

Rural Youths Development Needs in the Niger Delta Area of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT The strategic roles of youths in rural development in the Niger delta area of Nigeria cannot be overstated. This is because they form the mouthpiece for the community in contemporary times. This study examines the development needs of rural youths in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. A structured questionnaire was administered to 197 randomly selected respondents in the study area. Data analysis was through frequency, percentage and chi square. Findings of the study showed that majority of the respondents (55.3%) are between 20 and 25 years; rural youths have various development needs which include employment opportunities, educational advancement, environmental protection, community development, skill acquisition, social interaction, community services, health services, crop production, livestock production, decisions in development planning, scholarship training, leadership training, personality development, money making activities, information, computer related technologies. Results showed that education, gender, occupation, location significantly influenced perceived development needs. Also 51.8 percent of the respondents are males; 88.3 percent of the respondents are single; 59.9 percent are students; 53.8 percent located in the urban areas age, education, gender, marital status, occupation, location significantly influenced attitude of rural youths towards rural development.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of youths in the development of the Niger Delta region cannot be overemphasized. This is more so that their restive activities seem to be related to the nature of development accrued to the region. In essence, there seem to be a negative correlation between youth restiveness and development levels of the area. For instance, Adesope et al. (2000) observed that the spate of youth disturbances is particularly serious in the Niger Delta region. According to them the nature of exploitation of the region at the expense of other indigenes has been a major source of worry to the area and has resulted in restive activities.

The youths have been at the forefront of agitation for compensation for the exploitation of the Niger Delta area. This is not very surprising given the fact that they form a great portion of the entire society. Seiders (1996) opined that rural youth make up a large segment of the total rural population; however, they are often neglected and overlooked by government policy makers and international agency development strategists. This, it was noted, can be attributed in large part to the overwhelming concern for immediate solutions to problems of national

development with an accompanying inaccurate perception that youth are not yet productive and contributing members of society. Swanson and Claar (1984) explained that millions of young people living in rural areas are a significant and untapped resource available to assist in rural development process. Adesope (1999) reported that the youths because of their sizeable portion in the entire population are useful engines for development. The need to harness and therefore tap their numerous physical and mental resources becomes necessary. However, Obuh (2005) gave reasons such as low level of exposure, poor leadership, and lack of cooperation among youths, lack of encouragement from elders, as problems affecting their involvement in community development. Despite this, the youths have been found to have moderately high participation levels in community development and also favourable attitude towards community development (Adesope 1999). Also, Adesope et al. (2003) observed that youths are involved in community development because they want to help their communities, to be recognized, to interact with peers, and to gain personal benefits. This is a manifestation of their meaningful contribution to the development process.

The youths are at a developmental stage in life that place them strategically for activities

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related to community improvement, and matters related to development of the environment. Youths will participate in endeavours that will prove worthy to them. They will respond more to change if it is in line with their felt needs, interests and aspirations. Their psychological disposition also put them in a situation of active participation in development issues. This obviously could be why Jibowo (1996) identified the following characteristics related to them: innovation proneness, less fear of failure, faster reaction time, greater physical strength, less conservative, greater knowledge acquisition propensity, social propensity. The features justify why youths are active and therefore restive. This restiveness is not always associated with negative activities because they play key roles in sustainable development as a result of their potentials. Gobeli (1996) stated that youth have a role in sustainable development. Development it was noted, needs to be community-based because people in communities essentially know what is needed and why. Community-based development acknowledges that people have the solutions to their own problems – that sustainable programmes evolve out of the experiences of ordinary people and their perceptions of what problems should be addressed.

The Niger Delta area is made up of youths who are disadvantaged for some peculiar reasons. Their needs therefore will be peculiar and different from the needs of youths in other parts of Nigeria. For instance, African Youth Development Foundation (2002) appealing to individuals, private foundations, government agencies, donor organizations and bilateral organizations requested for support in the areas of information exchange, technical cooperation and financial aid. In addition they requested for the following to help them actualize their ongoing projects in the rural areas in the Niger Delta states of Nigeria:

- i. Used textbooks (in Pure Sciences, Social sciences, management, Politics, History, etc.), light reading novels, reference books, journals on different subject areas for junior-level, intermediate-level and senior-level readerships for use in the multi-purpose community development resource centres/library projects and book donations to schools in rural communities of the Niger region of Nigeria.
- ii. Specialized publications and newsletters on HIV/AIDS, conflict Resolution/Transfor-

mation, Human Rights, Reproductive Health, ICT Development, Agriculture and Rural Development.

- iii. Fairly-used Personal Computer systems and its accessories for use also at the multi-purpose Community Development Resource Centres for training young people and students, especially graduates at no costs or at user-fees rate since computer literacy has become a prerequisite for employment in work places.
- iv. Drugs for children's illnesses, eye diseases, malaria, tuberculosis and other infectious disease, including anti-retroviral drugs for HIV/AIDS patients.
- v. Donations of foods, canned goods and nutritional supplements for children and mal-nutritional adults
- vi. Fairly used clothing of all sizes and nappies for kids to assist unmarried teenage mothers take care of their children. These will also be used to support children orphaned by AIDS in these areas.
- vii. Disposable flowers and other household materials that could be sold to raise money in support of the on-going projects in these rural areas.

The foregoing confirms the fact that youths have many needs in the Niger Delta area. These needs bother on both their individual development and the development of the region. The spate of restiveness which recently has culminated into hostage taking and kidnapping could only have arisen out of the fact that priorities have been misplaced by governments and other authorities. It is expected that if the needs are properly identified, the youths can be assisted in achieving some to a large extent. This study therefore determines rural youth's development needs in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria and specifically describes their socio-demographic characteristics, and also determines their attitude towards rural development. This study also determines relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and attitude on the one hand, and socio-demographic characteristics and perceived needs on the other.

METHODOLOGY

The study area is the Niger Delta area of Nigeria which covers an area of about 70,000 km² and consist of a number of distinct ecological zones which are characteristic of a large river

delta in a tropical region: coastal ridge barriers, mangroves, freshwater swamp forests and low-land rainforests (Niger Delta Environmental Survey 1996). The geology of the Niger Delta according to Okonny et al. (1999) owes its success to the successful exploration and exploitation of crude oil in the Niger Delta. This exploration started back in the late 1950s.

The environment of the Niger Delta is very fragile in as much as there is so much water as a medium for transporting pollution from one location to the other. The climate ranges from humid to semi-hot equatorial climate. Majority of the delta areas especially Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa Ibom and Cross Rivers have weather conditions that are brought about by the moist tropical maritime air mass and the dry and dust laden tropical continental air mass (Oyegun 1999). The Niger Delta is peopled predominantly by the *Ijaw* ethnic nationality but recently the area was described as those areas around the delta tributaries which produce oil in large and moderate quantities. This was what informed the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) with headquarters in Port Harcourt.

For the purpose of this study, Rivers and Bayelsa were chosen. They were selected based on their relevance in the Niger Delta area and the fact that restive activities of youths have been very serious in the area recently. There are 23 local government areas in rivers state and 18 in Bayelsa State. From Rivers State, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area was selected and Ogbia local government area was selected from Bayelsa State. From each of the local government areas, two communities were randomly selected. Several youth associations existed in the study areas but for the purpose of the study, only those registered with the local government authority were involved in the study. In Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area, fifteen youth associations were identified but six were selected for the study (three per community). In Bayelsa State, twelve youth associations were identified in the study area and six were randomly selected for the study. A structured questionnaire was designed and administered to twenty youths in the selected associations to give 240 youths from the two states. However, only 197 useable questionnaires were used for analysis. Perceived development needs were determined by presenting respondents with 17 items

rated on a 3-point scale of very important (2 points), important (1 point) and not important (0 point). A mid point was obtained thus: $2+1+0=3 \div 3=1.00$. Based on this mid-point, decision was made thus: any mean score greater than or equal to 1.00 implies important need, and any mean score less than 1.00 implies less important need. Development needs scores were obtained and dichotomized into two: important and less important.

Attitude towards rural development was measured using a 10-item statements rated on a 5-point scale of strongly agree (5), agree (4), undecided (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1). A midpoint of 3.00 was obtained and based on this, decision rule was: any mean score greater than or equal to 3.00 implies agreement with the attitude statement, and any mean score less than 3.00 implies disagreement with the attitude statement. Attitude scores obtained were dichotomized into two: favourable and less favourable. Data analysis was done with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) utilizing frequencies, percentages and chi-square.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows that 22.3 percent of the respondents are below 20 years, 55.3 percent of them are between 20 and 25 years, 19.3 percent are between 26 and 30 years, while 3.0 percent are above 30 years. This suggests that most of the respondents in the study are between 20 and 30 years, that is, they are young, which confirms previous works (Adesope 1999; Jibowo 1996; Roy 2003). Since a great proportion of the respondents were young and in their active stage of life, they would have the physical strength to be part of physical community development work.

Also, 14.2 percent of the respondents attained primary education, 38.6 percent attained secondary education, while 38.1 percent attained tertiary education. This finding suggests that respondents were educated no doubt but the level of education acquired was just moderate. A higher level of education will help the youths to be more open to development ideals. The result of the study showed that 51.8 percent of the respondents are males while 48.2 percent are females. Males are more likely to be physical capable of participating in community projects.

The study further showed that 88.3 percent of the respondents are single while 11.7 percent are married.

Table 1: Personal characteristics of respondents (n=197)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Age</i>		
<20 years	44	22.3
20-25years	109	55.3
26-30years	38	19.3
>30years	6	3.0
<i>Education Level</i>		
Primary	28	14.2
Secondary	76	38.6
College	34	17.3
Polytechnic	12	6.1
University	29	14.7
Others	18	9.1
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	102	51.8
Female	95	48.2
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Single	174	88.3
Married	23	11.7
<i>Occupation</i>		
None	9	4.6
Student	118	59.9
Business	46	23.4
Civil service	11	5.6
Others	10	6.6
<i>Location</i>		
Rural	91	46.2
Urban	106	53.8
<i>Belong to Association</i>		
Yes	128	65.0
No	69	35.0
<i>Do You Think Youths Need Re-orientation</i>		
Yes	183	92.9
No	14	7.1
<i>Youths Need More Opportunities for Development</i>		
Yes	103	52.3
No	94	47.7

Personal Characteristics of Respondents

Findings of the study revealed that 4.6 percent of the respondents do not have any occupation, 59.9 percent are students, and 23.4 percent are in business while 5.6 percent are civil servants. It is obvious that majority of the respondents are students and these categories of individuals are easily influenced by peer groups which may also have implications for restive activities. The study also showed that 46.2 percent of the respondents indicated that they are located in the rural areas, while 53.8 percent located in the urban areas. The proportion of those located in rural areas shows that many youths do not reside in rural areas. However, it

is likely that those who reside in the area may be experiencing some frustrations as a result of the inadequacies of infrastructure. This may also inform restive activities.

The analysis of the study revealed that majority of the youths belong to associations, and majority think youths need re-orientation. The involvement of youths in associations may be to enable them share ideas and work as a unifying force. Also, majority of the respondents agree that youths need more opportunities for development. This is likely the only way to remain comfortable in the area

Rural Development Needs of Respondents

Table 2 shows the categories of rural development needs of respondents. From the table, respondents indicated employment as an important need (mean = 1.89). Unemployment problem has always been a bane to the development of youths in the Niger Delta area. The study also revealed that respondents need educational advancement (mean = 1.95). This is not surprising because the Niger Delta area falls under the educationally less developed areas (ELDAs) in Nigeria. Also respondents indicated environmental protection as important need (mean = 1.79). It is on records that the area is environmentally degraded as a result of the activities of oil exploration and this may be responsible for the perceived needs of respondents in this regard.

Respondents indicated community development as important need (mean = 1.74). This could be because of the level previous neglect of development of the areas by government and other development agents. Respondents further indicated skill acquisition as an important need (mean = 1.68). This realization could be because of the high level of unemployable youths that are found in the area as a result of lack of skills. Respondents indicated their need for social interaction (mean = 1.52). It is possible that the stigma of restiveness has rubbed off on them and the need to interact with people from other localities will enhance their public image and further expose them. Community services was also perceived as important need among respondents (mean = 1.53), obviously because of their desire for community improvement. Respondents indicated health services as important need (mean = 1.65). This could also be related to the

Table 2: Rural development needs of respondents (n=197)

<i>Needs</i>	<i>Very impor- tant</i>	<i>Impor- tant</i>	<i>Not impor- tant</i>	<i>Mean scores</i>
1. Employment opportunities	175 (88.8)	22 (11.2)	0 (0.0)	1.89
2. Educational advancement	187 (94.9)	10 (5.1)	0 (0.0)	1.95
3. Environmental protection	159 (80.7)	34 (17.3)	4 (2.0)	1.79
4. Community development	145 (73.6)	52 (26.4)	0 (0.0)	1.74
5. Skill acquisition	148 (75.1)	34 (17.3)	15 (7.6)	1.68
6. Social interaction	120 (60.9)	60 (30.5)	17 (8.6)	1.52
7. Community services	120 (60.9)	62 (31.5)	15 (7.6)	1.53
8. Health services	142 (72.1)	42 (21.3)	13 (6.6)	1.65
9. Crop production	112 (56.9)	72 (36.5)	13 (6.6)	1.50
10. Livestock production	89 (45.2)	83 (42.1)	25 (12.7)	1.32
11. Decision making in development planning	130 (66.0)	61 (31)	6 (3.0)	1.63
12. Scholarship training	154 (78.2)	43 (21.8)	0 (0.0)	1.78
13. Leadership training	119 (60.4)	72 (36.5)	6 (3.0)	1.57
14. Personality development	111 (56.3)	74 (37.6)	12 (6.1)	1.50
15. Income generating activities	116 (58.9)	58 (29.4)	23 (11.7)	1.47
16. Information	134 (68.0)	42 (21.3)	21 (10.7)	1.57
17. Computer related technologies	135 (68.5)	53 (26.9)	9 (4.6)	1.64
Grand mean				1.63

dilapidation occasioned by the environmental hazards that causes untold health problems on the people. The desire for food security was revealed in respondents' indication of crop production needs (mean = 1.50). This was also confirmed by their need for livestock production (mean = 1.32). Also respondents indicated their desire to be involved in decision making related to development (mean = 1.63). Adesope (2007) reported that youths are agents of information at the community level and as such are expected to be part of decision making. The findings revealed that respondents need scholarship training (mean = 1.78). Scholarship training in this regard refers to exposure for further educational development. This will help to erase the less educationally developed status bestowed on people of the area. Respondents indicated their desire for leadership training (mean = 1.57).

This is obviously because they are expected to assume leadership roles to equip them with leadership abilities (Adesope 2007). Personality development was identified as an important need by respondents (mean = 1.50). This could be related to the negative image that the outside world had had about the area as always a conflict zone. Developing their personality may bring back the lost glory. Respondents also indicated income generating activities as important need (mean = 1.47). This is one way to improve living standards. Also, respondents indicated their need for general information as important need (mean = 1.57). Many communities are not aware of happenings outside theirs because of the deprivation and frustrations of development experienced in their own communities. Findings revealed that respondents need computer-related technologies (mean = 1.64). This may not be unrelated with the desire to acquire skills in information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The finding generally shows that rural youths require development needs in many areas as have been identified in Table 2, suggesting that their expectations concerning rural development are high.

Table 3 shows that respondents agree that rural development is very necessary to the Niger Delta area (mean = 4.46). The importance of rural development cannot be overemphasized in a region like the Niger delta area of Nigeria. Youths in the area need to be part of the decision making for rural development. The mean score of 3.98 confirmed this. Youths can better appreciate the ideals of rural development if they are part of decision making on issues concerning them. Respondents agree that the Niger delta region has been left behind in terms of rural development (mean = 3.75). There is no doubt that the Niger Delta area is adversely affected by the long years of neglect, which was confirmed in Adesope et al. (2000). Respondents agreed that the poor conditions of the area is not encouraging (mean = 4.34). This gives credence to the realization that the Niger Delta area is not in good conditions in relation to the vast amount of resources obtained from the area which generates adequate revenue for the nation. In realization of respondents conviction of the importance of agriculture, they agreed that agriculture must be given adequate consideration for complete rural development (mean

Table 3: Attitude of youths towards rural development

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
1. Rural development is very necessary to the Niger Delta area	135 (68.5)	38 (19.3)	9 (4.6)	9 (4.6)	6 (3.0)	4.46
2. The youths in the area need to be part of the decision making for rural development	85 (43.1)	72 (36.5)	6 (3.0)	20 (10.2)	14 (7.1)	3.98
3. The Niger Delta region has been left behind in terms of rural development	82 (43.1)	46 (23.4)	17 (8.6)	45 (22.8)	4 (2.0)	3.75
4. The poor conditions of the area are not encouraging	126 (64)	35 (17.8)	18 (9.1)	13 (6.6)	5 (2.5)	4.34
5. Agriculture must be given adequate consideration for complete rural development	123 (62.4)	56 (28.4)	14 (7.1)	4 (2)	0 (0)	4.51
6. The youths are adequately provided with their needs & this has affected the level of development negatively	101 (51.3)	46 (23.4)	25 (12.7)	21 (10.7)	4 (2)	4.11
7. The present level of devpt. In the Niger Delta has not affected the youths in any way	55 (27.9)	31 (15.7)	40 (20.3)	69 (35)	2 (1)	3.35
8. I am satisfied with the present level of development in the Niger Delta areas	17 (8.6)	0 (0)	47 (23.9)	111 (56.3)	22 (11.2)	2.39
9. I like to be involved in rural development activities but I have no time	39 (19.8)	56 (28.4)	45 (22.8)	57 (28.9)	0 (0)	3.39
10. I do not even understand what rural development means	20 (10.2)	13 (6.6)	49 (24.9)	88 (44.7)	27 (13.7)	2.55
Grand mean						3.23

NB: Figures in parentheses are percentages

=4.51). Aware of the neglect of youths, respondents agreed that the youths are not adequately provided with their needs and this has affected the level of development negatively (mean =4.11). Also, respondents are not satisfied with the present level of development in the Niger Delta area (mean =2.39). As ambassadors of their communities, respondents indicated that they will like to be involved in rural development activities but have no time to do so (mean =3.39). The overall findings reveal that youths in the Niger delta area actually have favourable attitude towards rural development. This is confirmed with the grand mean score of 3.23, suggesting the readiness of youths in the area to take part in the development process of the region.

Relationship between Perceived Needs and Demographic Characteristics

From Table 4, the chi-square analysis reveals that education is significantly associated with perceived development needs ($\chi^2=19.374$; $P<0.05$). This implies that education level of the respondents influenced their perception of youths about rural development needs. This is expected since education increases knowledge and creates a reasonable awareness about development. Gender of respondents also significantly

Table 4: Chi-square analysis showing relationship between perceived needs and personal characteristics

Variables	χ^2	df	P-values	Relationship
Age	5.202	3	0.158	Not significant
Education	19.374	5	0.002	Significant
Gender	4.122	1	0.042	Significant
Marital status	0.290	1	0.590	Not significant
Occupation	26.732	5	0.000	Significant
Location	5.846	1	0.016	Significant

cantly influenced perception about rural development needs ($\chi^2=4.122$; $P<0.05$).

The occupation of the respondents significantly influenced their perception about rural development needs ($\chi^2=26.732$; $P<0.05$). This could be because most of the respondents in the study were students so they obviously appreciate what rural development stands for and therefore perceive the implications of a developed community favourably. Location also showed significant association with perceived needs ($\chi^2=5.846$; $P<0.05$). Most of the respondents are located in urban areas. Rural-urban migration is a trend among youths who seek better means of survival. The implication of this finding is that youths who reside in urban areas still appreciate the ideals of rural development. However, variables like age and marital status

did not influence perceived needs of respondents in this study.

Relationship between Attitude towards Rural Development and Personal Characteristics

Table 5 shows that age significantly influenced respondents' attitude towards rural development ($\chi^2 = 14.932$; $P < 0.05$). It is expected that older respondents would appreciate rural development and hence have more favorable attitude towards rural development. This finding suggests that older respondents may have experienced measurable changes in rural development over the years and as such this influenced their attitude. Apart from that, older respondents as a result of experience feel the need for rural development. Education showed significant association with respondents' attitude towards rural development ($\chi^2 = 36.362$; $P < 0.05$). As one receives education, he has a wider horizon of knowledge and appreciates the dynamism of changes in the environment better. Gender showed significant relationship with respondents attitude towards rural development ($\chi^2 = 26.373$; $P < 0.05$). Since more males were involved in the study, males seem to be more favourably disposed to rural development activities.

Table 5: chi-square analysis showing relationship between attitude towards rural development and personal characteristics

Variables	χ^2	df	P-values	Relationship
Age	14.932	3	0.002	Significant
Education	36.362	5	0.000	Significant
Gender	26.373	1	0.000	Significant
Marital status	9.780	1	0.002	Significant
Occupation	48.277	5	0.000	Significant
Location	19.291	1	0.000	Significant

Marital status significantly influenced attitude of respondents towards rural development ($\chi^2 = 9.780$; $P < 0.05$) suggesting that unmarried youths may appreciate the importance of rural development moreso that their future depend on it. Occupation significantly influenced attitude towards rural development ($\chi^2 = 48.277$; $P < 0.05$). Since majority of the respondents are students they understand what it could mean that for the communities to be developed as this obviously will add value to their existence. Location significantly influenced attitude towards

rural development ($\chi^2 = 19.291$; $P < 0.05$). This implies that since most respondents reside in urban locations, they appreciate the need for rural development because if the areas are developed rural-urban drift may reduce meaningfully. The findings agree with those of Adesope et al. (2004) who found that gender, education and experience influenced involvement in small scale agricultural enterprises. Ugwoke et al. (2005) also found that education, experience, farm size and household size influenced level of participation in farming activities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found that rural youths have various development needs which include Employment opportunities, Educational advancement, Environmental protection, Community development, Skill acquisition, Social interaction, Community services, Health services, Crop production, Livestock production, Decision making in development planning, Scholarship training, Leadership training, Personality development, Money making activities, Information, Computer related technologies. Results showed that Education, Gender, Occupation, location significantly influenced perceived development needs. Also Age, Education, Gender, Marital status, Occupation, Location significantly influenced attitude of rural youths towards rural development. It is, therefore, recommended that basic infrastructure should be provided to make the rural areas in the Niger Delta more conducive for living. This will make the youths to stay and help to develop their communities.

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