

Case Study of Youth Empowerment Scheme of Niger State, Nigeria in Poverty Alleviation

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of the Youth Empowerment Scheme (Project YES) of Niger State, Nigeria as a non-governmental organization in poverty alleviation through skills acquisition. The study was carried out to determine the impact of Project YES in poverty alleviation in the State and also to determine whether the scheme has succeeded in empowering its beneficiaries in terms of skill acquisition for self-empowerment. A survey design was adopted for the study. The study revealed that the Scheme has succeeded in empowering its beneficiaries by way of vocational skills acquisition hence contributing to a change in their socio-economic status. Based on the findings, the study recommends among others the urgent need to introduce the scheme at the Local Government Area levels to cater for the poverty stricken rural dwellers, and also the need for government at all levels to encourage individuals, philanthropists and philanthropic organizations to set up poverty alleviation related NGOs to supplement her effort in fighting the scourge of poverty in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Non-governmental organizations, vocational skills acquisition, self empowerment, socio-economic status, philanthropists.*

Introduction

Nigerian 2006 national census result put her population at over one hundred and forty million. She therefore, remains the most populous African country and arguably one of the best endowed. The country is endowed in terms of abundant deposit of crude oil, mineral resources, and agricultural products to mention but a few. In spite of all these abundant resources, the quality of life of her citizens has declined significantly over the years.

Perhaps, this was why Mohammed (2004) noted that despite the fact that Nigeria is ranked as the sixth richest nation in the world in terms of crude oil reserve and supply, and the fact that the country ranks among the nations that are blessed in terms of human and material endowment, her citizens are wallowing in abject poverty with little or no

economic empowerment for the larger percentage of the populace. The Federal Office of Statistics confirmed that at least seventy million Nigerians now live below the poverty line when compared with eighteen million in the 1980s (Garuba 2006; Patrick 2005).

It is also worthy of note that Nigeria remains the only member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) that is categorized among the world's poorest twenty countries (Adeola 2001). In a related research on the poverty index in Nigeria, Okunmadewa (2001) highlighted that Nigeria ranked fifty-fourth with respect to human poverty index (HPI) making her the twentieth poorest country in the World. It is also ranked thirtieth in gender related development index (GDI) while occupying the fortieth position from below in its human development index (HDI).

Indeed, the alarming and seemingly uncontrollable high rate of crime and shady deals in the country has been linked to the

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poverty situation. To buttress this fact, Oludotun (2001) revealed that the increasing rate of crime such as armed robbery, advance fee fraud (419), corruption, prostitution, nepotism, drug trafficking, cultism and other social vices are definitely the product of persistent poverty in the country. The situation affects sustainable national development adversely.

Previous governments in Nigeria made several attempts to alleviate the poverty situation in this country. For instance, the Gowon's regime initiated the Udoji's Commission to solve the problem of poor wage of civil servants in order to improve their standard of living. The next regime of Murtala/Obasanjo decided to attack the poverty situation through agriculture by initiating the popular Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) program. This program was re-packaged by the Shagari's regime and subsequently metamorphosed into the Green Revolution Campaign.

Perhaps, the regime with the widest approach to poverty reduction is the Babangida's regime. The regime introduced the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI) in 1986. This was followed by the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) in 1987. The same year, the Better Life Program was launched. The Peoples Bank followed closely in 1989. The Community Bank was also introduced and lastly the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC).

The immediate past government of Obasanjo also initiated her own programme to eradicate poverty. The first attempt was the Poverty Alleviation Program (PAP) in the year 2000 and was immediately replaced the following year by National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP). The regime also introduced other economic reform programs such as the Mandatory Attachment Program (MAP), the Capacity Attachment Program (CAP), and later the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (NEEDS). A summary of the major government initiatives at poverty reduction is shown in Table 1.

Despite these concerted efforts by previous regimes, the poverty situation seems

to be getting worse. The Nigerian Economic Summit Group, while assessing the eight years of Obasanjo's economic reforms on 6 May 2007 in a Press Conference, highlighted that the economic reforms of the Obasanjo's government did not tackle poverty effectively. Although the group applauded the reforms in service industry like the Banks, Insurance, Oil and Telecommunication, it however noted that "the reforms did not have appreciable impact in poverty reduction especially employment generation and self empowerment" (Iba 2007).

It is against the dismal performance by the government in their effort to fight the scourge of poverty that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) stepped in to supplement government's fight against poverty by initiating various programs targeted at alleviating poverty in this country.

The Youth Empowerment Scheme

The Youth Empowerment Scheme popularly tagged Project YES is a registered non-governmental organization initiated by Hajiya Zainab Kure, the former first lady of Niger State. The Scheme which was actually introduced in April 2000 was registered as a non-profit making venture with the Corporate Affairs Commission of Nigeria with registration number RC 13705.

According to the initiator and motivator, Hajiya Zainab Kure, Project YES is a form of human development intervention organization which offer opportunity for a wide range of vocational skills training for the youths because of their socio-economic situation (Kuti 2006). The scheme is targeted at training youths by way of empowering them economically and socially. It is also expected to intervene in their educational pursuit and also offer an opportunity for initiating behavioral change in the youth through the guidance and counseling programs aimed at putting them in proper psychological frame of mind for many challenges ahead in life. So far, over five thousand youths from the twenty-five local government areas of the state have graduated from various training programs

Table 1. Summary of major government initiatives at poverty alleviation.

S/N	Initiative	Year of introduction	Government in power	Target
1	Operation Feed the Nation (OFN)	1977	Obasanjo Regime	Malnutrition
2	Green Revolution.	1980	Shagari Regime	Malnutrition
3	War Against Indiscipline (WAI). Directorate of Food, Road and	1984	Buhari/Idiagbon Regime	Patriotism and nationalism
4	Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI).	1986	IBB Regime	Poor standard of
5	National Directorate of	1987	IBB Regime	living
6	Employment (NDE).	1987	IBB Regime	Economic poverty
7	Better life for Rural Women (BLP).	1989	IBB Regime	Economic Empowerment for women
8	People Bank of Nigeria (PBN).	1989	IBB Regime	Economic poverty
9	Community Bank	1988	IBB Regime	Social poverty
10	Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission	1996	Abacha Regime	Poor standard of living for the Niger Deltans
11	(OMPADEC). Vision 2010. Family Economic Advancement	1997	Abacha Regime	Sustainable human development
12	Program (FEAP). Poverty Alleviation Program (PAP).	2000	Obasanjo Regime Obasanjo Regime	Social poverty
13	National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP)	2001		Economic poverty Economic poverty

offered by the Project. It is also worthy of note that the graduates of the various trades are usually given start up capital and tools required for the particular trade. Indeed, graduates of the scheme, according to Yahaya (2006), are not only self-employed but also employers of labor.

Across the country, similar non-governmental organizations are gradually being established to support the government effort against poverty. Prominent among these NGOs are: The African Diaspora Foundation, Lagos; Grassroots Women Foundation, Enugu; Women’s Consortium of Nigeria, Lagos; and People to People International, Lagos to mention but a few. Just like project YES, the NGOs are non-profit making organizations dedicated to offering selfless service for the purpose of humanity and subsequently supplementing government effort at improving the living standard of Nigerians.

Methodology

The study adopted the use of survey research design. This particular method was adopted because the research attempted to

determine the opinion, attitude and behavior of the beneficiaries and their instructors with respect to the phenomenon of poverty and the impact of NGOs at poverty alleviation. According to Osuala (1982) surveys are usually oriented towards the determination of status of a given phenomena, they focus on people and their opinions, behaviors, belief, and attitudes. On the other hand, Nworgu (1991) identified survey research as one in which a group of people or items are studied by collecting and analyzing data from only a few people or items considered to be representatives of the entire group.

Area of the Study

The study was carried out in Minna, Niger State of Nigeria. Minna was chosen for the study because the Youth Empowerment Scheme is solely run from the state capital. The temporary head quarters of project YES was located at the Abdulsalam Abubakar Youth Centre, Paiko Road, Minna while the permanent headquarters was commissioned in 2005 and is popularly referred to as Gidan Matasa. The permanent center is located at

Matasa Drive, off Okada Road, Bosso, Minna, Nigeria.

Instrument for Data Collection

The data gathering instrument is a structured questionnaire with 20 items. The first section of the instrument centered on personal data of the respondents. Section B focused on research question 1 and it elicited for responses to answer questions relating to the extent to which Project YES has succeeded in empowering beneficiaries in terms of skill acquisition for self-empowerment. Section C focused on research question 2 and it attempted to find out the impact of project YES in alleviating poverty in Niger State.

Administration of the Instrument

The researchers personally visited the head office of the Youth Empowerment Scheme to administer the questionnaires. Oral interview was also used with some of the staff of Project YES. The contact addresses of the beneficiaries were collected and traced within the metropolis. The questionnaire was then distributed to them with the help of some of the staff. Oral interview was used to obtain information from some of the beneficiaries. The method was adopted to allow for freedom of expression as well as to enable the researcher obtain accurate and elaborate information. Personal visitation and interview was expected to allow for on-the-spot assessment of the businesses set up by the beneficiaries.

Findings

The purpose of the study was to investigate the role of non-governmental organizations in poverty alleviations through skill acquisition with the Youth Empowerment Scheme used as a case study. The findings revealed that the Youth Empowerment Scheme (Project YES) has succeeded in empowering its beneficiaries in terms of skill acquisition for self-employment. This agrees with the findings

of the National Committee On Monitoring of poverty alleviation programs in Nigeria (Zaynab 2003). The monitoring committee reported that the Youth Empowerment Scheme is a successful project which has empowered thousands of youths that has hitherto lost all hopes in the state. The scheme, according to the report of the committee should be emulated by other NGOs across the country. Also in consonance with the findings of the study is Yahaya (2006) who discovered that as a result of the successful empowerment of youths economically and socially, the Youth Empowerment Scheme (Project YES) has contributed tremendously to fostering of Nigerian nationhood. He also noted that the scheme has succeeded at intervening in the plight of the youths by providing them opportunities for acquisition of vocational skills of varied kinds which makes them not only self-reliant but also empowered them to be more efficient in the discharge of their responsibilities to the communities and Nigeria at large. Indeed the scheme has succeeded in fostering youths in all ramifications, especially vocational skill acquisition for self-reliance. Similarly, the investigation revealed that the beneficiaries were able to set up their own businesses after graduation. This is in consonance with the findings of the team of National Media Tour, which discovered that “today, most of the graduates of Project YES in Niger State are not only self-employed but also employers of labor” (Kuti 2005). In the same vein, the finding of the study that the scheme has contributed to the economic upliftment of beneficiaries corroborates the report of the team. The team reported that the Youth Empowerment Scheme practiced in Niger State has tremendously contributed to the upliftment of the economic status of the participating youths in the state.

The research also sought to determine the impact of Project YES in alleviating poverty in Niger State. The opinion of the respondents shows a clear indication of the great impact of Project YES in alleviating poverty in Niger State. This agrees with the findings of Yahaya (2006) who observed that the impact of Project YES goes beyond the issue of poverty alleviation alone because it has also intervened

in the educational pursuit of thousands of youths. As such, the youth were opportuned to develop their talents, self-esteem and become useful and acceptable members of the society.

Similarly, during the course of investigation, the researchers also observed that there was an improved sense of contentment among the participants of Project YES. This was evidenced by their prompt, enthusiastic response on experiences gathered during the training periods, the new change in their socio-economic status as a result of the skill acquired, and the fact that most of them are not only self-employed but also employers of labor.

Conclusion

Nigeria has witnessed a wide range of poverty alleviation policies and programs from previous governments. However, despite these concerted efforts by the government, the poverty situation seems to be getting worse. The Nigerian Economics Summit Group while assessing the eight years of Obasanjo's reform on 6 May 2007 highlighted that the Obasanjo's government just like his predecessors did not tackle poverty effectively (Iba 2007). It is against this dismal performance by the government in their effort to fight the scourge of poverty that Non-governmental organizations stepped in to supplement government's effort. On the basis of the findings of this study, it can be seen that non-governmental organizations can play a vital role in poverty alleviation. This is evident from the success story of Project YES as the findings revealed that the scheme has contributed to the economic upliftment of the youths by providing them with vocational skills acquisition and counseling services aimed at reorienting their attitudes towards self and societal development. The Project YES experience is a living testimony that Non-governmental organizations can play a vital role in poverty alleviation in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. In view of the success story of Project YES, governments at all levels should

encourage individuals, philanthropists and philanthropic organizations to set up poverty alleviation related NGOs to supplement their efforts in fighting the scourge of poverty in Nigeria. Governments' contribution can be in the form of provision of training centers/workshops and linkages to international donor organizations like the USAID, UNDP, UNESCO, and UNICEF.

2. Counseling sessions should be organized for fewer participants at a time. It should be more private and more confidential. Similarly, referral and follow-up services should be introduced in other to allow for effective counseling for the trainees.

3. The Youth Empowerment Scheme (Project YES) should set up offices across the three zones in the state in other to extend her services to the grass roots. This is necessary because under the present arrangement, the bulk of the beneficiaries are youths residing around Minna the state headquarter.

4. Proprietors of Project YES should set up a think tank evaluation committee. The committee should be charged with the responsibility of studying the findings of researches conducted on Project YES and similar studies conducted on other poverty alleviation related NGOs. Identified areas of weakness and strength should be critically studied with the hope of implementing the recommendations as a way of improving the programs designed for the trainees.

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Appendix A
Number of Graduates by Trades: 1st to 10th Batches

Batches trades	1 Feb. 2001	2Apr. 2001	3 Nov. 2001	4May 2002	5 Dec. 2002	6 Mar. 2003	7 Feb. 2004	8 May 2004	9Oct. 2004	10Jul. 2005	Total
Agriculture			66								66
Aluminum pot		14		7							21
Barbing	16		111				88				215
Blacksmith				2							2
Bricklaying				17							17
Carpentry					134				10		144
Catering	12		116	39	85		518			101	871
Ceramics		2		1							3
Computer	160		133	22	28		74			38	455
Dry cleaning				1	24		4				29
Electrical			31		108				6		145
Fashioned		4		26				181			211
Fine Arts	4			4							8
Hair dress		3		77				41			121
Knitting	13		135	28	58		215			59	508
Mechanical			9		65				19		93
Photography		10		77	39			155			281
Plumbing				30							30
Poultry			18								18
Printing					8				10		18
Shoe making				25				9			34
Soap making	14	11	147	21			34			40	267
Tailoring		267		875		101		750			1993
Tie Dye				15							15
Typing					2			8			10
Videocoverage				2				104			106
Vulcanizing			1	2					4	9	16
Welding				30					18		48
Total	219	311	767	1301	551	101	933	1248	67	2 47	5745

Source: Youth Empowerment Scheme, 2005.