



Research Paper

Vocational Training Initiatives and Youth Entrepreneurial Development in Rivers State 2012–2025

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Abstract

This study examined vocational training initiatives and youth entrepreneurial development in Rivers State between 2012 and 2025. The study was premised on the persistent challenge of youth unemployment in Nigeria, particularly in oil-producing communities, despite various empowerment programmes introduced by government agencies and multinational oil companies. Anchored on Human Capital Theory, the study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions involving thirty respondents and thirty-six focus group participants drawn from selected rural communities across the three senatorial districts of Rivers State. Thematic and qualitative content analysis were employed to analyse the data. Findings revealed that skill acquisition programmes implemented within the study period focused largely on basic vocational, entrepreneurial, agricultural, and ICT-related skills such as welding, tailoring, hairdressing, electrical installation, agro-processing, and computer literacy. These initiatives were sponsored mainly by the state government, local government, oil multinational companies, and interventionist agencies. While the programmes contributed positively to youth empowerment, income generation, and improved socio-economic capacity in some communities, their implementation were characterised by irregularity, uneven distribution, short duration, inadequate start-up support, political interference, and weak monitoring mechanisms. The absence of sustainability and structured follow-up limited the long-term impact of the programmes on youth employment and entrepreneurial growth. The study concluded that although vocational training initiatives enhanced human capital development, institutional reforms, consistent funding, community participation, and post-training support were essential to achieving sustainable youth entrepreneurial development in Rivers State.

Keywords: *Vocational training initiatives; Youth entrepreneurial development; Skill acquisition; Youth unemployment; Human capital development.*

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I. Introduction

Youth development is a critical driver of national progress, social stability, and economic sustainability. Investing in young people through education, skills development, and employment opportunities is essential for harnessing their potential as productive members of society (UNDP, 2021). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the importance of decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), highlighting the necessity of youth empowerment to drive innovation, entrepreneurship, and long-term economic resilience (United Nations, 2020). However, in Nigeria and Rivers State, the growing crisis of youth

unemployment poses a significant threat to these development aspirations. Youth unemployment remains one of Nigeria's most pressing socio-economic challenges, with far-reaching consequences for the country's stability and growth. Nigeria, as Africa's most populous nation, has a substantial youth population—defined as individuals aged 15 to 35 years. Despite this demographic advantage, economic prosperity remains elusive as unemployment rates continue to escalate. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Nigeria's youth unemployment rate surged to 42.5% in 2022, underscoring the economy's inability to absorb its expanding labour force (Nwogu & Ogidi, 2026). Similarly, Rivers State, despite its economic significance as a hub for oil and gas activities, experiences high levels of youth unemployment, contributing to socio-economic stagnation and rising discontent (NBS, 2022). The causes of youth unemployment in Rivers State and Nigeria are multifaceted, stemming from structural, economic, and systemic inefficiencies. A critical issue is the misalignment between educational outcomes and labour market needs. Nigeria's education system, particularly at the tertiary level, has been criticized for prioritizing theoretical knowledge over practical, industry-relevant skills. As a result, many graduates lack the technical competencies required for employment in key sectors, rendering a significant portion of the workforce unemployable (Agwu & Ekpo, 2022). In Rivers State, this gap is especially evident in the oil and gas industry, where demand for specialized skills such as pipeline engineering, offshore operations, and safety management far exceeds the supply of qualified personnel.

Additionally, Nigeria's over-reliance on oil revenues has hindered the diversification of its economy, limiting job opportunities in sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, and technology. The volatility of global oil prices and the declining demand for fossil fuels have exacerbated economic instability, leaving regions like Rivers State vulnerable to employment fluctuations (Amadi, 2019). Governance inefficiencies and poor policy implementation further compound the problem. Despite various government initiatives aimed at addressing youth unemployment, issues of inconsistency, corruption, and lack of accountability have significantly undermined their effectiveness (Ejiofor & Nwankwo, 2020). Addressing youth unemployment in Nigeria and Rivers State requires a multifaceted approach that prioritizes youth development, economic diversification, and policy reforms. Strengthening vocational and technical education, fostering entrepreneurship, and implementing transparent, sustainable job-creation policies are essential steps toward reducing unemployment and ensuring a more inclusive and resilient economy. Furthermore, the Niger Delta region, which encompasses Rivers State, has faced decades of socio-political instability. Issues such as communal conflicts, environmental degradation from oil spills, and inadequate infrastructure have not only hindered economic growth but also discouraged investments in youth development (Amadi & Ogidi, 2024). The result is a vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment that continues to plague the region (Ogbanga, 2018). Against this backdrop, skill acquisition programmes and youth capacity development have emerged as critical tools for addressing youth unemployment. Skill acquisition refers to the process of equipping individuals with practical, vocational, or technical skills that enable them to be self-reliant and employable (Akujuru & Ogidi, 2025). Youth capacity development, meanwhile, is a broader concept encompassing initiatives aimed at enhancing young people's competencies, knowledge, and abilities to achieve their potential. Together, these approaches have been recognised globally as essential mechanisms for fostering economic empowerment and sustainable development (Nduka, 2021). Skill acquisition programmes are particularly valuable in bridging the gap between education and employment. By offering hands-on training and certifications in relevant fields, these programmes prepare young people for the labour market while fostering entrepreneurial skills that enable them to create businesses. For regions like Rivers State, where the oil and gas industry dominates, skill acquisition programmes tailored to the sector's needs can create pathways to lucrative opportunities, reduce dependency, and foster community participation in economic activities (Agwu & Ekpo, 2022). Programmes such as welding, oil spill management, and instrumentation can significantly enhance the employability of local youths while addressing the industry's demand for specialised skills. The importance of these programmes cannot be overstated. Beyond individual benefits, skill acquisition initiatives contribute to broader socio-economic goals, including poverty alleviation, crime reduction, and improved social cohesion. By equipping young people with skills that align with industry demands, these programmes not only address unemployment but also promote stability by reducing the likelihood of social unrest and militancy. In resource-rich but underdeveloped communities like those in Rivers State, skill acquisition programmes represent a vital strategy for leveraging local resources to achieve sustainable development (Amadi, 2019). Traditional skill acquisition programmes in Nigeria have typically focused on vocational training in areas such as tailoring, carpentry, hairdressing, and plumbing. While these trades remain valuable, their relevance to contemporary economic realities is increasingly limited.

The shift towards a knowledge-driven global economy necessitates a broader focus on technical skills, particularly in high-demand areas such as information technology, renewable energy, and advanced manufacturing. In oil-producing regions like Rivers State, there is also an urgent need for training programmes

aligned with the oil and gas sector, which dominates the local economy (Ejiofor & Nwankwo, 2020). Despite the recognised importance of skill acquisition programmes, their implementation in Rivers State has been fraught with challenges. Government agencies, oil companies, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have all contributed to youth empowerment initiatives, but the outcomes have often fallen short of expectations. A significant issue is the misalignment between the programmes offered and the specific needs of the communities they are intended to serve. For instance, in many oil-producing areas, youths are frequently trained in trades like soap-making or catering—skills that, while useful, do not prepare them for employment in the oil and gas industry. This mismatch undermines the potential impact of these programmes and perpetuates the exclusion of local communities from the economic benefits of their resources (Nduka, 2021). A related problem is the lack of community involvement in the design and implementation of these programmes. Many initiatives are developed without consulting the intended beneficiaries, resulting in interventions that fail to address their needs or aspirations. For example, while there is a high demand for technical skills in pipeline construction, health and safety management, and environmental remediation, these areas are often overlooked in favour of generic vocational training. The absence of stakeholder engagement not only reduces the effectiveness of these programmes but also erodes trust between communities, government agencies, and oil companies (Ogbanga, 2018). Additionally, the duplication of efforts by multiple stakeholders has led to inefficiencies and resource wastage. Government agencies, corporate entities, and NGOs often operate independently, resulting in overlapping initiatives that lack coordination. This fragmented approach diminishes the overall impact of skill acquisition programmes and creates confusion among beneficiaries, further undermining their potential to address unemployment and foster development (Agwu & Ekpo, 2022). The socio-economic consequences of these shortcomings are profound. Unemployment among youths in Rivers State has contributed to widespread poverty, inequality, and social discontent, despite the region's resource wealth. Frustrated by their exclusion from the benefits of oil revenues, many young people have resorted to militancy, crime, and other forms of anti-social behaviour. This situation not only destabilises communities but also hinders the broader development goals of the region. As Amadi (2019) notes, addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that prioritises youth empowerment through targeted, well-designed skill acquisition programmes.

Therefore, the essence of conducting this study lies in its potential to address the critical gaps in existing Vocational Training Initiatives and Youth Entrepreneurial Development in Rivers State 2012–2025. Accordingly, the study raised the question; what are the skill acquisition programmes implemented Rivers State between 2023-2025?

The study segmented into five interrelated parts; segment one is the introduction which is just concluded, segment two covered the analytical foundation and discourse of relevant concepts, segment three deals with the method adopted by the study to generate and analyse the data, segment four is the presentation and analyses of data as well as well discussion while segment five encapsulates the conclusion/recommendations.

Analytical Foundation

Human Capital Theory

The Human Capital Theory, developed by economists Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz (1964), is one of the most significant frameworks in understanding the relationship between education, skills development, and economic outcomes, particularly in addressing issues such as unemployment and poverty. This theory suggests that individuals' abilities, knowledge, skills, and experiences are valuable assets that can be enhanced through education and training, leading to improved economic productivity and personal well-being (Becker, 1964). The theory emphasises the idea that investing in human capital, which includes formal education, on-the-job training, and experiential learning, can significantly enhance an individual's economic value and their ability to contribute to the economic development of a community or nation. Gary Becker, in his seminal work "Human Capital" (1964), argued that human capital investments are similar to investments in physical capital, such as machinery or infrastructure. Just as companies invest in physical capital to enhance production efficiency, individuals invest in their human capital to improve their chances of obtaining better employment, higher wages, and greater job security. In other words, education and skill acquisition are seen as key drivers of personal and economic development, positioning individuals as more competitive in the labour market and better equipped to participate in economic growth (Becker, 1964). This investment in human capital can be seen in the form of formal education, vocational training, apprenticeships, and other skill-building opportunities that lead to the enhancement of employability. The background of Human Capital Theory revolves around the idea that people, as the primary economic agents, can be improved or "developed" through various forms of education and skill acquisition. Initially, the theory focused largely on formal education as the primary means of enhancing human

capital, but over time, it has expanded to include other forms of training and learning, such as technical, vocational, and entrepreneurial skills. Becker's work significantly impacted both academic scholarship and policymaking, particularly in the areas of education, labour economics, and social mobility. For instance, it has provided a foundation for understanding the importance of skill acquisition in reducing unemployment, addressing income inequality, and fostering economic development at both individual and national levels.

The principles of Human Capital Theory include the notion that individuals who invest in acquiring higher levels of education or vocational training are likely to achieve greater returns in terms of higher wages and better job prospects. The central idea is that knowledge, skills, and expertise are valuable assets in the modern economy. The theory also asserts that education and training lead to the development of productive human capital, which directly enhances individual productivity and, by extension, national economic growth. It suggests that human capital is a key factor in economic performance because skilled individuals contribute more effectively to the labour force. Furthermore, the theory highlights the concept of returns on investment, which implies that the more individuals invest in their human capital, the higher the potential returns in terms of wages, job satisfaction, and overall career development.

In the context of the study of skill acquisition programmes in Rivers State, Human Capital Theory provides a valuable lens through which to understand the significance of education and training in addressing youth unemployment. Youth unemployment in Nigeria, and particularly in rural communities in Rivers State, remains a persistent issue, with many young people unable to access meaningful employment opportunities due to a lack of relevant skills and qualifications. The theory suggests that one of the most effective ways to address this challenge is through investment in human capital – that is, providing young people with the skills and knowledge required to meet the demands of the labour market, particularly in sectors like oil and gas. In Rivers State, which is home to substantial oil and gas resources, there is a significant opportunity for youth to develop skills that are directly applicable to the local industries. However, as the study highlights, many existing skill acquisition programmes are misaligned with the needs of the oil and gas sector, leaving young people ill-equipped to take advantage of the job opportunities available in this thriving industry. The theory suggests that by investing in targeted and relevant training programmes, especially those aligned with the demands of the oil and gas industry, youth can be empowered to enter the workforce and contribute to the state's economic growth. The application of Human Capital Theory to this study is particularly useful in assessing how skill acquisition programmes can be designed to enhance the employability of young people in rural communities. By focusing on relevant skills development, the study aims to show how investment in human capital can address the root causes of youth unemployment in Rivers State. For example, vocational training in skills related to oil extraction, refining, maintenance, or logistics would equip youth with the technical expertise needed to work in the oil industry, directly improving their employability and addressing the skill mismatch identified in existing programmes. Additionally, the theory can be applied to assess the effectiveness of government and corporate interventions in providing skill acquisition initiatives tailored to local needs. Governments and corporations, particularly those in the oil and gas sector, can play a crucial role in expanding the availability of skill development programmes that are specifically designed to meet the needs of the local labour market.

By investing in human capital, they can create an environment where young people are better prepared to meet the demands of modern industries and are more likely to secure stable employment. Another critical aspect of Human Capital Theory that is relevant to this study is the concept of return on investment. The theory suggests that when governments, corporations, and individuals invest in skill development, they are likely to see returns in the form of a more productive and skilled workforce. For example, if young people in Rivers State are provided with relevant training and skill acquisition opportunities, they are more likely to contribute to the growth of the oil and gas sector, thereby driving economic development in the region. Human Capital Theory has far-reaching policy implications, particularly in terms of how governments and corporations approach education, training, and economic development. In the context of Rivers State, policy initiatives aimed at reducing youth unemployment can be informed by the principles of this theory. Policymakers can design skill acquisition programmes that are not only relevant to local industries but also accessible to young people in rural communities who face barriers to education and training.

Government initiatives such as vocational education and training (VET) programmes, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training are vital components of the human capital investment strategy. By aligning these programmes with the needs of the oil and gas industry, policymakers can increase the chances of young people entering the workforce and reduce the rate of youth unemployment. In addition, corporations in the oil and gas sector can play a role in sponsoring or partnering with educational institutions to develop curricula that address the skills gap in the local workforce. Moreover, Human Capital Theory advocates for continuous investment in

human capital throughout an individual's career, suggesting that lifelong learning and skills upgrading are essential.

For youth in Rivers State, this means that skill acquisition programmes should not be limited to initial training but should also provide opportunities for ongoing education and skills development to keep up with industry advancements. Continuous learning helps individuals remain competitive in the job market and adapt to changes in technology and industry demands. The Human Capital Theory is a critical framework for understanding how investments in education and skills development can reduce youth unemployment, particularly in areas with rich natural resources like Rivers State. By applying the principles of this theory to the study of skill acquisition programmes and youth capacity development, it becomes clear that targeted, relevant training programmes aligned with the demands of the oil and gas industry can significantly enhance the employability of young people. This theory also underscores the importance of government and corporate interventions in creating a skilled and productive workforce, which is essential for driving economic growth and reducing unemployment in rural communities.

Conceptual Discourse

(a) Skill

Skill is a multifaceted concept that plays a crucial role in human development, societal progress, and economic growth. It refers to the ability to perform tasks with expertise and competence, encompassing both innate abilities and those acquired through education, training, and practice. Skills are essential for individuals to adapt to changing circumstances, contribute to their communities, and achieve personal and professional goals. Skill has historical roots that trace back to the dawn of human civilisation, when survival depended on the mastery of basic tasks such as hunting, gathering, and tool-making. Over time, the concept of skill evolved to encompass a wide range of abilities, including artisanal crafts, intellectual pursuits, and interpersonal competencies. During the Industrial Revolution, skill became increasingly associated with technical expertise and productivity, reflecting the growing importance of specialised labour in industrial societies (Becker, 1993). In the modern era, the advent of the knowledge economy has further expanded the scope of skill to include digital literacy, innovation, and adaptability, highlighting its dynamic and context-dependent nature.

Skill is generally defined as the ability to perform tasks efficiently and effectively. According to Becker (1993), skills constitute a vital component of human capital, which significantly influences an individual's productivity, earning potential, and overall economic value. The concept of skill encompasses various dimensions, including technical, cognitive, emotional, and social competencies. Technical skills refer to the practical knowledge and expertise required to perform specific tasks, such as operating machinery, programming software, or crafting artisanal products. Cognitive skills involve critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making abilities, which are essential for navigating complex situations. Emotional and social skills, often termed soft skills, pertain to interpersonal communication, teamwork, adaptability, and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995).

In rural and urban settings, the types and applications of skills vary widely. Rural areas often emphasise traditional and vocational skills, such as farming, fishing, weaving, and carpentry, which are aligned with the local economic and cultural context (Ekanem & Akpan, 2019). In contrast, urban environments demand advanced technical and professional skills, including engineering, information technology, and financial management, to meet the requirements of industrial and service sectors. These distinctions underscore the need for context-specific skill acquisition programmes tailored to the unique needs of rural and urban populations. Skill acquisition refers to the process through which individuals develop new abilities or enhance existing ones. It is a critical driver of human capital development and a key enabler of economic participation and social mobility. In Rivers State, Nigeria, skill acquisition programmes are particularly significant for addressing youth unemployment and fostering economic resilience. These initiatives aim to equip young people with the competencies needed to engage in productive activities, whether in formal employment, entrepreneurship, or self-sustaining livelihoods (Adediran, 2017). The dual rural and urban character of Rivers State presents unique challenges and opportunities for skill acquisition. Rural youths often face limited access to education and training facilities, restricting their ability to acquire skills that can diversify their income sources.

b. Skill Acquisition

Acquisition is a multifaceted concept that has evolved through history and holds significant relevance in various contexts, including education, business, technology, and rural development. At its core, acquisition denotes the process of gaining new knowledge, skills, or resources, often through learning, experience, or exchange. The concept is inherently dynamic and varies in application, reflecting cultural, economic, and

technological shifts. This conceptual review examines the historical origins, theoretical underpinnings, and contemporary applications of acquisition, with a particular focus on its implications in rural and urban settings. The concept of acquisition can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where the transfer of knowledge and skills was essential for survival and societal advancement. In prehistoric times, acquisition occurred informally through observation, imitation, and practice within family units or tribes. Skills such as hunting, gathering, and tool-making were acquired to ensure survival and community sustenance (Diamond, 1997). The advent of agriculture marked a significant milestone in acquisition, as communities began to develop and transmit farming techniques, irrigation methods, and storage practices.

During ancient civilizations, formal mechanisms of acquisition began to emerge. For example, in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, writing systems were developed to record and transmit knowledge. Apprenticeship systems in ancient Greece and Rome allowed individuals to acquire specialized skills in trades such as craftsmanship, medicine, and governance (Harris, 1989). These systems were often institutionalized, reflecting the growing complexity of societies and the need for structured methods of knowledge transfer. The Middle Ages saw the expansion of acquisition through guilds, which formalized the training of artisans and craftsmen. These guilds established standards for skill acquisition, ensuring consistency and quality across industries. Similarly, religious institutions played a crucial role in the acquisition of literacy and theological knowledge, particularly in monastic settings (Le Goff, 1988). The Renaissance and Enlightenment periods marked a shift in the understanding of acquisition, emphasizing individual learning and intellectual exploration. The printing press, invented by Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century, revolutionized the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge, making books and educational materials more accessible (Eisenstein, 1979).

This period also saw the rise of formal education systems, with universities and academies serving as hubs for the acquisition of scientific and philosophical knowledge. The concept of acquisition has been explored extensively in various theoretical frameworks. In psychology, acquisition is central to learning theories, which examine how individuals gain new knowledge or skills. Behavioral theories, such as those proposed by B.F. Skinner, emphasize the role of reinforcement and conditioning in acquisition. According to Skinner (1953), behaviors are acquired through repeated exposure to stimuli and the subsequent reinforcement of desired responses. Cognitive theories, on the other hand, focus on the mental processes involved in acquisition. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development highlights the stages through which individuals acquire knowledge, emphasizing the role of assimilation and accommodation in adapting to new information (Piaget, 1952). Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory underscores the importance of social interactions and cultural tools in the acquisition process, arguing that learning occurs within a "zone of proximal development" where guidance from more knowledgeable individuals facilitates growth (Vygotsky, 1978). In the field of linguistics, acquisition is a key concept in understanding language development. Noam Chomsky's theory of universal grammar posits that humans possess an innate ability to acquire language, guided by a set of universal principles underlying all languages (Chomsky, 1965). This theory has influenced research on second language acquisition, which examines the processes and factors that enable individuals to learn additional languages beyond their native tongue (Krashen, 1982). In educational contexts, acquisition refers to the process through which learners gain knowledge, skills, and competencies. The constructivist approach to education emphasizes active engagement and experiential learning as essential for effective acquisition. According to Dewey (1938), learning occurs through interaction with the environment and reflection on experiences, enabling individuals to construct their understanding of the world. In rural and urban settings, the mechanisms and outcomes of acquisition differ significantly due to disparities in access to resources, infrastructure, and opportunities. In rural areas, acquisition often focuses on practical and vocational skills, such as farming, fishing, and artisanal crafts, which are directly aligned with local economic activities. By contrast, urban areas prioritize technical and professional skills, including digital literacy, engineering, and healthcare, reflecting the demands of industrial and service sectors (Ekanem & Akpan, 2019).

Skill acquisition programmes have become a cornerstone of development initiatives in both rural and urban settings. These programmes aim to empower individuals by providing them with the tools and knowledge needed to improve their livelihoods and contribute to their communities. For example, in Nigeria, skill acquisition programmes targeting youth unemployment have demonstrated significant potential in enhancing economic resilience and social mobility (Adediran, 2017). In the business world, acquisition refers to the process of obtaining new assets, capabilities, or market positions. This concept is often associated with mergers and acquisitions (M&A), where companies combine or acquire others to achieve strategic objectives.

Method

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to examine skill acquisition programmes and youth capacity development in selected rural communities of Rivers State from 2012 to 2025. The study area covered rural communities across the three senatorial districts of Rivers State, a region characterized by oil dependency, rural underdevelopment, youth unemployment, and environmental challenges. The population comprised 1,728,000 residents drawn from selected rural communities in Rivers East, Rivers West, and Rivers South-East Senatorial Districts. Purposive sampling technique was used to select information-rich participants with direct experience of the programmes. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions involving youth participants, community leaders, local government officials, and programme facilitators, while secondary data were obtained from journals, reports, and official documents. Content and face validity were ensured through alignment of instruments with research objectives, expert review by supervisors, and pilot testing in a rural community outside the study area. Reliability was strengthened through the use of standardized interview guides, consistent administration of instruments, audio recording, verbatim transcription, and detailed field notes. Data were analyzed using thematic and qualitative content analysis, with coding, categorization, and triangulation of multiple data sources to ensure credibility and depth of findings.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

The descriptive qualitative data for this study were obtained through in-depth interviews conducted with a total of thirty (30) purposively selected respondents drawn from oil-producing and host communities in Rivers State. The respondents comprised community leaders, vocational trainers, youth coordinators, empowerment officers, and development specialists with practical knowledge of community assets and oil and gas operations. Also, participants were selected from Etche, Obio/Akpor, Ahoada West, Rumuokwursi, and Akuku-Toru Local Government Areas. Both male and female respondents were represented, ensuring a balanced range of perspectives. The respondents were actively involved in the management and utilisation of community facilities such as skill centres, youth hubs, business incubators, and development institutes. Their communities host major oil and gas assets, including facilities operating under OML 17 and OML 54. This broad demographic and occupational distribution enhanced the credibility and depth of the qualitative data. Consequently, the interview responses provided rich, context-specific insights aligned with the objective of the study.

Composition of FGD Participants

Category	Occupational Groups Represented
Self-employed artisans	Tailors, hairdressers, welders, electricians, phone repairers
Agro-based entrepreneurs	Fish farmers, poultry farmers, cassava processors, vegetable growers
ICT and creative practitioners	Computer operators, graphic designers, photographers
Unemployed/underemployed youths	Youths who had completed at least one skill acquisition programme
Community representatives	Community youth leaders and programme facilitators (as discussants)

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

In addition to this, data was generated through Focus Group Discussions conducted in selected rural communities in Rivers State for the study, and this was organised in line with the question of the study. Four focus group discussion sessions were conducted across four selected rural communities in Rivers State. Each group comprised between eight and ten participants. In total, thirty-six participants took part in the FGDs. The composition of the FGDs reflected gender balance, age variation and occupational diversity in order to capture broad youth experiences of skill acquisition programmes. Overall, the participants consisted of 20 males and 16 females. Participants were between 18 and 35 years of age, which corresponds with the nationally recognised youth category in Nigeria. In terms of occupational background, participants included:

- i. Self-employed artisans (tailors, hairdressers, welders, electricians and phone repairers);
- ii. Agro-based entrepreneurs (fish farmers, poultry farmers, cassava processors and vegetable growers);
- iii. ICT and creative practitioners (computer operators, graphic designers and photographers);
- iv. Unemployed and underemployed youths who had completed at least one skill acquisition programme;
- v. Community youth leaders and programme facilitators who participated as discussants.

Each focus group included both programme beneficiaries and non-beneficiary youths in order to ensure balanced perspectives on programme design, access and outcomes. Efforts were made to ensure that at least two female participants and one agro-based trainee were represented in each group.

II. Data Analysis

What are the impacts of the skill acquisition programmes implemented in Rivers State between 2012 and 2025?

According to the study skill acquisition programme is a component of youth development embarked upon by government agencies, oil multinational companies and individuals in Rivers State. Supporting this view, Pretty (2002), opined that skill acquisition programmes in Nigeria, focus on vocational training and entrepreneurship to combat high youth unemployment and foster economic independence. These initiatives target skills in digital technology, agriculture, and manufacturing, aiming to empower millions. Interestingly, this claim has been corroborated by an interviewee, a youth empowerment coordinator, Omagwa – Ikwerre LGA who thus revealed that:

Skill acquisition programmes in Rivers State from 2012 to 2025 were unevenly distributed across communities. In Omagwa, youths participated in basic skills such as computer appreciation, tailoring, and electrical installation, mostly sponsored by oil and gas operators. However, these programmes were irregular and often politicised. Some years recorded no training activities whatsoever. As a youth leader, I can confirm that many young people felt marginalised because selection processes were unclear and benefits were limited to a few individuals. Youth leaders consistently complained that skills acquisition programmes were announced but rarely sustained. In some cases, programmes were discontinued halfway without explanation. Neighbouring communities experienced even worse conditions, with no skill acquisition initiatives at all during the period under review. This situation increased youth frustration, restiveness, and dependence on informal jobs. The absence of structured and continuous skills training weakened the ability of youths to compete in the labour market (S. Okoro, personal communication, January 12, 2026).

Another interviewee, a vocational training instructor, Omagwa – Ikwerre LGA who confirmed the above claim thus revealed that:

Between 2012 and 2025, skill acquisition programmes implemented in Rivers State were inconsistent, particularly at the community level. In Omagwa, some basic vocational skills such as welding, carpentry, tailoring, and block moulding were introduced, mostly through short-term interventions supported by oil companies operating around OML 17 and occasional state government initiatives (E. Nnodim, personal communication, January 12, 2026).

In line with this perception, another interviewee, an entrepreneurship mentor in Omagwa – Ikwerre LGA, further states that:

From 2012 to 2025, entrepreneurship-related skill acquisition programmes in Rivers State focused mainly on small-scale activities such as soap making, catering, baking, and petty trading. In Omagwa, these programmes were introduced sporadically and reached only a limited number of beneficiaries. Several years passed without any entrepreneurial training. Youth leaders often stated that the programmes lacked seriousness because participants were not supported with start-up capital or mentoring after training. As a result, most beneficiaries could not translate acquired skills into sustainable businesses. In many communities, especially rural areas, no skill acquisition programmes existed at all during the period under review. This created a wide gap between policy intentions and actual youth empowerment outcomes (J. Doe, personal communication, January 12, 2026).

Further speaking on the nature of skill acquisition programmes implemented in Rivers State, an interviewee from Omagwa in Ikwerre LGA corroborated the claims of the above interviewee but revealed that:

Financial literacy and vocational skills programmes were implemented but largely inconsistent between 2012 and 2025. Basic training on savings culture, cooperative societies, and small business management was occasionally organised. However, these programmes were not integrated into broader economic empowerment strategies. The lack of continuity reduced the relevance

of skills programmes in addressing youth unemployment (V. Chike, personal communication, January 12, 2026).

Another interviewee, a technical skills trainer in Okehi – Etche LGA also noted that it is primarily a training programme that empowers participants to acquire skills but revealed that:

Technical skills training such as welding, fabrication, and generator repairs occurred mainly during periods of oil company intervention. Several years recorded no skills acquisition activities at all. Youth leaders consistently stated that training programmes were uneven and often abandoned midway. Where training existed, equipment was outdated and certification was unavailable. Consequently, many youths remained unemployed despite undergoing basic training. This irregular approach undermined the effectiveness of skills acquisition in Etche communities (T. Chuku, personal communication, January 12, 2026).

Following the above discussion, another interviewee, a vocational counsellor, in Okehi – Etche LGA also states that:

Vocational guidance and skill acquisition programmes in Etche communities, particularly Okehi, were largely inconsistent. While some basic vocational skills such as tailoring, hairdressing, and basic craft-making were introduced intermittently, there were long periods when no programmes existed at all. As a vocational counsellor, I observed that many youths were willing to learn but had limited opportunities. Youth leaders consistently stated that promised skill acquisition initiatives were often announced during community meetings but rarely implemented. Even when training sessions took place, they were short-term and lacked follow-up support such as certification, start-up tools, or job placement. The absence of sustained skills acquisition undermined the potential of vocational training to address youth unemployment in Okehi (S. Okafor, personal communication, January 12, 2026).

Reacting to the interviewees' analysis above, Focus Group (FG) participants also express mixed-feeling over skill acquisition and youth empowerment programmes organized in Rivers State. They however revealed that:

Skill acquisition programmes generally aimed to reduce poverty and stabilize socioeconomic lives of the youth. It is an employment and self-reliance programme that alleviate poverty and shun social vices among youths in Nigeria. However, skill acquisition or youth empowerment programmes have poorly organized in many communities not just in Rivers State but Nigeria at large. There are public outcries over poor implementation, political hijack, low start-up packages, poor monitoring as well as poor coordination (Participant 1, Focus Group 1, January 13, 2026).

The above exposition confirmed that skill acquisition programmes such as tailoring, hairdressing, welding, electrician, phone repairs, ICT and graphic design as well as agricultural skills were initiated and implemented in the listed rural areas of Rivers State between 2012 - 2025. Their responses above underscore the relevance of skill acquisition programmes.

III. Discussion of Findings

The impact of Skill acquisition on youth development programmes implemented in Rivers State, 2012 – 2025.

Data analyses revealed that the skill acquisition programmes implemented in Rivers State between 2012 and 2025 were predominantly basic vocational, entrepreneurial, and information and communication technology-oriented, with limited depth and sustainability. These views were confirmed by an interviewee who noted that:

The skill acquisition programme undertaken by government and oil companies operating in my company has really improve my socioeconomic live. Personally, some of us were trained on welding and fabrication. This skill involves working with metals and the knowledge acquired has really improve my capacity. Others were trained on entrepreneurial, ICT, agrobusiness, tailoring and other forms of artisanal jobs. I truly appreciate (S. Okoro, personal communication, January 28, 2026).

The study of Eze (2018), agrees with the views of the interviewees and thus revealed that the Rivers State Ministry of Youth Development is dedicated to empowering the youth of Rivers State to become self-reliant, responsible citizens, and effective leaders. With a focus on social, cultural, and economic well-being, the ministry works to engage and develop the youth through various programs and initiatives. Its comprehensive youth development policy covers areas like ICT, agriculture, and the creative industry, ensuring that young people have the skills and opportunities to thrive (Nduka, 2016). The ministry also advocates for youth inclusion in decision-making processes and promotes values such as human rights, equity, and gender equality.

Similarly, another interviewee who spoke on the skill acquisition programmes embarked upon by the state, noted thus:

Basic computer training and internet literacy were introduced. Some of the beneficiaries selected in my community were trained in the use of ICT gadgets including slight provision of internet facilities. The programme also focused on oil facility protection rather than community empowerment. In Ogbogu, some youths received basic safety orientation. These trainings placed most of us at an advantage and expose us to the bigger society. The absence of ICT education would have limited or reduce the relevance of the programme (E. Nnodim, personal communication, January 28, 2026).

Strictly speaking, another interviewee aptly responded that:

My community experienced relatively more capacity-building initiatives compared to other communities. Skills training in construction, mechanical repairs, and basic technical services were organised occasionally. However, most of these programmes were discontinued abruptly, watering down the expected effect (J. Doe, personal communication, January 28, 2026).

Okon and Udoh (2018), opined that skill acquisition programmes in Rivers State were driven by the youth initiatives programme of the Federal Government which is a transformative platform. This initiative is designed to provide a comprehensive, real-time overview of youth-related programs, projects, and policies that are implemented across the country which aims to streamline the monitoring, evaluation, and delivery of youth-centric initiatives, ensuring that young people have access to opportunities that foster growth, education, employment, and social inclusion (NBS, 2020). According to Odozi (2014), the programme serves as a dynamic tool that tracks the progress of various youth initiatives, allowing stakeholders, including government agencies, organizations, and youth themselves, to access up-to-date knowledge on ongoing projects, achievements, and areas for improvement. By consolidating data in an easily navigable format, the programme enhances transparency, accountability, and engagement, empowering youth and enabling them to take an active role in shaping their future (Pretty, 2002). The programme is committed to improving the lives of the youth by fostering collaboration, promoting the effective delivery of youth services, and ensuring that the voices of young people are heard in the decision-making processes that affect them.

Reacting further, an interviewee revealed that:

In my own community, some of us were trained on electrical installation, and community service training, often initiated by

oil companies. Basic training on first aid, hygiene, and community health awareness was organized. Though, the content of the programmes were fantastic but the timing was too short. Besides, some other communities which would have benefited from this training were lacking. This uneven distribution of opportunities contributed to youth unemployment and growing dissatisfaction (V. Chike, personal communication, January 28, 2026).

Akinola (2017), claimed that the skills acquisition programme which was sponsored by the Rivers State Government in conjunction with the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), is aimed at creating opportunities, reducing crime, poverty and hunger among the people, as well as equipping youths and women with skills for jobs and entrepreneurship. The event, which is taking place in Port Harcourt, capital city of Rivers State has youths, women and children from across the Niger Delta States as participants. Adedeji and Ogunola (2021), noted that 300 beneficiaries were being trained in tailoring, catering, shoe making, hairdressing, barbing, video and photography, making of soap, air freshener and beads/head ties, as well as Information Communication Technology (ICT), amongst other skills.

Supporting this view, another interviewee stated that:

In Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni LGA, some construction-related training such as masonry, plumbing, and road maintenance was organised intermittently for the youths. Occasionally, short sessions on communication, teamwork, and basic entrepreneurship were also organized. While this programme has actually helped some of us, there were visible hitches ranging from poor implementation, fund constraints and lack of technical skill by mentors or facilitators (T. Chuku, personal communication, January 28, 2026).

The response is in line with the position of Brown (2008), who thus claimed that skill acquisition programme such as carpentry, welding, electrician, mechanical, fabrications, tailoring and so on are on-demand skills that require the attention of every responsible government while providing a sustainable framework for permanent solution to unemployment and social vices. Youth skill development programme is to empower and uplift young people by providing transparent, real-time access to information on youth-focused programs and initiatives (Aghion, 2017). The programmes are dedicated to enhancing the delivery, monitoring, and impact of youth development efforts across the country, fostering collaboration between government, stakeholders, and youth themselves. In line with this argument, Akinola (2021), stressed that importance of skill acquisition programme and states that it is timely and the public including the tertiary institutions must incorporate it into syllabuses. Through innovation and accountability, skill acquisition programmes aim to ensure that every young person has the opportunity to thrive, contributing to a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous future for all (Amadi, 2013).

Matched with the findings above, Focus Group Discussants (FGD) also reinforce the number of skill acquisition programmes organized by public-private partnership at over three hundred (300). The group which is made up of aged 18–24 emphasised improvements in security and safety skills, health-related skill, welding and fabrication and tailoring within their communities. Older participants aged 25–35, particularly those operating small businesses, identified income generation, client expansion and improved service delivery as the most significant benefits. ICT-oriented participants highlighted enhanced digital competence, while agro-based participants reported improved farming techniques and productivity.

Sincerely speaking, we have been trained on security and safety measures, medical and health first-aid skills, welding and fabrication, tailoring, hairdressing, small business management, financial skills, environmental management and spillage cleanup, ICT and computer proficiency. These skills are some of them provided us. Some of us have been to established small businesses while others are meaningfully engaged (Participant 1, Focus Group 1, January 28, 2026).

From the foregoing, it is therefore instructive to note that skill acquisition programmes are instrumental to the development of youths and unemployed adults. Most of the skills development programmes were introduced by the Rivers State government in collaboration with multinational oil and gas companies, including interventionist agencies and interested individuals. The study revealed that skills were primarily hinged on tailoring, hairdressing, welding, electrical repairs, mechanical skills, entrepreneurship training, fish farming, poultry, vegetable cultivation, and basic agribusiness skills, soap making, phone repair, baking, petty trading, ICT, cultural and creative arts training and vocational workshops. As beautiful as this programme, 70% of the interviewees and discussants noted that the implementation was hindered by poor funding, inexperience facilitators, short timing, irregular and unnecessary political interference.

The study found that skill acquisition programmes implemented in Rivers State between 2012 and 2025 focused mainly on basic vocational, entrepreneurial, agricultural, and ICT-related skills. These programmes were largely sponsored by the state government, local government, oil multinational companies, and interventionist agencies. However, their implementation was irregular, unevenly distributed across communities, and often affected by poor funding, political interference, and lack of sustainability.

IV. Conclusion/ Recommendations

Skill acquisition programmes contributed positively to youth empowerment, income generation, and improved socio-economic capacity in some communities. Despite these benefits, the absence of continuity, inadequate start-up support, and weak monitoring limited their overall effectiveness. The gap between policy intentions and actual outcomes reduced the long-term impact of youth development initiatives in rural Rivers State.

It recommends that government and relevant stakeholders should institutionalize skill acquisition programmes through consistent funding, proper monitoring, and transparent beneficiary selection processes. There should be provision of start-up capital, certification, and post-training mentorship to enhance sustainability. Greater collaboration between government, private sector actors, and local communities is necessary to ensure equitable distribution and long-term impact of youth empowerment programmes.

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