

Rural Development in Niger-Delta: A Case for Citizens' Health and Safety

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Abstract

The quest for rural development and urbanization of communities in Niger-Delta, an oil-rich zone of Nigeria, due to influx of people and over-population, has brought about some untoward consequences to the unsuspecting rural dwellers. The community dwellers as a result, suffer unavailability of land for farming and housing due to indiscriminate sale of land. Ensuing from all these are endangered and extinct bio-species, endangered bio-diversity, heavily polluted environment, high female prostitution due to poverty, druggism and increased crime rate, denigrated and desecrated religion and cultural values, among others; all of which have led to relative unsafe and unhealthy rural dwellers. All these sad effects of improper rural development are grossly condemnable by the various statutes of international communities and Nigeria. They are also condemnable by the Christian religion. These have led to postulation of a model that represents all these, which is called perilous chain model. However, the way forward as a remediation for proper rural development according to internationally acceptable best practices have been suggested in this study, and they include timely and proper rural development plan and its strict implementation; siting poverty alleviation projects in the rural areas and enforcement of good laws on rural development and environment protection, among others. However, this concept is strictly better applicable by those who have not yet sold their land portions.

Keywords: rural development, indiscriminate land-sale, perilous-chain model, urbanization and niger-delta.

Introduction

According to Wikipedia (2022), the total measured land area of Nigeria was about 923,769 square kilometers and a population of over 225 million people. It therefore follows that given the way in which land is being sold indiscriminately today and at give-away prices in Niger-Delta, to land estate developers (land-grabbers) and other individuals, one wonders if there could be any remnant of land for food production and housing in the near future. It is traumatizing and a cause for concern to hear jingles everyday on radio that "so so land forest is available to be sold at 10 kobo and another is about to be sold at 5 kobo". So sad indeed!

Recently, on Thursday, June 29th, 2023, going by the media report, the women of Tai Local Government Area of Rivers State, a state in Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, massively protested against the acquisition of a very large hectare of their farm land by the government for fish pond farming since 1987. The site was fenced and abandoned by the government since then and the women complained that they needed the land back for farming because they were dying of hunger. No other land for farming. Also in the 1990's an Onopa community chief in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, rejected use of their land by the government. He complained that the community lacked land for housing and farming.

The quest for rural development and urbanization of communities in Niger-Delta, an oil-rich zone of Nigeria country, due to influx of people; has brought about some untoward consequences to the unsuspecting rural dwellers.

It has been observed that most politicians, opinion leaders and even the rabble believe wrongly though, that the only way a rural community can be said to have been developed is when virgin forests or thick vegetations are turned into roads and extincted by indiscriminate land sales; so that no other vegetation or forest exists. To them, O' our community is developed! We care no dimes of what befalls our off-springs in future! Globally, conferences are held on attenuating or perverting the impacts of climate change to man, but various governments in Niger-Delta kept bulldozing and devastating reserved and ancient forest resources in the name of development.

To the average lay-citizen, a governor of a state is judged to be performing well based on the rate at which forests in his or her domain are devastated for construction purposes; such as housing estates, refineries, and health centres, most of which are left fallow, redundant and dilapidated at the end of the tenure. What an environmental colossal waste? Such is unacceptable and myopic. A one-time famous pop music star – Michael Jackson, once sang “Don't Kill The World”, but we are politically and economically killing the world through indiscriminate forest devastation. In movies, we still watch presence of vast vegetative forest reserves and wood lands in developed countries. How about there in Niger-Delta which is just a budding developing region? Eventhe vast vegetative reserves we see in most western, northern and some eastern parts of Nigeria would for sure, call for a concern on why those in Niger-Delta should irrationally and out-rightly sell theirs, just in the name of rural development. Onumbu (2022) postulated that “land is not constant, it diminishes”. The human population is exploding at a very alarming rate while the land-mass is diminishing at a very dangerous rate in almost all the rural communities. This is a socio-technical challenge!

In China today and even in many states of America, it is almost impossible to secure a cemetery to bury the dead; corpses are often cremated (burnt). This is because of unanticipated consequences of over-population and urbanization. Here in major cities of Niger-Delta, like Port Harcourt, Obio-Akpor and Yenagoa, and some of their conurbations, space to culturally bury the dead has become a problem.

In the rural communities where land is being sold indiscriminately, the people encounter forced women-adultery and prostitution because the males sold the entire farm land that the females would have used for sustenance. There is also heavily polluted environment to the detriment of human health and safety. Often times, most of the males who sold the land end up being drug addicts, engage in some other crimes, and even go back to square-one as Bus Conductors and ‘agberoes’. Reason? There is no properly planned rural development implementation. The land use Decree Act of 1978 does not help matters too. Igwe (2019) rightly asserted that development at a given time should not jeopardize other socio-economic activities, nor even aid crises, unrests, crimes and death. In the same vein, Williams (2011) has already opined that a safe society will be built because we all think safe on the platform of general awareness that safety is achievable and a collective responsibility. Contrary to the expected, as is the case in Niger-Delta today, Odibo and Aguke (2011) observed that population growth, industrialization (which relates with rural development) and the consequential increases in land use activities have unleashed a multitude of irrevocable changes in the climatic characteristics of the environment. As a matter of fact, Aliyu and Amadu (2017); in view of the prevailing circumstances in Nigeria, especially in Niger-Delta, were constrained to observe that managing urban growth and urbanization (rural development) in Nigeria have become one of the most important challenges of the 21st century. They continued by suggesting that if managed carefully, urbanization or rural development help to reduce hardship and human suffering; on the other hand, it could also increase urban poverty and squalor. Is it not astonishing or something that boggles the mind to affirm that in the year 1986 when Port Harcourt International Airport, Omagwa, was constructed by Inter-Button Company, by

the Federal Government, an unquantifiable hectares of Virgin hunters forest-land was in the opinion of this workfastidiously and irrationally acquired by some agents of the government? Without due consideration to the land use needs of the host communities in the future; amidst scarce land availability in Niger-Delta. Again, arguably, the land sites of Universities in Niger-Delta are often over-estimated land sizes (areas). Take for instances; a university site in Elele of Ikwerre Local Government Area(LGA), Abara of Etche L.G.A, University of Port Harcourt, all in Rivers State, Niger-Delta, and so on. The areas of land for these universities were not economized by the planners.

Improper rural development through indiscriminate land-sale leads to strange urban/city life. According to Igwe (2019), the city dwellers in Nigeria are exposed to more kinds of toxic chemicals in higher concentrations and to more human-produced noise, heat, and particulates than the rural dwellers. So, those in rural areas should not make the same mistakes of the city or urban areas.

Aim of the Study

This study is aimed at stoppage of indiscriminate sale of land and promotion of health and safety of the rural dwellers through enforcement of proper rural development plans in the various communities.

Classification of Terms

This study could be better discerned in the following assertions from Onumbu (2022).

“How can we explain this? No farmland for sustenance of our children, wives and aged mothers! How do we explain this? No fresh-water (Ngwulo) to swim under hot sun, do “Ogwuaro”, cast nets and catch fishes, like ‘Ohiem’ and soak our cassava tubers for dough (Mbalaka). We now ferment our cassava in the house, what a shame! How can we explain this? Our grandma (Da-ada) and our wives would no more make money from sales in our weekly markets, to pay their contributions in village meetings, in churches, and buy wrapper-clothes! How must we explain this? No more market-day special soup! No more roasted fresh-water fish (pelenpe) eel, no more Ebi-Igwu, Nchi, Okpi, Ngbada, Okwa (bush meat) and their likes! How should we explain this? Those that go back to the cities at weekends can no more go with garri, yam tubers and plantains. No thought for tomorrow. No dice! Are we okay at all?” Onumbu, C.I (2022: 2).

The concept rural development is not new but what is strange is how most people perceive it, even some of the educated. Most unsuspecting people in Niger-Delta unconsciously see rural development as a massive deforestation, de-vegetation and building of structures in rural communities. That’s all! Sadly though, there are more to do than just that. Ogunsola and Shehu (2018) rightly pin-pointed that ‘no community can develop above the health status of its people. As a follow-up therefore, Igwe (2019) stressed that environmental sustainability has become a global issue and concern. So, every rural community, in the opinion of this study, should as a matter of emergency, decide and determine how their communities should be developed in order to establish safe-environment, healthy people and economized land use for a safer posterity. Hence, Obisike et al. (2023) emphasized that the destiny of every community, where they wish to be in terms of development and competitiveness is in their hands. Igwe (2019) therefore exposed the fact that it has been the need and focus of environmental scientists to conserve and preserve and maintain the purity of the environment of not only the cities but also the rural environment. Hence, he continued by suggesting that we are expected to determine in advance where development will occur. Rhea (2013) saw community development as the practice of taking on activities that provide basic services to communities.

Rural development as a concept is related to community development. “Rural Development” is therefore defined by this study as positive creation and sustenance of improved quality of life, commerce, good jobs and social amenities with economized land use in the localities or hinter lands. It implies sustainable development in the country side.

There is often a relative relationship between rural development and urbanization. Urbanization has to do with turning an area into an industrialized and highly populated area with a city life and infrastructure. Indiscriminate sale of land therefore is hereby defined as an iniquitous, uneconomized and irrational outright sale of land because of mainly laziness, overzealousness, over ambition and or stark ignorance. To this extent, indiscriminate land-sale hampers citizens’ safety. Citizens’ safety means the freedom of citizens of a place to enjoy and express themselves in sustainable health and freedom from non-self-expression, poverty, harm, and unnecessary loss or death. Land is therefore, hereby defined as an essential limited earth’s portion where human beings dwell on and whose vegetative and some other resources may get exhausted or extinct with time.

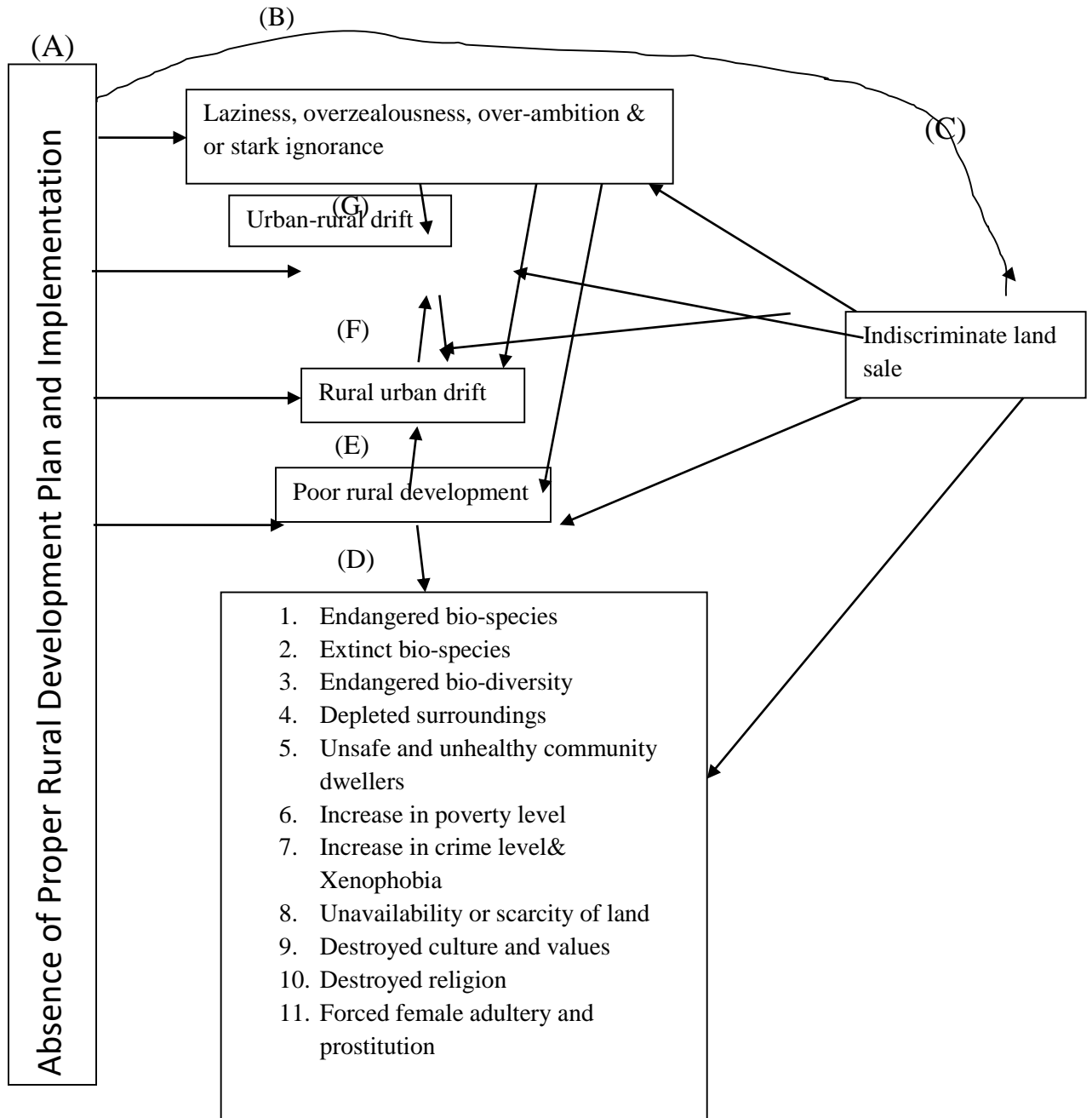
One of the best ways to engender proper rural development is by the various land users resorting to building of more than one-storey houses (upstairs) as much as is possible, instead of bungalows. That is a way to economize and save the land for future and posterity.

It has been observed that most of the community citizens who indulge in indiscriminate land-sale are mainly the lazy, unindustrious and unmeaningfully employed ones. The meaningfully employed, hardworking and the well-educated ones do not willingly practice indiscriminate sale of land unless they are coerced by manipulations of the government or community.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is premised on the health Promotion Model Theory of Nola J. Pender – 1982 & 1996, in the report of Onumbu (2022). Pender, J.N. in the years 1982 & 1996, a former Professor of Nursing in University of Michigan, did postulate that the Health Promotion Theory is a complementary instrument for health protection both at home and in work places. This theory saw health as a positive dynamic state not merely the absence of diseases. The theory therefore complements the stand of World Health Organization (WHO) on settings and strategies theory of 1986 as was remarked by Tones (2001). In that view, settings and strategies theory of WHO (1986) adopts an ecological approach in which the whole environment and ethos of a particular setting are geared to promoting health in a coherent and integrated fashion. Furthermore, a health – promoting setting should relate in a collaborative manner to the community in which it is situated. Similarly, a postulation made by this study, through the author, which is termed the Perilous-Chain Model or Indiscriminate Chain Model also supports the Health Promotion Model Theory of Nola J. Pender – 1982 & 1996.

Fig. 1. The Perilous Chain Model (Or Indiscriminate-Chain Model) by Chime I. Onumbu.



This perilous-chain model is factored herein as the fall-out from absence of proper rural development plan and implementation. This fall out involves a chain of perilous consequences that are highly regrettable in any society. From the chart above, it is observed that absence of proper rural development plan and implementation brings about lazy, overzealous, over ambitious and or stark ignorant indigenous land owners. These in turn lead to indiscriminate land-sale syndrome, in order to get rich quick or make ends meet. This absence of plan with its implementation also leads to endangered bio-species, extinct bio-species, endangered bio-diversity, depleted surrounding, unsafe and unhealthy community dwellers, increase in poverty level, increase in crime level, and xenophobia, unavailability or scarcity of land, destroyed culture and values, forced female adultery and prostitution, and finally, destroyed religion. Urban-rural drift, ruralurban drift and poor rural development are also affected by this lack of

proper rural development plan and implementation. It can be noted as in the figure above that indiscriminate sale of land leads to the problems highlighted in numbers D, E, F, G, and B. While attitudes highlighted in B may lead to C, E, F, and G. From the same figure, E leads to D and F while F leads to G and vice versa. It has been a popular observation in most developing rural communities and urbanized ones that due to lack of proper rural development plan and its implementation, heinous crimes like youth gang-cultism, kidnapping, stealing, armed-robbery, and prostitution-based hotels got proliferated in most rural communities. This is due to influence of bad eggs from different tribes and communities with their peculiar religio-cultural beliefs and practices. It is the strangers that often introduce these crimes in most rural communities.

This model stated herein makes it imperative for various governments and other stake holders in Niger-Delta to concretize a properly designed plan for the development of their rural areas. However, this must include enacting good laws that would strictly prohibit and even penalize indiscriminate sale of land and also strictly implement same so as to save the attendant perilous consequences of doing the contrary. Lease of land should be the best globally amiable practice, rather than indiscriminate land-sale. Although, these ideological concept is germane for those whose land portions are not yet sold and areas that have not been built upon yet.

The Position of the Bible on Indiscriminate Land-sale

The Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible in Proverbs chapter 19 verse 14 reads – “Land and property are inherited from the fathers”. The question here is, if you sell all the inherited land, which one will you bequeath your children and their lineage? Proverbs chapter 13 vs. 22: says that “a good man leaves an inheritance for his children’s children”. Do you like being called a bad-man? 1st Kings Chapter 21 vs. 2 & 3; Naboth told King Ahab, God forbid that I should give or sell to you the land inheritance of my father’s (ancestors). So did you sell your ancestors own? Leviticus chapter 25 vs. 23-24: God told the Israelites that their land should not be sold forever, unless for leasing, because the land is God’s own. Is the land you sold owned by devil or God? Finally, in the book of Genesis chapter 47 vs. 19-26: Egyptians became farm slaves to those they sold their lands to. This suggests that indiscriminate land sale, which is not meant for economic purposes, or social amenities, or living homes for those in dire need, but for the “money-miss-road” politicians or other aristocrats to show-case their illegal or moral wealth, may turn out to be a curse in future. No farms, no good environment, no food and so on.

Remember the Bible in Zechariah 11 vs. 1-3, Isaiah 60 vs. 13 and Deuteronomy 20 vs. 19-20; made us understand that the beauty of a properly planned rural or urban community is where the thick forest and vegetation exist along-side with the community dwellers. The idea of leasing a land for business purposes is the best option where applicable; based on the foregoing.

Effects of Improper Rural Development in Niger-Delta

As have been stated above, the effects can be summarized as follows:

- i. Indiscriminate land sale and unavailability of land in the future
- ii. Forced female adultery and prostitution due to loss of farm-land and hunger
- iii. Loss of farm-land and hunger in the land
- iv. Increase in crime rate and xenophobia
- v. Unsafe and unhealthy community dwellers
- vi. Polluted surroundings and atmospheric air
- vii. Endangered bio-diversity
- viii. Endangered and extinct bio-species

- ix. Over-population
- x. High-rate of urban-rural drift and rural urban drift
- xi. Loss of culture and community values
- xii. Distorted or destroyed religion
- xiii. Flood and erosion
- xiv. High disease rate index (epidemics)
- xv. Loss of property and life (death)
- xvi. Loss of tourist attraction and historical vestiges, through deliberate government and community practice which tend to extinct many ancient archival and aesthetic reserves or relics. Your history with evidences tells your root. You don't know your root then you don't know who you are!

Causes of Indiscriminate sale of land

The following can be summarized as unacceptable excuses for indiscriminate sale of land in the rural communities.

- i. Lack of proper urban and rural development laws or rules on forest and wild-life reservation and environmental protection.
- ii. Lack of enforcement of the few existing laws on rural and urban development, on forest and wild-life reservation and environmental protection.
- iii. Lack of and inaccessibility of good rural development plans.
- iv. Laziness and lack of foresight in wealth creation and sustainability.
- v. Over-zealousness and over-ambitiousness to get rich quick by some community land owners.
- vi. Stark ignorance of the short and long term consequences of indiscriminate land sale to both the individual land owners and the community dwellers.
- vii. The zeal to share a communal land owned by the families to individuals or groups may bring about unnecessary sale of land portions.
- viii. The temptation to imitate your fellows who have sold their land portions and are now living a high-taste or high-class life-style, may lead one to sell his.
- ix. The fear that the government may forcefully acquire the community owned land for unnecessary projects without adequate compensation may warrant sale of land. Sometimes some agents give wrong information in this regard so that the family or community leader may order for the sharing and sale of the land.
- x. Pangs of extreme poverty due to not being creatively and critically industrious and loaferring, lead to indiscriminate land sale.
- xi. Excruciating and deterrent government's economic policies.
- xii. Legal cases and challenges.
- xiii. Health challenges.
- xiv. Education challenges.
- xv. False ownership of land portion and land grabbing.
- xvi. Excess and uneconomized acquisition of a land portion for some government projects or by individuals and corporate investors.
- xvii. Unemployment and under-development.
- xviii. The desire to by-pass protocols and live a high-class life style.
- xix. The desire to get money and travel abroad.
- xx. Population explosion and immigration.
- xxi. Decision to bury the dead
- xxii. Decision to marry
- xxiii. Excruciating medical challenges

Position of Law and Scientists on Land-sale.

The International Charter on Human Rights (ICHR) and the Nigerian Constitution (NC) enshrined freedom to life, health and comfortable livelihood to all persons, whether in rural or city areas. Scientists all over the world have proven that those who dwell in an improperly planned urban or developing rural area which are faced with smelling gutters, sewage leakages, frosty hot-air, smelling dump-sites, and their likes suffer great health challenges and some even die earlier.

Magaji and Hassan (2015) believed that breathing polluted air all year round can shorten life by one to three years and also damage our environment. Proper rural development plan-implementation with enough vegetative surroundings is the panacea.

The Way Forward: Remedial Actions for Proper Rural Development and Citizen's Health and Safety

- a. Governments and the rural communities should collaboratively establish laws on and implement proper town plans through their relative experts. Various rural communities should have more decent task-forces to enforce the same than what we have now. Violators should face the penalties. Igwe (2019) rightly asserted that we are expected to determine in advance where development will occur so as to protect property values and prevent chaotic development. In the same vein, Omotoso and Oni (2014) averred that no nation worth its salt will stand-by while its citizens are in harm's way regardless of where they may be or what the circumstances are.
- b. Establishment of discrete and strict laws on forest and wild life species' protection and conservation so as to avert undue lumbering and poaching. Violators should face their penalties. The vegetative environment should be mapped out in certain areas of the rural community for strict reservation and preservation. Vegetation is the life of the community. It is sad to see individuals sell-off swampy vegetations which could have otherwise been preserved and kept for species survival and biodiversity, rice, palm and plantain plantations. This could reduce hunger and youth empowerment. Herbs for medicines would also abound from the vegetation.
- c. Protection and conservation of streams, rivers and some vegetation in line with the people's cultural values and belief systems. "A people without a culture is as good as a people that never existed"
- d. Provision of reasonable employment and viable entrepreneurial skills to the rural dwellers by the various stake holders should be established so as to promote self-sustenance, poverty alleviation, curb indiscriminate sale of land and reduce crimes. A hungry man may be constrained to sell his land.
- e. Abolition of land grabbing and commercial estate development by the various levels of government should be done. It's believed that estate development in a commercial way is an avenue where looted monies are trapped and the rural women farmers remain hungry without any other farm-land. Food security in the rural areas is heavily threatened now.
- f. Governments and the community's relevant laws or regulations should promote leasing of land portions instead of out-right sale of land. Penalties for violators should be well-captured and the sold land may be revoked by the appropriate institution. This would help reduce urban-rural drift and over population syndrome.
- g. Laws in the Niger-Delta should capture specific reasons to which a land can be out-rightly sold and with specific sizes of the portions of land. For instance, land could be sold for provision of some social amenities like hospitals, light and water projects; and primary and secondary schools with specifications on the acceptable land mass (or size of land).

- h. Government or corporate housing projects should be utterly banned, unless it is meant for the homeless and less privileged indigenes of the rural community. Allow the people buy their lands for housing projects, not the externals. Many acquired lands for housing projects are either abandoned or allocated to non-indigenous government workers and politicians who otherwise, could have afforded to rent their houses, while most of the natives leaved in slums and hunger. Take for instance, in outskirts of Abuja, many estates are built by individuals and abandoned without occupants because that is their means of hiding looted or immoral money. Another example is the case of Government Reserved Areas (GRAs) and D-lines part of Port Harcourt which are all dashed out to non-natives mainly.
- i. Restricted sale of land portion would help expand development to other rural areas instead of concentrating housing structures and the attendant air pollution in the communities that are close to the cities. People may be constrained to go to their own rural areas, build their houses and establish projects in their own rural communities; through this means. Surely, this encourages reasonable rural development and urban- rural drift.
- j. There should be massive dissemination, enlightenment and conscientization on the need for restricted land-sales and leasing of lands in the various communities. This could be done through various stake-holders on health education, safety and land resource utilization and entrepreneurship. Health education has been defined by Orime, *et al.* (2018) as any combination of leaving experiences designed to help individuals and communities improve their health, by increasing their knowledge or influencing their attitudes.
- k. Finally, more than one storey buildings (upstairs) should be encouraged not bungalows.
- l. Tourism should be encouraged in the rural communities despite the developmental strives because of its economic and other values. This could be done by way of ensuring that our ancestral archival reserves such as old buildings, forests, lakes and rivers are not extinct through unnecessary rural development policies and practices.

Conclusion

This study no matter how peculiar has revealed the pangs, both hidden and unhidden which rural community dwellers are suffering from because of misplaced and improperly planned rural development activities of both the various levels of government and stake-holders. Emphasis here has been placed on the inevitability of making good laws on rural development that would encourage good environment, vegetation and wild-life preservation and conservation. Implementations of such laws are however the ultimate here. Leasing of land is herein exposed as a better alternative to sale of land. Poverty levels faced by rural women and girls due to indiscriminate sale of land and the attendant health and safety challenges are also exposed here. Economic empowerment of the rural dwellers and poverty alleviation by various stake holders, have been discovered in this study as a major way to discourage indiscriminate sale of land in the rural communities, among others.

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