

Nigerian Niger Delta Community Participation: Catalyst for Sustainable Human Development

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Abstract

Due to degeneration resulting from years of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the government has embarked on several developmental initiatives to improve the living conditions of the people. However, the area is classified as one of the most underdeveloped among the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria despite its enormous contribution to the national revenue. This study examines community participation as a catalyst to foster sustainable community and human development in the region. An in-depth interview was conducted with the key informants. The qualitative data obtained was analyzed using the Nvivo 10 software. The findings revealed that issues such as community involvement in decision-making, awareness of government intervention programs, adequate consultation and collaboration are the catalyst for community participation. The study, therefore, concludes that there is need for government and development agencies to understand the needs and aspiration of community in policy formulation and implementation of developmental goals.

Keywords: Capability Building, Community Development, Community Participation, Human Development, Niger Delta

1. Introduction

The Niger Delta region is one of the richest areas in Nigeria with an enormous contribution to the national revenue. According to Babatunde (2012), Ebegbulem, Ekpe, and Adejumo, (2013), the Niger Delta region alone contributes over 85% to the Nigeria Gross Domestic Product (GDP) both in oil and gas. It also contributes more than 95% of the Nigeria's foreign exchange and 85% of the country annual income. Despite the enormous contribution of the Niger Delta to the Nigeria national revenue, the region yet experiences underdevelopment in both infrastructure and human development (Akpomivie, 2011). Also, the region capacity to produce over 2.5 million barrels of crude oil daily (Ezeamalu, 2014) puts Nigeria as number one in the hierarchy of oil producing countries in Africa and 11th in the world (Obi, 2014; Ojo, 2012; Okpo & Eze, 2012). Furthermore, the presence of crude oil in the region has attracted many oil multinational companies that engage in oil exploration. It is, therefore, expected that the presence of the multinational oil companies in the region should impact on the socio-economic well-being of host communities through their corporate social responsibility. Unfortunately, there is nothing to show for it.

Also, the Nigerian government efforts to develop the Niger Delta region through the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in order to expedite action on sustainable development projects particularly on human development, infrastructure and ecological development in the region has equally not yielded any much result (Jack-Akhigbe & Okuowa, 2013). In fact, the development of the area is not proportionate with the level of its contribution to the nation's national revenue and does not reflect the massive financial commitments by federal and state government (Obi, 2014; Kaur, 2013). In a related development, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2013) reported that the human development index of the Niger Delta region is put at 0.43 while similar oil producing communities in Gabon, Libya and Malaysia is placed at 0.668, 0.791, and 0.791 respectively. Similarly, Eneh (2011) highlighted that the region has a low rate of youth literacy and secondary education access compare with the South-West where there is not much oil deposit like the South-South. While Niger Delta has 87.9 percent of youth literacy and 70.3 percent on secondary education access, the South-West has 94.7 percent and 87.5 percent respectively. Also, there is only 1 primary school to 3,700 people which serves 3 or more communities while the ratio of secondary education was put at 1 to 14, 679 people which is 1 school to 8 or more communities (NDESR, 2010). In the same vein, result from Eneh (2011) revealed that the region has the highest rate of unemployment of youth in Nigeria. For example, while the region has 9.5 percent, North-East has 3.2 percent, North-West has 2.2 percent, North-Centre has 4.3 percent, South-East has 6.6 percent and South-West has 4.5 percent respectively.

Another report shows that only 45.5 percent of the people in the region have access to safe water source while North-West has 50.2 percent, North-Centre has 48.5 percent and South-West 73.1 percent respectively (Eneh, 2011). Given this scenario, it is not surprising that the constant protest and agitation in the region is connected to the level of exploitation, marginalization and underdevelopment in the area. Apart from that, it is also attributed to failure of government and non-governmental agencies including the oil multinationals in adequately addressing the issues of environmental degradation, unemployment and human development in the region (Agbibo, 2013; Davidheiser & Nyiayaana, 2011; Duru & Ogbonnaya, 2012; Ibaba, 2011). This has made the area one of the most underdeveloped and deprived areas not only in Africa but also among other oil producing regions in the world.

Nigeria government in the most recent time has put in more efforts in the area of capability building through vocational and non-vocational training both within and outside the country. It is quite unfortunate that most of those people trained are still found settling back in the creeks as a result of unemployment (Ubhenin, 2013). The failure of the training programme implies that the people were not properly integrated into the society and by implication, it is not sufficient to enhance capability because human development is attainable when it is all embracing (Nussbaum, 2001). Also, Aghedo (2013) contended that the post-amnesty programme initiated by the Nigerian government was not fruitful because it was not directed towards individual and community sustainability but rather as a way of disarming the aggrieved youths. Likewise, Apkomuvie (2011) asserted that it is not sufficient for the government to provide infrastructure for the people, however, when people are given the opportunity to participate in decisions making in issues that affect their lives, it enables them to realize their potential, build self-confidence, live a life of dignity and self-actualization. He further suggested that government should engage in project monitoring and also involve host community in its developmental agenda. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to examine the role of community participation as an instrument for the transformation of the Niger Delta region especially the oil-producing communities in the areas of human development capability and the well-being of community members.

2. Niger Delta Communities in Nigeria

The Niger Delta is situated in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria with a land mass of about 70,000 square kilometers. It covers the coastline of 560km that is about two third of the total coastline of Nigeria. It spans of nine states namely Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. The first oil well was discovered in Oloibiri, a town in Bayelsa state in 1955 while exploration of petroleum began in 1956 which attracted the attention of both Nigerian government and oil multinationals to the region. However, the oil exploration accompanied by oil spillage has made life unbearable for the natives. The destruction of their natural environment had drastically altered the socioeconomic life, once lively and regenerative region into a devastating state (Duru, 2014; Okonta & Oronta, 2001; Oluduro & Oluduro, 2012; Omadjohwoefe, 2011). This situation led to the first protest by the Niger Delta people in 1957 in Ogoni land, one of the oil producing communities in Bayelsa state, as a result of the realization of the exploitation, marginalization and underdevelopment of the region.

This drew the attention of international communities that stimulated the Nigerian government in taking drastic action in addressing the Niger Delta problems (Osuoka, 2007). Meanwhile, from the late 1950's, the Niger Delta region has been given special recognition by the Nigerian government to the establishment of various developmental agencies such as the Willinks Commission established in 1957, the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) in 1960. Later the Niger Delta Basin Development Board set up in 1965 and Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992. Subsequently, with the inception of the democratic rule, President Olusegun Obasanjo established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in the year 2000 to address the lingering underdevelopment in the Niger Delta (Jack-Akhigbe & Okouwa 2013; Okumagba & Okereka, 2012). More recently, the Niger Delta Ministry was also established, however, all these agencies failed as a result of mismanagement, lack of adequate funding, corruption and poor project implementation all which led to underdevelopment of the Niger-Delta region (Adesote & Abimbola, 2013; Femi & Helen, 2013; Omotola & Patrick, 2010).

3. Human Development in the Niger Delta

The focus of any development agenda is the human being. It is the process of creating opportunities for people to make choices through access to education, health and well-being (Akopmuvie, 2011; Arab Human development Report, 2002; Sen, 2000). Human development is more than making fund available; whatever fund utilized must be adequately monitored to yield the intended goals and objectives. Whatever development philosophy any society is proposing, the most important focus is people; and if developmental focus refuses to acknowledge this noble cause, definitely no developmental progress could be successfully achieved. Human development goes beyond economic well-being; it should be able to capture the needs and interests of the people in order to equip them by enhancing their choices and exercising freedom on matters that affect their lives (Dokpesi & Ibiezube, 2012). According to Akinwale (2010) many projects centered on human development has been implemented and executed in the Niger Delta region, unfortunately, it does not reflect in the well-being of the people. Therefore, Akpomuvie (2011) suggested that government should ensure that the host communities are adequately incorporated in the planning and implementation of development projects. The role of community members in sustainable community projects becomes crucial because they feel the direct impact of both the negative and positive implementation of any development agenda (Eversole, 2012).

Similarly, Warren and McFadyen (2010) argued that when community members are incorporated into developmental issues in their community, they tend to show much commitment and affection to the successful implementation and sustainability of such development. This act of engagement and commitment are what they termed as community ownership. Additionally, Nettles (1999) posited that community participation is the process whereby all individual members of a community are given active responsibility and working together in the planning and implementation of developmental plans. Therefore, the active participation of community members in the development of their community triggers a positive attitude and enthusiasm of community members towards achievement and sustainability of development programs. Several studies (Aghalino, 2012; Akinwale, & Osabuohien, 2009; Kadafa, Zakaria, & Othman, 2012; Okolo, 2014) indicated that despite the colossal efforts by the NDDC through her robust master plan in developing the Niger Delta region, not much has been accomplished. Wilson (2011) confirmed that the NDDC master plan has not been able to address the socioeconomic needs of the area adequately. He therefore, suggested for an all- embracing strategic approach. Emphatically, Okolo (2014) observed that the NDDC master plan is capable of addressing the infrastructural and human development issues in the region if only the commission can redirect her developmental approach on community development. Given this, the study investigated how community participation can be employed to facilitate the activities of developmental agencies in achieving sustainable human development in the Niger Delta region.

4. Research Methodology

Flyvbjerg (2006) and Yin (2013) point out that for an adequate and in-depth understanding of a phenomenon in qualitative studies involving community development studies, case-study research design with the interview are crucial. This study utilized a case-study research design with a face-to-face interview approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 community leaders which comprised of Community Development Committee (CDC) leaders, youth leaders, women leaders and community opinion leaders while three key officers in the Community Relations Department from NDDC were selected.

Data were analyzed thematically using NVIVO 10 Software.

The results of the interviews from the coding frames were conceptualized from views of the interviewees on the activities of NDDC and community development. Also, sub-themes were further developed to have an in-depth understanding of how NDDC programmes have improved on the well-being of community members.

5. Results and Discussions

The focus of the study is to investigate how community sustainability and transformation can be achieved by developmental agencies by the members of the community. The key interviewees identified all the issues that are causing underdevelopment and poverty in their community. These issues were categorized into five sub-themes namely; sense of ownership, adequate consultation, collaboration, enlightenment and capacity building as shown in Figure 2 below.

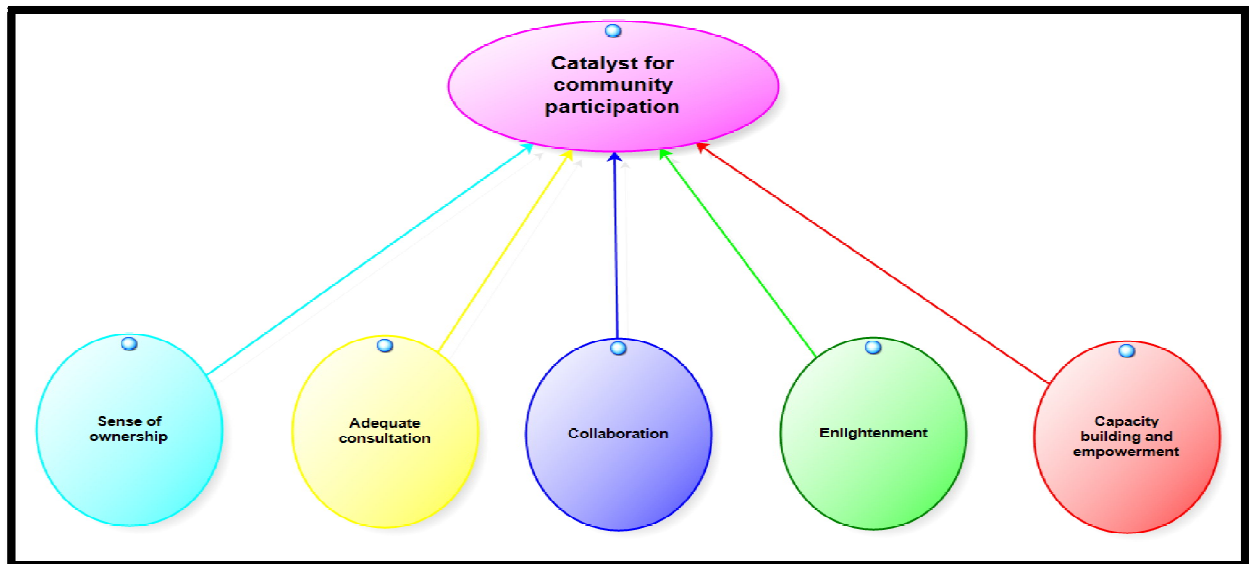


Figure 2: Catalysts for Community Participation and Involvement Framework

5.1 Community Member Sense of Ownership

Based on the finding of this study, it was discovered that sense of ownership is a critical catalyst for sustainable community development. Sense of ownership is the situation whereby community members take deliberate actions to guide and protect the way and the manner decision is taken about their community (Mzimakwe, 2010). Likewise, sense of ownership is the ability of community members to control and influence actions and decisions that contribute to their present and future needs (Roseland, 2012). The issue of control and influence was expressed by interviewee 4 community opinion leader thus; “This community belongs to us and our unborn children. Hence, we must take right action. Only our actions and decisions on what government is doing for us that will make all these projects last”. Specifically, another community opinion leader interviewee 8 expressed a similar concern that; “When community members are allowed to be part of plans on matters that affect their community and well-being, it will make them want to be part and parcel of that plan”. This claim was supported by interviewee 1 CDC chairman that; “If community members are given the opportunity to handle all these projects, it will go faster and they will also want protect the project for the next generation to benefit from it”.

These respondents’ views depict that sense of ownership and control on developmental projects are catalyst for sustainable development. However, it was discovered that community ownership cannot be realized unless there is perceived benefit from the proposed project. Perceived benefit refers to the mutual gain community stand to derive from such projects. This was pointed out by one of the youth leader, interviewee 5 that, “...definitely it will, but it depends on if that project or programme will benefit them. You don’t expect people to get involved in something that they know will not benefit them, it does not make sense”. Therefore, it was revealed by the respondents that perceived benefits lead to the community member sense of belonging which is a unique catalyst for sustainable community development and transformation. It is important to note that to build any sustainable development, community sense of belonging must be considered as a prerequisite for community participation to ensure sustainable community development.

5.2 Adequate Consultation from the Community

This study discovered that the ability to build sustainable community lies in the understanding of the community need and desire. This can be accomplished in many ways; one of which is community consultation. Community discussion gives voice to each of the community members to point to their needs and desire for the community that will directly transform to sustainable community development. This was stressed by interviewee 9 CDC chairman that.

If NDDC wants to embark on any project, they should visit the community and ask them what they want, plan with them and allow them to contribute in whatever they want to do. If you do not involve the community people in what you are doing, it will not make sense to them (Int.9). In the same way, women leader interviewee 19 lamented that; NDDC does not consult with us. Even if they have built roads, and other things they do it on their own, they didn't meet with us before doing them". Likewise, interviewee 15 opinion leader echoed that; "We are not part of the planning of all these projects NDDC have done in this community". Buttressing this claim, interviewee 17, community opinion leader, 11 youth leader and 6 women leader affirmed that "NDDC need to ask community what they need so that all these projects they are doing will make meaning to them". In fact, this study revealed that community consultation leads to local democracy whereby community members see themselves as a unit of a change agent to foster sustainable development in the community (Eversole, 2012). The positive attitude and local social equality makes community member input not to be minimised and ensure that they buy into the ethos of sustainable community development (Aghalino, 2012). This was expressed by interviewee 14 women leader thus; "We feel neglected by NDDC in their planning programs that is why we are do not show interest in what they are doing" However, a contrary opinion was shared by NDDC officer interviewee 20 who claimed that; "the commission tried all their possible best to consult with host communities because we know this is the only approach that can promote our activities but most times we get negative responses".

While interviewee 19 another NDD Officer, reiterated thus:

We try to carry community along; it's not easy to carry people along especially those in rural areas. Most times when we call for town hall meetings, community members do not seem to be interested, you need to put extra effort for them to attend. Some will even ask you if there are some benefits attached when they attend the meeting (Int.19). Nevertheless, it could be seen that both parties agreed that community consultation is a catalyst for sustainable community development although both sides were shifting blame on each other. Thus, this study also showed that community consultation enhances community approval and commitment on projects done in their community. This is because community discussion brings community engagement that is a unique feature in sustainable community development. It makes community members to avoid antagonism, and adversarial relationship because community members will speak out their minds on the sustainable community project that will benefit them and their future generations (Warren & McFadyen, 2010). This was buttressed by an opinion leader interviewee 8 that; "We do not see NDDC, how do you expect us to play any role in their projects? It's not possible, you must see the agency, discuss with them before you can accept any role given to you". Consequently, an NDDC officer interviewee 21, revealed thus; "...this is because we don't plan with them; our efforts are truncated by some people in the community by creating community conflict for us which is really affecting execution of most of our projects".

While interviewee 20, NDDC officer shared that:

NDDC has created a forum to deliberate with community but most times we are faced with a lot of challenges especially in the area of finance. What I think will help to address this problem is for the government to show to more financial commitment in the commission to enable us function well (Int.20).

5.3 Collaboration with Community Members

Community collaboration depicts the involvement of different parties in working together to achieve a predefined goal for the betterment of the community. This gives values to both teamwork and individual efforts in building a better community. It mainly shows that community members are the most valuable entities who can unleash creative ideas that are a primary catalyst in sustainable community development. This was echoed by one of the women leader interviewee 6 that; NDDC need to work with community, tell us what they want to do then we sit together and plan with them'. Also interviewee 11 youth leader emphasised that; "... Yes, working with community will make community members to be interested in what NDDC is doing because if NDDC involve Community they will be ready to work and cooperate with NDDC but NDDC is not doing that".

However, an affirmative and contrary view was expressed by NDDC officer interviewee 20 that:

Collaboration is very vital to effective implementation and NDDC is trying to work with the community. Nevertheless, the attitude of the community in most cases is discouraging when we call for town hall meetings. Most of them are reluctant to attend unless you assure them that they will be given some stipends after the meeting (Int.20).

Similarly, community collaboration creates a win-win situation (Quist & Tukker, 2013). It promotes the opportunity for community members to understand government intention for their community. This creates flexibility in the implementation of the community development project and removes complications that might be caused by community members. It creates an environment whereby community members are challenged to do their very best in ensuring that developmental projects are sustained in their communities. This was stated by community opinion leader interviewee 17 thus; “Community development can be only sustainable when both NDDC and community work together. But how can we work with them when they don’t carry us along in what they are doing”. Similarly, interviewee 4 CDC chairman reiterated that; “NDDC should come to the community, tell us what they want to do, and then we can plan and work together for a smooth, peaceful and successful work”. In the same way, interviewee 2, youth leader noted that; “The only way all these NDDC projects can last is for NDDC to team up with us then we will give them any assistance they need”(Int.2).It could be seen from this study that community collaboration resolved problematic community issues and further strengthen sustainable community development. It creates an enabling environment by giving confident and belief on community projects to generate far-reaching benefits for community members. It also provides confident to community members that their contributions will be recognized and appreciated which will negate the belief that community diversity is disadvantageous to achieve sustainable community development (Akpomovie, 2011; Zhang & Hamilton, 2010).It is established by this study that community collaboration is grounded in community networking; cooperation, partnership and coalitions that facilitate sustainable community development.

5.4 Enlightenment of Community Members

The study shows that it is an informed individual that will possess the adequate motivation to enhance sustainable community development. This depicts that dissemination of information, active consumption and perception of the community-based development project is a strong catalyst for sustainable community development. This was indicated by one of the opinion leader interviewee 8 thus; “Talk of information, the government is not informing the people. The government does not integrate or mix up with the people. The people are ignorant. Only a few individuals like us are privileged to get information”. Similarly, a women leader, Interviewee 13 stressed that, “We are not aware of what and how NDDC do their things, we only see their billboards. Here in Oloibiri community we don’t know if something like NDDC even exists”.

While a community CDC Chairman Interviewee 1 narrated thus:

Initially when NDDC was first established in the year 2000, they were coming to community to enlighten us on their programmes but for a long time now they have not been coming that is why you see that most community members do not know if they still exist. (Int. 1)Consequently, another opinion leader interviewee 7 that; “A man that is not informed is deformed. So community need to the right information to avoid conflict between them and government”.

Corroborating community views on the importance of enlightenment interviewee 20 NDDC officer stated that:

Knowledge of community members is a critical factor that enhances the level of community involvement in any developmental project going on in that community. However, NDDC has some constraints in trying to enlighten community especially on the need for them to embrace new developmental initiatives (Int.20).Contrarily, another NDDC officer interviewee 21 revealed that; “... it is supposed to be part of our programme but because of lack of funding, we cannot reach out accurately to the people, and in most cases what we usually do is sensitization programme some few years ago”.

In view of this, interviewee 22 NDDC officer however, suggested that:

If I have the opportunity to do a project, in an entry process of meeting I will bring all the representative of all the communities, tell them about our aims and objectives and even how to benefit more. At the end of the day, I will leave my phone number with them to call me whenever they need any information.

With this, I am sure community members will have a positive attitude and perception and be willing to work and contribute towards development programmes in their community (Int.22). Hence, this study maintains that enlightenment enhance community members' visualization and makes them come together in unity for the common good of their community. Without awareness, the community members will be left in the dark on developmental agenda that will deprive them of the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to their community.

5.5 Capacity Building and Empowerment

When community members team-up by working in unionism, it depicts that everybody regardless of social and academic status is useful and necessary to contribute individually and collectively to the empowerment of the community. This shows that there is strength in diversity of members in the community; the greater the diversity then, the richer the vision and the more improved the community. This is expressed by CDC chairman interviewee 1 thus; "...NDDC should train community members by building their capacity to the level where they will be able to stand and do things on their own without waiting for the government (Int.1).

While youth leader interviewee 16 lamented that:

The way NDDC do their training is not the best. Like here in Omoku, we do not feel the impact of the training, as there's nothing to show for it after the training. What I mean is that community are not empowered at all. That is why when we hear that NDDC is coming to train us; nobody is interested in their programme (Int.16)

This perspective corroborate with the views from NDDC officer who revealed thus:

Empowerment is one of the focuses of the NDDC because it will help to reduce the level of youth restiveness in the region. We acknowledge this fact, but as I have always said lack of adequate funding is affecting our performance because you need money to train and also empower after training (Int.20).

Whereas another NDDC officer interviewee 21 in a contrary view shared that:

NDDC is trying to see how community members can be self-reliant through some of our programmes like skill acquisition training that cuts across different areas like welding, carpentry, tailoring and even scholarship awards to study outside Nigeria despite the lapses of underfunding that we have. But community members are not encouraging us at all. After training, we give the starter packs and even give some soft loan to start with but at the end some will sell the materials while for the loan they hardly pay back (Int.21)

Also Interviewee 20 NDDC officer reiterated that:

NDDC is really trying in the area of empowerment and capacity building in the Niger Delta like in my state Delta state, we have covered a wide range of communities but you see we cannot include all the communities because the areas are many, and we do not have enough fund to do this that is why some of the communities are still complaining that they have not felt our impact (Int.20).

As a result of this, interviewee 18 opinion leader stressed that:

As for the empowerment, I have not seen any. NDDC should try and visit community, ask them what they need whether infrastructure or skill acquisition training, then community can plan with them, tell them what they need, then they can work together as a team (Int.18). Likewise, the organization of community through capacity building and empowerment will create a more positive environment where community members' will enjoy good quality and a better life. This will lead to sustainable community development where community members are consulted and engaged in discussion, decision and actions around the community needs and problems.

5.6 Conclusions and Recommendations

This particular study examines community participation as a catalyst to foster sustainable community and human development in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In-depth interviews were conducted with the key informants on the causes and solutions to the failures of developmental initiatives in the Niger Delta region. First the findings revealed that there is a low level of community participation in developmental programmes in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Secondly, the result also showed sustainable human development is achievable when issues such as community involvement in decision making in developmental plans, awareness of government intervention programmes, adequate consultation, collaboration and capacity building are adequately infused in execution of developmental programs. The study also creates an understanding that ownership, adequate consultation, collaboration; enlightenment and capacity building are fundamental factors for boosting community participation in achieving sustainable human development especially in underdeveloped communities.

In line with the findings, sustainable community development therefore, is not all about provision of technological and infrastructural development but the accessibility of developmental projects they are able to transform the wellbeing of community members and their immediate environment. In other words, community development should revolve around creating opportunities for people through access to adequate resources that will enhance and transform their life. In nutshell, government, development planners and community members would find the results of this study relevant as it would serve as a guide to subsequent formulation and execution of sustainable community development practices in communities such as the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Finally, based on the findings, the study, therefore, recommends that, to ensure sustainable human development, issues such as sense of ownership, adequate consultation, collaboration, enlightenment and capacity building of community members should be given adequate consideration in developmental initiatives to enhance community interest and participation in successful implementation and sustainability of developmental programs.

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