

Barriers to Access and Utilization of Available Youth Empowerment Programmes in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State

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Abstract: *The need for youth empowerment became glaring in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, to help re-focus the youths on meaningful self-development. This was as a result of the high level of youth restiveness over issues of marginalization, neglect by the federal government and the poor development of the region, which gave rise to militancy, kidnapping and other forms of exploitations amongst youths. These risk factors associated with the struggle left a huge negative impact such as un-employability on a large number of youths in the region. The study focused on analyzing the barriers to access and utilization of available youth empowerment programmes in Ogbia LGA of Bayelsa State. The questionnaire and in-depth interview were used as instruments for collection of data from 510 and 28 respondents respectively. The quantitative data were analysed using version 20 of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and frequency distribution tables and percentages were used to present the results. Chi-square (χ^2) was used to test the four hypotheses; binary logistic regression was used to predict the effect of independent variables on a dependent variable while the qualitative data collected were analysed in themes as complement to the quantitative data. The independent variables included: 'distance to programme location', 'attitude of government and youths', 'awareness', and 'sex', while the dependent variables were 'utilization'. The findings of the study revealed that a few majority of the respondents were aware of the youth empowerment programmes in Ogbia LGA of Bayelsa State; however, majority of them have not benefitted from any youth empowerment programmes. Among the findings was that younger youths have access to the programmes more than the older youths. Findings further revealed that there was statistical significance between the place of residence and perception of access while age, marital status, religion and education had no statistical significance. Also, education had statistical significance with utilization while the place of residence, age, marital status and religion had no statistical significance. Majorly, findings from the hypotheses tested showed that distance, attitude and awareness were significant predictors of utilization. This was confirmed using the binary linear regression analysis, only distance was not significant with perception of access but its long run significance was positive as were attitude and awareness, whereas sex had no influence and this was confirmed using the binary linear regression analysis. This implies that distance, attitude and awareness are significant predictors of access and utilization of the YEP. From the findings the study recommends that Government, policy makers and NGOs can collaborate to reduce the barriers to access and utilization of youth empowerment programmes. Government is also charged with ensuring there is adequate funding and that monitoring, maintenance and sustenance mechanisms are put in place for effective youth empowerment programmes in the area*

Keywords: barriers, youth empowerment, Programmes, Ogbia Local Government Area , Bayelsa State

INTRODUCTION

Youth empowerment has become a central theme in national development strategies across sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in countries like Nigeria, where over 60% of the population is under the age of 35. The Nigerian youth face significant challenges including unemployment, poverty, lack of access to education, and political marginalization. In response, various government and non-governmental organizations have implemented Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEPs) aimed at enhancing skills, providing employment opportunities, and fostering economic independence.

In Bayelsa State, several programmes such as the Bayelsa State Youth Empowerment Scheme (BSYES), N-Power, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) interventions, and the Amnesty Empowerment Scheme (AES) have been introduced. These initiatives are designed to address youth unemployment, reduce restiveness in the Niger Delta region, and promote sustainable development. However, despite the existence of these programmes, many youths remain unaware of them, while others who are aware face significant barriers in accessing and utilizing the benefits.

This study focuses on Ogbia Local Government Area (LGA), a predominantly rural region in Bayelsa State, where infrastructure, awareness, and governance challenges may limit the reach of empowerment initiatives. The effectiveness of any empowerment programme depends not only on its design but also on accessibility, inclusiveness, and responsiveness to the needs of the target population. Therefore, understanding the barriers that prevent youths from benefiting from these programmes is crucial for policy improvement and programme optimization.

The study is grounded in the belief that youth empowerment is not just about financial or material support but also about creating enabling environments where young people can participate meaningfully in social, economic, and political processes. It draws on both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a holistic understanding of the situation on the ground.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the proliferation of youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria, youth unemployment and underemployment remain persistently high, particularly in the Niger Delta region. In Ogbia LGA, many youths continue to live in poverty, lack skills, and are excluded from national development initiatives. While various YEPs exist, evidence suggests that their reach and impact are limited due to multiple barriers.

These barriers include poor public awareness, geographical inaccessibility, bureaucratic bottlenecks, corruption, inadequate funding, and negative attitudes from both government officials and beneficiaries. For instance, some youths are unaware of existing programmes, while others who apply face long delays, lack of feedback, or outright exclusion due to tribalism or political affiliations.

Furthermore, many programmes are centralized in urban centres, making it difficult for rural youths to access them. The lack of transparency and monitoring mechanisms also undermines trust and participation. As a result, the potential benefits of these programmes such as job creation, skill acquisition, and poverty reduction are not fully realized.

This study seeks to investigate the specific barriers that hinder access and utilization of YEPs in Ogbia LGA and to propose actionable solutions for improving programme delivery and inclusiveness.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the level of awareness of youth empowerment programmes among youths in Ogbia LGA?
2. What is the extent of access to and utilization of YEPs by youths in the area?
3. What are the major challenges hindering access and utilization of these programmes?
4. What strategies can be implemented to improve access and utilization?

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to examine the barriers to access and utilization of youth empowerment programmes in Ogbia LGA, Bayelsa State. The specific objectives were to:

1. Assess the level of awareness of existing youth empowerment programmes.
2. Determine the extent of access to and utilization of these programmes.
3. Identify the challenges that hinder effective participation.
4. Propose strategies for enhancing access and utilization.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are significant for several stakeholders:

Policy Makers: The results will inform the design and implementation of more inclusive and effective youth empowerment policies.

Government Agencies: Organizations like NDDC, BSYES, and N-Power can use the findings to improve transparency, outreach, and service delivery.

Social Workers: The study provides insights into community-level challenges and offers intervention strategies.

Academia: It contributes to existing literature on youth development and empowerment in Nigeria.

Youth Organizations: The findings can guide advocacy and sensitization efforts.

Empirical Literature on Youth Empowerment Programmes

Youth empowerment programmes (YEPs) have become critical instruments for addressing youth unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion in developing countries, particularly in Nigeria. These programmes are designed to equip young people with skills, financial resources, and opportunities that

enhance their socio-economic status and promote active citizenship. Despite their proliferation, studies have shown that access and utilization remain low due to a range of structural and systemic barriers.

A key challenge identified in the literature is low awareness of available programmes. Ajibola, Salau, and Aladejare (2014) observed that officials in charge of empowerment schemes often fail to conduct adequate sensitization campaigns, leaving many youths uninformed about the existence, benefits, and application processes of these initiatives. This lack of public enlightenment is particularly pronounced in rural areas like Ogbia Local Government Area, where information dissemination is limited by poor infrastructure and weak communication networks.

Similarly, Emaduku (2016) noted that many youths who are eligible for empowerment programmes remain excluded due to inadequate outreach and opaque selection processes. In some cases, beneficiaries are selected based on political affiliations, tribalism, or personal connections rather than merit, which undermines the inclusiveness and fairness of the programmes. This finding is corroborated by field data from this study, where participants expressed frustration over repeated failed attempts to access programmes, stating: *“We know how many times we have tried to access these programmes but to no avail.”*

Another significant barrier is geographical inaccessibility. Many YEPs are centralized in urban centres, making it difficult for rural youths to participate. Transportation costs, long distances, and poor road networks often discourage participation. As one focus group participant noted: *“Some of us were beneficiaries of the N-Power programme but couldn’t keep up with everyday transportation or trekking, so some had to just stop.”* This highlights the need for decentralized programme delivery and the establishment of local training centres.

Corruption and poor governance also play a major role in limiting access. Oomi (2012) emphasized that executive corruption in Nigeria has far-reaching socio-economic implications, including the misallocation of resources meant for youth development. When funds are embezzled or mismanaged, the quality and reach of empowerment programmes are compromised. Furthermore, the absence of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms allows corrupt practices to persist unchecked.

The lack of post-training support is another critical issue. Many youths receive training but are not provided with start-up kits, seed capital, or employment linkages, which reduces the long-term impact of the programmes. As one respondent stated, *“The skill might be useless without the start-up kits.”* This aligns with findings from the World Bank (2009), which stressed that training must be linked to actual job market opportunities to ensure successful job placement and self-employment.

Availability and Types of Youth Empowerment Programmes in Nigeria

Nigeria has implemented several youth empowerment initiatives at both federal and state levels. These include:

N-Power: A federal government scheme under the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) that provides job placements, skills acquisition, and stipends for unemployed graduates and non-graduates.

Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC): Focuses on youth training and development in the oil-producing Niger Delta region, including Ogbia LGA.

Amnesty Empowerment Scheme (AES): Targets former militants and vulnerable youths in the Niger Delta, offering vocational training and rehabilitation.

Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P): Introduced the Graduate Internship Scheme (GIS) to provide unemployed graduates with work experience in public and private sectors.

Bayelsa State Youth Empowerment Scheme (BSYES): A state-level initiative aimed at reducing youth unemployment through skills training and entrepreneurship development.

SEEFOR (State Employment and Expenditure for Results): A World Bank-assisted project implemented in Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, and Rivers States to create employment and improve public service delivery.

According to an IDI respondent (SEEFOR official), “The N-Power and Amnesty Programme are the most common federal government empowerment programmes,” while SEEFOR and other donor-funded projects periodically support youth development in the state.

However, despite the availability of these programmes, their reach remains limited.

Table 4.10 from the field survey (2019) shows that only a small proportion of respondents had benefited from any of the programmes:

Table 4.10: Percentage distribution of respondents on types of YEP benefitted from (N=510)

Benefitted from YEP	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Oil & Gas/SURE-P	25	4.9
See For/Trader Moni	46	9.0
NDDC/Npower	26	5.1
Bayelsa State Youth Empowerment scheme	11	2.2
Amnesty Empowerment Scheme	13	2.5
2-3 of the above	2	0.4
Not applicable	387	75.9
Total	510	100.0

This indicates a significant gap between programme availability and actual youth participation.

Awareness and Utilization Levels

Awareness is a critical precursor to access and utilization. The field survey revealed that while many youths are aware of YEPs, the depth of knowledge is often shallow. For instance, only 33.5% of respondents' perceived access to YEPs as high, while 24.1% reported actually utilizing any programme. This disconnect suggests that awareness alone is not sufficient — there must be clear pathways to application and participation.

The survey shows that a significant number of respondents believed that the media, government, and community leaders should play a greater role in disseminating information about YEPs. Respondents emphasized the need for door-to-door sensitization, enlightenment campaigns, and collaboration with social workers and media personnel to improve awareness.

Moreover, the perception of access varies by demographic factors. Data from cross-tabulation shows:

- **By education level:** Youths with higher education were more likely to perceive access as high ($\chi^2 = 29.290$; $p < 0.000$).
- **By age:** Younger respondents (18–25) were more optimistic about access than older ones.
- **By residence:** Urban residents reported higher access than rural dwellers.

These disparities highlight the influence of socio-economic and structural factors on access and underscore the need for targeted interventions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three key theories that provide a conceptual foundation for understanding youth empowerment:

Participatory Approach

The participatory approach emphasizes the inclusion of beneficiaries in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of development programmes. Ering (2000) argues that sustainable development must place people not just materials or funds at the centre. When youths are actively involved in decision-making, programmes become more responsive to their needs and more likely to succeed. However, in practice, many YEPs are top-down, with little youth input, leading to mismatched skills training and low motivation.

Systems Theory

Systems theory views society as an interconnected network of institutions (family, education, government) that influence individual behaviour. In the context of youth empowerment, barriers such as poor education, family poverty, and weak governance form a system that limits opportunities. Addressing youth unemployment, therefore, requires a holistic approach that transforms multiple systems simultaneously.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment theory, as defined by the World Bank (2011), refers to “the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.” For youths, empowerment means not just receiving training or money, but gaining the confidence, knowledge, and power to shape their futures. This theory supports the idea that empowerment is a lifelong process, not a one-time intervention.

Hypothesis Development

Based on the literature and theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were tested in the study:

- H₁: There is a significant relationship between awareness of YEPs and access to the programmes.
- H₂: Proximity to training centres significantly influences utilization of YEPs.
- H₃: Attitude of youths towards empowerment programmes affects their utilization.
- H₄: Socio-economic status (education, income, residence) significantly predicts access and utilization.

These hypotheses were tested using chi-square and logistic regression analyses, with results discussed in Chapter Four.

Summary of Literature

The literature consistently shows that while youth empowerment programmes exist in Nigeria, their effectiveness is hampered by poor awareness, geographical barriers, corruption, inadequate funding, and lack of post-training support. Theoretical perspectives emphasize the need for participation, systemic change, and genuine empowerment. This study builds on these insights by focusing on Ogbia LGA, where rural-urban disparities and governance challenges are pronounced. The findings aim to inform policy and improve programme delivery for greater inclusiveness and impact.

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is particularly suitable for investigating the barriers to access and utilization of Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEPs) in Ogbia Local Government Area, Bayelsa State. The descriptive survey design allows for the systematic collection of data from a target population to describe prevailing conditions, attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions regarding a phenomenon in this case, youth empowerment initiatives.

The design enabled the researcher to gather both quantitative and qualitative data using structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews (IDIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). This mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter by combining statistical analysis with rich, contextual narratives from key informants and community members. According to Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2006), survey research is effective in identifying patterns, relationships, and trends

within large populations, making it ideal for assessing public awareness, access levels, and challenges related to government programmes.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Ogbia Local Government Area (LGA) of Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Ogbia LGA is located in the central senatorial district of the state and shares boundaries with several other LGAs, including Yenagoa, Nembe etc. It is predominantly a rural area with a population largely dependent on fishing, farming, and artisanal activities. The region has been identified as one of the areas affected by youth restiveness due to unemployment, poverty, and underdevelopment making it a critical site for evaluating the effectiveness of youth empowerment interventions.

Ogbia comprises several communities including Oloibiri (widely recognized as the birthplace of Nigeria's oil industry). These communities were included in the study due to their varying levels of exposure to federal and state empowerment schemes such as N-Power, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) training, Amnesty Empowerment Scheme (AES), and the Bayelsa State Youth Empowerment Scheme (BSYES).

Study Population

The population for this study consisted of youths aged 15–45 years residing in Ogbia LGA, as well as key stakeholders involved in the implementation of YEPs. This age range exceeds the age range of the National Youth Policy of Nigeria, which defines youth as individuals between 18 and 35 years and that of the African Youth Charter which considers youth age to be 15-35 years, due to the realities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, which is hinged on the people's socio-economic context.

In addition to the general youth population, the study included officials from implementing agencies, such as representatives from N-Power, SEEFOR (State Employment and Expenditure for Results), and NDDC, who served as participants in the In-Depth Interviews (IDIs). These officials provided valuable insights into the structure, challenges, and operational dynamics of the programmes.

Sample Size

A sample size of 560 respondents was used for the study while 510 respondents were retrieved, covering a broader cross-section of the population across different communities and demographic categories.

This represents a 91.1% response rate, which is considered high and enhances the reliability and generalizability of the findings. The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane formula for calculating sample size in finite populations:

\[

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

\]

Where:

- (n) = required sample size

- (N) = total population (560)

- (e) = margin of error (0.05)

Substituting the values:

[

$$n = \frac{560}{1 + 560(0.05)^2} = \frac{560}{1 + 1.4} = \frac{560}{2.4} \approx 233$$

]

Sampling Technique

The study employed a multi-stage sampling technique to ensure representativeness and fairness in selection:

Stage One: Stratification of Ogbia LGA into the four major development areas (e.g. Ogbia Central, Anyama, Kolo Creek and Oloibiri).

Stage Two: Proportional allocation of the sample size based on the estimated youth population in each community.

Stage Three: Simple random sampling using balloting method to select individual respondents from each community.

Stage Four: Purposive sampling was used to select 10 key informants for In-Depth Interviews (IDIs), including programme coordinators, social workers, and government officials with direct knowledge of YEPs.

Stage Five: Four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted, each consisting of 8–10 participants (totalling 36), selected based on age, gender, and previous participation (or non-participation) in any YEP.

This combination of random and purposive sampling ensured both statistical validity and qualitative depth.

Instruments for Data Collection

Three primary instruments were used to collect data:

1. **Structured Questionnaire:** A well-designed, pre-tested questionnaire was administered to the 560 youth respondents. The questionnaire was divided into sections aligned with the research objectives and questions. It contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions covering:

- Socio-demographic characteristics (age, sex, education, marital status)

- Awareness of YEPs
- Access and utilization levels
- Challenges faced
- Suggested solutions

In-Depth Interview (IDI) Guide: A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct one-on-one interviews with 10 key informants. The guide allowed flexibility to probe deeper into issues such as programme implementation, funding, monitoring, and policy gaps.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide: A discussion guide was used to facilitate interactive sessions with youths. The FGDs explored collective experiences, perceptions, and suggestions regarding YEPs. Efforts were made to ensure balanced gender representation and diverse viewpoints.

Data Administration

Data collection was carried out over a period of four weeks in 2019. The researcher, with the assistance of two trained research assistants, personally administered the questionnaires to ensure clarity and minimize errors. Prior to administration, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the purpose of the study was explained in simple language.

For the IDIs and FGDs, audio recordings were made (with permission), and field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. One FGD session initially faced challenges as some participants attempted to exaggerate responses due to frustration with government policies. However, the researcher intervened by clarifying the academic nature of the study and encouraging honest, balanced input.

To ensure validity, the instruments were pre-tested in a neighbouring community (not part of the final sample), and necessary adjustments were made to improve clarity and relevance.

Method of Data Analysis

Data analysis was both quantitative and qualitative:

- **Quantitative Data:** Collected through the questionnaire was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and charts were used to summarize socio-demographic variables and responses. Inferential statistics, including Chi-square (χ^2) tests and binary logistic regression, were employed to test the hypotheses and determine relationships between variables (e.g., awareness and access, education level and utilization).

- **Qualitative Data:** Transcripts from IDIs and FGDs were thematically analysed. Key themes such as awareness, access barriers, corruption, geographical challenges, and recommendations were identified, coded, and interpreted to provide context to the quantitative findings.

The integration of both data types enhanced the credibility and richness of the results, allowing for triangulation and a more holistic understanding of the barriers to youth empowerment in Ogbia LGA.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study on barriers to access and utilization of Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEPs) in Ogbia Local Government Area, Bayelsa State. Data were collected from 510 youth respondents through structured questionnaires, 10 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs), and four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving 36 participants. The results are presented under thematic sections aligned with the research objectives: socio-demographic characteristics, awareness, access and utilization, challenges, and inferential analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 20, while qualitative responses were thematically coded and interpreted.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The socio-demographic profile of respondents provides context for understanding their experiences with YEPs. As shown in Tables 4.1 to 4.5:

- Sex: 65.1% (332) of respondents were male, while 34.9% (178) were female.
- Place of Residence: 52.2% (266) resided in rural areas, and 47.8% (244) in urban areas.
- Age: The majority (49.0%) were aged 15–25 years, followed by 36.9% aged 26–45 years.
- Marital Status: 67.1% (342) were not currently married, while 32.9% (168) were married.
- Education Level: 70.6% (360) had tertiary education, 29.4% (150) had secondary education or less.

Figure 4.1 (not shown here) illustrates that Christianity was the dominant religion (97.8%), followed by Islam (2.2%).

These findings indicate that the sample consisted largely of young, unmarried, educated males from both rural and urban communities a demographic highly affected by unemployment and thus a key target for empowerment initiatives.

Table 4.1: Distribution of Respondents by Sex (N=510)

Table 4.1: Percentage distribution of respondents by sex (N=510)

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	244	47.8
Female	266	52.2
Total	510	100.0

Source: *Field survey, 2019*

Table 4.2: Distribution of Respondents by Age (N=510)

Table 4.2: Percentage distribution of respondents by place of residence (N=510)

Place of residence	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Urban	261	51.2
Rural	249	48.8
Total	510	100.0

Source: *Field survey, 2019*

Table 4.3: Percentage Distribution of Respondents by Awareness of YEPs (N=510)

Table 4.3: Percentage distribution of respondents by age (N=510)

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
15-19	35	6.9
20-24	135	26.5
25-29	152	29.8
30-34	107	21.0
35-39	40	7.8
40-44	41	8.0
Total	510	100.0

Source: *Field survey, 2019*

Table 4.4: Percentage distribution of respondents by marital status (N=510)

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Married	168	31.0
Single	292	60.2
Divorced	30	5.5
Widowed	20	3.3
Total	510	100.0

Source: *Field survey, 2019*

Table 4.5: Percentage distribution of respondents by level of education (N=510)

Level of education	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No formal education	19	3.7
FSLC	12	2.4
WAEC/GCE	219	42.9
OND/NCE	45	8.8
HND/BSC	166	32.5
Others (M.Sc, PhD, Professional certificate)	49	9.7
Total	510	100.0

Source: *Field survey, 2019*

Awareness of Youth Empowerment Programmes

Awareness is a critical first step toward access. The study found that while many youths had heard of YEPs, detailed knowledge was limited.

- **General Awareness:** 67.1% of respondents reported being aware of at least one YEP.

- **Types Known:** The most commonly known programmes were N-Power (54.7%), NDDC (43.1%), and Amnesty Scheme (37.8%).

- **Sources of Information:** Respondents cited radio (38.2%), social media (29.4%), and word of mouth (22.0%) as primary sources.

However, 33.5% perceived access to YEPs as high, while 66.5% perceived it as low, indicating a gap between awareness and actual accessibility.

An IDI respondent (SEEFOR official) noted: “The N-Power and Amnesty Programme are the most common federal government empowerment programmes.” However, FGD participants in Oloibiri expressed scepticism: “We don’t even know if these programmes are real... government makes noise but we see no dividends.”

Access and Utilization of YEPs

Despite awareness, actual participation remains low. From the utilization rate: only 24.1% (123) of respondents had ever benefited from any YEP. The most Utilized Programmes are clearly stated in the table below:

Table 4.4: Percentage Distribution of Respondents on Types of YEP Benefitted From (N=510)

Benefitted from YEP	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Oil & Gas/SURE-P	25	4.9
See For/Trader Moni	46	9.0
NDDC/Npower	26	5.1
Bayelsa State Youth Empowerment scheme	11	2.2
Amnesty Empowerment Scheme	13	2.5
2-3 of the above	2	0.4
Not applicable	387	75.9
Total	510	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2019

In Figure 4.2: Percentage Distribution of YEP Beneficiaries shows that over 75% of youths had never participated in any programme.

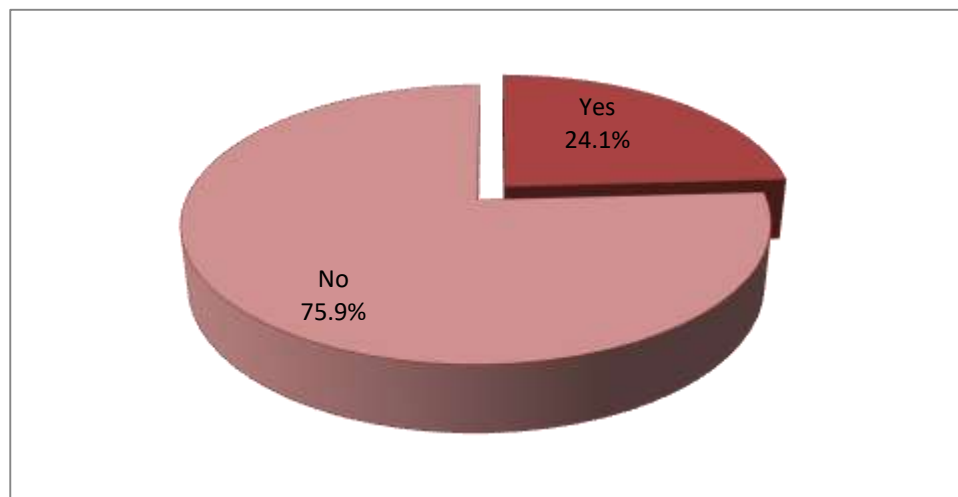


Figure 4.2: Percentage distribution of beneficiaries of the YEP (N=510)

Source: Field survey, 2019

A SEEFOR official observed: “Some persons shortlisted for the programmes most times refused to turn up... those who did, do not show seriousness.” This highlights both access and commitment challenges.

Challenges to Access and Utilization

Respondents identified multiple barriers:

1. Poor Awareness (38.4%) – Many youths are unaware of application processes.
2. Geographical Distance (28.2%) – Training centres are often far from rural communities.
3. Corruption and Favoritism (18.6%) – Selection based on connections rather than merit.
4. Lack of Information (10.4%) – No clear guidelines or feedback after application.
5. Inadequate Funding (4.4%) – Programmes lack resources for full implementation.

Challenges Hindering Access and Utilization

Pie chart drawn reflected: Poor Awareness 38.4%, Distance 28.2%, Corruption 18.6%, Lack of Info 10.4%, and Underfunding 4.4%). One FGD participant said: “Some of us were beneficiaries of N-Power but couldn’t keep up with transportation so some had to just stop.” This underscores the need for decentralized training and transport support. Another major issue is on lack of start-up kits after empowerment, 52.4% of respondents believed that empowerment is meaningless without start up support.

Table 4.5: Reasons for Needing Start-up Kits (N=510)

Reasons for startup kits	Frequency	Percentage (%)
For easy start up	118	52.4
To put the learned skill to practice	49	21.8
Encourages hard work	49	21.8
The skill might be useless without the startup kits	9	4.0
Total	510	100.0

Source: *Field survey, 2019*

Cross-Tabulation and Inferential Analysis

Chi-square and logistic regression tests were used to examine relationships between variables.

- Awareness and Utilization: $\chi^2 = 29.290$, $p < 0.000$ — highly significant. Youths with higher awareness were more likely to utilize YEPs.
- Education and Utilization: $\chi^2 = 29.290$, $p < 0.000$ — tertiary education significantly predicts utilization.
- Residence and Access: Urban residents were more likely to access YEPs than rural dwellers ($\chi^2 = 8.697$, $p = 0.003$).
- Attitude and Utilization: Positive attitude correlated with higher utilization ($\chi^2 = 7.856$, $p = 0.005$).

Below are the Binary Logistic Regression Results:

Predictors of Access to YEP (Logistic Regression)

Variable	p-value	Significance
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Awareness	< 0.000	Significant
Proximity	0.035	Significant
Education	0.072	Not significant
Age	0.101	Not significant

Predictors of Utilization of YEP

| Variable | p-value | Significance |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Awareness | < 0.000 | Significant |

| Attitude | 0.005 | Significant |

| Marital Status | 0.439 | Not significant |

| Sex | 0.153 | Not significant |

These results confirm that awareness and positive attitude are key drivers of utilization, while proximity to training centres significantly affects access.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal a significant gap between the existence of Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEPs) and their actual access and utilization by youths in Ogbia Local Government Area, Bayelsa State. Despite the presence of federal and state initiatives such as N-Power, NDDC, Amnesty Scheme, and BSYES, only 24.1% of respondents had ever benefited from any programme. This low utilization rate is alarming, especially in a region plagued by youth unemployment, poverty, and underdevelopment.

The study found that while 67.1% of youths were aware of at least one YEP, awareness alone did not translate into participation. This disconnect suggests that awareness campaigns, where they exist, are often superficial and fail to provide actionable information on application processes, eligibility criteria, and timelines. This finding is corroborated by Ajibola, Salau, and Aladejare (2014), who noted that officials in charge of empowerment schemes frequently fail to conduct meaningful sensitization programmes. As one FGD participant in Oloibiri lamented: “We don’t even know if these programmes are real... government makes noise but we see no dividends.” Moreover, the perception of access varied significantly by demographic factors. Youths with tertiary education were more likely to perceive access as high ($\chi^2 = 29.290$; $p < 0.000$), indicating that education level influences both awareness and confidence in navigating bureaucratic systems. Similarly, urban residents reported higher access than rural dwellers ($p = 0.003$), highlighting the urban-rural divide in programme delivery.

Awareness and Access Relationship

The logistic regression analysis confirmed that awareness is a significant predictor of both access ($p < 0.000$) and utilization ($p < 0.000$). This underscores the importance of public enlightenment as a foundational step in empowerment. However, awareness must go beyond mere announcements — it must be targeted, repeated, and accessible to all, especially in remote communities with limited media access.

The study recommends that government and programme providers collaborate with media personnel, social workers, and community leaders to organize door-to-door sensitization campaigns. Radio broadcasts in local languages, town hall meetings, and mobile information vans can enhance reach. As one IDI respondent (SEEFOR official) noted, “The N-Power and Amnesty Programme are the most common federal government empowerment programmes,” yet their visibility does not guarantee inclusiveness.

Influence of Proximity and Infrastructure

Geographical distance emerged as a major barrier, with 28.2% of respondents citing poor location of training centres as a challenge. Many programmes are centralized in urban centres like Yenagoa, making it difficult for rural youths to attend regular sessions. Transportation costs and poor road networks further discourage participation.

As one FGD participant stated: “Some of us were beneficiaries of the N-Power programme but couldn’t keep up with everyday transportation or trekking, so some had to just stop.” This finding aligns with World Bank (2009), which emphasizes that training must be linked to real-world accessibility and support systems.

The regression analysis showed that proximity to training centres significantly influences access ($p = 0.035$). Therefore, decentralizing programme delivery by establishing local training hubs in each community would greatly improve participation. Mobile training units and partnerships with local schools or community centres can also reduce logistical barriers.

Role of Corruption and Governance

Corruption and lack of transparency were frequently cited as obstacles. 18.6% of respondents attributed their exclusion to favouritism, tribalism, or political affiliations. This reflects a broader issue of weak governance and accountability in public programmes.

An IDI respondent noted that some shortlisted beneficiaries refused to show up or lacked seriousness, suggesting that the selection process may not adequately screen for commitment. To address this, the study recommends the establishment of monitoring and evaluation teams to track attendance, performance, and post-training outcomes. Youths who fail to participate should be replaced to avoid vacant positions.

This finding concurs with Kundiri and Umar (2017) and Olaniran and Mncube (2018), who emphasized that lack of monitoring and evaluation undermines the sustainability of YEPs. Regular audits, public disclosure of beneficiary lists, and whistle-blower mechanisms can enhance transparency and public trust.

Attitudinal and Structural Barriers

Attitude was found to be a significant predictor of utilization ($p = 0.005$). A positive mind set toward self-reliance and skill acquisition increases the likelihood of active participation. However, years of unmet expectations have led to cynicism and apathy among many youths, who view empowerment schemes as political tools rather than genuine development initiatives.

Furthermore, the lack of start-up kits and post-training support renders many skills useless. Over 52.4% of respondents agreed that empowerment is meaningless without start up kits to practice learned skills. As one participant noted: “The skill might be useless without the start-up kits.”

This aligns with the Empowerment Theory (World Bank, 2011), which defines empowerment as the expansion of assets and capabilities to influence institutions that affect one’s life. Without financial or material support, training alone cannot lead to economic independence.

Strategies for Improvement

Respondents and key informants proposed several strategies to improve access and utilization:

1. Door-to-door sensitization campaigns using media and social workers.
2. Decentralization of training centres to bring programmes closer to rural communities.
3. Provision of start-up kits and seed capital to enable self-employment.
4. Strengthening monitoring and evaluation to ensure accountability.
5. Sanctioning corrupt officials and replacing uncommitted beneficiaries.
6. Improving funding and infrastructure to attract qualified trainers and modern equipment.

These strategies are consistent with the Participatory Approach (Ering, 2000), which places people not just funds at the centre of development. When youths are involved in programme design and oversight, they are more likely to trust and engage with the process.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings

This study examined the barriers to access and utilization of Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEPs) in Ogbia Local Government Area, Bayelsa State. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 510 youth respondents, supported by 10 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The findings revealed that despite the existence of several YEPs including N-Power, NDDC, Amnesty Scheme, BSYES, and SEEFOR, access and utilization remain critically low.

Key findings include:

- Only 33.5% of respondents perceived access to YEPs as high.
- A mere 24.1% had actually utilized any programme, indicating a significant gap between awareness and participation.
- The most commonly known programmes were N-Power (54.7%) and NDDC (43.1%), yet actual benefit was minimal.

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- Major barriers identified were poor awareness (38.4%), geographical distance (28.2%), corruption and favouritism (18.6%), lack of information (10.4%), and inadequate funding (4.4%).

- Proximity to training centres and level of awareness were statistically significant predictors of access ($p = 0.035$ and $p < 0.000$, respectively).

- Attitude of youths and awareness significantly influenced utilization ($p = 0.005$ and $p < 0.000$).

The study also found that start-up kits and stipends are crucial for sustained participation. Over 52.4% of respondents believed that skills acquired would be useless without start-up support. Similarly, many beneficiaries dropped out due to transportation challenges, reinforcing the need for decentralized training and financial incentives.

Furthermore, the findings showed that despite awareness, many youths failed to benefit due to opaque selection processes, lack of feedback, and poor monitoring. As one FGD participant noted: “We know how many times we have tried to access these programmes but to no avail.”

Relationship between Findings and Theoretical Framework

The findings align closely with the three theoretical frameworks adopted in the study:

Participatory Approach (Paulo Freire, 1970): The study confirms that empowerment is most effective when youths are involved in planning and decision-making. However, current YEPs are largely top-down, with little youth input. This exclusion fosters distrust and reduces ownership. As Ering (2000) argued, participation must begin at the planning stage to identify real community needs.

Systems Theory: The barriers identified poor education, family poverty, weak infrastructure, and corrupt governance form an interconnected system that limits youth development. Addressing youth empowerment requires holistic reforms across multiple sectors, not isolated training interventions.

Empowerment Theory (World Bank, 2011): True empowerment involves expanding the assets and capabilities of youths to influence institutions that affect their lives. The study shows that without access, accountability, and post-training support, programmes fail to empower.

These theories reinforce the conclusion that empowerment is not a one-time event but a lifelong process requiring sustained investment, transparency, and inclusiveness.

Implications of the Findings

Implication for Social Policy and Programme

The findings have critical implications for policy formulation and implementation. They reveal that policy design alone is insufficient and that effective implementation, monitoring, and equity are equally important. Government agencies must move beyond tokenism and ensure that YEPs are:

- Inclusive: Designed to reach rural, marginalized, and vulnerable youths.

- Transparent: With clear selection criteria and public beneficiary lists.
- Sustainable: Backed by consistent funding, updated equipment, and qualified trainers.
- Accountable: Monitored by independent teams to prevent corruption and absenteeism.

Policies should also integrate stipends and start-up kits to support participation and entrepreneurship.

Implication for Social Work Practice

Social workers play a vital role in bridging the gap between government programmes and communities. This study highlights the need for social workers to:

- Act as facilitators in organizing door-to-door sensitization campaigns.
- Advocate for youth inclusion in programme planning and evaluation.
- Monitor implementation and report cases of corruption or exclusion.
- Provide psychosocial support to youths dealing with frustration and apathy.

The findings also show that social work interventions can enhance programme effectiveness by building trust, improving awareness, and ensuring that empowerment is not just theoretical but practical and life-changing.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights, it has some limitations:

- **Geographical scope:** Limited to Ogbia LGA, so findings may not be fully generalizable to other areas.
- **Self-reported data:** Some responses may be influenced by memory bias or social desirability.
- **Time constraint:** The four-week data collection period limited deeper longitudinal analysis.
- **Sensitivity of topic:** Some respondents were initially reluctant or overly critical due to distrust in government, requiring careful facilitation during FGDs.

Despite these challenges, the high response rate (91.1%) and use of mixed methods enhanced the reliability of the findings.

Conclusion

Youth empowerment is not just about training or hand-outs but it is about creating enabling environment where young people can thrive. This study has shown that while YEPs exist in Ogbia LGA, their impact is severely limited by structural, administrative, and socio-economic barriers. Awareness without access, training without support, and promises without implementation only deepen youth frustration.

However, the findings also offer hope that with improved awareness campaigns, decentralized training centres, transparent selection processes, and post-programme support, YEPs can become powerful tools for development. The youths are ready, willing, and capable and they only need the opportunity and the means to succeed.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Intensify Public Enlightenment Campaigns:** Government and programme providers should collaborate with media, social workers, and community leaders to conduct door-to-door sensitization and radio jingles in local languages.
2. **Decentralize Programme Delivery:** Establish local training hubs in rural communities to reduce travel burden and increase participation.
3. **Provide Stipends and Start-up Kits:** Ensure that all beneficiaries receive transport allowances and material support to practice their skills and start businesses.
4. **Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation:** Set up independent teams to monitor attendance, performance, and outcomes. Sanction corrupt officials and replace uncommitted beneficiaries to ensure accountability.
5. **Ensure Transparent Selection Processes:** Publish beneficiary lists publicly and use merit-based criteria rather than political or tribal affiliations.
6. **Improve Funding and Infrastructure:** Allocate adequate budgets for updated equipment, qualified trainers, and facility maintenance to enhance programme quality.
7. **Involve Youths in Decision-Making:** Adopt a participatory approach by including youth representatives in planning and evaluation committees.

Suggestion for Further Studies

Future research should explore:

- The long-term impact of YEPs on youth employment and income levels.
- Comparative studies across different LGAs in the Niger Delta.
- The role of gender in access and utilization, particularly the inclusion of young women.
- The effectiveness of private-sector-led empowerment initiatives.
- The integration of YEPs with formal education curricula to promote lifelong learning.

Such studies will deepen understanding and inform more effective, evidence-based policies.

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APPENDIX A: Structured Questionnaire

Title: Survey on Barriers to Access and Utilization of Youth Empowerment Programmes in Ogbia LGA, Bayelsa State

Section A: Socio-Demographic Characteristics

1. Sex:

(a) Male []

(b) Female []

2. Location:

(a) Urban []

(b) Rural []

3. Age: _____ years

4. Marital Status:

(a) Married []

(b) Divorced []

(c) Separated []

(d) Widowed []

(e) Single []

5. Religious Affiliation:

(a) Christianity []

(b) Islam []

(c) African Traditional Religion []

(d) Others: _____

6. Educational Status:

- (a) No Formal Education []
- (b) FSLC []
- (c) WAEC/GCE []
- (d) OND/NCE []
- (e) HND/B.Sc []
- (f) M.Sc/Ph.D []

Section B: Awareness and Perception of YEPs

7. Are you aware of any youth empowerment programme by government in your community?

- (a) Yes []
- (b) No []
- (c) Don't know []

8. If yes, which programmes?

9. Are you a beneficiary of any YEP?

- (a) Yes []
- (b) No []

10. If yes, which one(s)?

11. What is your opinion about these programmes?

Section C: Access and Utilization

12. How would you rate your access to YEPs?

(a) Very High Extent []

(b) High Extent []

(c) Low Extent []

(d) Very Low Extent []

13. Do you support giving stipends to beneficiaries?

(a) Yes []

(b) No []

If yes, why? _____

14. Should startup kits be provided?

(a) Yes []

(b) No []

If yes, why? _____

APPENDIX B: In-Depth Interview (IDI) Guide

Purpose: To gather insights from programme officials on implementation challenges.

Sample Questions:

1. What is your role in the youth empowerment programme?

2. How are beneficiaries selected?
3. What are the major challenges in programme delivery?
4. How is monitoring and evaluation conducted?
5. What improvements would you suggest?

APPENDIX C: Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide

Objective: To explore youths' lived experiences with YEPs.

Guiding Questions:

1. Have you ever applied for any YEP? What was your experience?
2. What prevents youths in your community from accessing these programmes?
3. Is corruption a problem in selection? Can you explain?
4. Do stipends and start-up kits matter? Why?
5. What changes would make these programmes more effective?