

Entrepreneurship and Mentorship as Agents of Manpower Development: A Case Study of Igbo Foodstuffs Dealers Progressive Association, Itam, Itu Local Government, Nigeria.

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Abstract

Mentorship is a pivotal mechanism for personal and professional development, particularly within entrepreneurial ecosystems. This study investigates the role of mentorship in manpower development, focusing on the Igbo Foodstuffs Dealers Progressive Association (IFDPA) in Etaha Itam Market, Itu LGA, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The Igbo apprenticeship model—where trainees undergo 5–10 years of structured mentorship before establishing independent enterprises—has significantly enhanced local economic growth. However, despite its success, low adoption among indigenous populations persists due to policy deficiencies in Nigeria’s educational and vocational training systems. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 120 market traders through questionnaires and interviews. Findings indicate that governmental disinterest in integrating skill-based curricula inhibits broader replication of this model. The study advocates for institutionalizing mentorship programs to mitigate unemployment and foster sustainable human capital development.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Mentorship, Manpower Development, Apprenticeship, Informal Economy

1. Introduction

The Igbo entrepreneurial mentorship system is a well-documented driver of Nigeria’s informal economy (Uma, 2015). The IFDPA mostly from EBONYI State (Okposi, Oshiri, Izzamgbo, Akaeze etc.), Abia, Enugu etc. who dominate this Market exemplifies this tradition, facilitating manpower development through structured apprenticeships in foodstuff trading.

The Importance of Mentorship in Overcoming Business Challenges

Launching and scaling a business is no easy feat, but a mentor can help smooth the path. Mentors offer crucial advice and support to help entrepreneurs navigate obstacles. Here’s how mentorship can assist in addressing business challenges:

- Problem-solving: Mentors bring fresh perspectives and innovative solutions to help resolve issues.
- Encouragement: A mentor’s belief in your vision can strengthen your confidence and drive during difficult phases.
- Connections: With extensive networks, mentors can connect you with key contacts to help overcome hurdles.
- Expertise: Seasoned mentors provide industry-specific insights to tackle common challenges.
- Mistake prevention: Learning from a mentor’s past experiences helps you avoid costly errors.
- Emotional backing: Entrepreneurship can be stressful, but a mentor offers reassurance and a listening ear.

In essence, mentorship is invaluable in helping entrepreneurs face business challenges with greater clarity and resilience.

How Mentorship Fuels Business Growth and Achievement

Mentorship can be a game-changer for business success, offering knowledge, support, and opportunities that drive progress. Here's how mentors contribute to growth:

- Strategy development: Mentors assist in crafting actionable plans to reach business objectives.
- Skill enhancement: They help refine and expand your abilities, boosting performance.
- Networking: Mentors open doors to valuable relationships that can accelerate growth.
- Resource access: They guide you to useful tools and opportunities to scale your business.
- Better decisions: With expert advice, you can make smarter, more informed choices.
- Self-assurance: A mentor's encouragement fosters confidence, propelling you toward success.

Ultimately, mentorship plays a vital role in business growth, empowering entrepreneurs to achieve their goals and thrive. Despite the proven efficacy of mentorship in economic empowerment, Nigeria's formal education system continues to prioritize theoretical knowledge over practical skill acquisition (SMEDAN, 2023). This study examines:

- IFDPA's mentorship framework,
- Its socioeconomic contributions, and
- The systemic barriers to its scalability.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Entrepreneurship and Manpower Development

Entrepreneurship serves as a catalyst for job creation and skill enhancement. Entrepreneurship is the process of starting and running a business, taking on financial risks in the hope of making a profit. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) constitute 90% of global businesses and account for 50% of employment (World Bank, 2020). In Nigeria, the informal sector—particularly markets like Etaha Itam in Itu Local Government - relies on cooperative strategies such as bulk purchasing and shared logistics (NBS, 2021).

2.2 Mentorship as a Knowledge Transfer Mechanism

Mentorship bridges competency gaps by pairing novices with seasoned professionals. Mentorship is the relationship where an experienced person (mentor) guides and supports a less experienced person (mentee) to help them grow personally or professionally. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019) identifies mentorship as a critical factor in reducing startup failures. Apprenticeship is a training system where a person learns a trade or skill by working under an experienced professional, often while earning a wage.

Informal Economy is an economic activity that are not regulated or taxed by the government, often involving small-scale, cash-based, or unregistered businesses. IFDPA's model emphasizes:

- Financial Literacy: Access to credit and reinvestment strategies.
- Market Intelligence: Pricing mechanisms and supply chain management.
- Customer Relations: Negotiation tactics and conflict resolution

3. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining:

- Quantitative Data: Structured questionnaires administered to 120 traders.

- Qualitative Data: In-depth interviews with key stakeholders (mentors, mentees, union leaders).
- Analytical Tool: Inferential statistical analysis to assess mentorship adoption barriers.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Structure of IFDPA's Mentorship Model

- Apprenticeship Duration: 5–10 years, with incentives such as mobile phones for communication and discipline tracking.
- Economic Impact: SMEDAN (2023) reports IFDPA members earn 40% higher incomes than independent traders.

4.2 Key Operational Practices

- Credit Access: Rotating loan schemes and biannual union-backed loans.
- Capacity Building: Workshops on bookkeeping, digital tools, and food safety.
- Market Expansion: Collective bargaining reduces operational costs.
- Governance: Elected executives oversee daily operations per union bylaws.

4.3 Challenges

- Policy Deficits: Lack of government support for vocational mentorship programs.
- Infrastructural Deficiencies: Poor storage and transportation facilities.
- Youth Disinterest: Declining participation in foodstuff trading.
- Taxation Issues: Multiple levies inflate commodity prices.

5. Recommendations

1. Policy Integration: Incorporate mentorship-based vocational training into national education curricula.
2. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): Encourage NGOs and governments to fund trade associations.
3. Technological Adoption: Leverage e-commerce platforms to modernize trade operations.
4. Youth Engagement awareness campaigns to revitalize apprenticeship interest.
5. Regulatory Reforms: Harmonize taxation policies to prevent double taxation on agricultural produce.

6. Conclusion

The IFDPA mentorship model underscores the transformative potential of structured apprenticeships in manpower development. Its success highlights the urgent need for policy reforms to replicate such frameworks nationwide. By institutionalizing mentorship, Nigeria can harness its demographic dividend, curb unemployment, and stimulate inclusive economic growth.

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