

Bridging Cultural Barriers to Youth Entrepreneurship: Assessing Community-Based Business Mentorship in Bekwarra, Cross River State.

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Abstract- *This study explores the transformative role of community-facilitated business mentorship in addressing socio-cultural impediments to youth entrepreneurship in Bekwarra Local Government Area (LGA) of Cross River State, Nigeria. Relying solely on qualitative methods, the study examines how local mentorship programs have influenced perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors among rural youth regarding entrepreneurship. Through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, this research captures lived experiences and social dynamics that quantitative metrics often overlook. The findings suggest that culturally embedded mentorship serves as both an educational and social intervention, shifting norms, empowering marginalized groups (particularly women), and fostering a more entrepreneurial community ethos. The paper contributes to rural development literature by offering a grounded framework for integrating mentorship into local economic development strategies.*

Indexed Terms- *Youth Entrepreneurship, Qualitative Analysis, Community Mentorship, Socio-Cultural Barriers, Rural Development, Nigeria*

I. INTRODUCTION

Youth entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable development, especially within rural contexts characterized by high unemployment, limited access to capital, and socio-economic stagnation. In developing countries such as Nigeria, youth make up a significant portion of the population, yet they remain disproportionately affected by joblessness and underemployment. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS,

2020), Nigeria's youth unemployment rate was over 40%, with rural areas often experiencing worse outcomes due to infrastructural neglect and systemic marginalization. In Cross River State, this crisis is even more pronounced. The state's agrarian economy, though rich in potential, remains underutilized due to a combination of policy gaps, poor investment, and cultural dynamics that suppress innovation. Government-led initiatives such as the N-Power program, Youth Empowerment and Social Support Operations (YESSO), and Cross River State's Agricultural Development Programme (CRADP) have attempted to stimulate entrepreneurship, but many of these interventions fall short. One major oversight in these programs is their limited engagement with the deep-rooted socio-cultural norms that influence youth decision-making (Audu, Yusri & Adebayo, 2019; ILO, 2021).

In communities like Bekwarra Local Government Area (LGA), traditional expectations about work roles, gender responsibilities, and respect for hierarchy significantly shape youth aspirations. Many young people grow up internalizing beliefs that discourage risk-taking, especially in entrepreneurial endeavors that challenge conventional livelihood paths. For instance, farming, civil service, and migration are often viewed as more respectable or attainable compared to starting a business, especially for women or socially disadvantaged youth (Ugochukwu & Ezeobi, 2020). This socio-cultural conditioning limits the range of opportunities that young people perceive as viable or acceptable.

Amid these challenges, community-facilitated mentorship has emerged as a promising approach to bridging the gap between traditional expectations and

modern entrepreneurial ideals. Unlike top-down training models, community mentorship leverages local leadership, cultural fluency, and trust networks to promote transformative change. Mentors who are respected within the community—such as elders, successful entrepreneurs, or religious leaders—can play a pivotal role in reshaping youth mindsets. When such mentorship is grounded in local values but geared toward transformation and empowerment, it can help overcome socio-cultural barriers that typically hinder entrepreneurial activity (Effiong & Ubi, 2022). This paper, therefore, seeks to explore how community-based mentorship initiatives contribute to entrepreneurial development in rural areas, using Bekwarra LGA as a case study. Rather than focusing solely on quantitative measures such as income levels or business start-up rates, the research adopts a narrative-rich, qualitative methodology that emphasizes lived experiences, personal testimonies, and local context. Through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, the study aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which mentorship can shift perceptions, build confidence, and nurture resilience among young aspiring entrepreneurs.

Such an approach not only fills a gap in the literature but also provides practical insights for policymakers and development practitioners working in similar socio-cultural environments. It argues for a reimagining of youth entrepreneurship frameworks to include indigenous knowledge systems, cultural sensitivities, and community-driven leadership. Only by addressing these socio-cultural dynamics can sustainable entrepreneurship truly take root in rural Nigerian communities.

2.1 Understanding Socio-Cultural Barriers

Socio-cultural barriers refer to the entrenched values, traditions, belief systems, and social expectations that shape human behavior and restrict personal and collective agency within specific communities (Sen, 1999). These barriers often operate subtly, embedded in everyday practices, language, and socialization processes, and can significantly hinder youth entrepreneurship by discouraging risk-taking, innovation, and non-conventional career choices.

In Bekwarra, a rural local government area in Cross River State, these barriers manifest in multiple forms. Firstly, gendered expectations play a significant role in dictating who can or should participate in economic activities, particularly entrepreneurship. Young women are often socialized to prioritize domestic responsibilities and are discouraged from owning or managing businesses, especially those in male-dominated sectors like agriculture, transportation, or construction (UNDP, 2022). This gendered division of labor limits not only women's economic mobility but also the overall entrepreneurial potential of the community.

Secondly, familial hierarchies and age-based authority systems can constrain youth from making independent career decisions. In many extended families in Bekwarra, elders and male heads of households are expected to dictate the life trajectories of younger members. As a result, many youths feel compelled to pursue careers that align with family expectations rather than personal interests or market opportunities. For instance, the pressure to enter subsistence farming, the civil service, or migrate for labor often overrides entrepreneurial ambition (Okon & Effiong, 2021).

Thirdly, religious and traditional beliefs often valorize humility, continuity, and survival over ambition, competition, and individualism—values typically associated with entrepreneurship. In some cases, local belief systems regard commercial ventures as morally risky or spiritually inappropriate, particularly when they involve borrowing, aggressive marketing, or profit-maximization (Eneh, 2010). This moral framing may dissuade youths from engaging in business for fear of social rejection or spiritual repercussions.

However, these socio-cultural norms are not fixed. They are dynamic and susceptible to change through sustained engagement with alternative worldviews and success narratives. Community-based mentorship programs serve as critical vehicles for this transformation. When respected mentors from within or outside the community challenge prevailing norms—by sharing their experiences, modeling entrepreneurial behavior, and encouraging critical reflection—they can disrupt entrenched ideologies

and foster new aspirations (Ajani, 2016). Such mentorship fosters what Mezirow (1991) describes as transformative learning, wherein individuals revise previously held beliefs considering new experiences and perspectives.

Moreover, mentorship that is context-sensitive and rooted in culturally familiar expressions can avoid cultural backlash while promoting empowerment. For instance, using proverbs, storytelling, and communal dialogue to advocate entrepreneurship makes such initiatives more relatable and effective (Ojong & Ogar, 2019). By aligning with cultural forms of communication, mentorship becomes not just an economic intervention but a socio-cultural reformation tool.

2.2 Mentorship as a tool for change

As societies evolve and much of learned knowledge becomes acquired through formal schooling, with its emphasis on certification, the emphasis on practical skills acquired through apprenticing became less fashionable. Many who had acquired this life skill through apprenticing lose their prestige and were accordingly accorded fewer social statuses or values. Mentorship in its strict sense gave way to formal schooling (Mboto, Enamhe, Akah, Bukie, Ede, Eyang, Abonor, Eleme, Ushie, Upeh, Mboto, Akah, Uba and Okan, 2024). Mentorship, particularly when delivered within a familiar cultural setting, holds transformative potential to reshape internalized norms that inhibit innovation, risk-taking, and enterprise development. Unlike externally imposed interventions that may lack contextual relevance or social legitimacy, culturally grounded mentorship engages youth on terms they can relate to—terms shaped by shared language, belief systems, and lived experiences. This groundedness fosters both emotional trust and cognitive openness, essential ingredients for behavioral change in conservative rural communities like those found in Bekwarra Local Government Area. As Wanberg, Welsh, and Hezlett (2003) emphasize, mentorship is not merely a transmission of knowledge; it also involves identity formation. Effective mentors' model what success looks like in a way that mentees can envision for themselves. They embody narratives of transformation—people who may have once shared the mentee's constraints but have successfully

navigated them. This identity modeling is especially powerful when mentors are drawn from the same cultural milieu as the youth they are guiding. Shared linguistic nuances, religious affiliations, community histories, and socio-economic challenges enable these mentors to serve as authentic role models, fostering identification and aspirational motivation (Wanberg et al., 2003; Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

Local mentors in Bekwarra, for instance, may use indigenous proverbs, storytelling, or community gatherings (such as itiang and atinn meetings) to convey entrepreneurial lessons and life skills. These traditional communicative platforms, often overlooked by formal education systems, serve as culturally appropriate mechanisms for mentoring and social learning (Ojong & Ogar, 2019). By embedding mentorship within such culturally resonant practices, these initiatives can gradually erode rigid norms that deter non-conventional career paths. Moreover, localized mentorship acts as a mediating force between tradition and transformation. While not rejecting cultural norms outright, mentors reinterpret them considering modern challenges and opportunities. For example, rather than dismissing farming as outdated, mentors may introduce agro-processing, value addition, or digital marketing as extensions of traditional agriculture that align with entrepreneurial goals (Ajani, 2016; Nwachukwu & Egwa, 2018). In doing so, they not only preserve cultural identity but also promote innovation.

Furthermore, culturally embedded mentorship enhances sustainability. Because mentors are often accountable to their communities, they are more likely to remain engaged and adaptive. Their investment is not only professional but also personal and communal. This long-term commitment fosters consistency, which is critical in mentoring relationships (Rhodes, 2005). Ultimately, when youth see entrepreneurial success as attainable and culturally permissible, they are more likely to internalize the attitudes and behaviors needed to embark on that journey.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Albert Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which offers a

comprehensive framework for understanding how people acquire and maintain behavioral patterns. SCT emphasizes the dynamic interplay between personal factors (such as beliefs and attitudes), behavior, and environmental influences, a process Bandura describes as reciprocal determinism. Central to this theory are three key constructs: observational learning, self-efficacy, and reinforcement. Each of these constructs plays a critical role in shaping entrepreneurial behavior, particularly among rural youth navigating complex socio-cultural landscapes.

Observational learning, also known as modeling, suggests that individuals can acquire new behaviors by watching others perform them—especially if the observed models are like them or are respected within their social context (Bandura, 1997). In the context of community-facilitated mentorship, this modeling occurs when local mentors—who share similar cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds—demonstrate entrepreneurial success. Such visibility provides youth with tangible examples of what is possible within their context, making abstract ideas about business and innovation more relatable and attainable (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006).

A key determinant of entrepreneurial intention and action is self-efficacy, or one's belief in their capability to organize and execute actions required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1997). In rural areas like Bekwarra, where socio-cultural constraints often undermine youth confidence and autonomy, building self-efficacy is critical. Community-based mentors help nurture this by providing not just skills training, but also encouragement, affirmation, and practical problem-solving strategies. According to Schunk and Pajares (2002), self-efficacy can be significantly improved through vicarious experiences (observing successful others), verbal persuasion, and mastery experiences—all of which are facilitated through mentorship. Moreover, environmental reinforcement—another SCT construct—underscores the importance of external factors that reward or discourage certain behaviors. Mentorship environments that celebrate innovation, recognize progress, and provide emotional and sometimes material support can reinforce entrepreneurial

behavior in young people. These reinforcements counteract the negative feedback loops present in many rural communities where failure is stigmatized, and deviation from traditional norms is often discouraged (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002).

Therefore, community-facilitated mentorship does more than transfer knowledge; it creates social learning ecosystems that challenge socio-cultural barriers and enhance youth capacity for action. By integrating cultural relevance with behavior-shaping mechanisms described in Social Cognitive Theory, such mentorship becomes a transformative pathway for youth entrepreneurship in rural Nigeria.

II. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative research design was adopted to explore the nuances of mentorship experiences and their effects on socio-cultural perceptions. Data were collected through in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observations.

3.2 Study area and participants

Bekwarra LGA in Cross River State was purposively selected due to the presence of a structured community mentorship program spearheaded by local leaders and NGOs. A total of 40 participants were engaged, comprising: 20 youth mentees (aged 18–35), 10 community mentors, 5 parents/guardians and 5 community leaders

3.3 Data collection methods

In-depth Interviews: Conducted with all 40 participants to gain individual perspectives.

Focus Group Discussions: Three FGDs were held, segmented by gender and age, to capture collective insights.

Participant Observation: Researchers spent two weeks observing mentorship sessions and community meetings.

3.4 Data analysis

Data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Emergent themes included: norm transformation, gender

empowerment, community validation, and entrepreneurial identity formation.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Shifting Norms and Perceptions

Mentorship led to a visible shift in how youth perceive entrepreneurship. One participant stated: “I used to think business was only for people who failed school. But now, I see that it can be a path to dignity and freedom.” Mentors reinforced new narratives of success that countered the prevailing stigma around business ownership. Through storytelling, lived examples, and community engagement, mentors helped youth reframe entrepreneurship as a proactive and respectable career path. This shift was further strengthened by the mentors' consistent support, which validated the youths' aspirations and bolstered their confidence to take calculated risks and pursue innovation within their communities.

4.2 Gender Empowerment

Female participants shared stories of transformation. Before mentorship, many were discouraged from handling money or owning property. A female mentee recounted: “My father said girls don't do business. Now, he helps me sell my vegetables.” This transformation extended beyond individual mentees to community attitudes, as confirmed in FGDs with parents and leaders.

4.3 Role Modeling and Trust Building

Youth expressed a high level of trust in mentors who were perceived as “one of us.” Unlike external consultants, community mentors used local idioms, shared similar histories, and modeled attainable success. This created a culturally resonant learning environment that built trust and increased receptivity to change. Participants noted that being mentored by someone who had “walked the same path” made entrepreneurship feel more realistic and less intimidating. The shared socio-cultural background helped bridge gaps in understanding, as mentors communicated in ways that aligned with traditional norms while gently introducing new ideas. This authenticity fostered emotional connection, making youth more open to guidance and constructive feedback. The mentors' presence also helped demystify business processes, transforming abstract

concepts into relatable, actionable steps. Over time, this trust-based relationship reduced resistance to change, encouraged experimentation, and inspired a growing belief among youth that success was not only possible but achievable within their own cultural context.

4.4 Community Validation and Support

Mentorship was often accompanied by public recognition ceremonies, which helped validate youth efforts in the eyes of the community. These rituals reinforced new social norms that valorized entrepreneurship. One community elder noted: “We now see business not just as survival, but as honourable.” Such events—ranging from award presentations during village meetings to the symbolic handing over of business tools—played a vital role in reshaping perceptions. Public acknowledgment boosted the self-esteem of young entrepreneurs and signaled communal approval. This not only motivated participants to remain committed but also encouraged other youth to consider entrepreneurship as a viable, respected path to success.

4.5 Entrepreneurial Identity Formation

Participants gradually began to identify as entrepreneurs. This identity shift was marked by changes in language (e.g., referring to themselves as “business owners”) and behavior (e.g., reinvesting profits, expanding markets). This aligns with Bandura's emphasis on self-efficacy as a precursor to action.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Governments and NGOs should institutionalize community-led mentorship as a formal component of youth development programs, particularly in rural areas where socio-cultural norms heavily influence behavior. This approach not only ensures greater sustainability but also enhances local ownership and cultural resonance, which are often missing in externally driven models. Unlike standardized training sessions that may lack contextual relevance, community-based mentorship taps into indigenous knowledge systems, shared experiences, and localized solutions, making interventions more relatable and impactful (Ajani, 2016).

To maximize inclusivity and effectiveness, gender considerations must be integral to mentorship design. Deliberate efforts must be made to recruit and empower female mentors who can serve as role models for young women. Many rural girls face additional layers of restriction—ranging from early marriage to domestic responsibilities—that limit their entrepreneurial potential. Addressing these gender-specific barriers through tailored mentorship helps ensure that no group is left behind in the development process (UNDP, 2022).

Moreover, programs should leverage local cultural practices, such as storytelling, communal labour (iyim aheni in Bekwarra), and intergenerational dialogue, as tools for engagement and knowledge transfer. These culturally embedded methods foster a sense of belonging and continuity, making learning more meaningful and less didactic. By embedding entrepreneurship messages into familiar traditions, mentors can bridge the gap between modern enterprise models and indigenous values.

Lastly, establishing a pipeline where successful mentees transition into peer mentors will strengthen the system's sustainability. These youth, having recently navigated the path to success, are well-positioned to guide others and reinforce the community's evolving perception of entrepreneurship. This ripple effect not only expands reach but also instills a self-perpetuating culture of support, growth, and innovation. Ultimately, such community-led, culturally grounded mentorship frameworks are critical to addressing youth unemployment and unlocking rural economic potential. Again, taking a look at the structural conditions that shape youth experience and provide incentives for violent choices in the way they express 'self' is critical to having a holistic conversation about the 'youth problem' hence, mentorship (Akah & Ikeorji, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that community-facilitated business mentorship can effectively bridge socio-cultural barriers to youth entrepreneurship in rural Nigeria. By grounding interventions in cultural relevance and local leadership, such programs foster

not just skills, but a deeper transformation of identity and societal norms. For development stakeholders, this offers a promising blueprint for inclusive and sustainable economic empowerment. The findings highlight the importance of engaging trusted local figures who can influence perceptions and catalyze behavioral change. When youth see entrepreneurship as both attainable and respected within their cultural context, they are more likely to pursue it confidently, leading to long-term community resilience and economic growth.

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