

Repositioning the Women 'August Meeting' in South East Nigeria for Sustainable Development

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Abstract: *The Igbo of South East Nigeria are well known for their self help initiatives. After the Nigeria- Biafra war (1967 – 1970) ravaged populations, homes and infrastructural facilities in the region, town unions mobilized funds for community development. Schools and roads were rebuilt while communities were provided with portable water. In the 1980s when the town unions seemed to have run out of steam, the women of South East Nigeria organized themselves under the aegis of 'August meeting' to embark on development projects in the region. More than two decades into the existence of the 'August meeting', her score card leaves much to be desired. Employing the political economy paradigm and relying mainly on secondary sources of data this paper critically reappraises the strengths and weakness of the 'August meeting' movement to deliver sustainable development in South East Nigeria. The paper suggests realignment towards the formation and management of cooperative societies for skills acquisition as livelihood programs through which the twin goals of women empowerment and community development can be actualized, leading to sustainable development*

Keywords: Community, Mobilization, Self help, Sustainable development, Women.

1. Introduction

In spite of her abundant endowment of human and natural resources, Nigeria remains a poor country. It is estimated that 70 percent of the population is living below the poverty line in both rural and urban areas [1]. Poverty manifests when and where a distortion becomes pronounced that people, groups (male and female) and countries become unable to adapt, change and survive [2]. In Nigeria, this distortion is traceable to the peripheral capitalism introduced through colonialism.

Table 1: Comparison of Development indicators in five African Countries in 2010 [3]

Growth Indicators	Nigeria	Gabon	Libra	Egypt	South Africa
Population (millions)	154.7	15.0	6.4	83.0	49.3
Life Expectancy at birth (years)	48.1	60.9	74.5	70.3	51.6
Infant mortality rate (per 1000 live births)	85.8	51.5	16.8	18.2	54.3
Physicians (per 1000 people)	0.4	-	1.9	2.8	-
Rural population (% of total population)	50.9	14.5	22.3	57.2	38.8
Adult literacy rate (% ages 15 and older)	60.8	87.7	88.9	-	88.7
Youth literacy rate (% ages 15 – 24)	71.8	97.6	99.0	-	97.6
Mobile Phone subscribes (per 100 people)	47.2	93.1	77.9	66.7	94.2
Internet users (per 100 people)	28.4	6.7	5.5	20.0	9.0

Whereas in pre-colonial Africa the urban centre was a place for industry and creation of wealth as obtains in the developed capitalist economies, peripheral capitalism has turned the African urban centers and even the rural places into mere centers of consumption and distribution of goods and services from the international capitalist system of production. [4]. The attendant competition to be relevant in this international capitalism, that is, to become part of

the comprador bourgeois class that superintends over foreign capital has polarized the Nigerian people. This has instituted ethnicity and religious intolerance while entrenching corruption. It also perpetuates poverty and poor governance as shown by the development indicators in table 1. This high level of poverty is not expected to improve in the nearest future as the exponential growth rate of the Nigerian population is seen as compounding the problem of providing food, jobs, shelter, education and exacerbating absolute poverty (Table 2).There is also the excessive dependence on Europe and America for ideas, financial and technological assistance which have brought about prevarications in government policies, attendant shortfall in the delivery of infrastructural facilities and services. Apart from this generally unsatisfactory state of affairs in Nigeria, the situation in South Eastern Nigeria is worsened by the civil war experience which has left indelible marks of economic suppression and socio – political marginalization. It is perhaps as a result of these anomalies that the Igbo of South East Nigeria have relied more on self help and community development projects to provide the region with much needed infrastructural facilities.

The Igbo of South East Nigeria are well known for their self help initiatives. During the colonial era, men and women mostly in unskilled employment mobilized scarcely available funds to send their kinsmen to the best schools in Europe and America, in pursuit of the Golden Fleece. These people trained through communal self help efforts did not only become role models in their communities, they also catalyzed development efforts within these communities and beyond. The roles played by such beneficiaries of early Western education as Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Mbonu Ojike and Dr. Kingsley Mbadiwe in the struggle for self rule and eventual wresting of independence from the colonialists attest to this fact. In the same vein, after the Nigeria- Biafra war (1967 – 1970) ravaged populations, homes and infrastructural facilities in the region, town unions organized the people and mobilized funds for communal self help projects. Schools

and roads were rebuilt while portable water and markets were provided for communities. The numerous community secondary schools, burgeoning markets, and edifices that adorn South East Nigeria as town halls and/or civic centers are eloquent testimonials to the community development efforts, self help initiatives and industry of these town unions. In the 1980s when these town unions seemed to have run out of steam, the women of South East Nigeria in a move reminiscent of the colonial era 'Aba women riot' organized themselves under the aegis of 'August meeting' to embark on community development projects in the region. This paper is a critical reappraisal of the strength and weaknesses of the 'August meeting' movement in the bid to highlight the reasons for the apparent inability of the movement to metamorphose into a revolutionary change agent. As a change agent, the movement is expected to harness available human and natural resources to deliver sustainable development in the region. The other sections of this paper provide insight into community development programs anchored on cooperative societies and skills

acquisition and how these can be nurtured to sustain development in South East Nigeria.

2. The Women August Meeting of South East Nigeria

The women 'August meeting' hereinafter referred to as the 'August movement' is a mass movement in South East Nigeria that embraces all women within the region. It derives its name 'August meeting' from the eighth month of the year when all women of eastern Nigeria extraction and those married in this sub region are expected to return to their places of origin to rub minds, brain storm and plan on possible and feasible ways and means of developing their communities. Thus membership is automatically generated through consanguinity and affinity. This movement has permeated all geographic, religious and linguistic.

Table 2: African Population Projections 1980 – 2100 [5]
(Population in Millions)

<i>Selected Countries</i>	<i>1950</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2025</i>	<i>2050</i>	<i>2100</i>	<i>Total Fertility Rate (1983)</i>	<i>Year in Which NRR = 1</i>
Cameroon	4.6	8.7	17	30	42	50	6.5	2030
Ethiopia	18.0	37.7	64	106	142	173	5.5	2035
Ghana	4.4	11.5	23	40	53	62	7.0	2025
Kenya	5.8	16.6	37	69	97	116	8.0	2030
Malawi	2.9	6.0	11	21	29	36	7.6	2040
Mozambique	6.5	12.1	22	39	54	67	6.5	2035
Niger	2.9	5.5	11	20	29	38	7.0	2040
Nigeria	40.6	84.7	163	295	412	509	6.9	2035
Tanzania	7.9	18.8	37	69	96	120	7.0	2035
Uganda	4.8	12.6	25	46	64	80	7.0	2035
Zaire	14.2	27.1	50	86	116	139	6.3	2030
Other Sub-Sahara	59.8	121.7	218	381	524	651	6.5	2040
Total Sub-Sahara	172.4	363.0	678	1202	1658	2041	6.7	2040
Other Africa	42.6	89.6	148	225	282	319	6.5	2025
Total Africa	215.0	452.6	826	1427	1940	2360	5.5	2040

NRR refers to Net Reproduction Rate. When $NRR = 1$, fertility is at reproduction level boundaries in south east Nigeria and its popularity and appeal continues to grow. Within this apparent universal appeal of the women August movement is embedded its contradiction. The August movement looms large like a leviathan with unlimited possibilities of transforming the South East region of Nigeria into self sufficiency and self reliant development. However, in about two decades that it has existed, the August movement has drifted like a rudderless ship. Its modus operandi is not universal within the region and its leadership is yet to transcend town union levels. This potent tool for mass mobilization and revolutionary transformation suffers immense neglect by its leadership which leaves the movement at the mercy of self seeking politicians and religious leaders in dire need of followership and/or immediate financial gratification from the group. The movement has passed through two discernible stages.

- (a) Teething stage
- (b) Quest for acceptance

(a) The Teething stage: This refers to the early period of the August movement. At this time the idea was still being spread from one community to the other. It initially met stiff opposition which bordered on the skepticism with regard to the aims of the movement, its capability to deliver development and the fact that the activism associated with the August movement deviates from the traditionally ascribed role of women as passive members of a largely patrilineal society. This is in line with the cultural belief system among the Igbo which confines the role of women to harkening to the bidding of their husbands. This period also witnessed various teething problems, prominent among which is the unhealthy competition between the urban and rural members. As stated earlier, the 'August meeting' derives its name from the eighth month of the year. At this time, all members residing outside the home place of origin are expected to return. The rivalry arose out of the 'we' and 'them' feeling which dichotomized the urban returnees and the rural home dwellers. While the former went out of their way to showcase what they felt depicted their supposedly superior urban status including borrowed clothes and cars expected to depict real or imagined affluence, the latter worked hard

at pretending not to be intimidated by the exhibition of affluence by their urban counterparts. This brought about disunity, antagonism and rancour, thus setting the movement back.

(b) Quest for Acceptance; The second stage can be seen as the period of reconciliation and damage control. In order to ameliorate the competition between and among members, stipulated uniforms were adopted and quasi autonomy granted home and abroad branches. This quasi autonomy had the advantage of engendering healthy competition in the enunciation and implementation of ideas and viable projects. However, the quest for acceptance also dragged the August movement back in the sense that prominent members of town unions, 'respected' political figures and the Clergy were let into the affairs of the movement presumably as mediators during the period of damage control. This stifled the spontaneity, radicalism and enthusiasm for which mass movements are known. It also gave self seeking politicians and prosperity preaching clergymen the opportunity to 'divide and rule' the August movement for their selfish interests. As a result, the August movement has not attained her potentials of revolutionizing development in the region. To achieve this lofty ideal, the agitations and aspirations of the August movement should go beyond the bread and butter level. Such fundamental issues in development as widespread poverty in South East Nigeria, the widening gap between the rich and poor, the marginalization of Igbo people, decline in male enrollment in both primary and secondary schools in the region, life threatening erosion sites as well as the conspicuous absence of even cottage industries in South East Nigeria should be the centre piece of the movement's development efforts in order to actualize the dream of sustainable development.

3. Impediments to the August Movement

The women August meeting in South East Nigeria is a post Nigeria civil war phenomenon. However, its modus operandi shares three major characteristics with the town unions that operated in South East Nigeria from the period of colonial rule till date. These features have to a large extent impeded the actualization of the developmental goals of the movement. These characteristics include.

(I) Overwhelming Reliance on Internally Generated Revenue; the main sources of internally generated revenue with which most development projects in South East Nigeria have been carried out are levies and donations. While the levies are imposed on both male and female members of the communities for specific projects, donations are received from 'well meaning' sons and daughters of these communities. This has impeded development in two ways. First, the donors tend to dictate the nature and scope of development projects within these communities. They also ensure that the social, economic and political gains that accrue there from are skewed in their favor. Secondly, it limits the quantum of capital that is invested in the communities to only what is available through donations and levies. Such other sources as banks and international donor agencies with the capacity to sustain development over a long period of time are

neglected. This translates into a colossal loss when viewed from the vantage point of present trend of globalization where donor agencies and non-governmental organizations fund and drive viable developmental projects. It is also important to take into cognizance, the fact that the worsening state of insecurity in Nigeria and the South East in particular where ruthless kidnappers lay siege, threatening those perceived as affluent have made raising funds through orchestrated launching and/or free will donations yield little or no dividends.

(II) Overwhelming Emphasis on Infrastructural Development; In South East Nigeria, there exists a deeply ingrained misrepresentation of the concept of community development. Emphasis has remained on such infrastructure as town halls and civic centres that have little or no capability of regenerating the capital invested in them. Human capital development, skills acquisition and youth/ women empowerment programmes are relegated to the background because they are not actually regarded as community development albeit in error. Thus a large pool of educated youth and women focus their attention and ambition on very few employment opportunities within government parastatals and other scarce white collar jobs.

(III) Absence of Ideological Inclination; This has led to an obvious lack of political consciousness among the people. Rather, false consciousness is widespread among the predominantly poor and illiterate masses that are always manipulated by the rich for self aggrandizement. This is made possible because the ideas and views of the dominant class predominate within a given society. As a result, such primordial sentiments as ethnicity, ascription rather than achievement, religious intolerance, traditional belief systems and stereotypes about socio-cultural and political institutions becloud reason and stultify development initiatives. This paper is of the view that the August movement should overcome these obstacles by embracing new ideas towards self actualization, revolutionary and transformative change and women empowerment.

4. The Realization of Self-worth through Political Consciousness

The United Nations Development Programme's Population Information Network (POPIN) stipulates that women empowerment has five components, which are;

1. Women's sense of self worth
2. Their right to have and to determine choices
3. Their right to have access to opportunities and resources
4. Their right to have the power to control their own lives both within and outside the home and
5. The ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order nationally and internationally [6].

The focus of this paper is enhancing the capability of the August movement to not only influence the direction of social change but also create a just social and economic order in South East Nigeria that will foster enabling

environment for sustainable development. Perhaps as a result of false political consciousness, the August movement as a mass of social capital, has not been able to realize her 'sense of self worth' and 'ability to influence the direction of social change' in South East Nigeria. Political consciousness is that state of being aware of and concerned about the socio-economic and political position of the individual or group in any given society. It is this awareness and concern that make hitherto politically docile groups organize and take political action to change the status quo. It is on this basis that KarlMarx distinguishes between 'Class in itself' and 'Class for itself'. Class in itself refers to a group of people whose members occupy the same position in their relation to the means of production. Its members may however not be aware of their common position in the production process. Consequently, they are unaware of the various ways and means through which they are exploited and cannot locate the source of their misery. When they are alienated, as they are bound to be, within the capitalist mode of production, their aggression is misplaced as in the case of the early 19th Century Luddites who as a protest against back breaking toil in European factories and attendant abject poverty destroyed their machines. The workers as a result of false consciousness imagined that their misery lay in mechanized production. The rivalry between the urban and rural members of the August movement mentioned earlier can be attributed to false consciousness. Though both rural and urban women suffer similar discriminations and exploitation at the work place, in homes and even within the larger community, they fail to identify their common history and the need for a united front to change the status quo. A social group fully becomes a 'Class for itself' when its members have class consciousness. At this stage, false consciousness is replaced by an awareness of the true situation of their relations to the means of production. They realize the nature and source of their exploitation and alienation. This realization produces class solidarity as members of the class recognize their shared interests and develop a common identity. The peak of class consciousness is that members of the class realize the potentials they have in collective action [7]. Political consciousness among people of a particular community is measured by their ability to organize and take action aimed at improving or protecting their general welfare if not changing the status quo completely.

It is also as a result of false consciousness that the August movement wants to identify with members of the bourgeois class who hold political office. Members of the movement are unable to trace the source of their exploitation in the form of grossly inadequate infrastructural facilities, insufficient and unavailable housing, unemployment and underemployment, ethnic and religious intolerance in Nigeria to this group. As a result of this false consciousness the movement cannot articulate her members' self-worth and potentials; she is also unable to empower her members. When she has the opportunity to negotiate with members of the bourgeois class her demands are at the bread and butter level. Thus at the end of the August meeting each year, the governor's wife or her representative in each of the South Eastern states hosts a party for the women where gifts of wrappers, food items

and equipment for the physically challenged are tagged 'empowerment' albeit erroneously and distributed to a few hand-picked women, leaving majority of these women to repeat this well worn ritual of returning to the home place of origin every August without empowerment or emancipation from this mental slavery.

5. Community Development, Self Help and Sustainable Development

Before discussing cooperative societies and skill acquisition, it is important that we understand the meaning of the concepts, 'community development', 'self-help' and 'sustainable development'. The idea of self-help appears to be self explanatory as it implies that the individual or group provides for himself or itself without depending on others. However, this is not exactly the case in self help projects. Help is in most cases received from other people or from without the group. However, as Sharma and Anstey [8] have pointed out, such help should be with good intentions and without attached strings of overt or covert motives. They opine that becoming dependent on such external help emotionally or physically negate the tenets and spirit of self-help. Unlike self-help, community development refers to or delineates a social group or geographic entity assumed to be a community. This community is seen as having common interests, a shared future. These are actually what make a community. Community development entails the harnessing of both outside help and local resources in the interests of particular communities. Taking into cognizance the fact that development is not only about economic growth, it incorporates modifications and reorganization of old institutional structures. This provides the platform to attract, progressive socio-cultural and political institutions while modifying and eradicating those that restrict the ability of women to make choices, represent them or be effectively represented by other women. In Igbo land the overwhelming dominance of males over females, the prevalence of such primordial divisive caste systems as 'Osu', 'Ume' and 'Diala' inhibit the empowerment of both men and women. Community development is largely seen as an effort or process of achieving desired economic, social, cultural and political changes through the assessment of the problem area and the selection and execution of a plan of action directed towards self-determination, self-help and broad based participation by members of the community. Thus community development is more of 'a motivation, a method, a plan and a process of improving living conditions in rural communities and in urban areas by breaking the cake of custom, promoting agricultural and industrial revolutions and converting relatively static communities into scenes of dynamic creativity' [9] The concept of sustainable development is defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development [10] as that development which 'meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. It encourages change through the responsible exploitation of resources, orientation and deployment of technological development and institutional change towards the harmonious enhancement of present and future needs and aspirations of man [11]. The idea of

sustainable development can be seen from the economic, ecological or socio – cultural perspectives. These are however, interrelated. The economic viewpoint is concerned about striking equilibrium between the available stock of capital or assets and the maximization of the profit that accrues as a result of these assets. The aim here is to efficiently manage scarce resources in order that the resources may yield optimum dividend. The ecological view of sustainable development emphasizes that biological and physical resources should be utilized at rates less than or equal to the natural rate of regeneration [12]. The emphasis here is on the stability over time of the biological and physical environment and not necessarily on maintaining an ideal, unchanging status quo. Rather the capability of the ecosystem to adapt to change should be encouraged and preserved. The stable transition or evolution of cultural and social systems is the concern of the socio – cultural concept of sustainable development. The spread of ideas on how best development can be sustained in view of the peculiarities that confront various human societies, the equitable distribution of resources to alleviate and eradicate poverty as well as involving the rights of future generations in policy making are part of the socio cultural view of sustainable development. It therefore incorporates modifications and reorganization of old institutional structures.

The urban and rural communities of South East Nigeria that are ravaged by unprecedented levels of erosion and unemployment of even tertiary institution graduates have remained docile for too long. This docility is linked to the prevalent town union based community development that is devoid of modifications and reorganization of old institutional structures. Thus while new markets are built to encourage industry and upgrade livelihood, the method of local governance for instance remains unchanged and supportive of socio cultural and political institutions that resist change, perpetuate inequality and encourage poverty. This docility is most unpardonable against the backdrop of a virile social capital provided by the August movement that has remained unharnessed as a result of the inability to articulate and blend this movement with available resources to revolutionize and sustain development in the region. These resources include;

(i) Natural capital: This includes lands, water, forests and fisheries. The land, water and forests in South East Nigeria are grossly underutilized. Agriculture in this region has remained rain fed while irrigation technology is yet to be applied in the optimal utilization of the land, water and forest resources of the region.

(ii) Human capital: This includes available body of knowledge and skills in specific areas. The body of knowledge available in this region is best illustrated by the monumental achievements in scientific discoveries and manufactures during the Nigeria – Biafra civil war. At that period, weapons of mass destruction were manufactured with crude tools. Apart from building makeshift refineries, the natural foliage of the mangrove forest was put to advantage in building an airport at Uli in Anambra state, with the hangers ensconced within the thick forests to avoid detection and strafing of the few Biafran planes.

(iii) Financial capital: This represents income opportunities. As stated earlier, the community development efforts in South East Nigeria have been wholly dependent on levies and donations for finance. The financial support of banks, international donor agencies, and non-governmental organizations are ignored. This has had the disadvantage of imposing a ceiling on the level of financial capital available for community development projects.

(iv) Physical capital. This is all about available infrastructural facilities to support livelihood. [13]

6. Sustaining Development in south East Nigeria through Cooperatives

Women empowerment is therefore directly linked to improving livelihood and enhancing the coping capability of the household. A livelihood comprises capabilities, assets, both material and social resources and activities required for a means of living [14]. It has been noted that for the August meeting movement to impact positively on the livelihood of the people of South East Nigeria by way of self help and/or community development projects she needs to attract, source or mobilize financial, physical, natural and human capital. Since majority of households in South East Nigeria are involved in commerce, agricultural production and live in the rural area, effective and sustainable self-help and community development projects should be targeted at these sectors in order to positively impact on the most vulnerable groups. However, most of the poor people in agricultural production belong to the informal sector while others are unemployed. As a result of these impediments they cannot access loans or credit facilities that represent financial capital. Such financial capital can only be accessible if these vulnerable groups are organized as cooperatives. These cooperatives will therefore identify particular projects deemed suitable for specific Eastern Nigerian environment within which to operate. These could be poultry, forestry, vegetable production or other informal sector ventures through which the poor can be empowered. The Cooperative society is a voluntary association of persons who join their resources together with the aim of improving or enhancing the welfare of members. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) a non-governmental cooperative federation that has represented cooperatives globally since its inception in 1895 defines a cooperative as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise” [15] It goes without saying that it is advantageous to organize the August movement into various cooperative societies in order to access investment capital, streamline viable production options, and empower these women in the same process that sustains development efforts in the region.

7. Role of Cooperatives in Socio - Economic Development

- 1) Cooperatives help in the distribution of goods and services within and beyond a given geographic entity.
- 2) They increase the social network of relationships in both rural and urban areas which is advantageous to economic activities.
- 3) Cooperatives are helpful in the distribution of farm inputs for agriculture. This is more so for farmers' cooperatives.
- 4) They encourage self help development.
- 5) Cooperatives help to stabilize prices by selling at reduced rates to members and non members. This is made possible by the economy of scale which the operations of cooperatives entail. That is to say, because cooperative societies are involved in bulk purchase of goods and services, they are entitled to large percentage discount that enable them sell at reduced rates.
- 6) Cooperatives encourage saving habit or culture among their membership thus facilitating the build- up of investment capital, especially in the rural area where the absence of banks compound the problem in saving.
- 7) They enjoy concession from governments by way of grants, aids and/or the propagation of new and improved species of crops and farm animals. This gives cooperators economic advantage over their non-cooperator peers.

Table 3: Types of Cooperatives

<i>Focus</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Agricultural/Farming	Farmers voluntarily unite to solve such common problems as source funds to purchase farm inputs, skill development and credit facilities.
Marketing Cooperatives	Help market products/manufactured goods and services. In addition to the economy of scale, this specialization affords the farmers the opportunity to concentrate on actual production.
Land/housing	Members pool resources to buy land, re sell same at some profit, access loans, build houses.
Credit and Thrift	This is the most popular type of cooperative. It enables member's access to credit facilities at low interest rates. It encourages saving. The thrift society may own shops, production units or grant loans o non members at higher interest rates.
Youth Cooperative	The youth may unite to form cooperatives that enable them share business/career ideas, access loans/skills development.
Trade/Artisan Cooperative	This cooperative enhances members access to loans to purchase tools and equipment or pool resources to finance contracts.
Professional Cooperatives	In addition to other benefits mentioned, professional cooperatives offer career counseling, training of members and mentoring.
Multipurpose Cooperatives	As the name implies, these cooperatives may combine the basic function of thrift and loan with the development/leasing of landed property for instance.

8. Conclusion

This paper draws a road map for repositioning the women August meeting in South East Nigeria for effective delivery of sustainable development. False political consciousness has been identified as keeping the aims and objectives of the movement at the bread and butter level without exploring her revolutionary potentials for the transformation of the region and empowerment of her members. This paper therefore suggests women empowerment, self-help, community development and Cooperative societies are suggested as the agency to organize and superintend over the various household based livelihood programs targeted at women empowerment. It is hoped that this will combat poverty and sustain development in South East Nigeria where government efforts at poverty alleviation and community development have been grossly inadequate.

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