

JOURNAL OF NIGERIAN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATORS  
*A Journal of the Nigerian Association of Social Work Educators*  
Vol 1, No 2, April, 2012, pp. 1-

**Indigenizing the Social Work Curriculum: Traditional Structures as Live Wire to Sustainable Community Development Projects in Nigeria.**  
**Veta, Oghenechoja Dennis**

**Abstract**

Social work is a profession that strongly recognizes the importance of social context in teaching, learning, practice and in research work. The profession's activities are not strange to Nigerians and Africans as a whole in aspect of initiating and attaining sustainable community development projects. This had predated colonial era. Social work is only differently packaged, induced and influenced by Western concepts and theories. The paper argues that for effective teaching, learning and practice of social work in order to attain sustainable community development projects in Nigeria and other African countries, indigenizing the social work curriculum is paramount. In this regard, emphasis should be placed on the importance of traditional structures and other formations such as town unions, and clubs; which reflect the African heritage. The Nigerian communities, in the pre-colonial era, with these traditional structures, were able to easily sensitize and mobilize their members to embark on self-help projects. These (projects) they planned and executed by labour and financial contributions. Citizen participation was upheld and projects were sustainable. It is the contention of the paper therefore, that traditional structures and other indigenous community development formations be given adequate recognition and embedded in our curriculum (teaching

and learning). Thus, in practice, they will be duly recognized, sensitized and mobilised to participate in community development process towards attaining success and sustainability of development projects in Nigeria and other African countries.

**Veta, Oghenechoja Dennis**

Mr. Veta, Oghenechoja Dennis, B.Sc. (Hons.), M.Sc. in Social Work (Community Development) (Nig.). He was the Acting Chief Community Development Officer in the Delta State Community Development Area Office, Warri South West Local Government, Ogbe-Ijoh (2003-2006). Presently, he is a Senior Community Development Officer and lecturer, Department of Social Development Studies, Centre for Social Development Studies (Affiliated to the University of Benin, Benin-City), Otorho-Abraka, Delta State.

**Introduction**

Certain agencies are basic in the evolution of human societies; they become overtly visible as soon as societies take shape. They are therefore, referred to as traditional agencies because they are fundamental to existence of the societies. In Nigeria and most parts of Africa, certain social groups characterise the rural communities (Akhude, 1992). These traditional structures have played vital roles in terms of social development in the various human societies, especially in Nigeria and other African societies. This was salient during the pre-colonial era when community development projects such as construction of homesteads, roads or pathways, bridges, clearing of farmlands, building of town halls and markets, defence of external enemies and provision of other social infrastructural facilities required at that primitive stage of development. Citizen participation of community members in community development process was upheld (bottom-top approach) and most of these projects were

generally accepted and being utilised till date therefore they are sustainable. World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) sees sustainable development as that development which meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs.

However, the colonial epoch defined community development in a different dimension. Decisions on issues affecting the lives of the people were taken by the government and handed down to the people, thus relegating to the background the former traditional structures. Top-bottom approach to community development was triggered. This continued into the post independent era till when government could not sustain the needs of the communities and things fall apart. These traditional structures, with which communities were able to resist their external enemies, construct and maintain roads, build markets, town halls, as pointed out by Oni and Ohiani (1987) were made ineffective.

It has been stressed that the obvious poverty level of our people (Nigerians) created the need for the first national development plan up to the fourth and the current vision 20-20-20. The federal and state governments have also established various development commissions; in all of these, sustainable development is almost a mirage. This could be attributed to the view that development is influenced by colonial experience and Western theories of modernisation and economic growth (Osie-Hwedie, 1993). Also, Olowu, et al (1991) observed that traditional structures or institutions either lack the power or are refused recognition.

In order to attain sustainable community development projects in Nigeria, as well as other African countries, social work

has relevant roles to play; but it has to shed off some of the Western and European culture. Hence, indigenising the social work curriculum to reflect the traditional structures and their practice of indigenous social work in aspect of sustainable community development projects in Nigeria is paramount. Therefore, it is the main objective of this paper to identify some of the traditional structures or institutions and their community development activities in the pre-colonial societies with the view to recognise them and embed their community development practice in the curriculum (teaching and learning). Thus, in modern practice, they will be duly recognized, sensitized and mobilised to participate actively in community development process.

### **An Overview of Sustainability in Community Development Projects**

The intellectual discourse on sustainable development is dichotomized, anchoring on either economic or ecology school of thought. Economists believe, almost, in the unlimited possibility of substituting man-made and human capital for natural resources through human inventiveness and institutional responsiveness (Schuh, 1987), while the ecologists view it as absolute scarcity in respect of assimilative capacity of the environment, with regard to human activities, is limited; and to this extent, a constraint on economic growth (Underwood and King, 1989).

World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) defines sustainable development as a development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Therefore, sustainable community development seeks improved public health and a better quality of life for all its residents by limiting waste, preventing pollution, maximising conservation and promoting efficiency and developing local resources to revitalise

the local economy. Thus, sustainable development is the human ability to survive by means of the rational use of renewable resources, by restraining from disrupting the ecosystem or overexploiting natural resources and by refraining from activities that destroy cultural or societies and instead allow them to reach their potentials (Ballara, 1991).

According to Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (2003) sustainability in community development refers to that development that maintains or enhances economic opportunity and community well-being while protecting and restoring the natural environment upon which people and economies depend. Jepson (2007) points out that sustainable development is about continuity; and at the local level, it is about residents looking ahead not just twenty years, but a hundred years or more and finding their community still thriving. Buttressing this view, Ilkerin Loita Intergral Development Programme (2009) considers an initiative to be sustainable when it is capable of continuing into the future generations in a socially desired and dynamic way.

Popular participation is shown to be relevant to sustainable development. It is the active process whereby beneficiaries influence the direction and execution of development projects rather than merely receiving a share of the project benefits (Paul, 1987). Supporting this view, Bamberger (1986) refers to it as an evolutionary process in which activities at the micro level can create the conditions for increased community involvement in the planning and implementation of development programmes at the local, regional or national levels.

Consequently, this gives rise to the concept of felt needs. In all ramifications, sustainable development is for the people and therefore, it must be designed to meet their felt needs. Hence all community development efforts must be derived from the felt

needs and aspirations of the people and not in response to the needs of the urban political economy (Idachaba, 1980). Accordingly, Akukwe (1988) sees felt needs as what the people recognized as problems in life. When people engage themselves in the process of collective thinking, discussing and deciding on what they really want; and then planning, organising and acting unanimously to implement the decisions they have reached, they develop more fully their potentialities to precipitate positive changes in their environment and provision of services and amenities that people are seen to need (Ezeh, 1999).

Generally, sustainable development has to do with participatory development, human development and environmental protection. An approximate measure that tends to capture these ingredients was formulated by UNDP in 1990: The Human Development Index (HDI), its aim is to capture the broader picture of human welfare by considering three indicators: life expectancy, literacy and living standard (Eboh, 1995).

### **Implementation Strategies for Achieving Sustainable Development**

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2001) views a strategy for sustainable development as comprising a co-ordinated set of participatory and continuously improving processes of analysis, debate, capacity strengthening, planning and investment. Similarly, UNDP (2006) views sustainable development strategies as interactive process of planning, setting priorities, implementing choices relevant to a country's sustainable development needs, and learning from experience to continually improve people's lives; this requires strong commitment, leadership and improved coherence of existing processes.

Efekwa (1992) posited that the local people should be

involved in the development of their respective areas, have their objectives and priorities defined and participate actively in making decisions on matters that concern them. This, he recommended, could be attained through local political education, initiative and understanding. Omoruyi (2001) supporting this view, noted that placing emphasis on democratic procedure, voluntary participation by the citizens, recognition and involvement of the indigenous or local leadership structure, proper identification of the common objectives of the people during the process of planning and ensuring that project to be executed are carefully and jointly selected or decided by the community and government agency are strategies to achieve sustainable development. To Bamberger (1986) popular participation at early stages results in better project design, ensures social acceptability of the project, project benefits are equitably distributed because beneficiaries are committed and it is easier to mobilize resources. He further noted that community institutions developed during the life of the project will continue to provide benefits after the project is completed. Safe water (2000) observes that the level of community participation should be an active process by which they influence the direction and execution of the projects by involving in planning, implementation, funding and maintenance. Similarly, Agunwamba (1995) opined that by motivating the communities and involving them especially in the execution and sometimes maintenance of the project reduces cost. He observed, also, that their involvement helps to inculcate in them a sense of ownership, responsibility to protect, and use the system carefully. Also, Cernea (1985) stated that where socio-structural institutional variables are left unrecognized or mishandled the project will fail, irrespective of the body sponsoring or amount of fund allocated to it.

According to Eboh (1995), strategies for rural

development in Nigeria include investing in human development to alleviate rural poverty, human misery and stabilize population, ensuring food security through rural compensation measures, creating incentives for rural growth and employment by improving access to production resources and institutional services, empowering rural people via participatory and community oriented development that is woven around local principles, skills, and technologies, and protecting the environment by generating and facilitating appropriate resource management systems. Also, Awa (1992) identifies direct development of the individual and improved local administration as strategies for sustainable development. In the same vein, Morgan (1990) posited that few programmes of rural development can succeed and be sustained without a parallel development of human resources. Sharing almost the same perspective, Maduekwe (1992) pointed out that strategies for sustainable development include financing rural agricultural development through co-operative groups, financing small scale industries, and establishment of banks and other business houses in the rural areas. He further noted that there should be policies and acts that provide loans and encourage private investments, industrialization of the rural areas, population control, increased production, increased education, provision of higher employment, increased participation of many adults in decision making processes in all that affect their lives, equitable distribution of income and wealth, and maximization of opportunity for human creativity.

Udoeye (1992) is of the view that community self-help development is a strategy for sustainable development. He explains that self-help development should be an induced change for achievement of community improvement, a well articulated programme and an effort to assist individual to acquire attitudes,

skills and concepts required for democratic participation. Similarly, Muoghalu (1992) observes that self-help development as a strategy is in two major phases: concentration on agricultural co-operative movements and execution of socio-infrastructure projects by communities.

### **Traditional Structures and Sustainable Community Development Projects**

#### **(i) The Age-grades**

In the pre-colonial era, various community development projects were embarked on and they were successful and sustained. Such projects were executed by community members on volition, mostly by the age-grades, peer groups and women organisations, while issues of land allocation were handled by the traditional rulers in collaboration with their traditional chiefs and kinship heads. These groups and organisations were held together by a common group interest/ ideology and goals. Inherent in them is the volition among members and the group interest to achieve better existential experience (Okeibunor, 1995). These agents of community development performed several tasks such as construction, re-construction and maintenance of inter and intra community roads, clearing of streams or water points, clearing of the village squares and market places. A specific age-grade may embark on a particular project and involve others if their resources proved inadequate; in such cases the entire adult members may be involved.

Apart from the group voluntary approach to community development, communal labour was also a strategy. In the findings of Udoe (1992) prior to the onset of colonial administration, communal societies in Imo and Anambra had employed communal efforts as the mechanism for mobilising community resources to provide physical improvement and functional facilities in the

social, political and economic aspect of their lives. It was further observed that communal labour was employed in constructing homesteads, clearing farm lands, roads or path ways construction, bridge making and the provision of other social- infrastructural facilities required at that primitive stage of development. It is interesting to note that these projects were regarded and referred to as communal projects, thus, solidarity, community participation in community development projects and sustainability of such projects were enhanced.

### **(ii) The Town Unions/Clubs**

The development of town unions became feasible since the end of the World War II, 1945 (Akhude, 1992). The few educated Nigerians who resided in the urban centres desired that the level of social-economic development which characterised the urban centres be equally transferred to the rural areas, therefore, they went home and mobilised their kiths and kilns to embark on community development projects. Impliedly, town unions and even clubs developed as a result of urban centres created during the colonial era. These town unions/clubs also acted as agents of community development. Ekpe (1997) sees formation of town unions in the urban areas as a result of development of towns in the mid 1940s with the purpose of making their influence felt in their various villages, to help their members retain their bearings in the strange and anonymous society and to help fellow townsmen in need.

Moreover, town unions in Nigeria and most African nations have contributed widely to the development of their various communities in terms of social infrastructures or community development projects. Akhude (1992) asserts that many of the town unions mobilised their members and embarked on the provision of pipe-borne water, rural electrification,

construction of access roads, building of post offices and civic centres/recreational parks

Despite the contributions of the town unions/clubs to community development projects, their strategy was mainly on mobilisation of their members and not on involvement of the community members in the development process. This had led to inadequate prioritisation of community felt-needs, feelings of indifference to participate on the part of non-members of such town unions. Thus, most of the projects were not sustainable. These town unions operate with the Western Liberal Societies and issues are settled on popular votes rather than conviction and consensus, therefore, development projects founded in this atmosphere may not survive (Okeibunor, 1995).

### **Indigenising the Social Work Curriculum in Nigeria**

Social Work profession, with its objectives, is relevant to Nigeria and other African countries. It had been effectively practised in the pre-colonial African traditional societies as Indigenous Social Work. All development efforts were communal. In the colonial era, it took a different dimension. Emphasis was on individualism, urbanisation and industrialisation. In the colonial period, the capitalist attitude of individualism came into the system and with this individualism people began to think about their personal goods only and problems began to be individualised and could no longer be collective problems as before (Okafor, 2003). In this vein, the concept of 'Self-help Project(s)' was developed against the traditional and cultural concept of 'Communal Project(s)' as existed in the pre-colonial African societies. A new approach (top-bottom) as well as other foreign strategies to community development was introduced, hence we have failed woefully in the implementation of all the development plans in Nigeria. Okoye (1992) stressed that sustainable development

prescriptions derived from postulates developed outside Nigeria have characteristically failed to produce the desired results. Also, Tamm (1991) noted that the extrapolation of the relevance of a particular experience of a society to another, involves separation of contextual determined from the more generally valid features and then super-imposing the latter on another social, cultural and economic environment.

In the light of the above revelations, for social work profession to attain successful and sustainable community development projects in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa its curriculum has to be indigenised. That is, the teaching and learning should recognise and reflect the place of traditional structures, especially the age-grades, must be considered and embedded in the curriculum. Thus, in practice, they will be duly recognized, sensitized and mobilised to participate in community development process towards attaining success and sustainability of community development projects in Nigeria and other African countries. However, this is not total teaching, learning and practice of indigenous social work so that trainees can practice in Africa and other continents.

### **The Benefits of Indigenising Social Work Curriculum**

There are various benefits of indigenising the social work curriculum in Nigeria and Africa in general. The cherished African cultural heritage and practice of indigenous community development social work, which greatly enhances citizen participation in development process, would be reflected to attain successful and sustainable community development projects. According to Dikirr (2008) several benefits are indeed expected to flow from the going back to Africa's roots movement such as:

- (i) Empowerment of individuals, sub-groups and local communities in managing their own resources and

- affairs;
- (ii) Restoring the rapid eroding kinship network of solidarity;
- (iii) Overcoming the seemingly intractable limitations of Western implanted ideas/models and the restrictive outlook, which they engender;
- (iv) Cultivating a more genuinely grounded sense of belonging to a place;
- (v) Boosting Africans pride in themselves and dignity in their hitherto immobilised cultural values;
- (vi) Strengthening virtues of collaboration, teamwork and cooperative problem solving mechanisms. And
- (vii) Providing individuals and their communities with a renewed sense of hope, audacity to dream new dreams and the confidence in, not only, creating their own futures but also in determining their own destiny.

## Conclusion

This paper has tried to look at the concept of sustainability in community development projects, the strategies of implementing sustainable development, the key players in planning and implementation of community development projects in the traditional African societies and their strategies. The need for indigenising social work and the benefits were enumerated. It was discovered that the traditional African societies, especially, the Nigerian communities in the pre colonial era gave freedom to all citizens to participate actively in community development process. This was identified as the major reason for sustainability of such projects. Communal interest/common ideology gave them the impetus to work as a team in order to achieve their prioritised felt-needs. It is therefore, suggested that these traditional structures,

especially the Age-grades, which cuts across the young and old, should be recognised and their practices, which are mainly cultural, be reflected in the social work curriculum. Thus in practice, they could be easily sensitised and mobilised towards attaining successful and sustainable community development projects in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Above all, Africans enjoy the full benefits of indigenising the social work, while social work educators and practitioners will have sense of fulfilled profession.

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