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Information as a Major Criterion for Success in Women's Group Activities in Borno State, Nigeria

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Introduction

The 2006 National Census puts Nigeria's population close to 150 million. Fifty two (52) percent of which are Women and about 45% of them live in the rural areas, the highest percentage of which are in the Northern part of the Country. As a Third World Nation, the features that characterized the population in Nigeria include illiteracy, poverty, hunger, disease, and general absence of basic infrastructure such as roads, schools, electricity, etc.

Despite this myriad of problems, the Women population is very resourceful and contributes to the sustainability of the family and the society. About 10% of the Women are educated and contribute their quota to national development working either in public or private sector, many occupying top executive and managerial positions. Majority of them however, uneducated live in the rural areas engaged in domestic chores such as cooking, fetching water and firewood, raising children; and are involved in petty trades such as weaving, sawing, farming, animal husbandry etc. To supplement the families' income. In order to achieve her goals, the Nigerian Woman has since the 1930s realized the importance of collective effort by forming Groups and Associations. The Aba Market Women Association; Matan Arewa; The Amazon; are notable women's groups and associations that have contributed greatly towards uplifting the living standard of the Nigerian woman through their activities before and after independence in 1960. Presently, there are several women's groups, associations, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) directed towards women activities in the Country. In Borno State alone, there are two hundred and fifty-six (256) women clubs, groups, associations, and NGOs operating in both rural and urban areas which are registered with the Ministry for Women Affairs.

This is an indication that the Women population in Nigeria has realized the importance of collective efforts, a potential if properly harnessed can provide the impetus needed for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and the plans of the Federal Government to becoming among the 20 Great Economies of

the World in the year 2020. Perhaps it is in realization of the enormous potential of Women and the role they can play in nation building that since independence in 1960, governments in Nigeria has rolled-out various development programs some specifically directed towards the women folk. Notable ones include Better Life Program for Rural Women (BLP), Family Economic Advancement Program (FEAP), and National Program on Eradication of Poverty (NAPEP). At the international level Nigeria is also committed to the achievement of the objectives of the Beijing Conference, and the current United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

However, despite the careful articulation of the various programs, and the huge amount of money spent towards the implementation of these programs through both Government agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the desired objective is still not achieved. The question that arises at this stage is why? Momodu (2002) probably has an answer when she lamented that "the missing link has been the absence of an effective mechanism for mobilization and stimulating them into action with a view to addressing their problems. That missing link is the lack of information in the right quantity and format."

The role of information in national development can not be overemphasized. Scholars have variously identified the indispensability of information in the developmental efforts of Third World Countries. Aboyode (1987) looked at the provision of effective information mechanism as necessary for rural development. He pointed out that rural development programs can only succeed where effective information delivery mechanism is sustained. Mchombu (1992) on the other hand identified the information requirements for rural development. Camble (1992 and 1994), and Pisagih (1999) emphasized on quality information and its utilization by development workers and women's groups in both rural and urban areas. This study is designed to investigate the information factor as an essential component in the design and implementation of any development program, particularly those directed towards the Women folk.

Statement of the Problem

Borno State was created in 1976 and falls amongst the oldest of the 36 States making –up Nigeria, covering an area of about 116,589 square kilometers occupying the greater part of the Lake Chad Basin in the extreme North Eastern part of the Country with a population of 4.3 million (Census 2006). Having realized the important role women can play in rural development, Borno State Government has over the years introduced various programs aimed at stimulating and enhancing their participation in developmental activities. Notable among the programs include Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW), Family Economic Advancement Program (FEAP), and National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP), has all the palatable inducements such as loan facilities at no interest, free enrollment into skill acquisition centers established in all the local governments of the state, free medical care for pregnant women and children etc. To cap it all, the Ministry for Women Affairs was established to monitor and facilitate the implementation of these laudable objectives.

Despite these efforts and the enormous amount of money spent, rural development is still a mirage and the Women who constitute majority of the rural population continue to live in abject poverty, diseased, hunger, and neglect. In fact Borno State is considered by a recent UNESCO report to be one of the poorest in the Country in terms of development. This is further confirmed in the 2008 Annual Report of the Central Bank of Nigeria presented by the former governor Charles Soludo. Could this be the result of a failure to incorporate Information delivery mechanisms in the programs for effective communication of quality information to the women's group as well as a feedback channel?

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions

1. Do women's groups and associations in Borno State seek and use information in their activities?
2. Do women's groups and associations in Borno State have in-built mechanisms for accessing and using information in their activities?
3. Does the use of information improve the success of women's groups' activities in Borno State?

Objectives of the Study

The study was aimed at achieving the following objectives

1. To find out whether women's groups and associations in Borno State seek and use information in their activities
2. To find out whether women's groups and associations in Borno State have in-built mechanisms for accessing and using information in their activities
3. To examine whether the use of information improves the success of women's groups' activities in Borno State

Significance of the Study

The study was aimed at investigating the consistent failures of rural development programs involving women's groups in Borno State despite the incentives and huge amount of money spent on their implementation. It is hoped that the study will provide the basis for which new development programs will not only incorporate information delivery mechanisms, but also identify specific roles they can play in the efforts of the government to develop Borno State.

Methodology

Survey method was used for the study. Questionnaire was the main instrument used for data collection. However official records also served as important sources of documentary literature.

The population of the study was made up of all the two hundred and fifty-six (256) women's groups and registered with the Borno State Ministry for Women Affairs as at December 2009. However, based on Robert and Morgan's (1970) "Table for Determining sample size for research activities", a total sample of one hundred and fifty-two (152) women's groups was drawn and used for the study.

Data presentation and analysis

A questionnaire each was sent to the Leader's of the one hundred and fifty-two (152) groups sampled, out of which one hundred and twenty (120) representing 78% were properly filled and returned. Descriptive statistical instruments such as frequency distribution tables, graphs, and charts were used to analyze the data collected.

Women's groups are said to be engaged in a variety of activities ranging from farming, small scale manufacturing, to petty trading. Table 1 shows that majority of the women's groups (25%) were engaged in petty trading followed by farming (21%), while the least percentage (5%) of the respondents engaged in pottery.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by activity

Type of Activity	Frequency	Percentage
Farming	25	20.8
Soap/pomade making	10	8.3
Knitting	10	8.3
Tailoring	15	12.5
Food processing	9	7.5
Pottery	4	3.3
Petty trading/retailing	30	25.0
Livestock production	10	8.3
Tie and dye	7	5.8
Total	120	100

It is realized that individuals as members of society have identifiable information needs, and relevant information is a necessary catalyst in their daily activities. Consequently, women's groups have a collective information need which they seek and use in order to achieve success in their activities. It is in this regard that women's groups were asked to indicate their information requirement. The responses which are categorized into 6 are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Distribution of respondents by information requirement

The highest percentage recorded by agricultural information needs is not surprising bearing in mind the large span of fertile land in the area and of course all are farmers even though at subsistence level. The information required in this area include where to get farm inputs and implements such as fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, improved variety seeds, tractors etc. free or at highly subsidized rate; and how to apply them. Others are information on animal husbandry such as breeds, feeds, animal diseases, period of fattening, available market etc.

Educational information needs came third with 12%. This again is not a surprise because it has been stated earlier that Borno is the most neglected and backward. The information required in this area is first of all awareness on the importance of education in the development of the individual and the society, and most especially girl child education. The few who send their children to school need information regarding school calendar, when examinations organized by external bodies such as JAMB, SSCE, GCE, are conducted, and what is expected of parents. They are also interested in information regarding government incentives such as scholarships and automatic employment towards girl-child education.

Eleven percent (11%) of the information requirement of the women's groups surveyed is related to petty economic activities that generate little income to the members such as sawing, knitting, pottery, tie and dye, animal husbandry, etc. They are interested in knowing where to get cheap raw materials for their trade, access to interest-free loans and market for their finished products at reasonable price. Others include how to better or improve their cognitive skills in order to enhance their earnings.

Health information requirement constitute twenty percent (20%). The most paramount requirement is ante-natal and post-natal care, immunizations especially on the six childhood killer diseases, how to prevent and manage Vascular Virginal Fistula (VVF), how to safely deliver pregnancy. The women's groups also need

information on how to prevent and control epidemics especially cholera and meningitis which are rampant in the area. Perhaps the health information required by rural women's groups generally is hinged on hygiene, good food, family planning and clean environment. These are in fact necessary for the well being of the community and the society at large.

At the moment women's groups in Borno especially those in the rural areas are not politically conscious. They are not aware of their responsibilities to government neither are they aware of their rights as citizens. The presence of government is only felt at the time of electioneering campaign where promises are made and not fulfilled. The apathy towards government and its agencies is reflected in the responses were political information requirement represents only three percent (3%). They need to know what governance is, their rights as citizens, their powers as electorates and how to use these powers wisely.

The Women also require information on the political parties and their manifestos to be able to participate and take decision to cast their votes independently against the present circumstances where they align simply to their husbands or relations.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents' views on in-built

information mechanism in their programs.

In-Built Information Mechanism	Frequency	Percentage
Workshops	90	75
Seminars	103	86
Conferences	10	8
Talks	50	42
Drama presentations	60	50
Demonstration activities	80	67

NB n=120 for each item.

The importance of effective communication channel in the success of any development program cannot be over-emphasized. Thus, Aboyode (1984) suggested the provision of an in-built information mechanism for continuous and consistent flow and feedback of information among women's groups and development agencies. Table 2 above shows that women's groups in Borno State have a variety of in-built information mechanisms which can be accessed and utilized by its members to enhance their activities both individually and collectively. Among the identified mechanisms Seminar, Workshop, and Demonstration activities which constitute 86%, 75%, and 67% respectively, are found to be the most popular among the women's groups. The least, Conferences which accounted for only 8% is unpopular among the women's groups surveyed. These in-built mechanisms as expressed by respondents helped them to keep abreast of changes and innovations as well as equipped them to apply such in their activities.

Having indicated the presence of in-built information mechanisms in their group activities as well as seeking and utilizing information in carrying out their activities, the study sought to find out whether the use of information in their activities is a factor in achieving success in their programs. The responses presented in Table 3 certainly confirms that information contributes towards the success of their activities.

Table 3: Information as a success factor in women's group activities.

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Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	98	82
No	22	18
Total	120	100

Presentation of Findings

From the above analysis the findings of the study can be summarized as follows:-

1. Women's groups in Borno State engaged in a variety of activities aimed at raising their standard of living as well as contributing their quota to the development of the State.
2. The information needs of women's groups in Borno State range from agricultural, educational, political, economic, and health related.
3. Workshops, seminars, conferences, talks, demonstrations, and drama presentations constitute the major information mechanisms found in the programs of women's group activities in Borno State.
4. Women's groups in Borno State seek and use information in their activities.
5. The use of information by women's groups in Borno State has enhanced their performance in various activities.

Recommendations

1. Women's group activities should be intensified. This can be done by encouraging women to form new groups and expand old ones so that they can earn more money to improve their quality of life and benefit from government's development programs.
2. In-built information mechanisms are necessary in designing programs for women's group activities. Consequently, they should be strengthened and deployed regularly.
3. The Borno State Ministry for Women Affairs, Local Government Councils, government agencies (FEAP, BLRW, NAPEP) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) should be more involved in women's group activities by providing information and monitor the utilization of such for their improvement.
4. The Borno State Library Board with its several public libraries spread across the State coupled with trained manpower and mobile services, should not only be involved in providing information to women's groups but should also act as the feedback channel between Government and women's groups.

Conclusion

Women's groups constitute an important segment of the labour force in Borno and Nigeria in general. They engaged in various activities their by earning income and improving their lives while contributing towards national development. Government has recognized this fact and consequently, involved women's groups in its various development programs such as FEAP, BLRW, and NAPEP, establishment of a ministry for Women Affairs, a host of NGOs, and spent millions of Naira annually towards the implementation of the programs. However, these programs have not totally succeeded because none has adequately provided an effective information

delivery mechanism that will act as a feedback channel between the Government and women's groups. In order to achieve any meaningful success in national development, future development programs must incorporate an information delivery mechanism. In this case, The Borno State Library Board with its several public libraries spread across the State coupled with trained manpower and mobile services, should not only be involved in providing information to women's groups but should also act as the feedback channel between Government and women's groups.

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