



ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SMES (AIJBES)

www.aijbes.com



INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR *IGBO* APPRENTICESHIP SCHEME: AN ENTREPRENEURSHIP MODEL TO CURBING POVERTY IN NIGERIA

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 10.10.2022

Revised date: 15.11.2022

Accepted date: 22.11.2022

Published date: 31.12.2022

To cite this document:

Onukwube, T. (2022). Institutional Framework For *Igbo* Apprenticeship Scheme: An Entrepreneurship Model To Curbing Poverty In Nigeria. *Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SMEs*, 4 (14), 10-18.

DOI: 10.35631/AIJBS.414002.

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Abstract:

Poverty is a societal bane leading to numberless social vices hampering justification of socio-economic development of any country. This malaise is variously addressed with entrepreneurship models, which include 'Igbo Apprenticeship Scheme', an age long practice which is more relevant in the contemporary economic challenges. However, it lacks institutional framework. These backdrops propelled this article to explore institutional framework for Igbo apprenticeship scheme as an entrepreneurship model to curbing poverty in Nigeria. This broad objective also defined the scope and limitation of the study. The research design and methodology was doctrinal approach, using exposition and analysis. The main sources of data collection were various related materials, both from the conventional library and e-library, including observable and life experiences. The summary of findings observed that Igbo apprenticeship scheme is a viable tool for curbing poverty and boosting Nigeria's socio-economic development. Therefore, it was recommended, among others, that the Nigerian Government, in partnership with the major stakeholders in the Igbo entrepreneurship, should develop a workable policy and institutional framework for effective implementation of the scheme and as a prototype for easy adoption by other ethnic groups in Nigeria and beyond. Finally, this article is significant to all stakeholders in the areas of practical increase of participants and beneficiaries, curbing managerial anarchy and abuse of the process, as well as forming a theoretical policy that can be leverage on.

Keywords:

Apprenticeship, Entrepreneurship, Igbo, Poverty, Development

Introduction

Communal spirit, called *Ubuntu*, has put *Igbos* above other ethnic groups in Nigeria. One of such outstanding communal spirits is the *Igbo* entrepreneurial activities which remain the mainstream of the Nigerian socioeconomic development (Orugun & Tunde, 2014). In Lagos, the Nigerian economic capital, *Igbo*'s businesses account for the 74% of all investments (Maliga, 2022). This *Igbo*'s businesses and entrepreneurial activities have continued to facilitate improved standard of living for Nigerians both in Lagos and other parts of the country (Iwara, et al 2019).

The propeller to this spirit was the need to revitalize the deplorable economic and social status of the *Igbos* after the Nigerian-Biafran civil war. It was used as a unique entrepreneurship apprenticeship approach to spur economic growth and sustainable livelihood (Agozino & Anyanike, 2007). Thus, in after about five decades, the economic achievement by the *Igbo* ethnic group is very significant. Their competitiveness and enterprising skills made them migrate in droves away from their cultural enclave in southeastern Nigeria, to other parts of Nigeria and beyond, where they have created and established different lines of enterprises (Agozino & Anyanike, 2007).

However, this entrepreneurship approach becomes conventional practice over the years with no defined institutional, legal, policy, or theoretical framework to regulate the practice and check the excesses of the stakeholders in the apprenticeship process. Thus, irrespective of the plausibility of the programme, it is faced with numberless challenges. This makes it adroit imperative to critically explore institutional and policy framework for the *Igbo* apprenticeship scheme to properly structure it as an entrepreneurship model to curbing poverty in Nigeria.

Who are the *Igbos*?

The *Igbos* are people with same language identity, culture and philosophy. They dominantly occupy the Eastern region of Nigeria, as their ancestral home, comprising of five (5) major states. The five main *Igbo* dominated states in the South-eastern Nigeria are Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. The *Igbo* people are one of the three most populous ethnic groups in Nigeria and estimated to be above 40million in population (Obi, 2020). While majority of the population are found in the South-eastern part of Nigeria, others are scattered in most other parts of the country.

The *Igbo* people are spread across the globe with business acumen and outstanding entrepreneurship skills. They are distinguished with a unique language called *Igbo*. This language is often used for most commercial transactions in the major markets across Nigeria, where *Igbo* entrepreneurs and businesses dominate (Agozino and Anyanike, 2013). It is from these people that the concept of *Igbo* apprenticeship has fulcrum to be refined into a commendable entrepreneurship model.

In terms of language, it is all encompassing including some topical and trending issues, as illustrated below:

Table 1: *Igbo* Language Coverage in Current and Topical Issues in Global Setting

Issues in English	Translations in <i>Igbo</i>
Current Issues	(okwuakpụnọny)
HIV/AIDS	(Mminwụ/Obirinaajaocha)
Drug Abuse	(Inu Ogwu Agharaaghara)

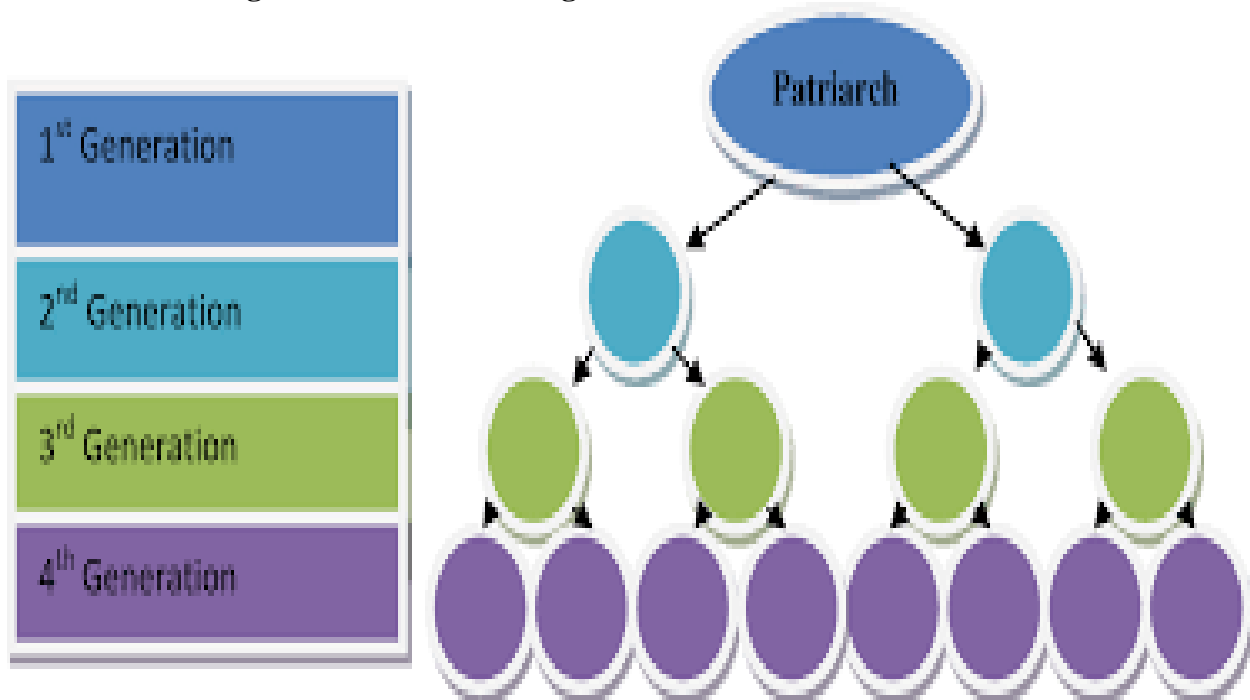
Cultism	(Otu Nzuzo)
Rights of Women and Children	(Oruuru Umunwaanyi na Umaka)
Human Rights Violation	(Inapu Mmadu Ikike)
Religious Conflicts	(Nsogbu Ndokurita Ekpemekpe Uka)

Source: UTME Syllabus (2023)

Nature of Igbo Apprenticeship

The entrepreneurship nature of Igbos apprenticeship entails working under a particular mentor and learning the tricks of mentor's innovation for a number of years, to engage in entrepreneurial activities. The potential apprentice (mostly males) or their sponsors often bargains and negotiates with successful entrepreneur on the possibility of being subjected to a servant and undergoing the apprenticeship to also become a successful entrepreneur. This is with the hope of serving under the master and acquiring the basic skills of entrepreneurship. This approach is known as *Igbaboi* (Emenanjo et al., 1995).

Figure 1: Illustration of Igbo Traditional Business School



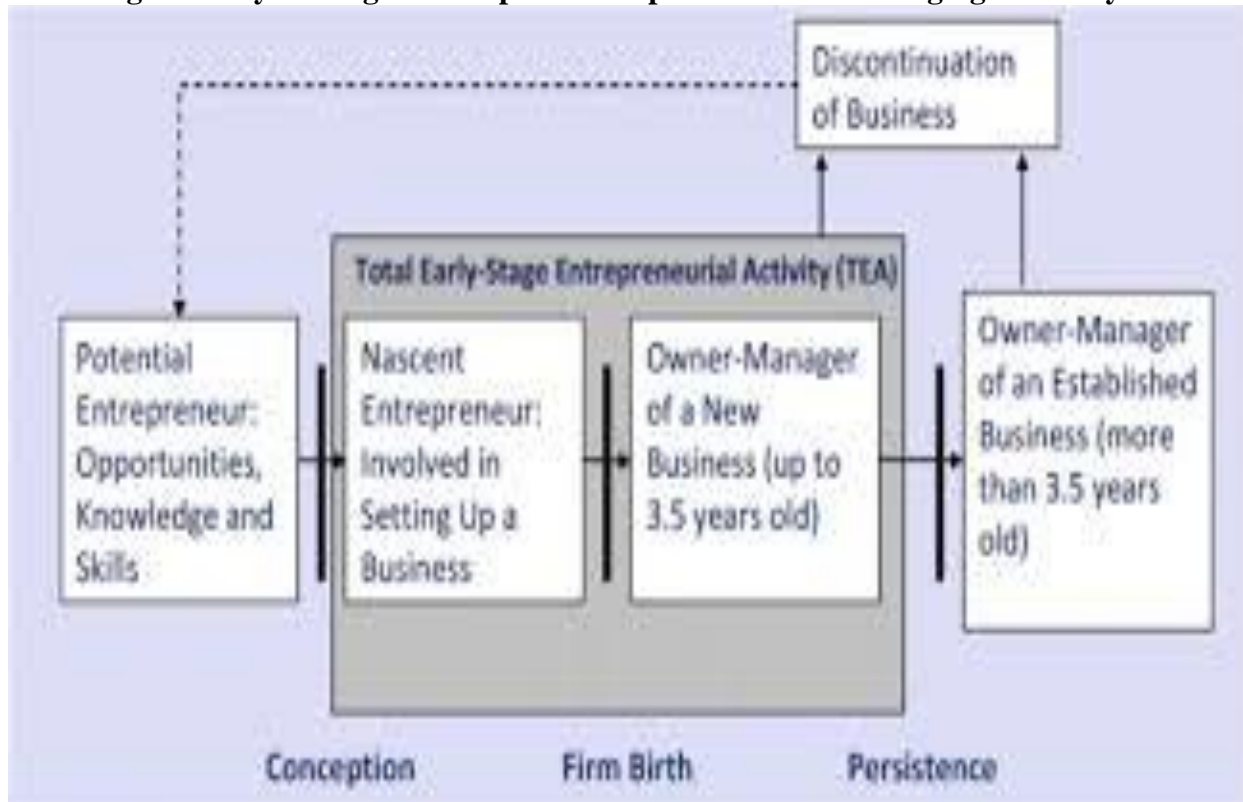
Source: Chinweuba and Evaristus (2017)

Other common and related concepts to *Igbaboi* in the Igbo business schemes are *Imu-ahia* (to learn a trade) and *Imu-oru* (to learn a craft), which are also common within the Igbo communities. However, unlike *Igba-boi* where mentees arrange a contract to have a complete training circle for free, *imu-oru* or *imu-ahia* is not done for free. In this, apprentice is expected to pay a ransom to their master to acquire skills. The contract is for a short period, often two years or less unlike *Igbaboi* which takes more years (Iwara et al., 2019). This is basically the igbo entrepreneurship scheme.

The term *Igba-boi* does not literally mean to serve another, as in slave. Rather, *Igba-boi* model is a process whereby someone is being trained in the act of entrepreneurship (Agozino &

Anyanike, 2007). Mostly, the family gives out their children to learn skills and startup their enterprises, having identified their talents. The terms and conditions of this process are embedded in the Igbo traditional worldviews, customs and norms. Interestingly, this Igbo culture of entrepreneurship can be traced back to the advent of slave export from the Bights of Biafra and Benin in the fifteen century.

Figure 2: Cycle of Igbo Entrepreneurship Phases in an Emerging Economy



Source: Chinweuba and Evaristus (2017)

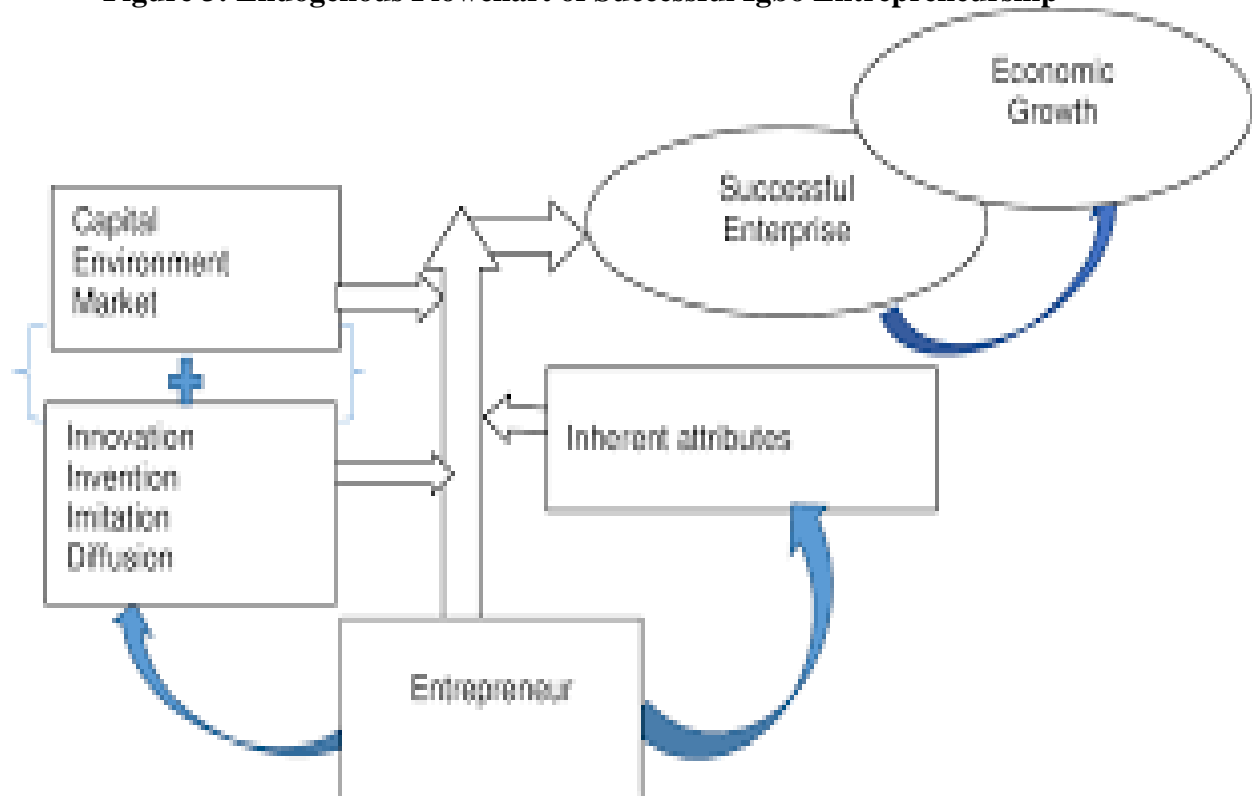
This process metamorphosed, upon abolition of slave trade in the 1900s, (Ohadike, 1998) from slave trade into entrepreneurship among the Igbos ethnic group and gained more momentum after the Nigerian civil war. Therefore, being integrated into a “worldwide economic system linked to spices, sugar, tobacco, cotton and industrial goods in the Americas, Europe and Asia” (Ohadike, 1998), also becoming leading exporters of palm oil and kernel. This culture entrepreneurship has been sustained till the contemporary age through apprenticeship framework. It involves a lot of processes and stages before the apprentice come out as an independent entrepreneur. The first stage has been discussed which involves identification of interest and intention to serve, and then assessment and acceptance by the successful entrepreneur to offer the service.

The follow-up stage is the learning stage which starts with the apprentice’s arrival at the mentor’s household. With the talent identified and the agreement made between the potential mentee and the mentor, they set to begin teaching and learning process. It starts with the household issues. Even though the mentee is not a typical housemate, he/she is expected to do minor chores (Iwara, 2018). The next step is to initiate the apprentice into the science of entrepreneurship and innovation, within the first three months of arrival. This is probationary

period which is passed with satisfactory assessment of the willingness to learn, resilience, smartness, humility and trustworthiness.

Basically, what is expected of mentee to learn in the early stage is not limited to market competitiveness system, market language and market bargaining strategy. As most Igbo aristocrats believe that the Igbo's understanding of entrepreneurship and business is embedded in their worldview. In other words, the world according to Onwuka (2022) is conceived in market terms, as a inimitable 'arena', where individuals "bargain" themselves in or out of any situation, including customer negotiation. The apprentice is also encouraged to develop certain unique skills that help them deal with innovation in their growth and development process.

Figure 3: Endogenous Flowchart of Successful Igbo Entrepreneurship



Source: Yew (2011).

The last stage is graduation, settlement and initiation of potential entrepreneurs into the entrepreneurship world. This stage sums the entire learning process and begins the innovation process. Often there is usually a freedom party which serves as a graduation and commencement ceremony for the erstwhile apprentice to start their venture. The mentee receives gifts in kind and cash from the mentor, friends, family, relations, associations, etc. to help him set up his own business which would in turn mentor and empower other persons.

According to Iwara et al. (2019), settlement is a motivational approach to initiate potential entrepreneurs into the entrepreneurship journey. They establish a venture with the rewards under the supervision of their mentor. Since they are at this stage familiar with basic approaches required to drive an innovation, requisite skills, market linkages and penetration for alliances, the programme benefits both parties. This is because, on the one hand, the mentee becomes empowered in skills and resources to run an enterprise, and on the other hand, the mentor has

a good opportunity and competent manpower to expand his enterprise and be rest assured of good management from his graduated mentee.

Challenges to Igbo Apprenticeship

There are numberless challenges bedeviling successful apprenticeship scheme. They are perennial bottlenecks to result oriented entrepreneurship programme. One of such challenges is that the Igbo apprenticeship scheme lacks sufficient documentation and model which other ethnic groups, even outside Nigeria, could adopt to promote and sustain entrepreneurial activities (Emenanjo, 2009).

The challenge of learning under someone is another quandary cannot be overemphasized. Generally, there is difficulty of being under another person's care, control, domination and sustenance. Sometimes one may feel like revolting against the system, truncating the process, bringing the scheme to a halt, and quitting the programme. Many apprentices are drowned in this challenge. That is why diligence, perseverance and resilience are germane (Ezikeojiaku, 2001).

Furthermore, the issue of settling the apprentice has been a challenge to many entrepreneurs. Based on general reports, very few entrepreneurs unflinchingly and dutifully reward their apprentice at the completion of the entrepreneurship scheme contract. Some of the apprentices face situations where the entrepreneurs use them for years and abruptly dismiss them with no justification, other than for filthy reasons. They may be framed or accused of theft, affairs with their master's wives, insubordination, or any cooked up warp story to pave way for their dismissal. This is no doubt very frustrating to the apprentice sequel with his poor family background and the difficulty in sourcing startup capital.

However, the challenge might be faced both ways. That is to say, the apprentice might actually be on the wrong. The accusations leveled against him might be true, especially involving theft. It might get as serious as causing bankruptcy to his mentor. This can as well discourage the mentor to continue the scheme, even with any other interested apprentice after the mentee is being dismissed. Thus, it closes door against goodwill potential apprentices as the news spread (Ikekeonwu, 2009). The summation of the entire challenges hinges on lack of written agreement prepared by a lawyer and signed by both parties with their respective sureties, next of kin and witnesses. Where there is no such formal contract, other issues must later creep in. Entrepreneurship scheme contract for apprenticeship which are arranged verbally, are difficult for the apprentice (mentee) to file a lawsuit against the entrepreneur (his mentor) and vice versa as the case may be (Okoye et al., 2007).

The Way Forward: Institutional and Policy Framework

The significance of the apprenticeship scheme as an entrepreneurship model for curbing poverty in Nigeria needs to be highlighted as the crux for opting for way-forward to the challenges. The scheme sets potential entrepreneurs on a career fast track because the skills they acquire during training are presumably important ones that drive success (Nzeako, 2002). Many individuals supposed to be effectively empowered through this approach of entrepreneurship to immensely contribute to sustainable livelihood and economic growth as entrepreneurship is a major occupation in the *Igbo* region (Agozino & Anyanike, 2007).

Thus, from the foregoing challenges, it is appropriate to explore the viable way forward from the malaises. This can be done through legislative enactment and establishment of a vibrant

institution with a workable policy. This would address the cankerworms defacing the *Igbo* apprenticeship scheme from attending its goal. The institution should exist in every state of the federation and a central office in one of the Eastern states, either Abia state or Anambra state.

Such institutions would serve as regulatory centres and perform dual functions of both administrative and educational. It can offer entrepreneurship courses at diploma level for interested entrepreneurs and registration centre for any apprenticeship scheme. One can pick his mentor or mentee but must go there to register, and one can as well walk in there to indicate interest in the apprenticeship scheme. In the latter case, the institution makes recommendation from the available records.

Obviously, the existence of such institution would activate Iwara's perception of *Igbo* entrepreneurship model as follows:

There are three main features of the entrepreneurship framework. Firstly, Igbo unique competitive cultural worldview, unique business network involving the apprentice and the other apprentices, capacity building for mentees start-off. These are pivotal attributes which are not present in most of the global entrepreneurship models. Another essential aspect is embracing entrepreneurship and innovation as a career in the early stage of human development, involvement of family in building entrepreneurial part and mutual benefits that comes between a mentee and a mentor (Iwara, et al 2019).

Furthermore, the preference of some persons, who would prefer being self-employed entrepreneurs than formal employment in the elite discipline, needs to be considered. According to Udegbe (2022), astute entrepreneurs in *Igbo* land such as Innoson Motors, Coscharis Motors, Chisco Motors, A-Z Petroleum/Chicason Group, Dangote Group in the Northern Nigeria and a host of others had apprenticeship glimpse. This served as foothold to rise to wealth, even without formal western education (Onwuka, 2022). Therefore, the scheme should be encouraged by addressing its perennial quagmires and quandaries through a legalized institution regulated by the Act of the National Assembly and the laws of different state houses of assembly.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article examined institutional framework for *Igbo* apprenticeship scheme as an entrepreneurship model to curbing poverty in Nigeria. Its task was concerned with clarification of some concepts, expatiation of the nature of *Igbo* apprenticeship scheme, exposition of the challenges in the scheme, as well as the way forward for a viable scheme for Nigeria socio-economic development.

Succinctly put therefore, the way forward analyzed above can as well serve as recommendations in this milieu. However, in a nutshell, it is recommended that the Nigerian Government through its legislators, and in partnership with the major stakeholders in the *Igbo* entrepreneurship, should develop a workable policy and institutional framework for effective implementation of the *Igbo* apprenticeship scheme. This should serve as a prototype for easy adoption by other ethnic groups in Nigeria and beyond. Furthermore, the kinsmen and successful entrepreneurs should encourage the youngsters and help them build strong and veritable entrepreneurship standard. Finally, veteran entrepreneurs should consistently carry out effective mentorship and veritable supervision on the activities of upcoming entrepreneurs

for sustainability and result oriented scheme. These suggestions and recommendations can be illustrated in the table below:

Table 2: Suggestions and Recommendations for Successful Entrepreneurship

s/n	Actors	Task (Recommendations)	Consequence
1.	Nigerian Government, Legislators, Igbo entrepreneur stakeholders	Should develop a workable policy and institutional framework for effective implementation of the Igbo apprenticeship scheme.	This would serve as a prototype for easy adoption by other ethnic groups in Nigeria and beyond. As a result, its impacts would cut across every sphere of life.
2.	kinsmen and successful entrepreneurs	Should encourage the youngsters and help them build strong and veritable entrepreneurship standard.	This would stampede poverty, insecurity, joblessness, and other social vices among the youths.
3.	Veteran entrepreneurs	Should consistently carry out effective mentorship and veritable supervision on the activities of upcoming entrepreneurs.	This would lead to sustainability and result oriented scheme for socio-economic development.

Finally, the significance of this article cannot be overemphasized. It is made relevant to all stakeholders in the areas of practical increase of participants and beneficiaries in the scheme. Also, it would help in curbing managerial anarchy by the mentors and other stakeholders who abuse the entrepreneurship process. Through all these, a theoretical policy that can be leverage on would be developed and sustained for effective institutional framework.

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