STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES: EXPERIENCES FROM COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION:
Akwa Ibom State is located in the south-south geo-political zone of Nigeria within the richly endowed Niger Delta basin, created in September, 1987 and has a population of about 4 million inhabitants. The state is bordered to the north by Cross River and Abia state, to south by the Atlantic Ocean and to the south-west by Rivers state. It covers an area of over 7,000 square kilometers. About 20 different languages are spoken in the state. The most widely spoken are Ibibio, Annang, Oron and Eket languages and they are identical with a few dialectical differences. The people are predominantly Christian although some native African religions and Islam are practiced.

Like many other states in Nigeria, Akwa Ibom State faces numerous development challenges. Statistically, the state is rated as the 7th poorest state in Nigeria and a recent poverty data shows that poverty affects 67% of the population and varies from 27% in a few local government areas to about 90% in several others. (Akwa Ibom-SEEDS 2004). Rural poverty in Akwa Ibom state is common among small scale farmers and self employed artisans and petty traders. The rural poor thus fall into two basic categories those who do not own enough land to grow food for family consumption. They are poor because of unequal distribution of cultivable land, which may be compounded by population pressure. The other category includes landless agricultural labourers and other non agricultural groups who rely on employment opportunities in the country side. Apart from low agricultural wages faced by the landless, they also face shortage of employment during the year. Accordingly, rural poverty in Akwa Ibom State is characterized by visible poor housing, poor food security, poor health, low productivity, limited or no access to development opportunities etc.
Poverty reduction strategies in our communities tend to focus on social sectors and public standing, but according to Ashley and Elliot (2003) ambitious poverty reduction targets cannot be achieved without significant and steady development of poor rural communities. The failure of previous efforts to practically address the issue of poverty alleviation through community development and empowerment makes it imperative to look at the possibility of ameliorating the menace of rural poverty using strategic development approaches for dwellers that live and obtain their means of livelihood from the rapidly vanishing and impoverished rural resources. Communities must inevitably develop if poverty is to be ameliorated among the poor rural households in the state. This paper discusses strategic approaches to development of rural communities using various dimensional approaches, tools and techniques to analyze community issues and apply pragmatic objectives to find common solutions to the issues identified and through practical case studies of some initiatives demonstrated in selected communities in Akwa Ibom State.

**REFLECT CIRCLES APPROACH**

**State of the Communities:**

At the commencement of our work, we selected two (2) Local Government Areas (LGA) namely: Etinan and Itu and nine (9) poorest of the poor, marginalized and communities excluded from government amenities and presence were objectively selected. These communities are Ikot Mfon, Ikot Udo-Otto, Ikot Udobia, Nkana, Ikot Umiang Ede, Iwo Etor and Ndon Utim all in Etinan LGA. Others are Adang Itam and Mkpeti Itam both in Itu LGA.
In a baseline survey conducted in the selected communities in 2005, it was discovered that the selected communities – despite their large populations were extremely poor, with extremely high level of illiteracy, unemployment, lack of electricity, good portable drinking water, health facility, government amenities or presence, generally de-empowered and afraid of engaging duty bearers to demand for their rights due to ignorance of their rights and lack of knowledge of where or how to demand for them. Most of the community needs identified in majority of the communities are primary Health Centres, establishing Agricultural Processing Mills, markets, Skill Acquisition Centres, safe drinking water, renovation and establishment of Primary Schools, road construction, electricity, Children Care Development Centres and education and training on HIV/AIDS.

![Figure 1: Percentage distribution of respondents by occupation and by sex](image)

Table 1: Percentage distribution of respondents by educational attainment, and by age and sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational attainment</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-formal</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>48.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post secondary school</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Strategic approach**

Our approach here was to carry the communities along in identifying problems/needs, finding solutions and to empower them by building their advocacy skills to demand for their rights through the application of REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy Through Empowering Community Techniques). REFLECT is an approach to learning and social change. Key to the Reflect approach is creating a space where people feel comfortable to meet and discuss issues relevant to them and their lives. Reflect aims to improve the meaningful participation of people in decisions that affect their lives, through strengthening their ability to communicate. This is a participatory approach enabled communities to identify their needs, analyze these needs, develop action plans and systematically follow the plan of action in developing projects in the communities and demanding their rights from the duty bearers.

**Action Taken and Achievements:**

The REFLECT approach was used in training 18 Community Facilitators in Akwa Ibom State who were to further step down the training to the other members of the Community Development Committee in their respective communities. These communities with the support of their community facilitators have been able to identify their needs, analysed and developed action plans. Presently, some communities have already succeeded in engaging duty bearers to support their needs. For instance, Ikot Mfon in Etinan LGA now has Electricity from the State Government, their Primary Health Centre has been renovated by EU-MPP6, and the Cross River Basin Authority has constructed a bore water project in the community. In a similar vein, Ndon Utim also in Etinan LGA has now acquired a Transformer from Government also. Iwo
Etor got a borehole hand-pump water supply. Mkpeti Itam succeeded in getting their community connected to the national grid while Adang Itam is already enjoying Electricity as a result of the community empowerment skill they acquired.

WORKSHOP MANAGEMENT APPROACH

State of the Communities in Akwa Ibom State:

Akwa Ibom state is richly endowed with much plant diversity and very fertile soil that supports crop production is the major reason why the agricultural sector engages a large proportion of the rural population in the state. However, despite the agricultural potential in the state, production has always been at its lowest ebb due to the prevalent slash-and-burn and poor agricultural farming practices in virtually all the communities. Lack of mechanize farming system, fertilizer, access roads, processing machines, preservation and storage, appropriate information on agricultural development, inadequate data profile on agricultural production, , lack of markets are among the numerous problems farmers are facing in the state.

Strategic approach

In view of the high degree of ignorance and dearth of knowledge prevalent in the State on modern farming techniques couple with lack of farm inputs to support resource poor farmers, the need to organize workshop training on Community Agricultural Resource Management as a complement to government role in the State to eradicate poverty became imperative. By this, Applicants Welfare in collaboration with World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) mounted a one month workshop series to sensitise grassroots organizations, farmers groups and community based organizations on various vegetative propagation techniques of indigenous medicinal and fruit trees in Nigeria, soil fertility management techniques and nursery management techniques as a strategy to eradicate poverty through increased food production in the State.
In addition, participants were enlightened on how to qualify for government direct financial support to improve grassroots development alongside access to grants from national and international development agencies.

**Action Taken and Achievements:**

The workshop was first organized as Training of Trainers (TOT) for all the Village Heads in Council only in Akwa Ibom State thereafter in all the ten Federal Constituencies of the State comprising: Uyo, Etinan, Itu, Abak, Eket, Ukanafun, Oron, Ikot Abasi, Ikono and Ikot Ekpene for all village Heads, members of the Village Councils, NGOs, CBOs etc, in collaboration with several government ministries. These included Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources; Ministry of Information, Culture and Ethical Reorientation; Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs; and the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly Committee on Rural Development and Public Utilities. In all, the Workshop series attracted over 2,700 participants from across the state.

**COMPETITION AND SENSITISATION APPROACH**

**State of the Communities:**

The in-depth concept of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the State was far from the knowledge of rural communities in Akwa Ibom State. As a result of this poverty of information, the people felt unconcerned about various government policies and the need to monitor implementation process at the local level. Rural women are strongly demanding for legislation against domestic violence on them, stop wife battery and to provide for wife inheritance; patriarchy is also a major threat to women empowerment. They are also demanding that government should ensure gender equality in all spheres of endeavour including traditional
and political setting in the society; provide access roads in rural areas in the State, electricity, water; and provision of appropriate technologies for agricultural processing in rural communities.

**Strategic Approach**

Education of rural women on Good Governance and strategic mobilisation on their rights and the need to demand for them through sensitization on MDGs was adopted. Our goal in educating the rural dwellers on MDGs was to enlighten them in order to enable them get involved in monitoring the application of these concepts at local levels; draw attention of the duty bearers to the gaps left in implementing these concepts; educate other grassroots women on the impacts of MDGs to the communities and to be watchdogs in ensuring its implementation to their benefits.

**Action Taken and Achievements:**

Sensitisation Workshop on Millennium Development Goals for over 40 Grassroots Women selected from various poor communities in Akwa Ibom State and staged it at Ikot Mfon in Etinan Local Government Area which brought duty bearers to the rural setting on 30th September, 2005. Thereafter as a follow up, an oral essay competition was organized under three categories namely: Drama and Poem for the rural Women on 6th October, 2005 to bring to life the ideals and concepts of the MDGs. At the end, winners that emerged were given gift prizes on 24th October, 2005 to mark the World Poverty Day.

Based on the women’s deeper knowledge and understanding of MDGs concepts, a Community Based Organisation was formed and it was named: *Akwa Ibom Rural Women Development Network*. This organization serves as a platform to ensure that duty bearers
comply with the philosophy and implement the MDGs in the State. Today, the Rural Women group is registered as a CBO with membership strength of over 300 and on 12\textsuperscript{th} December, 2006 organised her First Conference of Akwa Ibom Rural Women 2006 in the State. A Communiqué was reached and forwarded to State and Local Governments, Traditional Rulers Council and the Village Councils in the State as a tool which they use in advocating and demanding for their rights. Today the women network has a voice in the State with some traditional rulers and government officials supporting their course.

**PARTICIPATORY PUBLIC FORUM APPROACH**

**State of the Communities:**

Having observed that most youths in rural communities have no access to electricity to gather information on employment opportunities by listening to Radio or TV nor the means to buy Newspapers, are not able to compete to search for jobs locally, nationally or internationally, the vision of meeting this need as a means of eradicating poverty and ensure good governance becomes necessary. Also, noticing that a lot of youths here are not formally educated form the bulk of crime perpetrators in the society such as political thuggery was seen as a threat to the sustenance of democracy and conflict management. Lack of information on opportunities, age falsification and refusal to retire at appropriate times by existing workers; lack of new establishments by government, and non-provision of loan for micro-industrialists to expand and accommodate unemployed, lack of trade centres at rural communities and empowerment of the youths after training, lack of access roads to hinter farmlands to evacuate agricultural produce and keep them in agric business, lack of political will by government to create employment opportunities for unemployed youths, lack of encouragement to skillful youths for self-reliance are some of the major problems affecting youth development in most communities in Akwa Ibom State.
Strategic approach

Our aim is to eradicate poverty by ensuring that youths who are qualified and are ready to work have opportunity to work, earn a decent living; and that information and opportunities are made available for the youths especially those in rural areas. Furthermore, to ensure that unskilled youths have access to development opportunities and self-reliance initiatives for sustainable livelihood. Mass mobilization of unemployed youths from rural communities as well as information sharing and dissemination from employers about available job opportunities was adopted.

Action Taken and Achievements:

Since 2001 Applicants Welfare has been organizing annual Public Forum for Applicants both in Akwa Ibom State and National level for unemployed youths. This Forum is used to invite employers of labour, Government Officials, Royal Fathers, Religious Leaders, Leaders of Thought, NGOs and CBOs, etc to brainstorm on the problems and solutions for the unemployed youths. It is also a market square in where employers of labour announce employment opportunities available in their organizations and also conduct recruitment exercise for potential applicants. Other youths interested in trade development are normally invited to such forum for training and empowerment. Each Forum usually attracts about 1,500 participants.

WHY THE APPROACHES SUCCEEDED

- In all, we relied on the inputs made by the participants to identify issues bothering them, encouraged them to generate possible solutions which was analysed by them with our
support and motivation to take action that would produce tangible impacts to their lives and the society.

- Again, bottom-top approach in addressing community development issues gave us an added advantage along with participatory involvement of all the stakeholders in the community.
- Furthermore, using local language of the people as a vehicle of communication with constant periodical appraisal of the issues at stake is the best innovation which also helps in the monitoring and evaluation of the progress made on periodical basis.

LESSONS LEARNT

- Rural communities are embedded with high level of illiteracy, ignorance and lack of information
- Some community members have high level of innate potentials for development.
- Poverty is highly saturated in excluded and marginalized communities.
- Patriarchy is a dominant factor in rural communities and is also a challenge to development.
- Women and children need empowerment to demand for their rights.
- Sicknesses and diseases, land conflicts, malnutrition and traditional harmful practices are still dominant in communities which deter development.
- Government is not paying adequate attention to key issues in most rural communities.
- The communities are in dire need and demand for the attention of development organizations.
- The communities are willing and ready to comply with innovations that will help them out of their poverty situation.
RECOMMENDATIONS

- Government should create enabling environment to encourage the growth and development of private sector to strive in rural communities.
- Regular Town Hall meetings to sensitise traditional institutions and political stakeholders to pave way for the rights of women to prevail should be organized by NGOs and CBOs.
- Government and Development Agencies should encourage the establishment of Micro-Finance Banks at rural levels to enhance economic livelihood of rural dwellers.
- Efforts should be intensified to ensure abolition of Traditional harmful practices in communities.
- Agricultural development needs such as fertilizer, processing machines, improved farming practices, loans, etc should be provided to enhance community development.
- To enhance unskilled and semi-skilled youths development, development agencies and government should support the initiative for Trade Centres in communities.
- Development partners should support Public Forums that share information on opportunities that are available to unemployed and the need to develop unemployment data on periodical basis in the country.
- Government should review its privatization policy and strategy to pave way for true indigenous ownerships and empower young entrepreneurs to expand.
- Government and development agencies should focus attention of their infrastructural development to rural communities to prevent youth drive to urban centres.
- Technical education and skill acquisition centres should be established and equipped in rural areas to empower youth’s sustainability and enhance their livelihoods.
- Government is advised to retire all its employees whose tenures had reached the required number of years to pave way for the younger ones in the service and create room for mass youth employment.
REFERENCES
