

SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: AN OVERVIEW

ASAJU KAYODE

Department of Political Science

Faculty of Humanities, Management and Social Sciences

Federal University, Wukari.

P.M.B 1020, Wukari - Nigeria

Email: asajuk@gmail.com

Tel: +2348035992503

Abstract

Sustainable development is about responding to the needs of the poor in such a way that they will be self-sufficient and be able to participate and contribute to the economic, political and social development of their communities. These, however, had not been the case in most developing countries including Nigeria where the majority of the citizens reside in the rural areas. Despite the various policy measures (i.e. Programmes and projects) put in place by government and other NGOs, the rural areas are still stagnant and the quality of life of her citizenries is at a comatose. The Paper undertook a historical overview of rural development efforts in Nigeria. Specifically, the major Programmes and project geared towards rural development right from independent to date were briefly examined with a view to identifying their suitability to the needs of the rural people, as well as their areas of successes and failures. The paper concludes that various attempts at rural development in Nigeria had been met with acute failure. Major reasons adduced for this failure include poor implementation of these projects and Programmes, lack of government political- will, and the outright imposition of Programmes and projects by the government on the rural populace which are inimical to their needs. A collaborative effort between all the levels of government, other NGOs and the rural communities is therefore required to ensure a sustainable rural development. Above all, government political will is inevitable.

Keywords: *Development, Rural Development, Sustainable Development.*

Introduction

It is no gainsaying that more than half of the population of developing countries including Nigeria lives in the rural areas and depend largely on poorly developed traditional agriculture for their livelihoods. Statistic shows that about one fifth of the world population (i.e about 1.2 billion) who are living in the rural areas are poor (International Fund For Agricultural Development (IFAD). This implied that all efforts at enhancing the wellbeing of the populace should be more focused in the rural areas. But the appalling thing is that structural adjustments have dismantled existing rural systems, but have not always built new ones. Rural development implies the quantitative and qualitative improvement in the wellbeing of the rural populace. However, one of the problems in most developing countries including Nigeria had been that of transforming the rural areas to be an environment conducive for better living. The rural areas in most of these countries are still marked by continuing stagnation and backwardness in access to information that would have improved their living standard; poor production; low incomes and raising a

number of poor people) despite the high rate of development experienced in the urban areas (Wikipedia).

In specific terms, there is a sharp contrast between the rural and urban areas in terms of accessibility to social services i.e. health care, education, communication, electricity, employment, and infrastructural development and quality of life as the rural areas are far behind. Poverty incidence in Nigeria is higher in the rural areas where majority of the populace reside compared to urban areas. Population statistics shows that out of the 140 million people in Nigeria, about 80 million of them lived in the rural areas. These categories of people constitute the subsistence farmers, herdsmen, fishermen, artisans among others (source). Statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) shows that in 2004, poverty incidence in the urban areas was 43.1 percent, while that of rural areas was 63.8 percent. As at 2010, the poverty incident in the rural areas increases to 73.2 percent compared to 61.8 percent in the rural areas.(NBS, 2005, NBS,2010). Poverty in the rural areas is further aggravated by lack of access to good drinking water, good roads, electricity, education, and housing among others. These developments brought to the forefront the importance of sustainable rural development in Nigeria.

Issues of rural development had for sometimes constituted an important agenda of past governments and each government had accorded it a priority in their plans and policy agenda. In realisation of the important place of rural development, successive governments in Nigeria have initiated various policies and Programmes geared towards rural development. But despite these efforts, it seems much has not been achieved as the rural areas are still underdeveloped

Rural development is all about improving the living conditions of the rural communities in such a way as to bridge the gap between these communities and their urban counterparts and to make the rural economic self-sustaining and retentive of its population. It seems many politicians and other public office holders in Nigeria only pay lip services to the issue of rural development. But the question still remains; do these public office holders actually understand the important place of rural development in ensuring sustainable development in Nigeria? If they do, have they actually justify or demonstrate this understanding in their Programmes and projects? Finally, are this programmes and projects in consonance with the needs of the beneficiaries and have these programmes impacted on the life of the rural people? The answers to these questions informed the basis of this paper which is a critical overview of attempts at rural development in Nigeria. The paper examines past efforts put in place by the government in enhancing rural development in Nigeria. This is with a view to understanding and redefining its important place so that it could be accorded its rightful place both in policy making and actions.

The paper is a descriptive and an historical research, thus, it made use of purely secondary data collected from books, newspapers and official documents of some governmental and non- governmental agencies and institutions. In view of the fact that the data collected are qualitative in nature, they were analysed using the content analysis method.

Conceptual Issues

Definition of Rural Development

Rural development has been viewed by many scholars from different perspectives. Until recently, some scholars viewed rural development as synonymous with agricultural development. According to Abubakar (2001), the philosophical stand of rural development was based on the assumption that the rural folks can be rescued from poverty as long as the agricultural production increased. No wonder, early rural development programmes were mainly focused on the agricultural development and other agro- allied activities. However, it has long been realised that agriculture is not the only possible occupation of the rural people, and cannot be the only means of enhancing their well-being. Rural development can be seen as “an effort aimed at creating the external manifestation of an ideal society in form of large scale modern projects or simply as a gimmick”. In this sense, rural development is to physically transform a backwards community to stages represented by symbolic presence of such structures as modern building or town halls, schools, hospitals, roads, and bridge, pipe borne water, electricity etc. (Odiba, 2001)

However, despite the huge financial and material resources expended on various Rural Development Programmes in Nigeria, they did not yield the desired results. So, what then is Rural Development? Rural Development could be defined as a deliberate policy intervention in the rural areas aimed at improving the well-being of the people, improve their productivity capacity so as to raise their income and to integrate the rural areas with national economy for self- reliant economic development.

Mabogunje (1968) defines rural development as the total improvement of the living standards of the low-income population in rural areas on a self- sustaining basis through transforming the socio- spatial structures of their productive activities. Orewa (1997) defines rural development as a Programme which has the objectives and strategies aimed at transforming the citizens in the rural areas from the victim of poverty, ignorance and diseases into a contented human being able to earn an income capable of sustaining a reasonable standard of living for himself and his family. Rural development is the process of improving the quality of life and economic wellbeing of the people living in relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas (Moseley, 2003).

Some of the major components of rural development include, the enhancement of the people’s productive capacity and economic opportunities; the expansion of physical infrastructure and facilities; the improvement of human resources quality through intervention in education, health, etc.; the improvement of the quality of lives of the rural masses (household, groups and individuals); and the strengthening of rural organisation and institution capacities for democratic development(Directorate of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure, DIFFRI 1991).

Thus, the basic objectives of rural development is to organize, develop and utilize available resources(both human and material) in such a manner that inhabitants of rural areas would have the opportunity to meet at least their basic needs(food, clothing, shelter) including provision of education, and health without despoiling or degrading the environment (Adeyemo, 1989). Rural development is indeed the foundation of national development as it is the people that build the nations and that government only act as a catalyst. Therefore, the growth and development of the rural area require a strong ethos of mass participation and sustainability (Obasi, 2013).

Rural development in the holistic sense is a comprehensive development of rural areas in terms of enhancing the standard of living of the inhabitant, increasing their income and transforming the entire rural areas from a predominantly subsistence one to that which is market oriented. (Dalhatu, 2006)

Azizi (1979) underscores the need for an equitable distribution of resources; the formation of local organisations or socio-economic groups to oversee the judicious utilisation of the available human and material resource. He also advocates for the diversification of the rural economy to increase its multiplier effects on employment opportunities and the improvement of the quality of life of the local populace as the necessary conditions for rural development. This, he predicated on an effective policy of social services that will improve social relations and political and administrative capacity for planning and implementation of community development to provide linkages with the rest of the economy and protect the legitimate interest of the rural population.

In view of the above discussions, Rural Development encompasses the entire germane of rural life including the economic, political, social, and cultural development of the rural people. Thus sustainable rural development implied improving the quality of life for the rural poor by developing capacities that promote community participation, health and education, food security, environmental protection and sustainable economic growth, thereby enabling community members to leave the cycle of poverty and achieve their full potential. However, studies have shown that the level of rural development envisaged has not been achieved in the rural areas in Nigeria. Ehaghene (1987:112) gave a vivid picture of the situation in the rural areas in Nigeria thus:

There was a feeling of desertion, loneliness and deprivation clearly written on the faces of the rural dwellers.... The villages are thinly populated with old people and children. The rush to urban centre brought about by oil boom of 1970's had attracted young men and women away from home

For the past five decades, nothing had really changed. The rural areas are still in a deplorable state of neglect, with no pipe borne water, electricity, healthcare services, good roads education etc. The main feature of the rural areas in Nigeria has been that of depression, degradation, poverty, and deprivation. The high rate of rural- urban migration is one the consequences of this neglect. Thus, it seems the previous efforts at rural development have failed.

Origin of Rural Development in Nigeria

There have been different views on the origin of the concept of rural development. Some scholars argued that the concept emerged long during the traditional societies, while others were of the view that it started during the colonial era.

Okunola (1974) asserts that the concept of rural development started during the traditional era when people engaged themselves in self- help projects and provided social amenities such as roads, village halls, market squares, and constructing bridges across streams, etc. He concluded that self-help needed for rural development had existed in the traditional societies before the concept was introduced by the western world.

Ugwu (2000) however observes that rural development received a greater impetus during the colonial era with the introduction of indirect rule. The District Officers used the Warrant Chiefs, Obas and the Emirs extensively to mobilise the people for self-help projects. This later changed in the 1920's when taxation was introduced which led to the refusal of the rural communities to provide communal labour for public works. The people expected the government to provide them with the social amenities since they paid tax to the government.

With the 1955 Local Government Law, the local government authorities were empowered to take full responsibility for rural development. This provision of the law, therefore, enables the District Officers to champion rural development efforts in their districts. However, the government provided matching grants and technical aids to communities which embarked on self- help projects (Yahaya, 196--). Right from this time, rural development became a shared responsibility between the people and the government.

Critical Overview of Rural Development efforts in Nigeria

Past government efforts at rural development actually started in the 1940s. However, it gained impetus in the 1950s. According to Adeyemo (1989), government involvement in rural development started after the Second World War when efforts were made to encourage settlement schemes in the then relatively empty areas of the middle belt. These schemes included the Kontangora Land Development Schemes, Bamende- Cross River- Calabar Schemes and the Niger Agricultural Scheme. All these Schemes came into being in the 1940s, but as at the mid-50s, they had become a moribund without producing the desired results (Ajayi, 1987)

From the late fifties, various attempts were made to developed peasant agriculture by the colonial government through several schemes in order to promote rural development. The western region first introduced the Farm Settlement Scheme between 1959 and 1960 and other regions immediately followed suits. The objective of the scheme was to settle young men of farm holdings which were developed under the direction of officials of Ministry Of Agriculture in the region (Obaitan, 1997). As rightly asserted by Odiba (1999), the nature of rural development in pre- civil war Nigeria was largely a colonial legacy. The development institutions that were seen by the first crop of nationalists as exploitative and extortive during the colonial days later became structural imperative that served the pre-civil war economies of the various regions to a greater height. Some glaring examples were the Cocoa Plantation in Ibadan, the Bende Oil Palm, Rubber Farm Settlement in Abia, and the Biakpan Rubber Estate in Cross River State among others.

These developments became glaring later in the regions as the crops became the economic power of these regions i.e. Cocoa in the west, Groundnut in the North and Rubber in the Midwest. The indigenes of the various regions also formed Cooperative Societies to further enhance greater production. Agriculture, apart from being the major source of income in the country, served as a springboard for other self – help projects. The revenue realised by farmers at individual and cooperative levels was use to paying tax and other levies. The revenue was also used for other development projects, e.g. construction of roads, market, town halls, and schools among others.

In 1976, Eleven River Basin Development Authorities were established with a focus on the exploitation of and development of water resources. These basin authorities were established along the hydrogeological lines to cover the major river basins in the country. Later, the Basin Authorities were increased to reflect state boundary lines. To further highlight their needed responsibilities for rural development, the name River Basin Authority was changed to River Basin Development Authority without any apparent change in structure. Obaitan (1997) was of the opinion that the change was made only for administrative convenience. He further highlighted the major problems or constraints of the authority. These include the high cost of imported contents of some of the large irrigation schemes, socio- economic problems of misplaced priorities, the heavy capital intensive nature of the programme and financial mismanagement.

Also in 1976, considering the skyrocketing National Import Bill, the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) was launched. The major aim of OFN was to mobilise the people towards self-sufficiency in and self-reliance in food production. Obaitan (1997) observes that the problem with the initiative was that the implementation of the programme was limited to the temporary activities of scholars in the rural areas. Also, despite the high cost of the programme, no effective increase was achieved in food production.

He (Obaitan) identifies the following factors as responsible for the inefficiency of OFN, these include heavily bureaucratic structure, which impeded flexibility and exigency in the process of project execution, over-representation of various interest groups and lack of effective coordination between the local government council and the committees set up to implement the programme.

The Green Revolution was launched in 1980. It was a resuscitation of OFN and it was conceived to boost agricultural production in Nigeria and as well enhance rural development through agro-allied industries, construction of feeder roads, provision of housing, provision of water and educational infrastructure. The National Council on Green Revolution was created as the institutional structure to coordinate and monitor the various projects of the Programme. However, the Programme could not create the type of egalitarian society envisaged. The peasants were not organised and cannot be mobilised for production (Obaitan, 1997).

Another attempt at rural development was Back-To-Land Scheme, which was popularised by the Buhari-Idiagbon regime in 1984. The Programme was short-lived as the regime was soon overthrown in a palace coup. Other efforts of the government at that time included the Agricultural and Rural Development Projects and Integrated Rural Development projects (ADP) as it was popularly known, aimed at increasing food production to meet the food needs of the country, so as to reduce the foreign exchange expenditure on food imports. It was also aimed at raising rural incomes thereby rising or enhancing the standard of living of the rural people. It was further aimed at reducing rural-urban drifts and disparity.

The most visible of previous rural development efforts of the government was the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI). DFRRI was established in 1987 as a measure to correct major lapses in the earlier rural development programmes. The Programme initiated a community-based Programme bearing in mind the long history of communal living of the people. Against this background, the Programme mobilised the people through cooperative societies, age groups, trade unions, and craft associations, women organisations, youth organisations, sports and recreational organisations, local security organisation etc for their own development.

DFRRI was also aimed at rural infrastructural development through the construction of feeder roads, provision of portable water, rural electrification, and housing. Furthermore, productive activities were intensified in the area of agriculture, such as storage and processing of agricultural produce, promotion of local technological capabilities to design and fabricate wide-ranging processing machines and equipment. The Programme adopts the integrated approach by encompassing rural community participation in development among others to restore national social and economic prosperity (Obasi, 2013). These infrastructures were inadequately provided and even when provided, they soon become non-functional after installation either due to lack of maintenance or because the equipment is inferior products. Even, in some instances, the equipment or infrastructures installed

were inappropriate for such environment. Most times, executions of these projects were shoddily done without recourse to the quality job.

There were allegations that DFRRRI took credit for past programmes by replacing previous banners or post attesting to the completion of projects executed through the previous Programme, thus exaggerating the reported impacts of the Programme. Also, there were allegations of large-scale embezzlement and poor management and accountability by the implementers of the Programme (Obasi, 2013).

The Better Life Programme was another strategy intended at reaching the rural people, especially the rural women for development. The major setback of the Programme was that most of its activities were concentrated in the urban areas neglecting the rural areas. At the centre of these activities, the urban or elite women were more conspicuous than the rural women. Most of the glamorous and flamboyant activities of BLP were exhibited in the national and state capitals. The wives and mistresses of prominent members of the ruling and business elites high-jacked the Programme for their narrow and selfish interests (Anele, 2012). The rural women who were the major target of the Programme was cut off from the mainstream of events and activities of the Programme.

Another strategy aimed at rural development was the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP). FEAP was established in 1997 with the primary objectives of reducing poverty in Nigeria by stimulating various socio-economic activities in all the wards of the local government areas in the country. This is aimed at raising the productivity of rural populace. Just like BLP, FEAP was full of pomp and pageantry in the cities without any positive impact on the rural people.

The National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) was introduced in the year 2001 with a special focus on the eradication of absolute poverty in Nigeria. NAPEP was charged with the responsibility of monitoring and coordinating all poverty eradication efforts of the government at all levels. The earlier strategies of the NAPEP include Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), Rural Infrastructural Development Scheme (RIDS), and Natural Resources Development and Conservative Scheme (NRDCS).

Some of the interceptive programmes of NAPEP include Capacity Acquisition Programme (CAP), Farmer Empowerment Programme (FEP), Micro-finance Coordination Programme, NAPEP Tele-Com Programme, NAPEP Dangote Programme, NAPEP Promise Keeper Programme (PKP), and the Community Economic Sensitization Scheme (COMESS).

In an attempt to overcome the inadequacies of previous programmes, the Programme adopted a bottom –up approach to make it rural focused. Although, observers' comments on the effectiveness of the Programme all pointed to the fact that much has not been achieved.

From the above analysis, it is clear that past government efforts at rural development had failed. Apart from some of them, implementation constraint identified above, other reasons were adduced by scholars for the failures of these programmes. Nagya (2001) identified the following reasons for the failure of past government efforts at rural development in Nigeria, these include; Lack of proper understanding of the rural settings, misconception of rural problems, and lack of comprehensive planning, which leads to poor implementation of programmes. To him, past government efforts at rural development were externally induced and the bulk of the activities take place in the urban areas and worst still from the federal government.

According to Nagai (2001), one major limitation of the past Agricultural Development Programmes, i.e. River Basin, OFN, Green Revolution, ADP, etc, was that the major stakeholders who are the farmers were excluded in planning and implementation process. This greatly affects the rate of adoption of some of the strategies by these peasant farmers. Farmers were also relocated or removed from their traditional environment and placed under the advice of experts and domination of government officials. This made the farmers regard themselves as labourers working on government farms. Added to this, was the constant conflict between the government officials and farmers.

Another major defect of these Agricultural Programmes was that they were too expensive in nature. A Large sum of money was spent in acquiring land for the projects, building houses for displaced settlers, buying major inputs, among others Akin- George (2002). Apart from this, at the implementation level, some essential inputs such as improved seedlings, fertilizer were inadequately provided. The extension services needed for creating awareness on the use of such inputs were bought over by middle farmers who in turn sold them at an exorbitant price to the peasant farmers. Besides this, was the fact that these inputs were not released at the time they were required.

Bureaucratic bottlenecks and undue interference by the government in the activities these programmes constitute another major limitation. Akin- George (2002) observes that Programmes like Green Revolution and River Basin Development Authority achieved little success because of the incompetent Boards members and non-commercially minded Chief Executives the Programmes were saddled with.

Corruption and lack of transparency and accountability on the part of the implementers of these programmes constitute another constraint to the effectiveness of these programmes. These come in form of over-invoicing, inflation of contract, diversion of the fund, and the purchase of inferior equipment used for projects. In terms of credit scheme, the fund meant for loans are most times diverted into private pockets of public officers and their collaborators. Thus, the actually targeted beneficiaries of these credit schemes were excluded. Furthermore, the cost of administering the credit scheme was most times higher than the actual money given out as a loan. Finally, most of these rural development Programmes were politically driven without recourse to the implication on the rural populace.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

The problem of rural development in Nigeria now and in the future could perhaps be hinged on the misconception of the terms itself. The historical trend of events on the issue of rural development clearly indicated this unfortunate position which perceives the issue of rural development as only embracing all aspects of agriculture, the combating of erosion, development of infrastructure among others. It is also obvious that the present deplorable state of rural areas has not been due to lack of concrete efforts, because well-meaning efforts had being made in the last five decades to ensure an effective rural development, especially in the areas of agriculture, rural infrastructural development i.e. rural electrification, water, transport, health, education, among others. But the problem was that the programmes were uncoordinated, haphazardly implemented and imposed on the rural populace. As Oyotoye (1981) has rightly asserted, " past government efforts at rural development had failed because of wrong or misguided choice of enterprise, lack of clarity of goals sought to achieve, a dichotomy in policies, shoddy project execution, corruption

and political adventurism”. These problems had therefore jeopardised all efforts at achieving a sustainable rural development in Nigeria.

The paper, therefore, recommends the following:

Since the majority of the citizenry lives in the rural areas, it is pertinent that no meaningful National policy can succeed without the participation or involvement of the rural populace. The rural community who are the major beneficiaries or recipient of these Programmes and projects should be allowed to participate in the policy-making process right from the initiation to monitoring/ evaluation stage.

Recent development had shown that local government alone can not handle the issue of rural development, this, therefore, implies that for all rural development efforts to succeed or make any meaningful impact, it require the collaborative efforts of the three levels of government, other NGOs and the rural populace who are the major stakeholders.

There is also the need for rural mobilization. Rural mobilization implies mobilizing the human and material resources in the rural areas for the creation of a healthy national socio-economic and political environment for the benefit of the rural populace. Therefore, to achieve any meaningful rural development, key villages and community groups, and associations should be identified as a centre for development that would influence their surroundings or environments. This should be in collaboration with their Local Government Authorities.

The habit of paying lip service to the issue of rural development is over; government should be sincere and honest in ensuring a sustainable improvement in the wellbeing of the rural populace. In other words, government political- will is required in the development or the transformation of the rural areas. Therefore rural development remains the key to any sustainable development effort in Nigeria.

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