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A discussion of the Arondizuogu Daughters Association community service in rural Arondizuogu Nigeria

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Abstract

This article highlights some of the current trends and issues confronting the rural school environment in Nigeria. It examines factors that contribute to the dilapidation of these rural schools and articulates intervention strategies instituted by independent philanthropic agencies to improve the school environment status in rural Arondizuogu Nigeria. Furthermore, recommendations for the community, teachers and student body are discussed.

Keywords: Arondizuogu, Igbo, rural education, prod usage, producers, digital divide

Introduction

Arondizuogu is in the south-central Imo state of Nigeria. It is inhabited by the Igbo subgroup of the Aro people and is considered a stateless nation ^[1]. The Nigerian-Biafran War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970, left this region devastated ^[2]. With its infrastructure being gradually rebuilt and this region is experiencing an economic uptick. However, rural Arondizuogu still remains in need of assistance. The emigration of this region is influenced by:

1. Historical roots.
2. Cultural identity, and.
3. Socioeconomic factors.

Historically, there have been great numbers of people emigrating from the Arondizuogu region to the United States ^[3].

The cultural and religious landscape of Arondizuogu has received a profound influence from the Catholic Church. Educational and social development is supported by Catholic missionaries. Notwithstanding, Arondizuogu retains a uniquely indigenous cultural identity via integrating ancient native traditions with modern Catholic practices. An example of this is the Ikeji Festival. This major cultural event celebrates the new yam harvest and blends indigenous beliefs with the Catholic practices ^[4].

Throughout the world, education lies at the heart of national development as it provides individuals with the:

1. Knowledge.
2. Skills, and.
3. Abilities necessary for personal growth and societal progress.

Additionally, education plays a mission critical role with respect to attitudinal development for a high quality, productive workforce ^[5].

Despite the vital role rural schools play in providing education to Nigeria's vast population, stakeholders continue to grapple with numerous challenges that hinder school success ^[5]. Inadequate funding from the government is a pervasive issue, leaving many rural schools with crumbling infrastructure, outdated teaching materials, and insufficient teacher training and support. The lack of basic amenities such as clean water, reliable electricity, and suitable sanitation facilities further exacerbates the learning environment for both students and educators. Additionally, the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers remains a significant obstacle, as rural opportunities are often viewed as less desirable compared to urban areas. These systemic deficiencies contribute to substandard educational outcomes, widening the gap between rural and urban schools and perpetuating the cycle of educational inequality in Nigeria ^[5]. In Nigeria, primary education is free and compulsory.

However, it is estimated that 10.5 million Nigerian children between the ages of 5 and 14 do

not attend school. Furthermore, approximately 63 percent of all children living in rural areas are illiterate ^[6]. The summative effect of the is incomplete development of the Nigerian nation ^[5].

It can be postulated that education is a necessity for a nation in the same way food is essential to an individual's body and mind. This is a pivotal time in the history of Nigeria. The rural communities, such as Arondizuogu, need to take ownership and reclaim their schools. Ever since the state government assumed the schools' financial responsibilities teachers do not get paid their agreed upon wages and the physical environment can be described as deplorable. In sum, the schools have become destabilized ^[7].

The purpose of this article is to

1. Outline the challenges facing schools in rural Nigeria,
2. describe the mission and vision of the Arondizuogu Daughters Association USA; a private volunteer organization currently engaged in assisting rural Nigerian schools, and
3. Provide an overview of the strategic initiatives that the Arondizuogu Daughters Association USA are currently engaged in.

An overview of challenges facing rural schools in Nigeria

Rural schools are essential for educating Nigeria's children. However, the current state of education in rural Nigeria presents significant challenges to stakeholders seeking to improve the educational system's effectiveness.

Despite the fact the rural Nigeria is home to approximately 50% of Nigeria's total population, rural Nigerian schools suffer from poor infrastructure ^[7]. This stems from the Nigerian government's neglect for the educational development of these areas resulting in:

1. Crumbling infrastructure,
2. Outdated teaching materials, and
3. Insufficient teacher training and support.

The learning environment is further worsened by a lack of:

1. Clean water,
2. Reliable electricity, and
3. Modern sanitation.

This problem is further compounded by the fact private organizations also struggle to establish learning centers in this region due to the dire conditions faced by inhabitants ^[7]. Recruitment and retention of qualified teachers is mission critical for high quality education. Nonetheless, candidates often perceive rural teaching positions as less desirable, when compared to urban teaching opportunities ^[8].

The following is a list of one dozen overarching issues faced by rural Nigerian schools in their quest to provide meaningful education for their students:

1. Inadequate funding
2. Accessibility barriers
3. Quality of education
4. Gender disparities
5. Poverty and child labor
6. Conflict and insecurity
7. Educator recruitment and retention
8. Lack of community engagement
9. The digital divide
10. Health and nutrition

11. Inclusive education, and
12. Policy and governance ^[7].

These systemic deficiencies contribute to less-than-optimal educational outcomes. Further widening the gap between rural and urban schools, ultimately perpetuating the cycle of educational inequality ^[7].

Inadequate funding

The rural Nigerian educational system is characterized by a dearth of government investment. Without adequate funding, it is difficult for rural schools to provide students with the high-quality education requisite to open doors for a brighter future. This cycle of underinvestment by government entities prolongs a vicious circle: children in remote areas are denied the educational opportunities afforded to their urban counterparts. This, in turn, ingrains inequalities into the Nigerian society at large and preventing upward mobility. If Nigeria truly seeks to build an inclusive and equitable education system that serves all citizens regardless geography, the funding gap between rural and urban schools must be minimized ^[7,8].

Accessibility barriers

Accessibility to school is a significant problem in rural Nigeria. The remote locations of community schools force students to travel upwards of several kilometers, typically on foot, each day. This twice-daily journey is especially daunting for young children and those with physical disabilities. Additionally, once at school, teachers and students are regularly faced with a lack of basic amenities such as:

1. Electricity, and
2. Running water ^[7].

Quality of education

Because rural schools struggle to recruit and retain qualified and well-trained educators, instructional delivery is left to unqualified or undertrained instructors. Furthermore, educational delivery is plagued with outdated pedagogy that is not aligned with current educational standards or the evolving needs of students. Consequently, the quality of education in rural schools is significantly less than at urban schools, perpetuating the divide between Nigeria's urban and rural populations ^[7,8].

Gender disparities

Rural Nigeria is characterized by a significant gender gap in both educational opportunities and achievements. Girls exhibit lower enrollment and retention rates compared to boys. This stems from a deep-seated cultural bias that views education for females as:

1. Less valuable at best, or
2. Unnecessary at worst.

This reality is further exacerbated by the fact that rural schools typically lack the gender-sensitive facilities and support systems that serve to co-create a welcoming environment for female students. Without strategic interventions that address these systemic challenges, the cycle of unequal access to education will continue to perpetuate stark gender disparities ^[8].

Poverty and child labor

A major issue faced by rural Nigerian communities and schools is poverty. High rates of student absenteeism and dropouts can be traced to this issue as many families rely on their children's labor to augment household income. Students are typically withdrawn from school and put to work in the fields or on the informal job market. Despite efforts to implement programs whereby meals are cost free to students while attending school, limited resources and infrastructure barriers often hamper these efforts. In sum, poverty and child labor issues are tantamount to the educational divide between rural and urban schools. To provide quality education and retain the student population, the root causes of poverty need to be addressed [7].

Conflict and insecurity

Persistent conflict and insecurity pose a significant threat to educational efforts in rural Nigeria. Violence and civil unrest often force temporary school closures. Both students and teachers live under a constant threat of attack, abduction, and other bodily harm. Some schools have been forced to shut down as families flee their homes and communities to escape the ongoing turmoil. This environment of fear is not conducive to education. Without community safety and stability, it becomes virtually impossible for students to focus on their studies, impeding academic progress [8].

Educator recruitment and retention

The challenges to educators in rural Nigeria are multi-faceted and concerning. First and foremost is low pay and poor working conditions. Salaries typically fail to keep pace with inflation, while limited access to professional development opportunities precluded continuous improvement of instructional design and delivery. Additionally, there is a lack of administrative and community support. Without these resources, rural educators easily become discouraged and disillusioned, resulting in high turnover rates that contribute to an overall decline in educational quality [7, 8, 9].

Lack of community engagement

Rural Nigerians experience a disconnect between their communities and the schools that serve them, so much so that many schools have difficulty engaging parents and utilizing community resources for educational initiatives. Parental involvement is often limited due to:

1. The long distance between home and school,
2. Work responsibilities, and
3. An overall lack of awareness about the importance of parental participation.

Furthermore, community-based educational initiatives that could supplement the curriculum and provide extracurricular opportunities are few and far between in these underserved areas. Without robust partnerships between schools, families, and the broader community, rural Nigerian students are deprived of the holistic support system needed to thrive academically and develop into engaged citizens [9].

The digital divide

The digital divide is operationally defined as the gap created by unequal access to current informational technology

among various demographic groups and geographical regions [10]. Overcoming this issue is a significant challenge for rural schools. Lack of modern technology precludes student access to the transformative power provided by immediate access to global information. Unfortunately, many rural communities lack the:

1. Necessary infrastructure, and
2. Financial and human resources necessary to provide:
3. Reliable internet access, and
4. Adequate computer hardware [6].

The lack of digital access debilitates rural instructional delivery since students are unable to fully leverage the on-line educational resources that are mission critical for modern learning. Furthermore, the digital literacy gap experienced by both teachers and students precludes the effective integration of technology into the current curriculum. In these communities there is an overall lack of comprehensive training and support with respect to informational technology. Consequently, educators struggle to incorporate information technology into their pedagogical philosophy. This in turn, limits the potential for modern technology to improve the learning climate in rural schools [6, 10].

Health and nutrition

Public health and nutrition issues are community-wide concerns with repercussions manifested in the public school system. Typical issues include:

1. Malnutrition,
2. Food insecurity, and
3. The rapid spread of communicable diseases.

Students are vulnerable to preventable illnesses because many schools lack basic health services and adequate facilities. Addressing these fundamental concerns will result in strengthening the quality and accessibility of education in rural Nigeria [5].

Inclusive education

The concept of inclusivity has recently come to the forefront in educational circles. However, in rural Nigeria many barriers exist that prevent students with disabilities from full access to educational opportunities. There is inadequate funding and a lack of specialized resources. It is virtually impossible to recruit and retain teachers who specialize in exceptional education to work in the impoverished rural settings. This, in turn, limits the ability of schools to provide the individualized instruction exceptional students require. Challenges faced by students with exceptionalities are further compounded by societal attitudes and misconceptions leading to discrimination and exclusion, rather than inclusion. By addressing and rectifying these systemic issues, a culture of true inclusion is created since it is essential that all students, regardless of ability, are given the opportunity to reach their full potential [8].

Policy and governance

The rural school system in Nigeria is plagued by policy and governance issues such as the ineffective implementation of macroscopic educational strategic initiatives. Although many of these top-down policies are well-intentioned, they often fail to translate into meaningful change at the local level. This may be attributed to weak coordination between

federal, state, and local governments. This leads to a disjointed and fragmented policy approach, leaving schools without a clear and unified direction. Limited community involvement in the decision-making processes further deprives schools of valuable local insight and buy-in, eroding the potential for sustainable solutions [5, 8].

The mission and role of The Arondizuogu daughters association USA

The Arondizuogu Daughters Association USA (ADA-USA) is a non-profit organization comprised of women of Nigerian descent who trace their lineage to the town of Arondizuogu in Imo State, Nigeria. This organization was founded in 1992 to achieve the following goals for the betterment of Arondizuogu:

1. Promote and preserve the cultural heritage
2. Provide educational and financial support
3. Empower women through leadership development and mentorship initiatives, and
4. Promote unity and camaraderie among members of the Arondizuogu community in the United States.

The mission of ADA-USA is rooted in the Catholic faith. Consistent with Proverbs 22:6, ADA-USA believes that when you educate an adult, you are changing the world. When you educate a child, you are changing the face of the global community.

The overarching strategic initiative of the ADA is to empower the people of Arondizuogu, a rural Nigerian Community. Primary emphasis is placed on improving the quality of education students receive. The ADA relies solely on volunteer help and community donations to provide assistance in the educational and social domains. ADA members regularly visit their native Arondizuogu community to strengthen ties to their homeland and to deliver financial and in-kind contributions collected in the United States. The ADA-USA also strives to foster kinship and maintain the culture, ancient customs and traditions for members of the Arondizuogu community and their families living in the United States.

The ADA-USA Arondizuogu Project is at the forefront in the fight to reclaim the rural schools that serve this community. This initiative aspires to provide the tools to improve the lives of rural Arondizuogu schoolchildren and the Igbo community at large. It has the following theoretical underpinnings:

- Community led collaborative action
- User Perceived Value, and
- The spiritual dimension of health.

Community led collaborative action is mission critical to the success of grass roots programs. Interestingly, this partnership shares several common themes with Informational Technology's produsage movement. Via this process, produsers continuously collaborate and improve program content and quality. This process, noted for its cost efficiency and rapid results engages diverse communities of participants in a shared project [11]. It represents a seismic shift from the traditional, top down industrial approach. The ADA serves as both producers and users in the produsage model. They produce materials in the form of financial resources and in-kind gifts. Upon their annual return to Arondizuogu they work in conjunction with resident community stakeholders to improve the infrastructure of the

schools, disseminate in-kind gifts and participate in service-learning initiatives such as school-wide seminars.

Another feature of produsage is its reliance on unpaid community involvement. The volunteer labor force significantly reduces a project operating budget while simultaneously fostering fluid movement of participants between different roles within the community and project [11]. The ADA's efforts are completely voluntary. Members incur all financial responsibility for their Nigerian missionary trips.

A community that successfully employs community led collaborative action as a strategy for improvement must understand the implications and significances of their collaboration. Additionally, they must be:

- Creative
- Embrace critical thinking, and
- Communicate effectively and efficiently [11].

Creativity entails the ability to act as co-creators rather than self-sufficient producers. To this end, participants in community led collaborative action cannot be ego driven. Rather they need to embrace an abundance mentality. For the sake of continual improvement, participants must critically assess their contributions and the existing work portfolio on a regular basis to maximize results. Communication within the community is predicated on effective and successful dialogue with respect to ideas generated [11].

User Perceived Value represents the confluence of motivation theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs [12]. Maslow postulated that:

- Motivation drives behavior
- Motivation is the "why" of behavior, and
- People are motivated to fulfill their needs [13].

In this model, needs are defined as basic human requirements and wants represent individual preferences. User Perceived Value links needs and wants by allowing leaders to understand consumer decisions [12]. With respect to this project, education is the need, while Catholic education is the want.

Hirmer & Guthrie's User Perceived Value model allows leaders to appreciate why something is important to community members [12]. This in turn leads to understanding how a development initiative can benefit the community. Furthermore, by identifying personal priorities, it is possible to pinpoint what is of value to the end users. In sum, community leaders can use information generated via this model to communicate the benefits of their service to align them with personal values of the end user.

Community led collaborative action seeks to improve the shared living conditions of residents. Through sustained social action, community residents have a greater voice in both the policies and systems that impact their lives daily [14]. Through collaborations with multiple stakeholders, the community comes together and commits to an agenda dedicated to improving a specific social issue [14]. This becomes an excellent strategy when seeking to improve conditions in education since the ramifications transcend community levels and settings. The ADA-USA Arondizuogu Project understands that it is their responsibility to help the stakeholders in the schools they serve ascend to higher levels of Maslow's Hierarchy. Notwithstanding, self-esteem can only be earned. It cannot

be given to someone.

Not only does the ADA Project supply benefits to the community members of Arondizuogu it also positively impacts the lives of ADA members in the United States. Spiritual health is fundamental as it links Catholic communities in the United States and Nigeria. Being spiritually healthy has been positively correlated with improved:

- Mental and
- Physical health ^[15].

Furthermore, the spiritual dimension of health addresses the concepts of

- Interconnectedness and
- Meaning in life.

Interconnectedness can be among people and/or to a higher power ^[15]. The ADA project provides means for members to connect with their homeland. Meaning in life is a mission critical component of well-being. By witnessing the fruits of their labor with respect to the development of prosperity in their native community, ADA members are able glean meaning from this volunteer work. In essence, this project is a form of service-learning. It reconnects the communities of ADA members and Arondizuogu in the name of benefit to the disenfranchised ^[16].

ADA's mission and strategic initiatives embrace Catholicism's commitment to active service to others. In essence, service to others is a means by which Catholics demonstrate their faith and love for God ^[16]. Servant leadership programs such as this one promote transformation, solidarity with a global community and a commitment to helping the underserved.

The Arondizuogu daughters association school renovation projects

A healthy school environment is paramount to the development of any community. School is the institution created by society to perform the functions associated with the development of youth. For the school system to achieve these goals, the environment needs to be healthy, in order to promote effective teaching and learning. In Nigeria, it is officially the state's responsibility to provide a safe and healthy school environment. Notwithstanding, within the rural community of Arondizuogu the school environments are in deplorable conditions and teachers do not get paid on time, if at all. This is due in part to the political climate that has destabilized the school system.

The ADA-USA Community Service Renovation Projects (ADA-USA SCRPs) are organized on an annual calendar with specific goals and objectives dedicated to each annum. During a recent annual funding cycle the ADA USA CSRPs benefitted the following schools:

- The National High School
- IHEME Memorial Secondary School, and
- Obinetiti Comprehensive Secondary School.

Improvements were made to facilities that most Americans take for granted such as electricity and indoor plumbing. Additionally, the following schools received in kind gifts:

- St. Theresa's Catholic High School,
- Rev. Cunningham Primary School,

- St. Phillips Primary School, and
- St. Mark's Primary School.

At The National High School, teachers live at the school. Over the course of one fiscal year, the ADA renovated their living quarters. At IHEME Memorial Secondary School, indoor plumbing was installed, and the Chemistry Laboratory was renovated. Obinetiti Comprehensive Secondary School received upgrades in electricity and plumbing service.

One year's tuition at a Catholic school in Arondizuogu is \$70 US Dollars. Through their fundraising efforts, the ADA was able to award 107 scholarships for one academic year. Additionally, 570 Arondizuogu students received school supplies to last the entire school year: composition notebooks, pens & pencils.

School uniforms are a worldwide characteristic of Catholic schools. They are a central feature in developing a Catholic school identity. According to McBrayer ^[17]. The Catholic school uniform does not impart Catholicity, but instead is a symbol of unity with the body of Christ. One Catholic School community donated, 80 school uniforms to the Rev. Cunningham Primary School.

Sharing personal knowledge with younger generations is essential because it:

- Preserves wisdom and culture
- Fosters innovation
- Strengthens relationships
- Ensures continual progress, and
- Builds social capital.

In addition to the aforementioned financial and material contributions, at each school ADA members gave seminars on:

- The importance of education
- Respecting elders, and
- Respecting peers.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to Dr. Martin Luther King, the function of education is to develop the ability to think intensely and critically ^[18]. The goal of education is to develop both intelligence and character. These precepts guide the actions of ADA-USA.

The success of the ADA-USA Arondizuogu Project illustrates the transformative potential of philanthropy. This initiative incorporates three essential elements for community led collaborative action:

- A shared agenda for change,
- Mutually reinforcing and coordinated activities, and
- Continuous communication between community leaders ^[14].

The continued success of the ADA-USA Arondizuogu Project is motivated by the desire to honor the example of their founding matriarch, Nnenna Obiona, to take their anger with the current Nigerian political climate and build on their vision of their ideal schools. The goal is to improve the overall status of the rural schools in Arondizuogu. The partners in this grass-roots initiative have demonstrated the transformative potential of philanthropy with respect to meeting challenges faced by rural schools and embracing

the opportunities for change.

Looking to the future, the continued success of this program hinges on:

- Adopting best practices, and
- Engaging in effective and comprehensive long-term planning.

To ensure the sustained success of these initiatives, plans need to be

- Coherently articulated
- Designed to ensure financial transparency and accountability, and
- Minimize bureaucracy ^[19].

Worldwide, Catholic schools are conduits of hope ^[19]. Initiatives such as this one continues the overarching mission of Catholic schools: pulling improvised people out of the underclass and into the working and middle classes ^[19]. The results of this initiative reinforce inverse relationship between socioeconomic level and Catholic schooling's positive influence ^[20].

Although the community-based efforts are commendable, many challenges remain

- Compromised infrastructure
- Teacher shortages, and
- Overcoming cultural norms that deter progress.

To this end, sustained funding, community involvement and government support are essential for success. Rural education efforts depend upon

- Volunteer commitment.
- Mutually beneficial partnerships, and.
- Leveraging advantageous technology.

Volunteer efforts are vitally important for enhancing educational access and improving instructional quality in rural Nigeria. Their selfless dedication and meaningful results create an environment of hope and change for the future where every child has the opportunity to learn and to experience success.

In sum, investing in the education of our children is mission critical. Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world ^[21].

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