

The Role of Christian Religious Organisations in Community Development Programmes in Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper investigated rural-urban differentials in the role of Christian religious organisations in Community Development Programmes (CDPs) in Cross River State. Adopting the survey method, 150 churches were selected from 6 Local government Areas, comprising 3 urban and 3 rural communities across the 3 senatorial districts of Cross River State. Questionnaire was used to generate primary data, and descriptive statistics was employed for data analysis. Using the exchange theory as the basic framework for analysis, the study found that more rural than urban churches do not have autonomy, thus could serve as a hindrance to initiating and implementing CDPs in the study area. Result also shows that membership taxonomy of the church could hinder the goal of CDPs in terms of members' financing and participation in CDPs in the area. The church has the capacity to promote sustainable livelihood, guaranty social order, spur development, enhance the social functioning of individuals, serve as agent of change, and bring about increased organized commitment and participation in community development activities. It is recommended that the local church should see community development programmes as part and parcel of their ministry.

Keywords: rural-urban differentials, Christian religious organisations, church autonomy, development programmes

Introduction

The general inclination of rural based churches to be conservative rather than dynamic and change-oriented underlies the need to investigate their general contributions to community development (Ekong, 1983). Despite the fact that people, their needs and potentials for growth (both economic and personal) are central to the developmental process, religion emphasizes services to mankind and love for fellow men; the churches have a superior opportunity to be

initiators and sponsors of community development programmes because they are not only custodians of the tradition that would make life more abundant, but they are located everywhere; yet, a number of church organizations have tended to shy away from involvement in the community development process.

As Rubin and Rubin (2001) observed, community development occurs when people strengthen the bonds within their neighborhoods, build social networks and form their own organizations to provide a long term capacity for problem solving. Community members who have the capacity to do something to enhance their quality of life are portrayed as having the ability to think, to decide, to plan, and to take action in determining their lives. Therefore, in any community development programme both economic and individual growth must be given equal attention so as to ensure that the process of community development achieves its due balance of continuity and sustainability. Rubin and Rubin's definition clearly points out the place of corporate social responsibility through people oriented programmes aimed at developing them and not just physical projects.

The sole aim of any community development initiative as extant literature (Udensi, Udoh, Daasi & Igbara, 2012; Bassey, Udensi, Daasi & Igbara, 2013; Akpomuvie, 2010) has noted should be geared towards bringing about change in the lives of people with the aim of enhancing their livelihood and societal development. These with the above position will help the participants to achieve a more meaningful existence, become more responsible to an expanding common good, more responsive to human needs and more competent to live harmoniously with neighbours. This can be achieved if churches are fully involved and are in active participation in the physical and infrastructural development activities in their host communities.

The main thrust of this paper is to investigate rural and urban differentials in the role of Christian religious organisations in community development programmes in Cross River State. Specifically, the paper identified rural and urban based Christian religious churches in Cross River State by studying their characteristics; investigating specific community development activities undertaken by these churches in the past 20 years; and identifying the problems responsible for lack of significant contributions to community development by churches in rural and urban centers in Cross River State.

Literature Review

Literature on rural community development emphasizes the importance of citizen participation as a means of strengthening communities (Flora, Flora & Fey, 2004). Advocates and practitioners of rural community development also believe that citizens should be meaningfully involved in community decision-making (Coe, 1990). For development to occur there is need for a greater participation of local people and the church in development processes that will change the nature and direction of development intervention as well as result in a type of development that will have local people's support and recognition (CASSAD, 1992). With many developing countries facing increasing fiscal

constraints many of the rural communities are gaining less attention from government, hence the need for the residents to mobilize themselves for the task of community development.

Various studies have examined the problems and the role of churches in community development and provided the framework on which churches can help improve its host community (Ekong, 2010; Dreyer, 2004; Flint, Atkinson and Kearns, 2002; McRoberts, 2001 and Ekong, 1983). Ekong (1983) for instance investigated the characteristics of rural based religious organizations in six local government areas of south-western Nigeria, and their contributions to the development of the rural areas in which they are located. Findings from the study revealed, among other things, that lack of money, scanty membership, and competition for membership constituted their most important problems. Also, the establishment of schools appeared to be the major contribution of the organizations to the development of the areas in which they are located.

Another study by Dreyer (2004) which was motivated by the premise that the church, with its powerful resources and infrastructure, could be an important partner and role player in existing development strategies and initiatives in especially the rural areas. The study aimed not only to illuminate the unique role the church can play in sustainable development, but, more importantly, to inspire it to rise to the challenge of actual participation. It was therefore concluded in the study that participation by the church could contribute to the effective development of especially the rural people, thereby allowing for a more integrated, community-centered approach. The foregoing exposes qualities of the church which are vital to community development which is the focus of this investigation.

Churches are often well placed to play a part in the huge task of community development. Unlike other voluntary agencies, they are in many cases stronger in the rural areas than in the cities. The rural based church, especially the one established by missionaries, often locates their headquarters in that local area. This ensures close contact with the people, and can therefore help in overcoming the many problems in promoting community development which arise from difficulties in communication. Churches are primary meeting locations for communities, providing sites of 'sociability' and 'redemption' for local people (Ladd, 1998; Ammerman, 2000; Spain, 2001) and civic associations that encourage large numbers of citizens to participate in an array of social activities (Ammerman, 1996).

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the exchange theory as the theoretical framework for analyzing data on the contributions of urban and rural based churches to community development. The major proponents of exchange theory are George Homans and Peter Blau. According to Charles (2010), exchange theory is often seen as deductive in orientation because it involves propositions which guide reasoning and research. The propositions comprise statements of a

relationship which assumes that if condition “B” must take place, then situation “A” must prevail. A fundamental question which exchange theory seeks to ask is the ‘Quid pro quo’ - something given as compensation. That is, in a situation of exchange, one has to ask “what will I gain from this interaction or transaction?” The implied gain or loss is quickly calculated albeit, mentally before an actor engages in any interaction. This is not surprising because the world has become not only materialistic but also sentimental. Gratification is the keyword in exchange theory because nobody wants to go into a relationship he expects to suffer materially or emotionally. Everybody, as an individual actor, is driven by a profit motive to go into a relationship that involves an exchange (Charles, 2010).

Churches as well as its host community (which most often comprise of members of these churches) are actively engaged in finding the answer to the question “what will I gain from this interaction or transaction?” An important purpose of most Christian religious organisations in planning and carrying out community development projects or programs is to fulfill its evangelism function. The development projects also serve as welfare programs to its members who are also members of the community where it is based. But when this purpose is dormant, the aim of community development by the church is therefore defeated. For an exchange to take place, it is assumed that every actor is a free being and is not under any obligation to go into the transaction. This means that the actor has the choice to enter into or to refuse to enter into any exchange. There is therefore a strong element of voluntary action and freedom in taking a decision. No one is under pressure to enter into a relationship of any sort. This shows the various approaches the church engages to attract its members. This was the method used by the early missionaries who were able to convert community members by the provision of schools, hospitals and other amenities.

In exchange theory, it is assumed that each person is unique and is motivated by selfish interest to go into an interaction in order to get what he wants. A finding in a study by Ekong (1988) on Rural Based Religious Organization and Rural Community Development revealed that the sick constituted the second largest category of membership. This is a clear evidence of the extent to which self-interest motivates people to go into interaction and transaction. Reciprocity therefore enhances exchange in the society and sustains the relationship (Charles, 2010). If the church gains more and more membership through the corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs it gives to its host community, then the relationship will be sustained and could likely increase in dimension, intensity and regularity.

Materials and Methods

Cross River State is a coastal state in South Eastern Nigeria, named after the river, which passes through the state. Located in the Niger Delta, Cross River State occupies 20,156 square kilometers. It shares boundaries with Benue State to the north, Enugu and Abia States to the west, to the east by Cameroon

Republic and to the south by Akwa-Ibom. It comprises 18 Local Government Areas with Calabar as its capital. Its major towns are Akamkpa, Biase, Calabar South, Ikom, Obubra, Odukpani, Ogoja, Ugep, Obudu, Obanliku and Akpabuyo.

In this study, the Survey Method was adopted. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2000) and Nwagbara (2003) surveys describe current conditions or attitudes as well as explain the reason for certain existing situations. The survey was carried out through the administration of questionnaire on the selected church leaders and workers in the study area. The population of study comprises members of urban and rural based churches. The churches were identified in terms of ideology (that is their vision and mission statement, belief, and doctrine). Also, the officers involved in the day to day administration of the churches including Bishops, Reverends, Pastors, Evangelists, Prophets, workers and other church administrators in the area.

The sample comprised 150 churches in Cross River State selected through a multi stage sampling procedure. Firstly, simple random sampling technique (through balloting method) was used to select 6 Local Government Areas (LGAs) – Calabar municipal, Akpabuyo, Ikom, Boki, Ogoja and Obanliku LGAs. Secondly, the churches for the study were purposively considered. Finally, the sample size of 150 churches was selected for this study. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results and Discussions

Table 1 shows the characteristics of churches in the urban and rural areas of the study area. Rural based churches had more full-time preachers than urban churches. Table 1 further revealed that rural church membership constitute individual with poor low income as compared to the urban church. This result supports the general inclination (Ekong, 2010; Ihejiamaizu, 2002) that rural areas are poverty prone as compared to urban areas.

Table 1: Characteristics of Selected Church (N=150)

Characteristics	Urban		Rural	
	No.	%	No	%
Preacher’s appointment category				
Full-time	26	34.7	62	82.7
Part-time	49	65.3	13	17.3
Income range of church membership				
Low income earners	21	28	49	65.3
Middle income earners	37	49.3	20	26.7
High income earners	17	22.7	6	8
Church categorization				
Pentecostal	60	80	22	80
Orthodox	15	20	53	20

Duration of church existence				
< 10 years	41	54.7	12	16
11 – 20 years	21	28	14	18.7
>20 years	13	17.3	49	65.3

Table 1 also show that more orthodox churches than Pentecostal churches were located in the rural areas, than in the urban area. This finding further probe the fact that more churches had existed above 20 years in the rural areas than in the urban centers. Generally, the foregoing characteristics of Christian religious organisations will set the perspective for a broader insight into analyzing what roles the church can play in community development programmes in Cross River State.

Types of Membership of Christian Religious Organisations

Table 2 shows the type of membership of Christian religious organisations in the study area.

Table 2: Type of Church membership of Christian religious organisations in Cross River State

Types of Membership	Urban		Rural	
	No.	%	No.	%
Those that need spiritual assistance	44	58.7	34	45.3
Traders	7	9.3	5	6.7
Farmers	9	12	26	34.7
Students	7	9.3	5	6.7
Civil Servants	5	6.7	3	4
Politicians	3	4	2	2.6
Total	75	100	75	100

The data in Table 2 show that those that need spiritual assistance were highest in both urban and rural churches; while other categories according to data in Table 2 include: Farmers which came second; but was prominent in rural based church than urban based church. Traders and students came as the third categories of membership of urban and rural based churches, while civil servants and politicians came as fourth and fifth categories respectively (though there was disparity in the level of prominence between urban and rural based churches). The findings indicate that what constitute the church membership in both urban and rural based churches consists of members who sought for help rather than members who can contribute to the development of the church. The result in Table 2 further showed that the class of individuals in both urban and rural based churches is basically those whose needs (spiritual and physical) have been met at one point or the other. This result support the assertion by Igbara, Etu, Alobari and Naenwi (2014) that corporate social responsibility (CSR) could positively influence community development and also, as a strategy of pulling membership to the church especially through the

provision of free medical services, donation of items and other empowerment that may accompany it. However, the lowest categorization of church membership (politicians) as shown in Table 2 usually are rarely seen in church, in most cases are seen in church attendance only when invited. This therefore probe that need is the basics that draw people to church, thus, the church could take this as an advantage to mobilise their host community for a deliberate and well-intended plan to strengthen bonds and build social networks for a long term capacity for problem solving.

Sources of Income for Christian Religious Organisations

Data in Table 3 show sources of income of Christian religious organisation in the study area.

Table 3: Sources of income of Christian religious organisations in Cross River State

Source of income	Urban		Rural	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Church collection	28	37.3	44	58.7
Voluntary donations	11	14.7	4	5.3
External support from head church	2	2.7	21	28
Engagement in economic enterprise	29	38.7	4	5.3
Others	5	6.6	2	2.7
Total	75	100	75	100

Source: compiled from records of churches surveyed

Results in Table 3 indicate that the major source of income for the church is from church offerings as the church leaders in both rural and urban based churches unanimously agreed that church collection and voluntary donations form the major sources of their church income. However, rural based church had more external support (28 % of their total income). This shows that very few urban based churches and more rural based churches in the study area were dependent (not autonomous), while more urban based church and very few rural based churches were independent (autonomous). The dependent groups were branches with headquarters located elsewhere and as such, depend on decisions taken for them by the headquarters. This shows that the dependent churches cannot take action and react to observations that are development prone to their host communities. Most of these independent churches, as observed, are growing churches with small numbers of members and therefore lack the necessary resources to carry out community development projects or to even render effective assistance to its members. From the foregoing, it was revealed that more rural based religious organisations were dependent as compared to urban based churches.

Churches are often well placed to play a part in the huge task of community development. Unlike other voluntary agencies, they are in many cases stronger in the rural areas than in the cities. The rural based churches; especially the ones established by missionaries, often locate their headquarters

in that local area. This ensures close contact with the people, and can therefore help in overcoming the many problems in promoting community development which arise from difficulties in communication. Churches are primary meeting locations for communities, providing sites of ‘sociability’ and ‘redemption’ for local people. This finding is in line with other studies including Ladd (1998), Ammerman (2000), Spain (2001), and Ammerman (1996).

Result also indicates that 38.7 % of urban based churches total income is derived from engaging in economic enterprise. This shows that the amount of money these churches have is directly dependent upon fund raising activities of their members, viz. Sunday collection, tithes, gifts, etc. The implication of the above findings indicates that those churches that are engaged in economic enterprise and also have external financial support have been the most relevant to their host communities in terms of corporate social responsibility. Thus, creation of economic enterprise by churches (in both rural and urban areas) could serve as a model for income generation and employment creation for Christian religious organization.

Types of Community Development Activities carried out by the Churches

Respondents in both the urban and rural were asked the number of projects carried out by their churches. Table 4 presents various community development activities carried out by urban and rural based churches in the study area.

Table 4: Type of Community Development projects carried out by Urban and Rural Churches in the last 20 years in Cross River State

Project type	Urban (N=75)				Rural (N=75)			
	Completed/ Ongoing		Never embarked Upon		Completed/ Ongoing		Never embarked Upon	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Water supply	19	25.3	56	74.7	14	18.7	61	81.3
Electricity	0	0	75	100	0	0	75	100
New church building	31	41.3	44	58.7	69	92	6	8
School construction	27	36	48	64	47	62.7	28	37.3
Clinic	13	17.3	62	82.7	2	2.7	73	97.3
Piggery	0	0	75	100	1	1.3	74	98.7
Poultry	17	22.7	58	77.3	7	9.3	68	90.7
Orphanage home	31	41.3	44	58.7	0	0	75	100
Adult education/literacy	29	38.7	46	61.3	5	6.7	70	93.3
Skill acquisition center	57	76	18	24	43	57.3	32	42.7

In comparing the urban and rural divide, Table 4 reveals the geographical location that is more involved in community development activities. The data indicate various community development activities (water supply, electricity, new church building, primary/secondary school construction, clinic, piggery, poultry, orphanage home, adult education and skill acquisition center). The data in Table 4 also indicate that, the rural based churches were more interested in formal education and hence, the construction of more schools within their host communities (62.7%), even though some of the urban based churches were involved in the establishment of schools in the study area. This finding supports the fact that their basic interest (for establishment of schools) was for personal and profit gains and not necessarily the education of the populace. Data in table 4 further indicate that the rural based churches were more interested in building of new churches. This could be the reason why the church building may be the only nice building in most rural communities.

Further analysis of data in Table 4 further shows that rural based churches completed significantly more community development activities/projects than the urban based churches. For example, consider the establishment of schools in the past 20 years, the rural based churches have carried out and completed more projects as compared to the urban based churches. Generally the list of community development activities completed by churches (as shown in table 4) favours the rural based churches especially those with external assistance and foreign links.

Contributions of Religious Organisations to Community Development

Respondents were asked to indicate specific areas they have benefited from their churches. Table 5 shows their responses in that regards.

Table 5: Respondents’ (members) responses on specific areas they have benefited from churches

Contribution	Urban (N=75)				Rural (N=75)			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Social amenities	34	18	41	82	23	30	52	70
Career counseling	53	66	22	34	37	46	38	54
Health	18	16	57	84	53	66	22	34
Material blessing	64	88	11	12	66	72	9	28
Gift to spouse/children	26	40	49	60	57	54	18	46

Source: Field Work, 2014

The various responses are grouped into five dimensions (Social amenities, career counseling, health, material blessing and gift to spouse/children) as shown in Tables 5. A close look at the data reveals that members have benefited significantly from rural based churches as compared to urban based churches. The present study affirms Ekong (2010) observation that, the church building might be the only permanent and decent building available in the rural area.

The implication of the above depicts a multi-dimensional development, which is not only an urban business, but will also assist to develop the rural areas, thus, addressing the rural and urban dichotomy in development. This finding is in tandem with Dreyer’s (2004) conclusion that participation by the church in sustainable development could contribute to the effective development of especially the rural areas.

Problems Encountered by Churches

Respondents were asked to indicate the problems encountered by churches in their community. Table 6 contains responses about problems facing churches that may be responsible for their lack of impressive contributions to community development in the study area

Table 6: Responses on problems faced by religious organization in Cross River State

Challenges	Urban				Rural			
	Yes	%	No.	%	Yes	%	No.	%
Competition for membership	11	14.7	64	85.3	12	16	63	84
Lack of money	62	82.7	13	17.3	69	92	6	8
Lack of governmental support	17	22.7	58	77.3	33	44	42	56
Lack of trained pastors	26	34.7	49	65.3	52	69.3	23	30.7
Land problems	21	28	54	72	2	2.7	73	97.3
Poor attendance	59	78.7	16	21.3	46	61.3	29	38.7
Theft of church properties	28	37.3	47	62.7	9	12	66	88
Migration of youths	7	9.3	68	90.7	67	89.3	8	10.7
Membership discrimination	4	5.3	71	94.7	33	44	42	56

Source: Field work, 2012

Table 6 show that in the various problems that constitute a problem to Christian religious organisations had the following responses: Competition for membership (respondents responded was high for urban based churches than rural based churches), lack of money (respondents response was high for rural church than urban church), lack of governmental support (respondents responded was high for both rural and urban church), lack of trained pastors (respondents responded was high for rural based church than urban church), land problems (respondents responded was high for urban based churches than rural based churches), poor attendance (respondents responded was high for rural based churches than urban based church), theft of church properties (respondents gave higher responses for urban based church than rural based churches), migration of youths (respondents gave a very high response in favour of rural based churches), and membership discrimination (respondents

responded was high for rural based churches than urban based church). The present discourse supports the findings of extant researches (Ekong, 2010; Dreyer, 2004; Flint, Atkinson & Kearns, 2002; McRoberts, 2001; Ekong, 1983) which had variously explored the problems of churches in community development.

The foregoing findings have clearly portrayed the give and take interaction existing between the church and its membership. The principal actors' (the church and its members) engagement in the interaction is hinged on "who benefit". While the members are attracted to the church because of what they will benefit from the church, the church on the other hand is also interested in what they can get out of the members (in this case the vision and mission statement of the church). A balanced exchange with regards to fulfilling the bargain of the exchange can bring about community development, because everyone in the exchange is satisfied.

Conclusion

The church has the capacity to ensure participation in governance and decision-making, promote sustainable livelihood, guaranty social order, spur development, enhance the social functioning of individuals, serve as agent of change, and bring about increased organized commitment and participation in community development activities. Even though the foregoing were some of the findings that this study revealed, this is a new concept that may take some time for people to understand and accept. A general and universal implementation of this concept may take a long time. A lot of patience is therefore needed for those who are interested in seeing that this concept is applied at the local church level. For a successful implementation of this concept, it would be very necessary to begin with those church denominations and their local branches that understand and agree with the concept. Once they begin the implementation of even a single programme, they would then serve as a model for other churches to emulate.

Recommendations

1. The local church should see community development programmes as part and parcel of their ministry. As the local church is part of the community, it should embark on community mobilization programmes aimed at enabling people identify, analyze, plan and take action to solve their problems so that people can live fulfilled lives.
2. Extra effort should be made to implement effective information services in rural areas through Christian religious organisations. This would serve as a major solution to the unwarranted influx of rural dwellers into urban centers. This can be feasible if the implementation of rural development policies is geared to make it attractive to live in rural areas. The availability of very basic amenities (running water, rural electrification, and roads that are navigable all year round) would go a long way in making people choose to live in rural areas.

3. Training should be provided for the local churches on the holistic ministry and the role of the church in development. In addition, training should be provided in the following areas: Community based development/ Participatory Rural Appraisal, leadership and management, resource mobilization, financial control and accountability, appropriate technologies, monitoring and evaluation. Training should be participatory, learner-centered, experiential and contextualized.

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