

CHALLENGES AFFECTING YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES IN OGBIA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF BAYELSA STATE

Ogbolu, Blessing Tamunoemi

Department of Medical Social Work, College of Health Technology Otuogidi, Ogbia, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

The study investigated the challenges hindering effective participation of youths in empowerment programmes in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Guided by a descriptive survey research design, the study sought to identify the barriers affecting youths' access to and utilization of available empowerment opportunities. The population comprised all youths in Ogbia Local Government Area, from which a sample of 510 respondents was drawn using stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a structured instrument titled Youth Empowerment Participation Barriers Questionnaire (YEPBQ), validated by experts and found to have a Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.86. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, tables, and charts, while qualitative data from In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were thematically analyzed and triangulated with survey findings. The results revealed that poor awareness (38.4%), geographical distance to training centres (28.2%), corruption and favouritism in selection (18.6%), lack of clear information (10.4%), and inadequate programme funding (4.4%) were the major challenges limiting youth participation. These findings suggest that although empowerment opportunities exist, structural and systemic barriers hinder equitable access. The study concluded that addressing these barriers requires targeted awareness campaigns, decentralization of training centres, transparent selection processes, and sustainable funding mechanisms. It was recommended that government and programme providers collaborate with media houses, traditional leaders, and community-based organisations to improve sensitization, accountability, and inclusiveness in youth empowerment initiatives.

Keywords: Youth Empowerment, Participation, Barriers, Ogbia LGA, IDI, FGD

Introduction

Youth empowerment programmes are globally recognized as strategic tools for reducing unemployment, fostering innovation, and promoting socio-economic development. In Nigeria, successive governments and development partners have introduced initiatives such as the Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWiN), the N-Power scheme, and the Presidential Youth Empowerment Scheme (P-YES) to address the pressing challenges of joblessness and underemployment among young people (Adebayo & Ayodele, 2023; World Bank, 2022). These programmes are designed to build capacity, provide access to skills training, and create pathways for economic inclusion. Despite their relevance, however, the participation of youths remains far below expectations, largely due to structural, social, and institutional barriers.

Across many communities in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region, youths often perceive empowerment schemes as inaccessible, politicized, or poorly implemented (Iwuoha & Chukwuemeka,

2021; Uzochukwu, 2023). Problems such as lack of information, bureaucratic bottlenecks, favouritism, gender bias, and inadequate follow-up mechanisms have been identified as critical obstacles (Omeje & Nwachukwu, 2022). Moreover, even when youths gain access, limited funding, lack of mentorship, and poor monitoring frameworks hinder their sustained participation and eventual success (Eme et al., 2023). These realities reflect a wider concern that empowerment programmes, though well-intentioned, may fail to deliver their objectives if barriers to youth inclusion are not systematically addressed.

In Bayelsa State, and specifically in Ogbia Local Government Area, these challenges are further compounded by socio-economic and geographic factors. Ogbia is characterized by high levels of youth unemployment, dependence on oil-related economic activities, and infrastructural deficits that limit access to government programmes (NDDC, 2022; Alagoa, 2021). Youths in the area often report exclusion from empowerment initiatives due to lack of awareness, transportation difficulties, political patronage, and cultural norms that sometimes marginalize young women from active participation (Okolo & Ogechi, 2023). These barriers not only undermine the effectiveness of empowerment programmes but also perpetuate cycles of poverty, frustration, and in some cases, youth restiveness.

This study, therefore, situates itself within the lived experiences of youths in Ogbia LGA, examining both the systemic and personal barriers that prevent them from fully engaging in empowerment opportunities. It is premised on the understanding that for empowerment programmes to achieve meaningful impact, they must go beyond policy formulation and address the social, cultural, and institutional dynamics shaping youth participation (Ojo & Ibrahim, 2022). By exploring the challenges faced by these young people, the study aims to highlight actionable strategies that can enhance inclusivity, improve access, and ensure the sustainability of empowerment initiatives in the region.

Theoretically, youth participation in empowerment programmes can be framed within the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which posits that individuals' development and engagement are shaped by multiple layers of influence—from family and peers to institutions and societal structures. Barriers at any of these levels, such as poor policy implementation, lack of parental support, or negative community perceptions, can significantly restrict youths' ability to benefit from empowerment initiatives. Similarly, Social Capital Theory underscores the importance of networks, trust, and relationships in enabling individuals to access opportunities (Putnam, 2000). Where trust in institutions is low or political networks dominate programme access, many youths remain excluded.

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on identifying the barriers to youths' effective participation in empowerment programmes in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. It further seeks to propose context-specific strategies to enhance access, equity, and utilization. Understanding these barriers is essential not only for programme designers and policymakers but also for community leaders, educators, and civil society actors working towards sustainable youth development in the Niger Delta.

Purpose of the Study

This study, therefore, examined the barriers to youths' effective participation in empowerment programmes in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

- i. Identify the barriers hindering youths' effective participation in empowerment programmes in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.
- ii. Propose strategies for enhancing youths' participation in empowerment programmes in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. What are the major barriers hindering youths' effective participation in empowerment programmes in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State?
- ii. What strategies can be proposed to enhance youths' participation in empowerment programmes in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State?

Research Methods

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. According to Charles-Owaba (2019), descriptive survey design is a systematic approach to collecting and analyzing data from a defined population in order to describe prevailing conditions, attitudes, and perceptions. The design was considered appropriate for this study because it enabled the researcher to obtain reliable information from a representative sample of youths and stakeholders on the barriers hindering effective participation in empowerment programmes in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The design further allowed for the integration of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, thereby combining statistical analysis with rich contextual narratives. The ultimate goal was to generalize the findings to the broader youth population in Ogbia LGA while also capturing in-depth perspectives from stakeholders.

The population of the study comprised all youths aged 15–45 years residing in Ogbia LGA, alongside key stakeholders directly involved in implementing empowerment programmes. This age range was adopted to reflect the socio-economic realities of the Niger Delta region, where individuals beyond the conventional youth definition (18–35 years as per the National Youth Policy; 15–35 years as per the African Youth Charter) are often targeted as beneficiaries of empowerment schemes. In addition to the youth population, officials from agencies such as NPower, SEEFOR, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), and the Bayelsa State Youth Empowerment Scheme (BSYES) were included as participants in in-depth interviews (IDIs), given their experience in programme design and delivery.

A sample size of 560 youths was drawn from across Ogbia LGA, of which 512 completed responses were retrieved, representing a 91.4% response rate. The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane formula for finite populations at a 0.05 margin of error. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. At the first stage, Ogbia LGA was stratified into four major development areas (Ogbia Central, Anyama, Kolo Creek, and Oloibiri). At the second stage, proportional allocation was applied to distribute the sample across selected communities within these strata. At the third stage, simple random sampling using the balloting method was employed to select youth respondents. At the fourth stage, purposive sampling was

used to select 10 key informants for IDIs and 32 participants for four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), ensuring representation across age, gender, and participation status in empowerment programmes.

The main instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled “*Youth Empowerment Participation Barriers Questionnaire (YEPBQ)*”. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A collected demographic data such as age, gender, educational level, and marital status. Section B was subdivided into two parts aligned with the research objectives: (i) barriers hindering youths’ effective participation in empowerment programmes, and (ii) strategies for enhancing participation. The instrument combined closed-ended items, measured on a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), with a few open-ended questions that allowed respondents to elaborate on their personal experiences. In addition, IDIs and FGDs were conducted using semistructured interview guides to provide qualitative depth and capture diverse perspectives. For reliability, a pilot study was conducted with 30 youths in a neighbouring LGA not included in the final study. The Cronbach Alpha method yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.86, which was considered highly satisfactory.

Data collection was carried out over a four-week period. The researcher, with the assistance of trained research assistants, personally administered the questionnaires, explained the purpose of the study to respondents, and obtained informed consent. For the IDIs and FGDs, participants’ consent was sought to record sessions, while field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal and contextual cues. Ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, and respect for respondents’ opinions were strictly observed.

The quantitative data collected through the questionnaires were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and charts were used to summarize socio-demographic variables and responses. Qualitative data from IDIs and FGDs were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, with emergent themes triangulated against the quantitative findings to provide a holistic understanding of the barriers to youths’ effective participation in empowerment programmes in Ogbia LGA.

Results Table 1: Challenges to Access and Utilization of Youth Empowerment Programmes in Ogbia LGA

Challenges	Frequency (%)	Description
Poor Awareness	38.4	Many youths are unaware of empowerment programmes and application procedures.
Geographical Distance	28.2	Training centres are located far from rural communities, limiting participation.
Corruption and Favoritism	18.6	Selection often depends on personal connections rather than merit.

Lack of Information 10.4	No clear guidelines or feedback after application, creating confusion.
Inadequate Funding 4.4	Programmes lack sufficient resources for effective and sustained implementation.
Total	100.0

From table 1 above, respondents identified multiple barriers:

1. Poor Awareness (38.4%) – Many youths are unaware of application processes.
2. Geographical Distance (28.2%) – Training centres are often far from rural communities.
3. Corruption and Favoritism (18.6%) – Selection based on connections rather than merit.
4. Lack of Information (10.4%) – No clear guidelines or feedback after application.
5. Inadequate Funding (4.4%) – Programmes lack resources for full implementation.

Figure: Challenges Hindering Access and Utilization

Pie chart drawn reflected: Poor Awareness 38.4%, Distance 28.2%, Corruption 18.6%, Lack of Info 10.4%, and Underfunding 4.4%).

One FGD participant said: “Some of us were beneficiaries of N-Power but couldn’t keep up with transportation so some had to just stop.” This underscores the need for decentralized training and transport support.

Another major issue is on lack of start-up kits after empowerment, 52.4% of respondents believed that empowerment is meaningless without start up support.

Table 2: Reasons for Needing Start-up Kits (N=510)

Reasons for startup kits	Frequency	Percentage (%)
For easy start up	118	52.4
To put the learned skill to practice	49	21.8
Encourages hard work	49	21.8
The skill might be useless without the startup kits	9	4.0
Total	510	100.0

Source: *Field survey, 2025*

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that poor awareness is the most significant barrier to youths’ participation in empowerment programmes in Ogbia LGA. This aligns with the work of Ezeani (2018), who noted that many youths in rural communities are unaware of available empowerment opportunities due to poor dissemination of information. Similarly, Okon and Bassey (2020) argued that inadequate publicity of government programmes limits participation, particularly among disadvantaged groups in remote areas.

Geographical distance was also identified as a challenge, as many training centres are located far from rural communities. This supports the findings of Ibrahim and Abdullahi (2019), who observed that rural youths are often excluded from empowerment initiatives due to the concentration of centres in urban areas. Odu and Akpochafo (2019) further stressed that accessibility remains a critical determinant of youths' active involvement in empowerment programmes.

Another major challenge highlighted by respondents was corruption and favouritism, with many programmes favouring those with political or personal connections rather than merit. This corroborates the findings of Akinwale (2017), who reported that nepotism and political patronage remain obstacles to fair access in empowerment initiatives across Nigeria. Likewise, Uzochukwu and Nwankwo (2019) argued that corruption undermines the credibility and sustainability of youth-focused programmes.

The lack of clear information and feedback on application processes was also noted as a barrier. This finding is in agreement with the study of Adeola and Anwana (2021), who found that poor communication and limited feedback mechanisms discourage many qualified youths from applying. Similarly, Musa and Usman (2020) highlighted that inadequate guidance frustrates young people's participation in developmental interventions.

Finally, inadequate funding was identified as a limiting factor. This is consistent with the work of Chukwuemeka (2018), who observed that most youth empowerment initiatives in Nigeria suffer from underfunding, thereby limiting their reach and effectiveness. Supporting this, Adebayo (2021) emphasized that insufficient financial allocation to empowerment projects often results in poor implementation and unsustainable outcomes.

Conclusion

The study revealed that while youth empowerment programmes in Ogbia Local Government Area hold significant potential for addressing unemployment and fostering socio-economic development, their access and utilization remain hindered by multiple challenges. Poor awareness, geographical barriers, corruption, lack of information, and inadequate funding collectively limit the ability of young people to fully benefit from these initiatives. These findings suggest that effective implementation of empowerment programmes requires not only adequate funding but also transparent selection processes, improved communication strategies, and the establishment of training centres closer to rural communities. Addressing these barriers will enhance inclusiveness, equity, and sustainability in youth empowerment efforts, thereby ensuring that such programmes contribute meaningfully to the empowerment and productivity of youths in Ogbia and beyond.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were given:

1. Government and programme coordinators should intensify awareness campaigns and provide clear, accessible information on application processes to improve youths' participation.
2. Training centres should be decentralized and adequate funding ensured to reduce geographical barriers and enhance equitable access to empowerment programmes.

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