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# INFLUENCE OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES ON THE RURAL COMMUNITIES' FELT-NEEDS FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN RIVERS STATE

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## ABSTRACT

The perceived influence of government policies and programmes on rural communities' 'felt needs' towards sustainable community development in Rivers State is a key area of interest for many researcher and policy makers. Through a thorough analysis of government policies and programmes, this paper is aimed to shed light on the various ways in which they impact on the 'felt needs' of rural communities in Rivers State especially on the formulation of policies and programmes that negate the 'will' or needs of the rural people in a particular instance. It provided valuable insights on how government policies and programmes can optimized to promote sustainable community development in rural areas. It highlighted the importance of government intervention and community participation in achieving sustainable community development. This paper further revealed some of the challenges faced by these rural communities in implementation of government policies and programmes as well as provide evidenced based recommendation for policy makers to address the 'felt needs' of rural communities in Rivers State.

**Keywords:** Government Policies & programmes, Rural Community, Felt-Needs, Sustainability, Community Development.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The government policies and programmes greatly affect the rural communities' felt needs and overall sustainable community development in Rivers State. Through targeted initiatives and interventions, the government is able to address the specific needs of rural communities and promote their long-term growth and posterity. These policies and programmes are essential for creating an enabling environment for sustainable development, addressing key issues such as access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, and economic opportunities. By understanding the unique challenges and needs of rural communities, the government can effectively design and implement policies and programmes that foster sustainable development and improve the quality of life for residents. Through on-going evaluation and adaptation, the government can ensure that these policies and programmes continue to effectively address the evolving needs of rural communities in Rivers State. This in turn can lead to long-term and equitable development, ultimately benefiting both the rural communities and the overall State's progress.

### **Government Policies and Programmes**

Government policies and programmes refer to the plans and initiatives implemented by governments to address various social, economic, and political issues. These policies and programmes aim to improve the well-being of citizens, promote economic growth, and maintain social stability. Government policy should include 'due processes'. Due Process is a policy, which tries to ensure that rules and regulations are strictly followed and adhered to. The need for due process as a policy stems from the fact that, for long time in Nigeria, orderliness in the conduct of government business has been ignored. People often break the normal procedure of doing things with great disregard for laid down rules and regulation. Indiscipline has therefore reigned supreme in the conduct of government work nationally, and both the state and local levels. Government has many programmes and policies such as Universal Basic Education Programme (UBE) and National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) etc.

Universal Basic Education is a programme for free and compulsory nine-year basic education for Nigerian Children. It is aimed at making all Nigerian literate and able to live more lives that are useful. National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) is a programmes designed to develop the country faster. This is achieved through making Nigerians earn more money from their businesses and jobs. The policies and programmes have resulted in improved access to education, better health outcomes, and increased social support for vulnerable populations. Ahmed et al. (2021) identified other policies and programmes of government targeted towards rural development which were put in place by various administration in Nigeria. These programmes include several Agricultural Developments Programmes (ADPs), Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), the Green revolution Programmes, (GRPs), Better Life Programme (BLP) for African Rural Women, and Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFFRI). According to them, the factors responsible for the failure of these programmes include exclusion of relevant professionals in policy formulation, planning and implementation, conflicting programmes and projects, policy somersault and inconsistency, corruption and embezzlement, and technical know-how, misplaced priority, inadequate manpower.

Ahmed et al. (2021) further stated that despite enormous contributions of the rural dwellers to national wealth, it appears ironically as if successive development programmes

implemented by government were geared towards their exploitation and impoverishment. However, priority attention is needed in rural areas of Rivers State to cushion the effects of where poverty, unemployment, crime, etc. which are on the increase.

## **Rural Communities**

Rural communities are areas with lower population densities and more sprawling geographic areas, often located outside of urban centers. These communities face unique challenges and have distinct characteristics, including:

- Limited access to services (healthcare, education, shopping);
- Economic challenges (poverty, limited job opportunities);
- Geographic isolation;
- Limited public transportation;
- Close-knit communities with strong social bonds;
- Agricultural or natural resources-based economies;
- Scenic natural environment;
- Potential for outdoor recreation and tourism;
- Cultural heritage and traditional ways of life; and
- Resilience and self-sufficiency.

## **Felt-needs**

Felt-needs refer to the perceived needs or desires that individuals or groups experience and articulate. These needs are often driven by emotions experiences and circumstances, and can vary greatly from person to person. Wordu (2023:149) noted “the awareness of needs arises from dissatisfaction and discontentment with the existing condition”. Amanwo (2015:52) stated, “in general terms, felt-needs means something sincerely desired, something craved for; it means wants, longing, or aspirations; it also means a strong object of inner wish or an object of heart-felt prayers or something aimed at”. Anyanwu in Onyeozu (2007) conceptualized felt-needs in terms of “what is and what ought to be” in a community. To him, felt needs represent a psychological, social, economic or cultural imbalance; or lack of adjustment between present situation and a changed set of conditions assumed to be more desirable. Felt needs can be:

- Basic (food, shelter, safety);
- Social (connection, belonging, love);
- Emotional (happiness, fulfilment, purpose);
- Spiritual (meaning, transcendence, connection to something greater);
- Cultural (preservation of heritage, traditions, identity);
- Personal growth (self-improvement, learning, empowerment);
- Health and wellness (physical and mental health);
- Financial security (stability, prosperity);
- Environmental (clean air and water, natural beauty);
- Community development (improving local conditions, social cohesion)

Felt-needs are important because they drive human behavior and decision-making, influence goal-setting and prioritization, shape community and social dynamics, inform policy and programme development, impact individual and collective well-being.

## **Sustainability**

Sustainability refers to the ability to maintain or support a process or a system without depleting natural resources or causing harm to the environment. According to Toh in Amanwo (2015: 42), “achieving sustainability rest on three key pillars namely environmental sustainability, social sustainability and economic sustainability”. The environmental sustainability implies conserving natural resources, reducing pollution, and protecting ecosystems. Social sustainability promotes social justice, human rights and community development. Economic sustainability means the ensuring of long-term economic growth and stability, while minimizing waste and inefficiency. According to Sachs in Ugwu and Mbalisi (2016:115) “the holistic objective of sustainable development aims to continually improve human well-being through a combination of economic prosperity, social inclusion, ending poverty and ensuring environmental sustainability on the platform of good governance

## **Community Development**

Community development is a process that seeks to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of residents in a particular geographical area by promoting participation, collaboration and sustainability. Ugwu and Mbalisi (2016) viewed community development as the ‘evolution of all aspects of community well-being - economic, social, environmental, political and cultural’. The idea here is that community development affects all structured intervention that gives communities greater control over the conditions that affect their lives.

Onyeozu in Enyiche (2014:15) defined community development as “a process of social action in which the people of a community organize themselves for planning and action, define their common and individual needs and problems, make group and individual plans to meet these needs and solve their problems; execute these plans with maximum reliance upon community resources and materials from governmental and non-governmental agencies outside the community”. By investing in community projects, individuals and organizations aim to create stronger, more resilient and more cohesive communities. This process involves identifying and addressing community needs and assets, setting goals and priorities, and implementing strategies to achieve desired outcome. Community development can encompass a wide range of initiatives such as affordable housing, job training programmes, environmental conservation efforts, and ultimately, the goal of community development is to empower individuals and strengthen communities, leading to positive social and economic outcomes.

## **Some of the Challenges faced by Rural Communities in Implementation of Government Policies and Programmes**

In rural communities, implementing government policies and programmes can be challenging. Some of the main challenges faced by these communities include limited resources, lack of access to key information, and inadequate support from government agencies. These challenges

hinder the effective implementation of government policies and programmes, leading to unequal distribution of resources and services, and hindering the overall development of the community.

**Limited Resources:** According to Luis (2012), one of the major challenges faced by rural communities' is the limited resources available to them. This often results in insufficient infrastructure and basic services, such as healthcare and education. Without proper resources, it is difficult for these communities to effectively implement government policies and programmes, which ultimately affects their overall quality of life.

**Lack of Access to Key Information:** Rural communities also struggle with lack of access to key information. Government policies and programmes are constantly evolving, and it can be challenging for these communities to stay informed and up-to-date on the latest regulations and requirements. As a result, they may unintentionally violate policies and fail to fully benefit from certain programmes.

**Inadequate Support from Government Agencies:** Inadequate support from government agencies is another major challenge faced by rural communities. Without proper guidance and assistance, it can be difficult for these communities to navigate the complex process of implementing government policies and programmes. This can lead to delays, mismanagement of resources, and ultimately hinder the success of these initiatives.

### **Reasons Why Government Policies and Programmes Negates the 'will' or Felt-needs of the People in Rural Communities**

According to the government policies and programmes in Rivers State, it appears that rural communities are often neglected and their needs are not being adequately addressed. These communities are integral part of the state and their voices should not be silenced by policies that do not align with their needs. This has resulted in a disconnect between the government and the people, leading to a lack of trust and cooperation.

**Lack of Consultation:** One of the main reasons for this negation of the will of the people is the lack of consultation and dialogue between the government and the rural communities. Policies and programmes are often developed without considering the specific needs and challenges faced by these communities. As a result, they are left feeling unheard and ignored, leading to a lack of support and cooperation towards these policies. A typical example is the project that was executed by the former governor of Rivers State Rt. Hon. Rotimi Amaechi in Khana local government area of Rivers State, precisely in Nyo-Khana district. This project was known as 'Banana Farm' which the people of Nyo-Khana describes as 'Monkey project' and was rejected through vandalization and outright destruction of the farm produce. The actual felt-needs of people then was a RISONPALM firm whose lifespan has grown up today even though the name has been changed to Siat Nigeria Limited (SNL). Such firm is capable of creating a reasonable volume of employment and attract other forms of development in the local government area; but the banana farm that was established in Khana does not really have the potential to sustain development in the area.

Similarly, between 1999-2007 in Omuma local government area, during the time Sir Dr. Peter Odili as the governor of Rivers State, water project such as boreholes were carried out by

the Assembly members in Umuagwu village and other communities as against the felt-needs of the people such as town hall project and electricity project. The people had existing boreholes already and don't need the same project but different project. Another example is the case of Emohua local government area. Sometimes, in the year 2016 there was problem of insecurity in many communities of Emohua resulting from inter-cult clashes between the Greenlanders (Degbam) and Icelanders (Dewell). Ihemnachor (2016) revealed that due to incessant attacks and reprisal attacks, by these cult rivalries, uncountable lives have been lost in many communities.

According to Okirika (2022:62) "a lot of indigenes of Rivers State are jobless. Some of them are university graduates while some are uneducated but lack entrepreneurship skills that will make them self-reliant. Their last resort after several years of unemployment was to involve themselves in criminality to carter for themselves and family. This has resulted to insecurity and economic instability in the areas." A situation whereby communities no longer gather to take decisions on self-help projects activities rather depend on government policies and programmes which has resulted to dysfunction of leadership and value system (Oji, Ekekwe & Okirika, 2022).

This problem of insecurity was of paramount concern to the people since there was loss of lives and properties and every socio-economic activities were paralyzed, and the intervention of government was highly needed to address the security concerns as their felt-needs. The government failed in their duty to consult the people and provide initiatives to cushion the effect of the terrorism in the area rather the government initiated the renovation of Emohua General Hospital in each other general hospitals in each senatorial districts in Rivers State. This renovated projects was not the felt-needs of the people at that crucial period. Hence, the lack of consultation led to the hospital being ignored or underutilized because it does not address the community's priorities. The facilities of the renovated hospital were eventually vandalized and stolen by miscreants. Consequently, the people lost trust and confidence in government owing to disillusionment and frustration among citizens. What the youth needed to stop this mayhem was re-orientation and empowerment for de-radicalization and skill acquisition (Adebisi, Akinsooto & Akpomuje, 2015).

Okirika (2022: 62) observed "If the government at all levels (federal, State and Local) are proactive in using massive job creation efforts as preventive measures rather than curative nature of most of government's job creation initiatives, youth will not be susceptible to criminal tendencies as the situation is now in the country especially in Rivers State" and beyond. Community participation is a key to ensuring sustainability of government projects and programmes in any given society. Participation creates non-voluntarism, for ownership and protection of such projects. It brings collaborative bargaining, unity, sense of attitudinal change that will lead to self-reliance and sufficiency of the individuals towards reign of the spirit of 'we together' that enhance lifelong relationship amongst the people towards sustainable peace at all levels. Remember that social change can come as a 'disruptive process' (Gahia in Ajoku & Oji, 2020):

**Lack of Adaptability:** The implementation of these policies and programmes may not be feasible or sustainable in rural communities. The rural landscape and the way of life may not be vastly different from that of urban areas, making it difficult to fully implement and achieve the intended goals of these policies. This lack of adaptability and understanding of the local context further hinders the effectiveness of these policies and breeds discontent among the people.

**Neglect of Rural Communities in Government Policies and Programmes:** The neglect of rural communities in government policies and programmes in Rivers State is a major factor contributing to negation of the will of the people. It is crucial for the government to actively engage and consult with these communities, understand their unique challenges and needs, and work towards implementing sustainable and active solutions. This will not only bridge the gap between the government and the people. When the people feel that their voices are not being heard and their needs are not met, it can lead to feelings of frustration and resentment. The center of Ethics and Conflict Studies (CENTECS) of the University of Port-Harcourt in Okirika (2022) identified factors orchestrating conflicts in Niger Delta as unfulfilled promises and obligations of the government, inadequate distribution of oil resources, lack of opportunities for Deltans to participate in the oil and gas industry, that is rooted in a perverted federal system etc. Similarly, Okirika and Uwagwu (2023) also noted that there was a strained relationship between government owned companies such as Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) and some host communities in Emohua local government area such as Rumuji Communities and others where NLNG stations are situated because the affected communities have not been accessing the money for community development programmes for a long time leading to grievances and protest. Hence, government and its various institutions should pay priority attention to the needs of the rural communities and fulfil its obligations to foster rural development.

**Lack of Transparency and Accountability:** There is often lack of transparency and accountability in the implementation of these policies and programmes in rural communities. This can result in mismanagement and corruption, causing a further divide between the government and the people. When the people feel that their voices are not being heard and their needs are not being met, it can lead to feelings of frustrations and resentment towards the government. Adedayo (2012) stated that it is partly the failure of political leaders in governance such as arbitrary misappropriation of funds by government officials that paved way for violence. Ugwu and Mbalisi (2016: 114) suggested, “National and local governments needs to build effective institutions and pursue sustainable development with transparency, accountability, clear metrics, and openness to the participation of all key stakeholders”. They added that public policy decisions must be made on the basis of scientific evidence

### **Effects of Government Policies and Programmes that Negates the ‘Will’ or Felt-needs of the People**

**Underdevelopment:** Neglecting the ‘will’ or felt-needs of the people hinders progress and development. When policies and programmes are not tailored to the specific needs of the population, they may fail to address key issues and may even create new problems. This can result in wasted resources and setbacks in achieving societal goals. Enyiche (2017:23) attributed the cause of underdevelopment to government and political class. According to him, “a government we must realize is an administrative machinery put in place by the people to direct their affairs and provide for the welfare and comfort of the people have failed in their duties and often seen their positions as invitation or opportunity to amass wealth to the detriment of their constituencies. They neglect the needs, interests and aspirations of the people who elected them. The basic means of survival such as food, shelter, water, employment, education, good roads network, electricity and all that makes life comfortable are neglected. The people may not be able to bear these for too long and may end up in crisis”.

**Marginalization:** These policies and programmes may have negative impact on specific groups within the population. For instance, a policy that prioritize economic growth over environmental protection may disproportionately affect marginalized communities for their livelihoods. This can lead to further inequalities and injustices.

**Social Unrest:** One potential consequence of these policies and programmes is social unrest. When the government ignores the needs and wishes of the people, it can create a sense of frustration and anger among the population. This according to Enyiche (2017) can manifest in protests, revolution, civil disobedience, and even violence. This not only create a dangerous and unstable environment, but it also hinders the government's ability to effectively govern and address the issues at hand.

**Economic Instability:** When the government fails to consider the 'will' and needs of the people, it can lead to policies that are detrimental to the economy. For example, if a policy is put in place without considering the opinions of business owners, it could have a negative impact on their ability to operate and thrive. This in turn, can have a cascading effect on the overall economy.

**Communication Gap:** According to Imhabekhai (2009), communication is the life wire for maintaining good relationships in any group or community. It involves transferring information from individual(s) or group(s) to those individuals or groups that needs such information to direct their actions and carry out their functions efficiently and effectively. Poor or absence of communication in communities impede the level of citizens participation in development programmes or projects. It encourages rumor mongering which can obstruct cooperation and participation in programmes and projects and ember of conflict. Hence, not taking account of the 'will' and felt-needs of the people can erode the trust that people have in their government. This can lead to breakdown in communication and cooperation between government and the people, making it more difficult to address issues and implement effective solutions.

**Poor Livelihood:** When government failures persist, essential needs such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure are left unmet, leading to a decline in the overall quality of life of citizens. This can also result in long-term negative consequences, such as a decrease in economic growth and development.

**Bad Leadership:** In the context of government policies, bad leadership can manifest in various ways: For example, leaders may prioritize their own interests over those of the people, leading to policies that benefit a selected few rather than population as a whole. This can result in unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, further exacerbating societal issues. Poor decision-making is another common effect of bad leadership in relation to government policies. When the leaders are attuned to the needs and concerns of the people, they may make decisions that are not in the best interest of the population. This can lead to policies that are ineffective, or worse, harmful to the people they are meant to serve.

**Communal Clash:** The government policies and programmes often result in communal clash as they often fail to address the will and felt-needs of the people. This is due to the fact that the policies and programmes are often implemented without considering the perspectives of the



different communities and their unique societal and cultural dynamics. As a result, there is a lack of understanding and mutual respect among the people, leading to communal tensions and clashes.

**Cult Activities:** Various factors have been identified as potential drivers of cult activities, including socio-economic inequalities, lack of opportunities for young people, and perceived neglect by the government. The will of the people refers to their desires, beliefs, and values, while their felt needs are the areas in which they feel lack support or resources. When these needs are not met, it can create a sense of frustration and disillusionment among the population, leading to a search for alternative means of expression. In some cases, this can manifest in the form of cult activities as a means of rebellion or seeking a sense of belonging. According to Amanwo (2019:29), “a lot of youths join cult groups out of financial, academic, social and psychological frustration. These youths usually resort to drug taken as a way out, after which become cultist trooping for a miraculous solution”. Similarly, Okirika (2022) noted that when young people feel unheard, disregarded and unsupported by the government, they may turn to cults as a means of finding purpose and sense of community. This is especially true in situations where the government’s policies and programmes do not offer viable alternatives or opportunities for youth development.

### **Ways Government Policies and Programmes can Align with the ‘Will’ or ‘Felt-needs’ of the People in Rural Communities in Rivers State.**

Government policies and programmes can align with the ‘will’ or ‘felt-need’ of the people in rural communities in Rivers State by implementing participatory approaches. This can include conducting surveys and focus groups to identify the specific needs and concerns of the community. The government can also involve community leaders and representatives in the decision process to ensure their perspectives and opinions are taken into consideration. This corroborates with the view of Okirika (2022) that consulting with community leaders and members can help the government gain understanding of the specific challenges and aspirations of the people in these communities. This information can be used to inform policy-making and ensure that the government’s actions are aligned with the will of the people.

Additionally, the government can provide resources and support for community-driven initiatives and projects that address the specific needs of the community. This can include promoting sustainable agriculture, health care accessibility, and infrastructure development such as building roads, schools, etc.

Another important aspect is the implementation of programmes that address the socio-economic issues faced by these communities. This could involve providing job opportunities, skill training, and access to financial assistance for small businesses. By addressing the needs of the people, the government can ensure that their policies and programmes are in line with what the rural communities truly want and need.

Furthermore, the government can engage in regular communication and feedback mechanisms with the rural communities to assess the effectiveness and impact of their policies and programmes. This can help identify any gaps or areas for improvement, and allow adjustment to be made based on the needs and concern of the community. Amanwo (2019) noted that creating a platform for open dialogue or by involving the people in the decision-making

process can ensure that government policies and programmes truly serve the needs of the rural communities in Rivers State.

### **Some Key Areas for Optimization and Valuable Insights for Policy Makers**

Policy makers can create a more prosperous, equitable and sustainable future for their citizens. Data-driven insights and analytics can help inform policy decisions and measures progress towards these goals:

**Economic Growth:** This includes optimizing policies and government spending for maximum economic impact, encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship and fostering international trade and investment.

**Education and Workforce Development:** This involves the improvement of access to quality education and training programmes, aligning education with labour market needs, and enhancing teacher training and development.

**Healthcare and Wellness:** This implies optimizing healthcare system efficiency and effectiveness, improving access to healthcare services, especially for underserved care and healthy lifestyles.

**Environmental Sustainability:** This involves developing and implementing effective climate change mitigation strategies, promoting renewable energy sources and reducing dependence on fossil fuels, and encouraging sustainable land use and conservation practices. To Ugwu and Mbalisi (2016), environmental sustainability comprises sustainable exploration, exploitation, transformation and use of environmental resources as commodities (such as energy etc), control of pollution and other forms of environmental degradations, environmental remediation, beautification, protection and conservation, good sanitation. Thus, environmental resources could be explored and exploited to advance economic development for the satisfaction of human needs without comprising the ability of the environment to replenish itself.

**Social Welfare:** This ensures developing and implementing policies to reduce income and social inequality, improving access to social services, such as mental health support and social protection programmes and promoting social inclusion and community development. Oludele in Oji et al. (2022:435) perceived social welfare as “positive social change which involves desirable development and improvement in entire or some parts of societal institutions which include culture, economy, education, family, international affairs, laws, population, politics and religion, which invariably enhance, human and social conditions”.

**Infrastructure and Transportation:** This include optimizing infrastructure development and maintenance, improving public transportation systems and promoting sustainable transportation options, and enhancing connectivity and access to remote and underserved areas.

**Public Safety and Security:** This involves developing and implementing effective crime prevention and law enforcement strategies, improving emergency response and disaster preparedness, and enhancing cybersecurity and protecting against online threats.

**Governance and Corruption:** This simply implies improving transparency and accountability in government, reducing corruption and promoting ethical governance practices, as well as enhancing citizenship participation and engagement in decision-making process. It encourages collaborative governance i.e. fostering partnerships between local governments, NGOs, and private sector entities to leverage resources and expertise.

**Agricultural Growth:** This includes providing training, credit, and market access to farmers to improve productivity and income.

**Digital Inclusion:** This involves expanding broadband internet and mobile coverage to facilitate online access to services and information.

**Tourism Development:** This promotes rural tourism to create jobs and stimulate local economies.

**Community Engagement:** This means involving local communities in decision-making processes to understand their needs and priorities.

## CONCLUSION

The neglect of rural communities in government policies and programmes in Rivers state is a major factor contributing to the negation of the will of the people. It is crucial for the government to actively engage and consult with these communities, understand their unique challenges and work towards implementing sustainable and effective solutions. This will not only bridge the gap between the government and the people, but also ensure that policies and programmes are in line with the will of the people and contribute to the overall development of the state.

## Evidence-based Recommendations to Policy Makers in Addressing the Felt-needs of Rural Communities in Rivers State

Policy makers can effectively address the felt-needs of rural communities in Rivers State and promote sustainable community development in the region. However, the following recommendations are proposed to policy makers:

- A thematic investigation should be carried out before execution of government policies and programmes in any given community.
- Involvement of the community people at the stage of planning to evaluation.
- Proof of accountability and trust before the people
- Consultation should be devoid of ‘tokenism’.
- Carry everybody along in decision making and report feedback to the people accurately.
- Develop and implement policies to prioritize the provision of basic amenities in rural areas, especially those in Rivers State with the people’s consent.

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