

Challenges of Self-Help Projects in Rural Communities of South-East States of Nigeria: The Case of Igbo-Eze South Area of Enugu State

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Abstract

This study was carried out to investigate the practice of self –help projects in Igbo rural communities of South-East Nigeria with particular reference to those of Igbo–Eze South Area of Enugu state. It was achieved using the content analytical approach and oral interview methods. Community leaders of selected towns were interviewed on the subject matter based on which the existence status and level of practice of the self-help programs were examined. It was discovered that the age-long practice has dwindled appreciably on account of certain time-line factors associated with human growth and development the end result of which has, in the present, impacted negatively on the consanguine bonds and societal cohesion that propelled communal thinking in the past. The study recommended that the traditional institutions like age grade, umu-ada, etc, be resuscitated and encouraged to take up the lead once again in initiation and execution of self-help programs. It also recommended that governments should call corrupt community leaders and project officials to order so as to checkmate the continued diversion of money meant for projects to personal gains.

Keywords: Rural communities, self-help projects, Igbo Land, traditional institutions, proram leaders.

Introduction

Self-help project is an age long practice among the Igbo Communities of South Eastern Nigeria. The ancient Igbo communities had always organized themselves in the manner that would enable them solve their problems communally. Meeting halls were built, roads were constructed and maintained, village squares and markets were also built, and neighbourhood security watch were established and maintained communally. Communities and villages had networks of roads and pathways connecting to other villages, streams, markets and farm lands. The traditional administrative systems stipulated functions for every group in the society or community, such as, men, women, children, young men, young women, old men, and old women groups respectively. Members of each group were conscious of their functions and would not readily deviate or become defiant of the established norms. It is an age long practice through which communities improved the living standards of their people. The communities were known to be self-reliant and were able to sustain their social,

economic, religious and political needs. This practice was both participative and all involving, and as it is today every adult member of each community has a role to play. Echegu (2008) sees self-help project as a “self-relevant end product of community development, and as that which brings about the development of a community enabling the people to exploit, to their advantage, those resources which would have been lying dormant and untapped thereby making the people to suffer continually in ignorance and poverty”. Ndukwe (2005) defines self-help practice as strategies which do not involve actions by government; asserting that it is a strategy for inducing progress in rural communities which do not involve action by government. In support of Ndukwe(2005), Akredeolu (1995) opines that self-help projects are always initiated by the people themselves according to the needs of the entire people in the community adding that labour required for the projects is usually supplied free by the appropriate age grade. Also Eyaet *al*(2001) noted that the organization and execution of community self-help projects from *abinitio* have always been through the age grade system and other social organizations (e.g. Women Associations). He further opined that projects such as community hospitals, churches, markets and schools were embarked upon to guide the development of different communities since it appears difficult for government to cater for all the needs of the rural communities. In corroboration of the view by Eyaet *al*(2001), Alumode (2002) opined that “The age grade s engage in community development through communal work such as clearing planting ,harvesting and participation in road building and maintenance, also in helping to perform certain tasks that are of importance to the community .”According to Rodney 1986, the rise of age grade which cut across many families helped in the organizing of self-help efforts as communal labour are entered by the cross section of the community to make work more efficient. In this study self-help project can be defined as a combination of individual efforts and talents with a view to bettering the lots of their communities. Be that as it may, the practice of this important phenomenon appears to be declining in Igbo rural communities over the years, due to over reliance and dependence on government for the provision of social infrastructure. This has led much to the present state of rural neglect and decay in Igbo land.

The study is intended to:

- Compare the practice of self-help project in the past with the present in Igbo-Eze South LGA of Enugu State
- Identify factors that facilitate or militate against the program
- Explore possible ways of encouraging or revamping the communal spirit of embarking on self-help projects among the rural communities in Enugu State especially in Igbo-Eze South LGA.

Challenges of Self-Help Projects

We shall begin by comparing the past with the present with regard to the conditions or factors that helped to enthrone the spirit of embarking on self-help projects among the Igbo communities of the South Eastern Nigeria. This comparison is summarized in Table 1.0. In the past, towns, villages and communities were organized in a way that every member of each community or society was roundly known and identified in terms of family background (pedigree), strength of personal character, and his individual ability and capacity; and so every person was held as an integral part of the mainstream society. At present, this state of oneness, cohesion and integration seems to have been eroded by Western civilization. The age grade system, the Umu-Ada (Daughters of the land), the Umu-Okpu (titled women), and the Ndi –Oha or Ndi-Ama (titled men) institutions appear to be dwindling and this has posed some challenges in the organization and practice of self-help project programs in many rural communities in Igbo land.

Table 1.0: The Factors Determining the Success/Failure/Existence Status of Self-Help Projects In Igbo Land:-Past and Present

Past	Present
<p>Communities were close and cohesive and existed as large consanguine families delineated into 'Ekwus' and 'Umunnas' (i.e. closer and extended families), kindred and clans that inhabited villages and hamlets in one contiguous or split geographical location/s.</p> <p>Every member of the society complied with the community's code of conduct and upon breach of the code was promptly and accordingly punished to maintain law and order.</p>	<p>Communities today comprise people of the same or other ethnic origins who find themselves in the particular location/s for work and sustenance of life. Members may come from different cultural and social backgrounds.</p> <p>Closeness and cohesiveness can only obtain if neighbours are compatible socially or if members agree to unite to pursue common goals, but not necessarily if they are bound by consanguinity. Breach of law is visited under the extant penal codes of the Nigerian constitution or under the customary law and order, but not under any code of conduct established by the community.</p>
<p>The traditional institutions like the age-grades, Ndi-Oha, Umu-Okpuh, etc, were in vogue and different groups competed for fame, superiority and recognition.</p>	<p>Many of the traditional institutions are hardly in existence today as few people can afford the induction requirements; rather there are town unions which are structured to accommodate the membership of everybody with marginal costs, age notwithstanding. Nevertheless, there are very few social groups that come together as friends for merriment and entertainment with little or no interest for communal projects execution, let alone competing for fame or recognition on projects that would benefit the communities.</p>
<p>Self-help projects system flourished well because societies were almost corrupt free.</p> <p>Communalism was part of the cultural inheritance of the people; all must join hands to provide and maintain roads, water sources, markets, places of worship, meeting halls, and even festival and play grounds. Individualism did not work much in the provision of social amenities except in the carrying out of family responsibilities by the respective heads.</p>	<p>Corruption and sharp practices are much and so hinder the easy flow and completion of self-help projects in the rural communities. Communal litigations against fraudsters have more often brought disunity, rancour and nepotism issues leading to discouragement of the people to pursue common goals.</p> <p>Individuals undertake independent ventures and projects without involving others or the community. Sinking of water boreholes, establishment of fuel/service stations, markets/plazas, hospitals, hotels, play grounds and entertainment centres are now being established solely by individuals or group of persons purely for profit to the exclusion of other persons who can only benefit when they pay. Few persons can have the spirit of charity to donate such facilities for the</p>

	common good and welfare of the communities. In the present era individualism is in vogue. Governments now court the partnership of well to do individuals and organisations in the funding and execution of development projects under the public-private participation (PPP) policy.
The Colonial administration recognized the cultural and republican disposition of the Igbo to give to themselves what they deserve without depending on outsiders to provide such. Any man who worth himself strived to achieve something for himself without acquiring such things through begging or dependence on others, otherwise he would be an “ <i>efulefu</i> ” (worthless and lazy fellow). The Igbo communalism copies from a single man’s approach-attitude to independence and self-effort. The Colonial government appreciated and encouraged the self-help communal spirit and supplemented such with standard social amenities and infrastructure to the most active communities.	Government of today has appropriated certain programs that deal with providing some matching grants to communities that apply to be included in community self-help projects in partnership collaboration with government. It finds it difficult to redeem its Political Campaign promises given the numerous communities queuing up to benefit from such infrastructure and social amenities. Communities still depend or rely on government to provide the amenities especially if they have sons and daughters serving in in the government. Communities with no such sons or daughters wait in vain.

Time was when schools, hospitals and churches were built through communal efforts. Today, communities tend to depend and over rely on government for provision of socio-economic infrastructure and amenities. Unfortunately, and to every one’s dismay, government at all levels find it difficult to attend to the projects of the communities at the same time due to compelling priorities. On the other hand, the absence of the traditional groups seems to have taken away the kindred spirit and coherence as well as the communal enterprising endeavours among the members of many rural communities. Individualism has taken over.

Even when town unions try to embark on self-help projects, such projects are met with challenges of corruption by devious officials along the stakeholder chain who would want to plan and execute the projects with little or no honesty and accountability. Thus, corruption and unaccountability pass as great challenges. Nevertheless, apart from the above outlined problems which inhibit the realization of self-help projects in Igbo communities, the following stand out remarkably as factors militating against the initiation and successful implementation of self-help programs among rural communities in present day Igboland.

- Inept leadership within the communities leading to poor projects conceptualization, costing and prioritization, and the consequent delay in completion or abandonment of such projects
- Low participation as a result of inappropriate location of projects or due to other nepotism reasons in connection with project location and appointment of implementers.
- Misappropriation of public funds by officials in some communities.
- Lack of organizational ability, (in terms of, technical know-how, managerial competence, for example), lack of moral and financial support, absence of other technical or logistic assistance, etc.

Factors that Engender the Igbo Spirit to Embark on Self-Help Programs

In spite of the outlined challenges encountered in the initiation, planning, execution and general administration of self-help projects in the present day Igboland, there are also prospects of revamping the self-help enterprising spirit of the communal Igbo man, given some enabling factors. The factors that could easily catalyse the revamping of self-help projects in Igbo communities of Nigeria include:

- **Strong Traditional Institutions.** Traditional institutions like the age-grades, Umu-Okpu (titled women), Umu-Ada (daughters of the land), Ndi-Oha (titled men), NdiIchie (elders, usually men), etc, have always been associated positively with competitive eagerness for initiating and execution of communal self-help programs in all Igbo communities in the South East. Revitalizing those institutions in this era will fetch the right atmosphere required for initiating and executing self-help projects among the communities. Even at the present day people still crave to belong to each group as a special mark of honour and recognition. The groups try to create impact in the society by means of the projects executed, or originating of certain ideas and bye-laws to achieve more peaceful coexistence, social harmony and progress for the community.
- **Open Access and Participatory Stance.** Making open the concepts and plans of self-help communal projects at village or freely-attended community meetings, and the carrying of every group in the community along in the choice, location and planning of programs will facilitate the execution of such projects with little or no rancour.
- **Village Gong/Town Crying Publicity.** Mass sensitization through town criers with traditional gongs or with the modern day public address system will help in the mobilization and orientation of communities and members on the proposed projects; this will facilitate common understanding and participation in the projects. The publicity stunts may include emphasis on the need for the community to rather focus on their own self-help programs than to wait indefinitely and rely on government for the provision of all their needs.
- **Healthy Attitude by Government and Donor Agencies.** Government at all three tiers, and donor agencies whether local, national or international, giving adequate and befitting attention to the self-help programs of communities in this modern era will be a no mean morale booster to the people. Such external attention will even ginger up communities to compete with each other in self-help programs as these are about the fastest and surest means of developing the rural hinterlands of the country at minimal costs to government and other co-partners. Moreover, the oversight functions of government should be adequately matched with real prompt fiscal commitment to ensure that the joint government-community funded projects are completed within the tenure of those in power.
- **Special Sanctions and Scrutiny.** Special measures such as introducing laws and bills at State levels in the South East to monitor, scrutinize and curb sharp malpractices in the implementation of self-help projects by assigned officials and executors, are expedient and will push up the speed at which the projects are completed. Government should readily checkmate and punish corrupt and inept community leaders and project officials. The ICPC (Independent Corrupt Practices and Related Offences Commission) and EFCC (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission), and any other organ and agencies of the Nigerian government should be strengthened to focus on the effective handling of communal projects whether or not such projects are under the joint government-community partnership.

The Case of Igbo Eze South Lga

Methodology

To ascertain the existence and extent of practice of self-help project establishments in Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area of Enugu State, community leaders of six autonomous towns in the area were interviewed. The towns include, Ibagwa- Aka, Iheakpu-Awka, Iheaka, Ovoko, Itchi, and Unadu. Ibagwa-Aka and Iheakpu-Awka represent the South Central, Iheaka and Ovoko, the South East, while Itchi and Unadu represent the South West locations respectively. The locations and interviewees and response plans are shown in Table 2.0

Table 2.0: Location and Response Plans To Ascertain the Views of Selected Community Leaders on the Self-help Program in Igbo –Eze South LGA, Enugu State

Town/Community*	TC1	TC2	TC3	TC4	TC5	TC6
Community Leader**	CL1	CL2	CL3	CL4	CL5	CL6
Age of Respondents (yrs)	61	71	63	70	80	58
Response Variable	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6

* TC1 (Ibagwa-Aka); TC2 (Iheakpu-Awka); TC3 (Iheaka); TC4 (Ovoko); TC5 (Itchi) and TC6 (Unadu). **Same as Responden; CL (Community Leader)

In Table 3.0. are the questions asked the respondents (community leaders of the six selected towns).

Table 3.0: Questions Posed to the Community leaders of Selected Towns on the Concept and State of the Self-help Projects in Igbo Eze South LGA

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- (Q1): *In your own understanding what is self-help project?*
 (Q2) *What is your view about the existence and practice of self-help project in the rural communities especially your community?*
 (Q3) *What are the impacts of self-help projects on communities that practice the program?*
 (Q4) *What factors affect or facilitate self-help project execution?*
 (Q5) *As a community leader how, do you think, can the self-help practice be revitalized for accelerated rural growth and development?*
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Results

The answers given by the respondents to each of the five questions are presented in the table of question-response matrix (See Table 4.0).

Table 4.0: Responses ($R_i=1,2,3,\dots,6$)* of the Interviewed Community Leaders (CLs) to Questions ($Q_j=1,2,\dots,5$)** Posed on the Self-help Projects Status in Igbo Eze South LGA

Q_j	Q_1	Q_2	Q_3	Q_4	Q_5
R_1	Pulling their resources together to better the living standard.	Still exists; self-help effort has given us pipe-born water and electricity.	Speeded up social and infrastructural growth and development of the community.	Corruption, lack of finance and accountability among leaders and officials bring it down.	Re-introduce the Age-grade system and other traditional institutions where they do not exist.
R_2	It is joint effort towards a project that will benefit people	It no longer exists as it is used to be.	Achieved fast development of communities	Good leadership, transparency, accountability and individual commitment facilitate it.	Need for technical, and supervisory assistance and financial grants for self-help projects.
R_3	Group effort to achieve desired purpose.	Town unions make the self-help effort but no longer as strong.	Has brought speedy development.	Corruption, and lack of transparency are major setback, while transparency, accountability encourage it.	Mobilization and education of the people to be self-reliant and self-sustaining.
R_4	Joint self-effort to put in place social amenities for all.	It is in practice, and we are not relenting.	Socio-economic and educational growth.	Lack of funds and openness kill self-help; transparency and commitment encourage it.	Town unions should be made to execute at least one project in five years.
R_5	Physical and financial effort to execute projects to benefit the community	Yes by Town unions, which cannot match those of the old traditional institutions	Has fetched faster growth and progress of each community.	Fraudulent practices major setback; good leadership, and accountability boost self-help projects.	Enforce compliance on every member and punish deviants as accordingly.
R_6	Tackling a problem facing a community by its members	It exists; most town unions have projects on board	Brings quick and dependable development of communities	Corruption and lack of accountability retard self-help while good leadership and transparency encourage it	Strengthen oversight functions of government on self-help projects like in the past to build schools, churches, hospitals, etc.

* R_1 , Igwe H.I Eze Traditional ruler of Ibagwa-Aka; R_2 , Igwe OBJ Udaya of IheakpuAwka; R_3 , Sir G.Ugwu (Rtd Perm Sec), Comm. Leader, Iheaka; R_4 , Chief Sir F. Amoke (Rtd Perm Sec.), Comm. Leader, Ovoko; R_5 , Igwe R. Ayogu, Traditional ruler of Itchi; R_6 , Mr H. Ogara (Journalist), Comm. Leader, Unadu. **For identity of the Q variates see Table 3.0.

In Table 4.0 some respondents in Igbo Eze South LGA in Enugu State conceive the self-help program as physical and financial effort by members of a community to execute projects that interest such a community or town, while others view it as the coming together by the members of a community to tackle a problem facing it. The majority of the community leaders admit the existence of the self-help phenomenon but that it no longer is as strong as it was when the traditional institutions were in vogue

Other respondents among the community leaders interviewed gave credit to town unions as the only organ now left that spear head the execution of self-help projects in the areas. All the respondents agree that the self-help programs impacted very positively in the accelerated social and infrastructural growth and development of participating communities. But they pointed to the fact that corruption, lack of commitment, lack of finance and unaccountability of leaders and stakeholders affected self-help programs adversely. On the other hand they were in unison that good leadership, transparency, accountability and individual commitment facilitate or enhanced the program. To revitalize the self-help habit of the communities the respondents all agreed that the Age-grade system and other traditional institutions should be reintroduced where they have ceased to exist. Some respondents were also of the opinion that the town unions branches should be made to execute designated projects in stipulated time limits and that governments should strengthen the oversight functions to veritably partner the communities which embark on self-help programs in the manner similar to the approach by the colonial administration that provided schools, health centres and other social infrastructure. It was also the common view that government should align its relevant agencies to checkmate the excesses of corrupt leaders and officials and equitably punish the culprit who tamper with self-help project funds of the communities.

Discussion

From the responses of the interviewees one can see that self-help projects are practised rural communities, but it is no longer as strong and functional as it used to be when traditional institutions were much in place. Furthermore the weakening of this phenomenon can be adduced to be due to the present non-cohesion of people in village communities and the over reliance on government for provision of social and infrastructural amenities. Government does no longer readily collaborate with communities to achieve the desired physical and socio-economic growth. It was also discovered that corruption, lack of funds and accountability, contribute immensely to the non-smooth running of self-help projects in the present day communities. On the other hand transparency, accountability, individual commitment of leaders and project officials facilitate self-help projects in the rural communities.

Recommendation

From the above the study recommends as follows:

- Traditional institutions like age grades Umu-Ada, Umu-Okpu and NdiIche or NdiOha should be resuscitated and encouraged to take up the lead once again in the initiation and execution of self-help programs, and effort should be made by government and town rulers to ignite competition among the institutions as well as the town union branches. This will also engender appreciable love and cohesion among the people thereby providing the much required synergy for team work.
- Government should emulate the colonial masters who collaborated proactively with villagers to build schools, construct and maintain roads and other developmental infrastructure.

- Government should device a means of calling corrupt community leaders and project officials to order, so that money meant for projects in rural communities will not be diverted to personal gains.
- Cooperative societies situated in each rural location should be encouraged to facilitate self-help projects in those communities

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