

Art Education for Sustainable Development: Transforming Youth Unemployment to Productivity in Seme Border Communities, Nigeria

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Abstract

The Seme Border area in Nigeria is a strategic Nigeria–Benin trade corridor; however, local youth continue to experience high unemployment, limited access to skills training, and declining engagement with local arts and cultural practices. This condition reflects a gap in community empowerment programmes that integrate economic capacity building with cultural sustainability in border communities. This community service activity aims to empower youth in the Seme Border communities through art education grounded in the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework, with a focus on economic improvement, cultural preservation, and community resilience. The activities were conducted in Seme Border communities, targeting local youth as primary beneficiaries and involving local artists and craftsmen as community partners. The solution offered consisted of participatory mentoring and hands-on learning in traditional arts and crafts that integrate creative skill development with local cultural values. A participatory, action-based approach using qualitative methods was employed to support collaborative learning between the service team and the community. Data were collected through interviews and practical craft-learning sessions with artists, craftsmen, and youth participants, and analyzed thematically to evaluate the implementation process and outcomes. The results indicate that art education not only equips youth with marketable skills in arts and crafts but also revitalizes indigenous heritage, fostering pride and identity. Challenges such as limited resources and policy neglect highlight the need for public–private partnerships to scale community-based art learning programmes. This community service activity concludes that art education is a vital yet underutilized tool for reducing youth restiveness and promoting sustainable growth in border communities.

Keywords: Art Education, Cultural Preservation, Seme Border, Sustainable Development, Youth Empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION

The Seme Border area in Nigeria occupies a strategic position as a major Nigeria–Benin trade corridor and serves as an important gateway for cross-border economic activities in West Africa. Despite this strategic advantage, the socio-economic conditions of youth living in the area remain precarious. Many young people continue to rely on informal border-related activities that offer unstable income, limited legal protection, and few opportunities for long-term livelihood development (Nienaber et al., 2020; Valiente et al., 2020). Restricted access to structured education, vocational training, and productive employment has contributed to persistent youth unemployment and low levels of positive social engagement. As a result, the developmental potential of youth in the Seme Border communities remains largely underutilized, reinforcing cycles of economic vulnerability and social marginalization (Arisukwu et al., 2020; Virk et al., 2023).

Border communities such as Seme are frequently characterized by infrastructural deficiencies, limited social services, and inadequate educational facilities, which further constrain youth development (Risal et al., 2022; Uchechukwu et al., 2023). While border management and security concerns often dominate policy attention, community-based empowerment initiatives that prioritize youth capacity building receive comparatively limited support. This imbalance has created a gap between regional economic activity and local human development, particularly for young people who lack the skills, resources, and institutional support needed to participate meaningfully in the local economy. Previous studies have shown that the absence of sustainable livelihood opportunities in border areas increases youth vulnerability to unproductive activities and social challenges, thereby undermining community resilience and long-term stability (Mustapha, 2021).

Youth empowerment is widely recognized as a critical component of sustainable development, especially in contexts where economic opportunities are constrained and social inequalities persist. Investing in youth skills, creativity, and entrepreneurial capacity not only improves individual livelihoods but also strengthens social cohesion and community well-being (Baba, 2022). Global development agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals, emphasize the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education as a foundation for sustainable societies. In this regard, community-based education and skills development programmes are (Okereke et al., 2023). This increasingly viewed as effective mechanisms for equipping youth with practical competencies, fostering positive values, and promoting active participation in community development processes (Omeje et al., 2020; Trivelli & Morel, 2021).

This study is hinged on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework developed by United Nations is an approach designed to provide individuals with the essential knowledge, skills, values, and mindset needed to lead sustainable lives. It focuses on incorporating sustainability-related topics into educational content and encourages interactive, learner-centered methods that inspire active participation. ESD aims at encouraging the transformation of education so that it is able to contribute effectively to the reorientation of societies towards sustainable development. According to Kioupi & Voulvoulis (2019) humanity faces many sustainability challenges, product of complex, often nonlinear, interactions between people and the environment. The goal of ESD is to

nurture critical thinking, teamwork, and a strong sense of duty toward the environment and broader society (Adegbola, 2024).

According to United Nations Educational (2014), the core principles of Education for Sustainable Development are:

1. Sustainable Development. ESD is rooted in the concept of sustainable development, which recognizes the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic aspects of well-being.
2. Interdisciplinary Approach. ESD integrates knowledge from various disciplines to address complex sustainability issues.
3. Transformative Learning. ESD promotes learning that goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge to foster personal transformation and empowerment.
4. Participatory and Collaborative Learning. ESD encourages active participation and collaboration among learners, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for shaping a sustainable future.

This framework is suitable for this study, as it provides a flexible and transformative framework that supports both the educational and socio-economic aims of this study, making it an ideal lens for promoting sustainable development among the youth in Seme border.

Art education offers a viable and culturally responsive approach to youth empowerment in marginalized border communities. By engaging youth in traditional arts and crafts, art education facilitates the acquisition of marketable skills, nurtures creativity and critical thinking, and strengthens connections to local cultural heritage (Gbolade, 2020). Arts-based activities also create opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurship and income generation, while reinforcing identity, pride, and intergenerational knowledge transfer within communities (Eddy et al., 2021; Saleh & Mujahiddin, 2020). Several studies have highlighted the potential of arts and crafts as tools for poverty reduction and community empowerment; however, their application within structured community service programmes remains limited, particularly in border areas where socio-economic challenges are most pronounced (Lasisi et al., 2022).

Against this background, this community service activity was designed to empower youth in the Seme Border communities through participatory art education initiatives. The programme emphasized hands-on learning, mentoring, and collaboration with local artists and craftsmen to provide youth with practical skills and alternative livelihood pathways. By integrating creative skill development with cultural preservation, the activity sought to address existing gaps in youth empowerment programmes, reduce youth vulnerability, and promote sustainable growth within the community. Through this approach, the programme aimed to support the transformation of local youth from marginalized populations into active contributors to economic and cultural development in the Seme Border area.

METHODS

This community service activity employed an action-based community engagement approach, emphasizing active participation and experiential learning through art and craft practices. The programme was implemented

under an initiative titled “*Art for Development*”, which aimed to enhance youth capacity and productivity in the Seme Border area, Badagry, Lagos State, Nigeria.

The primary beneficiaries of this programme were youth residing in the Seme Border community, both male and female, aged 15–25 years, representing individuals at school age and early working life. In addition, local artists and craftsmen with expertise in traditional arts and crafts were involved as facilitators and skill mentors. Participants were selected using a purposive approach, based on their willingness to participate, interest in arts and crafts, and socio-economic conditions, to ensure that the programme reached youth who required alternative productive skills. The programme involved 30 youth participants and three local craftsmen, comprising 21 males and 9 females. Prior to implementation, coordination was conducted with community leaders and a local secondary school, and all ethical requirements, including institutional permissions and informed consent from participants, were duly obtained. Participant confidentiality was maintained through the use of identification codes during documentation and evaluation.

The implementation of the community service activity was carried out in several stages. The initial stage involved identifying participants’ baseline conditions through semi-structured interviews to explore their educational background, prior skill acquisition, and economic activities before joining the programme. This was followed by practice-based skill training sessions, conducted over three consecutive days at a secondary school within the Seme community. Each day consisted of six hours of training, divided into multiple sessions. The training focused on three selected crafts: basket weaving, cane chair construction, and *tie and dye*. Each craft was facilitated by one local craftsman, and participants were allowed to choose the skill that best matched their interests.

The subsequent stage focused on mentoring and basic entrepreneurship orientation, implemented through a mini exhibition showcasing participants’ works. During this stage, participants were guided on identifying potential markets, sourcing sales outlets, and exploring small-scale income opportunities within their local environment. As part of the programme’s sustainability evaluation, a follow-up activity was conducted three months after the training, aimed at assessing the extent to which participants applied the acquired skills and the perceived effects on their livelihoods. Data were collected through interviews, field observations, and programme documentation, and were analyzed using a descriptive thematic approach to capture the process, outcomes, and challenges of the community service activity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the “*Art for Development*” community service programme provides a comprehensive illustration of how participatory art education can be utilized as a practical empowerment strategy for youth in marginalized border communities (Eddy et al., 2021; Ramaano, 2020). Based on data gathered from interviews, observations during training sessions, and post-programme follow-up, several interrelated themes emerged that reflect both the initial conditions of the participants and the outcomes of the intervention. These themes include youth unemployment and socioeconomic challenges, art education as a tool for empowerment, participatory and context-appropriate learning, as well as sustainability and post-training impact (Faik et al., 2024). Collectively,

these themes highlight the relevance of arts-based community initiatives in addressing structural youth challenges within the Seme Border area.

Youth Unemployment and Socioeconomic Challenges

The initial phase of the community service activity revealed that youth participants aged 15–25 years living in the Seme–Badagry border area face persistent socioeconomic challenges, particularly unemployment, limited educational attainment, and restricted access to stable livelihood opportunities. Interviews conducted prior to the implementation of the programme indicated that a significant proportion of participants had disengaged from formal education and were involved in informal and precarious border-related activities. This condition reflects the broader vulnerability of youth in border communities, where economic survival often depends on unstable informal economies (Dike, 2025). The descriptive patterns illustrated in Figure 1.

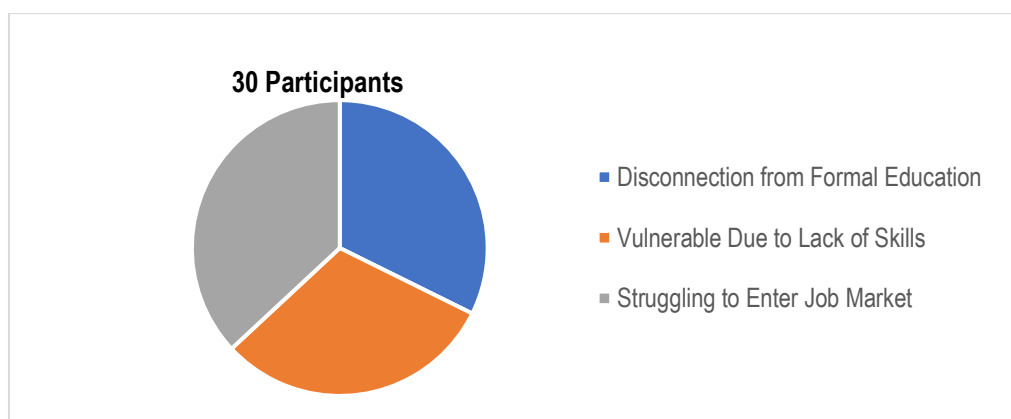


Figure 1. Youth Unemployment and Socioeconomic Challenges Status of Participants

Figure 1 demonstrate that many participants experienced overlapping challenges, including lack of employable skills and heightened exposure to economic hardship. These conditions underscore the urgency of providing alternative skill-development pathways for youth in such contexts. Consistent with Kamara (2023) youth empowerment initiatives that prioritize practical skill acquisition are essential for fostering productivity and reducing dependence on informal and risky livelihood strategies.

Art Education for Development and Empowerment

The implementation of art education within the programme positioned creative practice as a viable pathway for youth empowerment and economic engagement. Through structured training in basket weaving, *tie and dye*, and cane chair construction, participants were equipped with practical, market-relevant skills that could support income generation and self-reliance. The hands-on nature of the training demonstrated how art education can bridge the gap between creativity and livelihood, transforming artistic practice into a means of survival and development (Singh et al., 2022). Observations during the training sessions indicated high levels of engagement, particularly where participants were able to align their personal interests with selected crafts. This supports the argument that art education, when applied beyond aesthetic instruction, functions as a catalyst for social and economic development (Adewumi, 2022; Dorfleitner & Nguyen, 2024). In this context, art education enabled youth

to reimagine their economic potential while fostering confidence, creativity, and a sense of agency within their community.

Participatory and Context-Appropriate Learning

A defining feature of the “*Art for Development*” programme was its emphasis on participatory and contextually appropriate learning. The selection of crafts such as basket weaving, *tie and dye*, and cane chair construction was informed by the availability of raw materials within the Seme area and the existing demand for these products in local markets. This alignment between learning content and local realities enhanced the relevance and effectiveness of the training. The programme adopted a learning-by-doing approach, allowing participants to actively engage in each stage of production under the guidance of local craftsmen. The involvement of community-based artists as facilitators not only strengthened skill transmission but also reinforced local knowledge systems and cultural continuity (Adlam et al., 2022). Additionally, allowing participants to freely choose their preferred craft increased motivation and ownership of the learning process. These observations align with Opesemowo (2025) who emphasizes that learner participation, interest, and contextual relevance are critical determinants of effective skill-based learning, particularly in informal and community-based education settings.

Sustainability and Post-Training Impact

Sustainability was a central consideration in the design and evaluation of the programme, particularly through post-training follow-up and exposure to basic market dynamics. Three months after the completion of the training, follow-up interactions revealed that a majority of participants had begun applying their acquired skills for income-generating purposes, while others were in the process of establishing production spaces. The integration of a mini exhibition and guidance on identifying sales outlets exposed participants to real-world market conditions and enhanced product visibility. These post-training outcomes demonstrate that short-term, practice-oriented interventions can yield meaningful and sustained impacts when coupled with mentoring and follow-up support. Similar findings have been reported by Lasisi et al (2022) who note that craft-based empowerment initiatives can contribute significantly to poverty reduction when sustainability mechanisms are embedded within programme design.

In line with the objectives of this study, the findings highlight the critical role art education can play in addressing the dissatisfactory advancement of youth in Seme Border, Nigeria. In the introduction, it was explained that this border community, is characterized by socio-economic marginalization and limited educational infrastructure, presents a challenging environment where youth development is stifled by unemployment, poor attention to quality education, and a lack of creative and vocational engagement. However, the integration of art education initiative tailored towards sustainable development emerges as a transformative tool for empowering these young people with the skills, mindset, and opportunities necessary for meaningful progress. This is in line with the previous studies, such as Sydora et al (2023) art education possess the powers to transform the youth positively.

Art education in this context goes beyond the traditional boundaries of aesthetic learning; it encapsulates critical thinking, cultural identity, innovation, and community engagement. Evidences from the practices of the

participants reveal that participatory and appropriate learning is efficient for the training of youth in vocations that relate to hands-on activities. When applied through a sustainability lens, it enables youth to critically assess their environment and respond creatively to local and global challenges. The study reveals that incorporating art-based pedagogies into community systems can catalyze entrepreneurship, environmental awareness, and social cohesion (Stanley & Kuo, 2022). For instance, as applied in this study, training the youth in crafts not only instills pride in cultural heritage but also provides practical avenues for income generation and self-reliance. This gives credence to Gone (2022) findings that the community's involvement in preserving cultural heritage through craft is very important. Findings from the study also highlight the assertion of Eddy et al (2021) that in light of the need for increased collaboration between communities and other stakeholders, it becomes evident that fostering partnerships is crucial.

One other notable finding is the disconnect between national education policies and the realities of communities like Seme. While Nigeria has made strides in integrating sustainable development into its educational goals, the actual implementation at the grassroots level remains poor. Participants reported minimal access to creative learning spaces, mentorship, or exposure to indigenous and contemporary art practices. This gap reinforces the urgency of localized strategies that address the unique needs and potential of the youth in Seme border communities. Moreover, the research identifies a strong interest among the youth in creative expressions as a form of uniqueness. This underscores the need for art education models that are participatory, context-driven, and inclusive for the youth, both in formal and informal settings. The post-training follow-up reveals that the youth participants embraced the initiative. This means that with better inclusive programmes of such benefit, they would also participate. Stakeholders including educators, local government, NGOs, and artists must therefore, collaborate to design programs that are not only educational but also therapeutic and empowering.

CONCLUSION

The “*Art for Development*” community service activity illustrates that art education can function as a practical and context-sensitive strategy for empowering youth in the Seme Border community. Through participatory training, mentorship by local craftsmen, and exposure to basic entrepreneurial practices, the programme supported youth in developing productive skills while strengthening cultural identity and community engagement. The activity shows that arts- and crafts-based learning, when designed in accordance with local resources and market realities, can provide meaningful alternatives to unstable informal livelihoods and encourage positive youth participation in community development. Nevertheless, the continuity and wider impact of such initiatives depend on sustained support and collaborative action. It is therefore recommended that relevant stakeholders, including local government authorities, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and creative practitioners, jointly develop structured and inclusive art-based empowerment programmes that respond to local economic needs. Establishing partnerships with artisans and art institutions, providing accessible creative spaces and materials, and integrating art education into local development planning are essential steps to ensure programme sustainability. Strengthening community participation and institutional commitment will

further enable art education initiatives to contribute consistently to youth productivity, social resilience, and sustainable development in border communities such as Seme.

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- Author Contribution : ABA: Writing - Original Draft
 GSP: Writing - Review & Editing, Methodology, and Corresponding;
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 OAI; Managing the Programs;
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