

**EVALUATING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN EMPOWERMENT
PROGRAMS AND AWARENESS LEVELS IN OGBIA LGA****¹Okafor, Chiamaka Faith Nnenna and ²Johnson, Michael Thomas Andrew**¹Department of Public Administration, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria²School of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, United Kingdom

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Abstract

Youth empowerment has emerged as a critical component of sustainable development, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where young people represent a significant proportion of the population. In Nigeria, various governmental and non-governmental initiatives have been implemented to address youth unemployment, enhance skills acquisition, and promote entrepreneurship. These programmes aim to equip young people with the necessary competencies to contribute meaningfully to economic growth while reducing social challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and crime.

In Bayelsa State, several youth-focused initiatives, including the Bayelsa Youth Empowerment Scheme (BYES), Enterprise for Youth in Agriculture (EYiA), and vocational training programmes, have been introduced to enhance employability and entrepreneurial capacity among youths. These initiatives are designed to support engagement in key sectors such as agriculture, information and communication technology (ICT), and small-scale enterprise development. Despite the existence of these programmes, questions remain regarding the level of awareness among youths and their actual access to such empowerment opportunities.

This study examines the extent of youth awareness and access to empowerment initiatives in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. It also explores the effectiveness of information dissemination channels and identifies barriers limiting youth participation in these programmes. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing the impact of empowerment schemes and improving policy implementation strategies.

Findings from this study are expected to provide insights into how empowerment initiatives are perceived and accessed by youths at the grassroots level. The study further highlights the need for improved communication strategies, inclusive programme design, and stronger institutional support to enhance youth participation in empowerment initiatives. Ultimately, enhancing awareness and access to such programmes is vital for promoting youth development, reducing unemployment, and fostering sustainable socio-economic growth in the region.

Keywords: Youth Empowerment; Awareness; Access to Programs; Unemployment; Sustainable Development

Introduction

Youth empowerment has become a cornerstone of sustainable development discourse, especially in sub-Saharan Africa where young people constitute the largest demographic block (UNDP, 2023). In Nigeria, the government and development partners have introduced various empowerment initiatives—ranging from vocational skills acquisition to entrepreneurial funding schemes—with the aim of reducing unemployment, fostering innovation, and curbing social vices among youths (Nwogu & Ogwunte, 2021; Amah & Ibok, 2022). In Bayelsa State, initiatives such

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as the Bayelsa Youth Empowerment Scheme (BYES), Enterprise for Youth in Agriculture (EYiA), and several vocational training programmes are designed to prepare young people for productive engagement in sectors like agriculture, ICT, and small business development (Leadership, 2023; Bayelsa MOYD, 2024). These programmes underscore the growing recognition that empowering youths is essential not only for individual livelihoods but also for community stability and regional development.

Despite these investments, a persistent concern is whether youths are sufficiently aware of these programmes and can practically access them. Studies have highlighted that lack of awareness, poor dissemination of information, and bureaucratic bottlenecks often limit youth participation in empowerment initiatives across Nigeria (Okoye, 2020; Adegbite & Bello, 2022). Barriers such as limited infrastructure, rural marginalisation, and political clientelism further complicate access, leaving many young people either excluded or discouraged from engaging with available opportunities (Ekpenyong & Ekong, 2021; World Bank, 2023). In Bayelsa State, for instance, youth groups have repeatedly emphasized that programmes sometimes exist more on paper than in practice, pointing to gaps in inclusivity, long-term mentorship, and digital access (MOYD, 2024; Premium Times, 2024).

In Ogbia Local Government Area, the dynamics of awareness and access are even more complex, given its mix of rural and semi-urban communities. While government narratives often celebrate successful beneficiaries, the realities on the ground suggest that many youths remain uninformed or structurally excluded. Questions persist: Do young people in Ogbia know about initiatives like BYES, EYiA, or ICT-focused training schemes? Are these programmes designed in ways that rural youths can access them without prohibitive costs or logistical challenges? Evidence suggests that when awareness and accessibility are uneven, empowerment programmes risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than alleviating them (Oladipo & Adebayo, 2022; UNDP, 2023).

The present study, therefore, situates itself within this gap by examining how youths in Ogbia LGA perceive, engage with, and access empowerment opportunities. Beyond measuring statistical awareness levels, it seeks to humanize the issue—foregrounding the lived realities of youths whose future trajectories depend on whether empowerment translates from policy rhetoric into practice. By focusing on awareness and access, this study aims to inform both scholarship and policymaking on how empowerment can move from being a celebrated catchphrase to a functional instrument for socio-economic transformation in Bayelsa State.

Purpose of the Study

This study, therefore, examined the awareness and access to youth empowerment programmes among youths in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

- i. Determine the level of awareness of youth empowerment programmes among youths in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.
- ii. Examine the extent of access to youth empowerment programmes among youths in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

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Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. What is the level of awareness of youth empowerment programmes among youths in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State?
- ii. What is the extent of access to youth empowerment programmes among youths in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State?

Research Methods

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. According to Charles-Owaba (2019), descriptive survey design is a systematic approach to collecting and analyzing data from a defined population in order to describe prevailing conditions, attitudes, and perceptions. This design was considered appropriate for the study because it enabled the researcher to obtain reliable information from a representative sample of youths and stakeholders on their awareness of, and access to, Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEPs) in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The design further allowed for the integration of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, thereby combining statistical analysis with rich contextual narratives. The ultimate goal was to generalize the findings to the broader youth population in Ogbia LGA.

The population of the study comprised all youths aged 15–45 years residing in Ogbia LGA, alongside key stakeholders involved in implementing YEPs. This age range was adopted to reflect the socio-economic realities of the Niger Delta region, where individuals beyond the conventional youth definition (18–35 years as per the National Youth Policy; 15–35 years as per the African Youth Charter) are often beneficiaries of empowerment programmes. In addition to the youth population, officials from agencies such as N-Power, SEEFOR, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), and the Bayelsa State Youth Empowerment Scheme (BSYES) were included as participants in in-depth interviews (IDIs), given their expertise in programme delivery. A sample size of 560 youths was drawn from across Ogbia LGA, of which 510 completed responses were retrieved, representing a 91.1% response rate. The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane formula for finite populations at a 0.05 margin of error. A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted. At the first stage, Ogbia LGA was stratified into four major development areas (Ogbia Central, Anyama, Kolo Creek, and Oloibiri). At the second stage, proportional allocation was employed to distribute the sample across communities within these strata. At the third stage, simple random sampling using the balloting method was applied to select youth respondents. At the fourth stage, purposive sampling was used to select 10 key informants for IDIs and 36 participants for four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), ensuring inclusion based on age, gender, and participation status in YEPs.

The main instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled “*Awareness and Access to Youth Empowerment Programmes Questionnaire (AAYEPQ)*”. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section

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A collected demographic data such as age, gender, educational level, and marital status. Section B was further subdivided into three parts aligned with the research objectives: awareness of YEPs, extent of access to YEPs, and challenges/barriers to participation in YEPs. The instrument combined closed-ended items, measured on a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), with a few open-ended questions for elaboration. In addition, IDIs and FGDs were conducted using semi-structured interview guides to provide qualitative depth. For reliability, a pilot study was conducted with 30 youths in a neighbouring LGA not included in the final study. The Cronbach Alpha method yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.86, which was deemed highly satisfactory. Data collection was carried out over a four-week period. The researcher, with the assistance of trained research assistants, personally administered the questionnaires, explained the purpose of the study to respondents, and obtained informed consent. For the IDIs and FGDs, permission was sought to record sessions, while field notes captured contextual cues. Ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, and respectful engagement were strictly observed. The quantitative data collected through the questionnaires were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and charts were used to summarize socio-demographic variables and responses. Qualitative data from IDIs and FGDs were transcribed and thematically analyzed, with emergent themes triangulated against the quantitative findings to provide a holistic understanding of awareness and access to YEPs among youths in Ogbia LGA.

Results Awareness of Youth Empowerment Programmes

Awareness is a critical first step toward access. The study found that while many youths had heard of YEPs, detailed knowledge was limited.

- **General Awareness:** 67.1% of respondents reported being aware of at least one YEP. - **Types Known:** The most commonly known programmes were N-Power (54.7%), NDDC (43.1%), and Amnesty Scheme (37.8%).
- **Sources of Information:** Respondents cited radio (38.2%), social media (29.4%), and word of mouth (22.0%) as primary sources.

However, 33.5% perceived access to YEPs as high, while 66.5% perceived it as low, indicating a gap between awareness and actual accessibility.

An IDI respondent (SEEFOR official) noted: “The N-Power and Amnesty Programme are the most common federal government empowerment programmes.” However, FGD participants in Oloibiri expressed scepticism: “We don’t even know if these programmes are real... government makes noise but we see no dividends.”

Access to YEPs

Despite awareness, actual participation remains low. From the utilization rate: only 24.1% (123) of respondents had ever benefited from any YEP. The most Utilized Programmes are clearly stated in the table below:

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Respondents on Types of YEP Benefitted From (N=510)

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Benefitted from YEP	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Oil & Gas/SURE-P	25	4.9
See For/Trader Moni	46	9.0
NDDC/Npower	26	5.1
Bayelsa State Youth Empowerment scheme	11	2.2
Amnesty Empowerment Scheme	13	2.5
2-3 of the above	2 387	0.4
Not applicable		75.9
Total	510	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2019

In Figure 4.2: Percentage Distribution of YEP Beneficiaries shows that over 75% of youths had never participated in any programme.

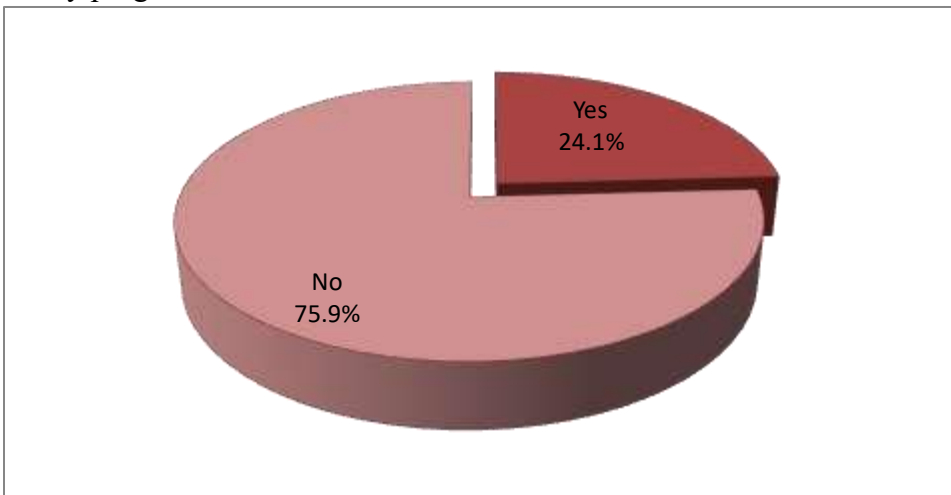


Figure 2: Percentage distribution of beneficiaries of the YEP (N=510)

Source: Field survey, 2019

A SEEFOR official observed: “Some persons shortlisted for the programmes most times refused to turn up... those who did, do not show seriousness.” This highlights both access and commitment challenges.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal a significant gap between the existence of Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEPs) and their actual access and utilization by youths in Ogbia Local Government

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Area, Bayelsa State. Despite the presence of federal and state initiatives such as N-Power, NDDC, Amnesty Scheme, and BSYES, only 24.1% of respondents had ever benefited from any programme. This low utilization rate is alarming, especially in a region plagued by youth unemployment, poverty, and underdevelopment. The study found that while 67.1% of youths were aware of at least one YEP, awareness alone did not translate into participation. This disconnect suggests that awareness campaigns, where they exist, are often superficial and fail to provide actionable information on application processes, eligibility criteria, and timelines. This finding is corroborated by Ajibola, et al., (2014), who noted that officials in charge of empowerment schemes frequently fail to conduct meaningful sensitization programmes. As one FGD participant in Oloibiri lamented: “We don’t even know if these programmes are real... government makes noise but we see no dividends.”

Conclusion

Youth empowerment is not just about training or hand-outs but it is about creating enabling environment where young people can thrive. This study has shown that while YEPs exist in Ogbia LGA, their impact is severely limited by structural, administrative, and socio-economic barriers. Awareness without access, training without support, and promises without implementation only deepen youth frustration.

However, the findings also offer hope that with improved awareness campaigns, decentralized training centres, transparent selection processes, and post-programme support, YEPs can become powerful tools for development. The youths are ready, willing, and capable and they only need the opportunity and the means to succeed.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Intensify Public Enlightenment Campaigns:** Government and programme providers should collaborate with media, social workers, and community leaders to conduct door-to-door sensitization and radio jingles in local languages.
2. **Decentralize Programme Delivery:** Establish local training hubs in rural communities to reduce travel burden and increase participation.

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