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Skills Training and Entrepreneurship Programme Beneficiaries' perception on the Barriers to Implementation of Empowerment Programmes in Delta State

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Abstract:

This study evaluated Skills Training and Entrepreneurship Programme (*STEP) beneficiaries' perception on the barriers to implementation of empowerment programmes in Delta State, Nigeria, examining its impact on youth empowerment. Using the Taro Yamane formula, 358 beneficiaries were selected from a population of 5,042 participants across seven implementation cycles. Data analysis utilized IBM-SPSS version 23.0, employing percentage, mean, and standard deviation. Findings revealed beneficiaries strongly agreeing (grand* $\bar{x}$ *= 3.59, SD = 1.36) on various items as implementation constraints. The most critical constraint was insufficient follow-up support for participants (*$\bar{x}$ *= 3.89, SD = 1.29), followed by low patronage of beneficiary-produced products (*$\bar{x}$ *= 3.79, SD = 1.07). The study recommended that State governments, through ministries of commerce and public procurement agencies should institutionalize structured off-take schemes that integrate programme beneficiaries into public supply chains via cooperative-based contracting systems. Programme Implementation Units, in collaboration with development partners, should establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework involving periodic field follow-ups, mentorship, and digital performance tracking to ensure long-term sustainability of beneficiaries' enterprises*

Keywords: Barriers, Implementation, and Empowerment Programmes

Introduction

Among the most daunting socio-economic challenges confronting Nigeria today, youth unemployment stands out as particularly alarming. Yakasai (2025) describes it as the condition in which young people 15 and 35, who are ready and willing to work, cannot secure gainful employment despite their actively seeking it. This challenge cuts across the globe but is felt most acutely in developing nations like Nigeria, where the labour market simply cannot keep pace with the rapidly growing number of young graduates and school leavers. Yakasai (2025) further noted that even within the narrower definition focusing on those aged 15 to 24 who are available for and seeking work, the problem remains deeply entrenched. The ripple effects of youth joblessness extend far beyond the individual. Poverty deepens, crime rates rise, and a generation of capable, energetic people find themselves with nowhere to channel their potential. Recognizing this, governments at the federal and state levels, alongside international donors and civil society organizations, have rolled out a range of empowerment programmes designed to equip young Nigerians with vocational competencies and entrepreneurial capabilities for self-employment and wealth creation (Njoku et al., 2020).

In Delta State, one of the most prominent responses to this crisis has been the empowerment programme such as Youth Agricultural Entrepreneurs Programme and Skills Training and Entrepreneurship Programme, launched in 2015 specifically to tackle joblessness among young people between the ages of 18 and 35 (Ajaino et al., 2023; Eboh, 2020). Through STEP, participants gain practical skills across a wide range of trades, including ICT, fashion design, catering, welding, building services, and electrical works. Reports from the Delta State Job and Wealth Creation Bureau indicate that a significant number of graduates from the programme have gone on to establish their own micro-enterprises, create employment for others, and noticeably improve their livelihoods (Eboh, 2023).Yet, despite these visible gains, the unemployment challenge in Delta State has not abated. As of 2020, youth unemployment in the state stood at 40.36% (Chovwen, 2021), and national figures from the National Bureau of Statistics (2023) put youth unemployment across Nigeria at 42.5%, with Delta State among the most severely impacted. Even with STEP having produced over 5,000 beneficiaries, many of whom have reportedly transitioned into entrepreneurship or employment (Eboh, 2023), widespread joblessness persists. This stark contrast between programme activity and ground-level outcomes raises a legitimate and urgent question: why are these initiatives not producing more lasting results?

Part of the answer lies in the troubling link between sustained unemployment and social deterioration. Research by (Omene 2021, Gabriel et al. 2020 and Bello et al. 2022) consistently points to connection between youth joblessness and involvement in crime, cyber-fraud, and other antisocial behaviour. These findings underscore the gravity of the situation and highlight why the effectiveness of empowerment programmes cannot be treated as a secondary concern. Several scholars (Adeyanju et al., 2023; Ovharhe et al.,

2021 have documented a range of implementation obstacles, including poor funding, insufficient follow-up support, policy inconsistencies, corruption, crumbling infrastructure, and fragmented institutional coordination Beyond these operational shortcomings, deeper systemic barriers also exist, such as cultural bias against vocational work, poor market access, inadequate mentorship, limited financial inclusion, unfavorable business environments, and infrastructure deficits (Zerihun, 2021; Ahmed & Ahmed, 2021; Ovharhe et al., 2021; Balogun & Olatoro, 2020).

What makes this situation particularly concerning is that much of the existing research has tended to focus on what these programmes achieve in terms of start-ups created, jobs secured, without adequately examining why they fall short of their potential. Studies (Ajaino et al. 2023; Gabriel et al. 2020, & Omene 2021) offer valuable perspectives on outcomes, but they largely sidestep the harder question of implementation quality and structural constraints. Even Ajaino et al. (2023), who evaluated STEP using descriptive statistics, did not interrogate the systemic and operational barriers that quietly undermine the programme's impact. This gap in the literature means that decision-makers have limited evidence to draw on when trying to understand why government investments in skills training are not translating into sustained economic change for beneficiaries.

Against this backdrop, that the present study is necessary. If the barriers to effective programme implementation are not clearly identified and addressed, the resources and goodwill invested in youth empowerment will continue to yield limited long-term returns. This study therefore focuses specifically on identifying the STEP beneficiaries' perception on the barriers to the effective implementation of empowerment programmes in Delta State.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Delta State, Nigeria, located in the Niger Delta region between latitudes 5°00' and 6°30' N of the Equator and longitude 5 0 00´ E and 5°00' and 6°45' E. of the Greenwich Meridian (Kabir & Anke (2023). Delta State covers approximately 17,698 square kilometers with a population of about 5.6 million people (National Population Commission, 2006. The state is characterized by a tropical climate with annual rainfall ranging from 2,500mm to 4,000mm, and diverse agro-ecological zones including freshwater swamp, mangrove swamp, and upland areas (Azih & Eze, 2023).

The state is administratively divided into 25 Local Government Areas (LGAs) organized into three agricultural zones: Delta North, Delta Central, and Delta South. Agriculture is the primary occupation for the majority of the rural population, with major crops including cassava, yam, plantain, maize, rice, vegetables, oil palm, and rubber (Arokoyu et al., 2020).

The population of the study comprised all beneficiaries in the Skills Training and Entrepreneurship Programme since its inception. The profile of STEP beneficiaries showing the trades is seen below:

Table 1: Population of the study

Implementation Circles	Total number of beneficiaries	Sample
2015/2016	1073	113.3
2016/2017	617	65.1
2017/2018	586	-
2018/2019	1056	111.5
2019/2020	549	68.1
2020/2021	645	-
2022/2023	516	-
Total	**5042**	**358**

Source: Eboh, 2023.

Four trades/ businesses and four implementation circles were purposively selected because they have high population of participants in the circles. This can be seen in the profile of STEP beneficiaries. Yamane formula was used to determine total sample size of 358 respondents for the study.

To determine the sample size for this study, The Taro Yamane formula was applied. The formula is: $n = \frac{N}{1+N\,(e)2}$ (1)

Where

n= sample size

N= population of the study

1= constant in value

e= error in margin usually 5% for 95% confidence level of significance.

Kumar formula was used to proportionate allocation of Values

Kumar formula $n_i = \frac{Ni}{N} x \frac{n}{1}$ (2)

Where:

n_i = Sample size proportionate allocated from each circle.

N = the size of the i-th group,

N_i = Population from each circle and

n = the total sample size.

Primary data was collected through a structured interview, and a shop/field observation. The secondary data was collected through the published and unpublished programme's publications and reports from the state job creation office. Only beneficiaries who had participated in the programme for at least 6 months post-training were included, to ensure they had sufficient exposure to assess impact and satisfaction.

Three hundred and fifty-eight (358) copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents

Data were analyzed using mean, and standard deviation. Respondents were asked to indicate from a list of Nine (9) barrier statements and to score on a 5-points Likert-type: Strongly Agreed (SA) =5, Agreed (A) =4, Neutral (N) = 3, Disagreed (D) = 2 and Strongly Disagreed (SD) = 1. The options were quantified as 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1. The mean of 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 equals which are 5+4+3+2+1/5 =3.00. For decision-making, an upper limit was established. The upper limit was thus 3.00+0.05 = 3.05 hence, the cut-off points of 3.05 as the upper limit was used to determine a positive response. Therefore, the mean score of variable items with ≥ 3.05 was regarded as Strongly Agreed, and the mean score value < 3.05 was regarded as strongly disagreed. The IBM – Statistics version 25 was used as software for the analysis.

Results and Discussion

The STEP Beneficiaries' Perception on the Barriers to the Implementation of the Empowerment Programme

Table 2 shows that the programme suffered low level of follow-up support for participants had the highest mean score ($\bar{x}$= 3.89, SD = 1.29) followed by low patronage of products produced by beneficiaries with a mean score ($\bar{x}$= 3.79, SD = 1.07) and the programme lacked continuity plans affect the implementation of the empowerment programmes with a mean score of ($\bar{x}$= 3.74, SD = 1.45).

The grand mean ($\bar{x}$=3.59) and standard deviation (1.36) indicate that beneficiaries' strongly agreed that all items reflected their perception on the barriers that affected the implementation of empowerment programmes. This finding is in line with the finding of Ifeanyi et al. (2022) who found limited access to capital, poor infrastructure, and insufficient mentorship have been identified as major barriers hindering the success of youth entrepreneurship initiatives. Also, The finding of Adeyanju et al. (2023) is not left out but found that lack of mentoring, and government regulations among others are the barriers.

Table 2 : STEP beneficiaries' perception on the barriers to the implementation of empowerment programmes

Barriers	Mean	SD
Insufficient government funding affect the implementation of the programme	3.28	1.45
Delay in giving start-up pack to trainees of the beneficiaries.	3.35	1.45
Inadequate financial incentives affect the implementation of the programme.	3.62	1.41
Insufficient time was allotted for some practical sessions.	3.54	1.40
Poor transportation facilities affect the implementation of the programme	3.56	1.45
The start –up pack for some trade/business was not enough.	3.56	1.46
Inadequate loan for the expansion of business affect the implementation of the programme.	3.66	1.38
Low patronage of beneficiaries products affect the implementation of the programme	3.79	1.07
The programme suffered low level of follow-up support for participants.	3.89	1.29
Grand Mean	**3.59**	**1.36**

Source: Field Survey, 2024. Cut of point of 2.55

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings show multiple constraints ranging from inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, weak monitoring mechanisms, policy inconsistency, and lack of mentorship continue to undermine the full potential of these empowerment programmes. Other significant factors such as socio-cultural attitudes, limited access to markets, high taxation, corruption, and the absence of enabling environments further aggravate the situation, reducing the long-term impact of such programmes on youth livelihood and state-wide economic growth. For Delta State and other similar regions to achieve meaningful youth empowerment through entrepreneurship, there is a compelling need for a more integrated and sustainable approach. This includes improving institutional capacity, strengthening follow-up mechanisms, ensuring proper funding, and fostering a business-friendly environment. Moreover, tackling these challenges will require coordinated efforts from government, private sector actors, NGOs, and the youths themselves. By identifying and addressing the implementation barriers, the state can maximize the benefits of its investment in youth entrepreneurship, reduce unemployment and social vices, and promote inclusive economic development.

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