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Entrepreneurship Empowerment and Gainful Employment: Panacea for Youth Restiveness in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria (Pp. 107-118)

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Abstract

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is the world's third largest wetland. Its rich crude oil deposit has attracted several oil and gas Multinational Corporations, whose exploitative and explorative activities have rendered its hitherto viable economy, unproductive. The prevailing high incidence of kidnapping, pipeline vandalism and many other social disorders, which are believed to be poverty and unemployment induced, are direct consequences of the environmentally destructive activities of these Corporations. This study

is aimed at determining the readiness of vulnerable Niger Delta youths to accept gainful employment and entrepreneurship empowerment, which were considered as alternatives that could possibly resuscitate their economies. Questionnaires were used to gather data from 900 resident respondents. Analysis revealed that the youths were willing to eschew violence and pursue legitimate means of livelihood. It was recommended that government in collaboration with the Multinational Corporations should offer the youths opportunities for entrepreneurship empowerment and gainful employment.

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is made up of; Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo Ondo and Rivers States. They constitute the third largest wetland in the world (UNDP, 2006). The ecological status of the region is characterized by; rivers, creeks, estuaries and swamps, as well as other natural resources like; palm oil and kernel, fish, oil and gas. The economic pre-occupation of the people of this region has been farming and fishing, salt making, hand-dug boat making and distillation of local gin. The availability of oil and gas in this region attracted several oil and gas Multinational Companies such as Chevron, Shell and Mobil producing (Exxon Mobil) to its major cities like; Port Harcourt, Warri, Yanagoa and the rest. Precisely, the oil and gas deposit in the Niger Delta region constitutes 97% of Nigeria's mineral exploitation and exploration (Iyayi, 2004). The region, due to its coastal location, and the exploration and exploitation activities carried out there, is highly vulnerable to both natural and man-made environmental hazards such as, flooding due to rise in sea level, land degradation, water pollution, desertification, fire disasters and frequent oil spill. In fact, the activities of oil and gas multinational companies in the Niger Delta is largely viewed to be a curse rather than a blessing as nature intended it to be (Turner and Brown hill, 2004). As a result of the identified factors viz; oil spillage, gas flaring, oil erosion and land degradation, all occasioned by the exploration and exploitation activities of the oil and gas companies, the environment has been generally rendered hostile and un-conducive for economic activities such as: fishing, farming, salt making distillation of local gin. It is imperative and informative to stress that these economic and agricultural activities were hitherto the main stay of the Niger Delta economy, before the commencement of the exploitation and exploration activities in the region. In other words, the commencement and increase in the oil and gas exploitation and exploration activities, with its attendant environmental consequences, is directly and wholly responsible for

the collapse of the hitherto viable economy of the Niger Delta people. The resultant effect of these economic and agricultural setbacks or collapses includes; poverty, unemployment, underemployment, underdevelopment and general insecurity.

Poverty has both income and non-income dimensions which are however intertwined. Poverty could be described as being in a state of lack of physical necessities, assets and income. It includes, but goes beyond being income-poor. It is a sub-set of the general condition of deprivation whose dimensions include; physical weakness, vulnerability, social inferiority, powerlessness and humiliation. Basically, it is always easy to identify the poor: They have low income, they are uneducated and in bad health. They live in abject lack of basic necessities of life such as; food, clothing and good shelter. They also lack skills, gainful employment and self-confidence (World Bank, 2006). The incidence of poverty in the Niger Delta has been on a steady increase in about the last three decades. Table I (attached in the appendix) shows empirically the trends of poverty in all the Niger Delta States of Nigeria from 1980-2004.

Unemployment, underemployment and underdevelopment are believed to be other challenges facing the Niger Delta people. Unemployment simply means a situation in which people who are physically and mentally well and willing to work, cannot be gainfully engaged (Agba, 1994). The Keynesian economists generally view unemployment to be in categories and types, but however, the above definition should contextually suffice, irrespective of the types or forms. Underemployment describes the incidence of under-paid jobs.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been described in recent times as one of the most unsafe, insurgent, turbulent and violent region in sub-Saharan Africa. It is imperative at this juncture to state pointedly, that the previously mentioned high level of poverty, unemployment and frustration amongst the Niger Delta people, occasioned largely by the environmentally destructive activities of oil and gas Multinationals, accounts colossally for the high wave of violence, and insecurity experienced in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in recent times. The Niger Delta youths in revolt and in an attempt to create equity, have diverted their energies to kidnapping and abduction of foreign (and sometimes local) oil workers for ransom as legitimate means of livelihood. Other vicious activities carried out by Niger Delta youths include; crude oil bunkering, pipeline vandalism and stealing, because of poverty and unemployment (Inyang, 2009).

Entrepreneurship Empowerment and Gainful Employment

It has been established from the afore outlined discussion that the collapse of the hitherto viable economy of the Niger Delta region was directly induced by the oil and gas exploration and exploitation activities of Multinational Companies, evidenced by the high incidence of poverty, unemployment, insecurity and violence that is easily identifiable in the Niger Delta region. These oil and gas exploitation and exploration activities have rendered the general environment agriculturally and economically unproductively, hence, compelling an alternative means of livelihood to combat the poverty and unemployment menace. One of such possible alternatives and potent remedy is for the government and oil and gas multinationals to collaborate and embark on an entrepreneurship empowerment scheme and create opportunities for gainful employment for the Niger Delta youths.

An entrepreneur is a person who pioneers new business ideas, bears risk and sources human, financial, natural and technological resources to produce goods and services and managing them profitably to the satisfaction of customers. Entrepreneurs usually need only a moderate amount of capital to start and meticulously nurture its growth to maturity. This is the reason they are usually referred to as small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs). SMEs are potent catalyst in the economic growth and development of their host communities and countries in general. To state pointedly, there is a strong correlation between economic growth and development and the viability of SMEs (entrepreneurs) in a region or country. This is owing to the fact that SMEs are labour intensive with the potentials of creating several thousands of job opportunities yearly.

According to official Chinese estimates, SMEs contribute over 60% of exports, growing to 68% in 2005 (USD 518 billion), a figure almost twice the GDP of Greece and about a quarter of the GDP of France. In the EU and USA, SMEs account for 23 million (99%) of enterprises and over three quarters (3/4) of total jobs (100 million job annually). The huge returns recorded by SMEs in these countries was largely facilitated or enhanced by the easy access of aspiring entrepreneurs to credit facilities at moderate interest rates (World Bank, 2006).

In Nigeria however, the experience of SMEs is very different from what obtains in other parts of the world, especially Asia, Europe and USA. The number huddles SMEs encounter in Nigeria range from; stringent collateral benchmarks imposed by banks, to unreasonably high interest rates, the lack

of relevant entrepreneurial and management skills by aspiring entrepreneurs and the gross non-compliance of bank in making available the 10% of their net profits to SMEs as clearly stipulated by the central Bank Nigeria (CBN).

Entrepreneurship empowerment and development, contextually, would entail, giving the Niger Delta youths an opportunity to acquire relevant entrepreneurial and management skills in desired commercial or business undertakings and ultimately making capital or funds available for them to start, manage and own their SMEs. Capital or funding may come in form access to low interest loans whose collaterals benchmarks are affordable and negotiable, or as financial aid.

Acquiring relevant entrepreneurial and managerial skills could be packaged in form of on or off the job training, through workshop/seminars and through apprenticeship schemes. The youths could also be encouraged to form cooperative societies and trade associations to easily get support from collaborating agencies and from each other. The chamber of commerce and industry would certainly be of importance equally. On the other hands, gainful employment should be made available for the skilled and educated Niger Delta youths. Possession of relevant skills and education are often viewed as key factors in the suitability for a job. To this end, government in collaboration with oil and gas Multinational Corporations could set up vocational and technical centers or sponsor vulnerable youths to short or long term courses or training (as the case may be), in order to acquire relevant skills and knowledge to make them employable.

A few contrary observations however have been made, describing the Niger Delta youths as irresponsible, unproductive and unwilling to work or be engaged in any legitimate means of livelihood. Their argument were premised on the fact that the youths resorted to kidnapping and abduction and sometimes even killing of foreign oil workers, as well as, even Nigerian's who do not have any business with the oil and gas sector. They maintained that, violence is unproductive and therefore is not a responsible and legitimate means of fighting any form of injustice (Okojie, 2009). Based on the foregoing, there is need therefore to find out the readiness or willingness of the Niger Delta people (youths) to engage in legitimate business undertakings and gainful employment as well as their readiness or willingness to accept any form vocational training, apprenticeship schemes and other forms of relevant trainings to acquire skills to make them skillful and employable. It is therefore the readiness or willingness of the Niger Delta

people or youths to be transformed into entrepreneurs or employable personality that this study seeks to investigate and establish.

Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study consists of a sample size of 900 respondents. Six states were selected from the nine states that constitute the Niger Delta region. They consist of Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Bayelsa, and Rivers States. From each of the 6 States selected for this study, a major city or town was chosen on the basis of either being a state capital or otherwise the major industrial city where most of the oil companies operate and where the vulnerable youths mostly resides (host communities). The selected towns are as follows: Uyo, Calabar, Port Harcourt, Yenegoa, Warri and Benin. 150 respondents were drawn from each of this towns make up the sample size. The stratified sampling method was used to ensure proportional representation of different categories or elements that constitutes the population in the selected sample. 900 Questionnaires were administered to physically fit adult youths in the six towns. A total of 858 questionnaires representing 95.3% were returned, whereas 42 questionnaires, representing 4.7% were not returned.

The level of an individual's readiness to engage in legitimate business undertaking or employment was measured by his readiness to attend workshops and seminars to acquire entrepreneurial skills, willingness to start a business if given capital to start one or willingness to accept apprenticeship schemes and so on.

The respondents were asked to indicate on a simple five point scale his or her readiness or willingness to engage in legitimate business venture or gainful employment, options ranging from strongly agreed to strongly disagreed.

In the data analysis procedure, the hypothesis testing method was adopted using percentages and frequency distributions.

Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The various activities or processes that should ensure the improvement of the productive capacities of the youth to actually and eventually make them suitable for employment or to become entrepreneurs were broken into six categories. They include the following:

- i. Readiness to attend business and entrepreneurial seminars and training workshops, to acquire relevant entrepreneurial and management skills.
- ii. Readiness to take up gainful employment on full time basis, if offered one and abandon all forms illegal survival means.
- iii. Readiness to accept formal education and apprenticeship schemes to acquire skills, in preparation for being an entrepreneur or accepting gainful employment.
- iv. Readiness to engage in small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) if capital or funds are made available.
- v. Readiness to join cooperative societies and trade association if encouraged to do so.

The readiness of vulnerable Niger Delta youths readiness to engage in the aforementioned activities is evaluated in the following degree of likelihood:

- Strongly Agreed
- Agreed
- Undecided
- Disagreed
- Strongly Disagreed

Detailed Results and Interpretations of Findings

- i. Readiness of Niger Delta youths to attend business and entrepreneurial seminars and training workshops to acquire relevant entrepreneurial skills

Analysis of the response of respondents indicate that 56.2% strongly agreed and are therefore ready to attend business and entrepreneurial seminars and training workshops. 23.4% agreed to attend whereas only 4.4% strongly disagreed to attend. (See table 2 attached for details).

- ii. Readiness of Niger Delta youths to take up gainful employment on full time basis if offered one and abandon all illegal survival means.

The result of analysis reveal that 41.6% of the respondents strongly agreed to accept gainful employment if offered one, 32.1% agreed to be employed,

whereas only 4.2% are strongly in disagreement to be employed. (see table 3 in the appendices for details)

- iii. Readiness of Niger Delta youths to accept formal education and apprenticeship schemes to acquire skills in preparation for being an entrepreneur or accepting gainful employment.

Result of analysis showed that 51.7% of respondents strongly agreed to accept formal and informal education and apprenticeship schemes, 26.6% agreed, whereas only 6.3% are in disagreement. (See table 4 attach for details).

- iv. Readiness of Niger Delta youths to engage in small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs), if capital or funds are made available.

Result showed that 52.6% of respondents are strongly in agreement to engage in small and medium scale enterprises, 29.3% are also in agreement, whereas only 0.9% of the respondents are in strong disagreement. (For details, see table 5 attached)

- v. Readiness of Niger Delta youths to join cooperative societies and trade associations if encouraged to do so.

Analysis showed that 52.7% of respondents are strongly in agreement or readiness to join cooperative societies and trade associations, 25.5% are in agreement and only 2.9% of respondents are in strong disagreement to join. (See table 6 attached)

Indices of the Readiness of Niger Delta Youths for Entrepreneurship Empowerment and Gainful Employment

An index here is on a scale of 5. It facilitates to do useful comparison and measure the extent of variations. A score of 5 indicates complete or total readiness, whereas a score of 1 indicates the lowest level of readiness. Table 7 (check appendix for details) showed that all the indices are higher than 4. This indicates that the Niger Delta youths are ready or willing to take up employment or to become entrepreneurs, willing to accept formal education and apprenticeship schemes, ready to attend business seminars and training workshops to acquire relevant skills, as well as ready to join cooperative societies and trade associations if given encouragement.

Conclusion

The sum of analysis and findings reveal that Niger Delta youth vulnerable, who mostly were compelled by poverty, unemployment and frustration to resort to organized crime and violence as legitimate means of survival, are ready or willing to accept entrepreneurial empowerment and gainful employment in order to earn legitimate livelihood. Our studies indicate that these vulnerable youths are willing to allow or accept their productive capacities to be developed to transform them into responsible components of the civilized society, who can make meaningful social and economic inputs that are capable of resuscitating the Niger Delta economy.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are considered necessary:

- i. Government in collaboration with NGO and oil and gas Corporations, should embark on measures aimed at making available opportunities for entrepreneurship empowerment and gainful employment to youths, especially in host communities.
- ii. Government in collaboration with oil and gas Multinationals should set up vocational and technical centres to train Niger Delta youths to make them more skillful, self reliant and employable.
- iii. Government in collaboration with other agencies should award scholarships to tertiary institutions to intelligent youths in the Niger Delta. This will enable them gain relevant knowledge and skills that could be useful to the companies in their domain.
- iv. Government, and oil and gas Companies operating in the Niger Delta should set up intensively and relatively short-termed apprenticeship schemes for Niger Delta youths and make provisions for their adsorption upon completion.
- v. Government and other agencies should organize regular business and entrepreneurial seminars and workshops to avail vulnerable Niger Delta youths opportunities to gain relevant skills to help them manage their enterprises.

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Table 1: Incidence of Poverty in the Niger Delta, 1980 - 2004

Year	1980	1985	1992	1996	2004
Nigeria	28.1	46.3	42.7	65.6	54.5
Edo/Delta States	19.8	52.4	33.9	56.1	Delta. 45.35 Edo. 33.09
Cross River/Akwa Ibom States.	10.2	41.9	45.5	66.9	41.61
Imo/Abia States	14.4	33.1	49.9	56.2	Imo. 27.39 Abia. 22.27
Ondo State	24.9	47.3	46.6	71.6	41.15
Rivers/Bayelsa States	7.2	44.4	43.4	44.3	Rivers. 29.09 Bayles. 19.98

Source: National Bureau of Statistic, 2004

Table 2

Responses	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
Strongly Agreed	482	56.2
Agreed	201	23.4
Undecided	82	9.6
Disagreed	55	6.4
Strongly Disagreed	38	4.4
Total	858	100

Table 3

Responses	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
Strongly Agreed	356	41.6
Agreed	275	32.1
Undecided	140	16.3
Disagreed	50	5.8
Strong Disagreed	36	4.2
Total	858	100

Table 4

Responses	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
Strongly Agreed	444	51.7
Agreed	230	26.8
Undecided	100	11.7
Disagreed	30	3.5
Strongly Disagreed	54	6.3
Total	858	100

Table 5

Responses	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
Strongly Agreed	451	52.6
Agreed	251	29.3
Undecided	133	15.5
Disagreed	15	1.7
Strongly Disagreed	08	0.9
Total	858	100

Table 6

Responses	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
Strongly Agreed	452	52.7
Agreed	219	25.5
Undecided	108	12.6
Disagreed	54	6.3
Strongly Disagreed	25	2.9
Total		100

Table 7

Components of entrepreneurship empowerment and gainful employment	Indices of entrepreneurship empowerment and gainful employment
Readiness to attend seminars/training workshops	4.21
Readiness to take gainful employment	4.01
Readiness to accept formal education.	4.14
Readiness to start an enterprise.	4.31
Readiness to join cooperative societies/trade associations.	4.19

Highest index = 5

Lowest index = 1

P(T <= t)two tail	0.411164936	
T critical two tail	3.18244291	