

Proactive Community Leadership and Rural Transformation in Delta State

Akpomuvie Orhioghene Benedict Ph.D.

Sociology Department
Delta State University, Abraka
Nigeria

Abstract

The main thrust of this paper, is community development which is seen generally as a movement designed to promote better living for the community with the active participation of the people. In addition, the study considered the relevance of effective leadership in these communities as a veritable tool and catalyst in the process of improving the living conditions of the rural dwellers in Delta State. The study which relied on the secondary method of data collection revealed that communities with effective leadership are more peaceful and developed than communities that are characterized by conflicts. The study however recommended that traditional rulers should always consult the people on matters affecting their development. Apart from regular dialogue, traditional rulers should be seen by the followers to be honest, transparent and accountable in their activities.

Keywords: *Mobilization, Traditional Rulers, Community Development, Projects, Problem Solving etc.*

Introduction

Community development is a major approach that has been utilized in rural transformation in many of the developing countries of the world. According to Onokerhoraye and Okafor (1994); Nnamdi (1998); Ojukwu (2013); Ihejiamaizu (2002), community development involves the mobilization of the people towards the promotion of better living conditions for the community.

Dunham (1970) contended that community development is not concerned with any one aspect of life such as agriculture, business, health, education but with total community life and needs. From this perspective, the people are expected to work with one and another to shape their own destiny. Mobilization is another vital element in community development process. As rightly noted by Ugiagbe and Osunde (2006), the successful participation of the people and attainment of self-help in the enhancement of the well-being of the people, is hinged on effective mobilization. They further observed that history is replete with evidence of how the success of any community developed programme is predicated on the massive and total commitment of the people and the effective employment of all community strength for the resolution of the dire needs confronting the people.

Williams (1978) similarly observed that the relevance of community development approach to rural change rests squarely on the existence of resourceful, dynamic and committed local leaders in the rural areas concerned as well as the level of determination of the change agents and government support for local initiatives and inclusiveness. He further asserted that the wide variations in the scope and impact of community development activities on the welfare of rural dwellers in different parts of the less developed countries reflect the nature of “community leadership” and their inclinations towards self-help programmes. This goes to show that in those areas where there are no evidence of self-help groups, community development activities have not made impact on the social welfare of rural dwellers. Finally, the reason for the inertia of the resources may be due to lack of leadership and lack of societal cohesion, conformity, awareness, general apathy, illiteracy amongst others.

Community Development and Mobilization for Rural Change

It is very important to organize the people to identify, take and share responsibilities for the resolution of problems affecting them as a group or community. This could be done through the process of community development, community organization or community relations (Ekong, 2003). Williams (1978) and Ihejiamaizu (2002) noted that community development entails that the people themselves should exert their efforts along-side the government to enhance their economic, social and cultural conditions.

If such efforts are lacking from the people of such communities, the government or outsiders could provide the impetus to awaken the interest of members through diversified strategies such as enlightenment campaigns, initiation of projects and financial aid for specific projects (Okafor, 1984). In the same vein, Ekong (2003) conceptualized community development as a deliberate and concerted efforts directed at improving and helping communities to identify their needs and take responsibilities for providing answers to problems and as such increasing their abilities to take part fully in the life of the nation.

Ojukwu (2013), identified the aims of community development to include; to create awareness, to evolve all sided development, motivate people and provide equality, enhance and change the thinking of the people, bring reforms and social justice, e.t.c. Ihejiamaizu (2002) however, observed that community development as a programme and method of achieving development gained international recognition in 1955 when the United Nations Organisation adopted a new definition of community development as a process whereby the efforts of the people are harmonized with those of government to enhance the economic, social and cultural conditions of the communities. Batten (1957) and Oduaran (1994) identified four principles of community development thus:

1. The agency must establish friendly and worthy relations with the people that are affected;
2. The agency must reach an agreement with the people on what the changes should be;
3. The agency must demonstrate that the said change is safe and
4. The agency must also be interested in working with the groups.

To Imhabekhai (2009), for community development to succeed, the social, physical, political and technological environment must be conducive. He further noted that the change agent must make efforts to identify all the environmental factors that facilitate or hinder attainment of the development aims. He also alluded to the fact that 'community leaders' must be identified and must participate in the planning and execution of any change effort in such communities. Failure to do this he noted, might lead to such leader constituting serious obstacles in the execution of the change efforts.

Mobilization is therefore the process of awakening the consciousness of the people to take active part in their development. The people who are experiencing the problem should share in the making of decisions for change. Those who are involved in the problem solving process should be able to communicate openly about the problems they are experiencing. However, change often generates conflict about methods, objectives and resources. Therefore, it is pertinent that project staff members and community leaders be sensitive to the causes of conflict in community development projects [U.N, 1989]. Thus, effective problem solving in community development projects must in it be a process of community participation.

It is very important in a community- participation scheme, that the goals are really those of the residents rather than those of someone else. The main thrust of the community workers' efforts will be to help the residents to discover what they want to be done and how they can be involved in the planning and implementation.

Rural Community Leadership

In every social system- organization, communities or family- key personalities have the ability to influence the ideas and actions of others. Ekong (2003) however, noted that in larger social systems, power structures tend to be decentralized because in such systems are found larger types of status roles, socially heterogeneous populations and a number of autonomous institutions. Similarly, Ojukwu (2013) contended that leadership is and has been described as the 'process' of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the successful carrying out of certain tasks. Leaders are able to achieve these feats by utilizing their innate leadership qualities such as strength of character, knowledge, skills, values, beliefs and what have you. Approach to leadership varies because it galvanizes the followers to achieving high and laudable goals instead of dampening their morale. Encarta (2009) summed up his contribution thus; leadership as the condition whereby an individual directs, guides, influences or controls thoughts, feelings or behavior of other human beings. Those who are charged with the tasks of taking decisions for the group therefore influence the actions of others in the group.

Gibb (1954) further distinguished between a head and a leader.

- (a) Headship or domination is maintained through an organized system and not by the spontaneous recognition by fellow group members of the individual's contribution to group goals;
- (b) The group's goals are chosen by the head in line with his interests and not internally determined by the group.

- (c) In domination or headship, there is little or no sense of shared feelings or joint action in pursuit of the given goals;
- (d) There is dominance relation, a wide social group between the group members and the head who is determined to maintain social distance as an aid to his coercion of the group;
- (e) The leader's authority is spontaneously accorded him by his fellow group members while the authority of the head derives from extra group power which he has over the group members who may not be called his followers.

Ojukwu (2013) in his contribution identified the qualities of effective community leadership to include amongst others; honesty of purpose, confidence, patience, focus, dedication, consistence, motivation to others, effective communication, enthusiasm, discipline, empathy, resourcefulness, justice and fairness, hard work, incorruptibility and so on. On the other hand, Ihejimaizu (2002) stressed the functions of a good community leader to include; policy-making, policy-implementation, building public image, policy interpretation, official responsibilities and supervision.

It is therefore imperative that if any community must improve its living conditions and survive within that ecological niche, there must be in place an effective leadership that can give a driving force to all members in achieving the projections of the community. The realization of individual goals is given prominence instead of the collective communal goals in the absence of leadership which makes the link between individuals and goals achievement difficult. The relevance of leadership is reflected in the statement that 'without leadership, a community is but a muddle of men and machineries' (Ojukwu, 2013). It has been asserted that managerial activities such as planning, organizing and decision-making will become futile and unrealistic until effective leadership triggers the power of motivation in the followers and propels them towards achieving goals, thereby mobilizing individuals to come out with their best in terms of productivity.

Finally, it is desirous of a leader to be able to study his community and address its felt needs, serve as a veritable tool and link between the community, government and other external bodies, must be at the vanguard of keeping peace and maintenance of law and order as well as a connecting rod between neighboring communities and projected aspirations.

Problems Associated With the Implementation of Community Development Programmes

This section of the paper is devoted to the examination of obstacles that impede the effective implementation of community development programmes in Delta State.

1. *Dwindling respect for traditional rulers in the study areas:* There is no doubt that respect for the elders and by extension the traditional rulers is gradually waning. Key factors that have contributed to the low level of respect for the elders and the traditional rulers include among others; abuse of privileges, participation in partisan politics, lacking of integrity by some traditional rulers, in-fighting by community members, military dictatorship which has led to dethronement and enthronement of stooges to government, dwindling area of influence, conflict of interest between local government authorities and the traditional rulers etc.

2. *Poor participation:* This situation arises when there is in-fighting and tussles for power in the community. When a section of the community is not consulted in any development project, it could provoke very poor participation due to poor enthusiasm for the project. Community development programmes that are initiated on political grounds can also lead to the non-chalant attitude of the people. On the other hand, there are those who deliberately refused to be part of the community activities owing to indifference.

3. *Social interest, war or political instability may stall the completion of a development project.* Communities that are prone to crisis arising from tussle for power and partisan politics are likely to be backward in terms of development in contrast with neighboring communities because no meaningful progress can take place in an atmosphere of violence. Government officials as well as other technical experts charged with executing these community projects could be scared. In Delta State, many community development projects have been abandoned due to intimidation, harassment and the demand for "deve".

4. *Politics could also retard the progress of rural communities:* The unwholesome attitudes of politicians can also spell disasters for community development efforts. In multi-party regimes where the local authority might be loyal to a different party other than the one in power, can lead to lack of interest or outright delay in executing projects in such areas.

5. *Dearth of fund*: Problems could also arise from inadequate funding. While government grants which are supposed to help eliminate the problem are not often forthcoming and financial support from other sources not very easy to come by, thereby jeopardizing the execution of community development projects.

On the other hand, bank credit and capital are very difficult to come by because of the demand for collateral security that is out of reach of these communities. Lack of fund is a major factor responsible for the non-completion of most community development programmes all over the state.

Other factors include; wrong notion about what constitutes community development, illiteracy and apathy, problems of improper coordination of community projects, lack of trained workers, communication gap, poor maintenance culture, etc.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, traditional rulers are very crucial in the whole process of community development efforts. They remain sources of inspirations and directions in the design to the implementation of development projects in their area of influence. It must be said that, traditional rulers are looked upon by the people, as primary initiators of development efforts and catalysts in change efforts at the local level. Experience has shown that traditional rulers have been at the vanguard of mobilization of their communities for development, act as linkages between their communities and development agencies including the central government departments, local government organs as well as NGO's, missions, movements, religious and welfare associations. The relevance of traditional rulers also resolve around settlement of disputes, revenue collection, promotion of economic activities and so on.

It is also clear from the above that the variations in the scope and impact of community development activities on the welfare of rural dwellers in Delta State, reflect the nature of 'community leadership' and their inclination towards self-help programmes. In addition, communities with active traditional rulers are usually peaceful and progressive because their rulers take proactive steps to resolve the problems confronting them.

Communities that have initiated community development projects that are on-going can seek assistance from several agencies and departments available in different communities for education, vocational skill acquisition, micro-credit loans, agricultural extension, health extension, road construction and maintenance, electricity etc. Mobilization is also another crucial element in the process of community development because the successful participation of the people and the attainment of self-help in the enhancement of the well-being of the people are predicated on sustained mobilization. This study has shown that the success of any community development programme is based on the commitment of the people and the total employment of the community resources for the tackling of the issues confronting the people.

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