

POVERTY, UNEMPLOYMENT, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN ENHANCING LIVELIHOODS IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

This study examined poverty, unemployment, and community development in Rivers State, with a focus on the role of social workers in enhancing livelihoods. The objectives were to assess how household income levels, access to basic services, and livelihood security influence community development; to examine the effects of youth unemployment, underemployment, and reliance on informal economic activities on livelihoods; and to explore how social work interventions contribute to improved household and community outcomes. The study adopted a qualitative research approach using secondary sources, including academic journals, government reports, policy documents, and institutional assessments. Data were analyzed through thematic content analysis, enabling identification of patterns and relationships among key variables. The study was anchored on Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1999), which assumes that development is realized when individuals have the freedom and capability to achieve well-being, emphasizing empowerment, access to resources, and agency in enhancing livelihoods and community participation. Findings revealed that low household income, limited access to basic services, and unstable livelihoods constrain participation in local economic and development initiatives, while youth unemployment and underemployment exacerbate household vulnerability and limit community development. Reliance on informal economic activities provides temporary income but fails to ensure long-term stability. Social work interventions—such as community empowerment, skills acquisition support, and access to social welfare services—were found to enhance livelihoods, promote community cohesion, and strengthen institutional responsiveness, facilitating sustainable development outcomes. The study concludes that integrated strategies combining economic support, social protection, and social work interventions are essential to improving livelihoods and fostering inclusive community development in Rivers State.

Introduction

Poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment continue to shape the socio economic landscape of Rivers State, presenting significant challenges to individual wellbeing and community prosperity. Poverty in this context refers to the sustained inability of individuals and households to access basic necessities such as adequate food, shelter, healthcare, and education, and is often measured by income levels, consumption patterns, and access to social services (World Bank, 2022). The indicators of

poverty such as low per capita income financial insecurity and limited access to basic amenities intersect with unemployment indicators including high non employment rates joblessness among youth and a predominance of low quality informal jobs to create an environment where many residents are unable to achieve sustainable livelihoods. Furthermore weak community development indicators such as limited access to clean water education and inadequate infrastructure reflect the systemic nature of these challenges, illustrating how individual

deprivation is embedded within broader social and institutional weaknesses. These overlapping burdens not only constrain personal growth but also weaken community resilience and adaptive capacity in the face of economic shocks. Unemployment reflects the proportion of the working age population that is willing and able to work but lacks gainful employment, with particular concern for youth and female unemployment, which remain disproportionately high in many communities across Rivers State (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Community development captures the collective ability of a locality to mobilize resources, foster social cohesion, and generate sustainable economic opportunities for residents through infrastructure, institutions, and participatory governance (Ezeani, 2021). These variables interact in difficult ways to undermine livelihoods and perpetuate cycles of deprivation, highlighting the urgent need for effective interventions.

Available national statistics indicate that poverty remains persistently high and has worsened in Nigeria in recent years.

Multidimensional poverty, which captures deprivations in income, education, health, and living standards, increased sharply in the early 2020s. By 2022, about 63 percent of Nigerians, estimated at roughly 133 million people, were classified as multidimensionally poor, including a substantial proportion of residents in the South South geopolitical zone where Rivers State is located (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). This level of deprivation demonstrates that poverty in Nigeria extends beyond income insufficiency to include limited access to essential social services and basic living conditions. Monetary poverty also remains severe, with estimates showing that over 40 percent of Nigerians lived below the national poverty line in the late 2010s, a situation

exacerbated by inflation and rising living costs (World Bank, 2022). Projections for the mid 2020s suggest that the poverty headcount may have exceeded 54 percent by 2024, with rural poverty rates reaching over 75 percent, reflecting the lingering effects of the COVID 19 pandemic and subsequent economic shocks on household welfare (NBS, 2023). Unemployment trends during the same period further reveal structural weaknesses in the Nigerian labour market. Using the revised labour force survey methodology, the National Bureau of Statistics reported an official unemployment rate of about 4.2 percent in mid 2023, alongside time related underemployment exceeding 11 percent, indicating widespread labour underutilization (NBS, 2023). Youth unemployment remains a particular concern, with rates among persons aged 15 to 24 estimated at about 7.2 percent in the second quarter of 2023 and remaining elevated into 2024, pointing to persistent difficulties in school to work transition for young people (Omoju et al., 2023). At the state level, Rivers State recorded an unemployment rate of approximately 13.4 percent in 2023, placing it among the states with the highest unemployment burden in the country and highlighting significant sub national disparities in labour market outcomes (NBS, 2023).

Taken together, the period from 2020 to 2025 reflects an economy grappling with deeply entrenched poverty affecting more than half of the population, alongside unemployment and underemployment that continue to undermine livelihoods. High poverty incidence, combined with rising prices, declining real incomes, and limited access to education and health services, weakens household capacity to meet basic needs and invest in productive activities. Persistent unemployment, particularly

among youths and urban residents, limits productive engagement and pushes many individuals into informal and insecure forms of work that offer little income stability or social protection. In Rivers State, unemployment rates above the national average intensify these challenges, contributing to social strain, weakened community cohesion, and constrained community development outcomes (Adeyemi, 2022).

Empirical studies further substantiate the severity of this situation. Omoju et al. (2023) demonstrate that despite multiple youth employment initiatives in Nigeria, unemployment remains high due to weak policy coordination, inadequate funding, and poor programme sustainability, revealing systemic labour market failures. A national level study on community economic insecurity finds that communities with high poverty and unemployment exhibit reduced economic participation, weak household coping mechanisms, and increased reliance on informal survival strategies, thereby heightening vulnerability and limiting development prospects (Akinwale, 2021). Research on rural livelihoods in Nigeria shows that elevated poverty rates are strongly associated with low agricultural productivity, poor access to markets and social services, and limited human capital investment, all of which undermine resilience and sustainable income generation (Ogunleye and Adeola, 2022). Similarly, an empirical study focusing on Rivers State establishes a significant relationship between unemployment and social instability, including rising crime rates and declining community wellbeing, underscoring the broader social costs of labour market distress (Okafor and Dike, 2021).

Overall, the evidence from national statistics and empirical studies presents a

deeply worrisome picture of Nigeria's socio economic condition between 2020 and 2025. Chronic poverty affecting a majority of the population, persistent unemployment particularly among youths, and pronounced sub national disparities such as those observed in Rivers State continue to erode livelihoods, weaken social stability, and hinder sustainable development. These realities underscore the urgency of integrated economic, social, and community based interventions aimed at poverty reduction, employment creation, and livelihood enhancement.

Despite various government and non governmental efforts, poverty and unemployment remain pervasive in Rivers State, with ripple effects on community development outcomes. Empirical evidence suggests that high poverty incidence is associated with low educational attainment, poor health outcomes, and limited access to productive assets, which in turn constrain individuals ability to participate meaningfully in economic activities (Adeyemi, 2022). Indicators such as household income below national poverty thresholds, high rates of informal and precarious employment, and inadequate community infrastructure underscore the depth of livelihood challenges facing many rivers communities. These conditions exacerbate social exclusion and erode trust in formal institutions, making conventional development strategies less effective. The persistence of these problems suggests that existing measures have not adequately addressed their root causes or integrated the social dimensions of livelihood enhancement. Within this context social workers are strategically positioned to play a transformative role in enhancing livelihoods and strengthening community development processes. Social work practice emphasizes the empowerment of vulnerable populations,

the strengthening of social support systems, and the facilitation of access to resources and opportunities that promote wellbeing (Gray, 2023). As frontline practitioners social workers engage with individuals, families, and community structures to identify needs, mobilize local assets, and advocate for policies that address structural barriers to economic participation. Their roles include community needs assessment, capacity building, counselling and psychosocial support, linkage of clients to employment and training resources, and promotion of participatory development initiatives that foster collective problem solving (Okoye, 2021).

This study is triggered by the observable gap between the ongoing livelihood challenges in Rivers State and the scope of social work interventions documented in existing practice. While government poverty reduction and employment generation programmes exist, they have often overlooked the localized social dimensions of vulnerability and the central role that social work can play in catalysing community led development. Without a clear understanding of how poverty unemployment and community development interact and the role of social workers in this nexus, policy responses risk remaining fragmented and insufficiently grounded in the lived realities of affected populations.

Therefore this study seeks to critically examine the relationships among poverty unemployment and community development in Rivers State and to elucidate the role of social workers in enhancing livelihoods, strengthening social capital and fostering inclusive community development processes that can sustainably improve wellbeing.

Objectives

- i. To examine the extent household income level, access to basic services, and livelihood security influence community development outcomes in Rivers State.
- ii. To assess how youth unemployment, underemployment, and reliance on informal economic activities affect livelihoods and community development in Rivers State.
- iii. To analyze the role of social workers in enhancing livelihoods through community empowerment initiatives, access to employment and skills development programmes, and linkage to social welfare services in Rivers State.

Research Questions

- i. How do household income levels, access to basic services, and livelihood security influence community development in Rivers State?
- ii. In what ways do youth unemployment, underemployment, and reliance on informal economic activities affect livelihoods and community development in Rivers State?
- iii. How do social work interventions such as community empowerment, skills acquisition support, and access to social welfare services contribute to improved livelihoods and community development in Rivers State?

Literature Review

Poverty and unemployment continue to constitute entrenched socio economic challenges in Nigeria, reflecting structural imbalances within the national economy and labour market. Contemporary empirical studies demonstrate that the relationship between poverty and unemployment is mutually reinforcing, operating through complex causal mechanisms that sustain deprivation. Recent econometric analyses

confirm that unemployment significantly increases household poverty by reducing income generating opportunities, while poverty simultaneously constrains access to education, skills acquisition, and productive assets necessary for employment participation. This dual causality suggests that labour market exclusion and income deprivation are interlinked outcomes of deeper structural inequalities rather than isolated phenomena, reinforcing the argument that fragmented policy interventions are insufficient for sustainable poverty reduction (Adeleye et al., 2023; Okafor & Aderemi, 2024).

Further macro level investigations indicate that rising unemployment among Nigeria's economically active population has intensified poverty incidence over the past decade. Studies employing time series and panel data methods reveal that unemployment shocks have a statistically significant effect on poverty headcount ratios, particularly in contexts characterized by weak social protection systems and limited public investment in human capital. Employment is therefore identified as a critical pathway through which households escape poverty, while persistent joblessness undermines consumption capacity, savings behavior, and intergenerational mobility. These findings underscore the centrality of employment creation to poverty alleviation strategies and highlight the vulnerability of households that depend largely on informal and unstable sources of income (Dauda, 2022; Ologunwa & Adepoju, 2023).

The social dimensions of poverty and unemployment are especially pronounced among youth populations, who experience disproportionate exposure to labour market exclusion. Empirical research consistently shows that youth unemployment in Nigeria remains persistently high, driven by skills

mismatch, slow economic diversification, and limited absorption capacity of the formal sector. This condition exacerbates poverty, frustrates social mobility, and weakens social cohesion, particularly in urban and peri urban communities. Scholars argue that prolonged unemployment among young people increases susceptibility to economic dependency, psychological distress, and social disaffection, thereby transforming labour market challenges into broader community development concerns (Akinwale, 2023; Edewor & Aluko, 2024). At the sub national level, studies focusing on Rivers State reveal that poverty persists despite the state's resource endowment and strategic economic position. Community based research conducted across selected local government areas demonstrates that poverty manifests through low household income, inadequate access to basic services, insecure livelihoods, and weak community infrastructure. Evaluations of government and donor driven community development programmes suggest limited effectiveness due to weak institutional coordination, insufficient community participation, and poor alignment between intervention design and local livelihood realities. These findings emphasize that poverty in Rivers State is not merely an individual condition but a collective community challenge shaped by governance deficits and structural exclusion (Amadi & Ekpo, 2022; Nwankwo et al., 2023).

Employment focused studies within Rivers State further illustrate the importance of local economic activities in shaping livelihood outcomes. Research on micro and small scale enterprises indicates that informal and semi formal businesses provide critical employment opportunities for low skilled and unemployed populations, contributing modestly to poverty reduction and income stabilization. However, scholars

caution that the sustainability of these livelihoods is constrained by limited access to credit, weak market linkages, and inadequate business support services. This suggests that while local employment initiatives have potential, their developmental impact depends heavily on supportive institutional and policy environments (Ibaba & Okechukwu, 2022; Eze & George, 2024). The literature on social protection adds further depth to understanding poverty and inequality in Nigeria. Empirical evaluations of social intervention programmes reveal that cash transfers, public works schemes, and welfare support can reduce poverty severity and enhance household resilience when effectively targeted. However, coverage gaps, administrative inefficiencies, and weak integration with employment and community development initiatives often limit long term impact. Scholars therefore emphasize that social protection must be embedded within broader livelihood and development strategies to address the multidimensional nature of poverty and unemployment (Holmes et al., 2023; Adebayo and Yusuf, 2024). Despite extensive scholarship on poverty and unemployment, significant gaps remain regarding the integration of community development and social work perspectives. Existing studies rarely examine how social work interventions such as community mobilization, empowerment, psychosocial support, and advocacy influence livelihood outcomes. Social work scholarship emphasizes the importance of strengthening social capital, enhancing access to social services, and promoting participatory development processes, yet these dimensions are underrepresented in mainstream economic and labour market analyses in Nigeria (Onyeonoru, 2022; Olatunji & Lawal, 2024). Emerging interdisciplinary studies suggest that multi

dimensional and community centered approaches are more effective in addressing poverty and unemployment than single sector interventions. This perspective aligns strongly with social work principles that emphasize holistic engagement, capacity building, and empowerment of vulnerable populations. Integrating social work practice into poverty and unemployment research therefore enhances analytical depth by illuminating how social relationships, community networks, and institutional support systems mediate economic outcomes.

In contexts such as Rivers State, where unemployment and poverty intersect with governance challenges and community vulnerability, social work offers a critical framework for strengthening livelihoods and promoting inclusive community development (Gray et al., 2023; Midgley & Pawar, 2024). In summary, the literature consistently demonstrates that poverty and unemployment in Nigeria are deeply interdependent and structurally embedded, with significant implications for community development and livelihoods. Evidence from Rivers State highlights the persistence of deprivation despite economic potential, pointing to the need for integrated and locally grounded interventions. By foregrounding the role of social workers in livelihood enhancement and community empowerment, this study addresses an important gap in existing scholarship and contributes to a more holistic understanding of poverty reduction and employment generation in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The Sustainable Livelihoods Theory was advanced by Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway in 1992 and later strengthened by the Department for

International Development in 1999. The theory emerged from development studies and social policy scholarship, focusing on how individuals and communities utilize available resources to achieve sustainable living conditions despite socio economic constraints. It is particularly relevant for studies addressing poverty and unemployment within community contexts. The theory is built on several core assumptions. First, it assumes that people possess a variety of livelihood assets, including human capital such as skills, education, and health, social capital such as networks and community support, financial capital such as income and savings, physical capital such as infrastructure and tools, and natural capital such as land and environmental resources. Second, it assumes that poverty and unemployment arise when individuals and households lack access to or control over these assets or are unable to convert them into productive livelihoods. Third, the theory assumes that external vulnerability contexts, including economic shocks, unemployment, environmental degradation, and weak governance structures, directly affect people's ability to sustain livelihoods. Fourth, it assumes that institutions, policies, and social structures either constrain or enhance livelihood opportunities depending on their inclusiveness and effectiveness. Finally, the theory assumes that sustainable livelihoods lead to improved well being, reduced poverty, increased employment opportunities, and stronger community resilience. The application of the Sustainable Livelihoods Theory to this study lies in its capacity to explain how poverty and unemployment undermine community development and livelihoods in Rivers State. The theory provides a framework for understanding how limited access to education, skills training,

employment opportunities, social protection, and community support systems perpetuates economic hardship among households. It also highlights the critical role of social workers as facilitators who strengthen human and social capital through skills acquisition programs, advocacy for employment opportunities, access to welfare services, and community mobilization initiatives. By applying this theory, the study is able to assess how social work interventions contribute to livelihood enhancement, poverty reduction, and employment generation within community settings. The theory therefore offers a comprehensive lens for linking individual vulnerabilities, community structures, and institutional responses in addressing poverty and unemployment in Rivers State.

Methods and Material

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to enable an in depth understanding of poverty, unemployment, and community development, with particular emphasis on the role of social workers in enhancing livelihoods in Rivers State. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for critical interpretation of existing knowledge, policy experiences, and social realities surrounding livelihoods and development, rather than relying on numerical measurement alone. The study relies exclusively on secondary sources of data. These include peer reviewed journal articles, academic books, government publications, policy documents, national and state development reports, labour force and poverty assessment reports, and reputable institutional studies relevant to poverty, unemployment, community development, and social work practice in Nigeria. Data were selected based on relevance, credibility, and recency, with emphasis on materials published within the last decade to reflect

current socio economic conditions. Data analysis was conducted through thematic content analysis. Relevant materials were systematically reviewed, coded, and organized into themes reflecting key indicators of the study variables such as income insecurity, unemployment patterns, livelihood vulnerability, community development initiatives, and social work interventions. This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns, relationships, and gaps within existing literature, thereby providing a coherent qualitative interpretation of how poverty and unemployment affect community development and how social workers contribute to livelihood enhancement in Rivers State.

Household income levels, access to basic services, and livelihood security influence on community development in Rivers State

In this study, household income levels refer to the total monetary resources available to a household from all sources, including wages, business earnings, remittances, and government support, and are understood in terms of the capacity of households to meet daily needs, support education, access healthcare, and participate in economic activities. Access to basic services captures the availability and utilization of essential services that support human development and well-being, including healthcare, education, potable water, electricity, sanitation, and social welfare provisions. Livelihood security reflects the ability of households to sustain a stable and adequate standard of living without the risk of falling into extreme poverty, encompassing income stability, employment opportunities, access to productive resources, and resilience against economic and environmental shocks.

Community development outcomes are conceptualized as the collective improvements in the economic, social, and institutional capacities of a community that enhance quality of life and well-being, particularly through the extent to which households contribute to and benefit from community initiatives, infrastructure, local economic activities, social cohesion, and sustainable development programs. The findings of this study indicate that household income levels, access to basic services, and livelihood security exert significant influence on community development outcomes in Rivers State. Five major pathways through which these variables shape community development are highlighted below:

1. Enhanced Economic Participation and Local Investment:

Household income directly affects the ability of residents to participate in local economic activities and invest in community resources. Families with stable and sufficient income can afford to purchase goods and services locally, support small businesses, and contribute to cooperative initiatives, which stimulates community economic growth. Empirical studies show that communities with higher household incomes tend to experience increased microenterprise development, greater entrepreneurial activities, and higher levels of economic vibrancy (Ibaba & Okechukwu, 2022; Eze & George, 2024). In Rivers State, households with better income security often engage in informal and small scale trading, which strengthens local markets and promotes economic sustainability.

2. Improved Access to Education and Human Capital Development:

Adequate household income enables families to send children to school and support skill acquisition programs, enhancing human capital in the community. Education and skill development have been

empirically linked to improved civic participation, better employment prospects, and stronger community leadership, which are crucial for sustainable community development (Dauda, 2022; Okafor & Aderemi, 2024). In Rivers State, households with higher income levels are better able to afford quality schooling, vocational training, and adult education, which strengthens the knowledge base and capacity for community initiatives.

3. Strengthened Health Outcomes and Community Wellbeing: Household income and livelihood security determine access to healthcare and essential services, which in turn affects community wellbeing. Empirical studies indicate that communities with households experiencing stable income and improved access to healthcare report lower morbidity and higher productivity (Holmes et al., 2023; Adeleye et al., 2023). In Rivers State, households with sufficient financial resources are able to access preventive care, health insurance, and treatment services, reducing disease burden and enabling residents to participate actively in development activities. Healthy communities are more resilient and capable of sustaining collective projects and social cohesion.

4. Participation in Community Development Initiatives: Income and livelihood security also influence the capacity of households to engage in community development programs. Empirical evidence from local studies in Rivers State indicates that households with secure income and livelihoods are more likely to contribute labor, resources, and ideas to community projects such as infrastructure maintenance, sanitation programs, and cooperative ventures (Amadi & Ekpo, 2022; Nwankwo et al., 2023). Conversely, households facing extreme poverty or unstable income often lack the time,

resources, and motivation to participate meaningfully in community activities, limiting the reach and sustainability of development initiatives.

5. Resilience Against Shocks and Sustainability of Development Efforts: Livelihood security and access to basic services enhance the ability of households and communities to withstand economic, social, and environmental shocks. Studies reveal that communities with higher household income and better access to services demonstrate greater adaptive capacity, which protects community development gains from erosion during crises such as inflation, flooding, or economic downturns (Akinwale, 2023; Edewor & Aluko, 2024). In Rivers State, secure livelihoods allow households to maintain their participation in development programs and community projects even during challenging periods, ensuring continuity and sustainability of interventions.

Collectively, these pathways underscore that poverty reduction, livelihood enhancement, and improved access to basic services are essential for fostering sustainable community development. Empirical evidence from Rivers State confirms that households with stable income, secure livelihoods, and access to education, healthcare, and social services not only improve their own wellbeing but also contribute significantly to broader community growth, cohesion, and resilience. These findings reinforce the argument that interventions aimed at poverty alleviation, employment generation, and social support must be integrated with community development strategies to achieve lasting impact.

Youth unemployment, underemployment, and reliance on informal economic activities

effects on livelihoods and community development in Rivers State

In this study, youth unemployment refers to the condition whereby individuals within the age bracket of 15 to 35 years are willing and able to work but are unable to secure paid employment, reflecting the broader inability of the formal labour market to absorb educated and skilled young people; underemployment captures situations in which economically active individuals are employed in jobs that are inadequate relative to their skills, education, or preferred working hours, resulting in low productivity and unstable earnings; and reliance on informal economic activities describes the sustained engagement of individuals in income-generating ventures that are outside regulated economic structures, such as petty trading, casual labour, subsistence farming, and unregistered small enterprises, which typically lack job security, social protection, and prospects for upward mobility. The findings indicate that youth unemployment has a profound negative effect on livelihoods and community development in Rivers State. High rates of youth unemployment limit access to stable income, reducing households' capacity to meet basic needs such as food, education, and healthcare. Empirical studies show that prolonged unemployment among young people contributes to economic dependency, increased poverty, and social discontent, which can manifest in anti-social behavior and reduced community cohesion (Adebayo, 2023; Iwuagwu & Eze, 2024). In Rivers State, the inability of the formal sector to absorb the growing youth labour force has created a significant mismatch between available skills and employment opportunities, weakening household resilience and limiting the potential for community-driven development projects.

Underemployment similarly undermines livelihoods by confining economically active individuals to jobs that do not fully utilize their skills or provide sufficient remuneration. Individuals engaged in part-time, temporary, or low-skill positions often experience unstable earnings, which restricts household investment in education, health, and local business initiatives. Studies conducted in Nigeria indicate that underemployment among youth correlates with reduced economic productivity, limited entrepreneurial engagement, and greater reliance on informal survival strategies (Okoye, 2022; Osagie & Eneh, 2023). In the context of Rivers State, underemployment diminishes not only household well-being but also the capacity of communities to sustain development programs, as households lack the resources and time to contribute meaningfully to collective initiatives. Reliance on informal economic activities provides short-term livelihood support but has limited potential to promote sustainable economic development. Informal work often lacks social protection, job security, and opportunities for skill enhancement, leaving households vulnerable to economic shocks. Empirical evidence suggests that while informal enterprises in Rivers State—such as petty trading, casual labour, and subsistence farming—provide immediate income, they rarely facilitate significant wealth accumulation or community-level investment (Iwuagwu & Eze, 2024; Adebayo, 2023). Consequently, communities with a high concentration of informal economic activities may struggle to fund infrastructure projects, maintain social amenities, or mobilize collective resources, which limits broader community development outcomes. The interplay between youth unemployment, underemployment, and informal economic reliance further exacerbates livelihood

insecurity. Households with young members experiencing these labour market challenges face compounded vulnerabilities, including irregular income, low savings capacity, and limited access to social services. Studies highlight that these vulnerabilities undermine both household resilience and social capital, reducing participation in community programs and weakening the mechanisms through which local development initiatives are implemented (Okoye, 2022; Osagie & Eneh, 2023). In Rivers State, these dynamics help explain why some community development efforts fail to achieve lasting impact, as households remain preoccupied with meeting immediate survival needs rather than contributing to collective growth.

Finally, the findings underscore the critical role of policy and social interventions in addressing these labour market challenges. Social work interventions, skills development programs, and youth empowerment initiatives can mitigate the negative effects of unemployment and underemployment by enhancing employability, diversifying income sources, and building social capital (Adebayo, 2023; Iwuagwu & Eze, 2024). By linking households to resources, facilitating access to vocational training, and supporting small enterprise development, these interventions strengthen both individual livelihoods and broader community development outcomes. The evidence suggests that integrated strategies that address unemployment, underemployment, and informal work simultaneously are essential for promoting resilient livelihoods and sustainable community growth in Rivers State.

Social work interventions such as community empowerment, skills acquisition support, and access to social welfare services contribution to improved

livelihoods and community development in Rivers State

The findings indicate that community empowerment initiatives led by social workers play a critical role in enhancing community development by promoting participatory engagement, strengthening local governance structures, and amplifying the voice of marginalized groups. Studies on social welfare and development in the Niger Delta region show that social work and social welfare programmes help address socio-economic challenges such as poverty, environmental degradation, and social unrest by fostering community ownership of development processes. These interventions build local capacity and encourage collective problem solving, which enhances social cohesion and lays the foundation for sustainable community development (Okorie Oko Ume, 2025). Social workers' facilitation of skills acquisition and livelihood support has also been shown to improve individual and household economic outcomes, which in turn strengthens community development. Although specific empirical studies on Rivers State are limited, research from nearby Nigerian contexts reveals that implementation of social workers' skills significantly improves community development programmes by engaging residents directly in project planning and implementation, thereby increasing the relevance and sustainability of interventions. This engagement builds local competence, encourages ownership of community initiatives, and enhances the capacity of residents to manage economic and social challenges collectively (Eze & Ayogu, 2025).

Access to social welfare services, a core focus of professional social work, also contributes to improved livelihoods by reducing the vulnerability of disadvantaged populations. Evaluations of social protection

programmes in Nigeria highlight that well-targeted welfare interventions can reduce poverty, mitigate inequality, and improve human development outcomes by enabling households to access basic services, health care, and income support. In Rivers State specifically, secondary evidence points to the potential of social protection in enhancing wellbeing and economic resilience among vulnerable groups when integrated with broader social work practice (Erondu & Uzoma, 2024). Beyond economic support, social work interventions contribute to community cohesion and conflict resolution, which are essential components of sustainable community development. Research conducted in other Nigerian states shows that social workers facilitate cooperation, trust, and collaborative problem-solving among diverse community members, which strengthens social networks and fosters collective action toward shared goals. These forms of empowerment and mediation enhance the ability of communities to address social issues such as poverty, discrimination, and resource competition, thereby improving community wellbeing overall (Azorodu, et al., 2025).

Furthermore, social work practice contributes to institutional strengthening and accountability mechanisms that sustain community progress. By linking communities to formal service delivery systems, social workers help ensure that vulnerable populations can navigate social welfare infrastructure, access legal protections, and demand quality services. This integration of community systems with health, legal, and social support networks enhances individual and collective resilience, thereby reducing livelihood insecurity and reinforcing development pathways that are community-owned and sustained over time. Interventions that emphasize capacity

building, leadership development, and community-led monitoring empower residents to hold service providers accountable, improving service quality and responsiveness (NEPWHAN community systems strengthening, ongoing). Collectively, the evidence suggests that social work interventions contribute to community development outcomes in Rivers State by enhancing local capacities, improving economic and social wellbeing, and fostering inclusive processes that strengthen livelihoods. Empowerment efforts help communities to participate actively in their development, skills acquisition support builds individual and household economic resilience, and social welfare access mitigates vulnerability. Where these interventions are well-integrated and sustained, they contribute not only to improved individual livelihoods but also to broader community cohesion, institutional responsiveness, and sustainable development outcomes.

Conclusion

The study concludes that poverty, unemployment, and inadequate access to basic services remain critical challenges undermining livelihoods and community development in Rivers State. Household income levels, livelihood security, and access to essential services significantly influence the capacity of residents to participate in local economic activities, invest in human capital, and contribute meaningfully to collective development initiatives. Youth unemployment, underemployment, and heavy reliance on informal economic activities exacerbate livelihood insecurity, limiting household resilience, reducing economic productivity, and constraining community development outcomes.

Importantly, social work interventions emerge as a vital mechanism for addressing

these structural challenges. Community empowerment, skills acquisition support, and access to social welfare services enhance both individual and household livelihoods while strengthening community cohesion, local capacity, and institutional responsiveness. Evidence from Rivers State and broader Nigerian contexts demonstrates that integrating social work practice into poverty alleviation, employment generation, and community development efforts creates more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient development outcomes. Overall, the study underscores that sustainable improvement in livelihoods and community development requires a holistic approach that combines economic support, social protection, and community-driven interventions. Addressing structural deprivation and labour market vulnerabilities while leveraging social work strategies can promote equitable access to opportunities, enhance household resilience, and foster long-term community empowerment in Rivers State.

Recommendations

Strengthen Youth Employment and Skills Development Programs: Government agencies and development partners in Rivers State should prioritize comprehensive youth employment initiatives that combine formal job creation with vocational and skills acquisition programs. Such programs should be designed to bridge the skills gap between educational institutions and labour market needs, thereby reducing youth unemployment, underemployment, and over-reliance on informal economic activities.

Enhance Access to Social Welfare and Basic Services: Policymakers should ensure that vulnerable households have improved access to essential services, including healthcare, education, water and sanitation, and social protection programs. Integrating social

welfare services with community development interventions will mitigate household vulnerability, reduce income inequality, and foster sustainable livelihoods. Social work practitioners should be actively involved in designing and monitoring these services to ensure they reach the most marginalized populations and are responsive to local community needs.

Promote Community-Based Economic Empowerment Initiatives: Local governments, in collaboration with social work agencies and community organizations, should support micro-enterprises, cooperatives, and informal sector initiatives that generate income and strengthen community resilience. By providing access to credit, technical support, and market linkages, households can diversify income sources, enhance financial security, and contribute more effectively to local development projects.

Integrate Social Work into Policy and Development Planning: Social work interventions should be institutionalized as an integral part of poverty alleviation, employment generation, and community development strategies in Rivers State. Practitioners should facilitate community mobilization, psychosocial support, advocacy, and capacity-building programs to strengthen social networks and promote inclusive development. Integrating social work perspectives ensures that development initiatives are people-centered, equitable, and capable of addressing structural vulnerabilities in a sustainable manner.

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