

Bottom-Up Approaches to Peacebuilding: Evaluating the Impact of Participatory Decision-Making in Nigeria's Empowerment of Rural Communities in the South-South Region

¹Paulinus Ikechukwu Attama, ²Onyemaechi C. Ugwuibe,

³Dennis Nnamdi Eze & ⁴Kingsley Chigozie Udegbumam

^{1&2}Department of Public Administration and Local Government, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

³Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

⁴Peace and Conflict Resolution Unit, School of General Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

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Abstract

This research examines the effects of participatory decision-making processes on peacebuilding in Nigeria's South-South region. By focusing on grassroots approaches, the study evaluates how inclusive decision-making contributes to sustainable peacebuilding in the implementation of intervention projects. Previous studies suggest that prioritizing local contexts in peacebuilding initiatives serves as a fundamental element that enhances effective delivery at the rural level. The application of this approach in assessing the intervention project of the post-amnesty program in the Niger Delta has not been thoroughly explored in current literature, particularly regarding the engagement of rural communities in both the design and execution of the intervention project. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research contends that participatory decision-making can improve community ownership, build trust, and enhance social cohesion, thereby contributing to more sustainable peace. Nevertheless, obstacles like power disparities, limited resources, and insufficient institutional frameworks can impede the success of these approaches. The results of this research hold significant relevance for policymakers, practitioners, and communities focused on promoting peace and development in the South-South region and beyond.

Keywords: *Bottom-up, Participatory, Peacebuilding, Decision-making, Power imbalance, Community ownership.*

Corresponding Author: Paulinus Ikechukwu Attama

Background to the Study

The Niger Delta area in Nigeria, especially the south-south geopolitical zone, has faced years of conflict, violence, and instability, primarily due to issues related to resource control, environmental damage, and socio-economic exclusion. Traditional top-down methods of peacebuilding have often failed to adequately address the complex and varied nature of these conflicts, underscoring the need for more inclusive and participatory approaches. A bottom-up approach to peacebuilding emerged following the conclusion of the Cold War in the 1990s. This shift occurred due to the ideological struggles between the East and West, leading to interventionist strategies in rural communities by either the United States or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). However, after the glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring) reforms resulted in the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, critics began distancing themselves from the "top-down approach to peacebuilding" (Lefranc, 2013). They advocated for an alternative method in which individuals impacted by the consequences of conflict and violence would be invited to contribute to the resolution of issues that affect them. Consequently, the bottom-up approach was integrated into broader post-conflict reconstruction empowerment initiatives. The concept of empowerment, in this context, refers to a group's capability to make decisions and take actions that affect the trajectories of their lives. This broader viewpoint indicates that there is control over available resources and the options people can pursue (Narayan, 2005). Given the vulnerabilities faced by the impoverished in our society, they frequently struggle to make well-informed decisions or to sway the actions of the institutions that influence their circumstances. In light of this, Narayan (2005) defines empowerment as "the enhancement of the assets and capabilities of the disadvantaged to engage in, negotiate with, influence, manage, and hold accountable the institutions that impact their lives" (Narayan, 2005, p.5).

At the outset of the post-amnesty Program, the federal government allocated 361 million dollars for the initiative, which was projected to be completed over five years beginning in 2009. However, President Goodluck Jonathan's administration later proposed a more extensive capacity-building package for the former militants, designating funding in the following amounts: 532 million dollars for 2011, 479 million dollars for 2012, 428 million dollars for 2013, 408 million dollars for 2014, 379 million dollars for 2015, 281 million dollars for 2016, and 213 million dollars for 2017 (Ebeide, 2017 p.22). From 2017 to 2021, the total budgeted figure was 146 million dollars, but there were no available records or documentation concerning the use of these funds. Despite these program provisions at both individual and community levels, the typical individual in the South-South region continues to live in dire conditions, and the community itself remains underdeveloped. Some have criticized the federal government for not effectively collaborating with community leaders at the grassroots level.

Numerous researchers contend that the post-amnesty initiative can foster a peaceful atmosphere conducive to peacebuilding in the Niger Delta (Davidheiser & Nyiayaana, 2011, Nnanta, 2023). However, the initiative does not adequately tackle the core issues that instigated the conflict initially. The immediate consequence is the ongoing decline in the quality of life for young people and communities in the Niger Delta area, which propels the

young people towards insurgency and the abduction of foreign workers hired by oil companies in the region. In light of this context, this study aims to address the following research question: Does the decision-making framework support grassroots participation for sustainable peacebuilding in the South-South region?

Review of Related Literature

The notion of enablement has consistently mirrored the value leanings of researchers. Nonetheless, empowerment evokes the idea of a group's ability to freely make choices and take actions that shape their life paths. This expanded perspective implies control over resources and the decisions individuals make (Narayan, 2005). Considering the vulnerability faced by the poor in society, individuals frequently feel restricted in their ability to make informed decisions or to impact the functioning of institutions that influence their circumstances. Consequently, Narayan (2005) defines empowerment as "the enhancement of the resources and abilities of the impoverished to engage in, negotiate with, influence, manage, and ensure accountability from the institutions that shape their lives" (Narayan, 2005, p.5).

Inspired by this definition, Uphoff (2005) describes enablement as possessing power and the ability to utilize it effectively for personal benefit. Fetterman (2005) identifies key principles such as improvement, community ownership, inclusion, democratic engagement, community knowledge, and accountability as fundamental to the concept of empowerment. An empowerment framework that incorporates these principles acknowledges that, despite many poor individuals feeling powerless and unheard, they are crucial partners with government actors and development collaborators in combating poverty at the community level (Narayan 2005). Hence, accurately measuring empowerment implies a critical understanding of the true nature of power, as this comprehension is valuable for evaluating empowerment initiatives that originate from governmental sources for the general populace at the local level. It also provides a practical framework for marginalized individuals to hold accountable individuals tasked with executing effective initiatives in their communities are essential. According to Chirenje et al (2013), participatory planning seeks to "purposefully recognize its obstacles and develop a plan to tackle those obstacles." They outline six forms of participation: passive participation, participation in sharing information, consultation-based involvement, participation for material benefits, interactive engagement, and self-mobilization or active involvement.

Many prominent strategies of empowerment initiatives target individuals and groups and often face challenges in terms of sustainability. Consequently, efforts are directed to the goal of enabling whole communities at the grassroots level to achieve lasting outcomes. Uphoff (2003) identified four critical qualities that local communities need to have in order to gain the advantages of empowerment. Communities should be involved in "decision-making, mobilizing resources, communicating, coordinating efforts, and actively engaging in resolving conflicts at the local level." The implications of these developments for empowerment analysts are to evaluate whether empowerment initiatives consider the community's makeup in identifying the beneficiary groups of government programs is

essential. Additionally, it is important to assess whether empowerment initiatives acknowledge the contributions of the poor in areas such as resource mobilization, communication, and conflict resolution. Taking these aspects into account constitutes citizen involvement, defined as "a process where individuals engage in decision-making within the institutions, programs, and environments that impact their lives" (Wandersman et al, 2006, p.43).

In this framework, Wiyaboon (2018) emphasizes that engaging Indigenous communities in the creation of collective projects is an essential strategy for enabling them to lead their own development and preserve their identity within the empowerment framework. Communities have evolved from being just unreceptive beneficiaries of enablement initiatives; they are now acknowledged as essential partners with an important role in both managing the projects and supervising efforts within their regions. This training marks the initial step in equipping them with the skills required to actively engage in recognizing and addressing community issues and challenges within development initiatives. These community partners act as local organizations that can provide the vital support and ongoing commitment necessary for a project. Engaging community members is considered a fundamental aspect of efficient governance, as it improves accountability, transparency, and the longevity of development efforts that incorporate public involvement in the developmental process. For development projects to thrive in rural areas, it is crucial to gain the support of key local leaders, as their absence could hinder the project's progress. As a result, any organization or agency initiating a development initiative in a community should focus on fostering a constructive relationship with essential local leaders. The effectiveness of a development initiative depends on creating robust systems for monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring and evaluation are crucial for making necessary adjustments during the project's duration and confirming that the project meets its intended goals.

Due to the challenging realities associated with excluding communities from decision-making during project implementation, Chevron implemented a new approach in 2005 that facilitated the identification of various communities contesting "over land ownership" and sought their input regarding projects that would meet community needs. This strategy yielded positive results, engaging 400 communities and empowering 600,000 individuals. Consequently, this resulted in the establishment of 600 social infrastructure projects within the targeted regions. According to Chevron's annual report from 2005, this achievement was credited to the company's collaboration with NGOs and Regional Development Committees (RDC), composed of community-elected members who serve as intermediaries between the local populations and both governmental and non-governmental organizations. The report stated that "currently, there are five RDCs across three Niger Delta states," tasked with overseeing the distribution of project finances and determining whether resources should focus on education, health, job creation, or infrastructure in the region. A public policy analyst linked to Chevron noted that prior to the implementation of the Global Memorandum of Understanding (GMoU), which laid the groundwork for the RDC structure, community leaders had no involvement in the planning and execution of projects. In evaluating the effects of the GMoU in the Niger Delta, the World Economic Forum (2016) published an article

titled “Responsible Investment in Fragile Contexts,” which asserted that “the implementation of the GMoU model has contributed to reducing violent conflicts and addressing community capacity deficits, unemployment, and various social challenges” (World Economic Forum, 2016, p.21). The report ultimately concluded that among the tangible outcomes of the company's efforts are a measurable enhancement in the security of the operational environment, significant progress in the health, education, and economic circumstances of local communities, and a marked improvement in the relationship between the local populations and the corporation (World Economic Forum, 2016, p.22).

Bede and Haslinda (2012) affirm that due to the hesitance of state actors in meeting their social contract responsibilities to the general populace, multinational corporations (MNCs) worldwide have stepped in to support these efforts. By referencing Coca-Cola's operations in Venezuela and the efforts of Nestle and Unilever in India, they highlight the notable and impactful roles that multinational corporations play in involving local communities during their project implementations. In the same vein, Constantin & Diaconu (2016) commends the GMoU, noting that its principles encourage “a bottom-up, pro-poor and pro-wider community involvement orientation,” and emphasizes that development should extend to communities not directly engaged in oil extraction as well. This approach has cultivated a climate of “transparency, accountability, and voluntarism” among the local population.

Tracey (2010) also argues that through GMoU, communities have managed to transcend the challenges of inadequate leadership and ineffective project oversight linked to previous governmental initiatives in diverse regions. The platform enables local community members to hold their political representatives accountable effectively. In a more detailed examination of how GMoU operates, Tracy (2010) noted that both Chevron and Shell establish their GMoUs through agreements between the company and community representatives benefiting from it. These agreements establish a centralized leadership body for GMoU referred to as Regional Development Councils (RDCs) within Chevron's structure and Cluster Development Boards (CDBs) in Shell's framework. The leadership consists of local elites, representatives from the community, the companies, state and local authorities, the NDDC, and organizations from civil society. Community representation may also encompass local governance bodies such as community trusts (Tracy, 2010, p.11). As stated by Tracy (2010), this approach to project execution adheres to principles of participation and equity while fostering a “bottom-up” mobilization that involves the whole community. He emphasizes that the demographic makeup of these local communities includes “women, youth, men, elders, councils of chiefs, along with other groups such as farmers, fishers, commercial motorcyclists (Okada riders), widows, young mothers, single-parent households, teachers, parent/teacher associations, students, community health workers, market associations, and traditional birth attendants” (Tracy, 2010, p.70).

In their examination of empowerment projects in the Niger Delta, Olawari & Fidelis (2011). Stress that information gathered from local communities by governmental representatives and donor entities is crucial for the success of any poverty alleviation programs. They noted that communities once focused primarily on reaping the rewards from oil extraction until they

started to experience the adverse effects of environmental degradation in their everyday lives. Consequently, the author argues that these communities in the Niger Delta are now in a position to identify the types of interventions they seek for their areas. However, she points out that "community participation" often remains limited to "buy-in projects," as state officials consider the opinions of community members to be unscientific and predominantly traditional. In line with this perspective, Nussbaum (2001) suggests that the repeated failures of empowerment programs and training initiatives in the Niger Delta over the years indicate a lack of adequate integration of individuals into the community, implying that enhancing skills alone is insufficient for human development, which can only occur through inclusivity. Furthermore, Aghedo (2015) posits that the Nigerian government's post-amnesty strategy did not succeed because it primarily focused on the immediate welfare of individuals and the community, treating the affected youth merely as a means to placate them. Similarly, Apkomuvie (2011) pointed out that merely offering educational and vocational training to the youth does not effectively address the issues faced by the South-South geopolitical region. Nonetheless, when individuals are included in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, it enables them to harness their potential, cultivate self-esteem, and lead dignified lives. He also stressed the necessity for the government to manage projects while incorporating local community input into its development plans. Okinono & Salleh. (2015) discovered through their study that the average citizen in the Niger Delta recognizes the significance of community involvement in enhancing the welfare of the region's residents. The community expressed sentiments such as: "This community is ours and belongs to our future generations. Therefore, we must take appropriate action. Only our choices and decisions regarding what the government offers us will ensure the sustainability of these projects" (Okinono & Salleh, 2015, p.233). This illustrates their readiness to contribute to the effectiveness of governmental initiatives in their areas. They therefore contend that the positive results achieved by Chevron through the implementation of a participatory democratic method in project execution are encouraging other multinational corporations in the South-South region to adopt enablement strategies, thereby fostering a peaceful environment in the Niger Delta.

In a study conducted by Adaka and Oboqua (2019) to assess if the NDDC empowerment program fulfilled the standards of participatory development in Akwa-Ibom, it was discovered that before the implementation of the empowerment initiatives, the rural societies expressed a desire to inform the organizers about their priorities for a program aimed at enhancing employment opportunities for community members. The organizers listened to their concerns and, following discussions with community members, established skill acquisition centres and facilitated access to computer literacy training, which, as noted by the authors, greatly contributed to the advancement of local capacities in the specified communities. Their conclusions correspond with those of Ayuk (2006), who investigated the youth empowerment aspects of NDDC's community-based poverty reduction programs in Cross-River State, concentrating on five local communities. The outcomes of this study revealed that the NDDC's initiatives to empower youth as a component of its community-focused strategies to reduce poverty establish a framework aimed at fulfilling the aspirations of youth to promote self-sufficiency, safeguard the environment, and instigate positive changes in the social, economic, and political spheres affecting young people.

However, existing literature is filled with voices arguing that corporate social responsibility efforts, such as constructing roads and hospitals, fail to adequately tackle the severe oil contamination and gas flaring challenges confronting the fishermen of the Niger Delta, particularly since the community is dependent on fishing for its livelihood, thus endangering their primary means of survival. (Idemudia & Ite, 2006). Idemudia (2014) explored the extent to which Multinational Corporations (MNCs) in the Niger Delta engage with local communities to meet their corporate social responsibilities towards their host populations. He discovered that the factors influencing the location of social infrastructures, such as road construction in many communities, are primarily dictated by whether the MNC would also gain from these projects. He challenges the widespread assumption that improved social infrastructure will automatically lead to economic growth in various regions globally, asserting that this does not apply to the Niger Delta. Nonetheless, the reality in the Niger Delta is that there is no direct correlation between enhanced social amenities and economic development. This disconnect is largely due to the decline of traditional livelihoods such as fishing and farming, with minimal or no efforts made to invest in alternative income-generating activities that could enhance the local economy, either by governmental bodies or oil companies. In the few instances where there has been investment in new economic opportunities, such as the Ibom rice farm in Ikot Ebidang, the facilities are often insufficient, and the ongoing projects tend to be poorly operational. As a result, the introduction of social amenities has generally resulted in an 'urbanization' trend without yielding substantial 'developmental' advantages for the local populations. According to him, the lack of consultation with local communities by MNCs on the provision of social infrastructures results in the construction of roads and the supply of electricity, yet the pressing need for a proper water supply persists, as oil spills have contaminated natural water sources. A person interviewed by Idemudia (2014) voiced concerns that although Mobil has provided "roads and electricity," their houses are being eroded, and they do not have access to clean drinking water. This situation illustrates the empowerment efforts in the Niger Delta, as financial contributions from donors often stem from business interests, frequently overlooking whether the local communities truly benefit. Both Inyang (2003) and Foxcroft (2003) corroborated this observation by indicating that numerous communities in the Niger Delta are filled with incomplete and abandoned projects because these initiatives failed to address the wider needs of the local population.

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reality in the Niger Delta indicates that there is no direct link between improved social amenities and economic progress. This disconnect largely stems from the decline of traditional means of livelihood, such as fishing and agriculture, with little to no effort from either governmental bodies or oil companies to invest in alternative income-generating activities that could boost the local economy. In the rare cases where new economic ventures have been pursued, like the Ibom rice farm in Ikot Ebidang, the facilities are often inadequate, and the projects in progress generally operate poorly. Consequently, the introduction of social amenities has typically led to an 'urbanization' trend without providing significant 'developmental' benefits for the local communities. According to him, the lack of consultation with local communities by MNCs on the provision of social infrastructures results in the construction of roads and the supply of electricity, yet the pressing need for a proper water supply persists, as oil spills have contaminated natural water sources.

Regarding the empowerment of youth in the Niger Delta through post-amnesty initiatives, various authors appear to agree that these efforts lack community involvement in both policy design. Ajibola (2015) emphasizes that the primary demographic of youth in the Niger Delta has not been adequately involved in empowerment initiatives, which significantly heightens the risk of a potential resurgence in insurgency. He warned, "If the empowerment process does not succeed, there will be ample manpower available to engage in violence within the region." This is attributed to the fact that "around 80 percent of ex-militants have been excluded from the program. A significant number of individuals have yet to gain any benefits from this initiative. If these 80% return to the creeks, or are recruited by more powerful third-party entities under the guise of continuing the struggle, then the chances for peace in the region are bleak" Ajibola (2015). In addition, Ajibola (2015) pointed out that one of the obstacles impacting the effective implementation of the empowerment schemes in the Niger Delta is associated with the government's execution of the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program. He characterized the method as "a fire brigade approach." The scholars contend that an effective way of nurturing peace should consider the voices of the community; however, the actions taken by the state and its agents merely equated empowerment to armed education, raising doubts about the program's longevity.

Nevertheless, he pointed out that the criteria for selecting community members to benefit from the empowerment program in the Niger Delta were rather unclear. The state's inability to implement a reconciliation and empowerment initiative for ex-combatants and their communities has obstructed the reintegration process and stunted community development. As reconciliation is essential for restoring the social fabric fractured during the conflict, the inadequate execution in the area has led to ongoing grief and resentment among the victims. Oluwaniyi (2018) reports that even with the massive investment of trillions of naira into empowerment initiatives for Niger Delta communities, challenges like rundown schools, families in hardship, competition for resources, and insufficient financial aid have compelled many children to drop out of school. As a result, residents in these areas have resorted to informal employment sectors such as fishing, oil smuggling, and other activities that yield immediate income, including trade and sex work for women.

Ator (2004) assesses the Micro Project Program for Six States (MPP6) in the Niger Delta area. The MPP6 is designed to engage youth in community development, particularly targeting those who are uneducated or have minimal educational backgrounds. A study by Udom (2006) investigated the impact of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) on rural development in the Niger Delta and found that many NGO efforts aimed at empowering rural youth did not prioritize job creation. Rather, these programs included a variety of initiatives to meet community needs, such as providing training opportunities, enhancing skills, generating employment, and increasing wealth through higher income and improved social status for the region's youth. Udom (2006) contended that these initiatives were primarily aimed at economically empowering rural youth, indicating that their focus extended beyond just offering employment programs. The Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), as described by NAPEP (2001), encompasses a wider array of activities, such as collecting information on job openings, boosting productivity, gaining new skills, and developing training programs for young people, the unemployed, and those who have recently lost their jobs.

Gaps in Literature

Despite the robustness of the existing analyses, the literature has yet to adequately address subjects concerning community access to information regarding project initiatives, involvement in decision-making processes, and the mobilization of local resources for the execution of empowerment initiatives. Consequently, this study addresses these gaps

Decision-Making Process of the Post-Amnesty Programme and Community Project Schemes

Some approaches aimed at empowering the poor concentrate on individuals and families directly, while other methods targeting the same goal adopt a wider perspective, involving larger units of analysis and action. It can be suggested that initiatives to empower the impoverished that treat individuals or families as standalone units may overlook opportunities to assist them effectively. This oversight arises because these strategies lack an emphasis on collective action and are typically less sustainable, as they do not build on the efforts of individuals and families. To satisfy the needs and desires of the poor, collective actions are often required, such as:

- i. Establishing and managing a clean water supply for the village.
- ii. Collaborating to buy raw materials in bulk at reduced prices for crafting, and marketing collectively to access better markets and lessen the time spent selling products alone.
- iii. Enhancing local sanitation to minimize diarrhoea and other preventable diseases that disproportionately affect the poor (although improving hygiene can be more of an individual endeavour).
- iv. Protecting petty vendors, day labourers, unmarried women, lower castes, and other susceptible groups from being exploited by police, moneylenders, and other influential local figures.

Mobilizing the poor to promote their interests and address their needs necessitates more than just the formation or presence of a formal organization. Reaching consensus on shared

objectives and on the distribution of costs and benefits associated with collective action is crucial in a legal context. However, the ability to achieve these goals, despite facing obstacles, relies on the actual execution of these functions. The actions linked to these four functions empower individuals to achieve greater outcomes with their resources than they would if they operated as isolated individuals or families

Table 1: Framework of stakeholders' interviews assessing the decision-making process in the building project schemes in the local communities in the Niger Delta

Coding name	Community leaders	Job description	Duration of the interview
ATYO1	Grassroots-Based Organisations	A traditional ruler from the Niger Delta	70 mins
ATYO2	Grassroot-Based Organisations	A member of the community-based organization	60Mins
ATYO3	Grassroot-Based Organisations	The staff of a community-based organisation in Bayelsa State	80 Mins
ATYO4	Community-Based Organisations	An executive of a community-based organisation from Rivers State	90Mins
ATYO5	Community-Based Organisations	The leader of a community-based organisation in the region	70Mins
ATYO6	Community-Based Organisations	Leader of a Youth group in Delta State	85 Mins
ATYO7	Community-Based Organisations	A Traditional Ruler from Rivers State	120 Mins
ATYO8	Community-Based Organisations	The staff of a community-based organization	60Mins
ATYO9	Community-Based Organisations	A community activist	90Mins
ATYO10	Organizations of Civil Society / Non-Governmental Organizations	A civil society activist	90 Mins
ATYO12	Social Organizations / Non-Governmental Organizations	An environmental activist	85Mins
ATYO13	Social Organizations / Non-Governmental Organizations	A member of a non – non-governmental organisation working in Delta state	60Mins
ATYO14	Social Organizations / Non-Governmental Organizations	The founder of a non – non-governmental organisation working with ex-militants	90 Mins

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Exclusion of the Community stakeholders in the project execution schemes in the Niger Delta

The initial aspect to examine is the omission of certain ex-militants from the PAP. Following the establishment of the PAP, a Presidential Panel was formed to oversee the Amnesty and Disarmament of Militants in the South-South, managing the DDR process in the region. Militants were required to disarm within a timeframe of 60 days, from August 6 to October 4, 2009. They needed to hand over their arms at designated sites to facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration. Within this 60-day timeframe, a total of 20,192 militants accepted the amnesty

by surrendering their weapons and ammunition to the Federal Government. In November 2010, an additional 6,166 ex-militants who had originally been excluded were allowed entry, signifying a second phase of the PAP. This increased the total number of individuals registered and demobilized to 26,358 at that time. By October 2012, the Federal Government endorsed the inclusion of another 3,642 former militants in response to protests from some youths claiming to be militants, who had not participated in the earlier phases, thus raising the total to 30,000 (Ikelegbe and Umukoro, 2016).

The criteria for recognizing and categorizing combatants and broader participation in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) are crucial, as accurately identifying eligible ex-combatants is essential for building trust among parties and ensuring the legitimacy of the program. The Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP) has frequently depended on the subjective criteria of internal lists submitted by the armed groups themselves, with some level of verification from military committees set up by the Defence Headquarters. The later acceptance of additional ex-militants into the program between October 2009 and 2012 resulted from calls for their inclusion (Ikelegbe and Umukoro, 2016). Those advocating for inclusion were mainly young people from the Niger Delta who claimed to be ex-militants but were not afforded the benefits of the PAP. Several factors contributed to this demand for inclusion. First, it has been proposed that some militants were initially doubtful about the PAP and opted to stay outside of it (Dode 2012). Some may have withheld participation as part of a coordinated backup plan in case the PAP did not succeed. However, over time, these groups began to view the PAP's intentions more favourably, prompting them to seek inclusion. For example, disarmed factions from previous state government-led peace efforts, like the Itsekiri National Youth Command, sought to be included. Similarly, groups that had been initially excluded, including some followers of the late John Togo and the Latu group from the Bakassi Peninsula, also needed to be integrated. Secondly, many perceived the government's selection process as being significantly flawed.

The selection process allocated positions based on a designated ratio, with slots for ex-combatants determined by the number of firearms surrendered to the authorities. Essentially, the inclusion of former militants was based not on the actual number of ex-combatants but rather on a figure designated by the government, influenced by external factors. This approach incited a number of protests from former ex-militant organizations regarding their exclusion in the second and third phases of the initiative, even after they had returned their weapons to the Joint Task Force, as illustrated by the Italibabon Revolution Movement led by General Nomukeme, Keity Sese (Ikelegbe and Umukoro, 2016). In a protest in March 2013, ex-militants set fire to a gas pipeline in the Ughelli-North Local Government Area of Delta State. By October 2013, some of the excluded ex-militants were reportedly planning to stage a demonstration in Abuja, seeking their inclusion in a future phase of the PAP. As a result of these protests, the criteria for program participants changed in subsequent phases, allowing for the inclusion of previously ineligible ex-militants.

The PAP was originally associated with a rise in criminal gangs, thugs, cult members, and others who suddenly proclaimed themselves as militants, eager to benefit from the program.

In simpler terms, some young people who were not genuine militants realized the advantages linked to the PAP and falsely presented themselves as former militants to gain access to the initiative. Additionally, evidence suggests that some individuals who arrived at the rehabilitation camp had never participated in the struggle but were “gate crashers” looking to take advantage of the relatively plentiful resources and opportunities offered by the program. These resources included monthly financial support from the Federal Government of Nigeria for ex-militants, as well as training opportunities, both locally and abroad. As a result, friends, associates, and family members of ex-militant leaders, along with ethnic and political figures, took the place of real ex-militants. There are allegations that some political appointees and influential leaders secretly recruited their political thugs and youth allies as ex-militants.

A major drawback of the PAP has been the exclusion of reconstruction efforts. In other words, the PAP agenda and process entirely overlooked reconstruction. Regions that are recovering from conflict require a development agenda cantered on reconstruction that supports conflict resolution, peacebuilding, political stability, and economic recovery. The objectives of socio-economic reconstruction include restoring damaged rural infrastructure and revitalizing sources of livelihood. This should involve initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty, improving incomes, and ensuring that the community as a whole benefit (Addison 2001, 1). Residents of the Niger Delta have faced numerous hardships and injustices, particularly as a result of armed conflicts and violence that lasted for more than a decade. These events led to extensive devastation of lives and property, and disrupted social services, commerce, and livelihoods. The oil-producing areas continue to deal with pollution and the deteriorating state of schools, healthcare facilities, and social infrastructure. Devoid of modern amenities, what little they possessed has either been destroyed or is falling apart. Most community members still depend on subsistence work—primarily agriculture and fishing—which are susceptible to oil pollution and land seizures. Communities that have been devastated by police actions, military operations, and confrontations between the military and militias, along with those impacted by internal militia conflicts, remain in a state of disrepair; the social facilities and services that were lost have yet to be rebuilt (Oluduro & Oluduro, 2012). The PAP has not successfully established itself within a framework designed to address the rehabilitation and reconstruction of properties, social amenities, and communities affected by violent conflicts from 2009 to 2024. This is important since many residents lack fundamental services such as electricity, clean water, and healthcare facilities. In addition, the populace experiences significant negative effects stemming from oil extraction and production, including oil spills and gas flaring that jeopardize local livelihoods (Ojo 2010; Ushie 2013).

Based on the data collected, the assumption that local stakeholders were not involved in the execution of the DDR is supported.

Table 2: Responses aimed at determining if the decision-making process of empowerment initiatives hinders grassroots participatory involvement in the long-term viability of community project schemes in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone

S/N	Variables	SA	%	A	%	D	%	SA	%	No of subjects
1.	Important stakeholders participated in the decision-making process for empowerment initiatives in the South-South geopolitical zone from 2009 to 2024.	95	45.7	78	37.5	25	12.0	10	4.8	208
2.	A bottom-up participatory approach was utilized in the empowerment initiative and community projects in the South-South region from 2009 to 2024.	80	38.5	68	32.7	35	16.8	25	12.0	208
3.	The participation of beneficiaries in the post-amnesty program contributed to the program's success in the South-South region from 2009 to 2024.	90	43.3	60	28.8	30	14.4	28	13.5	208
4.	An internal system was established to oversee and assess the post-amnesty program in the South-South region from 2009 to 2024.	82	39.4	78	37.5	25	12.0	25	12.0	208
5.	The exclusion of beneficiaries from the initial discussions of the program hindered its success.	75	36.1	65	31.3	30	14.4	38	18.3	208
	Total	222	203	349	167.7	145	67.2	126	60.6	1040

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

The data from Table 2 indicates that 95 respondents, which represents 45.7% of the total, strongly concurred that key stakeholders were engaged in the decision-making process of empowerment programs in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria from 2009 to 2024. Additionally, 78 respondents, accounting for 37.5%, agreed with this statement, while 25 respondents, or 12%, disagreed, and 10 respondents, making up 4.8%, strongly disagreed. In the same table, it is shown that 80 respondents, or 38.5% of the total participants, strongly agreed that a bottom-up participatory approach was not utilized in the empowerment initiatives and community projects in the South-South zone between 2009 and 2024. On the other hand, 68 respondents, which is 32.7%, agreed with this statement, 35 respondents, or 16.8%, disagreed, and 25 respondents, representing 12%, strongly disagreed.

The data gathered from the table regarding question 3 indicates that the participation of beneficiaries in the post-amnesty program contributed significantly to its effectiveness in the South-South region from 2015 to 2023. Specifically, 90 respondents, making up 43.3% of the total, expressed strong agreement with this assertion, while 60 respondents, representing 28.8%, agreed. In contrast, 30 respondents, or 14.4%, disagreed, and 28 respondents, accounting for 13.5%, strongly disagreed. According to the responses outlined in the table for question 4, 82 respondents, which is 39.4% of the total, strongly agreed that an effective mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the post-amnesty program existed in the South-South region between 2009 and 2024. Additionally, 78 respondents, comprising 37.5%, agreed with this point, while 25 respondents, representing 12%, disagreed, and another 25 respondents, or 12% of the total, strongly disagreed. In relation to question 5, 75 respondents, or 36.1% of the total, strongly agreed that the lack of beneficiary involvement during the initial discussions of the program negatively impacted its success. Meanwhile, 65 respondents, accounting for 31.3%, agreed with this statement, whereas 30 respondents, comprising 14.4%, disagreed, and 38 respondents, or 18.3% of the total, strongly disagreed.

Test of Hypothesis

The hypothesis was evaluated using a Chi-square statistical test. The Chi-square value is determined with the formula: $\chi^2 = \sum \frac{O - E}{E}$ where: O = Observed frequency E = Expected frequency χ^2 = Chi-square \sum = Summation. The Chi-square test applies what is referred to as degrees of freedom (d/f). The degrees of freedom are calculated through the formula: $d/f = (r-1)(c-1)$ where: r = Number of rows in a specific table c = Number of columns in a specific table. The researcher established a 0.005 level of significance for the hypothesis testing.

Chi-Square Decision Guideline: Discard the null hypothesis when the computed value exceeds the critical/tabulated value at the specified level of significance.

Table 3: Degree of freedom = $(R-1)(C-1) = (5-1)(5-1) = 16$

Responses	Observed Frequency	Expected Frequency	(O-E)	(O-E) ²
Strongly agreed	95	44	54	2,916
Agreed	78	44	31	961
Disagreed	25	44	-16	-256
Strongly disagreed	10	44	-34	-1,156
Total	787	176	575	2,465

Source: Researchers' computation

$$\chi^2 = \frac{\sum (O-E)^2}{E} = \frac{2,465}{176} = 14.00 \text{ (Accepted)}$$

Decision: In this case, $-30.011 \leq 3.841$, we fail to reject H₀ because the computed chi-square value of 14.00 is less than the critical value of 3.841. Therefore, the hypothesis, which

posits that the decision-making process of the empowerment schemes seems to hinder a bottom-up participatory approach to the sustainability of community project schemes in the South-South zone, is accepted. This indicates that the decision-making process of the empowerment schemes was predominantly a top-down approach.

Finding

Based on the feedback from respondents, it was discovered that the elite (stakeholders) participated in the decision-making for empowerment schemes and were involved in the preliminary identification of the beneficiaries of the post-amnesty programme. There was also a built-in mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the post-amnesty program, but it was not followed to the letter. In contrast to the findings from the questionnaire responses, interviewees indicated that the lack of beneficiary participation, corruption, and absence of a monitoring and evaluation mechanism hindered the programme

Discussion

Sustainability within the project represents a business approach that harmonizes environmental, social, and economic dimensions of project-based endeavours to satisfy the immediate needs of stakeholders without jeopardizing or burdening future generations. It ensures access to adequate health services, secure and healthy housing, and quality education for every community member. It creates an environment that is free from crime and violence. It nurtures a sense of community, fostering feelings of belonging, place, and self-esteem. Even though many ex-militants from the Niger Delta have benefitted from valuable capacity building and skills training, alongside formal education as part of the second phase of the Amnesty Program for Rehabilitation, it is concerning to highlight the absence of a strategic plan to involve these youths in productive commercial or economic activities. The amnesty initiative has faced accusations of corruption and is perceived to favour former militants over other local youth. Additionally, there has been no attempt to tackle environmental challenges such as gas flaring or to enhance the living conditions of those residing in the Niger Delta. This aligns with the findings of Odubo and Tobor (2016), which indicate that rather than resorting to radical actions, most participants have effectively utilized the skills, knowledge, and training gained in amnesty training centres to improve their circumstances by seeking employment, starting their own businesses, engaging in civic and community efforts, and contributing positively to their communities. All of these factors influence the sustainability of the post-amnesty community project in the South-South geopolitical zone. Furthermore, Lasisi, Nwoke & Kidi (2017) noted that 11,993 youths have received training in various skill areas and formal education, with around 4,698 youths currently undertaking similar education at prestigious universities worldwide. Nevertheless, a significant challenge lies in how to integrate these youths into meaningful economic activities, especially given the precarious labour market in the country. This raises immediate concerns regarding the sustainability of the Amnesty Programme, particularly in terms of the integration phase, which is meant to establish a conducive environment for youth employment, ensuring they do not revert to previous lifestyles.

According to those surveyed, the program was deemed unsustainable because the issues of deprivation and marginalization persisted within the framework of the Federal Government Amnesty Project. Given the assertion that amnesty fails to tackle the underlying problems that have fuelled the rise of militancy and various forms of violence in the Niger Delta, it becomes clear that the initiative is merely a tactic to retain control over the region's economic benefits while feigning an effort to create lasting peace. Consequently, there are strong indications that we will witness a rollback of the progress made through amnesty, leading to an increase in violence as more youths become frustrated and aggressive. This observation aligns with Akinola (2011), who concurred that amnesty could be fleeting due to its neglect of the root causes of the Niger Delta crisis. While it is said that the amnesty program has allegedly brought some degree of tranquillity to the region, outbreaks of insurgency continue, resulting in the familiar consequences of kidnapping, the vandalism of oil pipelines and other facilities, alongside various illicit economic activities that constitute sabotage. Regarding the impact of the amnesty initiative on conflict management in the Niger Delta Region, opinions are divided. Thus, the amnesty program is an inadequate solution and is unlikely to foster sustainable peace in the area.

Concluding Remarks

The research investigated whether the decision-making framework of the empowerment programs promoted a grassroots participatory approach to the sustainability of community project schemes in the South-South region of Nigeria. We observed at the outset that one of the factors that inhibited the accomplishment of the intervention programmes in the Niger Delta over the years was the marginalization of the direct beneficiaries in the conception and implementation of these intervention projects. When the post-amnesty empowerment programme was conceptualized in 2009, these fears of relegation of the rural communities in the background were taken into consideration. Nevertheless, we demonstrated through responses from the respondents that the elite still maintained the adversarial top-down approach rather than the reigning bottom-up approach in the driving of the empowerment programme. Little wonder that few positive outcomes were realized from the implementation of the programme. We recommend that the federal government of Nigeria should pay closer attention to the mobilisation of the rural communities in the implementation of these projects. The reason is that oil exploration in the Niger Delta has affected the livelihood of the rural communities that depend on the resources from the water for their day-to-day survival.

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