

THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN UMUEBU, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study is part of an ongoing development project by Umuebu Neighborhood House (UNH) in Umuebu, Delta State of Nigeria. Umuebu is a patriarchal community where women and children never participate in decision making, even in matters that affect them. Most women in Umuebu are poor; ninety-five percent (95%) of them are farmers, and seventy-five percent of them are uneducated. In sustainable development, exclusion of women and children from the process of decision-making has consequences on the individuals and the society. In order to facilitate change in the structures that promote patriarchy in the community, UNH uses soccer to promote social integration of girls, and provide them with adult mentors. Participation in these physical space activities promotes gender equity, provides girls with self-confidence, access to public spaces such as sports fields and additional income. This paper focused on the challenges and the possibilities of including women and children in the process of sustainable development in Umuebu. The study draws on the participatory action research method of data collection. Participants in this study are one hundred and twenty (120) children aged 10 to 17 years and forty-five (45) women aged 15-49 years. This study reports that the challenges for women include belief systems, poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment, while the children face the challenge of violation of their rights by adults. The implication of this study is that women and children can participate in the process of sustainable development by participating in finding ways to change patriarchal structures that are detrimental to sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Patriarchal, Soccer, Neighborhood House, and Poverty

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainability dates back to a number of environmental movements in previous decades, but the Brundtland Commission was the first worldwide attempt to deal with the issue of sustainable development. In the analysis of sustainable development, the Brundtland Commission focuses on the connection between poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. This article first defines sustainable development and the related concepts; the importance of sustainable development in Nigeria, the neighborhood house concept, the role of the Umuebu Neighborhood House in facilitating sustainable development in Umuebu, the challenges and opportunities for the participation of women and children in the sustainable development projects in Umuebu, Nigeria.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development has several definitions. According to the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development: “Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Hart, 1995, 4). This definition identifies the importance of social, economic, and environmental factors when considering development. The definition also draws attention to the need for poverty alleviation and equality. In this definition, the key concepts of sustainability are:

- Today’s needs should not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs.
- A direct link exists between the economy and the environment
- The needs of the poor in all nations must be met
- In order for our environment to be protected, the economic conditions of the world’s poor must be improved.
- In all our actions, we must consider the impacts upon future generations.

(The Brundtland Commission, 1987)

According to the Brundtland Commission, the aim of sustainable development is to facilitate harmony among humankind and between man and the natural world. That commission states that efforts to attain sustainable development require the following:

- A political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision making
- An economic system that is able to generate surpluses and technical knowledge on a self-reliant and sustained basis
- A social system that provides for solutions for the tensions arising from disharmonious development
- A production system that respects the obligation to preserve the ecological base for development.
- A technological system that can search continuously for new solutions
- An International system that fosters sustainable patterns of trade and finance
- An administrative system that is flexible and has the capacity for self-correction

(World Commission on Environment and Development, 65).

In 1996, The United State President’s Council offered a new definition for Sustainable Development by adopting a Brundtland Commission’s definition of sustainable development and adding its own vision statement and identified ten national goals towards sustainable development. The goals are as follows:

Goal 1: Health and the environment: To ensure that every person enjoys the benefits of clean air, clean water, and a healthy environment home, at work and at play.

Goal 2: Economic prosperity: To sustain a healthy U.S. economy that grows sufficiently to create meaningful jobs, reduce poverty, and provide the opportunity for a high quality of life for all in an increasingly competitive world.

Goal 3: Equity: To ensure that all Americans are afforded justice and have the opportunity to achieve economic, environmental and social well-being

Goal 4: Conservation of nature: To use, conserve, protect, and restore natural resources- land, air, water, and biodiversity – in ways that help ensure long-term social, economic, and environmental benefits for future generations and ourselves.

Goal 5: Stewardship: To create a widely held ethic of stewardship that strongly encourages individuals, institutions, and corporations take full responsibility for the economic, environmental, and social consequences of their actions.

Goal 6: Sustainable communities: To encourage people to work together to create healthy communities where natural and historical resources are preserved, jobs are available, sprawl is contained, neighborhoods are secure, education is lifelong, transportation and health care are accessible and all citizens have opportunities to improve the quality of their lives.

Goal 7: Civic engagement: To create a full opportunity for citizens, businesses, and communities to participate in and influence the natural resource, environmental and economic decisions that affect them.

Goal 8: Population: To move towards stabilization of U.S. population

Goal 9: International responsibility: To take a leadership role in the development and implementation of global sustainable development policies, standards of conduct, and trade and foreign policies that further the achievement of sustainability.

Goal 10: Education: To ensure that all Americans have equal access to education and lifelong learning opportunities that will prepare them for meaningful work, a high quality of life, and an understanding of the concepts involved in sustainable development (President’s Council on Sustainable Development, 1996).

In the context of the President’s Council on Sustainable Development, sustainable communities refer to cities and towns that thrive because people work collaboratively to produce high quality of life that they desire to sustain and persistently improve. People in these communities plan and implement development plans that create diversified employment opportunities. The people engage in building their community together by actively participating in making community decisions, and drawing on participatory methods in order to reach consensus decisions about their project designs (President’s Council on Sustainable Development, 1996).

There are two questions to ask about sustainable development. The first question is the question of development. This question focuses on the issues of economic growth, of wealth and poverty. It is the question of how Nigeria can get on the path towards development. There is the second part of “sustainable development” – the challenge of sustainability. There are two dimensions to the challenge of sustainability: economic dimension and the environmental challenges that go along with economic development.

THE CONCEPT OF NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE

The concept of “Neighborhood House” is new in Nigeria. The concept is also known as the “Settlement House”. The Settlement House movement started in the mid 19th century in England. Samuel Bennett and his wife Henrietta Roland

developed the concept in 1885. In 1931, Jane Addams transferred the idea of settlement house to USA by establishing the Hull House in Chicago and in New York. From Chicago and New York, the idea of “Settlement Houses” spread all over North America, Eastern United States, and Canada (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010).

UMUEBU NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE (UNH)

Sunday Ofili Ibobor established Umuebu Neighborhood House (UNH) in Umuebu on 28th June, 2010. Umuebu is a predominantly agrarian community in Ukwuani Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. About 70 percent of the landmass is cultivated for agricultural production as a means of livelihood. This results in environmental degradation in the community. Most women in Umuebu are poor; ninety-five percent (95%) of them are farmers, and seventy-five percent of them are uneducated. Umuebu is a patriarchal community where women and children never participate in decision making, even in matters that affect them. When decisions that affect women and children are being taken, the women are either asked to stay away or made to be present but not heard. The situation is worse for children; they are asked to stay away from the meeting venue. Curious children might stay by the window while the meetings last. The patriarchal household is a prominent feature in Umuebu. Traditional practices, customary prohibitions against a woman’s right to own and control economic resources as well as domestic obligations limit the ability of women to increase their earning capacity.

The issues of poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation are present in Umuebu just as much as they constitute the main theme in the analysis of sustainable development. UNH provides sports, children and youth-focused workshops; and programs for adults: men and women as well as seniors in the community. UNH is research driven, people focused, and community engaged.

METHODS

The study draws on the participatory action research method of data collection. Participants in this study are one hundred and twenty (120) children aged 10 to 17 years and forty-five (45) women aged 15-49 years

The study took place between January and March 2012 (twelve weeks). The study preceded the community soccer competition that took place between 15 April 2012 and 27 May 2012.

INTERVENTION

In order to facilitate change in the structures that promote patriarchy in the community, UNH uses soccer to promote social integration of girls, and provide them with adult mentors. Participation in these physical space activities promotes gender equity, provides girls with self-confidence, access to public spaces such as sports fields and additional income.

The outcomes of these activities are several: improved social interaction, and increased participation in community visioning, planning, development, and entrepreneurship. These outcomes have opened up several opportunities for women and children; however, there are several challenges that frustrate the efforts of women and children from participating in sustainable development projects.

UNH MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Umuebu Neighborhood House (UNH) Model of Sustainable Development is a process that draws on the community soccer to mobilize and empower people to support sustainable development in the community. This ensures effective participation and contribution to development projects in Umuebu.

UNH organized the first community soccer competition between 1st September, 2010 and 1st October 2010. UNH used the final match for that year to mark the National Independence Day in the Community. The second edition of the community soccer took place between 1st October, 2011 and 23rd October, 2011. The third edition took place between 15th April, 2012 and 27th May 2012. UNH used the final match of the third edition of the community soccer competition to mark the first ever-celebrated children's day in the community. UNH is already collaborating with the youth in the community to mentor 88 kids aged 9 -11 to participate in another competition to mark the first ever World Youth Day in the community on 12th August 2012. The girls in the community requested for an exclusively female soccer competition in the community. This will take place between September 15 and 7st October 2012. This will provide opportunity to raise funds for a skills acquisition center in the community. Between 1st, November 2012 and 22 November, 2012, the youth in the community will be participating in another soccer competition to raise fund for the establishment of a community shuttle and transport park. UNH has facilitated the setting up of sixteen teams in the community. Each team has a membership of thirty (30) members made up of twenty-two (22) players and eight (8) supporting soccer officials. This translates to four hundred and eighty participants directly participating in this phase of the projects.

These soccer competitions provide an opportunity to show that the sustainability and the development challenges in Umuebu can be resolved through effective cooperation, team spirit, and working together. Since it is impossible for a team to win, if the members fail to cooperate with one another, the lesson for the community is that the community will be unable to move to the next level of development if they fail to work together to accomplish set goals. The Trophy in each of these competitions symbolizes a successfully completed community project. This is how Umuebu Neighborhood House (UNH) is building team spirit in the community to foster the ability of community members to cooperatively set and implement development plans for the community. This experience is consistent with Sachs (2005) idea that the way to solve the sustainability and development challenge is to start acting cooperatively, sensibly and scientifically.

The few excerpts below suggest that UNH has stimulated the interest of residents and community members in participating in sustainable development projects in the community.

Am so excited that we have this group in existence, all hands must be on deck to realize this great journey we are to embark. Thanks to the organizer and pray that the good Lord and the lords of our land will continue to inspire you not to relent in carrying out these laudable objectives of ours. (ID, 2012).

Am very proud of you and happy to be in the midst of my people. Thank God, for the face lift that civilization is brought to our Umuebu town. Long live Umuebu, Long live Ukwuani... LGA... Long live Ndokwa. (AM, 2010)

You guys have done great in my town. I wish to see you guys soonest and join you people (FI, 2012)

Up Umugbo, that is great, hope to join the organizer next season to make it more colorful. (O.I, 2012)

CHALLENGES

The Brundtland Commission listed several challenges associated with sustainable development. These challenges include energy, urbanization, population and human resources, species and ecosystems, industrial development and food security. The challenge of sustainable development can also be classified into two categories: the development challenge and the sustainability challenge.

THE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE

The development challenge refers to the question of economic growth, of wealth and poverty.

Development can be defined from different perspectives. Economists see development in terms of economic development. That is an increase in the GNP measured by per capital income. The inadequacy of the economists' view of development brings us to Goulet's (1971), conception of development as that which includes major economic and social objectives and values that societies strive for. To this end, he identifies three basic components of development: life sustenance, self –esteem and freedom. Using these components, one can say that development has occurred when a country is able to supply its inhabitants' basic needs. When the country and the individuals in are free from wants and liberated to raise their standard of living and become independent economically. Seers (1972) corroborates this view by contending that “The questions to ask about a country's development are : what has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all of these have become less severe, then there has been a period of development for the country concerned, but if all these central questions have been growing worse, particularly, where all these conditions are growing worse, it would be strange to call the result development, even if per capita income have soared.”

Evidence from Table 1 suggests that the population of Nigerians in poverty has increased over the years. In 1980, the estimated population of Nigeria was 65 million, the incidence of poverty was 27.2 percent, and the population in poverty was 17.1 million. In 2010, the population increased to 163 million, the incidence of poverty increased to 69.0 percent and the population in poverty increased to 112.47. This situation suggests a major challenge for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Table 1: Relative Poverty Headcount from 1980-2010

Year	Poverty incidence (%)	Estimated Population (Million)	Population in poverty (Million)
1980	27.2	65	17.1
1985	46.3	75	34.7
1992	42.7	91.5	39.2
1996	65.6	102.3	67.4
2004	54.4	126.3	68.3
2010	69.0	163	112.47

Source: National Bureau of Statistics, HNLSS, 2010

Evidence from the Nigeria Poverty Profile (2012) suggests that poverty impact more on the children, the women, and the youths more than it does on the male adult population. In order to address the poverty problem in Nigeria, the federal government has put in place several poverty alleviation strategies. Some of these development strategies use gender equality and women empowerment as indicators. In June 2007, The Federal Republic of Nigeria launched the National Gender Policy. The policy seeks to promote gender equity and sustainable development. It draws on the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Nigerian Constitution guarantees the fundamental human rights of all Nigerian citizens that incorporate the principles of global and regional frameworks that support gender equity and women's empowerment (Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey [NDHS], 2008).

Gender equity and women empowerment are important components of sustainable development. Several factors affect the status of women in any country. Onwuejeogwu, (1975) identifies eight of these factors as: biological, cultural, ideological, political, economic, technological, ritual and marital. In Umuebu, the status of women is affected by inequality and poverty. These two factors constitute the major obstacle to their participation in sustainable development projects. Other factors are the belief systems, illiteracy, and unemployment. Inequality is also an obstacle to women gaining access to employment. According to ILO, (1995) the "most significant being inequality with respect to access to education, discrimination in employment, and occupation, which leads to the categorization of jobs according to gender, national laws and regulations, inequality with respect to access to factors of production, the low level of women's participation in decision-making and social control bodies and finally, social attitudes".

The capability to make decisions that affect women's personal circumstances is critical to their empowerment. In Umuebu, most women are poor and are often excluded from participating in decision making in the community. This is consistent with the findings of the NDHS, 2008.. Evidence from the NDHS suggests that majority of women who participate in the family decision- making process, earn more than their husbands. The NDHS (2008) data suggests that a woman is more likely to participate in the decision making process on how her earnings and her husband's earnings are spent, if she makes earns more than the husband or the same amount of money as her husband.

In the context of sustainable development, children are the future generations. They face numerous challenges: child labor, child trafficking and harmful practices. The violation of the rights of the child is the most significant challenge to children in Nigeria. The cultural expectation is that children should be seen and not heard. These challenges have critical implications on the ability of future generations to meet their needs. In order to address these challenges facing children, the Federal Republic of Nigeria introduced the "The Child's Right Act" to ensure child protection and sustainable development in Nigeria. Despite the existence of the Child Rights Act, the situation of children in Nigeria, particularly the vulnerable children has not changed significantly. In contrast, children across postindustrial democracies have civil rights and a say in decisions that affect their lives. They are treated as right holding individuals as indicated by their status under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Cockburn 2005)

Another major challenge is the problem of population. The growing size of the population of Nigeria is putting ever-increasing pressure on the physical environment of Nigeria. There is the challenge of how to level off the growth in Nigeria in order to raise the quality of life for future generations in Nigeria.

THE SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE

The sustainability challenge has two dimensions: the economic dimension and environmental challenge that goes along with economic development. The economic dimension focuses on how to keep what the nation already has in order to

avoid economic crisis. The environmental challenge refers to the challenges of managing the issues of environmental degradation associated with the economic activities in the county.

Before the discovery of oil in Nigeria, the country depended on agriculture for food, agro-industrial raw materials for foreign exchange earnings. By 1960, more than 75 percent of the labor force of Nigeria was engaged in agriculture. It also provided employment and a source of livelihood to over 90 percent of the population. Although, oil and gas reserves now constitute the mainstay of Nigeria's economy, agriculture is still providing employment for a significant number of Nigerians particularly those residing in rural areas. In Umuebu, agriculture provides employment for ninety-five percent (95%) of the population.

In 2006, oil and gas reserves contribute 38.8 percent to the GDP, while agriculture contributed 32.5 percent. Oil and gas extraction activities and agricultural activities have several implications for sustainable development. Burning fossil fuels leads to a concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which in turn leads to global warming. By continuously adding carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, the oil and gas extracting companies are ruining the climatic conditions in Nigeria and compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. A major challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria is how to capture the carbon dioxide and safely dispose it.

Although, the agricultural sector of the economy is shrinking, the percentage of women who are employed in the agricultural sector is increasing especially in the rural areas. Poverty is associated with both gender and informal labor such as in the agricultural sector. Women engaged in the informal sector experience higher poverty rates than those engaged in the formal sector.

In Nigeria, most women engage in the agricultural sector because they are unable to secure employment in the formal sector. Agricultural activities: land clearing for farming and logging for fuel wood, logs and pulpwood, lead to deforestation. Deforestation in Nigeria is often unaccompanied by reforestation:

Poor women are excluded from the economy and from the ladder of development. In order to survive, some of them engage in the destruction of the environment through land clearing for farming without reforestation. Therefore, to protect the environment, women should be empowered by deliberate efforts to improve their economic conditions. This is consistent with the findings in the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey, 2008. Empowering women provide the opportunity to get women on the ladder of sustainable development.

CONCLUSIONS: THE WAY FORWARD

The practices in the agricultural as well as the oil and gas sectors in Nigeria, the inadequate consideration of the impact of our actions upon future generations, the increasing poverty rate, the fast growing population, the proportion of women who are poor, the violations of the rights of the child and the uninterrupted circles of failed vision, policy and political agenda in Nigeria (Dike, 2011), unemployment and insecurity of lives and properties (Uhunamwuangho & Epelle, 2011) suggest that Nigeria is not yet on the ladder of sustainable development.

Sustainable development in Nigeria calls for integrated decision making at all levels in Nigeria and the inclusion of the whole community in deciding the collective ideal of the future. Therefore, the way forward is to make a deliberate effort to understand the challenges women and children face in patriarchal societies.

Evidence from this study suggests that illiteracy, poverty, unemployment and the belief system in the community are some of the challenges facing women in Umuebu. Education plays a major role in sustainable development. In Umuebu,

about seventy-five percent of the women are uneducated. Illiterate women tend to have limited opportunities to participate in decision making in the households. They also have reduced opportunities for earning income outside the home, farming, or trading. Women in the community spend about eight hours in the farm in order to provide basic needs for their families. In addition, they spend some hours fetching firewood, water, shelling palm kernels, melon, or other agricultural products. Consequently, they hardly participate in family or community decision-making process and hardly participate in sustainable development projects, since they spend most of their time trying to make ends meet.

Although, unsustainable patterns of development are associated with serious health risk of women and children in Umuebu community, they silently bear the burden of the wrong decisions made by the community leaders. Some of such decisions include establishing fishponds in the centre of the community, and embezzling development funds in the community and leasing community farmlands for unprofitable ventures in the community. These constraints arise from the limited participation of women in the political issues of the community.

Umuebu is patrilineal community; therefore, women's economic security depends on the men. A woman farms her husband's land and do not have farmland rights in the community. This cultural arrangement poses further challenges for women in the community. The women invest their resources on subsistence products while the husbands own the cash products from the farm. This inequality in the management of farmlands and other natural resources translates into poverty for women and makes it challenging to participate in sustainable development projects in the community.

Umuebu Neighborhood House is only about three years old and do not have enough finance to pay all those who work for the association. The association therefore hugely depends on the services of volunteers. This is challenging because women and children who participate in the projects are poor and wish to be paid for all their services. Therefore, poverty is a major challenge hindering the participation of women and children in sustainable development projects in Umuebu community.

According to the Child's Right Act 2003, children have rights to leisure, recreation, and cultural activities, but a few parents in Umuebu have continuously violated this right of children by preventing their children from participating in the neighborhood house projects, According to one of the child- participant in the neighborhood house projects:

“Talk to our parents and our senior brothers, they are the ones discouraging us” (IK, 2012).

It is also important to understand how the challenges stand as obstacles in the context of sustainable development. There is also the need to take advantage of all available opportunities to encourage women and children to participate in sustainable development projects in Nigeria. In addition, efforts at all levels directed towards sustainable development in Nigeria should acknowledge the differing interests of women and children and accommodate their voices.

The implication of the experience in Umuebu is that women and children can participate in the process of sustainable development by participating in finding ways to change patriarchal structures that are detrimental to sustainable development. Local government officials and community development practitioners in communities can apply the knowledge and experience from Umuebu to communities with similar interests, cultural or socio-cultural features.

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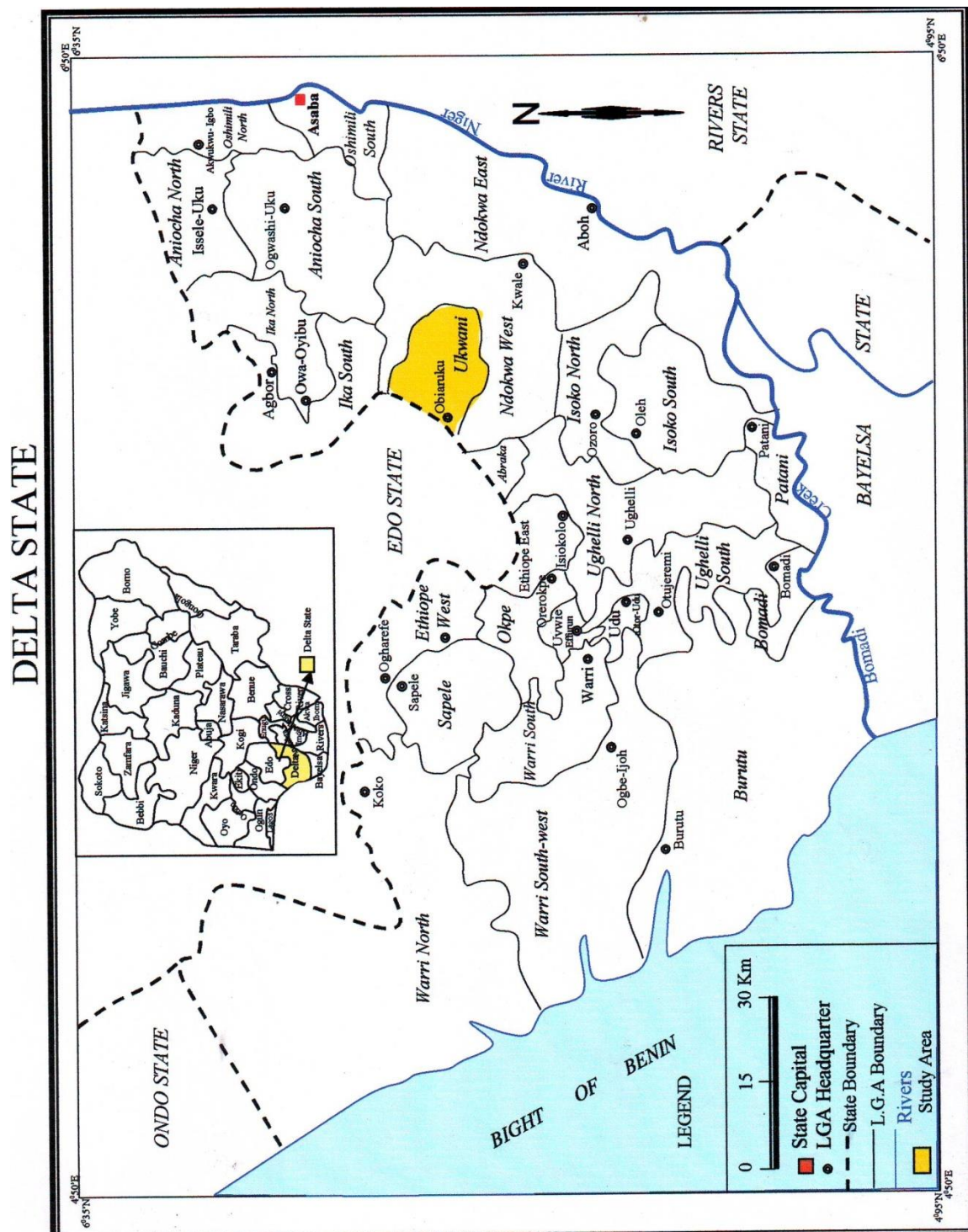
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Appendix 1: Location of Umuebu, Ukwuani Local Government Area, Delta State, Nigeria.



Produced By: Centre for Geographic Information Systems (CGIS) Benin City 2007.
Source: Land Survey, Asaba, 2002.