

Harnessing the Socio-Economic Development Potentials of Rural Nigeria: Role of Rural Women Associations

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Abstract

Rural Nigeria in which 50 per cent of Nigerian population resides is blessed with abundant human and material resources. However, there has been no conscientious effort over the years by successive governments to transform these resources into productive forces that would engender socio-economic development of the rural areas. This study assesses the potential role of women, through the auspices of their associations to harness the abundant material and human resources in the rural areas for rural transformation, using secondary sources. The study underpins its arguments on the participatory development approach which emphasizes the need for beneficiaries of development to be active participants in the development process. Findings of the study reveal that women's associations are engaged in diverse socio-economic activities in their communities. However, members' optimum capabilities are not utilized in the productive process due to gender-based socio-cultural constraints such as disinheritance, exclusion from decision-making, gender division of labour, etc. Thereby, women's contributions to agriculture and rural enterprises are limited. However, if these constraints are removed, women's associations could serve as catalysts to unlock the largely untapped socio-economic development potentials of rural Nigeria. In view of this, the study recommends that associations' productive capabilities should be enhanced through provision of an enabling environment. Therefore, policy actions aim at maximising associations' socio-economic activities such as creation of rural industrial parks, access to inheritance and inclusion of women in local decision-making bodies should be implemented by government at the various levels.

Keywords: Rural, Women-associations, Resources, Socio-economic, Agriculture

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is ranked among the Low Human Development Countries globally. With a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.539, Nigeria takes 161st position among 189 countries ranked in the Report (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020). Being a low human development country implies a high level of poverty. According to Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2020), about 83 million Nigerians (40.1 per cent) of the population live in extreme poverty. On the other hand, the World Bank (2020) acknowledges that 79 million Nigerians are extremely poor accounting for 20 per cent of the extremely poor population in Sub-Saharan Africa. Based on the World Bank statistics, Nigeria has the largest poor population in the sub region and the majority (52.1 per cent) of this poor population resides in the rural areas (NBS, 2020). This is because the rural areas although blessed with abundant material and human resources still suffer from neglect and underdevelopment. Basic infrastructure that would engender socio-economic development are lacking, hence productivity is low, resulting in low incomes.

This poor socio-economic profile of Nigeria is not due to the absence of human and material resources but rather due to the absence of a conscientious effort to transform these material and human resources into productive forces that will engender economic growth and development. The African Development Bank (AfDB) (2016) rightly observes that the failure to tap the enormous resources in Africa such as the

agricultural potential has contributed to persistent poverty and deteriorating food security in the continent. Thus, although abundant human and material resources abound in Nigeria, especially in the rural areas, such as arable land and other natural resources (Odusanya, 2020), they have remained largely untapped. For instance, the enormous agricultural potential of rural Nigeria has remained largely untapped; hence the country depends on massive food importation to ensure food security for her citizens (International Trade Administration, 2020). These abundant resources if exploited would result in rural transformation and socio-economic development. Evidence shows that rural transformation is a major driver of positive societal change because it presents new opportunities for economic growth and rural development (Bishop, 2019). In addition, rural development has been proven as a reliable and potent force for poverty reduction and broad-based social and economic development (International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 2016).

Nigeria is in dire need of rural transformation and socio-economic development. There must be a conscientious effort to harness the abundant human and material resources available in the rural areas into productive forces that would engender economic growth. So what role can rural women's associations play in this transformation? In the rural areas, women constitute a vital human resource. Not only do they constitute a majority of the rural population (as often the youths and other able-bodied men migrate to the cities in search of greener pastures), they are equally engaged in diverse socio-economic and community development activities (Eshiet, 2010). This study aims at investigating the role of rural women's associations in harnessing the abundant material and human resources in the rural areas into productive forces that would engender socio-economic development, thereby serving as catalysts to unlock the untapped socio-economic development potentials of rural Nigeria. The study utilizes secondary data sourced through review of extant literature in journals, textbooks, government's reports, reports by Non-Governmental and Community-Based Organizations, etc. as the basis of its analysis.

The paper is divided into various sections including this introduction. The next section appraises the participatory development paradigm as a theoretical guide for the discussion. Rural women's associations and their socio-economic activities in the communities are thereafter assessed, followed by an analysis of the impediments to women's community development activities. The subsequent section shows how women's associations can become catalysts for rural transformation if given the enabling environment. The paper concludes with some recommendations aimed at improving related policies.

Participatory Development Approach

The participatory development approach arose as a reaction to the failure of decades of development practice guided by the 'top-down' modernization approach to 'trickle down' development to all strata of the population. Practical realities did reveal that the 'development as growth paradigm' resulted in the economic and social marginalization of large sectors of the population such as the poor, rural dwellers, women, elderly, etc. (Oakley, 1991). To remedy this situation, there was a shift in development thinking and a search for alternatives. Thus, the participatory approach emerged as an alternative paradigm. Scholars such as Sen (1999), Oakley (1991) Fulglesang & Chandler, (1986) argue on the need to adapt development practice to the social, economic and political context of the people. In other words, development should be people-centered rather than capital-centered, as poverty is structural, having its roots in the economic and political conditions that influence the livelihoods of rural people. Thus, to effectively tackle poverty, the abilities of the rural people must be developed and their capabilities strengthened to have a say, and some influence on the forces which control their livelihoods (Bhasin, 1985; Galjart, 1981).

Evidence shows collective action as an effective strategy for forging effective participation in development projects. International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (2016) describes collective action as the voluntary agreement by a group of people to pursue shared objectives. Ostrom

(1990) and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)(2012) posit that collective action is the most common mechanism for generating and supporting sustained engagement for marginalized groups, aiming to promote their participation at different levels of development. The United Nations recognises the importance of collective action. Hence, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of Financing for Development advocates that the resources, knowledge and ingenuity of volunteers should be mobilized to complement the efforts of government in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015).

In view of the importance of collective action in development, the African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation did urge community members to form autonomous community-based organizations as platforms for articulating their interests (UNDP, 1998). The ubiquity of rural associations including women's associations in Nigeria may be partly a response to these calls and observations.

Rural Women's Associations and Community Development Activities

Rural women's associations are women's groupings that are locality based. They comprised of diverse types based on lineage, marriage, craft, trade, religion, etc. Nevertheless, they all serve a common purpose of being platforms for the articulation of women's interest in the community (Eshiet, 2010; Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), 1990). In Nigeria, a number of rural women's associations abound. Although rural women organizing is historic (dating back to pre-colonial times) (Mba, 1982), it was however, made more visible at the national level during the Better Life Programme (BLP) (1987-1993), of the then first lady, late Mrs Maryam Babangida. The aim of the Better Life Programme was to revive rural women's income generating activities through group action. Consequently, it led to the formation of more rural women's associations and cooperatives all over Nigeria (Better Life Programme (BLP), 1990).

Associations are run on voluntary basis and they perform diverse activities in the communities. They play a significant role in developing and maintaining cohesion in the communities. They are the platforms through which women organize their participation in local representative and decision-making bodies. Equally, associations carry out several collective income generating activities such as cash crop farming; animal husbandry; poultry keeping; fishing; gardening; food processing; handicrafts making and marketing of agricultural and other produce. They also carry out educational and information dissemination activities. Members are taught literacy and numeric skills, family planning, childcare, nutrition, welfare, healthcare and sanitation. Similarly, associations embark on physical development projects such as construction of roads, schools, health centers and market stalls, while at the same time maintaining community sanitation (Eshiet, 2010; Odurukwe, Asiabaka, Ugwoke, Ehirim & Ejiogu-Okereke, 2007; ECA, 1990; BLP, 1990).

Rural Cooperatives also provide women with an alternative way of organizing. And rural women have embraced the idea of cooperative formation because of its importance in increasing their credit-worthiness and placing them in a position of strength to support income generating activities out of pooled resources. Cooperatives provide thrift, credit, labour, supplies, marketing, food production and processing, and savings facilities for members (Eshiet, 2010; ECA, 1990; Dunmade, 1990; BLP, 1990).

Women although actively engaged in these activities, often times do not utilize their optimal capabilities due to certain socio-cultural and political constraints. The Food and Agriculture Organization (2011: x) observes that although women in developing countries make crucial contributions as farmers and entrepreneurs in agriculture and rural enterprises, they nevertheless are faced with gender-specific

constraints that reduce their productivity and limit their contributions to agricultural production, economic growth and the well-being of their families, communities and countries.

Socio-Cultural and Political Impediments to Women's Associations Community Development Activities

The enormous socio-economic contributions of women in their communities are hindered by certain socio-cultural and political factors, which tend to undervalue women's contributions to rural development. The System of National Accounts (the International Labour Organization (ILO) procedure for measurement of work) categorizes women's associations' community development services (which are quite enormous) as 'social' and 'voluntary' and therefore have no 'economic value' and so are uncompensated (ILO, 2018; data2X⁰ & ILO, 2019). Similarly, women's work in the agricultural and informal sectors, were initially unaccounted for by the System of National Accounts. Hence Women's activities in these sectors were unrecognized and unremunerated (Prakash, 2003). However, in present times work in these sectors has been included in labour statistics. Nevertheless, they remain misrepresented and under-remunerated due to the 'invisible' nature of work in these sectors, which cannot be fully captured by existing system of data collection (data2X⁰ & ILO, 2019; United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 2005; Prakash, 2003).

The devaluation of women's work undermines the importance of women's role in development (National Transfer Accounts (NTA), 2017). The stereotypical labelling of women as mere 'helpers' and 'supporters' in the labour process, rather than as independent workers with economic and political rights, has constituted a barrier to women and their associations' access to opportunities for economic advancement. A fall out of this labelling is the presumption that men are 'breadwinners' and head of households. And in spite of empirical evidence that has proven the contrary, as studies have shown the existence of households headed by women in both rural and urban centres (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020; Mazzotta & Ng'weno, 2020), this erroneous perception still prevails. Hence, policy actions by government often times reflect this perception and so favour the men. Women's plight is further compounded by their exclusion from inheritance. In some communities, family property is bequeathed to only male children, while widows are disinherited of their late husband's property. This hampers women's access to land and other assets which they could tender as collaterals during loan negotiations with financial institutions (FAO, 2011; Eshiet, 2010; Oyekanmi, 2008; Human Development Initiative (HDI), 2005).

The totalizing effect of these practices is the limitation of women and their associations' access to productive facilities like land, credit, technology, appropriate information, etc., which would otherwise enhanced their productive capabilities (Eshiet, 2010). FAO (2011) aptly describes the challenges faced by women farmers in accessing productive resources. According to the report, women control less land than men and the land they control is often of poorer quality while their tenure is insecure. Similarly, they are less likely to use modern farming inputs such as improved seedlings, fertilizers, pest control, tractors and other mechanical tools. They equally have less access to extension services and credit, and when they do have access to credit, they do not control such credit. All these it argues hamper women's productivity in agriculture.

In the political sphere, the non-inclusion of women beyond token levels at national and local policy making and implementation bodies work negatively against women. For example, in most villages, women are either totally absent from the village councils or disproportionately represented (Eshiet, 2010). This low participation in policy and decision-making reinforces the obstacles to social and economic inclusion because if women are not involved in decision-making, their needs are therefore, unlikely to be heard and acted upon. Hence, government policies often do not address the peculiar needs of women in the communities.

Equally, women's role as care givers also affects their optimum contributions in income-generating activities through associations. Family commitments, responsibilities for social care (children, elderly, and disabled) which are compounded by poor facilities and support services such as adequate housing, accessible drinking water, energy, good roads and effective transportation, pose as major obstacles to women's time and efficiency in income generating activities. Despite these limitations, rural women through the auspices of their associations have still become empowered by engaging in diverse socio-economic activities as revealed by findings of an empirical study of women's associations by Eshiet (2010). Therefore women's associations can serve as catalysts for rural transformation if given the enabling environment devoid of socio-cultural and political constraints.

Women's Associations as Potential Catalysts for Rural Transformation

Rural women's associations have great potentials to harness the abundant material and human resources available in the rural areas of Nigeria for rural transformation and thereby unlock the socio-economic development potentials of rural Nigeria. They can do this through mobilization of rural women for popular participation in socio-economic activities. Utilizing the power and strength that come from numbers, women's associations can contribute immensely to rural transformation within the framework of an enabling environment devoid of gender-based socio-cultural constraints. As the Food and Agriculture Organization (2011) has observed, women do not have equal access to resources and opportunities that would enhance their productivity in the agricultural and rural enterprises sectors. Thus, if these barriers are removed, women's associations' productive activities would be enhanced and associations' activities could contribute to rural transformation in the following ways –

Improved Agricultural Productivity – Since women constitute the bulk of agricultural producers (FAO, IFAD and World Bank, 2009) enhancing their associations' access to agricultural inputs such as land, technology, credit, extension services and information will enable women to unlock the untapped agricultural potentials of the rural areas. This will result in increased food production both for consumption and further processing within the food chain.

Rural Industrialization – Networks of women's associations who are engaged in the production of similar goods can serve as catalysts for rural industrialization through the establishment of cottage industries. Given the requisite financial and technical aid from relevant government agencies, women's associations could establish small-scale food processing industries such as juice extraction from fruits (pawpaw, orange, carrot, pineapple, etc.); flour processing from tuber and grains (cassava, yam, potato, corn, millet, soya beans, etc.); oil processing from palm kernels, coconut, groundnut, etc. Also handicraft industries such as weaving, pottery, carving, etc. could be established. These will reduce wastage, generate employment opportunities and lead to increase in rural incomes, therefore reducing rural poverty and migration to urban centers.

Improved Marketing and Distribution Networks – Women's associations given the requisite assistance would serve as channels for marketing rural produce. This will eliminate the exploitation of rural producers by middle men, thus ensuring that goods get to the consumers at a reduced cost, while at the same time boosting the income of the producers. Similarly, improved marketing means enhancing products value through improved packaging, branding and advertisement. These will create awareness for rural products, thus resulting in higher demands and sales. It will also create avenues for exports. The resultant effects will be an increase in production, income and the widening of employment opportunities. The totalizing effect will be an improvement in the rural economy and the general well-being of rural dwellers.

Mass Mobilization and Information Dissemination - Women's associations could be used as channels for mass mobilization of rural dwellers as well as tools for dissemination of information on government development programmes such as family planning, nutrition, immunization, sanitation, health education (maternal and child care, Covid19, HIV and malaria prevention, etc.), adult literacy, and political participation (voter's registration, collection of voter's card and voting in elections). They could serve as platforms for civic engagement with relevant governmental agencies for effective and efficient service delivery in the communities (Eshiet, 2019). Thus, women's associations can assist in bringing governance nearer to the people. This invariably results in grassroots' participation in governance with the accompanying dividends.

CONCLUSION

Rural women's associations play a vital role in community development. They are engaged in both productive and reproductive activities which are imperatives to the survival and well-being of rural dwellers. However, their maximum capabilities are yet to be exploited due to political and socio-cultural hindrances. Given the enabling environment, women's associations can serve as catalysts to unlock the untapped socio-economic development potentials of rural Nigeria towards rural transformation. As recognized by the Addis Ababa Action Agenda that the resources, knowledge and ingenuity of voluntary groups should complement the efforts of government in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, it therefore, puts a premium on federal, state and local governments to adopt appropriate policies and actions that would create the enabling environment for women's associations to utilize their optimum capabilities in their socio-economic pursuits, which will invariably kick start the unlocking of the untapped socio-economic development potentials of rural Nigeria.

Recommendations

To create an enabling environment, this study advocates the creation of context relevant industrial parks in rural areas across Nigeria by national, state and local governments, in order to provide the requisite technology and other infrastructure that would aid women's agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Equally, government and other development bodies should provide grants to associations so as to give them access to the requisite finances needed to boost their income generating activities. Similarly, in marketing their goods and services, associations should collaborate with the relevant governmental agencies to do so. This will reduce middle men who often serve as intermediaries in the marketing of women's goods and services and so do exploit them in the process. To give women a voice in the community, their decision-making power should be enhanced through inclusion of women's representatives in village councils beyond token levels. Finally, women should be given access to land and other infrastructure through purposive legislation and enforcement of such legislation.

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