

## VOLUNTEERISM AS A STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *Community development remains a key concern in Nigeria. Despite frantic efforts of the government and non-government organizations to improve the socio-economic wellbeing of rural communities in Nigeria, there are indicators of under development in the areas. This study examines volunteerism as an effective strategy for developing rural communities in Nigeria. It adopts qualitative research method. The study relied on the secondary sources of information, such as journals, textbooks, the internet, and newspaper. Concerned with the challenges of prevalence poverty in the country and success stories of volunteerism as a viable strategy, the study advocates for the involvement of more Nigerian in delivering selfless services for the benefit of others and their immediate communities.*

**KEYWORDS:** volunteerism, poverty, community, socio-economic development

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### INTRODUCTION

Volunteering as a social development concept refers to the act of rendering service by choice or free will for the benefit of the wider community by an individual, group, or organisation without necessarily expecting a monetary gain in full knowledge and appreciation of being a volunteer. Even before the turn of the millennium, the government has recognized the critical contribution that volunteering makes to build a strong and cohesive society since government cannot do alone and has therefore supported volunteering as the essential act of citizenship, a means for combating social exclusion, and promoting self-help for community development.

Volunteerism, an altruistic/unselfish activity, is defined as the practice of people working on behalf of others without being motivated by financial or material gain. It is an engagement based on free will, commitment and solidarity, with the aim to promote human development by supporting the delivery of economic and social services, fostering reciprocity among people and contributing to social cohesion. Volunteering provides individuals the opportunity to get involved in humanitarian activities.

According to Brown & Swanson (2003), voluntary action is deeply embedded in most cultures, especially African culture. In almost all societies, it comes from the most basic of all values- people helping people and, in the process, helping each other. It emerges from long-established, ancient traditions of sharing, philanthropy and community service, or civic participation and advocacy. Volunteering as the ultimate expression of the willingness and ability of people to help others, brings significant benefits to individuals and communities

and helps to nurture and sustain a richer social texture and a stronger sense of mutual trust and cohesion. It is often referred to as the "glue" that holds society together.

With busy lives, it can be hard to find time to volunteer. However, Clary, Snyder & Ridge (1992) disclosed that the benefits of volunteering are enormous; to the individual, the family and community at large. The right match can help one reduce stress, find friends, reach out to the community, learn new skills, and even advance his/her career. Giving to others can also help protect mental and physical health. It can combat depression, and provide a sense of purpose. While it's true that the more one volunteers, the more benefits he will experience, volunteering doesn't have to involve a long-term commitment or take a huge amount of time out of one's busy day. Giving in even simple ways can help others, or those in need, guarantee happiness and develop the community.

Broadly speaking, there are two major benefits of volunteerism; economic and social. Economic benefits are related to the activities undertaken by volunteers which would otherwise have to be funded by the state or by private capital. It adds to the overall economic output of a country and reduces the burden on government spending. In countries where empirical studies exist, the contribution of volunteering is estimated to be between 8% and 14% of Gross Domestic Product (Yoga, 2006). On an individual level, volunteerism contributes to capacity building processes by helping the individual volunteer to develop marketable skills, providing access to workplace networks and boosting confidence and self-esteem (Isaac & Michael, 1997).

Socially, volunteering helps to build more cohesive communities, fostering greater trust between citizens and developing norms of solidarity and reciprocity that are essential to stable communities. The social capital represented by volunteering plays a key role in economic regeneration (Yoga, 2006). Volunteering is both an opportunity and an asset for development. It represents a tremendous resource for addressing many of the development challenges of our times. The value of volunteerism to community development and its contributions in various forms is widely acknowledged.

To explore volunteerism and its connection to community development, an interactional perspective is assessed. Following this perspective, people sharing a common territory interact with one another over relevant matters (Wilkinson, 1991). Voluntary action evolves out of these interactions and set the stage for purposive efforts designed to meet common needs. Community development is, therefore, a process of building relationships that increase the adaptive capacity of people who share a common locality (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff & Swanson, 1995). These capacities reflect the ability of local people to voluntarily organize, manage, utilize, and enhance those resources available to them in addressing local needs. This paper examines the social and economic impacts of volunteering as an effective approach to community development in Nigeria.

### **Objective**

The paper is set to assess social and economic impacts of volunteerism to community development and to identify strategies for increased volunteerism and community development in Nigeria.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The paper is qualitative in nature. It adopts the historical, descriptive analytical approach as its method of study. The study relied on the secondary sources of information, such as journals, textbooks, the internet, and newspaper.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study adopts the social capital theory advanced in the study of Yoga Rasanayagam (2006). According to him, social capital is said to refer to traditions of engagement, trust, solidarity and reciprocity that exist in every society, although they are more manifest in some. Social Scientists define social capital as the strengths of a particular community. Some definitions refer to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions when defining the concept of social capital (Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Wilkinson, 1991). Social cohesion, an outcome of positive social interactions, is critical for societies to interact positively and prosper economically. Social interactions resulting in social capital enable individuals, groups and communities to achieve their needs by using their strengths such as norms, values, and interactions.

He established that in the context of development social capital is a complement to the established capital categories (physical, financial, human) to explain how development can occur in some situations and not in others. Social capital attempts to achieve development through individualized efforts. As a development strategy, social capital directs individuals, groups, and communities to achieve their needs through collective action. In this sense, social capital is interpreted as the cumulative capacity of social groups to mutually and beneficially co-operate and work together for the common good. In this regard, it may be said that strong links exist between the mobilization of social capital and volunteerism.

His thesis argued that volunteerism and volunteers are at the core/heart of Social Capital. It is very important to bring about a better understanding and acceptance of the vital contribution volunteering can make in mobilizing social capital for development as volunteerism constitutes an enormous reservoir of skills, ingenuity, creativity, solidarity and local knowledge (Jordan, 2003). As a form of social capital, volunteerism benefits the recipients of service and the broader community. As people continue as volunteers, commitment to the community increases. Commitment, in turn, increases the incidence of volunteer actions on behalf of the community (Yoga, 2006). Thus, volunteerism represents selfless actions that promote community spirit and civic participation.

### **Social and economic impacts of volunteerism to community development**

Volunteerism is broadly defined as an activity where someone provides a service for the benefit of a person, group or organization without any monetary gain in return. Volunteering refers to the rendering of service by choice of or free will for the benefit of the wider community by an individual, group, or institution without necessarily expecting a monetary gain in full knowledge and appreciation of being a volunteer. In the last decades, the government has recognized the critical contribution that volunteering makes to build a strong and cohesive society. It has promoted volunteering as the essential act of citizenship, a

means for combating social exclusion, and an important contributor to the delivery of high-quality public services.

The community is a dynamic field of interaction rather than a rigid system (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Luloff & Bridger, 2003). This process reflects the building of relationships among diverse groups of residents in pursuit of common community interests (Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Wtlkinson, 1991). Through voluntary efforts, individuals interact with one another and begin to mutually understand common needs (Luloff & Swanson, 1995). From this interaction, voluntary efforts to improve the social, cultural, and psychological needs of local people emerge.

The development of the community is an active process involving diverse segments of the locality. The key component to this process is found in the creation and maintenance of channels of interaction and communication among diverse local groups that otherwise are directed toward more limited interests (Luloff & Bridger, 2003). Where these relationships can be established and maintained, increases in local adaptive capacity materialize. Through this process and through active volunteer efforts, the community can emerge.

Volunteerism is a social activity targeted at community development. Defining volunteering as an activity is important for many reasons, not least because since the 19th century, volunteering as an activity has developed into a highly dynamic and varied form of civic engagement, as Ellis, Paine, Hill & Rochester (2010) categorisation attests to. Furthermore, identifying people as volunteers is important because it recognizes people for the work that they do and helps build solidarity between people working towards a common goal. Volunteers are uniquely different from paid workers and this should be recognized, they are different in the sense that they are not being financially remunerated for the work they do and are therefore first and foremost motivated by a desire to contribute to social need, build up skills and/or connect with others.

Identifying volunteers also means that they can more easily access support and guidance from the volunteering infrastructure with regards to recognition and effective volunteer management implying recruitment, selection, support, management and dealing with legal issues around involving volunteers. The following reason are advanced to why people volunteer,

1. to help others and contribute to the community
2. to use skills in a new setting
3. to find new friends and new relationships
4. to develop a sense of accomplishment and self-worth
5. to learn new skills
6. to meet requirements of a course or program
7. to challenge themselves
8. to work for a cause
9. to gain recognition for their abilities
10. to help improve the quality of community life (Smith, 1994)

There are various forms of volunteering. Five of which include,

1. Self-help and mutual aid- people with shared problems, challenges, and conditions working together to address or ameliorate them.
2. Philanthropy and service to others- It typically involves an organization recruiting volunteers to provide some kind of service to others and is the type of activity which most people recognize as volunteering.
3. Governance- volunteers who provide leadership and direction to groups or organizations.
4. Advocacy or campaigning- a collective action aimed at securing or preventing change which includes campaigning against developments seen to be damaging to the environment.
5. Expressive Behaviours- expressing their interest and passion in a particular field through volunteering (Ellis, et al 2010).

They stated further that community development framework must offer a clear structure around which volunteering can be positioned and recognised, as a way of achieving successful community development. It is important that people are given the opportunity to 'identify their own needs and aspirations', to take action to exert influence on the decisions. Many services fall under the umbrella of volunteerism: from helping out to clear the road after wind storm, clearing the gutters for free flow of erosion, providing education and health services to underprivileged in the community, access to basic needs like clean water, education and sufficient nutrition, to sponsoring social activities and projects at local communities centre and so on.

The nature of collaboration on volunteering includes: community partnership, networking, advocacy, funding, support, and invitation to participate in events. It is more than an altruistic or philanthropic gesture. Volunteers make effort to give back to society. It is driven by passion to avail ones time and service in giving back to society certain comfort. Volunteers fill gaps in meeting social, economic, and community needs, and provide opportunities for individual self-fulfilment in places that often have limited capacities to meet such needs. Voluntary action is vital to protecting, retaining, and maintaining rural communities (Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Wilkinson, 1991).

Emerging research suggests that giving and volunteering have reached record highs in the last decade (Independent Sector, 2001). This behavior is shaped by a variety of factors. For example, sociodemographic variables have been linked to volunteerism and social participation. Most research indicates that older females, with higher levels of education, higher incomes, who are married, and have an overall higher socioeconomic status are more likely to participate in formal volunteer efforts (Cook, 1993; Cox, 2000; Smith, 1994). In another light other studies sees individuals of lower socioeconomic status as sometimes being involved in informal volunteerism. Smith (1994) suggests that such individuals may view voluntary activities as routine social support behaviors (common courtesy, neighborliness), and not as formal volunteer activities. Household size is also seen as being important, reflecting the importance of interaction between family members and the outside world in fostering opportunities for volunteerism (Independent Sector, 2001).



Volunteerism can also be the result of more practical conditions, such as a need to develop job contacts and enhance existing skills. In geographic areas where employment opportunities are limited, voluntary activities can offer a valuable alternative to paid employment (Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992; Clary, Snyder, Copeland, & French, 1994; Independent Sector, 2001). Individuals also volunteer for self-actualization (recognition, raising self-esteem) and social responsibility (setting an example, public duty) (Clary et al., 1994; Cook, 1993; Independent Sector, 2001). Volunteerism is facilitated by participation in community-based groups. Interaction between social groups promotes awareness of needs and helps identify volunteer opportunities (Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Wilkinson, 1991).

Voluntary organizations are key players in the economy in their own right as employers and service providers, adding to the overall social and economic development of communities and reducing the burden on government spending. Social development is a process which results in the transformation of social structures in a manner which improves the capacity of the society to fulfill its aspirations. In 2001 the United Nations Economic and Social Council's Commission for Social Development held detailed discussions for the first time, on the role of volunteerism in the promotion of social development. Among its resolutions; recognition of the valuable contributions of traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, service delivery and other forms of civic participation to economic and social development and the recognition of volunteerism as an important component of any strategy aimed at poverty reduction, sustainable development and social integration, in particular overcoming social exclusion and discrimination were noteworthy (Geoghegan and Powell, 2011).

Studies have shown that the most effective and sustainable community development programmes are those which involve local people at all stages. The times of parachuting people' into communities, especially paid staff to do things to a community rather than support them to do things for themselves has shown to be an ineffective model. Local people are more likely to invest in a programme of work and be actively engaged with it if they are given ownership and meaningful ways of being involved (Melby, Bourke, Luloff, Liao, Theodori, & Krannich, 2000).

The volunteering makes a significant contribution to the economy all around the world. According to the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies 2011, approximately 140 million people in the 37 countries engage in volunteer work in a typical year. If those 140 million volunteers comprised the population of a country, it would be the 9th largest country in the world. Those 140 million volunteers represent the equivalent of 20.8 million full-time equivalent jobs. It's estimated that volunteers contribute around \$400 billion to the global economy annually. These estimates are produced using data on hours volunteered or the wage-based dollar value. One interpretation that could be given to this wage-based estimate is that it reflects what users of volunteer labor would have had to pay if they had had to hire the labor that instead was freely given to them Geoghegan and Powell, 2011).

Yoga (2006) stated that in the United States, volunteers produce services worth \$113 billion to \$161 billion annually (Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action, 20102). In 2009, 63.4 million Americans volunteered to help their

communities, 8.1 billion hours of service is produced, which has an estimated dollar value of \$169 billion<sup>3</sup>. In United Kingdom in 2003, according to the Institute for Volunteering Research and Volunteering England,<sup>4</sup> 42 percent of people in England and Wales volunteered through a group, club or organization at least once, equivalent to approximately 17.9 million people. Each volunteer contributed an estimated 104 hours in the twelve months before the survey and the total contribution was 1.9 billion hours. This was equivalent of one million full-time workers (Yoga, 2006). The volunteering plays as the bridge of different parts in the society, which concerned of benefits and demands for different social sectors.

The volunteer sector plays a key role in social life. Volunteer activities bring together people who might not otherwise have contact with one another. The social fabric can only be strengthened by practices that bridge our socioeconomic divides. There would be potential values lying in the social capital, combining the community organizational life, participation in voluntary associations, engagement in public affairs, and informal sociability and social trust. The social impact of voluntarism on community development includes strengthening social connections, building strong, safe, cohesive community; enhancing civic engagement; and delivering public goods and services. In this regard, volunteering has certain positive impact on the volunteer, such as social recognition, better health and self-esteem, building social relationship, training and career enhancement; economic benefits and capacity in the labor market (Wilson & Musick, 2000; Carlin, 2001; Katz & Rosenberg, 2005; Prouteau & Wolff, 2006).

According to Robert (1991) volunteering creates the sense of self worthiness and instills self esteem. It gives the very important feeling of being needed as through volunteering somebody is offered help, which is by itself a very rewarding experience for the helper. Besides, volunteering can represent an important trial period and provide opportunity to experiment and put preferences to practice (Street, 1994).

In the review of the health benefits of volunteering, a longitudinal study of older married adults found that those individuals who reported providing instrumental support to friends, relatives, and neighbors had lower rates of mortality five years later than those who had not reported providing support. In addition, providing support was found to have a stronger relationship with longevity than receiving support from others (Brown et al., 2003). A study of adults age 65 and older found that the positive effect of volunteering on physical and mental health is due to the personal sense of accomplishment that an individual gains from his or her volunteer activities (Herzog et al., 1998).

Volunteering can provide a sense of purpose, as found in a study of older adults; according to this study, formal volunteering moderated the loss of a sense of purpose among older adults who had experienced the loss of major role identities, such as wage-earner and parent (Greenfield and Marks, 2004). A second study found that, in general, volunteers report greater life satisfaction and better physical health than do non-volunteers, and their life satisfaction and physical health improves at a greater rate as a result of volunteering. The researchers found statistically significant, positive relationships between volunteering and lower levels of depression (Harlow and Cantor, 1996).

### **Volunteerism as a strategy for community development in Nigeria**

Communities in Nigeria are faced with several development challenges; rural and urban alike. Rural areas tend to lack sufficient roads that would increase access to agricultural inputs and markets. Without roads, the rural poor are cut off from technological development and emerging markets in more urban areas. Poor infrastructure hinders communication, resulting in social isolation among the rural poor, many of whom have limited access to media and news outlets. There are inadequate educational and health facilities. These widen the gap of poverty. Historical facts have shown that, the government as an institution of the government cannot provide all these services. This is where volunteerism becomes needful in supporting the development process.

Volunteerism is classified among the less visible types of support that create social and economic opportunities for improving the wellbeing of other. However, it is very significant in promoting social welfare to the under privileged in the society. Concerned with the challenges of prevalence poverty in the country and success stories of volunteerism as a viable strategy, the study advocates for the involvement of more Nigerian in delivering selfless services for the benefit of others and their immediate communities. Volunteering promotes people to be more active in civic engagement and concerned of citizenship. It will help deliver public services by encouraging more people work in public section, contributing to the development of social infrastructure and improving the wellbeing of the people. In addition, these leaves positive impact on volunteers as individuals, increase their self-esteem, enhance various skills and capacities, expand career paths and be healthier physically and mentally. Volunteering is both an opportunity and an asset for development. It represents a tremendous resource for addressing many of the development challenges of our times.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study viewed volunteering as a form of social capital, with particular reference to the role of volunteering in promoting social inclusion, assisting marginalized social groups, its relationship to other forms of civic participation and unpaid work, creating a civil society, social action, in community building and community renewal. It concludes that volunteering promotes people to be more active in civic engagement, contributing to the overall development of the community and nation at large. It is a strategy for supporting the course of community development in Nigeria.

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