vast resources exist in virtually every developing country which, if properly harnessed, are capable of meeting impressive developmental ends. Integrated rural development therefore seeks to develop all sectors of the rural economy simultaneously and link them up effectively with their urban components. Thus, this approach seeks to promote spatial, economic and even psychological linkages not only among the various sectors but also among the different regions of the national economy. Ultimately, the strategy ensures a more equitable distribution of resources rather than mere increase in GDP alone, while at the same time maximizing national welfare (Agiobenebo, 1991).

National development policy set in a regional framework attempts to disaggregate national plans and sectoral investment programmes and to integrate development activities at the local level. Regional planning can then be used as a link between microanalysis of local needs and the macro-analysis of national development needs. Thus, a strategy designed to stimulate growth and development must not lose sight of the spatial dimension (Johnstone, 1970).

Integrated rural development therefore seeks, among others, to

- Correct development policies, which literally concentrated development incentives in a few selected areas.
- Harmonize rural and urban development programmes with each region by co-ordinating agricultural and industrial programmes (FAO,1977) and
- Ameliorate unemployment by bringing jobs to people in view of the prospect of establishing labour-intensive projects in rural areas.

4. The Self-Help Initiatives and Rural Development.

4.1 The Relevance

The availability of such a plethora of rural development strategies is a tacit admission of the fact that each of the existing ones is fraught with inherent drawbacks. In particular, there is a virtual absence of provisions for the involvement of the rural people for whom the various projects are provided. Even the much-celebrated IRD strategy cannot be spared this accusation. Moreover, apart from the urban bias earlier alluded to; the strategies place the responsibility for rural development solely on government and its agencies. Projects/programmes are conceived, designed and executed on behalf of the rural dwellers without adequate consultation with them as to what they would prefer.

Besides, while it is generally recognized that women play a pivotal role in economic activities, especially in the agricultural sector. No specific measures have been provided to remove the constraints they face. For instance, women who produce about 70 per cent of the total food output of the nation have very limited stand in their way of progress. No provision has been made by any of these strategies to penetrate the iron curtain of cultural prejudices, which we all know pose the stiffest resistance to genuine participation and mobilization of the rural folks for economic development. The charge that these strategies are non-human therefore appears to be sustained.

Through participation, individuals and communities solve various local problems. They participate to gain necessary social changes, for material gain for skills acquisition, to reform government agencies or to secure basic rights. Participation makes it easy to identify rural people's priorities among such contending needs as improvement in incomes, employment opportunities, and access to credit, potable water and other basic infrastructural facilities. Herein lays the relevance of self-help initiatives in rural development. Such self-help groups (SHGs), non-governmental organizations, private voluntary agencies, and other grassroots institutions are increasingly becoming involved in the design and execution of development projects. The Nigerian government once made its initiatives targeted at women who became the main beneficiaries of the Better Life and the Family support Programmes. In these programmes, women were encouraged to form co-operative societies in order to enhance their access to credits, their productivity and income earning opportunities. Aside from co-operative societies, community-based organizations have also featured as agents of development through self-help activities (Ogwumike, 1998).

The schedule below contains a list of certain basic needs and suggestions as to the possible community development projects which could be communally executed to meet such needs.

Rural Development Projects That May Be Implemented Through Self-Help

<u>Basic Need</u>	<u>Development Projects</u>
Food	Cooperative farming-food and cash crops, poultry, animal husbandry; food processing-garri processing, rice milling, bakery; food shops and open food markets, etc.
Education	Day care services, nursery/primary schools, secondary schools, classroom blocks, modern quarters (accommodation) for teachers, Bursary/scholarship schemes, local libraries etc.
Healthcare	Community health centres, maternity homes, drug store, dispensary/infirmery refuse disposal facilities, basic health environmental education facilities, etc
Water	Protected wells, boreholes, pipe-borne water, protection of local (natural) source of drinking water, e.g local stream, etc.
Shelter	Disabled peoples home, orphanage, community/village council halls, development of local sources of building materials, etc.
Transport and	
Communication	Rural roads construction/maintenance (roads to rural markets, farms, etc. between communities), Lorries and Buses, engine/speed boats, motorcycles, community viewing stations
Security	Police post, maintenance vigilante groups enlightened war against social exclusion and other vices.
Social Development	Civil centres, recreation facilities/parks, playground, gardens, Swimming pool/rehabilitation centre, remand homes.

(For a succinct exposition of the evolution of Self-Help development activities in Nigeria, see Akpomuvie, 2010).

4.2 The Strengths

For economic growth and development to translate into improved social conditions for the rural areas, there must be supplementary public and private investment. Apart from direct distributional implications, rural projects executed through self-helps are opportunities for the participants to pool resources together and take due advantage of scale economies. Other strengths of self-help strategy are:

- Offering opportunities to widen the range of choices available as well as access to them;
- Setting the limit to government intervening with the economic process in a constraining way;
- Affording the opportunity to play down upon the primacy of private property rights, since society tends to ignore the negative externalities inherent in profit-motivated exploitation of property rights;
- Encouraging enterprise, which is the backbone to industrial growth and development;
- Fostering a sense of belonging. The feeling of relevance is a thing of pride. This happens when the age-grades compete and boast over the number, scale and relevance of the projects each group has executed in its area through self-help;
- Creating and enhancing the capacity of an area to absorb a growing number of employable persons;
- Encouraging self-reliance among the people, which enables them to deploy their own initiatives and resources in meeting their basic needs;
- Permitting the mobilization of resources outside the government budget and the promotion of government programmes arising from closeness to the people and knowledge of local conditions.

4.3 The Constraints

However, the self-help approach has certain weaknesses. It is subject to changes in public moods and opinions. It is also limited by the volatility of available investment funds and the challenges of private entrepreneurs. Besides, the existence of small isolated and scattered villages makes mobilization difficult and the provision of social service exorbitantly expensive. Often also, the interdependence and synergies among the different projects are ignored. For instance, such pertinent questions as what happens if education but not health-care is provided? And, how effective is a school built through communal efforts which may remain under-utilized because there are no access roads? These are questions that are generally not asked before embarking upon self-help projects.

4.4 The Way Forward

In the light of these weaknesses, self-help need not exist independently of government. However, government intervention should generally seek to provide a favourable operational environment for the execution of self-help projects in rural areas. For instance, there is no point in legislating against informal money lenders while co-operative credit societies are yet to replace them as sources of consumer loans. Nor is there any justification in hounding ethnic vigilante groups while our official security outfits cannot guarantee any level of security to lives and property.

Government institutions must be available to give self-help groups the right incentives, including property rights and a reliable judicial system. Social policies should target the promotion of health, education (especially of women) and social capital. Police reform measures, which should be rural-development oriented-with the 'rural man' as the main focus should therefore seek to:

- Exploit comparative regional and technical advantages within the country,
- Encourage production and marketing contract arrangements for crops that are required by the emerging agro-based industries,
- Create more marketing channels and chains in the rural areas to encourage competitive purchasing and protection against unfair practices,
- Direct marketing research to identification of social, economic, political and technical constraints to the functioning of rural industries,
- Provide well-equipped vocational training centres to train people in maintenance of community-based projects; and
- Address the problem of improving the performance of both the formal and informal sector services by mobilizing and encouraging producers/providers of such services through training, provision of equipment and credit facilities.

5. Conclusion

This paper has drawn attention to the difficulties associated with defining such concepts as self-help, 'ruralness' and rural development-concepts which understanding is crucial in appreciating the role of self-help in rural development. We have also highlighted the various rural development strategies and noted that apart from these being pro-urban in nature, people (particularly rural people) do not matter in these strategies. Herein lays the relevance of self-help, which is considered to be ideologically neutral and relevant, no matter which overall development strategy a country adopts.

There is no doubt that Self-Help initiatives offer participants invaluable opportunities to activate and utilize the rural community's productive resources. However, rural mobilization and rural schemes can only be meaningful to rural dwellers if the latter are involved in the actual processes of project identification, formulation, planning and implementation. As rightly observed by Akpomuvie (2010), increased people's participation cannot be expected in situations where development projects were imposed on them by 'outsiders' who more often than not are ignorant of the real needs of the affected communities. However, in extolling the strengths of self-help as a rural development strategy, attention has been drawn to the constraints it may face. There is need, therefore, for the Nigerian government to put in place policy reform measures that are considered germane to the practice of self-help in rural development activities anywhere in the country.

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