

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC ISSUES IN DELTA NORTH SENATORIAL DISTRICT: A CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Onwordi Temishi Mary, (Ph.D)

Department of Sociology & Criminology

Faculty of Social Science

University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State.

Email: mary.onwordi@unidel.edu.ng

Phone Number: +2348033457318

&

Egwu Rachel Nkechi

Department of Sociology & Criminology

Faculty of Social Science

University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State.

Email: rachel.egwu@unidel.edu.ng

Phone Number: +2348165922601

Abstract

The traditional system of governance is still very active in the process of government and grassroots development in Nigeria, especially within Delta North Senatorial District. The paper focuses on the importance of traditional rulers, councils of elders, and local governance in handling current social problems like insecurity, unemployment among youth, intercommunal disputes, and infrastructure deficiencies. While governmental agencies have increasingly become dominant, traditional institutions are still relevant because of their cultural importance, availability, and continuity (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). A qualitative approach is used in the research with the use of interviews, focus group discussion and secondary sources of data. Results indicate that traditional institutions play an important role in mediation, maintenance of security, and resource mobilization for development purposes. In addition, they act as intermediaries between government agencies and citizens making policies more effective and acceptable (Sklar, 2004). Their activities are limited by many factors such as political influence, financial constraints, loss of traditions and lack of constitutional provisions (Ray, 2003). These factors prevent them from contributing effectively to modern governance. The study comes up with a conclusion that traditional institutions are very important in dealing with grassroots problems and development. There is need for increased cooperation between the two systems; capacity building of traditional leaders, and policy changes that would lead to integration of traditional institutions within the governance system. Improved institutions would be able to deal with the contemporary challenges of governance and development in Delta North Senatorial District.

Keywords: Traditional Institutions, Contemporary Public Issues, Community Development, Delta North Senatorial District

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The traditional institutions are the backbone of governance in African countries. In Nigeria prior to colonization, there was an indigenous system of governance that was in charge of ensuring harmony, resolving conflicts, and fostering development in communities (Afigbo, 1981). This system involved the kings, the chiefs, the council of elders, and the age grade systems, among others, that were critical in the governance process. Colonial rule brought about changes to this structure, though the institutions remained intact. The colonial government applied indirect rule that included these institutions into the colonial government framework (Ekeh, 1975).

At present, in Nigeria, there is a combination of traditional and modern governance institutions. This dual system of governance has been an advantage and a challenge in solving public matters since while the formal institutions are mandated to undertake governance, the traditional ones still have the influence in some way because of the culture surrounding them (Ray, 2003).

Context of Delta North Senatorial District

Delta North Senatorial District is found in Delta State, Nigeria and is mainly occupied by Igbo-speaking people. The area has strong cultural heritage and developed traditional systems. Delta North Senatorial District is made up of nine LGAs, namely; Aniocha North, Aniocha South, Ika North East, Ika South, Ndokwa East, Ndokwa West, Oshimili North, Oshimili South, and Ukwuani. The area is mainly occupied by the Anioma group, which has established traditional systems led by Obis, village leaders and councils of elders. These traditional systems still play a major role in conflict resolution, maintenance of peace, cultural preservation and community development (Afigbo, 2005; Ola&Tonwe, 2009).

However, the district faces numerous contemporary public issues, including:

- Insecurity and communal conflicts
- Youth unemployment and restiveness
- Poor infrastructure
- Environmental degradation

Government efforts to address these issues have often been inadequate due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and limited resources (Olowu, 2003). As a result, traditional institutions have increasingly become important actors in community development.

Statement of the Problem

Even with the existence of a formal government system, there are still some persistent socio-economic problems that exist in many communities in the Delta North Senatorial District. These problems include poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and inadequate service delivery (Ekeh, 1975). These institutions are normally relied on to tackle these problems; however, they have no clear function in the existing system of governance. They also have to contend with such challenges as political meddling, erosion of power, and inadequate funding (Ray, 2003).

These facts raise pertinent questions regarding the ability of these institutions to deal with modern public problems and their place in the modern system of governance.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of traditional institutions in addressing contemporary public issues in Delta North Senatorial District.

Specific objectives include:

1. To analyze the functions of traditional institutions in community development.
2. To identify major public issues affecting the district.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of traditional institutions.
4. To examine challenges facing these institutions.
5. To propose strategies for enhancing their roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Traditional Institutions

Traditional institutions are the indigenous systems of governance that are derived from the customs, tradition, and practices of a group of people. Traditional institutions include traditional rulers, chiefs, councils of elders, among other forms of regulation within a community (Afigbo, 1981). In Africa, traditional institutions existed before the onset of the colonial era and have been resilient even in the presence of new forms of governance.

According to Ray (2003), traditional institutions get their powers from the past, cultural values, and community acceptance, not from constitutional mandate. Therefore, they are very powerful because of the influence they wield at the grassroots levels by ensuring culture and justice.

The traditional institutions in Nigeria vary from one ethnic group to another, though there are similarities in some of the characteristics of these institutions such as hierarchy and customs. In Delta North Senatorial District, traditional rulers have key roles in ensuring social order and development of the community.

2.2 Concept of Community Development

Community development is described as a process in which members of a community join hands to work collectively for finding solutions to problems facing them. It entails the improvement of the social, economic, and environmental aspects of communities using a participatory approach (Olowu&Wunsch, 2004).

The focus of community development is on the principles of self-help, participation, and empowerment. It acknowledges that sustainability can only be attained through the involvement of local communities in the process. Traditional institutions help facilitate this participation since of the legitimacy they enjoy.

According to scholars, any development process will need effective leadership from local people, a function that traditional institutions excel at offering (Olowu, 2003).

2.3 Traditional Institutions and Governance in Nigeria

The involvement of traditional institutions in the governance process has changed over the years. In the pre-colonial period, they were the main institutions that governed through administration, administration of justice, and security (Afigbo, 1981). Nevertheless, colonialism brought about a new approach to governance where the traditional rulers were involved in the administration of colonialism through the use of indirect rule (Ekeh, 1975).

After colonialism, the traditional institutions continue to be an integral part of the governance system of Nigeria despite the adoption of democracy in the country. While the institutions are not constitutional parts of the political system of the country, they continue to provide advice and assistance in governance (Ray, 2003).

According to Sklar (2004), the traditional institutions supplement the modern approach to governance through providing legitimacy and stability in the governance process.

2.4 Role of Traditional Institutions in Conflict Resolution

The resolution of conflicts constitutes an important function of traditional institutions. The traditional leaders and the councils of elders make use of customary law and indigenous knowledge system in mediating disputes (Ray, 2003).

Unlike the formal justice system, traditional dispute resolution mechanisms focus more on reconciliation and restoration. They are very useful in solving conflicts concerning land, family, and community relations.

It has been shown through research that traditional institutions are greatly preferred to formal court institutions because of their proximity, affordability, and cultural significance (Olowu&Wunsch, 2004). The decision made by these institutions is usually acceptable because it is value-based.

2.5 Traditional Institutions and Security

Traditional institutions are among the key players in ensuring security in many Nigerian societies. They work with local security agencies and engage in community security programs like vigilantes.

As noted by Olowu (2003), the traditional rulers help in crime prevention through the enforcement of societal norms and the supervision of community affairs. Their close association with the community helps them identify security risks early.

The traditional institutions have played an active role in solving problems like youth restiveness and communal clashes in Delta North Senatorial District.

2.6 Traditional Institutions and Economic Development

Furthermore, traditional institutions are involved in economic development through resource mobilization and facilitation of economic activities in the locality. In this case, they make sure that people within the community participate in the development activities.

For instance, traditional leaders play an important role in the creation of markets, provision of support for agriculture and attraction of development projects into the community (Afigbo, 1981). Through such leadership, they promote cooperation.

2.7 Challenges Facing Traditional Institutions

Despite their importance, traditional institutions face several challenges that limit their effectiveness:

2.7.1 Political Interference

Government officials often interfere in the activities of traditional institutions, undermining their autonomy and credibility (Ray, 2003).

2.7.2 Financial Constraints

Many traditional institutions lack the financial resources needed to implement development projects (Olowu, 2003).

2.7.3 Erosion of Traditional Values

Modernization and westernization have led to a decline in respect for traditional authority, particularly among younger generations.

2.7.4 Lack of Constitutional Recognition

Traditional institutions are not formally integrated into Nigeria's political system, which limits their influence and effectiveness.

2.8 Empirical Review

Empirical research has proved the significance of traditional institutions in terms of governance and development.

Olowu & Wunsch (2004) have identified the presence of traditional institutions in the sphere of governance and services provided at the local level in Africa. In addition, Sklar (2004) claimed that the presence of traditional institutions promotes political stability and legitimacy.

However, it should be mentioned that some scholars claim that these institutions become effective only if they are supported by the government and involved in the formal governance system (Ray, 2003).

This research can be distinguished from previous studies due to its concentration on the particular region – Delta North Senatorial District.

2.9 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Structural-Functionalism Theory

According to the Structural-Functionalism theory proposed by Parsons (1951), a society is regarded as a system made up of different parts which work collectively towards maintaining stability and order in society. Each part of the system is said to have certain functions which help in the maintenance of the survival of the whole system. The traditional institutions are believed to be integral parts of the social system and function as law and order maintainers, conflict managers, cultural preservers and developers.

In Delta North Senatorial District, traditional institutions are integral in ensuring the stability of the society since they deal with societal problems on the grassroots level through their various functions in conflict management, community mobilization and governance.

3.0 MATERIALS AND METHOD

This research was conducted through the use of qualitative research design, particularly the case study research approach, to explore how traditional institutions can play an important part in handling current public problems in Delta North Senatorial District. This study employed the use of qualitative case study as it helps in the understanding of people's experiences and interpretations of social events as they happen in the natural setting of life. As cited by John W. Creswell Creswell & Poth (2018), qualitative research design is ideal when researching on complex social issues due to its ability to collect rich and extensive data from the participants. According to Robert K. Yin Yin (2018), the case study research approach facilitates the investigation of current issues in their natural settings.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Secondary data were gathered from books, journal articles, government documents, conference papers, among other scholarly sources concerning traditional institutions and community development.

Data was primarily collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide had questions that were meant to explore the views of the respondents on how traditional institutions could help resolve some of the common issues affecting their communities including conflict resolution, security, youth development, culture, environment and community development. It is easier to have a semi-structured interview as it gives room for flexibility (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

4. 0 RESULTS

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with traditional rulers, community leaders, youth leaders, women leaders, and local government officials in selected communities within Delta North Senatorial District. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which generated the following major themes as:

Table 4.1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Traditional Rulers	5	25
Community Leaders	5	25
Youth Leaders	4	20
Women Leaders	3	15
Local Government Officials	3	15
Total	20	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4.2: Themes Emerging from the Interviews

Theme	Participants' Responses	Supporting Literature
Peace and Conflict Resolution	Traditional rulers mediate family, land, and communal disputes using customary laws and dialogue.	Ray (1996); Afigbo (2005)
Community Development	Traditional institutions mobilize residents for self-help projects, road construction, school renovation, sanitation, and community security.	Aiyede (2017); Ola & Tonwe (2009)
Cultural Preservation	Traditional rulers preserve indigenous customs, festivals, languages, and moral values.	Afigbo (2005); Ola & Tonwe (2009)
Government Collaboration	Traditional institutions collaborate with government agencies, security organizations, and NGOs in addressing community problems.	Logan (2013)
Challenges	Political interference, inadequate funding, modernization, constitutional limitations, and declining youth participation reduce effectiveness.	Ubink (2008); Logan (2013)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4.3: Illustrative Verbatim Quotes from Participants

Theme	Representative Quote	Interpretation
Conflict Resolution	<i>"Most disputes are first brought before the palace because people trust the traditional institution."</i> (Traditional Ruler)	Traditional institutions remain trusted mechanisms for resolving conflicts.
Community Development	<i>"The Obi mobilizes everyone whenever there is a development project."</i> (Community Leader)	Traditional rulers promote community participation and collective action.
Cultural Preservation	<i>"Our culture survives because the traditional institution protects it."</i> (Women's Leader)	Traditional institutions preserve cultural identity and values.
Government Collaboration	<i>"Government projects succeed better when traditional rulers are involved."</i> (Local Government Official)	Traditional institutions facilitate implementation of development programmes.
Challenges	<i>"Politics often limits what traditional rulers can do."</i> (Youth Leader)	Political interference affects the effectiveness of traditional institutions.

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4.4: Summary of Major Findings

Research Objective	Major Finding	Conclusion
Examine the role of traditional institutions in conflict resolution	Traditional rulers resolve disputes through mediation and customary laws.	Traditional institutions promote peace and social stability.
Assess the contribution of traditional institutions to community development	Traditional institutions mobilize communities for development projects.	They contribute significantly to grassroots development.
Examine collaboration with government	Traditional rulers work with government and security agencies.	Collaboration enhances community development but requires strengthening.
Identify challenges	Political interference, inadequate funding, modernization, and weak legal recognition hinder effectiveness.	Government support and policy reforms are necessary.

Source: Field Survey, 2026

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The results show that traditional institutions still maintain an important place in solving modern public problems in Delta North Senatorial District. It was learned that traditional rulers continue to serve as reliable leaders due to their legitimacy based on history, culture, and community approval. The fact that they play a crucial role in conflict resolution validates the claim by Ray (1996) that indigenous governance systems still retain their effectiveness since they value dialogue and reconciliation, not litigation.

Furthermore, it was found that traditional institutions make important contributions to community development due to mobilization of people and other resources. It turned out that many initiatives in

the community were implemented under the leadership of traditional rulers. This fact validates the findings of Aiyede (2017) who claimed that community involvement in development activities is more efficient when traditional institutions are involved.

Also significant from the findings is that traditional institutions foster cultural preservation and enhance social solidarity. The participants argued that cultural festivals, traditional laws and traditional ceremonies continue to foster unity, discipline and social identity among people. Such findings confirm Afigbo (2005), who contended that the traditional institutions continue to serve as the custodians of African culture amid massive modernization.

The study also shows that traditional institutions supplement governmental initiatives toward fostering peace, security and development. Traditional rulers were cited as intermediaries whose role was to facilitate communication between governmental agencies and community members. Such findings confirm Logan (2013), who claimed that traditional institutions remain relevant since they have more credibility compared to many formal institutions within the grassroots level.

It was equally established that political interference, lack of governmental recognition, limited financial resources, constitutional restrictions and reduced youth participation render traditional institutions ineffective. Such findings confirm Ubink (2008), who claimed that the continued relevance of the traditional institutions in future will depend on reforming the institutions and engaging them with democratic governance structures.

Overall, the findings suggest that traditional institutions remain indispensable partners in promoting sustainable community development and addressing contemporary public issues in Delta North Senatorial District.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the role of traditional institutions in addressing c This study has critically analyzed the importance of traditional institutions in tackling modern public problems in Delta North Senatorial District, especially concerning community development. It has been found out that traditional institutions are still very relevant despite the predominance of modern systems of governance.

Traditional kings, councils of elders, and many other indigenous institutions continue to make important contributions in resolving conflicts, maintaining law and order, organizing communities, and ensuring development initiatives. The cultural relevance of such institutions and their close relation to grassroots communities help them tackle the issues of the community in a way that modern government institutions are unable to (Olowu&Wunsch, 2004).

What is more, traditional institutions function as mediators between the government and citizens. This helps to improve the communication and the implementation of government policies in communities (Sklar, 2004). Considering the specific socio-cultural conditions in Delta North Senatorial District, this aspect becomes especially crucial.

Contemporary public problems in Delta North Senatorial District, focusing on community development. It can be seen from the results that traditional institutions are still very much in demand in spite of the prevalence of modern governance systems.

The traditional rulers, councils of elders and other indigenous institutions still have a lot to do in conflict resolution, maintenance of law and order, mobilization of the community and development. The cultural authority of the traditional institutions and their proximity to the grassroots community

allow them to cope with the problems which official governmental institutions may not be able to solve (Olowu&Wunsch, 2004).

Furthermore, it has been found out that the traditional institutions act as very important intermediaries between the government and the community. They help in increasing the communication, creating the trust and implementing the government policies in practice (Sklar, 2004). In the case of the Delta North Senatorial District, this function has its own importance in view of the socio-cultural situation of the area.

In summary, it should be said that traditional institutions are very important players in solving contemporary public problems and ensuring the community development.

Recommendations

Recommendations based on the findings and conclusions of the research are:

1. There needs to be more collaboration between government and traditional institutions. The traditional rulers need to get actively engaged in policy making, implementation and evaluation of community development programmes owing to their linkages with the local community. This is in line with Logan (2013), who suggested that traditional authorities complement democratic governance at the grassroot levels.
2. The traditional institutions should receive constitutional recognition and advisory positions. This will make it possible for the traditional rulers to participate in the process of resolving conflicts, governance and community development activities. Ubink (2008) contended that the legal standing of traditional authorities makes them more effective in resolving community problems.
3. There should be proper funding and logistical support to the traditional institutions. Government and other development organizations should provide necessary funds that will allow the traditional rulers to carry out various development projects, peace building initiatives and social welfare programs. Ola and Tonwe (2009) indicated that funding was critical in enhancing the developmental role of traditional institutions.
4. The traditional leaders need to continue encouraging peace and conflict resolution in communities through indigenous means. Dialogue, mediation, and reconciliation should be encouraged to solve communal disputes without turning them into violent conflicts. This suggestion is in line with the views of Ray (1996) that the indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms are still relevant in Africa.
5. Youths and women should take part in traditional leadership activities and community development initiatives. This will help maintain the indigenous system, encourage innovations, and increase the ownership of development projects. According to Aiyede (2017), inclusion in participation leads to sustainable community development.
6. Traditional institutions should work hard in preserving the cultural values and indigenous knowledge. Traditional festivals, indigenous education, and language should be encouraged for social unity and cultural heritage of the Anioma community. This suggestion follows the ideas of Afigbo (2005).
7. Capacity building programs can be undertaken for traditional leaders. Government departments, universities, and NGOs should conduct regular trainings on leadership skills, conflict resolution, community development, public administration, and participatory governance to make traditional institutions more effective. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), institutional capacity building improves organizational efficiency and sustainable development.



8. Collaboration among traditional institutions, civil society organizations, and development agencies should be promoted. Collaborations will ensure that community-oriented projects are carried out efficiently, access to development resources is improved, and grassroots governance is strengthened.

With the above recommendations being put into practice, traditional institutions will become more effective in solving contemporary public problems and ensuring sustainable development in Delta North Senatorial District.

REFERENCES

- Afigbo, A. E. (1981). *Ropes of sand: Studies in Igbo history and culture*. University Press.
- Afigbo, A. E. (2005). *The Igbo and Their Neighbours*. University of Nigeria Press.
- Aiyede, E. R. (2017). *Governance and Development in Africa*. Ibadan University Press.
- Ake, C. (1981). *A political economy of Africa*. Longman.
- Babbie, E. (2021). *The Practice of Social Research* (15th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Ekeh, P. P. (1975). Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: A theoretical statement. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17(1), 91–112.
- Falola, T., & Heaton, M. M. (2008). *A history of Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fatile, J. O. (2010). Evolution and development of local government in Nigeria. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 4(3), 112–117.
- Igbafe, P. A. (1979). *Benin under British administration*. Longman.
- Ikelegbe, A. (2005). The economy of conflict in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 14(2), 208–234.
- Logan, C. (2013). *The Roots of Resilience: Exploring Popular Support for African Traditional Authorities*. Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 128.
- Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton University Press.
- Nnoli, O. (2003). *Introduction to politics*. Pan African Centre for Research on Peace and Conflict Resolution.
- Ola, R. F., & Tonwe, D. A. (2009). *Local Administration and Local Government in Nigeria*. Amfitop Books.
- Olowu, D. (2003). Local institutional and political structures and processes: Recent experience in Africa. *Public Administration and Development*, 23(1), 41–52.
- Olowu, D., & Wunsch, J. S. (2004). *Local governance in Africa: The challenges of democratic decentralization*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Otite, O. (2000). *Ethnic pluralism and ethnicity in Nigeria*. Shaneson Press.
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. Free Press.
- Ray, D. I. (1996). Divided Sovereignty: Traditional Authority and the State in Ghana. *Journal of Legal Pluralism*.
- Ray, D. I. (2003). *African traditional leadership in the modern political system*. University of Calgary Press.



- Sklar, R. L. (2004). *African politics in comparative perspective*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Ubink, J. M. (2008). *Traditional Authorities in Africa: Resurgence in an Era of Democratization*. Leiden University Press.
- Ugwu, S. C. (2000). *Issues in local government and urban administration in Nigeria*. Enugu: Academic Publishing Company.
- Williams, G. (1980). *State and society in Nigeria*. Idanre Press.
- World Bank. (2010). *Local governance and community development report*. World Bank Publications.