

**CHARACTERIZATION AND ANALYSIS OF RURAL COMMUNITY ASSOCIATIONS IN A PERI-URBAN COMMUNITY OF IMO STATE, NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper focuses on characterization and analysis of rural community associations in a peri-urban community of Imo state, Nigeria. A qualitative methodology was used to characterize rural community associations in the study area. In Agbala community, these social units exist, comprising of six (6) women organizations, two (2) men organizations, two (2) church groups, one (1) agricultural group and seven (7) age grades. There are more social interactions among the women organizations than the males. However, inter group interaction could be described as weak and might be a manifestation of poor social cohesion in the community. Their scope of activities cover infrastructural development, education concerns, membership welfare and agriculture. Agricultural activity is the least of activities engaged in by these organizations. There is the need to educate the membership of existing community organization on the importance of incorporating economic oriented projects in their programmes. Extension service should concentrate efforts in designing a clear strategy that would utilize the existing social organizations as veritable tools for economic empowerment through grass root mobilization.*

**Keywords:** rural community associations, peri-urban community

**INTRODUCTION**

Human beings from time live in organized communities. Community is defined as a spatial or territorial unit of social organization in which people have a sense of identity and a feeling of belonging (Richard and Robert, 1995). Such aggregation of people living together is bound culturally, politically and socially for their common welfare and development. There is therefore the need to consciously arrange and harness this array of people of diverse interest to improve the livelihood strategies. Thus, the concept of community organization is seen as a method of arranging relationship between the various individuals and groups in a community or their institutions in order for that community to function properly and attain its objectives (Ekong, 2003). Man has constant quest to improve his environment and this he pursues through collective efforts from individuals and social groups within the society.

Social group has been defined by different authorities but these authors commonly agree that social group is made up of a number of individuals who

interact adopting designated patterns of social organization. Some conditions which make an aggregation of individuals qualify as a group includes:

- ❖ Close interaction among them.
- ❖ Members' willingness to share or adopt goals.
- ❖ Members are not coerced to belong.

A social group invariably has common objectives of staying together; accepting a pattern of interaction and the decision to belong is very willingly done compulsion. Although the basic characteristics are similar, various criteria are used in classifying social groups (Asiabaka, 2002; Perry and Perry, 1973; Chitambar, 1977). Some of the criteria are: situational or circumstantial e.g. occupation, religious beliefs, territorial proximity, socio economic interest, institutional attachment; degree of structural arrangement that is formal (organizational structure well defined) and informal group (interaction relatively unstructured) and degree of social distance where group could be primary (when members engage in intimate interaction and cooperation) and secondary (members are not interested in one another but interact in terms of roles and functions assigned).

The implication of the above classification is that groups may differ significantly in their structural arrangement but the essential elements of social organization (norms, social controls and ranking systems) are common to them. When a group becomes large and formally organized, it could be described as an association or organization (Richard and Robert, 1995; Defleur et al., 1972). In this case interests and objectives of the group and members are more articulated and specified. An association is therefore synonymous with organization in that large numbers of people acting as a group relate to one another in an acceptable manner to achieve some designated or mutually agreed objectives or goals. Local associations are therefore social units or institutions that are locally constituted. They are known for participation in socio economic development and environmental resource management of their various communities (IIED, 1992). Their activities are therefore important in catering for the welfare of the rural people. For example, rural farmers in some farmers' associations engage in activities that are of mutual benefits to them. These activities include; exchange of farm inputs and communal labor, teaming up to rent vehicles for the evacuation of farm produce and sharing of farm equipment (Gibbons and Shroeder, 1989). Understanding the modus operandi of such institutions and their existence in communities helps to lay the foundation for effective community participatory extension approach (CPEA) to rural and agricultural development programmes (GTZ, 1992). It is important for the extension worker to know and understand whom he/she is working with. The purpose of this paper is to categorize and analyze community associations in Agbala. In this paper, group, association and organization will be used interchangeably.

### **Survey of Agbala Community**

Community organizations are instrument of social change and are also regarded as change agencies. According to Nwokorie (1999) a community can have many organizations acting as instruments or forces of development through the initiation and implementation of certain specific projects. He further identified such organizations to include; age grades, town unions, cultural group, women groups, co-operative societies, farmers' organization and youth organizations. In South eastern Nigeria, village or community organizations well-rooted in tradition have proven effective in mobilizing participation for development processes since the post-war launching of the "Otu olu obodo" programme in the 70s (Okereke, 1996). "Otu olu obodo" was a clarion call on individuals, organizations and associations within communities in Igboland to complement efforts of government in uplifting and transforming the living standard of the people through the provision of infrastructural facilities. The proliferation of these indigenous associations both formal and informal is because group actions are part of the cultures in which these organizations exist. People voluntarily combine efforts to hunt, clear land, build structures and engage in other socio-economic activities. As a group, there are such benefits as higher bargaining power and availability of resources for their use through the pooling of their individual resources. Verlagen (1980) notes that institutions based on traditional, indigenous forms of collective organizations are sometimes advocated as the most appropriate means of involving the entire population in a balanced process of social and economic development.

In Agbala community in Owerri North Local government Area of Imo State, Nigeria there exist various community associations or organizations. They fulfill enormous variety of personal and societal needs, in addition to shaping the lives of every individual within the community. The following community organizations exist in Agbala:

- ❖ Agbala Town Union (ATU);
- ❖ Ogbako Egbelu Agbala (OEA)
- ❖ Believers Association of Agbala (BEA)
- ❖ Catholic Women Organization (CWO)
- ❖ Agbala farmers' Cooperative Society (AFCS)
- ❖ Ugomba age grade (UA)
- ❖ Olara-iche Age grade (OIA)
- ❖ Omenma Age grade (OA)
- ❖ Odozi Obodo Age grade (OOA)
- ❖ Umunna Age grade(UAG)
- ❖ Ezinwanne Age grade (EA)
- ❖ Udo diri Age grade (UDA)
- ❖ Aladinma women association (AWA)
- ❖ Udokanma women's group (UWG)
- ❖ Ndom chinaemere (NC)
- ❖ Ndom new chasis (NNC)
- ❖ Ndom Umugweze (NUG)
- ❖ Ndom Umuokpo (NUO)

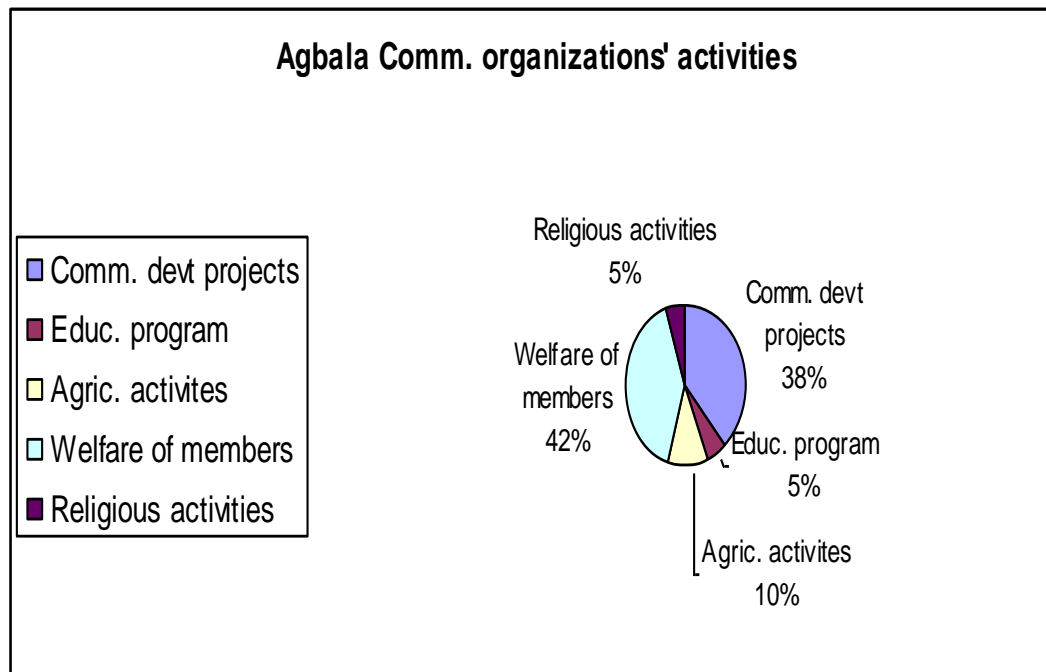
The classification of the organizations would be based on two criteria of:

- a) Activities of the organization and
- b) Gender, with respect to membership.

**Segmentation according to activities**

As mentioned earlier, these organizations engage in a number of multiple activities since there are no restrictions on the type and number of activities. Chart 1 shows their participation in the identified activities in the community.

**Chart 1:** Relative participation of Agbala community organizations in various activities



The chart 1 shows that majority (42%) of the community organizations in Agbala are engaged in activities that promotes the welfare of their members; 38% are involve in community development projects, while 10% are engaged in agricultural activities. Only 5% of the organizations engage in religious and educational related activities respectively. This reflects the type of challenges and needs of Agbala community and as well defines the type of organization that would be found in a community (Ekong, 2003). The age grades are instruments to fulfill and satisfy membership emotional needs as the account for 41.2% of the community organizations. The Age grades are one of the commonest social groups in Igbo communities of south eastern Nigeria. According to Ifemesia (1985) Age grades are known and formed early in life when elders encourage young ones at about the age of three to expand their social horizon by joining their age-mates (Ndi ogbo ya) to play in the village square and playgrounds. Overtime, this informal association becomes organized through encouraging members to develop affinity among members, become cohesive, develop group solidarity, declare common interest and possibly declare collective pursuits and joint achievements (Ebirim, 1990). They are veritable tools for social mobilization and group participation in community development efforts.

Community development has been the main focus of social organizations (see chart 1). Some of the community projects executed include; renovation of the postal agency, construction of secondary school hall and sinking of water borehole and reticulation. Only 10% of the organizations engage in agricultural activities. This implies that economic activities are not their major objective. The concerned organizations (Udokanma Women’s group and Ndom Chinaemere) engage in direct production of food crops like cassava, groundnut, yam and cocoyam. In addition, they provide supplementary labour for members only on request. This confirms earlier findings that community organizations provide labour to supplement family labour in south eastern Nigeria (Chidebelu, 1991). There is the need to encouraging these organizations to metamorphosize into core farmer organizations to enable them play key roles in agricultural extension service delivery system that emphasizes farmer-to-farmer contact approach.

**Segmentation according to gender membership**

**Table 1:** Segmentation of community organizations by gender of membership

<b>Community organization</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
Women organization	7	38.9
Men organization	2	11.1
Others	9	50
Total	18	100

Table 1 indicates that Women organizations

account for 38.9%, men organization 11.1% of all community organizations in Agbala. Other organizations which do not discriminate on the basis of gender accounts for the remaining 50%. Among this later group includes the Age grades and Christian association. Women of south eastern Nigeria are known to play significant role in community development programs through their organizations, which Omolulu (1997) notes as representative of Women’s broader interest. Some are structured and formed to pursue the improvement of the socio economic and political situations of women, while others seek the overall development of the communities where they live in. These organizations are formed independent of Men’s group or influence and membership has been exclusively for women. The existence of women organizations in churches, and communities are a testimony of their importance in the society, which Agbala is not an exception. They include; Aladinma Women Organization, Chinaemere Women’s group, Udokanma Women group, Ndom New Chasis, Ndom Umugwueze, Ndom Umuokpo. The objectives and functions of these Women organizations are limited to the localities as some of their names imply. For instance, The Ndom Umugwueze and Ndom Umuokpo women Organizations are exclusive for women from Umugwueze and Umuokpo communities where

they respectively operate. On the other hand Aladinma Women Organization and Ndom Chinaemere are larger organizations that draw women membership from the length and breadth of Agbala town. Their functions and objectives are broader in perspective as they engage in development efforts that affects the entire town.

Although the women organizations are exclusive for married women in the community they occasionally invite their male counterparts in the Agbala Town union (ATU) or Ogbako Egbelu Agbala (OEB) to intervene whenever there is major dispute among members of the association. Agbala Town union (ATU) and Ogbako Egbelu Agbala (OEB) are the two umbrellas of men association. While OEA was sectional as it addresses development problems in a section of the community, ATU directs and coordinates all development activities in the whole of Agbala community. Every male adult is an automatic member of the organizations. They engage primarily in community development activities, resolve conflicts and settle disputes in the community whenever the need arise.

### **Membership**

All the community organizations draw their membership from the community. Some of the organization like the Agbala Town union and Ogbako Egbelu Agbala offer automatic membership to all male indigenes of the community from eighteen years of age and above. As a result of this condition, they do not maintain nominal role of members at the executive level rather the component sister associations in the various kindred create and maintain the machinery for identifying members.

The age grades differ in their membership as they are specific in adopting age as a criterion for registration. Individuals whose ages fall outside the required age bracket are not admitted in the associations. However, honorary membership could be granted to some individuals based on their supportive roles in promoting the group ideals. Table 2 shows the membership size of the various age grades in the community.

Table 2: Membership size of Agbala community age grades

<b>Age grade</b>	<b>Size of membership (persons)</b>
Ugo mba age grade	35
Olara-iche Age grade	42
Omenma age grade	32
Odozi obodo age grade	28
Umunna age grade	42
Ezinwanne age grade	30
Udo diri age grade	48

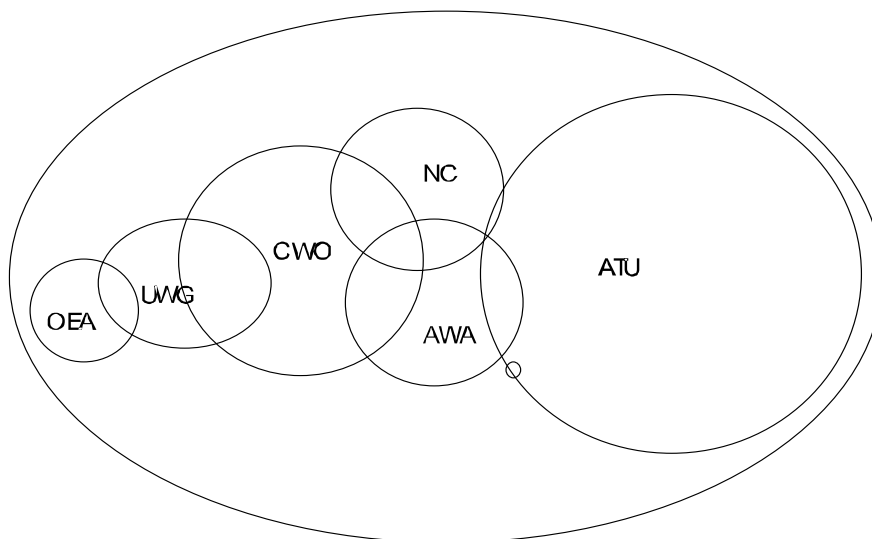
Average: 36.7

The average membership of the age grades was 36.7. It is common among the age-grades for members to enroll with their spouses in order to ensure continuity even at the death of one of the couple.

**Social interactions among the community organizations**

Community organizations are established as the basis for interaction among individuals and groups that exist in a geographical location to satisfy common needs. These social units have specific goals, which guide their interaction with other associations that have similar objectives in the community. At other times their meeting point might be by chance or by virtue of common and uniting factors in the community e.g. religion. Interactions between groups help the social workers (change agents and supporting institutions) to locate common interests and target action for intervention in the community.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS IN AGBALA COMMUNITY



Interactions among most social groups in Agbala could be described as loose. Apart from the strong ties between the two men’s organization and some women’s organizations (OEA and UWG; ATU and AWA and NC), there is no identifiable strong links between the other associations. This is represented in the Venn diagram above. It shows that Ogbako Egbelu Agbala (OEA) maintains strong ties with Udokanma women’s group (UWG), which in turn strongly relates to the CWO due to the dominance of her members drawn from the Catholic Church. Similarly, the Aladinma women association and Ndom Chinaemere strongly relates with the Agbala Town Union (ATU). These high levels of interactions among the women organizations position them as read tools for social and economic development programmes. There are no apparent interactions between and among the age grades and other organizations. However, there exists loose interacting channel through the ATU, which has a wider coverage in her activities within the community.

**CONCLUSION**

Many communities have locally-constituted organizations age grades, development unions, women’s group and Church associations. These social

organizations are formed according to local needs and circumstances and this affects their degree of interactions. Understanding the nature and scope of such organizations is a prerequisite to extending human resource development to underprivileged groups like women farmers and rural youths in remote areas with less access to formal or vocational education. In Agbala community, these social units exist, comprising of six (6) women organizations, two (2) men organizations, two (2) church groups, one (1) agricultural group and seven (7) age grades. There are more social interactions among the women organizations than the males'. However, inter group interaction could be described as weak and might be a manifestation of poor social cohesion in the community. Their scope of activities cover infrastructural development, education concerns, membership welfare and agriculture. Agricultural activity is the least of activities engaged in by these organizations. There is the need to educate the membership of existing community organization on the importance of incorporating economic oriented projects in their programmes. Extension service should concentrate efforts in designing a clear strategy that would utilize the existing social organizations as veritable tools for economic empowerment through grass root mobilization.

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