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Youths' Poverty and Livelihood Strategies in Fegge, Onitsha Urban Local Government Area, Nigeria

Peter Ezeah

Introduction

The world has in recent times been experiencing rapid urbanization. Presently, over 80 per cent of children and youths live in urban cities of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Unicef 2002:21). Sub-Saharan Africa is said to have the most youthful populations in the world. An estimated 200 million young people between the ages of 12 and 24 years live in Africa's urban cities today. This rapid rate of growth has pushed the absolute size of the youth population in Sub-Saharan Africa beyond that of many other regions. By 2030, youths will account for 28 per cent of the population, making Sub-Saharan African the 'youngest' region in the world (Garcia and Fares 2008:5).

The implication of this scenario is that the growth of the population of children and youths is bound to outstrip the coping capacity of poorly resourced governments and economies in developing nations, such as most nations in Africa, to absorb new residents and provide them with adequate jobs, shelter and services. In these circumstances, many if not most children and youths may end up in substandard housing in unserviced and marginal locations with exposure to health hazards and poor nutrition as well as other livelihood challenges.

In Nigeria, an estimated 20 per cent of children and youths are found in cities (Wikipedia, accessed 10th October 2009). Many of the urban youths live in squalid slum dwellings with poor basic infrastructure and social services. Given the situation they are confronted with, the youths are bound to initiate and construct various forms of adaptation as livelihood strategies to enable them to survive and stay in the city. Onitsha is a densely populated city and has a very high percentage of its population made up of youths that migrated from the many communities that

make up the South East geographical zone of Nigeria. Livelihood opportunities are the major attraction of youths to the city.

Conceptual Issues

Around the world the terms 'youth', 'adolescent', 'teenager', and 'young person' are interchangeable term, often meaning the same thing but occasionally differentiated: 'youth' generally refers to the time of life that is neither childhood nor adulthood, but rather somewhere in between (Wikipedia, accessed 10th October 2009). The age varies at which a person is considered a 'youth' and thus eligible for special treatment under the law and throughout society. The United Nations defines youth as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24, while for the World Bank, youth generally refers to those between the ages of 15 and 25 (Wikipedia, accessed 10th October 2009). The African Union defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 35 (African Union Charter 1999). United Nations and Commonwealth Association of Nations Charters (2000) defined youth as persons between the ages 14 and 30. For the purpose of this work, youth is defined as those persons aged between 14 and 30. This is the accepted definition of youth in Nigeria which informs the pegging of the maximum age for the National Youth Service Corps programme at 30 years.

The recent attention paid to urban livelihoods follows from a wide recognition that significant proportions of urban poor in developing countries are vulnerable in terms of their sustainable livelihood systems. Because of the absence of formal employment opportunities in the city, youths take to various forms of informal economic activity as livelihood strategies in order to survive. Urban poverty in developing countries is predicated on the fact that the major urban centres in these countries face tremendous pressure of population with insufficient infrastructure and social services (Hossain 2005).

The urbanization of poverty and the impacts of structural adjustment programmes have lead to a situation in which for many of Africa's poor, urban spaces provide opportunities as well as fears and economic hardships in livelihood provision. Anan (2000:29) captures this succinctly:

Cities are often described as cradles of civilization and sources of cultural and economic renaissance but, for the roughly one third of the developing world's urban population that lives in extreme poverty, they are anything but that. Most of these urban poor have no option but to find housing in squalid and unsafe squatter settlements or slums. And even though the population of cities like countries has on the average become older, slum dwellers are getting younger.

The most accepted definition of poverty is provided by scholars who attempt to combine both material and non-material dimensions of poverty (Chambers 1982, 1992; Sen 1981, 1997). According to Hossain (2005:45), poverty is not defined

solely in terms of low income, but should include broader concepts of deprivation and insecurity. Deprivation occurs when people are unable to reach a certain level of functioning or capability. In this sense, Chambers (1983: 1989) includes 'physical weakness, isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness in addition to lack of income and assets'. A pyramid starting from income poverty as the most measurable, to access to common pool resources, state-provided commodities, assets, dignity, and autonomy are identified (Hossain 2005:46).

In this chapter, poverty is conceived as a multiple concept, including economic and social deprivation particularly for urban poor youths in Nigeria. Thus, poor urban youths are persons who are not able to maintain secure and positive livelihoods due to their limited economic and social resources in the city.

A livelihood is generally defined as comprising the capabilities, assets, and both material and social resources and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood framework may be used as a basis for analyzing, understanding and managing the complexity of lives (Carney 1998, cited in Rakodi 2002:9). In the livelihood framework, poverty is not only characterized by lack of assets and inability to accumulate a portfolio of them, but also by the lack of choice with respect to alternative strategies. The livelihood framework suggests that people can choose, and choices make a difference, despite the economic or social constraints they face. By pooling resources, by working in both formal and informal economies, by self-construction of shelter, and by the use of social networks, youths avoid entrapment in a self-perpetuating culture of poverty (Roberts 1994 cited in Hossain 2005:45).

The livelihood framework is therefore a very useful guide for research and intervention on poverty. It proposes thinking in terms of strength or assets as an antidote to the view of the poor as 'passive' or 'deprived'. Central to the approach is the need to recognize that those who are poor may not have cash or other savings, but they do have other material or non-material assets such as their health, their labour, their knowledge, and the natural resources around them. Livelihood approaches require a realistic understanding of these assets in order to identify what opportunities they may offer, or where constraints may lie.

In a livelihood framework, the poorest and most vulnerable households and individuals are forced to adopt strategies, which enable them to survive but not to improve their welfare (Hossain 2005:46). In urban areas in developing countries, households as well as individuals seek to mobilize resources and opportunities and to combine these into livelihood strategies, which comprise a mix of labour market investment, pooling of labour and assets, and social networking (Rakodi 2002:47). Households and individuals adjust the mix according to their own circumstances and the changing context in which they live. Economic activities form the basis of a household and individual strategy, but to them, and overlapping with them, may be added migration movements, maintenance of ties with rural

areas, such as education and housing, and participation in social networks. The 'livelihoods' concept is a realistic recognition of the multiple activities, in which households and individuals engage to secure survival and improve their well-being (Ellis 1998, cited in Hossain 2005:46). In other words, livelihood strategies are those implicit principles that guide youths when seeking livelihood opportunities for coping with adverse urban conditions.

In a study conducted in the city of Dhaka in Bangladesh, using the livelihood framework, Hossain (2005:50) found how poor communities cope with urban life through 'household strategies' such as putting more family members into the work force, through petty trading, avoiding many basic goods that represent luxuries to them, increasing household size by inducting more relations, withdrawing their children from education, constructing their own shelters, using kinship as social capital, and establishing patron-client relationships with local leaders. These findings provided important indicators for this present study in investigating how youths in Fegge, Onitsha, utilize both economic and non-economic resources to overcome poverty. Urban youths in Onitsha utilized a mixture of economic and social strategies to fight poverty in the city. Economically, the youths are engaged in various informal activities to improve their low-income status and in the process spend their meagre financial resources only on cheap essential commodities so as to encourage savings. They also utilized social networks as social capital as a strategy to boost their limited social resources.

In recent decades the issue of urban poverty in Nigeria has attracted attention from scholars as the major cities in the country face serious challenges of population growth and poverty. Studies by Gugler (1997) and some others in Nigeria used micro- and macro-level data to explain the trend and pattern of urban poverty, as well as the spatial and economic characteristics of the urban poor. However, few studies have focused on the coping mechanisms of poor urban youths in adverse urban settings using the livelihood framework in Nigeria. This is the gap in knowledge that this study sets out to fill. This study therefore investigated the strategies adopted by poor urban youths in response to the challenges of securing livelihoods based on the livelihood framework, in Fegge, Onitsha. To this end, the study focused on the different economic and non-economic resources and activities which the youths in Fegge have developed for adaptation to enable them cope with their livelihoods in the city. The following research questions guided the study.

- (i) What are the different livelihood activities available and accessible to youths in Fegge?
- (ii) In what ways do youths in Fegge utilize economic strategies in overcoming poverty?

- (iii) What are the non-economic strategies adopted by youths in Fegge in dealing with poverty?
- (iv) What are the perceptions of youths in Fegge about their livelihood strategies?
- (v) What are the constraints facing youths in Fegge in their livelihood strategies?

The Study

This study is located in Fegge, Onitsha. Onitsha is one of the largest cities in Nigeria. It is made famous by the River Niger and the Onitsha market, which is one of the biggest markets in West Africa. Onitsha is the gateway to Eastern and South-Eastern Nigeria through the River Niger Bridge. The Onitsha market makes the city the second largest commercial centre in Nigeria, coming after Lagos. Commerce is thus the major factor behind the ever-growing population of Onitsha. A majority of the residents are traders, although manufacturing, crafts, fishing, and different informal economic activities also thrive. A few of the residents are engaged in white-collar employment.

Fegge is one of the settlement areas in Onitsha. It is an over-crowded area with a very high population density, with poor infrastructural facilities and social services. Negotiating livelihoods by residents of Fegge, particularly by children and youths, is often challenging on account of the poor social condition in the area. Fegge is purposively chosen for this study because it has the largest proportion of typical poor urban youths in Onitsha.

According to the Nigerian population census figures (2006), Onitsha had a population of 261,574. This figure is generally perceived to be very low given the fact that the 2006 census exercise in Onitsha was disrupted by violent protests by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) leading to the under-counting of Onitsha residents. Wikipedia (accessed 10th October 2009) estimated the population of Onitsha at 700,000. A breakdown of this figure for the various settlement areas that make up Onitsha including Fegge is not available. However, it is estimated that Fegge has about 150,000 and 45 per cent of this figure is made up children and youths (LEEDS document 2008). The sample size for this study is 220 youths made up of 20 respondents for in-depth interview and 200 for questionnaire data. The respondents were purposively selected from ten different informal economic activities on the basis of availability sampling technique. The informal economic activities are as follows:

- (i) Newspaper vending
- (ii) Food processing and sales
- (iii) Fashion and designing
- (iv) Hair dressing
- (v) Music vending

- (vi) Motorcycle transport (*okada*)
- (vii) Petrol attendant
- (viii) Mobile telephone operators
- (ix) Barrow/truck pushing
- (x) Video/cinema house operators

Two respondents who were not amongst those administered the questionnaire within each of the ten informal economic activities were selected and interviewed. Data for the study were collected in two phases between October and December 2009. Firstly, 20 youths were interviewed based on their different informal economic activities. Secondly, a structured questionnaire was constructed utilizing the information obtained from the in-depth interview on the various forms of adaptation and livelihood strategies by youths in Onitsha. Thus, the structured questionnaire focused on the various forms of adaptation by poor urban youths in Fegge, such as their informal economic activities, expenditure and purchasing patterns, shelter and environmental services, use of social services, rural-urban ties, social networks, urban food production, and community participation

The data from the in-depth interviews were analyzed based on the narratives of the youths on their perspectives and constraints in their livelihood strategies; while descriptive statistics (simple percentages) were used to analyze the questionnaire data.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents shows that a large proportion of the youths (39.5%) are aged 24 to 28, with 54.5 per cent males and 45.5 per cent females. The respondents are fairly educated: about 53 per cent have completed secondary education. Over 96.5 per cent are Christians; and 98 per cent of the Igbo ethnic group. The rates of income and wages for the youths are very low. Their average monthly income is only ₦8,000.00 (US\$55), which is less than US\$2 per day, signifying low-income status of the youths.

The main survival strategy of the urban youths in Fegge is engagement in various informal economic activities listed above. The youths adopt the following strategies within their informal economic activities.

The survey indicated that poor urban youths mostly spend their earnings to meet basic needs of cheap items. They cannot afford to buy expensive items liked meat and milk on regular basis. Some 65 per cent of the youths buy meat or poultry once or twice a month. The youths rarely buy new clothes: most of them buy second-hand clothes. They also depend on other cheap household goods with low prices. Sometimes some of them receive discarded items such as clothes from relatives or friends.

Housing is as major problem in Onitsha generally and particularly for poor urban youths. Some of the youths (25%) live in makeshift shelters that they have built themselves on vacant private and government land, making them squatters in the city. Most of the youths (78%) live in single-roomed housing. In some cases more than four youths live in one congested room. Only 6.5 per cent live in their family houses of more than one room. The majority of youths (57%) cook inside their rooms or in open spaces. They more often cook with firewood, charcoal, and sometimes with kerosene stove. Access to public electricity supply is inadequate and irregular. Sewage systems are poor. Some youths sometimes defecate in fallow lands, which gives pollutes the environment. Similarly, solid waste disposal facilities are lacking. Waste is generally disposed of very close to their settlements, which also poses serious challenges to the physical environment.

The youths have limited access to formal health facilities: only 33 per cent utilize health services from the formal sources. Accessibility and affordability of formal medical services, as well as less attention from physicians, are some of the reasons for the urban poor accepted youths not using government hospitals. Half of them buy their medicines from chemist shops without consulting trained physicians. Some (15%) make use of local herbs and medicines. Urban transportation is chaotic and expensive for poor youths. A large proportion of the youths (41.5%) walk up to six kilometres to their places of business, while 25.5 per cent, use the motorcycle transport system known as *okada*. The youths have little access to outdoor game facilities in the city and they spend their leisure time by playing few indoor games like 'ludo', drafts, and card games. Some of the youth pass their leisure time on most Sundays by watching television or movies, particularly at local television viewing centres (see Omotosho in this volume for a description of these in another south-eastern Nigerian town). There are no zoos, parks, or museums for recreation and leisure in the area.

The level of urban migration to Onitsha affects lives in the city. Only 5 per cent of the youths were born in the city. Others migrated from different rural communities. The major reasons for their migration include poor income in rural areas, and more job opportunities in the cities. However, migration to the city often leaves the youths disappointed when their expectations are not fulfilled. But they do not want to move from the city where they earn some income.

In spite of the fact that they have lived in the city for a while, they do not generally loose their bonds with their kith and kin in their villages of origin. They therefore maintain a dual system as a source of support and sustenance to poor urban youths in the city (see Gugler 1997). Of the urban youths in the survey, 65.5 per cent maintain links with their villages from time to time. One major reason for the youths visiting their villages is farming. The youths bring back such food items like rice, yams, cassava, palm oil, and vegetables cultivated by them or by their relatives to the city. This is an important source of food security for them.

One major source of 'social capital' for these youths is social networking. According to Hossain (2005:46), social networks play an important role for the poor to cope with urban life. The youths in the study maintain various kinship ties while in the city. These networks become social capital in the context of migration to the city by providing the youths with information relating to accommodation, work, and employment opportunities, and to enable them adapt to city life. Neighbourhoods where the youth live also provide social capital to them. Many of the youths (43%) have close relationships with their neighbours. Similarly, landlordship and employment play crucial role for social networks for the youths. Some landlords provide temporary accommodation and care for new migrants. Social networking as a social capital helps to perpetuate reciprocity in the microeconomic life of the youths. Over 70 per cent of the youths visit and invite each other on social occasions. Relatives, friends, and neighbours help poor urban youths to mitigate their economic and social crisis. More than 43 per cent of the youth receive financial assistance from their kin, friends, and neighbours, while 33 per cent of them receive non-financial support such as used clothes, food items, and sundry personal effects from these friends and relatives.

The urban youths utilize structures within their communities to mitigate their problems in the city. More than 53 per cent of the youths are members of different community-based and voluntary organizations. Ethnic affiliation is the basis for group identity, which helps youth to survive in the city. Belonging to a community association is a form of social insurance as these ethnic and community associations render various services to their members – especially in times of adverse life challenges, including death.

A considerable proportion of the youths (56%) take part in party politics: 20.8 per cent served as election monitors and 8 per cent provide security services to politicians. Onitsha is one the hotbeds for political activities in Nigeria. Poor urban youths in the area engage in various political activities as a form of livelihood strategy in the city. For example, for the 2010 gubernatorial election in the state, some of the youths could provide security services (thugs) to politicians for a fee. Thugs are hired by politicians to harass and intimidate political opponents during elections. In many cases thugs contributed to electoral violence and electoral malpractices. Youths serving as security agents or thugs are a common phenomenon in Nigerian political culture. Thuggery is often seen as a lucrative business for youths during elections and many youths get themselves involved because of the financial rewards involved. Youths enjoy doing this job because of the immediate financial remuneration and the hope for employment opportunity at the end of the election should their political master win. However, despite participating in different political activities and maintaining contact with political leaders, the youths complain of being ignored by politicians because their aspirations and expected goals for employment opportunities and provision of social services are often not met.

Perception of the Youths about their Livelihood Strategies

The perception of the youths in Fegge about their livelihood strategies is drawn from what the youths themselves have said, particularly in the in-depth interviews. The general notion in literature is that the roles children and youths play in the labour process in Africa are considered inhumane, exploitative, and degrading (Agbu 2009). However, the findings in this study show that while some youth see their involvement in informal economic activities as undignified, a good number of the youths interviewed (over 60%) perceive their livelihood strategies positively.

One remark made by a 23-year-old University graduate elucidates this point. When asked how he felt working as a motorcycle (*okada*) transport operator, he replied:

Why should I not be happy? I am happy as an *okada* rider. I was doing nothing in my village for two years after my National Youth Service programme. I had no source of income and no support because my parents passed away shortly after my graduation. Since I came to Onitsha and started this motorcycle transportation, my life is changing. It has not been easy, but I am managing to survive.

An 18-year-old female hair dresser/designer shared similar optimism and hope. When asked if she would prefer to return to her village in view of the many difficulties of life in Onitsha, she said, 'I don't want to return to my village even though life in the city is tough. I am making a living here and I am happy with what I am doing.'

One possible explanation for the positive perception of some of the youths about their livelihood strategies is that the poor youths in Onitsha develop bonds of friendship and an ethnic network as social capital to cushion the effects of urban life amongst themselves. According to Reynolds (2007), urban youths are active agents, consumers, and recipients of social capital. Some 70 per cent of the respondents interviewed for this study shared high expectations of their close personal friendships and they were strongly interested in these relationships. Friendship values of reciprocity, trust, equality, honesty, support, loyalty, and mutual understanding recurred in most of the young people's narrations, thus driving home the positive influence of social capital in sustaining poor youths in the city. For example youths share thoughts, aspirations, advice, and hopes together. Some keep custody of property and money for one another with mutual trust.

On the other hand, some of the youths interviewed quite frankly expressed their negative perception about their livelihood strategies in the city. Two of the youths interviewed lamented, 'Life is not easy in Onitsha because there are many difficulties facing residents. Onitsha town is chaotic and disorganized. Lack of basic infrastructure such as electricity affects livelihood in the city.'

With regard to wages, a 19-year-old female petrol attendant stated, 'My monthly wage is very poor and irregular I barely exist. If I get something better, I will quit.'

For her part, an 18-year-old female mobile telephone operator said, 'My work makes me weak and tired. At the end of each day's work my legs are weak for running after customers. The work is hard. I don't want to stay longer doing this work.'

Socio-economic conditions in Onitsha were identified by some of the youths as the major sources of their misgivings about their livelihood strategies. A 20-year-old boy expressed this view: 'Onitsha is overpopulated and many youth are not properly placed in the city. This is why many youths are involved in crimes like armed robbery, human trafficking and other social vices.'

The gender dimension of the perception of the youths about their livelihood strategies was explored. Interestingly, some of the female youths interviewed were quite happy about their informal economic activities. A 25-year-old female newspaper vendor expressed joy about her job. In her words, 'This job has exposed me to many prominent and influential men in the city. Some people whom I am in relationship with are helping me to survive in the city through this job and I am happy about it.'

The study also reveals some challenges in youths' livelihood strategies. For instance, sexual harassment echoed prominently during the interviews with some of the young girls as the major challenge facing them in the city. According to one 22-year-old female mobile telephone operator interviewed:

I have been sexually harassed on different occasions by some men who pretended to be genuine customers. One day a man lured me into his car at about 7.30 in the evening pretending to buy a recharge card from me. I was shocked when he put his hands inside my dress and... My initial reaction was to maintain a distance from male customers. However, one day one of my female friends and a colleague told me that male customers could help improve my livelihood if I agreed to enter into a relationship with them. I am still thinking about it.

Other challenges were also identified as including extortion of money by touts and law enforcement agents; unsafe working conditions that damage health; carrying heavy loads; dangers of motor accidents; harassment and intimidation by law enforcement agents; insecurity of life and property; refusal of some customers to pay for food they have eaten; and accommodation problems.

Conclusion

The inabilities of poor urban youths to access employment in the formal sector push them into different informal economic activities as sources of livelihood in Fegge. The youths consequently utilize economic strategies such as avoiding the purchase of luxury goods and items, and living only on basic goods such as food for survival in the city. They also use non-economic resources or social networks

as social capital including ethnic and friendship bonds, participation in urban politics and serving as security agents to politicians during elections, belonging to community/neighbourhood organizations, etc., as strategies to deal with their condition of poverty in the city. These strategies are in line with the livelihood framework, which considers the use of economic resources and other material resources for the enhancement of the well-being of urban poor youths in city.

In addition, the youths in Fegge also perceive their livelihood strategies positively. Some youths do not see themselves as engaged in degrading and exploitative informal economic activities. Indeed, some female respondents in the interview contended that their work has helped to expose them to many prominent men in the city who have helped them maintain positive livelihoods. In the same vein, some of the male youths asserted that informal work in the city has helped in raising their status out of unemployment, which they suffered prior to their migration to the city. In spite of these positive perceptions, however, youths are faced by some challenges such as sexual harassment, extortion of money by touts and law enforcement agents, insecurity of life and property, etc, in their livelihoods in Fegge.

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