

Micro - Lending As an Empowerment Strategy for Poverty Alleviation among Women in Yala Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria

Festus Nkpoyen, PhD
Department of Sociology
University of Calabar
Calabar, Nigeria

Bassey, Glory Eteng
Department of Sociology
University of Calabar
Calabar, Nigeria

Abstract

The study assessed Micro-lending as an empowerment strategy for poverty alleviation among women in Yala Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Three null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. 300 respondents participated in the study and data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. The study showed that increased savings, promotion of local cooperatives societies and creation of self-employment opportunities significantly related to poverty reduction. The study recommended that Micro-lending programmes should be encouraged in communities because of impact on household income and more non-governmental organizations should be involved in Micro financing in rural areas.

Introduction

Poverty is a crucial problem in all developing countries in the present day world. The poor are important group in every nation because the proportion of the poor in a population determines the potential for growth in that economy. It determines the potential of that economy for wealth accumulation (Amali, 1996). Countries with fewer poor grow faster than those with a large number of poor people. In Nigeria, the poor has been in the political centre of all policies but it is very doubtful if the poor have benefited much from anti-policies of the government in the country. Both the United Nations and the World Bank have recently made poverty eradication as a development priority (Amali, 1996).

The year 1997 has seen the United Kingdom government create a Department for International Development (DFID) which subsequently released a White paper with poverty elimination as its central goal. DFID has attempted to address a spectrum of the causes of poverty including but not limited to the debt burden, political and economic stability, balanced trade, agriculture policies and conflict prevention. Many bodies like the UNESCO, FAO, ESAP, ESCWA etc have anti-poverty projects and programmes. There are many organizations involved in poverty studies and its eradication because poverty is not a problem, it is many problems and it is cancerous.

The incidence of poverty in the Third World is higher among women than among men. Pearson (1992) asserted that women have consistently lost in the development process in these countries. Today, Nigeria is facing the twin challenge of revival of its economy and checking poverty. Nearly half of the population has no access to the basic social services like safe drinking water and primary health because no proportion of their income is dedicated even to health care services. Although growth is critical for poverty reduction, focus on growth alone is not enough (Almas 2003).

Micro-lending has been considered as the latest panacea for poverty alleviation. Several factors have led to increased interest in micro credit in promoting growth with equity.

There has been a growth in the recognition of the importance of empowering all people of their access to all the factors of production including credit (IPAD, 2001; Ahmad 2004). In addition, the value of the role of non-governmental organizations in development is receiving more attention. It is in that context that micro credit has recently assumed a certain degree of prominence. This could allow the poor to become more self-reliant, create employment opportunities, increase savings, enables them acquire entrepreneurial skills and not least, engage women in economically productive activities (Aslam, 2001; Hussain, 2003).

A lot has been done by the government of Nigeria in the past years in particular to reduce rural poverty to the barest minimum because of the dangerous dimension it has assumed over the past decades. The federal government in a bid to fight the menace of poverty therefore has set up some agencies essentially to provide financial assistance particularly to youths and women involved in small scale business (Shekan 2011). These agencies include National Poverty eradication Programme, NAPEP; Small Medium Entrepreneur Development Agency of Nigeria, (SMEDAN), National Directorate of Employment (NDE); Nigeria Agricultural Cooperative and Rural development bank (NACROB) and the Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme, ACGS: all having a common objective of providing credit facilities too target beneficiaries at the national, state and local government levels. Due to increasing unemployment rate in the country, government initiatives in the area of poverty alleviation have not been sufficient to meet the aspirations of the unemployed, so rural micro lending operations has become a popular poverty alleviation strategy. It is a development strategy aim at assisting rural communities. It provides a model for pooling resources of people of limited means to achieve commonly identified development needs of the respective people.

Statement of the problem

Many households in Nigeria's rural areas live below the poverty line. The federal government in a bid to combat poverty and empower rural dwellers has set up some poverty eradication agencies have not been able to promote good security, health security, social and financial sustainability, productive self employ and support for poor people's economic initiatives. However, rural micro lending operation has been found to play a significant role in reducing the poverty status of rural dwellers. It has facilitated empowerment for poverty alleviation through increase savings, acquisition of entrepreneurial skills and creation of employment opportunities for sustainable rural livelihood.

Objectives of the study

1. To determine the relationship between increased savings and employment for poverty alleviation.
2. To examine the relationship between promotion of local cooperative societies. And empowerment for poverty reduction.
3. To determine the relationship between creation of employment opportunities and empowerment for poverty reduction.

Research hypotheses

1. Increased savings do not significantly relate to empowerment for poverty reduction.
2. Promotion of local cooperative societies has no significant relationship with empowerment for poverty reduction.
3. Creation of employment opportunities has no significant relationship with empowerment for poverty reduction.

Review of related literature

Currently, there are estimated to be about 3,000 micro finance institutions in developing countries. These institutions also help create deeper and more widespread financial markets in those countries and have succeeded in reaching the poorest of the poor by devising innovative strategies (Hussain 2003). According to Hussain (2003) these include the provision of small loans to poor people, especially in rural areas, at full-cost interest rates, without collateral, that are repayable in frequent installments. Borrowers are organized into groups which reduces the risk of default. These are also effective mechanisms through which to discriminate valuable information on ways to improve the health, legal rights, sanitation and other relevant concerns of the poor especially female community (Buthe, 2000; Rutherford, 2002). These institutions have preference and priority over men for gaining access to micro credit and micro finance services.

There are many different rationales that explain the priority on women's access to these services as gender inequalities in developing countries are more pronounced (CIDA, 1999). Women are also the poorest of the poor. Through micro-lending programmes women have become empowered to participate in decisions and to make the choices that best serve their needs and resulted in increased recognition of women's productive role (Sosibo 1999; Bayes, 2005). Informal and small-scale lending arrangements have long existed in many parts of the world, especially in the rural areas and they still survive. They provide the rural population with access to savings within the local area and a certain cushion against economic fluctuations. They encourage a cooperative and community feelings. The groups formed provide joint collateral and serve as instruments for spreading valuable information that is useful for economic and social progress.

All economies rely upon the financial intermediary function to transfer resources from savers to investors. In market economies, this function is performed by commercial banks and the capital markets. More widespread financial intermediation as well as increasing depth and variety is a hallmark of advancing development (Okaba, 2005). But in many developing countries, capital markets are still at a rudimentary stage and commercial banks are reluctant to lend to the poor largely because of the lack of collateral and high transaction costs. The poor would borrow relatively small amounts and the processing and supervision of lending to them would consume administrative costs that would be disproportionate to the amount of the lending. A study by the International fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has confirmed that complicated loan procedures and paperwork combined with a lack of accounting experience, limit poor people's access to formal sources of credit. Other reports cite the fact that commercial lenders in rural areas prefer to deal mainly with large –scale farmers (Dedhich 2002).

The absence of commercial banks has led to non-conventional forms of lending. The recent prominence given to micro credit owes much to the success of a relatively few micro credit programmes and their increasing scale. The Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, the most prominent of the successes, now reaches over 2 million people, with cumulative lending of about \$2.1 billion. Similar successful examples are known in Latin America (e.g. Banco Solidario in Bolivia), less so in Africa (the Kneya Rural Enterprise Programme is a good example) (IFAD 1992).

Buckley (2007) asserted that the emergence of micro-lending as a viable alternative to the conventional banking in accomplishing the goal of empowerment for poverty alleviation has been recognized world over. It has become a major tool of development and found to be the only practical and most appropriate solution to the deep seated challenges of poverty. The development purposes to which micro-lending can be put include livelihood promotion, developing the local economy, empowerment, building democratic people's organizations and changing wider systems of institutions within society (Vosantakumari and Sharma, 2010).

Increased savings and empowerment for poverty reduction

Ahmed, Naveed and Ghafor (2004) asserted that community micro lending operations contribute significantly to empowerment for poverty reduction:

- 1) It empowers the rural women to establish their own rights.
- 2) Improves the living standard of the rural people through additional income
- 3) It makes easy access to institutional credit facilities and resources
- 4) Mobilizing rural savings

Akerele (2000) stressed that micro lending significantly moderates poverty. It is the practice of providing financial services such as micro-credit, micro-saving and micro-insurance to poor people. Akerele stated that through the work of micro-financial institutions such individuals are able to access credit, accumulate useably large sums of money, invest in their entrepreneurial vision, work towards financial stability and build a better future for the entire community. This expands their choices and reduces the risk they face. Bayes (2005) commented that micro-lending is recognized worldwide as a powerful economic development enabler and an important tool in alleviating rural poverty. It increases the average savings for households.

In a study carried out by Ndubi (2008) a micro lending scheme and women empowerment in rural communities of Enugu North Senatorial District, he found out that a significant association exists between micro lending scheme and empowerment.

Ndubi's findings indicated that micro credit has implications for women's economic and social empowerment which in turn has implications for the overall empowerment and improvement in their children's well being. This finding supported Chuk's (2007) study of rural communities in Nemte, Bayelsa state that micro lending improves savings, strengthens human capital by bringing about investment in health.

Existing literature indicates a correlation between micro lending and empowerment for poverty alleviation through enhancement of financial capital. Develtere, Pollet and Wunyama (2007) in their study found out that micro lending operation increases asset holding and is a significant determinant of total household expenditure. Birchall (2004), Birchall (2003) and Kabeer (1998) discovered that micro lending operation leads to increased physical mobility, ownership of productive assets, increased involvement in community decision making and self worth. Amadi (2010) reported from his study that micro lending operation increases household income, changes or improves diet patterns, improves status of rural dwellers and participation in public life.

The World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995 underlined the importance of improving access to credit for small rural or urban producers, landless farmers and help to build on existing networks, expand financial networks, promote attractive opportunities for savings and ensure equitable access to credit at the local level ().

Opportunity for self employment and empowerment for poverty reduction

Micro-lending for sustainable livelihood has been able to facilitate vocational and skills training, it has been able to create opportunities for self-employment, improve the income of people among whom women constitute the majority (Chuks 2007). Micro-lending has enhanced empowerment for poverty reduction. According to Olabode and Ebegebede (2009) participants in the micro lending programmes have gained greater control over the sources of power, especially by disadvantaged groups and communities. People have received opportunity for self employment.

Akpabio (2005) stated that micro-lending as operated in rural areas have resulted to the sprouting of small scale enterprises because of accessibility to financial resource. This provides opportunities for the talented, enterprising individuals of limited financial means to participate actively in the development of the rural economy. The development of small and medium enterprises through micro-lending has helped to reduce rural poverty (Schwetman 2009). This has significantly empowered the rural dwellers to take part in efforts to improve their socio economic life. According to Ndubi (2008) micro lending scheme promotes self employment through the development of small scale enterprises in rural communities. Such enterprises act also as major source of capital formation via the mobilization and productive channeling of private savings. Ndubi argued that small scale enterprises absorbs a still rapidly growing labour supply in rural areas thus micro lending is an economic strategy for self employment.

Availability of opportunities for self employment through micro lending has positively affected the lives of the rural dwellers. According to Makombe, Temba and Kihomb (2001) reported that micro lending has facilitated the development of small businesses. It has enhanced the emergence and consolidation of new entrants to businesses. This has helped to revive the rural economy by creating avenues for self employment. Moreover, according to Makombe et al (2001), small scale enterprises in rural communities can easily adapt to local market and local resources of raw materials. Schwetmann (2007) argued that rural poverty cannot be meaningfully addressed except provisions are made to promote self employment. He lauded the operations of micro lending machinery for its role in combating rural poverty by stimulating self employment. Through this, business development consciousness among rural dwellers has been activated.

Promotion of local cooperative society and empowerment for poverty reduction

Ihejiamazu (2012) asserted that to tackle the increasing problems of rural neglect, poverty and deprivation, rural people are resorting to micro lending operations to alleviate their poverty: The formation and management of cooperative societies is one of such responses. Micro lending through cooperative societies is very important in addressing the problem of persistent rural poverty in Nigeria. Ere (2001) stated that modern cooperative associations contribute to rural poverty eradication through its micro lending activities.

Ere argued that local cooperative societies could be regarded as voluntary organizations of persons with a common interest, formed and operated along democratic lines for the purpose of supplying service at minimum cost to its members who contribute both capital and business. Ere stressed that the promotion of local cooperative societies and empowerment for poverty reduction in rural areas.

Girigiri (2002) reported that a signification association exists between promotion of local cooperative societies and empowerment for poverty reduction in rural areas. Cooperatives help members out of their economic predicaments. Ihejiamaizu (2002) observed that many communities have provided basic social amenities through credit facilities issued to members. Chaven, Pallavi and Kumar (2002) argued that rural cooperatives enhance rural poverty reduction by making capital available to rural dwellers. These have become widespread owing to the substantial capital needs of most cooperatives. Okaba (2005) commented that local cooperative societies have tremendously assisted the rural dwellers empowerment for poverty reduction as indicated by improved living standard of rural dwellers. Okaba stated that cooperatives in recent times have become one of the most efficient vehicles for the effective mobilization of rural productive resources and accelerated rural transformation.

The empirical contributions of micro lending through local cooperatives to rural poverty eradication have been documented in the literature. Ndubi (2008) reported from his study that micro lending through local cooperative societies help in employment creation and income generation thereby promoting accessibility to financial capital. Ndubi (2008) found out that local cooperatives create employment opportunities for rural dwellers. Lukpata (2009) found out that local cooperatives offer self-employment to members whose participation in the economic that they make possible substantially guarantees their empowerment for poverty reduction through the possibility of a decent income. Wanyama, Develfere and Pollet (2008) argued that by promoting financial capital cooperatives reduce rural poverty. By creating employment opportunities, generating income and facilitating financial flow for the members and non-members Local cooperatives through their measure of micro-lending make available to the individual and household financial resources that are utilized to participate in activities through which a living is earned.

Theoretical framework

Participatory institutional development model

This model is associated with Bass (1998) and Mbilinyi (2003). Bass asserted that participatory institutional development in its broadest sense is a process which mobilizes locally coordinated collaborative linkages between the groups and other local and higher level institutions. The model stressed that since the poor generally lack economic and physical capital, focusing on strengthening their social capital and financial capital makes sense as these are pre-requisites for achieving sustainable collective action and useful in acquiring all other forms of capital. Participatory institutional development strengthens localized social capital accumulation processes in rural areas of mobilizing self-help capacities, progressive skills development and local resource mobilization (savings indigenous knowledge) in order to improve ultimately the group members' human, natural and economic resource base and their political power. The model is made of four interrelated cornerstones: process, empowerment, participation in decision making and networking. These are all concerned with the building up of collaborative action.

The model implies that is possible to strengthen the relative position of the poor and marginalized groups in Yala local government area of Cross River State, Nigeria through their participation in micro lending scheme. Their involvement helps them to secure micro credit which aids in poverty reduction. Equally, the model posits that the poor can have access to financial capital through micro lending. Micro lending brings about increase savings, creates employment, help existing business grow or diversify their activities and empower rural dwellers towards poverty reduction.

Methodology

The study was carried out in Yala local government area of Cross River State. It is one of the 18 local government areas of Cross River State. Yala comprises two state constituencies, the Yala 1 state constituency (Ukelle speaking). The major inhabitants include Yala, Ukelle, Yache and Igede Igabu people. The vast local government has two major dialects: the Ukele and Yala speaking people with a total population of 156,617 having male population of 76,687 and female population of 79,930 (NPC, 2006).

Yala local government area comprises 14 wards. It consists of a total of 35 clans each with a traditional head referred to as Clan Head. The wards include Echuniofana, Gabu, Igede, Ijiraga, Ntrigom/Mfuma, bioh/Aga, Okpoma, Okuku, Ugaga, Wanihem, Wanikade, Wanokom, Yache and Yahe. The local government area is bounded by Obubra and Ikom local government areas and in the west by Ebonyi state. The climate is generally tropical and the temperature is rarely less than 60⁰c throughout the year. The people are farmers, fishermen and also engage in wild games. The indigenes are known for the size of their yam, rice and cassava farms. A wide range of artisans from Yala include babers, shoe menders, tinkers, smiths, tailors, watch repairers, electronics technicians, bar parlour operators etc (Ugbama, 2008).

The population of the study consisted of all the inhabitants of Yala local government area. The 10 wards were selected using simple random sampling. Two villages were selected through hat and draw method of simple random sampling from each ward. All adult women of all works of life residing in these communities and comprising those gainfully employed, self employed, farmers, entrepreneurs and others who have been beneficiaries of micro lending operations. Thus, from each village, 30 respondents were systematically selected. This amounted to 300 respondents in all from the study area.

The study obtained data from both primary and secondary sources. Under the primary source, the study used questionnaire and focus group discussion (FGD). Information was obtained from the respondents' demography; also on the major variables of the study. Analytical tool used included percentages and Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient.

Data analysis

Hypothesis 1

Increased savings do not significantly relate to empowerment for poverty reduction

Table 1

Pearson product Moment correlation coefficient analysis of the relationship between increased savings and empowerment for poverty reduction (N=300)

Variables	$\sum x$	$\sum x^2$	$\sum xy$	r-cal
Creation of employment	$\sum y$	$\sum y^2$		
Opportunities (x ₁)	5565	117865	91940	0.716
Empowerment for poverty Reduction (y)	4720	75980		

Significant at $p < 0.05$, $df = 298$; crit - $r = 0.196$

Table 1 indicates that the calculated 0.716 was greater than the critical r-value of 0.196 at 0.05 level of significance with 298 degrees of freedom. With this result, the null hypothesis was rejected meaning that increased savings has a significant relationship with empowerment for poverty reduction.

Hypothesis two

Promotion of local cooperative societies has no significant relationship with empowerment for poverty reduction

Table 2

Pearson product moment correlation coefficient analysis of the relationship between local cooperative societies and empowerment for poverty reduction (N=300)

Variables	$\sum x$	$\sum x^2$	$\sum xy$	r-cal
	$\sum y$	$\sum y^2$		
Creation of employment Opportunities (x_2)	5565	117865	91940	0.716
Empowerment for poverty Reduction (y)	4720	75980		

Significant at $p < 0.05$, $df = 298$; crit - $r = 0.196$

Table 2 indicates that the calculated r value of 0.613 was found to be greater than the critical r-value of 0.196 at 0.05 level of significance with 298 degrees of freedom. With this result the null hypothesis was rejected in support of the alternative hypothesis. This implied that a significant relationship exists between promotion of cooperative societies and empowerment for rural poverty reduction.

Hypothesis three

Creation of employment opportunities has no significant relationship with empowerment for poverty reduction.

Table 3

Pearson Product moment correlation coefficient analysis of the relationship between employment opportunities and empowerment for poverty reduction (N=300)

Variables	$\sum x$	$\sum x^2$	$\sum xy$	r-cal
	$\sum y$	$\sum y^2$		
Creation of employment Opportunities (x_3)	4675	10389	71789	0.513
Empowerment for poverty Reduction (y)	4720	75980		

Significant at $p < 0.05$, $df = 298$; crit - $r = 0.196$

Table 3 indicates that the calculated r-value of 0.513 was found to be greater than the critical r-value of 0.196 at 0.05 level of significance with 298 degrees of freedom. With this result, the null hypothesis was rejected meaning that creation of employment opportunities significantly relate to empowerment for poverty reduction.

Discussion of findings

Increased savings and empowerment for poverty reduction

Result of statistical analysis indicate that a significant relationship exists between increased savings and empowerment for poverty reduction. These findings supports Ahmen, Naveed and Ghafor (2004) that micro lending operations contribute significantly to poverty reduction as it empowers rural women to establish their own rights, makes easy access to institutional credit facilities and resources and mobilizes rural savings. The findings equally support Akerele (2000) that micro lending significantly moderates rural poverty. It is the practice of providing financial services such as micro credit micro saving and micro insurance Akerele stressed that through micro lending individuals are able to access credit, accumulate usably large sums of money, invest in entrepreneurial vision and build a better future for the entire community.

Findings equally support Bayes (2005) that micro lending is recognized worldwide as a powerful economic development enable and an important tool in reducing rural poverty.

Promotion of local cooperative societies and empowerment for poverty reduction

Results of statistical analysis indicate that a significant relationship exists between promotion of local cooperative societies and empowerment for poverty reduction. The findings support Ihejiamaizu (2002) who asserted that to tackle the increasing problems of rural neglect, poverty and deprivation rural people are resorting to micro lending programmes to alleviate their poverty. The formation and management of cooperative societies is one of such responses. Micro lending through cooperative society is very important in addressing the problem of persistent poverty in rural areas. The findings also support Ere (2001) who argued that modern cooperative society contribute to rural poverty eradication through its micro lending activities. The findings agree with Girigiri (2002) that a significant association exists between promotion of local cooperative societies and empowerment for poverty reduction in rural areas. This is so because cooperative societies help members out of their economic predicament. Ihejiamaizu's (2002) findings are consistent with this. According to him, many communities are able to provide basic social services through the micro lending activities of cooperative societies. In the process, communities are able to empower their members for poverty reduction.

Creation of self-employment opportunities and empowerment for poverty reduction

The analyses indicated that a significant relationship exists between creation of employment opportunities and empowerment for poverty reduction. The findings support Chuks (2007) that micro lending for sustainable livelihood has been able to create opportunities for self employment and improve the income of people among whom women constitute the majority. The findings also support Olabode and Elegbede (2007) that participants in the micro lending programmes have gained greater control over the sources of power, especially by disadvantaged groups and communities. People have also received greater opportunity for self employment. The finding also agree with Akpabio (2008) that micro lending as operated in rural areas have resulted to the sprouting up of small scale enterprises because of accessibility to financial resources. This provides opportunities for the talented, enterprising individuals of limited financial means to participate actively in the development of the rural economy. Ndubi's (2008) findings have been supported here. He observed that micro-lending scheme promotes self employment through the development of small scale enterprises in rural areas.

Conclusion and recommendation

The result of the study indicates that micro-lending programme is an empowerment strategy for rural poverty reduction. Most of the community members indicated that micro-lending has enabled them to increase their savings and this has led to improvements in other aspects of their rural lives such as provision of better educational opportunities for their children and health care services. Secondly, micro-lending promotes the operation of cooperative societies which have been discovered to contribute to poverty alleviation. Finally, the findings indicated that through micro-lending, self employment is possible.

Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Micro lending programmes should be encouraged in communities because of impact on household income.
2. More non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should be involved in micro financing in rural areas.
3. Micro credit lending should be seen as part of a comprehensive programme to empower rural dwellers for poverty reduction.

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