

Evaluating Poverty Alleviation Strategies and Sustainable Development in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated the effectiveness of poverty reduction measures implemented by the Imo State Government through the Imo State Poverty Alleviation Bureau (IMO PAB) in achieving sustainable development. The study aimed to identify poverty reduction indicators and evaluate their implementation. A survey design was utilized, with data gathered from 400 participants using a structured questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. Various sampling techniques, such as simple random, and purposive, were employed for sample selection. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze respondents' personal variables, while a Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to test the study hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level. Results revealed that, although Imo PAB initiated commendable programs and projects, their implementation was not significantly extensive. However, the few implemented projects did contribute to reducing poverty. To enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of poverty alleviation efforts, it is recommended that the target population be actively involved in planning and implementation of poverty reduction programme. Additionally, agencies responsible for executing pro-poor programs should be properly funded by the government and international donor agencies for effective service delivery.

Keywords: poverty reduction indicators, sustainable development, Nigeria.

Introduction

The inherent aspiration of human beings is to live a life unburdened by challenges such as scarcity, ill-health, discomfort, and other issues associated with poverty. Despite this innate desire, in today's world, poverty has emerged as a daunting obstacle that threatens the very core of human existence (Aluko, 2003; Agwu, & Kadin, 2014; Omang, Okpa, & Okoi, 2022). Poverty is universally acknowledged as a major impediment to both human and material development. Staggering statistics reveal that nearly half of the world's population, which amounts to approximately three billion people, live on just \$2.50 per day. Furthermore, around 1.4 billion people struggle to survive on less than \$1.25 per day (Shah, 2013; Hussaini, 2014). In light of the prevailing global economic conditions, it is plausible to contend that these figures have deteriorated even further (Ukwayi & Okpa, 2017; Ofem, Okpa, & Joshua, 2021). The acute nature of the poverty crisis has prompted the implementation of a variety of strategies aimed at fostering conscientious national and international efforts to combat it (Muhammed, Malarrizhi, Mohammed, & Zhan, 2014; Mohammed, 2018).

One notable initiative in this regard was the establishment of the United Nations Organization (UNO) Charter in 1945. Its primary objectives include building and maintaining world peace, as well as facilitating international cooperation in addressing complex global issues of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian nature. The UNO is of the firm belief that by pursuing sustainable development, peace and security can be safeguarded for all individuals, thus ensuring their prosperity (Musa, Addullah, & Wahid, 2016). To this end, the UNO has introduced a range of

programs and initiatives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which consist of 17 interconnected goals aimed at addressing various aspects of poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, and more. By setting targets to be achieved by 2030, the SDGs serve as a roadmap for nations to work collaboratively towards a more equitable and sustainable future.

The prevalence of poverty in Nigeria, and its escalating impact on the people of Imo State specifically, is deeply concerning (Obiwuru, 2019; Ugwoke, Okonkwo, & Obidebube, 2022). This hardship manifests in various forms, such as persistent hunger, ill-health, malnutrition, high maternal mortality and morbidity rates, premature infant deaths, inadequate housing, limited access to clean water and sanitation, unemployment, and a severe lack of essential amenities (Kolawole, 2021). A simple walk through the streets of Imo State provides a vivid illustration of the widespread poverty afflicting its residents. The devastating consequences of poverty in Imo State pose a significant threat to both human and material development, and call into question the state's ability to achieve even the most basic objectives outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Indicators of this widening poverty gap include poor living standards that fall below the UN-recommended minimum of \$1.25 per day, as well as an insufficient foundation to support quality education, gender equality, zero hunger, good health and well-being, decent work and economic growth, and industry, innovation, and infrastructure (Obiwuru, 2019; Peter, Okpa, & Okoi, 2020; Ugwoke, Okonkwo, & Obidebube, 2022).

To address the persistent issue of poverty, the Federal Government of Nigeria has implemented several poverty reduction initiatives, including the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P), and Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) Initiatives, among others (Okonkwo, & Obidebube, 2022). Despite these efforts, the intended benefits have not yet materialized, as poverty remains a significant concern, particularly in Imo State (Imo State Government, 2011). The Imo State Poverty Alleviation Bureau (IMO PAB) is a government agency established in Imo State, Nigeria, with the primary goal of reducing poverty and improving the standard of living for the citizens of the state (Imo State Poverty Alleviation Bureau, 2006). The bureau typically focuses on developing and implementing policies, programs, and projects aimed at improving the economic situation and social welfare of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in the state (Imo State Government, 2011). The agency works in collaboration with other government agencies, international organizations, and NGOs to achieve its goals (Imo State Poverty Alleviation Bureau, 2006). This study investigated the effectiveness of poverty reduction measures implemented by the Imo State Government through the Imo State Poverty Alleviation Bureau (IMO PAB) in achieving Sustainable Development. The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

- (a) What are the poverty reduction programmes currently implemented in Imo State?
- (b) To what extent does education empowerment relate to sustainable development?
- (c) How does economic empowerment relate to sustainable development?

Hypotheses of the study

- (a) There is no significant relationship between education empowerment and sustainable development.
- (b) There is no significant relationship between economic empowerment and sustainable development.

Methods

Study setting and population

The study is conducted in Imo state, Nigeria. Imo State is one of the 36 states in Nigeria, situated in the southeastern part of the country. The capital city of Imo State is Owerri. The state covers an area of approximately 5,530 square kilometers and is bordered by Anambra State to the north, Rivers State to the south, Abia State to the east, and Delta State to the west. Imo State is known for its oil production, agriculture, and cultural heritage. The primary ethnic group in the state is

the Igbo people, and the primary language spoken is Igbo, along with English as the official language. The geographical coordinates for Imo State, Nigeria are 5.5° N latitude and 7.0° E longitude. The estimated population of Imo state is four million, nine hundred and twenty-eight thousand (4.928) (NPC, 2017).

Design and Sampling

The study employed a multi-stage sampling technique to collect diverse data from a total of 422 respondents, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic, addressing the research questions from multiple perspectives and providing a deeper insight into the experiences and opinions of the participants. For this study, 400 respondents were selected for quantitative data collection through simple random and purposive sampling technique. To complement the quantitative data, qualitative data were collected from 22 purposively selected participants through In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). IDIs were conducted with six key informants, including three community leaders and three staff members from the Imo State Poverty Alleviation Bureau (IMO PAB). These individuals were chosen based on their significant roles and experiences within the community, allowing for a deeper understanding of the poverty alleviation program from an organizational and community perspective. Two FGD sessions were held to gain insight into the experiences of beneficiaries of the poverty alleviation programme aged 18 and above. Each FGD consisted of two groups, one from urban wards and the other from rural areas, with eight participants in each. A total of 16 participants were engaged in these discussions, allowing for diverse perspectives to be shared and compared. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods enabled the researchers to leverage the strengths of both approaches. Quantitative data provided a broader understanding of the overall trends and patterns, while qualitative data offered a deeper exploration of individual experiences, feelings, and motivations. By integrating these methods, the study was better equipped to provide more comprehensive and nuanced answers to the research questions, ultimately leading to a more thorough understanding of the subject matter.

Ethical consideration and data collection procedure

The research adheres to all established ethical principles guiding social science research, including disclosure policy, informed consent, safety protocols, anonymity, and confidentiality to ensure the integrity and validity of the study. Prior to administering the main instrument, a pre-test is conducted using 10% of the sample size in various locations not chosen for the study. The instrument is also subjected to content and face validity evaluations. The researcher, along with four research assistants fluent in English and Igbo dialects, administer the questionnaire. To assess the reliability of the responses, the test-retest method was employed. For in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD), the researcher conducts the sessions using a recorder, with participants' permission. One research assistant operates the recorder and takes notes simultaneously. Respondents were duly notified and appointments scheduled before interviews to avoid meeting them unprepared and to ensure a conducive environment for their full participation. This approach help guarantee the quality of information generated during the sessions.

Data analysis

This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques. The quantitative data, gathered from the questionnaire, is coded and processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 and Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC). Results are presented using descriptive statistics, such as percentages and frequency tables. For the qualitative data, initial transcription occurs in the local language, followed by translation into English while ensuring that the meanings remain consistent across both versions. During the transcription process, phrases with unique or

significant meanings was highlighted. These phrases serve as illustrative quotes that complement the quantitative findings, providing a richer understanding of the results.

Findings and Discussion

A comprehensive survey was conducted in selected streets and communities in Owerri, Imo state to gather data for the study. Out of the 400 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 375 were deemed complete and valid for analysis, while 25 were unusable due to either being incomplete or not returned. This indicates a 93.75% response rate, which is generally considered a good representation of the target population which are the residents of Owerri Metropolis. The respondents were diverse in terms of gender, age, marital status, education, and occupation. The gender distribution revealed a slight male dominance, with 58.1% being male and 41.9% female. This provides a balanced perspective from both genders in the study. The age distribution showed that the majority (39.2%) of respondents were between 38 and 47 years old, followed by the 28-37 age group (21.9%). This highlights the involvement of the more experienced and mature population in the study, which can bring valuable insights based on their life experiences. In terms of marital status, the majority (69.3%) of respondents were married, providing insights from individuals who likely have families and different responsibilities compared to other marital statuses.

The single, divorced or separated, and widowed respondents made up smaller proportions of the sample, but still provided valuable perspectives. The educational backgrounds of respondents were diverse, with the majority (57.3%) holding a Senior Secondary School Certificate. This suggests that the respondents were generally educated, which can contribute to a more informed and nuanced understanding of the issues being studied. The varying levels of education also allow for the analysis of different perspectives based on educational experiences. Occupationally, the largest proportion (45.1%) of respondents were traders, followed by students (24.8%) and farmers (16.8%). The implication of this occupational diversity is that different sectors provide unique opportunities and challenges for individuals to grow, develop skills, and gain economic independence. In summary, the data collected through the 375 completed questionnaire provide a diverse and representative sample of the Imo state population across gender, age, marital status, education, and occupation. This diversity enabled the study to draw insights and conclusions from a wide range of perspectives, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the issues being examined.

TABLE 1: Respondents demographic characteristics (n= 375)

Variable	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Sex		
Male	218	58.1
Female	157	41.9
Total	375	100
Age in years		
18-27years	62	16.5
28-37 years	82	21.9
38-47 years	147	39.2
48-57 years	37	9.9
58 years and above	47	12.5
Total	375	100
Marital status		
Single	95	25.3
Married	260	69.3
Divorced/Separated	10	2.7
Widowed	10	2.7
Total	375	100

Educational status		
Non-formal education	21	5.6
FSLC	32	8.5
SSCE	215	57.3
Graduate	107	28.5
Total	375	100

Occupation		
Student	93	24.8
Farmer	63	16.8
Trader	169	45.1
Civil servant	30	8.0
Other occupations	20	5.3
Total	375	100

Fieldwork, 2023

Knowledge of Imo State Poverty Alleviation programmes

The data presented in Table 2 reveals that the majority of respondents (80.5%) confirm their awareness of poverty alleviation programs in their community. A small percentage (5.6%) states that they were unaware of such programs, while 13.9% are uncertain about their existence. This implies that most participants are informed about community efforts to combat poverty, although there remains a significant number of individuals who are either unaware or unsure of these initiatives.

Table 2: The percentage spread of respondents' awareness of available poverty alleviation programme

Available programme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	302	80.5
No	21	5.6
Do not know	52	13.9
Total	375	100.0

Source: Fieldwork, 2023

During an In-Depth Interview (IDI) with a community leader in Owerri, the leader shared his insights regarding the existing poverty alleviation programmes in the state. He acknowledged that there are indeed several types of empowerment initiatives aimed at helping those in need. However, he expressed concern over the adequacy of these programs, stating that the resources and opportunities offered are not sufficient to cater for the entire community. The community leader further explained that only a handful of individuals have been able to benefit from the available programs, leaving many others still struggling with poverty. This situation raises concerns about the inclusivity and accessibility of these poverty alleviation initiatives in the Owerri community: His views were expressed thus:

Indeed, several types of poverty alleviation programs exist within the state, but the resources and opportunities provided are insufficient to cater to everyone's needs. A limited number of individuals from the community have managed to benefit from the available programs, leaving many others still in need of support. (IDI/community leader/Owerri community).

In a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) session, participants from Owerri shared their insights on the impact of poverty alleviation programs in their community. They were unanimous in stating with conviction that the poverty alleviation initiatives are inclusive and cater for people from various social backgrounds, ensuring that a wide range of individuals can benefit from them. According to the informant, these poverty alleviation programs have made a significant

difference in the lives of community members across Imo State. People from diverse communities have witnessed remarkable transformations in their living conditions, thanks to the support provided by these initiatives. The informant emphasized that the programs have not only uplifted individuals but also positively impacted their families.

Existing poverty alleviation programmes

Table 3 provides a breakdown of the data on existing poverty alleviation programmes, highlighting that the most common poverty alleviation program is handset repairs, with 69.0% of respondents mentioning it. Shoe making comes in a close second at 68.8%, while block molding/masonry is reported by 57.9% of respondents. Photo/video operation and craft development are also mentioned, with 57.9% and 52.8% of respondents acknowledging their presence in their communities. The survey results indicate that skill-based, technology-related, and diverse poverty alleviation programs are prevalent in the studied communities. These programs can potentially contribute to local economic growth, job creation, and improved living standards by equipping individuals with in-demand skills and facilitating self-sufficiency.

Table 3: Percentage analysis of respondents by the type of poverty alleviation programmes in existence

Available programmes	Mentioned	Not mentioned	Total
Cosmetic production	36 (9.6)	339 (90.4)	375 (100.0)
Computer maintenance/repairs	133 (35.5)	242 (64.5)	375 (100.0)
Tailoring/fashion designing	155 (41.3)	220 (58.7)	375 (100.0)
Catering services	150 (40)	225 (60)	375 (100.0)
Barbing/hair	179 (47.7)	196 (52.2)	375 (100.0)
Craft development	198 (52.8)	177 (47.2)	375 (100.0)
Wood work/carpentry	189 (50.4)	186 (49.6)	375 (100.0)
Welding	192 (51.2)	183 (48.8)	375 (100.0)
Vehicle maintenance/repairs	194 (51.7)	181 (48.3)	375 (100.0)
Car spraying/painting	136 (36.3)	239 (63.7)	375 (100.0)
Block molding/masonry	233 (62.7)	142 (37.8)	375 (100.0)
Handset repairs	259 (69.0)	116 (31.0)	375 (100.0)
Shoe making	258 (68.8)	117 (31.2)	375 (100.0)
Polythene technology	163 (43.5)	212 (56.5)	375 (100.0)
Metal works and fabrication	157 (41.9)	218 (58.1)	375 (100.0)
Electronic repairs	165 (44)	210 (56)	375 (100.0)
Plumbing	182 (48.5)	193 (51.5)	375 (100.0)
Photo/video operation	217 (57.9)	158 (42.1)	375 (100.0)
Vulcanizing	69 (18.4)	306 (81.6)	375 (100.0)

Source: Fieldwork, 2023

During the IDI, the availability of poverty alleviation programmes is demonstrated through the response of an employee from the Imo state poverty alleviation agency. The staff member reported being aware of several initiatives, such as cosmetic production and handset repair training, which have been specifically designed to empower individuals from various age groups. The goal of these programmes is to equip participants with valuable skills that will enable them to become self-reliant and financially independent. Her submission is summarized below:

I have learned about various poverty alleviation programs, including cosmetic production, handset repair, and more. These programs are designed to empower individuals of all ages by equipping them with skills that promote self-sufficiency and independence. (*IDI/Staff/Urban/ Imo State Poverty Alleviation Agency*).

An excerpt from the view of a participant of the availability of poverty alleviation programs is transcribed below:

In my community, people from all walks of life, including men and women, as well as the young and elderly, have had the opportunity to access a wide range of poverty alleviation programs. These initiatives have been instrumental in enhancing our community's overall productivity and promoting economic diversification. As a result, we have witnessed a noticeable improvement in income equality among community members to ensure that no one is left behind, these programs have also provided targeted support for the unemployed. Various skill development courses have been organized, offering a platform for individuals to acquire new competencies and enhance their employability. The courses encompass a diverse array of fields, catering for different interests and aptitudes. Consequently, these training programs have played a pivotal role in empowering individuals to secure stable employment and improve their overall well-being. (FGD /Community leader/Owerri).

Test of hypotheses

Hypothesis one

There is no significant relationship between education empowerment and sustainable development. The independent variable in this study is education empowerment while dependent variable is sustainable development. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to test the hypothesis and the result is presented in Table 4

TABLE 4: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient of the relationship between education empowerment and sustainable development

Variable	N	X	SD	r	p-value
Education empowerment		375	17.76	3.92	
				0.621	.000
Sustainable Development		375	14.01	3.31	

*Significant at 0.05, df = 373, r-critical=0.139, $R^2 = 0.386$.

Source; Fieldwork, 2023

The result of the statistical analysis as presented in table 4 indicates that the calculated r-value of 0.621 is greater than the critical p-value at 0.05 level of significance with 373 degree of freedom. This therefore, indicates that there is a significant relationship between education empowerment and sustainable development in Imo state. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is upheld. The result also shows R^2 of 0.386 which indicates that the education empowerment accounted for 38.6 % of the determinants of sustainable development in the study area.

Hypothesis two

There is no significant relationship between economic empowerment and sustainable development. The independent variable in this study is economic empowerment while the dependent variable is sustainable development. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to test the hypothesis and the result is presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient of the relationship between economic empowerment and sustainable development

Variable	N	X	SD	r-cal	p-level
Economic Empowerment	375	16.13	4.13	0.534	.000
Sustainable development	375	14.01	3.31		

*Significant at 0.05, r-critical= 0.139, $R^2 = 0.285$, df 373.

Source; Fieldwork, 2023

The result as presented in Table 5 ($r=0.534, p=.000$) indicated that there is a significant relationship between economic empowerment and sustainable development of Imo State, Nigeria. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected at 0.05 level of significance and the alternative hypothesis was retained. The result also shows R^2 of 0.285 which indicates that the economic empowerment accounted for 28.5 % of the determinants of sustainable development in the study area.

Discussion of findings

The result of hypothesis one shows that there is a significant relationship between education empowerment and sustainable development. The strong correlation between education and sustainable development highlights the importance of prioritizing education in poverty alleviation efforts. The result shows that by investing in quality education for all, governments and policymakers can help break the cycle of poverty, as educated individuals are more likely to have better employment opportunities and higher incomes. The study also reveals that education can empower individuals to develop skills and knowledge that enable them to pursue sustainable livelihoods. This not only helps them escape poverty but also contributes to sustainable development by promoting responsible use of resources and reducing the negative impact on the environment. Education empowerment, particularly for girls and women, can help address gender inequalities that contribute to poverty. By ensuring equal access to education, countries can tap into the potential of their entire population, which can result in economic growth and poverty reduction. The findings of this study are in accordance with previous studies such as Ofei-Manu and Didham, (2014); Eseyin, Okafor and Uchendu, (2014); Banigo, Azeez, and Ezelote, (2017); Ebingha, Eni, and Okpa, 2019; Peter, Okpa, and Okoi, (2020); Accord (2020). These studies highlighted the importance of investing in education as a key strategy for poverty alleviation and sustainable development. By ensuring access to quality education for all, countries can create a more equitable and resilient society, ultimately helping to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development.

The result of hypothesis two shows that there is a significant relationship between the economic empowerment and sustainable development. This result suggests that economic empowerment plays a crucial role in achieving sustainable development and poverty alleviation. The result highlights the need for policy-makers and development practitioners to prioritize economic empowerment initiatives, as they can contribute significantly to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and alleviating poverty. The result also implies that sustainable development can only be achieved through inclusive growth, where all segments of the population benefit from economic progress, and where people are empowered to participate in the economy actively. Similarly, the result underlines the need for social protection programs, such as cash transfers and social safety nets, to support the economically vulnerable populations. These programs can help build resilience and facilitate economic empowerment, contributing to poverty alleviation and sustainable development. The finding of the study is in support of the finding of Akyeampong and Fofack, (2014); Nwakwesiri, (2019); Onebunne, and Ezeaka, (2020); Okpa, Ilupeju, and Eshiotse, (2020); Adeniyi, Eneji, and Okpa, (2019); Okoi, Ogar, Ubi,

Ubi and Okpa, (2022). The significant relationship between economic empowerment and the achievement of Sustainable Development suggests that efforts to alleviate poverty should prioritize initiatives that empower individuals and communities economically.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research findings underscore the integral role of both economic and educational empowerment in sustainable development. Economic empowerment provides the means and resources for individuals and communities to rise above poverty levels, contributing to economic stability and growth. Similarly, educational empowerment fuels innovation, promotes social inclusion, and fosters human capital development, all of which are key pillars of sustainable development. Therefore, for a holistic approach to achieving sustainable development, it is critical to consider and implement strategies that promote both economic and educational empowerment. This multifaceted approach will not only ensure a more balanced and inclusive development, but it will also lay the foundation for a resilient, sustainable future that benefits everyone.

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