

## SELF HELP: A TOOL FOR ENHANCING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG RURAL DWELLERS IN NIGERIA

**Abdulsalam Oladimeji Sholagberu**  
Department of Adult and Primary Education,  
University of Ilorin  
[sholagberu.ao@unilorin.edu.ng](mailto:sholagberu.ao@unilorin.edu.ng)

&

**Kayode Sadiq Toyin**  
Department of Adult and Primary Education,  
University of Ilorin  
[kayode.st@unilorin.edu.ng](mailto:kayode.st@unilorin.edu.ng)

### Abstract

*In spite of all governments' efforts to bring overall development to every part of the country, rural communities still lag behind in acquiring some basic amenities but underdeveloped as compared to urban areas. This paper seeks to explore community self-help as a tool for enhancing sustainable community development among rural dwellers in Nigeria. The paper further explained why the rural dwellers need to embrace self-help initiative to make up for neglect and delay on the part of government. It aims to adopt Self-help as a tool for enhancing sustainable development among rural dwellers in Nigeria. It is guided by General System Theory of Development, and highlighted the significance of self-help activities in fostering and promoting sustainable Community development. Lastly, the challenges of self-help initiative and proffer solutions to the stated challenges were discussed.*

**Key words:** Self-Help, Enhancing, Sustainable Community Development, Rural Dwellers

### Introduction

Historically, human society has always used some type of mutual aid or self-help social support system. This has been a common experience particularly at times of greater need, such as during emergency or disaster situations. Neighbours, relatives and friends help each other in times of need. At other times, the whole community comes together to work on common needs or problems which they may face. For instance, they may build local roads and bridges, schools, churches, or form a neighborhood watch group to defend against intruders. In all of these efforts, the community tries to mobilize its own resources in order to address and tackle its needs or problems (Akande, 2020). Such practice is very common among rural communities in developing nations. However, grassroots' contribution to the design and implementation of development projects have often been overlooked or neglected. It is believed that education was key to remedying economic and social issues. This had the connotation of the “haves” bestowing wisdom upon the “have-nots.” While education does have a key role in sustainable development, it must be used as part of a two-way conversation with the communities. The educational practices used during the period of instruction tended to be condescending, dismissing the value of the indigenous people’s knowledge. This is rather unfortunate, because ordinary citizens or community members have a lot to offer and an important role to play in tackling and solving their problems. Sustainable development cannot take place without active citizen participation or involvement in the development

process. Thus, regrettably a potentially valuable asset has been overlooked and under-utilized (Abatena & Hailu, 2018).

The concept of self-improvement and participation is important for any community development undertaking, but will be especially useful to those which have limited resources, are willing to make a long-term investment, and seek after societal impact including improving health factors or better quality of life and enhanced access to education, rather than easier to measure means such as rate of disbursement (Imparato & Ruster, 2023). These groups, which may include international aid organizations, NGOs, or government programs, need to have an intermediary group facilitating community participation. These groups have the responsibility of establishing links across disciplines, and between the community and other stakeholders.

Self-help and community development initiatives significantly impact educational development by fostering a supportive environment for learning and encouraging participation. Community education, in particular, is crucial for building self-confidence, fostering self-respect, and promoting social equality which are so essential for educational success. Self-help projects, often initiated by community members, can directly address educational needs by providing resources, scholarships, or other support for indigent students. These project can also create a sense of ownership and pride in the community, which can foster a more positive and supportive learning environment (Imparato, & Ruster. 2023).

Community development initiatives can also address barriers to education, such as poverty, lack of access to resources, and cultural norms that may hinder educational attainment. By providing economic opportunities, improved infrastructure, and access to healthcare, community development can create a more conducive environment for educational success. The community development cycle is grounded in the philosophy that education holds the power for change. Education improves the overall health of families by reducing child mortality, increasing child health, and increasing wage earnings and employment. It also impacts communities and the environment by encouraging sustainable resource use, and slowing population growth, which taxes resources.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is guided by General System Theory of Development. The system theory of development views Community as an entity that is made up of distinct units which must work together to realize their common needs. Originating in biology, systems theory was developed in the 1950s against the backdrop of a need to have a set of systematic theoretical constructs to discuss the empirical world (Jeff Palmer, 2019). It provides an analytical framework that can be used to describe many factors involved in development. It helps define some key issues such as assessing patterns of power and influence, deciding where to intervene, understanding the dynamics of intergroup relationships, planning and carrying out development activities.

According to system theory, components of each system are structured in a hierarchical ordering, and components are interdependent with one another in the system to the extent that one component cannot function without the support of other components. Components of a system can be tightly coupled, and where the components are closely interdependent, or loosely coupled, where the smaller subsets of tightly connected components are loosely connected to one another.

### **Concept and Meaning of Self-Help**

Self-help in community development parlance is best help. According to Imhabekhai (2019), through self-help, Communities are encouraged to identify and utilize the material and human resources available in their communities to plan and execute programmes and projects as expedient. Inherent in the principle of self-help are elements of cooperativeness, communalism, collaboration, culture and companionship. Self-help refers to the action or process of developing oneself or overcoming ones problems without the aid of others, it is an action or process of doing things to improve the living standard of individual, groups or community at large through self-initiatives and procedures. Self-help enables people to get together and plan to bring their community on the path of progress.

A functional democracy needs an informed citizenry, empowered media, popular participation in policy making, a responsive state, and governing processes that are open, transparent and inclusive to all legitimate interests. Improving relationships between citizens and their government means working simultaneously on state responsiveness and effectiveness, citizen empowerment, and the accountability of elected officials and council members. The state or community alone cannot solve society's many problems or provide the remedies for democracy's deficits—this also requires citizen action or coordinated activities of some individual or groups (self-help group) (Akande, 2020). A meaningful democracy must strengthen civic voices, demonstrate responsive governance systems, and promote the interest of all its citizens.

Hamer (2018), identified the following area through which self-help initiatives can be promoted these includes:

- i. awareness-raising and building capacity to mobilize;
- ii. research and information generation for advocacy;
- iii. lobbying to influence planning and policy formulation;
- iv. citizen-based monitoring and evaluation;
- v. partnership and implementation;
- vi. auditing;
- vii. joint management of sectoral programs (including co-production schemes); and
- viii. Government frameworks for participatory planning.

According to Imhabekhai (2019), the core objectives of self-help groups in any community include strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations and citizens to demand transparent and accountable local government, advocating on behalf of citizens demanding improved public services, and positioning civil society organizations as legitimate and respected government partners. The program helps to increase opportunities for citizen engagement and strengthens citizens' capacity to contribute to public policy constructively and effectively and to enhance structural changes on matter affecting their well-being.

### **Concept of Sustainable Development**

Chambers (2020) defines development as good change which is synonymous with progress that entails an all-encompassing improvement a process that builds on itself and involves both individuals and social change. Kangbampati (2019) argues that development requires growth and structural change, equity, modernization in social and cultural attitude a degree of political transformation and stability, an improvement in health and education so that population growth stabilizes an increase in urban living and employment. Sustainable development means that development is achieved without excess environmental degradation in a way that both protects the right and opportunities of coming generations and contributes to compatible approaches to sustainable development.

Hutt (2018) defined sustainable development as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. In another definition by Munasinghe (2018), sustainable development is a process of improving the range of opportunities that will enable individuals and communities to achieve their aspirations and full potential over a sustained period of time while maintaining the resilience of economic, social and environmental system.

### **Significance of Self-Help Activities in Fostering and Promoting Sustainable Community Development**

Active grassroots participation in development activities is necessary for the following important reasons. Firstly, every community has some limited capability and necessary resources such as ideas, talents, skills, leadership, human energy, financial and material assets, regardless of how little the available amount may be. Efficient utilization of these resources will enable the community to tackle, at least some of its problems and thereby appreciate its own capability. Thereby gaining some self-confidence and developing the motivation and the willpower to do more in the future. Secondly, this will progressively help to encourage more local initiatives and reduce negative psychological inertia such as apathy and hopelessness. Ultimately the community may achieve a relatively higher level of self-reliance.

Thirdly, fuller and more efficient utilization of available local resources will enable the community to make similar use of external resources if and when they become available. This is quite important, for no amount of external resources will make the community effective unless it already knows how to manage efficiently what it already has. In short, sustainable development will require the community to mobilize itself and make efficient use of its limited resources and appreciate its own capability before it looks for help from elsewhere. Then external assistance can be sought to supplement what it already has and to encourage local initiatives for undertaking and promoting development programmes.

Specifically and more importantly, the mobilization of organized local self-help groups or activities is essential to foster local input in problem assessment and need identification, enhance sound and feasible decision-making, expedite proper programme planning and implementation, and facilitate the development of community capabilities. Akande (2020) stressed that voluntary and active citizen participation in the process of problem definition need assessment can facilitate proper problem diagnosis and a clear definition of the problem in a number of ways as the process would facilitate gathering of firsthand and appropriate data about local conditions, expression of felt need and realistic assessment of the community's needs and problems and adequate exploration and comprehensive assessment of various issues which may have some relevance to the problem under consideration.

In the same vein, organized local self-help activities would afford the community members an opportunity to come together and discuss problems which they may have experienced. In turn, this will increase the chances for gathering a rich variety of valuable information by which the problems can be properly assessed (Chambers, 2019). That is, through free and open democratic discussion the community can generate wide varieties of useful data, including pertinent information about the origin and historical development of the problem. In the course of such discussion genuine and firsthand data about local community conditions, such as the environment, politics, culture, religion, economics, education, etc can be obtained.

In addition, the community can help to provide correct and pertinent interpretation of the data, such that the problem can be properly understood and clearly defined. In other words, the problem can be studied more thoroughly and properly assessed from the perspective of those who have firsthand experience and knowledge about it. As a result, the danger of reading things out of context can be minimized. Thus, active community participation in the problem-solving process is imperative. This is quite important in light of the fact that just as the patient is an essential source of basic information about his/her ailment, so is the community about its problems.

Similarly, local community involvement in tackling local problems would facilitate proper identification of local need. It allows the citizens to express their felt needs directly as opposed to what others may perceive those needs to be (UNESCO, 2021). This is extremely important because unless the people can express their needs as they see fit, there is little chance that their problems can be clearly understood and needs directly addressed. The lack of community involvement in the problem-solving process often results in executing projects which may not be perceived useful to the community or may not directly address the community's problems and/or needs.

Consequently, the project may not attract sufficient community interest, and may not receive the community's support, which is essential in order to sustain it. On the other hand, active and broad-based community involvement in problem assessment or need identification will help to put in focus both the nature and scope of the problem such that there is a clear understanding of it. How well this can be achieved is indeed a test of whether the programme serves the interest of the whole community or a narrow special-interest group.

Moreover Borman, (2019), maintained that local self-help activities which are designed to address genuine community needs have the potential for facilitating considerable community mobilization to address such need(s). Extensive and active community involvement in such endeavours would, in turn, increase the chances for greater representation of various groups, as well as the expressing of divergent points of view so that a comprehensive assessment of the issues at hand can be made. An open and well-organized democratic public discussion would be a good vehicle to foster this level of involvement. Such discussion, if or when properly managed, can engender cross-fertilization of diverse ideas, which are potentially a source of creativity and innovation (Kumar, & Shukla, 2018). As a result, the participants may be able to learn from each other and gain a better understanding of the problem. This will enable them to make an informed decision which they can support. Subsequently, the chances for finding feasible and realistic solutions to problem(s) may increase.

Similarly, Gadamu (2019) stressed that, the process may help to encourage cooperative and collaborative relationships among the community members may help to strengthen the degree of community solidarity. Consequently, there may be extensive community interest and sustained support for the projects which may ensue from the problem definition or need identification. Evidence from developing countries indicates that local community involvement in project design and implementation has a favourable impact on project success. For example, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has implemented many successful rural development projects, such as soil and water conservation, village irrigation projects, rural women's production group organizations, etc, in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The organization suggests that many of their projects were successful primarily because active grassroots participation was utilized in the design and implementation of the projects (Alamgir, 2018).

Self-help groups can contribute to sound decision-making in various ways, such as increasing the possibilities for exploring alternative solutions or goals, making practical suggestions regarding ways to improve upon the various, proposed solutions or goals and voting to directly influence the decision.

Organized discussion among the community members will foster the free exchange of ideas and opinions. This may, in turn, help to increase their knowledge and broaden their foresight about a variety of important issues and options which they need to consider before reaching a final decision. Consequently, the process may help facilitate informed and sound decision-making. This is possible because the majority of informed citizens will not make wrong decisions often without recognizing and correcting their mistakes (Borman, 2019). Furthermore, in as much as self-help groups are usually organized to tackle local problems or needs, the membership of such groups is more favourably predisposed to suggest prospective solutions or answers to the problem. The various suggestions which the group may propose will potentially provide a database of a range of alternative solutions which the group may carefully consider.

Systematic and guided democratic discussions would help the members to share ideas and learn something about each other. With some encouragement for tolerance of differences of opinion, members may be persuaded to listen to one another with an open mind and change their own opinion whenever there are compelling reasons to do so. As a result, they may be able to reduce or narrow their differences, and increase the chances for reaching an agreement which would have broad-based support. Besides, proper application of sound organizational principles and conflict resolution strategies can help the group reduce their misunderstandings and reach a mutually acceptable decision. These principles and strategies can foster cooperative working relationships among the members so as to achieve a greater degree of community solidarity and widely-supported decisions which can be fully implemented (Ross, 2019).

Normally, community input in problem definition and decision-making regarding the choice of relevant and feasible intervention strategies would pave the way for successful programme implementation. Appropriate programme planning and implementation, by and large, depends on the degree to which a problem has been clearly identified and defined, and sound and feasible solutions have been selected. So, to the extent that local community participation in self-help activities would facilitate the accomplishment of targeted goals of development (UNESCO, 2021). Thus, voluntary grassroots involvement in the implementation of self-help activities would be necessary to garner stronger and broader community support for the programme. In turn, this would help to facilitate:

- 1) Initial programme execution or implementation
- 2) Sustained programme operation or execution, and
- 3) Further programme development and expansion.

### **Challenges of Self-help Approach to Community Development**

Alamgir (2018) identified the following challenges in using self-help approach to community development;

- 1 Limited resource: communities may lack the financial, human, or material resources needed for large scale projects.
- 2 Inequitable Participation: not every member may participate or benefit equally in the projects leading to a potential conflict or equity.

- 3 Lack of expertise: community might lack the technical or managerial skills necessary to implement and sustain development projects effectively.
- 4 Difficulty in coordination: there may be difficulty in ensuring effective coordination among various stakeholders.
- 5 Sustainability: projects initiated through self-help may not be sustained in the long term if there is no constant support and maintenance by the people.
- 6 Political and Social Dynamics: local power struggles or social division can hinder cooperative efforts and projects success.

### **Strategies to Promote Self-Help Approach to Community Development**

There are certain essential conditions for grassroots self-help organisations to succeed in promoting community development; First self-help organisations must involve voluntary grassroots groups or active citizen participation in activities of interest to the group. The participants should be organised on their own free will or be encouraged to do so with the ultimate decision left to them. They must not be coerced in any way to do something which they neither believe in nor have an interest in. Members must actively participate in all stages of the problem-solving process, including problem diagnosis/need assessment, decision making, project design and implementation, and evaluation. In all of these stages the group must have democratic freedom to manage their own affairs.

Also, the group must be encouraged to make maximum feasible mobilisation of local (its own) resources before any attempt is made to obtain external assistance. This is to enable the group to make efficient utilisation of its own resources, no matter how limited they are, before looking elsewhere, this will help them gain self-confidence in accomplishing task on their own. This experience also will help the group to learn how to make efficient use of any external resource when it becomes available. External assistance shall be sought only after it is determined that such a resource cannot be mobilised from within. The primary objective of seeking external resources must be to supplement internal community resources. This must be obtained in a form or shape that can be put directly to productive use, with little or no chance for abuse; and it must be obtained at the right time (Kumar, & Shukla, 2018).

Similarly, there must be some technical guidance and encouragement for the group. That is, there must be an enabler to guide the group in taking responsibility for itself, such that the group will, over time, develop its own capability and become relatively independent. Therefore, fostering community cohesion and resolve conflicts through dialogue and negotiation by engaging local leaders and influential figures to build consensus as well as cooperation among members.

However, Avis and Warren (2019), suggested the following strategies to promote Self-help initiative at the expense of community development. These are; efficient resource mobilization which could be achieved through external funding such as government grants, NGOs, and private sector collaboration, inclusive participation to address any imbalance in participation, capacity building, effective coordination and sustainable planning to develop and encourage community to take ownership as well as responsibility for the up keep of the projects. Furthermore, every effort must be made to make the right mix of internal and external resources such that self-reliance can be encouraged and dependence on external sources can be minimized.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Self-sustaining community development strategies, focused on education as a means for change and education have great potential to make an impact on initiated projects which will

foster community development through self-help. Self-help group participation in policy and sustainable development has attracted the attention of many scholars and democratic governments realizing the need for a partnership with the public and self-help groups for effective felt-need. The realities of increasing global inequalities have been of major concern to the international community over the year. More people participation in community development and has assumed an important condition for achieving accelerated and sustainable development. In this regard, many development practitioners and agencies have emphasized the need to secure active support and participation of citizens in the policy making and development processes. This development not only brings about progressive reduction of material deprivation and social inequalities, but also promotes the growth of human capabilities and potentials

## **Recommendations**

Based on the conclusion drawn, the following recommendations were made,

1. The community should look inward to utilize community resources for their identified problems. Since government intervention may not arrive on time due to other plausible competing needs. Therefore, communities need to come together to use their local resources and initiative to solve their local problems.
2. Self help initiative should be encouraged at all levels by community elders. People ability should be tapped and adopted in the identification of problem, execution and evaluation stages.
3. Government should provide financial support in form of grant and loan for communities to execute projects that require urgent attention and the accessible loan will allow the communities to fund projects for immediate use.
4. Local community should partner with external professionals where the community lack expertise in a particular stage and seek support from non-governmental organisations to complement community effort.
5. A well-publicised and well-organised public meeting consisting of members drawn from a broad cross-section of the community would be a good vehicle at the initial stage to enhance community development process.
6. Education should not just be shared responsibility of government alone; Civil Society, Faith-Based Organizations, Private Sector, Individuals and Communities should also contribute to the human capital development and the provision of conducive and quality learning environment.

## **References**

- Abatena, S. H, & Hailu, F. O. (2018). *Grass Root Participation in the Development Process: An Empirical Study of the Problems of Rural Development in Ethiopia*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.
- Akande, J. O. (2020). *Understanding Community Development*. A Handbook for Educators and Practitioners. Published by Obafemi Awolowo University Press, Ile-Ife Nigeria

- Alamgir, M. (2019). "Participatory Development: The IFAD Experience", in W P Lineberry (ed) *Assessing Participatory Development: Rhetoric Versus Reality*, West View Press, Boulder, CO, pp 3-19.
- Avis, Warren, E. (2019) *Shared Participation*, Doubleday & Co Inc, New York.
- Bagodion, Benjamin, U. & Korten, Frances, F. (2019) "*Developing Irrigators' Organisations: A Learning Process Approach*", in Michael M. Cernea (ed) *Putting People First: Sociological Variables in Rural Development*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Borman, E. G. (2019). *Discussion and Group Methods: Theory and Practice*, Harper & Row, New York.
- Chambers, M. A. (2020). *Multimodal logistics in disaster relief*. In G. Kovács, K. Spens, & M. Moshtari (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of humanitarian logistics and supply chain management* (pp. 445-490). London, UK: Springer Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59099-2>
- Gadamu, F. (2021). *Social and Cultural Foundation of the Gurage Associations*, in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, 1966, Vol. 3*, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Haile Selassie 1 University, Addis Ababa.
- Hamer, J. H. (2019) *Human Development: Participation and Change among the Sidamo of Ethiopia*, the University of Alabama Press.
- Hutt, R. (2018). *These are the world's five biggest slums*. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/10/these-are-the-worlds-five-biggest-slums/>
- Imhabekhai, S. J. (2018). *Economic and Social Development: A Process of Social Learning*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.
- Imparato, I., & Ruster, J. (2023.) *Slum upgrading and participation: Lessons from Latin America*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. Retrieved from <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/277391468765324276/pdf/multi0page.pdf> India Const. Art. 17. India Const. Art. 21A.
- Jeff Palmer (2019). *Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission*. Retrieved from <https://erlc.com/resource-library/author-index/jeff-Palmer>
- Kangbampati, S. (2019). *Community Participation in Rural Water Supply*, in Sheldon Annis & Peter Hakim (eds) *Direct to the Grass Roots Development in Latin America*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO.
- Kumar, K., & Shukla, T. (2018). Education outcomes and child's work: A case study of children in slum. *Educational Quest: An International Journal of Education and Applied Social Sciences*, 7(2), 117-124. <https://doi.org/10.5958/2230-7311.2016.00028>.
- Munasinghe, R. P. (2018) "*Overcoming Resistance to Change*", in *Human Relations*, 1, pp 512-532.

Ross, M. (2019). *A Self-Help Housing Project in Rural Tunisia in Retrospect*, Africana Publishing Co, New York. Dey, S K (1964) *Community Development: A Bird's Eye View*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, India.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2021). *Education counts: Towards the millennium development goals*. Paris, France: Author.