

Influence of Age Grade Associations on Rural Development in Anambra State Local Government System

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Abstract: *This study examined the impact of Age Grade Association as an agent of rural development, self help projects on grassroots development: A study of Anaocha Local Government, Anambra State. What promoted the study is that despite the obvious successes recorded in the recent past in the community self- help projects and grassroots development; there are yet challenges that are yet to be surmounted. Among these challenges is the non-compliance of the well-to- do individuals and elites that are indigence's of the various communities through monetary donation and to use their positions to attract government aids for grassroots development. This therefore brings a huge burden on community self- help project and the grassroots development improvement with particular reference to Awka North Local Government Area. The research has three, objectives, research questions and hypotheses. The study was anchored on diffusion of innovations theory, a term originally coined by Everett Rogers in 1962. The research adopted descriptive survey design; primary and secondary sources of data were employed in this study. The population of the study is 400. Data generated were presented in tables and responses were converted to frequencies and percentages and chi-square was used to test the hypotheses. From the study, the researcher made the following findings; the community unions / associations helped implementation of community self-help projects and grassroots development in Awka North Local Government Anambra State, secondly, the well – to – do individuals and elites that are indigenes should come and develop their communities through monetary donations and use their position to attract government aids for grassroots development in Awka North Local Government Area Anambra State. Thirdly, the continuous contribution of the community clubs and unions / association should be encouraged in order to fast track the general development of the community from the grassroots in Awka North Local Government Area Anambra State Nigeria. Based on the findings, the researcher recommended that: Non-Governmental Organization (N.G.OS), Charity Organizations multi-national companies and other business organizations can invest / grant aid to develop rural areas and help complete some of abandoned community self- help projects that dots all over the place in the rural communities in Awka North Local Government Area Anambra State, Nigeria. Finally, Government Towards capital and developmental projects in grassroots areas and make population be the focus.*

Keywords: Age Grade, Agent, Rural Development, Self Help

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The community is made up of various groups of individuals who operate at various levels, but collectively achieve desired results that may not be achieved individually. For any community to attain any desired development objectives various groups are formed to carry out some activities. One of these groups is the age grade associations, Olufemi (2010). Age grade organizations (AGAs) are social groups in which people of a particular community organize themselves, plan and take actions towards development. They execute their plans with maximum reliance upon community resources and supplement these resources with services and materials from outside. However, age grade organizations approach to self-help involves the fullest participation of all members in the decision making and implementation process. The participation of local people in age grade organization activities is an act involving every member of that community whether resident in that community or outside. It embodies the notion that a community can achieve greater self-determination within constraints imposed by the larger political economy in which it is imbedded. Age grade association in the community development practice is rudimentary that the solution to community problems is sought first within the community and its available resources and capabilities. Hence self-help embodies two interrelated features: (1) it is expected to produce improvements of people's living conditions, facilities, and/or services; and (2) it emphasizes that the process by which these improvements are achieved is essential to the development of the community. Willynilly, the "community" is both improved and empowered as a result. (Christenson & Robison, 2016)

Age grade is an association of people of equal or about the same age, operating within a given territory or area with the aim of individual, collective and societal transformation/development. The organization, structure and activities of age grade practices in most Igbo communities differ. But mainly, they serve as an organ of development, maintenance of peace, law and order, depending on the community they operate. Over the years, traditional and even contemporary Igbo societies have recognized and respected age grade or group system. This may not be unconnected to their roles in community development.

According to Wikipedia (2014) age grade is a form of social organization based on age, within a series of such categories through which individuals pass over the course of their lives. This is to say that, it is people in the same age range. Age grade system is said to be an age long socio-cultural institution in Igbo land, located in the south east of the present day Nigeria. It is one of the oldest institutions used in the administration before the advent of the white missionaries. People of the same age – born same year (grade) or within a two or three year period (group) indentify themselves and come together to form an organization. And because they are about the same age, democracy becomes the order of the day as issues are raised and decisions taken by simple majority.

Ujumadu, (2017) asserted that age grades are groups of persons who, according to societal norms and values, are regarded as people of the same age. Age grades do vary from one community to the other. In some communities, persons within a specific period of three, four or even five years age bracket form an age grade. In some communities, the female wing of the age grade operates independent of the male wing. For instance, due to age difference, a man and his wife could belong to different age grades. He included that the most important roles of age grades include unity among members, maintaining security of lives and property, enforcement of law and order, development and execution of community initiatives and projects, crime control which is a growing area of need in many communities. Others include conflict resolution within the age grade and in the entire community, (Ujumadu 2017).

Obiukwu and Olisa (1992) defined rural development as a concerned improvement of the living standard of the population living in the rural areas on a self- sustaining basis through transforming the socio-economic, socio- spatial and structure of their productive activities, it deals with those methods and strategies designed to improve the economic and social life of the people in rural dwellers.

Age grade association is a social institution that constitutes important system in the social structure of any given society the age grade comprises of persons who are regarded as mates or born within the same age range.

Jeffery, (1950) sees age grade association as “a duty formalized social institution”. Rural development is a situation where the rural dwellers are provided with the basic needs of life such as food, water, shelter enjoyed by the urban dwellers. There are basic needs or amenities absent or lacking in Nkpor Town. The age grades associations help to harness the provision of the above mentioned needs by each group. Taking up one or more of the needs or projects makes them available to the rural dwellers.

The age grade in the traditional Igbo society is the most important agent of socialization apart from the family. Each age grade has definite role or roles it performed for them or community. Generally, age grades functioned in relation to service pertaining to security, sanitation and general administration. Each of them is organized under a leader and some other officials and can answer different names depending on the purpose, time or circumstances surrounding its formation. The general activities and forms of the age grades provide the platforms for the training and orientation of young ones especially the males into adulthood and full membership in Igbo society. In some part of Igbo land, it can lead to a form of initiation which is related to maturity to manhood. (Ishichie, 2017).

However, a review of the age grade system in Igbo communities from pre-colonial to the contemporary shows that, it is a vital instrument for fostering unity, good human relation and development among the Igbo. Thus, their roles have shifted from mere social organization to initiating and executing important social and economic projects in the various Igbo towns and villages (Ikwor, 2014). Membership of age grades in many communities is either compulsory or voluntary depending on the goal of formation. So, the extent of change in the structure, organization and formation has always been influenced by emerging globalization and civilization but its role has continued to be a factor of community development.

Despite the efforts made to effect development at the rural areas, the conditions of the rural dwellers have not improved, rather they have further deteriorated. It is against this background that this work examines “age grade association as an agent of rural community development with particular reference to Aguluzoigbo community, Aniocha local government area, Anambra State”.

Research Questions

research question will guide this study

The following

1. To what extent does age grade as a sustainable alternative effect grassroots development in Aguluzoigbo community?
2. What is the impact of age grade system on community development of Aguluzoigbo community?
3. What are the activities of age grade associations and implementation of community development of Aguluzoigbo?

Conceptual Clarification:

Age Grade

The organization and structure of age grade system in traditional Igbo societies where it operates differ from society to society. In sociology and Anthropology literature “age grade” or “age-set” is usually referred to as peer group. It begins, in these societies, with informal peer alliance formation of children born within a time bracket. It was this age group of childhood adolescence that graduated into adulthood. In most communities where age grade operates, their functions and reasons for their formations are clearly established. They performed several important social functions in their various communities and even at individual levels. They operate as an organ of development, maintenance of peace, law and order. Forded and Jones (2005:15) assert that:

They helped in community development and in the welfare of their members, for instance, in clearing paths, cutting forests, acting as market police and guarding in settlement in time of war, and in providing mutual help and exercising discipline over their own members who had misbehaved.

Fafunwa (2004) on this noted that they were also used for educational purposes, citizenship training in general or for purely political activities. Moreover, the age grades sometimes levied themselves to raise money for some important community project, acting as village police and executive agents for the supreme governing body of the town or the village – the town or union – enforcing penalties and collecting fines imposed on individuals or sections of the community by the union. As the younger male sets helped in those simple functions like sweeping the village square regularly, the female ones helped in clearing the market square on market days and the path to the community stream on specific day. It is not unusual to see age grade exercising some influence on their members. They operated under unwritten constitution and bylaws. But in recent times, they operate under written constitutions that regulate their activities and conduct. For instance, if a member steals, or is found wanting, or in any other anti-social act, he is immediately tried and appropriate penalty is meted out to him. For those who do not belong to any age grade or do not want to belong, sanctions are their penalty. Generally, the roles of age grades in contemporary Igbo society have come in the way of construction of drainage in the community, renovation of schools, building of market stalls, maintenance of the town union secretariats, security, maintenance of law and order, awarding scholarship to indigent brilliant children in the community, attracting development projects from government to their communities and so on. It should be noted that age grade practice in Nigeria is dated back to the pre-colonial era during which the Igbo adopted it as a political institutions in their traditional political administration. Under this system, males within a given age brackets, usually 5 years, for instance, those born from 1860-1865, were grouped under a particular age war duties preparing one term centre for ceremonies. From among members of each age grade, a leader and other officials were elected to handle the affairs of the age grade in line with the traditional practices. In most parts of the country today, age grade practice is still in practice as it has been observed to be an effective mechanism for checkmating social vices and for capacity building at the community level. Even today, the place of age grade system in Nigeria is still being prioritized in the Igbo land though it has been modernized to fit into the modern democratic society.

Consequently, there was no law guiding the appointment of the leaders but it is imperative to note that before one can be assured to be the leader of age grade, such person must be a person of unquestionable character who have distinguished himself in many ways with very sound knowledge of the customs and tradition of the society. Additionally, one with commanding personality, one who is industrious, brave, eloquent, intelligent, affluent and initiative is also acceptable with prior approval of the council of elders.

The age grade in Igbo traditional communities performed social and political functions. Ezenwaji (2002:206) asserts that, these age groupings were indeed:

A system by which democratic communities cooperated for work and war, government and entertainment in so many ways, age group fostered communalistic and human being, aimed at community acceptance, progress and development

In his contribution, Anyaele (1994:312-313), noted that age grades perform varied but development-oriented functions including: Defending their communities against both internal and extend aggressions, carrying out civil and communal works, performing political duties in maintaining law and order, performing socialization functions, checking wrong use of powers by paramount chiefs and council of elders, execution of policies and decisions made in their communities and performing ceremonial functions during important occasions

Age Grade in Igbo

Age Grade in Igbo land According to Okodo, (2012), age grade is known as ‘ogbo, ebiri or uke’ as obtain in different cultural localities in Igbo land, means one’s age mates. Age grade system is a phenomenon which is organized in various places throughout Igbo land in order to give men and women common place in the various age grades. Members discuss matters that are peculiar to them as a result make their situations better. They also improve the environment in which they live by looking after it, and administer discipline to erring members and contributing towards its development through communal labour, constructing and maintaining

roads, building town halls and bridges, providing portable water and amongst others, they protect their communities from military attacks or invasions from their neighboring communities. It is against this backdrop that we align this study on the above concept because age grades in Igbo land over the years have achieved more than as highlighted and should participate in housing development in order to achieve result at the same time improve the living condition of the rural populace through the provision of affordable houses.

Ndukwe (2015) opined that age grade is an association of people of equal or about the same age, operating within a given territory or area with the aim of the individual, collective and societal transformation. In any case, the organization, structure and activities of age grade practices in most Igbo land communities differ. Age grade, serves as an organ of development, maintenance of place, laws and order, depending on the community they operate.

Wilson (2014) suggests that age grade is a form organization based on age within a series of such categories through which individuals pass over the course of their lives. Membership is either voluntary or compulsory depending on the goal of the formation but its role has always been centered on community development. While, Orji (1989), argued that the efforts of most of those age dares are geared towards enhancing the social and economic lives of the rural people. The above argument tends to be supported as age grades would be used to achieve the goals of this study. The rural people through the participation of the age grades can initiate housing projects and programmes that are achievable within the limit of the income and sources of the age groups to meet their housing needs.

Problems of the Age Grades

Despite the notable success associated with the age grade, it has some challenges. One of such challenges is how financial strength of the age sets. The economics background of the rural communities affect the source of income of members except those that are making fully gain employed in cities or are doing business with huge capital. The projects embarked upon by the age grades are determined by the numeric and financial strength of menses. Political institution of the rural communities, when there is power tuzzle in an area, consciously and unconsciously if affects the social organization in the area. This affects the effort of the age grade, as fund mopped development projects could be used for litigation thereby impeding the effort and vision of such group.

Security challenges: This restiveness of youths and adults in the rural communities in Nigeria has bedeviled the rural community based organization and their effort. Security problems consume funds that could be used to develop the communities. It may result to insecurity of lives and property, causing risks to age grade. Again, cooperation of members in every twelve there must be Judas! Aggrieved members may pose threat to the vision of the group. Such members or may sabotage the efforts of others or brain wash active members.

Death: Death as a natural phenomenon could clear people during epidemics, natural disaster or during war and in such situation, the strength of the members will reduce thereby hampering their efforts towards rural development, example during the Nigeria civil war, young men lost their lives and it affected the age grades from which the war took. A social-economic status, level of education and opportunities of life also challenges the viability of age grades in rural development because the income, education and level of exposing determined the activities of the age grades.

Source of Income for Age Grade

The age grades source and generate income used in project execution from the following ways; Levy, donations, fines and interest from thrift. They levy members and collect donations from members who are affluent and philanthropies during ceremonies, fines from defaulting members and interest from the weekly or monthly thrift. Age grades can spread their tentacles in order to provide houses in rural communities by initiating action towards credit loan from banks, grants from Government and lots more.

Rural Development

Rural development refers generally to the process of improving the quality of life and economic wellbeing of people living in relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas. Rural development has traditionally centered on the exploitation of land intensive natural resources such as agriculture and forestry. It is obvious that no country of the world today, whether developing or industrialized can afford to reject the blooming significance of tourism to its economic, social, political and cultured development. Countries of the world have become aware of the numerous benefits accruing from tourism and are working more than ever before to develop their tourism industry.

According to some observers, tourism may now be the single largest industry on earth (World Travel and tourism council, 1995) tourism is certainly a very important vehicle for the transfer of capital worldwide. In human history, tourism is the only industry that

accounts for the largest migration of people all year round. Unite other industries tourism industry talks the customer to the product, rather than delivering the product to the customer (Manning, 1998) Tourism has become a significant and even essential part of the local community its potential to alleviate poverty is numerous it has a unique potential to carry exchange and investment directly to the local level, and can as well make significant contribution to rural development particularly in agricultural transformation, community enrichment and social empowerment. It enhances the social standard of any given community and can change both the environment and the lives of the members of their community.

Anambra state is endowed with natural and cultural tourism resources located all over the state, having the highest concentration in traditional rural communities, which when hammered can produce a distinctive tourism industry capable of generating income and raising the living standard of the local communities. Communities suffering economic bottleneck often have the necessary drive to actively consider development option, and an appealing opportunity is the potential offered by tourism therefore, the development and marketing of tourism potentials through community based tourism will not only end at boosting the economy of the area and upgrade the living standard of the people, but will also better the social, political and the cultured lives of the host

Elaigwu (1995) stated that the concept “development” is fluid and controversial. All one can say is that development implies a change from one position states, standard of living, etc at one point in time to the other.

James Obe(1996) states that community development is a process in rural transformation whereby the government in partnership with the people particularly in rural communities aim at bringing about socio-economic and cultural changes in the way of life of the people through the own initiative. This initiative is encouraged by the provision of financial grant technical Assistance and expert Advice.

Rural Development in Perspective

In the rural sector in Nigeria, public policy has consistently emphasized “increased agricultural out-put and productivity” as the main instrument for rural development (Okpala 1980:161). Similarly, public policy makers also regard rural development as synonymous with agricultural development (Hall, 2000; Onokerhoraye and Okafor, 1994 and, Tom, 1991). The assumption was that increase in agricultural output would lead to increase in rural income and improvement in the livelihood of the people. However, Okpala (1980) disagrees and argues that the prevailing public policy emphasis on increased agricultural out-put and productivity as the main goal of rural development, is at variance with the communities’ perception of what constitutes their development. It is obvious from the above positions that the rural dwellers do not share government’s enthusiasm for agricultural development. They frequently do not adopt the type of rural development proposals, programmes and projects that are espoused in the official national development programmes. The communities therefore, undertake other type of projects that they think are more relevant to their felt needs and aspirations.

As Olisa (1992) rightly observed, over 80% of the country’s population live in the rural areas and are engaged in agriculture, yet the country’s internal food supply relative to domestic demands, has been consistently on a steep decline, climaxing in the ongoing national food crisis associated with or aggravated by the ongoing World-Bank-Sponsored Structural Adjustment Programme. And yet in many parts of the country, evidence abounds of abandoned agricultural projects originally sponsored by one Nigerian government or the other or foreign aid agencies. Another way of stating the Nigerian rural development dilemma, Olisa further stated, is that if all the agricultural and industrial projects started in all corners of Nigeria since the 1950s to the present were successful and in active production today, the country would be recording substantial food surplus and much of its rural areas would have undergone substantial transformation. Instead, the present general condition of the country’s rural population is one of poverty, malnutrition, poor infrastructure, acute shortage of staple food items, poor medical facilities, persistence of local endemic diseases which reduce the quality of the labour force, dependent deprived rural women folk and unproductive subsistence agriculture.

The 1970s witnessed the formulation and application of various rural development approaches in a bid to achieve progress in the rural areas of Nigeria. These approaches were founded on the firm belief of notable economic strategists and administrators that rural development provides a more reliable springboard for national development (Onokerhoraye and Okafor, 1994; Tom, 1991; Diejomaoh, 1984 and Udo, 1984). Consequently, between 1973 and 2007, Nigeria launched successively national rural development programmes with supportive schemes. That these programmes have not generated infrastructural and human capital development in the rural areas is an indication of their weaknesses and ineffectiveness. The decay and worsening rural conditions and the attendant increasing rural-urban migration are evident in the long years of neglect of the rural areas.

Since the government was “far” from the rural areas in terms of development and with the realization that government alone cannot provide all their needs, the people had to learn to look inwards through community development activities. Despite the changes in the rural areas which have undermined self-help and communitarian philosophy of some communities, evidence of community participation in rural development abound in most communities in Nigeria.

Traditional Agencies and Rural Development in Nigeria

Certain agencies are basic in the evolution of human societies. These agencies become overtly visible as soon as societies take shape. They are therefore, referred to as traditional agencies because they are fundamental to the existence of the societies. According to Akude (1992), in Nigeria and in most parts of black Africa, certain social groups characterize the rural communities. Commonest of such social groups are the age-grade and village assemblies which have in recent times mobilized themselves to form larger town unions. These traditional agencies have all through the history of human societies played significant roles in bringing development nearest to the door steps of our rural communities. Each has contributed immensely to the educational, economic and social development of the countryside (see Akude 1992). The major concern of this write-up however, are the activities of age-grade sets in the acceleration of the process of rural development in Nigeria.

Age grades and Rural Development in Nigeria

Age grade is a social institution which constitutes vital system in the social structures of any given society. An age grade is an association of persons who were born within a period of time. It may be two three or five years. However, the age brackets of the age grades may vary from one community to the other. In some communities, persons born within a specific period of three, four or five years usually form an age grade. But the most important thing is that each age grade is clearly distinguished from one another. It then means that a man can only belong to one age grade at a time and each is usually associated with specific roles.

According to Akude (1992), age grade is a very vital organ of social structure especially in our traditional Nigerian communities. For example, amongst the Igbo in Anambra, Imo and Bendel States, the Tiv in Benue State, the Ibibio in Cross River State and so on, the formation and membership of an age grade is a much revered.

He continued further that age grades, are characterized by the events that occurred during the period members were born or when each age grade becomes officially recognized in the community. In essence, the names of the various age grades in the different communities are often drawn from the historical events that took place when the age grade was initially formed, age or condition of members and their activities in the area. For example, in Onitsha Inland Town, all those who were born between 1960-1962, formed a group which they called „independence“ (in commemoration of the year 1960) when Nigeria gained her independence from the British. In addition, Onitsha has about seventy-three recognized age grades, the oldest (represents people born between 1886 and 1888) known as „Ekwueme“. Similarly in Njikoka local government area in Abagana, there is an age grade known as ‘Oganiru’, meaning development or progress. This group represents all males born between 1945 and 1949. Historically, the period 1945- 1949 marked the return of war veterans of the Second World War (1939-1945).

While in Urhoboland we have Ekpako age grade which consists of very old men, Ivwraghwa which is made up of the largest and the main working group. Imitetete which consists of small children, Ekwokweya which consists of old women who have passed the child bearing age, Eghweya which is made up of married women, Emete which consists of unmarried and generally uncircumcised girls, Emetogbe which consists of widows and divorcees and so on.

More significantly, an age grade is an organized group of people born within a given period and whose activities are centered around a set of common goals and a set of code which regulate their conduct. Apart from a high degree of personal intimacy and informal conduct, members are bound together by common challenges such as marriages, burial of parents building of houses etc. Over the years, age grade in different communities have distinguished themselves in the performance of such roles that aim at enhancing the socioeconomic life of the people.

They had in the pre-colonial and colonial periods concerned themselves with traditional functions such as the maintenance of law and order, settlement of disputes between warring members, construction and maintenance of roads and markets, maintaining the cleanliness of local streams and above all, protecting their communities from external aggression. In recent times, however, age grades have diversified their roles to include newer activities which aid development. They have contributed immensely to the educational, political and social development of their various communities.

Age Grade as Sustainable Alternative to Grassroots Development in Nigeria

One of the major development challenges facing the governments at the three tier levels (Federal, States and Local Government Areas) in Nigeria is the increasing disparity between the urban and rural areas. This gap according to Igboeti (2012) has its roots in the neo-classical economic theories which presumed that development can be accelerated by concentrating investments in the cities and that rural poverty will be ameliorated by the trickle down of benefits from the urban industrial growth. This has resulted in imbalance between the urban dwellers and rural people in terms of living condition and infrastructure. Consequently, there is the search for alternative strategy that will not only accelerate growth but also spread the benefits of development to the rural areas.

Aboyade (2010) has specifically decried the profound dualism between the urban and rural areas of Nigeria and the proportionate costs and consequences of rural infrastructural lay behind urban modernism. Similarly, Muoghalu (1992) contended that rural development has become a national imperative in Nigeria and gave reasons for his position. He argued that the proportion of the national population resident in the rural areas of Nigeria is high, for example it was 80.7 % in 1963 census, 70.113 % in 1985 and 69 % in 1990. The gap between rural and urban is a threat to sociopolitical stability in Nigeria. The unfortunate situation of this dichotomy results in pervasive and endemic poverty, squalour, poor health linger and lack of access to formal education amongst others (Akpomuvie, 2010; Okafor, 2005).

The position of this work is that rural areas of Nigeria are on toss [to borrow Okafor's (2005) coinage] because of the so-called trickle-down effect development policy coupled with dearth of knowledge about rural societies and what they actually need in term of development. The so called development experts and bureaucrats have little or no knowledge about the problems and prospects of rural areas. This has resulted in the ill-fated programmes and white elephant projects purportedly earmarked for rural areas that failed woefully to transform the rural areas and the lives of the rural dwellers. The missing link is the inadequate knowledge about the rural areas. The nexus between the situation and condition of rural areas and where they ought to be is the people themselves. Progress and development will only be attained if the people (rural dwellers) are made to be part and parcel of development plans, policies and programmes.

The most outstanding stakeholders in rural areas are the indigenes and community members themselves. When rural dwellers are committed to their own destiny in terms of development, then there will be progress. The most pathetic but avoidable problem of rural areas is the so-called lack of maintenance culture. In other words, the feeling of ownlessness of the projects and infrastructures always results in rot and decay of infrastructures and by implication retrogression in the rural areas.

The age grades hold the key to development of rural areas because of the following reasons: Age grades know their terrain, their desires and prospects: The social solidarity between and within age grades will spur them on to ensure that programmes and projects attain their set goals and protected from vandals.

The service approach to community development calls for the active participation and initiative of the local people. The various age grades will form the hub of the management of any project in that community. The issue of unhealthy competition and wanton destruction occasioned by rivalry will be lacking. This is because age grades are hierarchical and leadership positions are well established hence the feeling of oneness will enhance development ventures.

The age grades know these products/resources more than others. The land will not be an issue because lands are owned by communities. The quarries and other companies in extrusion, processing, etc. are unfortunately in the hands of foreigners from outside Nigeria or outside the community hence the problem of capital flight will always continue to affect the communities adversely for a long time to come except the trend is reversed.

Age grades are metamorphosing into pseudo political and economic development associations (informal indigenous institution) such as community development association, youth organizations, trade and professional guilds, women group, social clubs, thrift and credit cooperative unions. These associations of age grade in modern times are credited with embarking on laudable projects like building of schools, health centres, and construction of roads, bridges, town halls and more importantly mobilization for community projects for the benefit of all. The government and development agencies should zero in on this natural, formidable and sustainable cultural heritage. The government should avoid rhetoric and face reality by empowering these community age grades across Nigeria.

Indigenous institutions (age grades) play active roles in the administration of justice, maintenance of law and order, peace keeping, provision of security and conflict resolution as earlier mentioned. These are some of the parameters that are used to measure development. If there are peace, employment and basic infrastructure in rural areas, the rural urban drift will be stemmed. The winner-takeit-all that characterizes the political arena and government of Nigeria can be redressed if people are answerable to their community. Only very few Nigerians will defile their community and age directives or attempt offending or violating the rules of the gods and ancestral spirits or shrines of their community because they know the repercussion and the grave consequences.

Age grade system and community development

Age grades are also voluntary organizations. They are voluntary because membership is dependent on individual choice; though a times membership may be compulsory as in the case of certain trades or professions such as the market women unions. Most age grades are formed to solve the most pressing problems facing man in the rural communities. Community members, residents, through their common problems come together, find a basis for common action and form an organization (Aina,1990). The contributions of these age grades to rural development is of great concern because, over the years governmental policies have inadequately and un-

properly enhanced the development of the rural areas, primarily either because they are initiated and executed by outsiders who do not know the needs of the people and therefore cannot positively serve them. The age grades are set up by collective efforts of indigenous people of homo or heterogeneous attributes but living or working within the same environment.

Their coming together creates conditions which broaden the base of self-governance and diffusion of power through a wider circle of the population (Adeyemo, 2002; Adejumbi, 1991).

In the words of Dongier et al, (2003) “age grades are generally membership organizations consisting of group of individuals in a self-defined community who have joined together to further common interests. They often consist of people living in close proximity to each other. The common interest includes production, consumption, pooled resources or delivery of services”. Organizations such as age grades, town unions, women groups, credit/saving groups, youth clubs, cooperative groups, religious groups, and local NGOs all of these are categorized as community based organizations or grassroots (Arrossi, 1994).

Anyanwu (1991) sees the age grade system as the end product of community development. He argues that the age grade does the following to their communities:

- (a) Enables people to exploit their advantage, the resources which would otherwise be dominant
- (b) Make use of under-utilised labour
- (c) Enables people to change the way they look at their responsibilities and help then to cultivate the sense of local initiative and effort.
- (d) Promote the idea of ultimate control by the people
- (e) Foster sustainable degree of freedom by individuals and groups
- (f) Promotes wide spread citizenship participation.

In the words of Opare, (2007) age grades are increasingly recognized as important actors in development of rural communities. Studies suggest that the age grades play an important role in providing economic security and bargaining power to their members (R.Rindell, 1995). They are the catalytic organizations that promote community empowerment and are recognized as essential ingredients of rural community development (Opare, 2007).

Age grades are localized institutions in that their spheres of influence hardly extend beyond their immediate communities or neighbourhood. They are non-profit and non-governmental because all members contribute economically towards the fulfilment of their responsibilities to the immediate environment and not depend on government before fulfilling these (Claudia, 2003). Benefits accrued from members’ contributions to the associations are shared accordingly with fairness. They are concerned with the development problems of and development programme projects in their various areas (Esman and Upholt, 1984; Bralton, 1990). They respond to community felt needs rather than market demand or pressure.

Similarly, Nuama (1993) believes that such community organisation like the age grades is really in touch with more people than any government organ can hope to reach. As development association, they are expected to capture the micro configuration of rural development, because they are micro societal organisations directly in touch with the rural populace.

Age grades are small informal associations created for the purpose of enabling members to reap economic benefit out of mutual help, solidarity, and joint responsibility. The benefits include mobilization of savings and credit facilities as a pursuit of group enterprise activities. The group-based approach not only enables the poor to accumulate capital by way of small savings, but it also helps them to get access to formal credit facilities. These groups by way of joint liability, enable the poor to overcome the problem of collateral security and thus frees them from the clutches of moneylenders (Shylendra, 1998).

Ijere (2012) noted that administratively, self-help associations such as age grade facilitate good and efficient government. The laws and regulations made in the council of elders are transmitted to individuals through their age grades. Thus, these bodies are used to appeal to larger groups of people and to elicit cooperative action by the group. He stated that in certain localities where age grade system operates, the “Government” of the town usually rotates among the age grade, each age grade “reigning” for 3-4 years. This means that the age grade “in Power” has the responsibility for law and order, promotion of community development projects and the display of cultural dances and show for entertainment. He further asserts that in times past, it was the age grade group that led the people to wars.

Ekpe (2015) posits that self-help group like the age grades emphasizes the involvement of the community members in programmes aimed at improving their quality of life. Involving the rural populace through the age grade association in rural development programmes would be a process through which their efforts are linked with those of the government in order to improve their socio economic, political and cultural life, which is the aim of integrating them into the National scheme of rural development.

Onoibokun (2016) perceived the technique of the age grade in community ventures as strategy by which inhabitants of an area cooperatively undertake the building and or the rehabilitation of their neighbourhood or their own community using their own effort and their own resources.

Battern (2017) noted that for a community or group within the community such as the age grades to undertake to develop their neighbourhood without government assistance, such effort becomes the non-directive approach to community development. He maintained that the non-directive approach applied in the sense that efforts are made through some kind of self-efforts or collective action in various communities to promote their better living for the residents of those communities.

Activities of Age Grade and Implementation of Community Development

The participation of local people in age grade organization activities is an act involving every member of that community whether resident in that community or outside. In most communities, it is mandatory that so long as one is a son or daughter of that community, his/her participation must be active in a project which requires a democratic approach. The function of age grade involved the provision of services for community development, for them to provide such services the people must come together and identify a problem before initiating plans on how to implement the project. Through these various agents, community development has recorded huge success both in the local, state and national levels. The rehabilitation of most of the uncompleted projects such as culverts refilling of pot-holes and creating of gutters are all such activities carried by age grade organizations. The belief is that all members make their contributions in decision that affect them, people are more likely to be committed to a rural project, if they are involved in its planning and implementation because they are more likely to identify themselves with it, use it and regard it as their project (Modo, 2015). It is therefore observed that most projects undertaken by age grade organizations are always successful especially as most members would not like to be associated with failure.

Credit facility projects have been identified as one of the key strategies used by age grade associations to address poverty. The provision of credit assistance to members of the community helps them to have their own businesses, increase their productivity and earning. Credit facilities are essentially the dispersion of small collaterals free to foster income generation and poverty reduction through enhancing self-employment (Chowdhury, 2015). The provision of credit facilities has been found to strengthen crisis-coping mechanisms, diversify income earning sources, builds assets and improves status of people who have such opportunity (Mordunh, 1998).

Empowerment is often carried out with skills acquisition (Sen, 2001). This reduces the rate at which the entire community depends on the age grade associations to provide everything. The author further stated that credit facilities through the developing world, especially in South Asia and Africa have played a significant role in the promotion of economic right, self-employment and income generation. Rankin (2001) asserts that credit facilities promote small scale enterprises and also create a variable panacea for poverty worldwide. It enhances community development projects and programmes.

Gilliver (2014) is of the view that age grades bring about progress and improvement in the lives of the people by performing specific functions. These functions are grouped as follows, social, political, economic, security and developmental functions.

Social Function: Age grades engage in healthy competition to achieve greater heights in any endeavor. They accompany their members during marriage celebrations; celebrate with members at child birth and death.

Political Function: Consequently traditional government is organized through age grade systems in villages where it is obtained. They aid in enforcing law and order in the rural ages, ensure good sanitary condition of the villages and are involved in conducting ceremonial activities within and outside the village, such as new Yam festivals, burial ceremonial wedding ceremonies. They elderly statesmen among them are involved policy making organ of the community and work with the Eze-in-council to foster smooth running of the communities in most part of Igbo land like Ohafia, Abiriba, Nkporo, Item, etc.

Economic Function: The economy of any community depends to a large extent on the material buoyancy of the age grades within each community their fund are usually developed oriented and are used to improve the standard of housing of the people and community. Age grades economic roles introduced thrifts and loan, since history. Thus, most of infrastructural amenities in the communities are built by these age grades.

Security Function: The age grades in Ohafia areas in Igbo land, from the olden days known to be security conscious and have protected their communities from external invasion or war. The internal security has become the responsibility of the age grades especially on market days and at time of crisis.

Findings

This research studies age grade association as an agent of rural development in Aguluzoigbo community, Aniocha local government area, Anambra State. From every indication, research findings obtained in this study, it has been established beyond every reasonable doubt that age grade association is an agent of rural development.

In summary, the tested hypothesis revealed that there is significant relationship between age grade association as sustainable alternative and grassroots development in Aguluzoigbo community. This means that age grade plays a very big role as a sustainable alternative on grassroots development in Aguluzoigbo community

There is a significant impact of age grade system on community development of Aguluzoigbo community. The shows that age grade had impacted a lot on community development of Aguluzoigbo community.

Finally, age grade associations' activities have a significant impact on implementation of community development of Aguluzoigbo, therefore it means that age grade associations has involved and implemented in so many activities in community development of Aguluzoigbo.

Conclusion

The age grade in the traditional Igbo society is the most important agent of socialization apart from the family. Each age grade has definite role or roles it performed for them or community. Generally, age grades functioned in relation to service pertaining to security, sanitation and general administration. Each of them is organized under a leader and some other officials and can answer different names depending on the purpose, time or circumstances surrounding its formation. The general activities and forms of the age grades provide the platforms for the training and orientation of young ones especially the males into adulthood and full membership in Igbo society. The role of age grade association has significantly influence rural development, age grade practices in Aguluzoigbo community is an age longed practice that has been from generation with slight changes following the transformation in the society which the root cause is the society. In spite of the above, there is also continuity in the age grade practices in Igbo communities because it is considered as a strong factor and instrument of societal development, defensive body against neighbouring enemies, body used to secure compliance from the members of the society, source of entertainment in the society amongst others. Thus, the study on the age grade practices have brought to fore that no matter the level of societal changes and civilization; age grade practice is a phenomenon that cannot be underrated because of the important role it perform in Igbo society. Despite the changes that have occurred, they still exist.

Recommendations

In a bid to strengthen the existence and laudable role played by the age grade in rural development, the work therefore recommends the following:

1. Government recognition on the existence of age grade considering their role in community development
2. Creation/establishment of age grade office at the local government level for effective coordination and registration of members;
3. Elimination of any obnoxious traditional norms/rituals that form part of the age grade practice, where such practice exists in contemporary world. Inclusion of the officials of the age grade in government pay roll to motivate them.
4. Government should as a matter of necessity, ensure that the modus operandi of all age grades or clubs, are constitutionally defined to avoid any unwholesome practice.
5. All age grades must be duly registered by both the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) and Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Matters to certify their operations within their jurisdictions.

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