

Re-Imagining the African "Local Community" in Social Research: Lessons from Mbagen Development Association of Benue State

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Abstract

In Africa, community development is viewed as a holistic approach encompassing various sectors such as agriculture, education, housing, health, and employment. While there is considerable evidence of global approaches to development, research documenting the efficacy and impact of local approaches remains scarce. This study explores the developmental initiatives undertaken by the Mbagen Development Association (MDA), a local community in Benue State, aimed at addressing the needs and aspirations of its populace – with a specific focus on health and education. This study employed qualitative research methods, including participant observation and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders within MDA. By engaging directly with members of the community and documenting their experiences, a comprehensive understanding of MDA's developmental activities in health and education was achieved. Furthermore, the study revealed the effective approaches to community development in Mbagen, Buruku local government area of Benue state, particularly in the critical areas of health and education and the impact of such developmental efforts were discussed. Potential challenges encountered by MDA in the cause of her developmental efforts were highlighted. One of the findings of this study among others was that there is a formidable community development association in Mbagen called Mbagen Development Association (MDA). The paper recommended among other recommendations that wealthy sons and daughters of Mbagen should continue to donate huge amount of money to the association so that more projects could be executed for benefit of Mbagen community. **Keywords:** Local Community, Mbagen Development Association, Benue state.

Introduction

The development of local communities until few decades ago was not given much attention and prominence by both government and rural individuals in Africa and by extension Nigeria. Right from the colonial period, rural communities constitute the socially and economically backward areas of Nigeria where Benue State is an integral part. Invariably the peasant population that form the bulk of rural areas and produce much of the agricultural products that the nation depends on seem neglected by government and rural community dwellers. This situation has resulted in the much-orchestrated problems of rural- urban drift, declining agricultural production and its attendant food shortage, unemployment, urban congestion and overstretched facilities.

According to World Bank (2021) a vast majority of people across countries live in the rural areas with 60 percent of Nigeria's population living in the rural areas. To this end, the roles which the rural communities play in the generation of national health and national development cannot be underestimated. In view of this, there has been synergy between governmental Institutions and community development association's such as Mbagen Development Association (MDA) to undertake and monitor the complicated process of nation building, development and integration with particular reference to local communities.

Flowing from the above therefore, community development is viewed from the prism of a holistic approach encompassing various sectors such as agriculture, education, housing, health and employment. While there is considerable evidence of global approaches to development, research documenting the efficacy and impact of local approaches to community development remains scarce. It is on this note that researching on the topic "Re-imagining the African local community in social research

Methodology

The methodology employed for this work is qualitative research method, including participant observation and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders within MDA. Data was also collected from books which blended with the primary sources of data which in the long run aided the seamless articulation of the issues in the research. Purposive sampling technique which is used to obtain sample of groups and people who meet somewhat predetermined criterion in a research was adopted in this piece of work. The data collected from both primary and secondary sources were analysed using descriptive technique.

Conceptual elucidation

Concepts used in social sciences and political science in particular are known to have high propensity of being misinterpreted. They can be ambiguous and to that extent misleading if not properly contextualized and elucidated. To reduce such possibility of ambiguity, it is imperative to elucidate the following concepts; Development and Community Development.

Development

The concept of development and its usage in contemporary social science discipline is not only vague and nebulous but also polemic. For example, such terms as 'growth', 'change' and sometimes 'industrialization' which are often used interchangeably with development complicates the problem of providing a generally acceptable definition of the concept. On this note however, it is important to look at the concept of development from both the liberal and Marxist perspective so as to set a balance view of the concept.

To the liberals, development means change which results due to maximization of the growth of Gross National Product (GNP) through capital accumulation and industrialization. They see development as the capacity of a national economy whose initial economic conditions have been more static to generate and sustain an annual increase in its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at the rate of 5 or 7 percent.

On the other hand, the Marxists view development differently. To them development transcends only economic progress but encompasses multi-dimensional processes that focus on the well being of human beings. According to Rodney (1972) development in human society is a many-sided process. At the level of individual, it implies increased skills and capacity, great freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. At the level of the society or groups, it implies an increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relations. Rodney's views on development spans three levels; the individual, society and mode of production.

Agreeing with the Marxists view of development, Zam (2022) argues that development starts at the individual level of the society and therefore for real development to emerge there must be improvement in the education and training of the working population, raising the standard of living and improvement in the health of the people. To Zam, greater attention and investment by government is required in infrastructure and utilities especially roads, electricity and water.

Seers (1969) asked some pertinent questions regarding the concept of development thus;

The questions to ask about a country's development are therefore, what has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all three of these have declined from high levels then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for the country concerned. If one or two of these problems have been growing worse, especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result development even if per capita income doubled. It therefore means that development per se cannot be tied to economic advancement only but a general improvement in the living conditions of the people.

Community Development

The concept of rural or community development will be used in this study interchangeably to mean the same thing. The scope of the concept of Community Development is very wide. It is a multi-dimensional process involving such areas as agriculture, health, education, provision of rural infrastructure, social life, Political and economic issues, commerce and industry among others and their integration with the national economy. It is however often assumed by policy makers and development planners that rural development is synonymous with agriculture. To correct this impression, it is very necessary to carry out a detailed conceptualization of the concept by scholars in the field of community development.

According to the United Nations (1976), the concept of integrated rural development implies that it is a composite or comprehensive programme for rural development in which all relevant sectors such as agriculture, education; housing, health and employment are conceived as interlinking elements in a system having horizontal as well as vertical linkage in operational and spatial terms. To Aziz (1999), the concept of rural development should be viewed as a holistic concept which recognizes the complexity and inter-relatedness of the many variables which influence the quality of life in the rural areas. It is a complex process which involves the interaction of economic, social, political, cultural, technological and other situational factors. Hence, for the actualization of the concept, these factors have to be integrated with local government policies and plans with the objectives of improving the quality of life of the people in the rural areas.

Furthermore, according to Mabogunje (1981), rural development is concerned with the self-sustaining improvement of rural areas and implies a broad-based reorganisation and mobilization of the rural masses so as to enhance their capacity to cope effectively with the daily tasks of their lives and with the changes consequently upon this. In the opinion of Gana(1996), rural development is important not only for its impact on rural places and people but also for its contribution to the overall development of the nation. In Nigeria where the bulk of the people and land are rural and where the level of rural output is very low, rural mobilization provides the quickest and most direct route to national development.

It is to be observed that the ambit of Community development is very wide indeed and it requires a comprehensive approach. It includes generation of new employment, more equitable access to arable land, equitable distribution of income, widespread improvement in health, education, housing and the creation of incentives and opportunities.

Brief Historical Background of Mbagen Development Association (MDA)

It is a truism that when the likes of Awolowo, Azikiwe and many other Nigerians went to Europe and America to study, their brief stint in those places helped to broaden their world

view and upon their return to Nigeria the giant of Africa, they wholeheartedly demanded for the independence of Nigeria. Similarly, the war veterans who fought in the Second World War came back from the war to join forces with the nationalist leaders who were making a clarion call for independence (Terna, 2013).

One of the founding fathers of Mbagen Development Association, Aondoakaa Orga did not study abroad, neither was he conscripted into the army to fight the second world war but his story is closely related to the nationalist leaders. Just like the nationalist leaders went abroad and studied and came back home to demand for independence which has brought appreciable development to Nigeria, Aondoakaa Orga left Tivland to study at the University of Benin, a development which led to the creation of Mbagen Development Association (Terna, 2013).

In an interview conducted by the researcher on the 26th of March 2013 which was published in the book: Elder Aondoakaa Orga, a Date with History- written by Terna Vincent Tavershima, Aondoakaa Orga had this to say about the establishment of Mbagen Development Association:

When I was at the University of Benin, I discovered something unique about my room mates. Every Sunday, they would desert our room and I would be left in solitary confinement in the room. Where they always went on Sundays I didn't know and they didn't invite me not even for once as a hospitable roommate to go with them. Something was definitely amiss. As a Tivman would say "mnyim ma gbeduenga, saausu u alu", meaning there can never be smoke without fire. Aware of this Tiv axiomatic saying, I decided to ask them where they usually went on Sundays. They told me that they always went to their tribal meetings which they held for the development of their areas. Curiosity it is said kills the cat. I demanded for the Constitution of their associations and they gave them to me. I went through them and found them fascinating. With the benefit of hindsight, I rightly thought as MDA has proven today that going home with a Development Association would rekindle the illusive progress and unity of the people of Mbagen. After all, a Tivman would say "ka kezende or zoough a kwagh ye", that is, precious things are got on journey. I came home for one of my weekends with the Uka Development Association's Constitution. Upon arrival, I quickly organized a meeting of Mbagen sons resident in Gboko at the house of Dzua Iortyom. In the meeting I presented what I brought from Benin to them. After a thorough line by line scrutiny of the Uka Development Association's Constitution, the people at that inaugural meeting adopted the constitution with a slight amendment. Ours would then be called Mbagen Development Association (MDA).

No doubt, this community development association which was established in the 1970s has continued to champion the development of the Mbagen people of Buruku LGA who are found in four (4) council wards of the local government which include Mbaakura, Mbaade, Mbaazagee and Mbatyough. It must however be mentioned here that before the coming on board of (MDA), there was an association called *Mmough u Mbagen* headed by Tyoor Mbaakaa Indyorhwer. This umbrella body as far back as the 1940s served as an anchorage on which the voices of the good people of Mbagen found expression (Terna, 2013).

Discussion on the developmental strides of Mbagen Development Association (MDA) in the Health and Education sectors

While it is the responsibility of government to create the enabling environment for community or rural development, the attendant corruption, greed and mismanagement associated with these Institutions and agencies have not allowed them to achieve their desired objectives. In this connection, Okpaga (2004) asserted that "Rather than making these

Institutions vehicle for rural transformation, they become conduit pipes from where public funds are siphoned into private pockets". Added to the foregoing is the fact that the British colonial administration did not concern itself with planning for the development of the rural areas. The few amenities and infrastructure that were available were concentrated in the few urban towns particularly in the "European Quarters" or "White Reserved Areas".

There is no iota of doubt that the establishment of Mbagen Development Association a developmental oriented association was to bring development closer to the Mbagen people of Buruku Local Government Area of Benue State by improving the quality of life of the people. In an interview conducted on the 6th day of September 2024, Oscar Apesough, a prominent Mbagen son averred that "the motive behind the establishment of Mbagen Development Association was to improve the quality of life of the people as life without development is meaningless". He further posited that the establishment of MDA was to encourage rural participation in the activities of life and to see how they could address local challenges thereby empowering the Mbagen people to take ownership of the development of their community.

In an interview dated 14th September, 2024 His Royal Highness (Ter Buruku) Moses Hanior stated that "the primary motive and purpose of Mbagen Community Development Association as considered by the founding fathers was the need to rally the Mbagen community for her unity to engender progress that was homegrown. The obvious backwardness in Mbagen despite her contribution to the colonial economy informed the urgent need of a development inclined hub; hence the setting up of MMOUGH U AGEN in the 1950s. The passion went down but was reinvigorated in 1972 by the likes of Benjamin Dzua Iortyom, Aondoakaa Orga, Patrick Anyam, Hungwa Igyor Anyam and several others with Chief Denen Tofi and other prominent sons of Mbagen being strong supporters, such as Ambe Uvah etc. As her name implies Mbagen Development Association has been development inclined and oriented from her formative years to date".

On his part, Chris Orngu a notable stakeholder of Mbagen Development Association who was interviewed on the 8th of September, 2024 submitted that "The motive behind the establishment of MDA was to close the gap of social transformation and to create a platform for a self help approach to community development especially in education, health and critical infrastructure".

Joseph Ityav and Shie Aondoakaa who are also critical stakeholders in the Mbagen developmental strides both submitted in an interview conducted on the 10th of September 2024 that, "The establishment of Mbagen Development Association was to bring about development to Mbagen in all areas without necessarily waiting for government". Pursuant to the above motives the Mbagen Development Association focused her developmental strides in the areas of education and health care.

Education

Education is a critical sector to the whole question of rural or community development. Improving literacy levels is critical to improving rural hygiene and rural living conditions and diseases prevention. Conscious of the critical role education plays in the overall development of an individual and community as a whole, the Mbagen Development Association established schools which the researcher was able to verify thus;

- Mbagen Comprehensive Secondary School – Abwa Mbaakura Mbagen.
- Mbagen Community Secondary School – Anongul Mbaazagee Mbagen

- Mbagen Health Technology – Abwa Mbaakura Mbagen

Health Centers

The health sector offers an insight into the performance of Mbagen Development Association. Aware of the saying that health is wealth, the Mbagen Development Association established health centers which the researcher was able to verify thus;

- Mbagen Community Hospital – Abwa Mbaakura Mbagen
- Mbagen Comprehensive Primary Health Center – Ashibi Mbatyough Mbagen
- Mbagen Health Clinic – Ugbema Mbaakura Mbagen
- Nyamatsor Primary Health Care Center – Nyamatsor Mbaazagee Mbagen
- Mbagen Health Clinic – Nongov Mbaade Mbagen.
- Mbagen Health Technology – Abwa Mbaakura Mbagen.

It is worth of note that projects executed by Mbagen Development Association in the areas of education and health are visible and verifiable in the four (4) council wards of Mbaakura, Mbaade, Mbaazagee and Mbatyough that make up the Mbagen Community. His Royal Highness (Ter Buruku) Moses Hanior, Joseph Ityav, Oscar Apesough, Shie Aondoakaa and Chris Orngu all affirmed in separate interviews the visibility of projects established by the Mbagen Development Association in the areas of health and education which are sited in the four council wards of Mbagen in Buruku Local Government Areas of Benue State.

Worthy of note is the huge impact these projects have had on the good people of Mbagen and its environs. The impact of Mbagen Development Association's projects on the Mbagen people is very much. Over 40 years ago the people had benefitted from the Mbagen Comprehensive Health Services's institutions at Abwa, Ashibi, Ugbema, Nyamatsor and Nongov. In addition the children of the community had been trained in her schools and are now doing very well. Aside that health and other institutions have employed suitably qualified people of Mbagen extraction and beyond. The Abwa Market is a commercial hub in Mbagen, it was upgraded by the Mbagen Development Association, and its impact is manifold (His Royal Highness (Ter Buruku) Moses Hanior 14th September, 2024).

Shie Aondoakaa interviewed on the 10th September 2024 asserted that "The impact created by the projects established by Mbagen Development Association in the areas of education and health is huge. For example, if MDA had not established such schools in Mbagen, imagine the kind of pressure that would have been on government schools in terms of admission and the total number of students in a particular class". He further stated that, the establishment of those developmental projects by MDA has created "employment opportunities as at least 90 percent of Mbagen sons and daughters work in the education and health sectors where they draw salaries to take care of their daily needs". In addition, the immediate communities where those projects are located like Abwa have been opened up for all sorts of legitimate businesses like building houses for rent to students and workers, setting up of shops where buying and selling takes place etc.

Joseph Ityav in an interview dated 10th September 2024 noted that the establishment of schools in Mbagen by MDA has created skilled and knowledgeable manpower needed by both government and private sector for the smooth running of Institutions and enterprises. To him, this skilled and and knowledgeable manpower have further contributed to the growth and development of democracy in the country. They have contributed to democratic

discourse on social media with well-informed views on national development. To him, were it not for the formal education acquired through MDA established schools, the vibrant democratic engagement these Mbagen sons and daughters carryout would not have been possible. On his part, Chris Orngu interviewed on the 8th of September 2024 submitted that "There has been significant impact in terms of employment, social transformation, public enlightenment and infrastructure as a result of the establishment of schools and health centers by Mbagen Development Association"

Oscar Apesough interviewed on the 6th of September 2024 had a slightly different view of the impact of MDA's projects in Mbagen. He argued that even though the schools and health centers established by MDA have impacted positively on the people, the impact has no far reaching effect because MDA have neglected other areas of development like agriculture, trade, finance and other which if focused on would have had a far-reaching effect on the majority of the Mbagen people.

Notwithstanding the positive impact which education and health care services have brought to bear on the Mbagen people of Buruku Local Government Area of Benue State, it has been observed by the interviewees and the interviewer that there are some challenges militating against the rapid development of Mbagen through the instrumentality of MDA. Some of these challenges include but not limited to;

- 1) Finance/funding - In this area, all the interviewees agree that funding and financing of projects have been the greatest challenge of Mbagen Development Association.
- 2) Partisan politics - This has also constituted a major challenge as Mbagen sons and daughters who are well to do, some of whom are involved in politics decline to contribute generously for projects initiated by MDA just because of political party affiliation. They argue must times that the leadership of MDA sometimes support a particular candidate in political party against other candidates and political parties instead of being neutral and fair to all.
- 3) Geographical limitations in terms of access to those projects as most roads in Mbagen are hardly accessible.
- 4) Poor maintenance culture - It has been discovered that some of the infrastructure put in place in schools and health centers by MDA are now in a terrible state of disrepair. Some of them have been shut down like Mbagen Health Clinic Ugbema Mbaakura Mbagen, for lack of proper maintenance.
- 5) Mismanagement and corruption by both MDA officials and those managing the schools and health centres.

Findings

The following were the findings of the study:

- That there is a formidable community development association in Mbagen called Mbagen Development Association (MDA).
- That the association has been visible in its developmental strides in the areas of health care and education.
- That some Mbagen sons and daughters have contributed to the development of Mbagen with their personal projects outside the association's purview.
- That some challenges like inadequate funding, security and party politics have slowed down the progress of the association.

Conclusion

The paper has concluded that the initiative of MDA as a community development association is commendable and that her developmental efforts in the areas of health care and education have reached some rural areas of Mbagen which if government was allowed to develop such rural areas, it would have taken many years.

Recommendations

It has been recommended thus;

- i. That wealthy sons and daughters of Mbagen should continue to donate huge amount of money to the association so that more projects could be executed.
- ii. Those critical stakeholders in Mbagen communities should put aside political party interest and focus more on the unity of purpose of the development of Mbagen communities through the Mbagen Development Association.
- iii. That the Mbagen Development Association should collaborate with government and international non-governmental organizations to attract developmental grants that would enable them carryout more projects.
- iv. That community security should be the priority of MDA as insecurity could hamper the progress of the association.
- v. That funds meant for the development of the Mbagen communities should not be mismanaged by the officials of MDA. Key stakeholders should checkmate the spending of the funds to avoid misappropriation and embezzlement.

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