

HOW DO I CONTRIBUTE TO SOLVING COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

I think there is no easy answer to this question because the immediate needs of rural communities differ according to their level of separate developments. Since resources are always scarce, and we cannot give every community all their needs, satisfaction of each community's need has to be prioritized to give them the greatest satisfaction. For instance some communities will require good motorable roads, to another, it may be electricity or water or even the improvement of the educational institutions within the area. As a Youth advocate, I always pay regular visits and contacts with the communities to know their immediate needs.

Civil political leadership return to us in Nigeria dated 29th may, 1999. Civil political leadership is different from military political leadership. Military leadership incarcerates the people because of it's relative lack of freedom of expression and the absence of the rule law. Ideas are bottled up and cannot flow.

The military force by their training is more prone to destruction than to build. Nigeria as a nation has been pushed back several years in terms of all round development because of long years of military rule. Every aspect of our national life has been destroyed by the military and to some extent even, the military itself has been bruised badly.

Civil political leadership at the grassroot is not different from any other types of leadership. The difference is that its focus is on the rural and agricultural population of our communities. To my mind, the aim of civil political leadership, or any other leadership for that matter, is to bring the greater happiness to the greatest number of people. In Nigeria today, the greatest number of population live and have their being in the rural and agricultural areas of our communities. It follows that, if you succeed in improving the lot of the group you would have succeeded in bringing happiness or joy to the greatest number of people.

During my regular visits to these communities, I discovered that poverty and environmental issues have created unrest, with no voice, no means and no hope in their particular situation of flight or refuge, no organization or sense of direction either.

The deplorable conditions of these communities whom I saw, and the general absence to human – centred development programmes to improve the quality of life for the poorest people in these communities, lit a humanitarian fire in me. Believing that development should focus on uplifting all people in society in March 2001 I initiated a self – help voluntary Association called. `` The co-operative society Afia Nsit Atai (Cosana) with the sole aim of contributing to solving community problems, recognising that;

The purpose of development is not just clean water, decent food, or a new road, but it is the awakening of compassion, loving, kindness and empowerment in the hearts of development workers and recipients.

I believe that through shared activities, we strengthen our social, mental, emotional and spiritual character. We may build road for a village, but the act of building the road build our common welfare, opening the doors for awakening and enlightenment.

The mission of the co-operative society Afia Nsit Atai (Cosana) is to promote human-centred development to improve the quality of life for the poorest people in various communities of the South – South geopolitical Zone of Nigeria, Most especially, in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria where I hail from.

The mission seeks to influence global development policies to become more human – focused and more mindful of the non-economic areas of life. We also promote self-reliance rather than dependency because it enables and empowers people to take responsibility for planning their own futures. By engaging them organizing and sharing voluntary work, our approach aims towards fulfillment of individual, family, community, national and global needs.

COSANA as a little association, has a vision of a new social order rooted in Nigeria's diverse religions heritage, a multi-cultural society with the values of truth, non-violence, and self-sacrifice. Such a society is governed by the ideals of participating democracy with decentralized power and resources, in which basic human rights are upheld and basic human needs are satisfied. In this society, people protect and nurture the natural environment in which we all live.

``Awakening`` is the pre-requisite to the development of a person, a community and country and it takes place when people join together for the benefit of all. In order to achieve both personal and social awakening, we work for a balanced integration of spiritual, moral, cultural, social, economic and political dimensions.

For an example, Nigeria is monetarily a poor country – Although exports have been increasing and overall income has risen, economic wealth has not

reached the population evenly, while the cities and the upper classes have seen great progress, the quality of life in the rural areas of the South – South geopolitical Zone of the Country has not improved. Many in the agricultural Sector continue to live at or below poverty level. Industrialization has also created a new urban underclass whose earnings have increase but who cannot afford to feed themselves.

The results of this unbalanced development can be seen in the country's inter-ethnic clashes, increasing violent crime, corruption, political instability and the Niger-Delta Conflict. Left out of the growing prosperity they see elsewhere, many people feel powerless to help themselves. In many cases, they have become desperate, self-destructive and even engage in violence. The most obvious examples is the Niger-Delta conflict, a conflict that has involved armed struggle since 1985 at least 40,000 people most of them civilians which include women, children, youth have died from the fighting, and more than half a million are now refugees.

To counteract such deep-seated social problems, this little association under my supervision works directly with people of all ages and backgrounds at the village level. This promotes self-reliance, not only for the individual but also for the community. The organization works from the bottom up in an evolutionary process, and also from the top down, developing skills and self-governance from above. It's work originates at the local level, implemented by village people who have received training from people like themselves who have learned through COSANA activity.

In view of this, COSANA has identified ten basic human needs that must be satisfied for all individuals in a just society.

There are:

1. A Clean and beautiful environment
2. A clean and adequate supply of water
3. Basic clothing
4. A balanced diet
5. A simple house to live in
6. Basic health care
7. Simple Communication facilities
8. Basic energy requirements
9. Well-rounded education
10. Cultural and Spiritual Sustenance.

COSANA believes that in order to facilitate development, all of its activities must promote living in harmony and violence must end. In August 2001, we introduced Nsit People's Peace Initiative that drew more than 5000 people to its

inaugural programme at Ikot Edeson, Nsit, Ubium, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. This programme has help us to continue working for healing, reconciliation, and economic balance.

In Jan 2002, we began 5 villages programme to build integrated development to a broader rural base. The organization began to expand from 10 of unpaid Youth volunteer workers to 10 villages participating in their own communities.

In July 2002, we commence ``The pioneering village programme`` embodied with a new approach. People from more than 10 villages were trained to assist and empower neighbouring communities as well as their own. Today this little association called ``COSANA`` is more effective than before, with streamlined management and a new commitment to developing self-reliance. This new spirit is reflected in both the administrative infrastructure and the more than 20 communities engaged in our thought and action.

In the future our plan is to continue embracing a balanced vision for society, a future of peace, where all people from various communities can meet their basic needs, where no one is excluded from a compassionate development process.

PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT

Our programmes are grouped into three areas: social empowerment, technological, empowerment and economic empowerment. All three division have specialists available at each constituencies to assist village in planning and implementing their development goals. The three division work together, allowing each community to move forward at its own pace.

a. Social Empowerment:

The Social empowerment division is the foundation of COSANA development, working through village workers to help their communities participate in a five stage development process.

- (1) The community capacity Building Unit directly implements the COSANA vision of an enlightened society using the voluntary sharing of labour, and skills. This is achieved through a process of identifying community needs establishing collaborative methods to utilize village resources.
- (2) The community Health Unity Co-ordinates primary health activities, public awareness campaigns and training of local health workers. It provides reproductive health, mental and nutrition services with an increasing emphasis on the mental health of children.

- (3) The Early childhood Development Programme has made it possible to construct 3 pre-school in Ikot Obio Ndua, Ndiya and Ikot Ukap working with parents and children, in partnership with Nsit Ubium Citizens Assembly and the living values Educational Programme, we train new teachers, home visitors and **COSANA** members in child care, food security and healthy growth and development.
- (4) The 5R programme works primarily in Ikot Abasi Ufat Village. It's goal is to meet essential human needs and restore life with dignity in areas affected by calamity and conflict. Led by district and village co-ordinators, cosana workers have responsibilities that encompass basic road and bridge building, sanitation, water management and agriculture in addition to helping families restore their household income. Their mission can be summed up by ``5Rs`` relief, reconstruction, rehabilitation, reconciliation and re-awakening. Their role is to alleviate suffering and rebuild lives.
- (5) The development communication unit connects the rural population with the media, audio – visual presentations and other forms of information technology. Youth and adults are mobilized under the guidance of professionals through workshops, media presentations, Youth camps and creative aesthetic programmes.

b. Technological Empowerment

COSANA RURAL TECHNICAL SERVICES (CRTS)

In South – South geopolitical zone of Nigeria more than a quarter of Nigerian population still lacks access to clean water, CRTS helps villages create the basic infrastructure they need such as water, housing, sanitation and electricity. This has brought affordable progress and health to villages even in the most remote area of Nsit Ibom and Nsit Ubium, all in Akwa Ibom State Nigeria.

c. **ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

COSANA ECONOMIC ENTERPRISES DEVELOPMENT SERVICES (CEEDS)

Established in Jan. 2003, CEEDS offers a comprehensive package of services that it terms ``Credit plus``. The approach starts at the grassroots level to establish a village banking and enterprise infrastructure with people's participation, building financial discipline through promoting a saving culture improving livelihoods with credit and capacity development, building private sector linkages, introducing new technologies and creating self sustaining village owned and managed societies.

CEEDS works through three main divisions,

Banking Division:

The Banking Division helps create a people centered village banking system through:

- (a) Initiating and strengthening a village based capital formation process.
- (b) Providing additional investments for enterprise creation and development
- (c) Developing the infrastructure for sustainable rural financial institutions.

- **TRAINING DIVISION**

Through a range of training programmes, the Training Division Strengthens the institution capacity of village societies, seeking to enable societies to become sustainable level infrastructures for social and economic empowerment. Over the last two years the Training Division has conducted more than 5 institutional development programmes for village societies training over 500 people from various villages and communities to enhance their capacity in the fields of management and enterprises. Services offered include:

- (a) Leadership, Management, and Financial Management Skills training for community leaders.
- (b) Training and experience sharing to, and with like-minded organizations on grass roots development and micro finance management.
- (c) Volunteer development training to ensure that CEED`S meet the changing needs of its development programme.

OTHER INTERGRATED PROGRAMMES INCLUDES:

Pathway To Peace, founded in 2005 working in 3 communities of Ikot Obio Ndua, Ikot Abasi Ufat, Afia Nsit Atai with more than 300 members working for peace, amity and friendship. Inter-religious youth camps to explore common bounds and provide community service are hosted by COSANA. Participants in this programme learn leadership, tolerant and practical skills they can use at home, school and work. Through sports and cultural festivals, peace mediators and national activities, pathways to peace members provide a force for stability. In their own villages, Pathway To Peace members provide first aid and health services, manage home garden, conservation and education projects, and provide recreation activities.

(2) COSANA WOMEN'S MOVEMENT.

The COSANA women's movement, founded also in 2005, has a straight forward mission: to provide women with opportunity and direction so they can assume their rightful place in society and realize their aspirations, hopes and strengths. During the last one year, it has nurtured more than 30 village mother's group into a regional movement. It has also provide:

- (1) Skills training for self employment
- (2) Shelters, rehabilitation and education for street children and their mothers.
- (3) Rehabilitation and transitional care for women.
- (4) Bank loans to women for income generating projects
- (5) Organic farming programmes.
- (6) Training trainers for the elimination of violence against women.
- (7) Gender sensitization training.

The goals of self reliance drive the co-operative society Afia Nsit Atia (COSANA) as well as it's constituents. Together, these projects provide revenue to the administration of the organization, helping provide stability in a world where's donors interests may vary from year to year, They also contribute to the organization's ability to maintain it's programmes which have no outside resources.

From the beginning, this self help organization has operated on this premise: Villagers themselves offer the most important resources for their own quality of life. Through a network of various individuals in Nigeria, Villagers time, effort, and resource donations far exceed the contributions of our donors. Individual's donors have been moved to support the work in general, or specific programs and activities. In Nigeria, contributions range from a capful of rice from each child in a pre-school. From abroad, a us\$50 contribution may purchase a bicycle for cosana volunteer worker; a us\$2-us\$3000 donation funds construction of a pre-school.

I consider this programme to be innovative because it's integrated as well as recongnising the economic, educational and psycho-social needs of people. It's also contribute to building a positive youth culture in our communities.

The volume of people in our communities in need of programme intervention requires that programmes develop ways of working with large numbers of participants with minimum resources. The only way to improve the impact of this programme is by ensuring that a wide range of individual and service providers commit themselves to incorporating the principles of promoting human-centered development in their work. This includes, government department, religious organizations, sports clubs, civic and community organization, professionals, such as teachers, nurses, social workers, and other individuals. Also massive community education is required to make this possible.

My organization consana has become a role model for other community development organizations with little exposure and recognition, in Nsit Ubium Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

The Cosana unique practices are being emulated and copied by many youth in various communities. Cosana provides all help and guidance to any youth wanting to replicate the unique programme of cosana. Many youth volunteers and community leaders left cosana and started their own organization. All these organizations are also doing very well and are successfully spreading the Cosana philosophy of human-centered development and self-reliance.

The cosana model is entirely self-sustainable and can be replicated by anyone anywhere. COSANA mobilize internal and local resources, accept grants from governments, organizations and individuals, internal fund raising through income generating activities and COSANA TRUST FUND to recognize individuals and organizations instrumental in helping humanity, building peace and assisting COSANA to achieve it's aims and objectives.

As a youth advocate, the pages of this paper give you a clear picture of my little contribution to solving various community problems thereby bringing into their consciousness in very simple language a philosophy that embraces all life, work for all, and appropriate structures pertaining to their social, economic and political development that enable the ordinary people to understand and participate in their own development and welfare to ensure peace and justice for all in their communities.