

ENHANCING A SUSTAINABLE RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SELF-HELP PROMOTION STRATEGY

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Abstract

The success of a sustainable poverty reduction in sub-Saharan African countries is based on socio-economic activities of rural communities that are characterised by participatory actions and group performance. The actions are mostly championed by various socio-cultural/socio-economic groups in the communities. To translate rural economic development initiatives into sustainable project development for poverty reduction will therefore require working with existing structures in the rural communities. This article examines the concept of self-help organisations in the rural communities of developing countries, especially Nigeria. The article equally highlights the significant roles of these organisations, and particularly their contributions to the socio-economic development of their various communities. The article also analyses the approaches of government development agencies to the socio-economic development of rural communities and proposes a better role for them. The article then describes how performance effectiveness can be enhanced by the government development agencies in their proposed new role.

Keywords: Self-help promotion, institution, sustainable development, monitoring, self-evaluation.

Introduction

Development approaches of most developing economies, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa are often directed at addressing poverty problems and other related issues. Economic growth which is expected to impact positively on the lives of the poor through sustainable poverty reduction has failed to translate to development. Nigeria in particular has one of the fastest growing economies in the world (about 7% annual growth), this however, has failed to lift millions of Nigerians out of poverty.

Generally, a combination of factors has been observed to be responsible for the high level of poverty in developing countries. These include inequality, unstable political situations, corruption, and insecurity, misapplication of research

findings and poor implementation of development policies among others. In most cases, the socio-cultural set up in most rural communities cannot accommodate the foreign designed and imposed conditions for economic growth and poverty reduction that are adopted by policy planners in developing countries.

In Africa, and Nigeria in particular, there are community base organisations/associations that are socio-cultural or socio-economic in nature, and which have been serving as structures for socio-economic development and the smooth running of their communities. These organisations, over the years have helped in ensuring sustainable development in the rural communities in particular. Specifically, such organisations/associations are structures with which the local resources are

harnessed and evenly distributed. It is equally with these structures that vices such as corruption, stealing etc, are generally put in check. In different communities, these organisations/associations go by different names such as Youth Organisation, Market Women Association, Community Development Association, Cooperative Society etc.

However, the negative perception of these organisations and their functions in particular by outsiders has been responsible for their gradual destruction and extinction in many communities over the years. For instance, as perceived by Michael Lipton (1982), rural people, while much more numerous than urban people, are also much more dispersed, poor, inarticulate and unorganised. Socio-economic structures in developing countries have suffered and continue to suffer from such ethnocentric perception by outsiders.

Before the advent of colonialism and up to this modern time, most rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa have co-existed peacefully by employing the structures of self-help organisations. However, over the time, this peaceful co-existence that has been the hall mark of these communities started giving way to violence which is mostly expressed in incessant inter and intra community clashes. Most of the self-help organisations that have served as structures with which most communities are administered have witnessed gradual destruction through the application of urban bias hypothesis. This has further alienated the rural areas by worsening the poverty and inequality problems. Even when in few cases, development is to be extended to the rural areas, the planning and implementation of such development policies are always the products of theories and researches that are not applicable in most cases, to African situations and therefore cannot be accommodated within existing rural structures. This often finds

expressions in foreign imposed development plan and projects. Urban development structures are exported to the rural areas with little or no modifications, while small interlocking urban elites (composing mainly business men, politicians, bureaucrats and supporting staff of professionals) substantially control the distribution of resources in the rural areas.

If economic growth is to translate into sustainable development and subsequently alleviate poverty, development policy implementation must not stop at mere acknowledging the significant role of self-help organizations in rural economic development, but should equally adopt the structures in their development planning and policy implementations. This should be the primary concern of our development policy planners because rural poverty represents the push factor that pushes the rural dwellers to the urban areas. Most of the poverty alleviation initiatives of the governments of Third World countries, especially Nigeria have failed to record appreciative success because the trickle-down effect of our national economic growth has not actually trickle down to the rural poor. And unless and until the rural areas witness socio-economic development through massive investments which will be pro-poor enough to alleviate rural poverty, poverty will continue to represent the push factor that will continue to push the rural dwellers to the urban Centres in search of the proverbial greener pasture.

The Nature and Potentials of Self-Help Organisations

Since the existence of mankind, self-help has been practised in innumerable ways, particularly in Africa. Even today, it is the main characteristic of the productive behaviour of the rural poor. Past development approaches of techno-scientific inspiration have largely ignored this potential. They have facilitated the

introduction of new system of organisation and production which tend to undercut rather than stimulate the capacity of the rural poor to help themselves. As argued in this paper, the introduction of such new system of organisation and production has been largely responsible for the destruction of most community base organisations. In most cases, pseudo organisations/associations are imported to the rural communities by the local elites to protect and promote the interest of the urban elites. These modern organisations/associations represent modern times. However, while modern times have provided greater opportunities for a few, they have narrowed the economic base of the 'poor majority' living in the rural areas. Similar observation can be made in relation to the position of the rural poor in other developing countries.

Indigenous self-help organisations have been known to be effective in the area of socio-economic development of their communities through several collaborative efforts. In most rural communities, they are effective structures to work with when it comes to the establishment of community market, health clinics, schools, places of worship, provision of security etc. The modern organisations have hitherto reduced the positions of rural dwellers from that of actors in their own development to that of 'beneficiaries' of development projects, 'adopters' of new technologies, consumers of ill-coordinated public welfare services, daily labourers, plantation or factory workers etc. Situations which all imply a high degree of dependence on the benevolence entrepreneurial capacities and economic means of others than themselves.

From the development point of view, it is obvious that national economic growth alone cannot substantially prevent the growth of mass poverty. As argued by El Ghonemy and Rahman Khan, the one-sided emphasis on economic achievement

by national policy-makers has set in motion a process of alarming socio-economic polarisation and the deepening of social cleavages in both urban and rural areas (El Ghonemy, 1985 and Rahman Khan 1984).

Generally speaking, the population of the rural poor is often high, and this has placed some limitations on the amount of help they can secure from outside, 'self-help' has therefore emerged as a new paradigm for combating rural poverty, and self-help promotion as the main orientation for government development agencies and NGOs in developing countries. As argued in this paper, the approach of most developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa to rural development and poverty alleviation has reduced the position of the rural poor to that of 'beneficiaries' who have to be reached. This has gone a long way in weakening the position of the poor. By merely 'being reached', the poor tend to become dependent on the feeding bottles of development agencies; and thus held captive in a development process not of their making.

There are great risks that the poor in their role of 'beneficiaries' may become overly dependent on their beneficiaries for delivery of inputs, access to credit, sale of produce, or other facilities, and may finally be left in a vulnerable position. This is what the development approaches of most government development agencies have done to the psyche of the rural poor. This argument is not meant to deny the fact that the established development agencies with distributory functions have no role to play. They do have, but in a supportive and in a directive functions.

Self-help organisation is a means of raising the claim-making capacity of the rural poor for reaching out to such agencies as they are willing to work with and which can provide them with additional production resources. A sustainable approach to poverty alleviation should

therefore include assigning the function of strengthening self-help organisations for effective performance at the grass root level to government development agencies and NGOs.

In the rural areas, most economic activities have often been undertaken by individuals, or in groups such as cooperative societies or trade associations. Even in West Africa sub-region, associations such as cooperatives are traditional. Evidences from the South-West geo-political zone of Nigeria clearly point to the fact that all women cooperative farms and rural credit schemes appears to be the most promising way of financing rural enterprise development. And as observed by Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), 'policy makers and international experts have persistently resisted the idea of all women cooperatives.' There are a number of arguments that have helped to further confirm the effectiveness of cooperative activities in rural communities as an effective strategy of growing the rural economy. For instance, Longtau and Jemkur (2013) argue that the Taroks of Plateau state, Nigeria, have attractive farming-cycle with several activities that typify cooperation among families in the community, the result of which is better economic output.

The whole essence of employing the structures of community base organisations to grow the rural economy for job creation and poverty alleviation is to revisit the strategy of working with the structure of community development associations and other community base organisations in the planning and implementation of socio-economic development projects. The best way we can assist the farmers is to facilitate group formations. We should encourage them to meet, discuss and reflect on their common problems and find their own solutions (Onucheyo, 1998). DSE/FAO International Expert Consultation on the Challenges of Rural Poverty (1985), puts it like this:

'A basic solution to rural poverty is to respect and encourage the autonomous, independent organisation of the rural poor and those who work with them. The principal purpose of such an organisation is to enable the rural poor to actively participate in order to influence the decisions and forces which affect their lives.'

Community base organisational development has proved to be the best strategy of promoting socio-economic development of rural communities in developing countries since 1930, when cooperatives started in Africa in order to sell members' farm produce. Self-help organisations are membership organisations since they are administered and controlled by their members, whose interests they are supposed to serve. Membership organisations are meant to counterbalance the overwhelming influence on the economy of the profit-oriented private sector and the state controlled public sector. When functioning according to their principles, they offer the poor an opportunity for a partial re-shaping of the economic system which governs their daily lives in a direction congruent with their interests.

However, as argued by Verhagen, self-help organisations in itself is unable to solve problem of rural poverty or to change positively the position of low-income groups, if the structure of such organisation's membership is predominantly high and middle income (Verhagen, 1984). In most cases, the influence of local elites in the formation and running of rural or community base self-help organisation often leads to leadership problem that may eventually impact negatively on the effectiveness of such organisation. Such situation may even worsen the contradictions in rural areas where they are successful in creating new opportunities for the 'haves' and simultaneously reduce the opportunity for, or neglect the interests of, the 'have-little.'

Osner et al. however, argue that there are sufficient documented, empirical evidence available to show that the poor, under a wide variety of circumstances are able to bring about substantial improvements in their living conditions through self-help effort (Osner et al., 1985; Rouille d'Orfeuil, 1984; Esman and Uphoff, 1984).

In self-help promotion, economic growth is one of the aims. This however is not the kind of growth which exploits or marginalises large sections of the population, undermines their subsistence security and leads to loss of cultural identity and dignity. Through self-help organisation, people with few resources start to change their conditions of production and consumption at micro-level. The approach is more participatory and more humane, but therefore, also displays all the weaknesses of the human character.

Enhancing a sustainable rural economy development that will be pro-poor will therefore require a policy implementation that takes into consideration existing rural structures, which could be strengthened for more effective performance. These structures are rural people's creation put in place to address their identified felt needs. The most effective and sustainable form of poverty alleviation is that which carries the people along in its planning and implementation by working with the various community base organisations/associations. The effectiveness of these organisations can be further enhanced through support from government agencies and NGOs. Such support will include assisting them in finding ways and means to pool their resources, identify viable, gainful and meaningful economic activities, develop systems of accountable leadership and management, manage funds, keep records of income and expenditure etc.

It is imperative for government development agencies and NGOs to begin to redirect their development approach with the objective of carrying out these functions as self-help promotion institutions. Self-help promotion signifies a broader, more comprehensive approach to development than the narrower project approach. It promotes and encourages better participation at the community level, more cost effective and it enhances wider impact of development activities. The project approach has the tendency to fragment development assistance into inconsistency parts. In self-help promotion, appraisal, planning and implementation of poverty alleviation projects are embedded in a multi-faceted strategy which is put into practice through the deployment of series of coherent initiatives and measures, called 'self-help promotion instruments.' Self-help promotion thus conceived can be broken down into a range of interrelated instruments or promotion services that are essential in the strengthening of self-help organisations for effective performance. Such instruments and services are directed specifically to self-help organisations and their membership.

• Self-Help Promotion Instruments

There are different categories of variables which have a decisive impact on the formation, functioning and development performance of self-help organisations. These are what I refer to in this article as *instruments* because they correspond to identifiable operational tasks in the field and are to a large extent under the control of the system's actors. These instruments are mostly internal factors that can also be referred to as 'conditions of successes for self-help organisations. Self-help promotion works through a carefully selected combination of instruments, which are applied once the process has started, although the exact combination depends on the stage of development of the organisation concern and local conditions. In performing their function of

strengthening self-help organisations, government development agencies, NGOs and other accredited institutions for that purpose, will function as self-help promotion institutions. In carrying out their promotional activities, self-help promotion institutions focus on target group identification, or planning, or training, or savings mobilisation etc.

These and many other instruments are areas where self-help promotion institutions can provide support for the strengthening of self-help organisations. In view of the importance of these instruments as part of a comprehensive development approach, it is important that they are further analysed and discussed:

Identification of Target Population and Groups

In this process, the rural poor as groups or as individuals are identified or encouraged to identify themselves as potential partners in development. Generally, the rural poor have their own criteria of identifying and grouping people into different socio-economic categories. However, whatever criteria are to be used to carry out this task, it must be mutually agreed upon by both the self-help promotion institution and the rural people. Such criteria as may be agreed upon must be specific to the area or location, and must be determined from the perspective of the rural population itself.

There are some Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) research tools that the self-help promotion institutions may employ in supporting the self-help organisations to carry out this task. Some of the tools such as wealth ranking make use of familiar criteria like ownership of assets, such as land or livestock, or access to other income generating activities or living condition such as housing.

Generally, the rural poor are organised in groups, thus, the identification process may relate to groups rather than

individuals. Identification of target population or groups may be undertaken by the self-help promotion institution in interaction with local key-informants, including the rural poor themselves.

Participatory Research and Planning

Participatory research refers to the active participation of the target population and groups in diagnostic and problem-solving thinking about development constraints and their present socio-economic position. Its aim is to identify economic activities through which they could overcome such constraints and thus improve their position. Participatory planning on the other hand implies the target population's participation in the assessment of the feasibility of proposed action and in the planning of operations. Feasibility assessment comprises several dimensions such as economic, social, political, technical and operational.

Education and Training

Education and training generally imply a one-way transmission of standardised package of knowledge and skills from educated to non-educated, from skilled to unskilled. However, in self-help promotion, education and training refer to a synthesis of expertise brought in from outside and experiential knowledge of the rural poor. The result of this process is new knowledge which is well adjusted to the local institution. Education and training in this situation can be replaced with 'knowledge sharing and knowledge generation.' Self-help promotion institution (SHPI) can help in strengthening self-help organisation (SHOs) through training in form of knowledge sharing in different areas of socio-economic and skill development for members.

Resource Mobilization and Resource Provision

Individual member of self-help organisation possesses resources that if pulled together for the common interest of the group members can go a long way in addressing individual and by extension, group's socio-economic problems. Resource mobilization is therefore used to denote the process of pooling and putting to practical use, the productive resources owned or possessed by (potential) members of self-help organisations. Such resources can be natural (land, water), financial (money), material (seed, grains, manure) or non-material (knowledge, entrepreneurial skill, claim-making or bargaining power). By pooling their resources together, the poor achieve economic of scale and levels of knowledge or influence which are beyond the reach of individual.

Resource provision refers to the acquisition of additional financial resources (credit, productive inputs). In self-help promotion, external resource provision should be complementary to the contributions members of self-help organisations are able to make from their own resources.

Management Consultancy

Management consultancy implies the assistance given which is always in form of advice which aims at ensuring the efficient use of resources by local self-help organisations or their higher level organisations, and in a direction consistence with the objectives of the organisation. Self-help promotion institutions can provide consultancy services in different aspects of management which are central to self-help organisations' performance and continuity. These include:

- The management of financial resources

- The management of human resources
- The management of conflicts
- Technological management which is directly related to the appropriate technology used by the self-help organisation.

Management consultancy as a self-help promotion instrument assumes that even when socio-economic activities have been well prepared and planned, new and unforeseen financial, economic, operational and technical problems, particularly in the management of small and medium scale enterprises, will emerge in the course of action, for which the self-help organisation may need some outside advice and assistance.

Networking with Third Parties

This denotes the build-up of relationship or network of linkages between, on the one hand, the self-help promotion institution/self-help organisation subsystem, and on the other, various administrative or academic units whose support, service, collaboration or tolerance are necessary for the smooth functioning of the self-help organisations.

Monitoring and On-going self-Evaluation

Monitoring, as part of a self-help promotion system, is the periodic review by development actors and promoters of on-going activities at every level of the system, and the assessment of whether or not activities are proceeding efficiently according to operational plans, and reaching specific objectives. On-going self-evaluation however, is a process of whereby the development actors and their promoters determine systematically the relevance, effectiveness and impact of activities undertaken at every level of the self-help promotion system in the light of its long-term development objectives. According to Porter and Clark, it is viewed as a dialogue over time and not as a static

picture at one point of time (Porter and Clark, 1995).

There are two major approaches that self-help promotion institution can take in providing this service to self-help organisations. Self-help promotion institution may be requested by self-help organisation to help train its members to conduct monitoring and on-going self-evaluation, or self-help promotion institution may be requested to organise a participatory monitoring and self-evaluation exercise of self-help organisations.

There are three major levels where monitoring and on-going evaluation may need special organisational efforts. These include, the micro-level, i.e the level of self-help organisations, the level of self-help promotion institution and self-help promotion system which assumes participation by delegates from 'other supporting institutions.'

The degree of participation of the target population in MOE activities will very much depend on how the process is organised and where evaluation meetings are held; whether it is in the field or in town offices. Self-help promotion instruments are very strategic to the development of self-help organisations and so, the effectiveness and sustainability of any rural economic empowerment projects depend to a large extent on how strong the self-help organisation that the government development agencies or NGO is working with.

Generally, the insignificant success recorded by most poverty alleviation projects, particularly in the areas of developing countries can be attributed to the wrong formation method or weak nature of the community base self-help organisations, or worst still the failure of development agents to work with the self-help organisations. In quite a number of developing countries, self-help

organisations constitute the main structure through which governments and NGOs work with the rural people to achieve sustainable people-oriented development. A self-help promotion approach to rural economic development has been undertaken as a research project in countries like Brazil, Indonesia and Thailand with huge success recorded.

Conclusion

In the application of development theories and research findings for the purpose of addressing poverty problem in developing countries, the efforts of researchers, development planners and policy formulators and implementers should be directed at identifying relevant theories and research findings that could be accommodated by the existing rural structures in such countries.

It is important that scientists put emphasis on the development of technologies which can be adopted by farmers rather than going on increasing the body of knowledge of science. It is not to deny the research efforts in basic sciences, but applied aspects are more pragmatic and practical in the present situation. Priority must be given to applied science over and above basic science. Presently, the outcome of majority of research works is in the form of body of knowledge. If the consumers are willing to take up the knowledge, the application part is lacking.

If our training programmes in entrepreneurship and vocational skill acquisition are to translate to job creation and poverty alleviation, the training approaches to be adopted should be capable of having a wider impact on the community as a whole. Individuals should be encouraged to work in groups and follow-up exercise be designed to monitor group economic development activities. Training institutions and government development agencies should assume the

functions of self-help promotion institutions.

Evidences abound in Nigeria of rural economic activities whose success stories are strongly linked to the initiatives of working with existing structures in their community of operations. Today we have nucleus estate initiatives for the development of value chains in different crops in Nigeria. We also have different community base organisations such as the farmers' cooperatives, youth movements, market women associations, community development associations etc. that have been playing relevant roles in the socio-economic development of their respective communities. African society is not an individualistic society. It is a cooperative society, where everybody is his brother's keeper. After all, it is a well-known saying in Africa that 'Alone we are weak. Together we are strong.'

Even in the developed economies of Western Europe, (a society famous for individualistic style of living) history has it that the Italian economy for instance, found itself on the verge of total collapse during the 1970s after two decades of steady growth. It however witnessed a turn around that was only made possible with a new perspective that stressed the dynamism of rural entrepreneurship with peasant origins, especially in the North-eastern and Central regions of the country (Amatori and Colli, 2006). This eventually led to an 'economic miracle in Italy that was built around individual production units grouped in geographically concentrated clusters known as 'industrial districts.'

An important feature of the industrial district was the sense in which the firms' activities relied upon an embedded and complex social structure largely dependent upon local traditions and trading practices, and bonds of trust between individuals. As argued by Porter, this has led to a specific form of 'diffuse entrepreneurship' in Italy

which has benefited from refined craftsmanship, a strong tradition of cosmopolitan trade, and an ethic of hard work in the country side (Porter, 1990).

This article is meant to provoke further research, reflection and discussions on the various development approaches we have adopted in the past. I don't intend it to be just another piece of academic work. Rather, it should stimulate the process of action and reflection on how to encourage economic activities in rural areas between government development agencies and partner organisations in the rural communities of developing countries.

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