



Political Leadership And The Administration Of Rural Development Programmes In Nigeria: The Abia State Experience, 2007-2022

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ABSTRACT

This study undertook a comprehensive assessment of the impact of political leadership on the administration of rural development programmes in Nigeria. Using experiences in Abia state between 2007 and 2022 as a case, the study attempted to determine how the wielders of political power, particularly in the capacity of heads of executive arm of the government, by virtue of the statutory powers conferred on them to make and implement policies, influenced either negatively or positively, the administration of rural development programmes in Nigeria. The prevalence of the deteriorating state of socio-economic condition in Nigeria's rural communities, expressed in the form of excruciating level of poverty and hunger, poor health delivery system, dilapidated level of infrastructural development, etc. prompted the quest for this research work. The scientific investigation into the above problems was guided by four research questions as well as four research objectives. The study was anchored on the elite theory. The study used both the primary and secondary sources to generate data. The findings in this study, among other things, established that lack of political will, poor level of local government autonomy, as well as political/bureaucratic corruption constituted the factors that frustrated the administration of rural development programmes in Abia state, between 2007 and 2022 in particular, and the larger Nigerian state in general. The study therefore recommended among other things, that the Nigerian political leadership should rise up to their constitutional responsibility of providing meaningful socio-economic dividends at the grassroots by exhibiting the core attributes of political will. The core attributes of political will according to this study must consist of transparency, accountability, commitment and elimination of morally-decadent tendencies, both in the political leadership class and in the bureaucratic domain.

Keywords: Bureaucracy, Corruption, Economy, Grassroots Development, Policy, Poverty Reduction

INTRODUCTION

The imperativeness of tackling a country's socio-economic needs from the grassroots is critical to the attainment of a vastly sustainable national development goals. Hence, Ayuba (2015), observes that a well-spread rudimentary approach to the administration of national economic policies and programmes is objectively significant in addressing the complexities of unbalanced development. In a similar opinion, Ogbeni (2017) contends that "any all-encompassing national prosperity in any given nation-state is usually a product of a conscientiously integrated rural developmental achievements" (p. 43). By implication, Ogbeni's position is emphatic about the inevitability of an effectively administered rural development policies and programmes as a prelude to a concrete and sustainably-impacting all-round national growth and

development. In a nutshell, the views expressed above were succinctly but comprehensively enunciated in the postulation of Osarome (2019). Thus:

A prudently conceived national development plan, which central objective is anchored on creating a sustainable socio-economic substance for the betterment of the living standard of the citizenry, must find its initiatives, sprout from the grassroots. The rural setting, ordinarily, should constitute the focal instrument through which the larger society is viewed. In any democratically progressive nation, the state of socio-economic development in rural communities represents a template by which a country's level of socio-economic growth and development is judged. Therefore, a purpose-driven leadership of any sovereign nation state should not underestimate the essentiality of rural development as a core prerequisite for attaining an overall national development milestone. (p. 56)

The last statement in the above excerpt brings to the fore, the crucial role leadership plays in the actualisation of a well-administered socio-economic development initiatives, specifically at the domain of rural development concerns. Unarguably, leadership determines either the positive or negative translation of any administered national development programme. Hence, leadership remains the driving component of administration. It is the fundamental basis for the thriving of any good administration. Accordingly, Mohammed and Ayeni (2018), posited that, while an organisation is the brainchild of administration, the latter cannot be achieved without the ineluctable act of leadership. Therefore, Mohammed and Ayeni (2018), rationalised that leadership constitutes over 80% of what an organisation, be it public or private in nature, requires to exist and function optimally.

At the government cycle, leadership fundamentally entails the act of utilising the privileges of state power, vested in individuals, either through election, appointment, conquest or by inheritance, to transform the will of the state into tangible social good that would benefit the society. The will of the state in this context, consists in all the primary obligations of the state to the citizenry, which underscore its fundamental existence, essence and relevance. Some of the key basic obligations of the state to the citizenry include the security of lives and property of the citizens, provision of social services through job creation and other sundry welfare services to the less privileged class of the society, and the development of basic amenities to improve the living standard of the people. Ideally, these basic social amenities may comprise the provision of public infrastructure like electricity, good road, good pipe-borne water, etc. The responsibility of the state to provide basic amenities to the people may equally involve the creation of public facilities like healthcare, schools, recreational centres, etc. The state responds to the discharge of these fundamental, but lawful responsibilities through its machinery-the government. Operationally, the latter is saddled with the task of initiating various social policies and programmes, and utilising its bureaucratic structures for the purpose of effective implementation (Chukwuezi, 2000; Ugwu, 2009).

Over time, the Nigerian state has been haunted by a high degree of devastating socio-economic development. Such an unpalatable situation is a consequence of the unbalanced nature of socio-economic and infrastructural development that exists as a differential phenomenon between the urban cities and the rural areas. Hence, in the typical Nigerian scenario, the urban setting is mostly distinguished from its rural counterpart on the basis of the disparity in the existence of socio-economic and infrastructural developmental indicators.

The existing incidence of poor administration of rural development policies and programmes in Nigeria is largely marked with high level of unemployment, seasonal employment, low income, extreme poverty, hunger, malnutrition, rapid spread of communicable diseases, low level of social interaction, poor level of infrastructural facilities like healthcare delivery system, access roads, poorly spread electrification projects in rural areas, etc. The existence of high rate of deteriorated road networks in Nigeria's rural communities has, in a very great measure, negatively affected farming activities and other agricultural ventures in Nigeria's rural communities. Such a situation, ultimately, has continued to lead to poverty, low income, hunger and malnutrition at the grassroots in Nigeria. Specifically, Ogbeni (2017) observed that "the problem of poor

level of industrialisation in Nigeria- a trend that is more conspicuously noticeable in rural communities has continued to place people living in rural communities in perpetual financial lack” (p. 84).

In the aspect of administering rural healthcare needs, there is a high degree of dilapidation in rural healthcare providing centres and outlets. This situation is conspicuously indicated in the high incidence of lack of drugs, medical equipment, environmental dilapidation, poor hygiene services and shortage of manpower in healthcare facilities at the grassroots in Nigeria. Hence, Ibong (2019) observes that over 80% of public health centres and clinics located in rural communities in Nigeria lack disease diagnosis instruments, quality drugs and sufficient health manpower. Hence, the high rate of spread in communicable diseases, as well as upsurge in infant/maternal mortality rate in rural communities in Nigeria can mainly be attributed to the alarming level of deterioration in rural healthcare delivery system.

Moreover, there is the apparent lack of comprehensive social welfare services at the grassroots. Accordingly, a meaningful administration of social welfare dividends should have gone a long way to ameliorate the plight of people living at the grassroots. However, in the Nigerian context, the reverse is the case. The inability of government at the various levels to consciously extend a well-meaning social welfare development effort at the grassroots in Nigeria has continued to increase the poverty rate in rural communities, as well as deteriorate all other aspects of the living condition of rural dwellers.

The prevailing incidence of poor administration of rural development programmes in Nigeria has continued to heighten the upsurge in rural-urban migration. Hence, the grossly limited access to socio-economic development indicators like quality healthcare system, good roads, electricity, employment opportunities, food sufficiency, reduction in the level of poverty, etc. in rural communities has continued to constitute a major factor that propel a lot of people in rural areas to relocate to urban areas in search of a better improved living condition. Unfortunately, the high influx of people to urban areas from rural communities in Nigeria has continued to constitute infrastructural challenges in urban areas. Incidentally, over population of urban cities in Nigeria has continued to give rise to housing deficits, unemployment, electric energy crisis, poverty, etc.

The various social problems highlighted above, which are prevalent in rural communities in Nigeria, necessitated the quest for this study. With a view to gathering a set of authentic and reliable data from field work, this study generated four research questions and four research objectives. Hence, it is from the research questionnaires that the researchers hope to elicit questionnaire items for the study.

Therefore, it is in view of the existence and prevalence of these social issues in Nigeria’s rural communities that this study is specifically focusing on the trends in Abia State between 2007 and 2022, to investigate and determine the circumstances surrounding the failure of political leadership in Nigeria to administer sustainable rural development programmes.

Research Questions

- ❖ What is the nature of political leadership in the administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022?
- ❖ What are the factors responsible for the failure of political leadership in the administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022?
- ❖ What are the consequences of poor administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022?
- ❖ What strategies should be adopted to improve the capacity of political leadership to effectively administer rural development programmes in Abia State?

Research Objectives

The Objectives of this study are to:

- ❖ ascertain the nature of political leadership in the administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022.
- ❖ critically investigate the factors responsible for the failure of political leadership to administer rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022.
- ❖ establish the consequences of poor administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022.

- ❖ determine the strategies that should be adopted to improve the capacity of political leadership to effectively administer rural development programmes in Abia State

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the survey design as the guiding plan for the purpose of gathering reliable set of data, proportion and interpret them adequately. The study utilized both the primary and secondary sources of data collection. The questionnaire method was used to generate data from target respondents, on the impact of political leadership in the administration of rural development programmes in Abia State, between 2007 and 2022. On the other hand, data from textbooks, journals, official documents and materials from the internet were used for literature review. The study administered 20 questionnaire items generated from four research questions to 500 respondents on a four-points Likert scale basis, which is structured in the form of: SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, SD=Strongly Disagree and D=Disagree. The 500 respondents were culled from 6 rural communities in 6 local governments of Abia State. The researchers purposively selected 2 local governments each from the 3 senatorial districts in the state. The diagram below provides a clearer analysis. Thus:

SENATORIAL DISTRICT	LOCAL GOVERNMENTS	COMMUNITIES
ABIA CENTRAL	Umuahia South	Omaegwu
	Isiala-Ngwa North	Amuzu
ABIA NORTH	Ohafia	Amaekpu
	Umunneochi	Eluama-Orota
ABIA SOUTH	Ukwa West	Ogwe
	Obingwa	Umuikeaba

The researchers were able to retrieve 400 out of the 500 distributed questionnaires. Thus, the researchers worked with 400 questionnaires. The study used both the quantitative and qualitative method for the interpretation and analysis of data.

Conceptual Review

Political Leadership

The definition of political leadership, by reason of its identifiably unique attributes, fundamentally derives from the original meaning of political science-the latter which is considered as the science that studies activities that are associated with authoritative decision making on the allocation and distribution of resources and other values in a society. Specifically, politics is about the quest to acquire legitimate power in the state in order to wield the power or authority to determine the manner and processes required in the day-to-day official responsibility of acquisition, allocation and distribution of resources and other social benefits in the society. It therefore logically follows that political leadership presupposes a condition where individuals, having already acquired political positions or offices now have the legitimate right and authority to preside over or influence the determination of “who gets what, where and how” in the society (Mohammed & Ayeni, 2018).

In the second to the last line of the above excerpt, the words, ‘preside and influence’ were juxtaposed to explain the differences in the administrative functions of the executive and legislative arms in a democratically elected government. The legislative organ of government influences the allocation and distribution of resources in the state by virtue of the powers vested in it to make laws, propose bills and undertake oversight functions. On the other hand, the executive presides over the allocation and distribution of resources in a society, on account of the exclusive function of public policy implementation constitutionally vested in the executive arm of government.

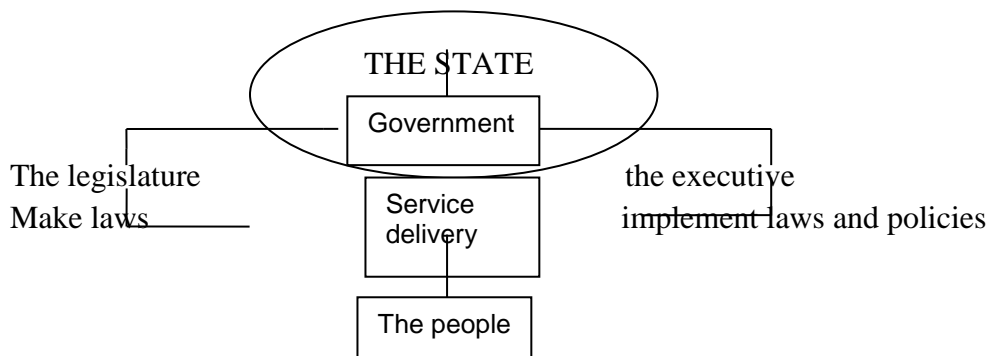
By extension, the definition of political leadership also has its fundamental root in the basic rationale that necessitated state formation. It totally embodies a systemic expression of the will of the people to commit the entirety of their social existence to a handful of either appointed or elected group of persons to govern. The governance of the entirety of the social existence of the people in any given society consists in, but is not restricted to their social, economic, political and external relation concerns. Hence, Ogundiya (2009) posits that:

The cost of political leadership transcends the immediate quest by the holders of political offices to replenish or compensate the processes which aided the acquisition of their political positions; it goes beyond the prompt desperation to gratify the initially-informed desire to vie for elective political offices. Instead, political leadership should entail the prioritisation of the institutionally-enabling fulfilment of the aspirations of the masses-the core reason for which political positions were originally created. Therefore, political leaders are duty-constrained to utilise the privileges of the offices they occupy, as well as the enabling laws to make the state an enabling environment where the masses maximally realise the essence of having a government. (p. 285)

In concurrence with the above position, Abada and Onyia (2020) explain that political leadership entails the lawful responsibility on the part of political leaders to judiciously deliver on the historically established terms of agreement subsumed in the social contract between the people and their representatives at the government leadership cycle. Thus, while the former (the people) willingly surrendered to the supremacy of the latter (the leaders) by way of legitimising their mandate to rule over them, the latter are expected to fulfil their own side of the bargain by using the authority conferred on them to distribute the resources of the state for the fair, equitable and just benefit of the people. Beyond the responsibility of authoritatively distributing the resources of the state to the masses, Abada and Onyia also maintain that the terms of the social contract between the people and their leaders in government include the provision of adequate security for the maximum safety of the people against physical and economic threat. In addition, Akinyetun (2020) emphasises that political leadership involves a situation where government functionaries exploit statutory laws and powers to ensure that social justice translates into the provision and distribution of social benefits in a state. Also, in corroboration to the above definition, Audu (2018), posits that:

political leadership involves a process where a person or group of persons are elected through a democratic voting process, either as heads of executive of the various tiers of government or representatives at the legislative level, and equipped with constitutional powers and authority to make laws, initiate public policies and programmes, and develop institutional mechanisms to implement them for the provision of social services to the people. (p. 15)

Furthermore, a diagram was developed by the author of the above definition to illustrate the pattern of intergovernmental relation among the two levels of government (the executive and the legislature) in the political leadership of a country. Thus:



Source: Audu (2018, p. 16).

Analytically, the diagram above elaborately illustrates the state as the forum which accommodates the government, the masses (the people) and all other administrative functions that exist in it. The second in the diagrammatical illustration is the “government” which is represented as the machinery through which the will of the state is realised. Flanked by the left and right of the part of the illustration that bears the “government” are the legislative and the executive arms of government which are saddled with the constitutional responsibilities of making and implementing laws respectively. The box beneath the “government” which has arrows directed at it from both the “legislature and the “executive”, contains “service delivery”. Hence, service delivery summarily represents the will of the state which the government as an institution of the state was primarily created to actualise, through its organs, the legislature and the executive. The last illustration in the diagram captures “the people”-the latter for whom state governing laws and policies are made, and who are also the beneficiaries of the various social services rendered in the state.

Beyond the sphere of providing social services to the citizenry of a state, political leadership according to Carpenter (2000), also entails a process in a democratic system of government, where a body of persons are elected to ensure strict compliance by citizens, with the rules and regulations that govern the social relational existence of the society. To this end, Amao (2011) informs that political leadership entails a democratic process where people with the right leadership skills, intellect, values and ethical morals are elected into political positions to govern, through the implementation of social dividends to the people and also to regulate the socio-economic relations in the state.

In the light of the explanations provided above on the concept of political leadership, this study reliably states that political leadership fundamentally involves the legitimate use of political authority by individuals, obtained through election, under a democratic process, to allocate state resources and to implement other aspects of regulatory laws and policies within a geographically defined jurisdiction.

Administration of Rural Development Programmes

The understanding of the above concept (administration of rural development programmes) is fundamentally subsumed in the process of public policy making and implementation. To elucidate further, rural development programmes constitute an integral part of the larger national development policies and programmes. Hence, the operationalisation of the concept of rural development programme administration is unequivocally excised from what public policy implementation represents and portrays, both in principle and in practice. To this end, since public policy implementation fundamentally denotes the art of transforming public policy statements or intentions of government into tangible goal realisation to address social issues, through the creation and utilisation of actionable activities, therefore, the administration of rural development programmes simply involves the process of carrying out or dispensing some aspects of the broader national development policies, schemes and initiatives at the grassroots (Nwankwo, 2009 ; Orluwene, 2015).

Comprehensively, Orluwene (2015) and Akindele (2016) rationalise that the administration of rural development programmes represents an effort that is aimed at bringing the presence of the government to the grassroots, in terms of equitability and uniformity in the dispensation and delivery of national socio-economic needs. According to these authors, administration of rural development programmes also emphasises the deliberate integration of the rural areas into the mainstream national developmental strides. Specifically, Akindele (2016) informs that “administration of rural development programme consists of a holistic effort initiated by the government, to commit part of what is contained in the comprehensive national development plan, to address the myriad of socio-economic challenges in rural communities” (p.42).

In line with the above, Ogbeni (2017) provided a detailed overview of what the administration of rural development programme implies. Thus:

Administration of Rural Development Programmes is an integrated development initiative which represents an offshoot of the broader national development plan of any country, most especially developing countries where there exists, majority of rural settings. It is fundamentally intended to create and establish institutional mechanisms, approaches and strategies that would be instrumental to the deliberate execution of rural development policies. These policies could be either social or economic in nature, and may include: healthcare, education, agricultural

development, local industrialisation, employment generation schemes, social welfare, etc. (p.91)

The above elaborate definition by Ogbeni (2017), harps emphatically on the indispensable role of enabling laws and institutions in the administration of rural development programmes. Accordingly, these laws and the institutions in which they exist and function are administered by government personnel who are either elected as political office holders or who function within the bureaucratic domain of the public service. The latter (the bureaucrats) constitute the body of manpower, operating within an institutional framework, who activate and bring into fruition, the various mechanisms and strategies, established and authoritatively sanctioned by the former, (political office holders). Hence, Ogbeni (2017) clarifies that the same template applies in the administration of rural development policies.

In the opinion of Ayuba (2015),

administration of rural development programmes involves a deliberate step by the government to convert the wishes, aspirations, as well as the problems of the rural people into policies. Subsequently, various activities are created, with the provision of sufficient human, material and financial resources, and also backed by statutory laws to bring to actualisation, the several development policies in the form of project executions. (p. 23)

The above clarification by Ayuba (2015), on the concept of administration of rural development programmes is summarily descriptive of the fact that the existence of peculiar social needs of local people in rural communities invariably prompt the initiation of potentially sound development policies by the political leadership class, as well as the political will to commit resources (financial, human, material and legal), to realise.

To further reinforce the above established position, Onyeiwu (2021) asserts that the administration of rural development programmes entails “a lawfully binding resolve by the government to lift the teeming rural populace out of poverty and underdevelopment through the formulation of policies and creation of strategies and schemes to implement them” (p. 12). Also, similar to this definition, Esohen (2018) posits that the administration of rural development programmes “means a concerted effort by the government to improve the standard of living of people at the grassroots by embarking on the design of appropriate policies and effective mechanisms and strategies to implement them” (p. 52).

Therefore, on the strength of the insight gained from the various definitions and clarifications tendered above by different authors, this study submits that the administration of rural development programmes emphatically entails a statutory obligation on the part of the government to better the life of people living at the grassroots by authoritatively allocating sufficient human, financial, legal and material resources for the execution of developmental projects.

A Critical Evaluation of the Administration of Some Select Rural Development Programmes in Nigeria.

Directorate of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI)

This was a rural development programme, conceived and promulgated in 1986 under Decree No 4 of 1987 by Gen. Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida-the then Nigeria Head of State. The decree establishing the creation of this commission defined its organisational structures. These structures include: Rural Development Council, State Directorate of Rural Development and Monitoring Services, and Zonal Directors.

According to Osarome (2019), the DFRRI scheme was commissioned to perform the following functions:

- i. To adopt a massive approach to the identification and construction of feeder-road network in rural communities across the country, with a view to facilitating realisation of the nation’s prospect of food sufficiency.
- ii. To embark on a widespread national approach to the provision of safe and portable drinking water in rural communities. This is expected to be achieved with the full consent and participation of the local people and local government personnel so as to guarantee the maintenance and security of cited rural infrastructural facilities.

- iii. To encourage initiatives, support and sponsorship from the private sector, international organisations and multi-national corporations aimed at providing rural developmental projects and improving the overall living standard of the rural people.
- iv. To enlist the involvement and responsibility of rural area leaders and representatives towards sensitising the members of the local community to articulate, prioritise and present their developmental needs for the prompt and decisive attention of the government.
- v. To engage, through the services of sub-boards and agencies of DFRRI, the continuous supervision of ongoing rural development activities
- vi. To determine an efficient and accurate system of financial disbursement to rural communities.
- vii. To develop a strong system of feedback mechanism for the effective evaluation of the impact of the various rural development projects executed, or in the process of execution by DFRRI.

The DFRRI project recorded some rural development milestone in Nigeria, especially in the area of rural road construction. According to Ahmed et al (2021), “DFRRI provided basic amenities of modern living and developed rural access roads to connect rural-rural communities, rural-urban centres and farmers to the markets” (p. 88). To justify the above assertion, Akindele (2016) informed that as at 1989, the DFRRI project led to the award and subsequent completion of a total of 57,074.78-kilometre feeder roads across Nigeria. Thus, that had greatly enhanced a faster pace of socio-economic development of the rural dwellers in Nigeria by linking villages and communities in remote parts of most local governments. According to Akindele, that had enormously aided the easy movement of farmers and their farm produce from one locality to the other, through the use of vehicles and motorcycles.

However, according to Ahmed et al (2021), the overall achievement of DFRRI was infinitesimal when compared to the enormity of developmental objectives the commission originally set out to accomplish. In the opinion of Ayoola (2001), the inability of DFRRI to maximally accomplish most of its set out goals can be attributable to:

- i. Inherent flaws and deficiencies in implementation plan and strategies. This, according to Ayoola includes: low level of community involvement in decision making process, faulty process of need identification, assessment, articulation and prioritisation, inadequate funding, poor mobilisation and coordination of human, material and financial resources for the execution of the myriad of rural projects in various rural communities, poor feedback mechanism, and poor coverage network of the programme.
- ii. Elitist influence and usurpation
- iii. Lack of political will, with regards to project execution
- iv. Political/bureaucratic corruption.

Better Life Programme for African Rural Women

This was a scheme initiated and launched in 1987 by late Maryam Babangida, the wife of Nigeria’s former military Head of State. Mrs. Babangida’s foresight in conceiving the programme was prompted by her desire to actualise her age-long ambition of achieving gender equity, women empowerment and the elimination of illiteracy and ignorance among women. The project initiator’s specific terms of economic viability, access to quality healthcare, education, skill acquisition and essential aspects of socio-political information. The initiation of the scheme was borne out of the realisation that the life of an average rural woman in Nigeria and Africa as well, revolved around unmechanised farming activities (Ahmed et al, 2021).

According to Azudinobi (2020), the specific objectives of the scheme include:

- i. The provision of income-generating opportunities through elaborate programmes in agriculture, entrepreneurial skills like bag making, hair dressing, dress making and other forms of commercial activities.
- ii. The reduction to the barest minimum, incidences of maternal and child mortality rate in rural communities throughout the country, with increased emphasis on improved healthcare delivery system
- iii. To introduce a sustained administration of social welfare packages for rural women throughout the country.
- iv. The push for the integration of rural women into national development plans.

However, the programme was severely criticised on account of its implementation flaws. First, the provision of funds for the execution of the various projects of the Better Life Programme was usually delayed or never made available. Besides that, there was no institutionalised mechanism to ensure proper accountability for funds released for the execution of projects. Hence, the fact that the funds meant for the execution of projects initiated by the BLP were not captured in government's annual financial spending plan was enough reason to cast doubts on the transparency and accountability status of the programme.

A Critical Review of the Administration of Rural Development Programmes in Abia State, 2007-2022.

The Administration of Gov. Theodore Ahomefulu Orji of Abia State was formally inaugurated on May 29, 2007. In his inauguration speech, the newly-sworn in Governor promised among other things, to strengthen the economy of the state by concentrating on revitalising the agricultural and local manufacturing sectors. To realise these laudable objectives, Gov. Orji impressed that specific emphasis and actions should be directed towards rural infrastructural development. Hence, the needed manpower for the execution of the large-scale agricultural project and also potential talents in creative skills were mostly found in rural communities. Therefore, in order to maximize the full gains, inherent in rural economic potentials, Gov. Orji said that it was expedient to improve the living condition of rural dwellers through the provision of quality and sustainable capital and basic infrastructure like quality healthcare system, basic education, feeder road construction, rural electrification and pipe-borne water. The governor further informed that, in addition to conceiving new rural development initiatives, his administration will not discountenance the need to continue with, and complete existing rural development projects initiated by past administration in the state (Ibezim, 2012).

Governor Theodore Orji embarked on his rural development efforts through massive investment in youth empowerment. According to the governor, such initiative was aimed at meaningfully engaging youths, especially those in rural areas to become responsible citizens by becoming economically useful to themselves, their communities, the state and Nigeria at large and not constituting nuisance to the society. On the strength of that, the governor vowed to empower over 20 thousand idle Abia youths, most of whom are located in rural communities in his first batch A and B empowerment programmes in the areas of skill acquisition, formal education and transport. Specifically on March 12, 2012, the governor distributed a total number of 250 tricycles to the beneficiaries of the then on-going youth empowerment scheme of the Abia state government. Also, on April 24, 2013, the governor distributed 202 branded transport vehicles to the beneficiaries of youth empowerment programme. All those occasions were eventful and historic, and separately took place at the Michael Okpara auditorium in Umuahia, the state capital (Uzodinma, 2013).

However, grave criticisms greeted the youth empowerment programme as initiated and executed by Chief Theodore Orji during his second tenure as the democratically elected governor of Abia state. The critics based their argument on the grounds that the administration of the programme was not a reflection of grassroots development-the latter which purportedly formed the basis on which the youth empowerment scheme was initiated (Ikedirim, 2018). An empirical study carried out by Ekeji (2019) revealed that the random sampling interview conducted among youths selected from communities drawn from the three senatorial districts of the state, indicated that majority of the respondents were of the opinion that the beneficiaries of the free tricycles and transport vehicles donated by the state government did not reflect the names initially compiled at the village and community level. According to Ekeji (2019), the selection process initiated at the grassroots that determined qualification to be a beneficiary of the youth empowerment scheme was fraudulently manipulated by government functionaries from the two Ministries of Youth Development and Rural Development, hence, the names generated from rural communities were dumped in preference for names obtained from dubious sources.

The rural development agenda of Dr. Okezie Ikpeazu after assuming office as the democratically elected governor of Abia state in 2015, was contained in his pre-election campaign slogan, "Okezuo Abia". The word, "Okezuo" was derived from the governor's first name, "Okezie", hence, the English language translation of "Okezuo Abia" means: "let the dividends of good governance spread to all the nooks and crannies of Abia state. While delivering his inaugural speech on the 29th of May, 2015, the Governor emphasised that his administration's desire to spread development to other rural communities that make up Abia state was borne out of the need and desire to decongest the Aba metropolis. He blamed the over-

flooding degree of youths from rural communities in Abia to the Aba metropolis on the seemingly low level of infrastructural amenities, trading opportunities, as well as big and small-scale manufacturing industries. Thus, existence of these indicators of economic development in Aba and their absence or dearth in rural communities would always propel the desire among youths, to relocate to the Aba mega city. According to Gov. Ikpeazu, while his administration will place premium on the importance of greatly enhancing the rehabilitation of Aba's infrastructural needs, especially in the areas of road infrastructure and power supply, there was a pressing need to diversify the existing economic potentials in Aba to other rural communities in the state with a view to making Abia significantly great in Nigeria's economy. In his words, "the time is ripe to use the over 110, 000 shoe makers and 50,000 garment makers, majority of who are potentially spread across the remotest parts of Abia as a launching pad to enable Abia to truly become the undisputed SME capital of Nigeria" (Obiagu, 2015).

Basically, the Governor Okezie Ikpeazu-led administration in 2016 kick-started the Abia state rural industrialisation initiative with massive investment in palm production. Fundamentally, it was the prospect of the Ikpeazu administration to comprehensively rehabilitate the moribund Abia palm company limited located in Ohambele community in Ukwa east local government. The Abia state government was determined to use the rehabilitation of the Abia palm company in Ohambele as a foothold on which it could conveniently embark on the diversification of the palm production project to other rural communities in Abia state. To achieve this, the Abia state government under Gov. Ikpeazu's administration targeted the procurement of 10,000 hectares of land in the 17 local governments of the state, with the prospect of developing up to 7.5 million seedlings between 2016 and 2019. Towards the last quarter of 2016, the state government had procured up to 4,500 hectares of land in Ahiaba Umueze community in Osisioma local government, Owaza community in Ukwa west local government and Ohambele in Ukwa east local government. During an official visit by the governor at the Ahiaba Umueze palm project site on November 5, 2016, it was reported by news men that up to 1.5 million nuts had been planted and were already at the nursery stage. It was also reported that each of the seedlings was procured at a unit rate of N350 and it was projected that within a space of one year, it would make a financial return of up to N700 million.

The former commissioner of agriculture in the state, Hon. Uzo Azubuike who accompanied the state governor on the visit, explained to newsmen that while embarking on the project, the state government under Ikpeazu envisioned a boost in employment opportunities, sustainable income earning for rural dwellers through the maximum utilisation of rural farmers and also, a veritable source of income generation for the state through local and international trade channels. The commissioner further informed that with the establishment of the palm production project in Abia rural communities, the state government hoped to gainfully employ more than 5000 youths from different rural communities throughout the state. Hon. Azubuike further explained that the state government's promise of massive employment of youths in rural communities, rests on its avowed commitment towards ensuring that each rural community in the state gets a palm processing mill (Elendu, 2016).

However, a field work on the evaluation of the rehabilitation of Abia palm under Ikpeazu's administration, embarked upon by Uwalaka (2021) revealed that the huge promises in 2016 by the Ikpeazu administration to rehabilitate Abia palm has remained a mere political statement, devoid of any concrete but determined action. Uwalaka in his report, reminisced on the thriving status of the Abia palm project in Ohambele community in the 90s during the military era. Uwalaka's report reckoned that in those years, the management of the Abia palm project in Ohambele was by the World Bank, with Mr. Hubrace as the Managing Director. According to Uwalaka, in those years when the World Bank managed the Abia palm limited, the project was raking in between 25,000,000 to 30,000,000 annually to the Abia state government's purse as dividends, aside the sundry local government taxes, community levies and royalties. In addition, Uwalaka reported that the presence of the palm oil company in Ohambele community had attracted the establishment of a community bank in that community, as well as an averagely equipped community clinic. Again, Uwalaka further reported that the Abia palm company in Ohambele had over 1000 employees in its payroll-a staff strength which gulped up to 10-12 million naira monthly as salaries and allowances. The report also added that close to 70% of the company's workforce was from the host

communities and its neighbours which this time, comprised the entire two local governments of Ukwá east and Ukwá west.

Unfortunately, Uwalaka in his report affirmed that the Abia state palm limited in Ohambele when visited in 2021 was a shadow of its past, despite the lofty and throat-watering promises of the present Okezie Ikpeazu-led administration in 2016 to commit resources to revamp the moribund palm-oil company in Ohambele. Uwalaka's finding confirms that the administrative headquarters of the company located near the palace of HRH Eze Obioma Nnadede, which used to be a beehive of activities was deserted, and the whole building covered with lawns of weeds and grasses. Uwalaka identified administrative lacuna, inconsistencies and defect as one of the major factors responsible for the downturn, in the fortunes of the palm-oil company located in Ohambele community. For instance, Uwalaka revealed that within a space of 16 years, between 1999 and 2015, the services of over 10 firms have been employed to manage Abia palm. Undoubtedly, these various firms have over time, approached the management of the palm-oil production project with inconsistencies in operational policies and strategies. Sometimes, according to Uwalaka, the application of some of these varying strategies and policies to the day-to-day administration of the project come with it, some dints of incompetence.

Theoretical Framework

The elite theory as historically propounded by two renowned social scientists, Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) and Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941), was established on the philosophy of social stratification. In response to such a social condition, the society is stratified into two strata, (the lower stratum and the upper stratum). Essentially, while the lower stratum shall consist of common men like the poor and the working class, the upper stratum shall comprise the rich (the elite). The upper stratum, though made up of small fraction of a society's entire population, consists of men and women of notably high socio-economic pedigree, who by virtue of their ability to dictate the social formation and existential characteristics of a society, dominate the lower stratum-the latter which consists of the larger population (Akindele, 2016).

Fundamentally, the elite theory as conceived in the field of political science and sociology exists to explain the impact of class relations in the exercise of state power, over the management and distribution of a society's resources. The elite theory in its characteristic nature is idealistically opposed to pluralism while it embraces social segregation. The theory is primarily built on the assumption and belief that a small minority in the society possesses the required capacity and competence to conceive socio-economic development plans and determine the criteria and processes for the distribution of a society's collective social good and benefits. Elitism, as conceived by Wright Mills in 1956 represents a triumvirate composition of power groups which consists of wielders of political, economic and military resources. In a capitalist arrangement, the interest of the elites is preferentially considered and protected in the course of national economic policies conception and social rules initiation and regulation (Volpe, 2021).

Accordingly, Azudinobi (2020), identifies some major attributes of the elite theory and how they apply to governance in the typical Nigerian political system and they include:

- i. Dominance of the majority by the minority in all aspects of state's governance.
- ii. Primitive accumulation of the scarce resources of the state, as well as the maximum control over the means of production and distribution of all aspects of socio-economic resources of the state by members of the ruling class and their cronies.
- iii. Imperialistic control and manipulation of the bureaucracy and other aspects of the state's security architecture for the exclusive benefit of the members of the ruling class and their cronies.
- iv. Deliberate creation and sustenance of socio-economic class differences between the ruling class and the masses through acts of deliberate economic impoverishment and social injustice.
- v. Prejudiced and discriminatorily-informed pattern of socio-economic and infrastructural development among the various sections of the society.
- vi. The creation and perpetuation of the wide infrastructural development difference between urban areas and rural community settings.

The bulk of the reviewed literature on the administration of rural development programmes in Abia state-the latter which is the study focus, reveals the demonstration of influences of elitism by the political

leadership class in the state, in the course of implementing rural development programmes. Poor utilisation of rural community members in the course of rural development implementation plans, politicisation and ethnicisation of the distribution of rural development benefits among the various rural communities in the state, exhibition of acts of corruption by government functionaries in the course of programmes implementation and the unwholesome collaboration between government functionaries and traditional rulers, in the exclusive accumulation, appropriation and retention of rural welfare programme packages are explicitly demonstrative of elitist inclination and interest. Thus, elitist theory is relevant to this study as it aptly describes the unfair and unjust administrative demeanour of political office holders with regards to administering rural development in Nigeria.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

What is the nature of political leadership in the administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022?

The researcher raised four questionnaire items to help generate responses on the subject matter.

Descriptive statistics on the nature of political leadership in the administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022

n = 400

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	MEAN	DECISION
1	The Abia State government fully involved stakeholders at the grassroots in the course of development plan initiation, prioritisation and implementation between 2007 and 2022.	58 (232)	87 (261)	105 (210)	150 (150)	2.13	Rejected
2	Political leadership in Abia State exhibited fairness, justice and equity in the distribution of the benefits of rural development programmes throughout rural communities in Abia State between 2007 and 2022.	33 (132)	56 (168)	101 (202)	210 (210)	2.11	Rejected
3	The Abia State government between 2007 and 2022 initiated and implemented rural development programmes that reflected the actual needs of the rural people	23 (92)	33 (66)	148 (296)	196 (196)	1.62	Rejected
4	The administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022 enjoyed continuity and sustainability	12 (48)	29 (87)	189 (378)	170 (170)	1.70	Rejected

Source: Field study, 2022

Table 4.11 above reveals respondents' responses to issues bordering on political leadership in the administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022. Data proves that respondents rejected research questionnaire item numbers, 1,2, 3 and 4 respectively with mean frequencies of 2.13, 2.11, 1.62 and 1.70, all of which are below the criterion mean standard of 2.50 and therefore stand rejected accordingly. What this means is that the Abia State government sidelined key stakeholders at the grassroots in the course of development plan initiation, prioritisation and implementation and also the government and some of its officers did not exhibit fairness, justice and equity in the distribution of the benefits of rural development programmes throughout rural communities in Abia State.

What are the factors responsible for the failure of political leadership to effectively administer rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022?

Descriptive statistics on the factors responsible for the failure of political leadership to effectively administer rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022.

n = 400							
S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	MEAN	DECISION
5	Inadequate Planning	149 (596)	198 (594)	28 (56)	25 (25)	3.17	Accepted
6	Lack of political will	183 (732)	147 (441)	25 (50)	45 (45)	3.17	Accepted
7	Political/bureaucratic corruption	187 (748)	158 (474)	21 (42)	34 (34)	3.24	Accepted
8	Poor level of local government autonomy	179 (716)	187 (567)	13 (26)	21 (21)	3.32	Accepted
9	Corrupt and unpatriotic attitude of local government functionaries and traditional rulers.	165 (660)	121 (363)	55 (110)	59 (59)	2.98	Accepted

Source: Field study, 2022

above depicts respondent's responses on the factors responsible for the failure of political leadership to effectively administer rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022. The table shows that respondents agreed on research questionnaire items' numbers 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 with mean frequencies of 3.17, 3.17, 3.24, 3.32 and 2.98 all of which are above the 2.50 criterion mean standard and therefore stand accepted. The respondents' responses as agreed proves that inadequate planning, lack of political will, political corruption and unpatriotic attitude of government workers were responsible for the failure of rural development administration at the grassroots in Abia state.

What are the consequences of poor administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022?

The researcher raised six questionnaire items to help generate responses on the subject matter are presented in the table below.

Descriptive statistics on the consequences of poor administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022?

n = 400							
S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	MEAN	DECISION
10	High level of basic infrastructural deficits in rural areas	187 (748)	159 (477)	21 (42)	33 (33)	3.25	Accepted
11	High level of unemployment in rural communities.	171 (684)	147 (441)	25 (50)	57 (57)	3.08	Accepted
12	High rate of poverty and hunger in rural communities in Abia State.	157 (628)	171 (513)	25 (50)	47 (47)	3.09	Accepted
13	Poor level of entrepreneurship in rural communities.	187 (748)	111 (222)	44 (88)	58 (58)	2.79	Accepted
14	High rate of rural-urban migration.	183 (732)	147 (441)	25 (50)	45 (45)	3.17	Accepted
15	The high rate of rural-urban migration in Abia state did not constitute infrastructural challenges in urban areas between 2007 and 2022.	51 (204)	78 (234)	124 (248)	147 (147)	2.08	Rejected

Source: Field study, 2022

above depicts respondent's responses on the consequences of poor administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022. The table above shows that respondents agreed on research questionnaire items' numbers 10-14 but rejected item number 15 with a mean frequency of 2.08 which is below the criterion mean standard. The respondents' responses as agreed proves that the following are the consequences of poor administration of rural development in Abia state with high level of infrastructural deficits in rural areas having a mean score of 3.25; high level of unemployment in rural communities having a mean score of 3.08; poor level of entrepreneurship in rural areas receiving a mean score of 2.79; high rate of rural-urban migration having a mean score of 3.17 and high rate of poverty and hunger in rural communities in Abia state getting a mean score of 3.09. Also, with the purported claim that rural-urban migration in Abia state does not constitute developmental challenges in urban areas getting a mean score of 2.08 suggests that majority of the respondents were opposed to the claim- a position which implies that rural-urban migration in Abia state actually constitutes developmental challenges in urban areas.

What strategies should be adopted to improve the capacity of political leadership to effectively administer rural development programmes in Abia State?

Descriptive statistics on the strategies should be adopted to improve the capacity of political leadership to effectively administer rural development programmes in Abia State.

n = 400

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	MEAN	DECISION
16	Political leaders should be made to be accountable, responsible and responsive with regards to the delivery of social services at the grassroots.	145 (580)	121 (363)	51 (102)	83 (83)	2.82	Accepted
17	Political leaders should encourage the integration and participation of the rural people in rural policy initiation and development plans implementation.	172 (688)	102 (306)	56 (112)	70 (70)	2.94	Accepted
18	The political leadership in Abia State should revamp the institutional capacity of the bureaucracy to make it more responsive, responsible, transparent and accountable.	135 (540)	129 (387)	59 (118)	77 (77)	2.80	Accepted
19	Improvement in local government autonomy should be greatly emphasized.	147 (588)	174 (522)	45 (90)	34 (34)	3.08	Accepted
20	The political mandate of incompetent political office holders should be periodically reviewed through the democratic voting process.	128 (512)	163 (498)	25 (50)	84 (84)	2.86	Accepted

Source: Field study, 2022

Above table shows respondents' responses on strategies that should be adopted to improve the capacity of political leadership to effectively administer rural development programmes in Abia State. With all frequencies above the 2.50 criterion mean standard, respondents accepted items 16-20 which states that the political leadership in Abia State should revamp the institutional capacity of the bureaucracy to make it more responsive, responsible, transparent and accountable; improvement in local government autonomy should be

greatly emphasised and political leaders should be made to be accountable, responsible and responsive with regards to the delivery of social services at the grassroots. Also, periodic elections should serve as veritable instruments in any democratic society, aimed at replacing the governments of political office holders who are not administratively responsive, especially with regards to carrying out developmental programmes and projects at the grassroots. Invariably, all of the above constitute strategies which could help the government succeed in rural development programmes.

Some Major Findings in the Study

- ❖ Political leadership in Abia State, between 2007 and 2022 failed to fully integrate the participation of stakeholders at the grassroots in the course of rural development policy/plan initiation, project prioritisation and implementation. Hence, majority of the rural development policies and programmes executed in the state within the period under study did not reflect the actual needs of people at the grassroots. Accordingly, this situation depicts experiences in the larger Nigerian society.
- ❖ Inadequate planning, lack of political will, political/bureaucratic corruption, poor local government autonomy and the unpatriotic activities of corrupt traditional rulers were the factors that impinged on the realisation of an effective administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022. This also reflects experiences in the larger Nigerian society.
- ❖ Poor administration of rural development programmes in Abia State between 2007 and 2022 gave rise to a hike in the level of unemployment, high rate of poverty and hunger, poor level of entrepreneurship in rural communities and the overall high rate of rural-urban migration.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

The deteriorating and pitiable condition of socio-economic development of rural communities in Nigeria have extensively demonstrated the extent of failure of the political leadership in Nigeria to effectively utilise the mandate vested in them to improve the living condition of people living at the grassroots. The experiences in Abia state between 2007 and 2022-the latter which is the centre-piece of this study showcases a similar characterisation of a general Nigerian outlook. Supposedly, it is the constitutional responsibility imposed on the political leadership class, especially in a democratic environment to dispense equitably, the common wealth of the nation in terms of service delivery to all manner of persons, irrespective of social standing, region or geographical location. On the other hand, it is supposed to be the inalienable socio-economic right of citizens, regardless of their geographical designation to have equal and fair claim to the distribution of social services in the state. However, on the basis of the bulk of literature reviewed in the course of this study, as well as the findings from fieldwork, it is obvious that the rural areas which form part of the larger society have over time, been unduly shortchanged in the delivery of socio-economic benefits of the state.

Based on the findings in this study, the political leadership in Abia state, as well as in the entire Nigerian state embarked on the administration of various rural development programmes. Fundamentally, the various rural development programmes in Nigeria consist of series of activities purposefully designed to strategically implement the various initiated rural development policies. This, by design is primarily aimed at alleviating the plight of people living at the grassroots. The various rural policies anchor around food production to tackle hunger, health delivery, rural roads construction, poverty reduction and income generation, etc. It was discovered, in the course of the study that the realisation of these objectives was compromised by obvious implementation oddities. The presence of these administrative foibles was manifest in the form of implementation plan inadequacies, tendencies of corruption on the part of political office holders and their allies in the bureaucratic domain as well as on the part of local government functionaries and traditional rulers, and the subsisting poor level of local government autonomy. It is instructive to unequivocally impress here that the exhibition of the various administrative anomalies which featured dominantly in the administration of the various rural development programmes as appraised in this study could only thrive on the threshold of the lack of political will on the part of the Nigerian political leadership class. Normally, it should be incumbent on the holder of political power, most especially at the

realm of the executive arm of government to utilise the instrument of authority to ensure a near absence of the inadequacies mentioned above.

Therefore, this study is unequivocally stating here that unless the political leaders in Nigeria rise up to the occasion by maximising the fundamental and core essence of the political mandate bestowed on them, the decadent state of socio-economic development in Nigeria's rural communities will remain unimproved.

The occupiers of political positions, especially in the domain of the executive arm, in the course of authoritatively allocating state resources should be made to be responsible, accountable and responsive to people at the grassroots, bearing in mind that they constitute part of the people from where they (the members of the political leadership class) derived their mandate.

There should be a maximum utilisation of the principle of political will on the part of the political leadership in Abia state and Nigeria in general, in the aspect of disbursement of sufficient financial, human and material resources for the successful implementation of the various rural development policies and programmes. Political will in this context should be significant in the aspect of rolling out effective and qualitative implementation plan strategies with the maximum incorporation and utilisation of rural community stakeholders, as well as the granting of adequate autonomy to the local government.

Again, since the bureaucracy is the instrument through which the government executes its policies and programmes, it should be paramount on the holders of political offices to ensure that the bureaucracy comprise civil/public servants who have the competence to deliver. The political leadership should also ensure that the bureaucratic structure should consist of civil/public servants with high moral standing. This can be maximally achieved through training, re-orientation, staff motivation and discipline.

The electorate in rural communities in Abia state in particular and Nigeria in general should periodically appraise the performances of political leaders' vis-à-vis the administration of rural development programmes, through the democratic voting process. By implication, periodic elections should be adequately weaponised, to prevent incompetent individuals from aspiring to political leadership positions.

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