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ANALYSIS OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONSTRAINTS OF THE AKWA IBOM WOMEN COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION

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Abstract

Women self-help groups may be utilized to play dual vital roles of female socio-economic empowerment and rural development. In this wise, this study was undertaken to determine the role of the Akwa Ibom Women Cooperatives Association (AKIWOCA) in the socio-economic development of Akwa Ibom State. A structured questionnaire was utilized to derive information from a sample of 30 leaders of different AKIWOCA group affiliates. The use of simple analytical statistical tools thereafter revealed that AKIWOCA is involved in loan scheme. It has also established cottage industries on corn mill, textile and dyeing, garri processing and soap manufacturing. These activities have helped in the socio-economic empowerment and development of our female folk and rural communities, respectively. Certain constraining factors such as inadequate funds, defaults on loan repayment, low level of education, apathy and poor income are however reducing the effects of these achievements. Recommendations are therefore provided to remedy the situation.

INTRODUCTION

Cooperatives are formed in order to enable people to achieve through joint efforts what they are unable to achieve singly by themselves. They are legally established organizations operating on the basis of a specific set of principles, and they have been defined (World Bank, 1989; Erdman and Tindley, 1957) as association of persons who have voluntarily joined together to achieve a common objective through the formation of a democratically controlled organization, making equitable contributions to the capital required and accepting a fair share of the risk and benefits of the undertaking.

The necessity to form cooperatives become more apparent due to the realization that government alone cannot ensure effective development of all facets of the economy. Ugal (1992) has also emphasized that grass root organizations (including cooperatives) possess essential ingredients that make for self-sustaining development in the rural communities and that they are the basic

ingredients of grass root developments. Based on this premise, a lot of cooperative organizations exist and operate in rural areas of Nigeria, including Akwa Ibom State.

Women are not left out of this trend of cooperative formation. Women's participation in rural development have received impetus since the May 1995 Beijing World Women Conference, where they became effectively empowered. Akwa Ibom Women are not left out of this trend as Akpabio (2000) revealed that 80 percent members of rural agro-cooperatives are women. Over time, Akwa Ibom women have been helping themselves by joining together to embark on projects and economic activities such as garri and oil palm processing, and weaving and dyeing industries, etc. It has however been noted that these cooperatives are constrained by many problems, notably finance.

It is from this point of view, and most especially to consolidate the gains of women cooperatives that women in Akwa Ibom State saw the need for the formation of an apex body to mobilize available resources and various

rural women cooperatives for meaningful ventures and projects. In this wise, the Akwa Ibom Women Cooperative Association (AKIWOCA) was inaugurated in March 1993 by the then First Lady of the State, Obonganwan Imo Isemin. The major goal of the AKIWOCA is aimed at making women cooperatives in Akwa Ibom State more functional and effective.

The AKIWOCA has now existed for about 8 years. It therefore becomes necessary to identify the achievements and constraints of this apex association, as a first step towards consolidating its achievements and recommending effective measures to improve its level of services to the rural women.

STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted in Akwa Ibom State. The state is situated within the humid zone with a landmass of 8, 142 km², and an estimated population of over 2.3 million located in 31 Local Government Areas. Due to its small mass, the population density ranges between 285 – 400 persons per square kilometer.

Thirty leaders of different AKIWOCA group affiliates in Akwa Ibom State were purposively selected for this study, based on the effectiveness of the group affiliates. Data for the study were collected through the use of structured questionnaire (consisting of closed and open – ended questions), oral interviews, personal discussions and information from secondary sources (material from the library of the Akwa Ibom Women Cooperative Association).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

OBJECTIVES OF AKIWOCA

The Association's major goal is to improve the living conditions of women and their immediate environment. It has the following objectives (Isemin, 1993):

- i. To serve as a uniting force for women in the economic sector.
- ii. To enable women co-operative societies obtain credit for their viable activities.

- iii. To strengthen women participation in cooperatives
- iv. To serve as a forum for the exchange of ideas, discussion of problems and strategies for implementation of such ideas.
- v. To initiate, encourage and promote the training of members for the development of individual talents.
- vi. To establish linkages among women cooperatives for the enjoyment of economies of scale and dissemination of information to members.
- vii. To assist in the identification, assessment and development of projects and businesses for the benefit of member societies.
- viii. To provide right information on loan conditions, credit administration and repayment possibilities.
- ix. To provide assistance in the preparation of byelaws, feasibility studies and market studies.
- x. To introduce technical advice on implementation of quality of goods and service of member societies and opening of market outlets for such goods.
- xi. To provide incentives for members to work and apply themselves to their fullest capacity.
- xii. To embark on co-operative education through seminars, workshops, etc as well as public enlightenment on cooperatives through the media.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF AKIWOCA

The Akwa Ibom Women Cooperative Association through its affiliate cooperative groups in the various Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State have mobilized the women to embark on several projects which are basically aimed at generating income and boosting the financial stance of the rural women. These projects include:

- i. The fish smoking scheme at Uta Ewa, Ikot Abasi Local Government Area.
- ii. Palm oil processing mill at Nkek, Ukanafun Local Government Area.
- iii. Soap making project at Afaha Obong, Abak Local Government Area.

- iv. Garri processing mill at Ikot Ntu, Itu Local Government Area.
- v. Women craft at Ikot Ekpene Urban, Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area.
- vi. Fish smoking scheme at Ebuhu, Mbo Local Government Area.
- vii. Weaving project at Okobo Local Government Area.
- viii. Weaving project at Ure Offong Oruku.
- ix. Bore hole drilling project for rural women at Ikot Udo Abia, Etinan Local Government Area.
- x. Garri processing project at Okobodi Use, Itu Local Government Area.

AKIWOCA also mobilizes women to be directly involved in agriculture. In this wise, AKIWOCA has established a cassava farm in Nsukara Offot, Uyo Local Government Area and a piggery farm in Adadia Ward 17, Uruan Local Government Area.

AKIWOCA is involved in organizing seminars and workshops in the rural areas which are aimed at sensitizing rural women on the State Government's policies on women, educating rural women on better family living, etc. A workshop with the theme "harmful Traditional Practices on Women" was successfully organized in 2000 for women in the various Local government Areas of the State.

CONSTRAINTS OF AKIWOCA

Table 1: Constraints of AKIWOCA

Constraint	Frequency	Percentage
Inadequate funds	9	30.00
High illiteracy level	5	16.66
Loan defaults	2	6.66
Absenteeism	4	13.36
Lack of external aid	5	16.66
Leadership problem	5	16.66
TOTAL	30	100.00

Source: Field Survey (1999)

As indicated on table 1, the most pressing constraints of AKIWOCA was inadequate funds necessary to effectively carry out the

activities of the women co-operatives in the state. High level of illiteracy among rural women, lack of external aid and leadership problem each ranked second among the constraints faced by AKIWOCA in the state.

ANALYSIS OF RESULT ON CONSTRAINTS

- i. **Inadequate funds:** Finance determines to a great extent the success of women cooperatives in the State. Respondents have revealed that inadequate finance constitutes the major constraint faced by AKIWOCA. One of the major activities of AKIWOCA is giving loans to its members, but the Association's self generation funds have not been enough to achieve this set goal and this has posed a great hindrance to the achievement of their aim of rural development.
- ii. **High Illiteracy Level:** The low level of education of members of AKIWOCA especially in rural areas, pose a major problem to the Association's activities.
- iii. **Loan Default:** Inability of members to repay loans when due is also one of the major problems faced by AKIWOCA. This delays the acquisition of loans by other members of the cooperatives. Thus, projects are usually delayed or suspended. Community development is affected on the long run.
- iv. **Absenteeism:** Absence or irregular attendance at meetings by some members of the cooperatives pose a constraint to AKIWOCA. Members who do not attend meetings regularly are always backward in utilizing disseminated information on current issues concerning the progress of the Association. As a result of this, most of the projects carried out in the rural areas suffer delay or lack of attention, and this greatly affects the timely improvement of the rural areas and their inhabitants.
- v. **Lack of External Aid:** Lack of external aid from the State and Federal Government, and Non-Governmental organizations limit the effectiveness of AKIWOCA.
- vi. **Leadership Problem:** Ineffective leadership of women cooperatives at Local

levels affects the effectiveness of AKIWOCA at such rural areas.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The activities of Akwa Ibom Women Cooperative Association (AKIWOCA) have contributed immensely to the economic development of rural communities in Akwa Ibom State. The achievements of the Association points out clearly that it has played significant roles in the socio-economic development of rural women and rural areas in general. If given the due support by both Governmental and Non-Governmental organizations, AKIWOCA will definitely contribute more effectively to the socio-economic development of Akwa Ibom State. Following the achievements and constraints of AKIWOCA, the following recommendations are hereby proffered:

- i. Non-Governmental Organizations and meaningful individuals should offer both moral and material support to the Akwa Ibom Women Cooperative Association (AKIWOCA) as a means of contributing to the development of the state.
- ii. The Akwa Ibom State government should see the Akwa Ibom State Women Cooperative Association as an important instrument for rural development and give them the necessary logistic and financial support to carry out its programmes.
- iii. The Association should take active part in National Council of Women societies in order to encourage the participation of more women in their programmes. The Akwa Ibom Women Cooperative Association (AKIWOCA) through the mass media and strategic publicity should create more awareness of their existence and their activities.

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