

Social Protection Programmes and Poverty Reduction in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria (2017 - 2026)

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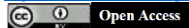
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ABSTRACT

Poverty remains one of the global major challenges that threatens human survival by negatively affecting the health, education and living standards of the people. The severe nature of poverty in Akwa Ibom State reveals that about 71% of the population lived in multi-dimensional poverty (NBS, 2022). To eradicate extreme poverty, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals was introduced and adopted by many countries including developing country like Nigeria. At the state level, social protection and security policies in Akwa Ibom State are designed to improve the socio-economic conditions of poor and vulnerable groups affected by unemployment, inequality, old age, disability, natural disasters, and unequal access to resources. This study examined the impact of social protection programmes on poverty reduction in Akwa Ibom State. The paper identified inadequate funding, corruption and policy inconsistency as major challenges undermining the efficacy of the programmes. The study was anchored on the New Public Management and Human Capital Development (HCD) theories and adopted a survey research design. A sample of 384 respondents was selected from the projected population of 4,979,400 (NPC, 2022) using stratified and simple random sampling techniques. Data were collected through a 12-item structured questionnaire and analysed using simple percentages and tables. The findings revealed that social protection programmes have a significant relationship with unemployment reduction in Akwa Ibom State. The programmes improved access to education by promoting social empowerments resulting in better employment opportunities, higher incomes and enhanced living standards among beneficiaries. The study posit people-centered social protection programmes that effectively targeted at the poor/vulnerable rather than serving elites interests. It recommended adequate funding in line with the International Labour Organization's social protection benchmark of 19 – 27% for human capital development, strengthened monitoring and evaluation to reduce misappropriation, and sustained investments in education, agriculture, and entrepreneurship to create more employment opportunities to curb unemployment and youth restiveness.

Introduction

Poverty, as a worldwide challenge, requires increased policy attention and effective intervention strategies, particularly given the commitment of many developed countries to prioritizing the reduction of extreme poverty. In contrast, the widespread incidence of poverty in developing countries such as Nigeria poses a serious threat to human development and long-term sustainability. Consequently, the global commitment towards ending extreme poverty as articulated in UN SDGs, and goal 1 is increasingly at risk of falling short of its targets within AKwa Ibom State communities (Kaseem, 2018, United Nations, 2015, 2022).

The evolution of the concept of social protection could be traced to key international milestones, including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations General Assembly, the International Labour Organization's Social Security Convention of 1952 (No. 102), and the 1999

World Summit for Social Development. These frameworks were instrumental to establishing minimum social protection standards applicable across countries (ILO, 2014, cited in UNDP, 2016). Social protection also referred to as social security, is aimed at improving the economic well-being of the poor and vulnerable individuals affected by circumstances such as natural disasters, illness, disability, old age, childbirth, unemployment, inequality and lack of access to state resources (United Nations, 2015; Ekpo, Umoh & Utok, 2023).

Ekpo et al. (2023) drawing from the World Bank and International Labour Organization, opined that social protection involves a set of policy measures adopted by government to protect individuals and families against economic and social distress with the aim of fostering wellbeing for all. World Bank (2025) outline the three pillars of Social Protection to include: Social assistance, social insurance and labour market programmes. It is concern with how governments at various levels designed and implement welfare programmes such as poverty reduction schemes, deliver public services to the public. It encompasses administrative policies relating to income redistribution, healthcare, education, housing, employment, and social protection. Interestingly, a well-designed social protection programmes have high returns on investment, support long term human capital development, economics growth and help people to become self-reliance. World Bank (2025) revealed that while over 4.7 billion people have been captured in social protection in the middle income countries, thereby showing some levels of improvement, on the other hand, about 3 in 4 people in poorest countries have no social protection coverage while about 2 billion people remains inadequately covered across middle-income countries including Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria and this indicate a gap in policy implementation and call for policy review to close the gap in social services of which this study intend to tackle.

According to World Bank (2024) social protection policy or administration can be defined as “the process of designing policies that can help individuals and societies to manage risk, volatility (instability) and protects them from poverty and destitution, through welfare programmes or other instruments that improve resilience, equity and opportunity”, (World Bank, 2012, cited in World Bank, 2024). The World Bank outlined six types of social policy administration to include policies on safety net, migration, cash transfer, pensions, skill development, and job/labour market. The study added that, the target group for social policy administration is the poor and vulnerable persons in the community or state.

The World Summit for Social Development (1995, cited in Ekpo et al., 2023) definrd absolute poverty as “a state of extreme deprivation in which individuals lack access to basic human necessities such as nutritional food, safe drinking water, sanitation, healthcare, shelter, education and information etc”. Nevertheless, despite the implementation of various development strategies, many rural communities in Akwa Ibom State continue to experience poor socio-economic conditions, rising inflation, and limited access to essential social services. Additionally, a large proportion of the economically active poor population is concentrated in the rural areas of the state (Ekpo, et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the frustrations expressed by rural residents stem largely from the failure of governments at different levels, as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), to effectively mobilize and manage resources to improve living standards, address governance deficiencies, and prevent frequent policy reversals, all of which require urgent attention. Additionally, government and NGOs have assisted to introduce social protection policies and programmes targeted at reducing poverty and vulnerability through creating employment opportunities, minimizing exposure to socioeconomic risks, and strengthening people’s capacity to manage certain challenges such as hunger, unemployment, social exclusion, illness, disability, natural disaster and old age (Ekpo et al., 2023). As a result, Akpan et al. (2019) observed a strong relationship between unemployment and poverty in Akwa Ibom State, noting that high unemployment contributes to low gross domestic product, increased crime and violence with adverse psychological and health consequences, and heightened political instability. In light of this, reversing the state’s unfavourable unemployment situation and reducing poverty requires deliberate and coordinated implementation of policies such as social protection initiatives and agro-allied development programmes.

Nkpoyen et al. (2021) examined development gap in social policy through assessing impact of National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) on rural communities in Akwa Ibom State, and found that, non-involvement of beneficiary communities in the project design, corruption and poor policy implementation significantly influenced poverty reduction efforts. The study concluded that

NAPEP failed to achieve its goals in rural areas. Similarly, Ekpo et al. (2023) reported that social protection programmes in Akwa Ibom State have a direct positive effect on human capacity development by improving access to education, healthcare, social empowerment, and employment. In related studies, Umo-Udo et al. (2023) and Ekpo et al. (2024) posit that education significantly promotes entrepreneurial sustainable development in Akwa Ibom State through enhanced acquisition of skills for self-empowerment and job creation. These studies advocates the need for adequate funding, capacity building, effective monitoring and evaluation of programmes to curb corruption and improve programmes outcomes.

Therefore, the continued prevalence of rural poverty has widened the income gap between the rich and the poor, intensifying social inequality and contributing to increasing social problems in both rural and urban areas of Akwa Ibom State. Globally, poverty is recognized as a social challenge that must be tackled with the desire to achieve humane, stable and equitable society in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). As a result, many household remain stuck in extreme poverty, and declining social welfare that require effective economic policies to lift the populace above poverty line (Nkpoyen et al., 2021). Irrespective of the sustained efforts of the successive state's leadership in tackling poverty, the outcomes still remain unsatisfactory as the gap in poverty line continue to widen in Akwa Ibom state. Although the United Nations has made notable progress in reducing extreme poverty globally, material deprivation and low well-being persist in Akwa Ibom State and across Africa. Notwithstanding various poverty alleviation initiatives, poverty incidence in the state reportedly reached about 71% in 2023 (Okojie, 2023).

Effective implementation of social protection programmes (SPPs) could stimulate economic growth and attract foreign direct investment by creating a conducive business environment. However, transforming Akwa Ibom State into a viable investment destination rather than a transitional economy requires sound and consistent social policy implementation. Such policies should support a private sector-driven economy, expand employment opportunities, reduce poverty and unemployment, and ultimately improve the living standards of the people.

The World Bank Group (2024) advocates a poverty-targeted social protection model which, despite its intent, is often prone to errors that may generate social tension and hinder progress toward universal social protection, thereby necessitating stronger global coalitions and partnerships with regional governments. Although the United Nations identifies social protection as a fundamental human right, a large ratio of the global inhabitants still lacks access to such programmes. Nkpoyen and Bassey (2019) observed that poverty conditions appear to worsen despite the increasing number of poverty alleviation policies. Edem & Umoh (2022) acknowledged key drivers of poverty in Akwa Ibom State, to include high illiteracy rates, limit income progress, gender inequality in education, income disparities, corruption, political insecurity, and uneven development.

The World Bank (2024) highlights that access to social protection is vital for ending extreme poverty and stimulating shared prosperity. While cognizance of social protection programmes has improved, supported by digital innovations and the large-scale expansion of social transfers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study noted, over half of the world's population, approximately 4.1 billion people, remains unshielded and vulnerable to economic shocks. As at February 2024, about US\$29 billion had been invested globally in social protection and employment programmes, including US\$16.4 billion targeted at the poorest countries through the International Development Association (World Bank, 2024). Against this background, the study examines the extent to which social protection programmes in Akwa Ibom State have bridged the gap between human capital development and poverty reduction.

Statement of the Problem

Poverty remains a major socioeconomic drawback in Akwa Ibom State and is closely linked with the growing rate of unemployment, particularly among youths. Data from BudgIT Research (2021, 2022), the National Bureau of Statistics Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022), and Okojie (2023) show that the poverty rate in the state increased from 51% in 2021 to about 71% in 2023, out of a projected population of 4,979,400 (NPC, 2022). Within the South-South region, Akwa Ibom State ranks second in poverty incidence after Cross River State. Unemployment has also worsened significantly, rising from 37.7% in 2018 to 67.69% in 2022, with approximately 1.26 million persons unemployed.

This inclination replicates the wider national pattern of growing unemployment (Ekpo, Atakpa & Umoh, 2024).

Low household income positions have further reserved rights to education, as many families are unable to register their children in school. Hence, education funding in Akwa Ibom State as at 2023 indicated below 7% of total budgetary allocation, far lower than UNESCO's recommended benchmark of 20–26%. Additionally, the state recorded about 581,800 out-of-school children, and nationally ranked second position (NBS, 2020; Federal Ministry of Education, 2020). Notwithstanding the state's rich resources and government efforts to expand access to education through free and compulsory education, illiteracy, poor health outcomes, and low living standards persist in the state. These disorders emphasize the need for effective poverty reduction strategies. Consequently, this study examines the role of social protection programmes in addressing poverty in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

The primary objective of this study was to examine the impact of social protection programmes on poverty reduction in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to investigate the effect of social protection programmes on unemployment, evaluate the efficacy of SP in reducing poverty, and identify challenges to the successful implementation of the social protection programmes in the state. To guide this study, the following research questions were raised: how does social protection programmes influenced unemployment in Akwa Ibom State; what are the impacts of the social protection programmes on poverty reduction; and what are the constraints to the effective implementation of SPP in Akwa Ibom State.

The findings of the theoretical and empirical study of this nature are expected to benefit students by enhancing their understanding of the concept and knowledge of social protection, access it for skill development, vocational training, and entrepreneurship for self-reliance. For government and policymakers, the study may provide useful insights for socio-economic planning and the formulation of effective policies aimed at human capacity development, job creation, and citizen empowerment. The study may also inform the public on the role of entrepreneurship, empowerment and vocational training to reduce illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment. In addition, the research may contributes to current literature and serves as a reference material for future studies. The study adopted a descriptive survey design, reviewed relevant literature, applied appropriate theoretical frameworks, and employed survey methods for data collection and analysis to generate findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Review of Literature

Conceptual Review

Poverty is commonly defined as material deprivation or multidimensional disadvantage, reflected in low income, poor health, limited education, and insecurity, with solutions centered on improved income, healthcare, education, and social security (World Bank, 2012; Ekpo, 2023). It also refers to the inability of individuals or households to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, education, and healthcare due to inadequate income and limited employment opportunities (Andem, 2020; Umoh & Ekpo, 2023). The World Bank classifies poverty and extreme poverty using income thresholds of less than US\$2 and US\$1 per person per day respectively, based on purchasing power parity (PPP) (World Bank Group, 2019; World Vision, 2019).

According to the World Bank (2009, cited in World Bank Group, 2019):

Poverty extends beyond income deprivation to include hunger, lack of shelter, poor health without access to medical care, limited access to education, illiteracy, unemployment, and insecurity about future survival. Poverty as a multi-dimensional event varies across border in contexts overtime, and is generally an undesirable state in which people seek escape. Therefore, addressing poverty requires collective action from the poor and the rich aims at promoting access to adequate food, healthcare, education, housing, security and citizens' participation in community decision-making process (World Bank Group, 2019)

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2016) applied the Human Poverty Index (HPI) for measuring of poverty beyond income, whereas the World Bank's Human Development Index (HDI) captures average achievement in health, education and improved standard of living of the citizens. As a result, HDI calculates the geometric mean of indicators such as life expectancy at birth, educational attainment reflecting the literacy rate, mean and expected years of schooling, and Gross National Income Per Capita (World Bank, 2012). Worthy of note is that, while the HDI is useful, but it does not capture

some important indicators of poverty such as inequality, vulnerability, empowerment, employment, and human security to mention but a few.

To this effect, the human development report office decided to introduce additional indices to provide more comprehensive measures of human development to reflect inequality, gender disparity and Poverty (UNDP, 2019, cited in Ekpo et al., 2023). Therefore, both the HDI and HPI adds values to a multi-dimensional approach to poverty by including deprivations in health (survival), Education (literacy rate), and economic well-being. Additionally, HPI precisely measures deprivations by applying indicators like low life expectancy, adult literacy, lack of access to safe water, sanitation, health services, and child malnutrition, thereby proposing a more comprehensive assessment of poverty (UNDP, 2016). As such, the HPI provides a robust tool for ranking poverty levels that complements income-based measures (Ekpo et al., 2023).

Poverty arises from factors including ill health, low income, hunger, illiteracy, and lack of basic needs, while poverty reduction involves policies and programmes aimed at improving livelihoods through human capital development, employment creation, economic growth, and social protection (Barder, 2009; Ekpo, Umoh & Utok, 2023). Vulnerability denotes to the risk of dwindling into or remaining in poverty due to exposure to shock such as illness, natural disasters, or economic instability. Poverty may be relative, reflecting incapability to meet fundamental social standards, or absolute, connoting the inability to satisfy basic needs. Above all, poverty suggests both income deprivation and limited access to education, healthcare, employment, and other essential opportunities (World Bank Group, 2019; World Vision, 2019; Ekpo, 2023).

Concept of Social Protection

Social protection, also known as social security or social welfare, extends beyond basic services such as education and healthcare to include labour market policies that support economic survival and sustainability (World Bank, 2012; UNDP, 2016). The United Nations (2021) defines it as a set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion across the life cycle. Similarly, the Asian development Bank report quoted by Ekpo et al. (2023) views social protection as a strategy for tackling poverty which entails strengthening the labour markets to reduce exposure to high risks, and enhancing people's capacity to cope income shocks. World Bank (2024) conceptualized social protection as programmes of government designed to intervene and protect individuals from economic and social risks stemming from income loss due to illness, unemployment, old age among other forms of shock. These interventions include social insurance, social assistance, and labour and economic inclusion initiatives, particularly targeting vulnerable groups. Financing is provided through contributory schemes and tax-funded public programmes. Concisely, social protection function as a key mechanism for poverty reduction and human development and is guided by doctrines of equality, non-discrimination, participation, transparency, and accountability to the people (World Bank, 2024).

Benefits of Social Protection Programmes

Social protection Programmes (SPP) plays essential role in advancing the welfare of the poorest and vulnerable persons or groups by empowering the marginalized people through employment provision, wealth creation, social inclusion, peace, security and building human capacity for development towards attaining Sustainable development goals by 2030 (UN, 2015; World Bank, 2024). The primary objectives of social protection include reducing inequality and social exclusion, breaking intergenerational poverty, particularly among women, youths, and persons with disabilities—and providing social insurance, social assistance, employment, and economic inclusion to ensure social security. These programmes also improve access to healthcare, education, food security, and protection for the elderly (World Bank, 2024).

In addition, SPP contributes significantly to social cohesion and strengthened social contract by promoting peaceful and progressive societies, while maintaining resilience to economic and environment shock, and promoting environmental sustainability (UN, 2015). Empirical studies have shown that social protection ease income poverty and inequality by encouraging investment in productive assets and human capital aimed at enhancing access to credit, and enabling households to manage risks and secure sustainable livelihoods (ILO, 2010 cited in Ekpo et al., 2023).

Concept of Unemployment

Unemployment refers to the condition in which individuals who are willing and actively seeking work are unable to secure employment. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022) defines unemployed persons as members of the labour force who did not work up to 40 hours during the reference week. The unemployment rate, widely used as an indicator of economic performance, measures the proportion of jobless individuals within the total labour force and is expressed as a percentage (Akpan et al., 2019). Unemployment poses challenges to development mostly in developing economies like Akwa Ibom state.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Human Capital Theory (HCT) to explain the relationship between social protection and poverty reduction in Akwa Ibom State. Major proponents of the theory are Becker (1962) and Rosen (1976). HCT posit that investment in people's education and health, enhances skills, knowledge, and higher productivity, which in turn drives economic growth and development. The proponents argue that a well-educated and healthy population constitutes the foundation of human development, improved labour efficiency, and capital formation within an economy.

Human Capital Theory is considered appropriate for this study because human capacity development is assessed through human capital indices that measure the contributions of education and health to individual and national productivity (UNDP, 2016; Ekpo, 2023). The theory underscores the importance of quality education, school enrolment and attendance, accessible healthcare, and skills acquisition as critical investments addressed by social protection programmes to improve human development outcomes. Its main philosophies include skills and knowledge development, entrepreneurship promotion, self-reliance, technological innovation, improved public services, and provision of modern infrastructure (Ekpo, 2023).

HCT also allows individuals' choices and participation in industrious activities as key to sustainable livelihoods (Ita, 2020). Accordingly, SPP regularly integrate cash transfers with skills training to support economic and social inclusivity, self-employment, and job creation. By improving financial literacy and workforce participation, these programmes reduce dependence on government jobs and encourage private sector participation through public-private partnerships.

World Bank (2024) affirms that sustained investment in human capital is important for economic revolution in developing economies. Therefore, strengthening human capacity building, entrepreneurship, and social inclusive institutions promotes transparency, accountability, and the rule of law, which remains vital indicators for sustainable development and poverty reduction in the state.

Empirical Studies

Nkpoyen, Archibong, Undelikwo, Obeten, and Ofem (2021) investigates the gap between social policy and social problems by evaluating the impact of the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) on rural communities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study engaged an ex-post facto research design with focused on Oron and Udung Uko Local Government Areas. A multistage sampling technique was used to select 400 respondents, with data analyzed using the Chi-square (χ^2) statistical method. Findings shown a significant relationship between limited community participation in project design, corruption, weak policy implementation, and ineffective poverty reduction. The paper concluded that NAPEP has not meaningfully reduced poverty in rural communities and recommended a more inclusive and community-driven approach that allows beneficiaries to identify priority projects and eligible participants.

Ekpo, Umoh, and Utok (2023) weighed the effect of social protection programmes on human capacity development in Akwa Ibom State, focusing on the Akwa Ibom Enterprise and Employment Scheme (AKEES). The study adopted a descriptive survey design to engage seven selected MDAs and programme beneficiaries, with a sample of 322 respondents determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table. Data were collected through a structured 10-item questionnaire using stratified sampling. Analysis was conducted using simple percentages and tables, alongside contextual analysis of secondary data. Findings showed that AKEES significantly contributed to human capacity development through improved access to education and healthcare resulting in promoting SMEs, and enhancing employment opportunities in the state.

Umo-Udo, Ekpo, Udoaka, and Udo (2023) explored the link between political leadership and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Akwa Ibom State, using the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) as a case study. A descriptive survey design was used, drawing from a population of 40,266 education officials across 2,826 SUBEB-affiliated schools. A sample of 380 respondents was selected using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, with data collected through a 12-item questionnaire administered via simple random and stratified sampling. Data were analyzed using simple percentages, Pearson correlation, and tables. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between political leadership and ESD in the state. The study recommended policy reforms to address inefficiencies in educational administration, increased funding to meet UNESCO's 26% benchmark, recruitment of qualified teachers, continuous teacher training in technical and entrepreneurial skills, and improved educational infrastructure such as libraries and laboratories.

Impact of Social Protection Programmes in Akwa Ibom State

Social protection policies or programmes aim to reduce youth restiveness, promote gainful employment, and strengthen practical skills through curriculum reforms that emphasize entrepreneurship and vocational training over theory (AKSG, 2022). By the first quarter of 2021, 11,990 SMEs had been registered across the state, with Uyo Senatorial District accounting for 40%, Ikot Ekpene 33%, and Eket 28% (AKSG, 2022; Akwa Ibom Impact, 2022).

Agricultural empowerment also featured prominently. Under programmes such as FADAMA, GUYS, and the Rice Anchor Borrowers Scheme, thousands of farmers and youths were supported through land cultivation, training, funding, and value-chain development. These initiatives contributed significantly to food security and job creation across multiple local government areas (AKSG, 2022).

Since the inauguration of Governor Umo Eno's administration on May 29, 2023, the Akwa Ibom State Government (AKSG, 2024) has recorded notable achievements across key social and economic sectors. Within one year, about 2,984 persons benefited from agricultural programmes, while 100 public secondary and 30 public primary schools received agricultural inputs. In addition, 2,195 individuals classified as multidimensional poor were supported through social intervention initiatives. Infrastructure development included the construction of 229.4 km of roads, 14 bridges, three underground drainage systems, and 37.7 km of rural feeder roads. Social interventions also reached 600 elderly persons and provided skilled and unskilled employment to 4,600 individuals across the state.

In the education and health sectors, 48,797 students benefited from the payment of 2023/2024 SSCE fees, while 16,522 patients received government-sponsored medical care. Furthermore, 4,603 individuals benefited from entrepreneurship schemes, and 3,583 retirees from state and local government services were paid retirement benefits totaling ₦18.234 billion as of December 2024 (AKSG, 2024).

Under the ARISE Agenda, the state implemented conditional cash transfer programmes, benefiting over 300,000 youths and women with payments of ₦50,000 or ₦75,000 disbursed in installments. Additional interventions included the Dakkada Skills Acquisition Centre, AK-CARE, and AK-CARES. The Community and Social Development Project (CSDSP) earmarked 1,055 beneficiaries for ₦150,000 grants in the second phase of AK-CARES, following 353 beneficiaries who received ₦100,000 in the first phase (Odey, 2024). The government also launched entrepreneurship acceleration programmes through Ibom LED, providing ₦400,000 support to 800 trained beneficiaries, while strengthening AKICORP for improved investment management.

Overall, the administration executed over 450 projects targeting rural development, employment generation, education, infrastructure, and food security. Complementing these efforts, the Food Subsidy Initiative was introduced to mitigate hunger and support vulnerable households registered under the state social safety net (AKSG, 2024).

Constraints to Social Programmes in Akwa Ibom State

Social protection programmes in Akwa Ibom State are constrained by several interrelated challenges, with administrative corruption being the most critical. Weak and inconsistent policymaking, poor leadership, and lack of people-centered policies have encouraged misappropriation of public funds, embezzlement, financial mismanagement, and unrealistic programme targets, resulting in economic waste. These governance failures have also contributed to political instability, social exclusion, inequality, and widespread frustration among citizens, often manifesting in social tension and aggression

Poverty and unemployment remain major economic obstacles to effective social programmes. Field observations reveal complaints from beneficiaries of conditional cash transfer schemes regarding unexplained deductions from stipends meant for poor and vulnerable households. Such practices suggest exploitation by programme implementers and significantly reduce the effectiveness of social protection initiatives, ultimately undermining their poverty-reduction objectives.

Materials and Methods

The study employed descriptive and survey research approaches. Secondary data were sourced from textbooks, newspapers, magazines, the internet, and official publications including reports from the World Bank, National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), and Transparency International (TI). Human Capital Development (HCD) was measured using indicators such as education, healthcare, income level, training and skills acquisition, small and medium enterprise development, level of human empowerment, access to credit facilities, interest rates, and public expenditure on HCD for the period 2017–2026.

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to residents of Akwa Ibom State affected by social protection programmes and poverty, from a projected population of 4,979,400 (NPC, 2022). A sample size of 384 respondents was selected using simple random and stratified sampling techniques. A 12-item questionnaire was administered, and the data were analyzed using simple percentages and presented in tables and charts.

Data Presentation and Analysis

In this section, data collected from secondary sources and primary survey methods are presented in tabular form and analyzed in line with the research questions that guided the study.

Table 1. 380 correctly retrieved questionnaire showing respondents' perception on the impact of Social Protection Programmes and Poverty Reduction in Akwa Ibom State.

S/N	Questions	Responses/Percentage (%)	
		Yes	No
1	Social Protection Programmes (SPP) increases incomes of the poor and vulnerable person for self-reliance in Akwa Ibom State (AKS)?	280 (73.7 %)	100 (26.3%)
2	SPP enhances access to credit which help household to meet essential needs and secure future livelihood as well as manage risks?	264 (69.5 %)	116 (30.5%)
3	SPP promotes social inclusion and re-distribution of resources to the poor in order to reduce poverty and inequality in AKS?	294 (77.4%)	86 (22.6%)
4	SPP foster social cohesion and safety of all citizens in AKS by giving the people a sense of belonging and social justice?	204 (53.7%)	176 (46.3%)
5	SPP has significantly reduces unemployment among citizens in Akwa Ibom State?	242 (66.7%)	138 (36.3%)
6	SPP has met its goal of poverty reduction amongst the poor by lifting them out of poverty level AKS?	75 (19.7%)	305 (80.3%)
7	SPP enhances access to productive resources including credit, subsidy for education, agriculture and healthcare services in AKS?	248 (65.3%)	132 (34.7%)
8	SPP reduces poverty by promoting economic activities leading to human capital development, employment, economic growth in AKS?	198 (52.1%)	182 (47.9%)
9	SPP as Poverty reduction strategy helps to promote the environmental resilience and sustainability in AKS?	147 (38.7%)	233 (66.3%)
10	SPP such as cash transfer, AK-CARES, Arise food subsidy, Dakkada skill acquisition and empowerment, Agro-business, etc. encourages	245 (64.5%)	135 (35.5%)

	entrepreneurship for job opportunities and self-reliance in AKS?		
11	Inadequate funding of SPP and other social services contributes to increase in poverty rate in AKS?	312 (82.1%)	68 (17.9%)
12	Poor monitoring and evaluation, administrative corruption, lack of transparency and accountability are major problems of SPP and Poverty reduction in AKS?	237 (62.4%)	143 (37.6%)

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Furthermore, to achieve the objectives of the study, relevant questions were formulated and the survey method was employed to collect data for analysis as follows:

Research Question One

How has the social protection programmes affected unemployment in Akwa Ibom State?

In table 1, the perception of respondents to Q1-6 provides answer to how have the social protection programmes affected poverty reduction among people in Akwa Ibom State as 280 respondents which constitutes 73.7% agreed that Social Protection Programmes (SPP) increases incomes of the poor and vulnerable person for self-reliance in Akwa Ibom State while 100 respondents, representing 26.3% disagreed. Also, 264 respondents which represented 69.5 % agreed that SPP enhances access to credit which help household to meet essential needs and secure future livelihood as well as manage risks while 116 respondents, representing 30.5% disagreed.

To determine the level of social inclusion and cohesion in SPP, 294 respondents which constitutes 77.4% shows SPP promotes social inclusion and re-distribution of resources to the poor in order to reduce poverty and inequality in AKS while 86 respondents which represented 22.6% expressed dissatisfaction with performance of SPP in the area of social inclusion. In addition, 204 respondents which constitutes 53.7% agreed that SPP foster social cohesion and safety of all citizens in AKS by giving the people a sense of belonging and social justice while 176 respondents representing 46.3% disagreed. In that same order, 242 respondents which constituting 66.7% agreed that SPP has significantly reduces unemployment among citizens in Akwa Ibom State whereas 138 respondents representing 36.3% did not agree. In determining goal attainment, 75 respondents which represented 19.7% agreed that SPP has met its goal of poverty reduction amongst the poor by lifting them out of poverty level AKS whereas 305 respondents representing 80.3% disagreed. Going by the opinion poll, 66.7% agreed that SPP has significantly reduces unemployment among citizens in Akwa Ibom State. The implication of above data revealed that there is significant direct relationship between social protection programmes and job creation to reduce unemployment in Akwa Ibom State.

Research Question Two

What are the impacts of social protection programmes as poverty reduction strategy in Akwa Ibom State?

The perception of respondents to Q 7 - 10 provides answer to the impact of social protection programmes as poverty reduction strategy in Akwa Ibom State, 248 respondents which represented 65.3% agreed that SPP enhances access to productive resources including credit, subsidy for education, agriculture and healthcare services in AKS while 132 respondents which made up 34.7% disagreed. Also, 198 respondents which made up 52.1% agreed SPP reduces poverty by promoting economic activities leading to human capital development, employment, economic growth in AKS while 182 respondents which represented 47.9% disagreed. However, the implication is that much more is needed in the areas human capital development, employment, economic growth in AKS. Concerning poverty reduction and environmental sustainability, 147 respondents which represented 38.7% agreed that SPP as Poverty reduction strategy helps to promote the environmental resilience and sustainability in AKS while 233 respondents which made up 66.3% disagreed. On the other hand, 245 respondents which represented 64.5% agreed that SPP such as cash transfer, AK-CARES, Arise food subsidy, Dakkada skill acquisition and empowerment, Agro-business, etc. encourages entrepreneurship for job opportunities and self- reliance in AKS whereas 135 respondents which made up 35.5% disagreed.

Drawing from the above analysis data revealed social protection programme (SPP) reduces poverty by promoting economic activities leading to human capital development, employment, and economic growth in AKS.

Research Question Three

What are the challenges/constraints to effective implementation of social protection programmes as poverty reduction strategy in Akwa Ibom State?

The perception of respondents to Q9 & 10 were used to assess the challenges/constraints to effective implementation of social protection programmes as poverty reduction strategy in Akwa Ibom State. To this effect, 312 respondents which made up 82.1% maintained that inadequate funding of SPP and other social services contributes to increase in poverty rate in AKS whereas 68 respondents which constitutes 17.9% disagreed, thereby, implying that more funds should be released to finance SPP in the State. Similarly, 237 respondents which constitutes 62.4% opine that poor monitoring and evaluation, administrative corruption, lack of transparency and accountability are major problems of SPP and poverty reduction in AKS while 143 respondents representing 37.6% did not agree. The implication of opinion poll is shows that SPP requires adequate monitoring and evaluation to prevent administrative corruption and promote transparency and accountability for effective service delivery to curb poverty in Akwa Ibom State. Finally, the 62.4% of respondents opined that corruption and insincerity of the implementers/social care givers shows that corruption and insincerity of the implementers/social care givers are setback to improved implementation most social policies to meet set goals Akwa Ibom State and by extension Nigeria.

Major Findings

Major findings of the study are:

- i. There is significant direct relationship between social protection programmes and job creation to reduce unemployment in Akwa Ibom State.
- ii. Social protection programme (SPP) reduces poverty by promoting economic activities leading to human capital development, employment, economic growth in AKS.
- iii. Poor monitoring and evaluation, inadequate funding and administrative corruption by implementers of social protection programmes serve as drawback poverty reduction in Akwa Ibom State.

Discussion of Findings

Firstly, findings revealed there is significant direct relationship between social protection programmes and job creation to reduce unemployment in Akwa Ibom State. To ascertain the result of the first finding, Akwa Ibom Social Protection Programmes through its programmes of action make to training of the citizens mostly youths on capacity building programmes in various careers, technical, entrepreneurship, managerial skills in oil and gas, Agric-business, ICT and SME to address entrepreneurship such as sewing, soap making, craft work, carpentry, clothes waiving, agriculture etc in the state with the goal to achieve global standard of education and decent work/economic growth as encapsulated in the Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 8 which is targeted at ensuring education for all and sustained, inclusive productive employment and sustainable economic growth that will end poverty in 2030, this finding is supported by (UN, 2015 and Ekpo et al, 2023).

Second finding shows Social protection programme (SPP) reduces poverty by promoting economic activities leading to human capital development, employment, economic growth in AKS this finding is support by (World Bank 2024, Ekpo, et al 2023; Ekpo, et al 2024).

Third finding indicated that poor monitoring and evaluation, inadequate funding and administrative corruption by implementers of social protection programmes serve as drawback poverty reduction in Akwa Ibom State, and this is support by (World Bank 2024, Ekpo, et al 2023; Ekpo, et al 2024, World Bank, 2025).

Impact of Social Protection Programmes in Akwa Ibom State

The state's social protection policy reiterated commitment in human capacity building through training and empowerment of people to acquire skills for more productivity and built infrastructures to open opportunities to women and youths for the development of SMEs for self-reliance job creation to curb social unrest and insecurity which may be attributed unemployment, lack of training and empowerment and non-engagement of youths in gainful businesses by the state government. Akwa Ibom

state social protection policy have led established Ibom Enterprise Development Scheme (IBEDS) for empowerment of entrepreneurs, and Akwa Ibom Enterprise and Employment Scheme (AKEES) to sustainable plans to curb youth restiveness and ensure the youths are gainfully employed and given the right training in schools to practicalize businesses and other ventures rather than concentrate on theoretical aspects, it will enhance the best interest of the society and called for a change in schools curriculum to bring in more of practical work (AKSG, 2022). In this regard, 11,990 SMEs was registered within the first quarter of 2021 with uyo senatorial district having 40%, Ikot Ekpene Senatorial District 33% and Eket Senatorial District has 28% support (AKSG, 2022, Akwa Ibom Impact, 2022).

Entrepreneurial programmes provided as a result of social protection in the state include: 500 youth entrepreneurs (My Entrepreneurs Goal Programme, MEGP); 2050 youths trained on web development and design, 200 youths trained on Oracle, 200 youths trained on micro works; 2234 trained on basic schools administration on Covid-19 prevention; training of 850 teachers and 150 head teachers (total of 1000 teaching staff) on jolly phonetic; 20 Bio-medical Engineers for maintenance of hospital equipment; 40,000 youths in solar installation, ICT and Agro-base venture; 2500 women empowerment in Dakkada Women Entrepreneurship and Mentorship Programme (DWEMP) in baking, food processing, tailoring, hair dressing and making, make up etc.; 3000 youth Ibom project 1st batch; 3000 youths trained in skills acquisition in oil and gas; and the Ibom 3,000 Project 2nd batch, My Entrepreneurial Goal Programme, MEGP and the 2Billion Naira interest free loan to traders and SMEs, all aimed at creating jobs opportunities for the youths in the state (AKSG, 2022, Akwa Ibom Impact, 2022).

Agro-Business: The state have over the years shown commitment towards food production and sufficiency for the teeming population in the state. Recently, 3240 hectares of land were used in 15 LGAs under FADAMA programme to cultivate cassava; 1200 hectares for rice cultivation in Ini; 49,318 farmers registered on Rice Anchor Borrower Scheme; 450 youths trained on cocoa plantation and maintenance. In addition, 300 youth trained in farming under Graduate Unemployment Youth Scheme (GUYS); training of 360 youth on Agricultural enterprises in Israel; creating 50,000 jobs through cassava farmers and mobilization scheme; creating 24,000 jobs in catfish farming scheme; provision of N95,364,000 to 249 beneficial of FADAMA GUYS trainees under Akwa Ibom Enterprise Employment Scheme (AKEES) (AKSG Weting Udom Don Do, 2022). Since the inception of the administration of Governor Umo Eno from May 29, 2023, AKSG (2024) quantitative data report on the performance of the state government in the past one year revealed that: 2,984 persons have benefited from the agricultural programmes; 100 public secondary schools and 30 public primary schools have received agricultural input; 2,195 people rated under multidimensional poor category has been raised up the poverty ladder through various social intervention programmes such as infrastructural development to include: 229.411Km of roads, 14 bridges and 3 underground discharge have been constructed; 37.7Km of feeder roads have constructed in rural communities across the state; 600 elderly persons, 4,600 persons employed under skilled and unskilled labour across the state. in the area of healthcare services, 16,522 patients benefited from medical care sponsored by state government; 48,797 students benefited from payment of 2023/2024 SSCE fees, 4603 people have benefited from different entrepreneurship scheme of the state government while 3,583 retirees from the state and local government services received their retirement benefits to the tune of N18.234 billion as at May, 2024 (AKSG, 2024).

Also, the state government through the ARISE Agenda in collaboration with the state ministries of finance and Economic development proposes programmes such as conditional cash transfer, Dakkada Skills Acquisition Center, AK- CARE and others. Recently, Akwa Ibom State Agency for Community Development and Social Development Project (CSDSP) earmarked 1,055 beneficiaries for N150, 000 each for AK- CARES second phase of social intervention in the state whereas the first phase recorded 353 beneficiaries who received N100,000 each, (Odey, 2024). In the areas of human capacity development the state government has establish Entrepreneurship acceleration programme coordinated by Ibom LED and about N400,000.00 has been set aside for 800 trained beneficiaries and Akwa Ibom Investment Corporation (AKICORP) has also been strengthen to oversee effective management of investments (AKSG, 2024).

According to manager of the Agency, Mr. Martins Umoh since the inception of Governor Umo Eno administration, about 450 project aimed at impacting the lives of the rural communities in line with the ARISE Agenda seek to the promote macro-economic stability, generate employment, redistribute income through Agricultural revolution, rural development, infrastructure advancement, security and education aim at improved standard of living of the citizens which is the core principle of ARISE agenda of the present administration (Odey, 2024).

Mr. Umoh added that, AK- CARES has affected diverse sectors of the state's economy such as education, health and businesses, adding that through the CDSDP project, farmers, low income earners and youths would be impacted. The intervention takes place in three major areas such as education, health and water/sanitation. The Agency make use of the state social safety net register to get names of people from 18 to 40 years of age with about 60% for women and 40% for men. He added that the agency train them, enroll them and then hand them over to the payment service provider which is the designated bank for verification and disbursement of funds to beneficiaries (Odey, 2024).

In addition, the state government devices a measure to intervene in the areas of food shortage in the state launched the Food Subsidy Initiative to cushioned effect of hunger and food crisis especially among the poor and vulnerable registered in the state social safety register (AKSG, 2024).

On the other hands, third findings revealed poor monitoring and evaluation, inadequate funding and administrative corruption by implementers of social protection programmes serve as drawback poverty reduction in Akwa Ibom State and this is supported by studies conducted by (Nkpoyen, Archibong, Undelikwo, Obeten, & Ofem, 2021; Akpan, Alfred, Edema, and Morgan, 2019).

Constraints to Social Programmes in Akwa Ibom State

Administrative corruption: These emanates from poor policy making and policy inconsistency on the parts of our political leaders to make people-friendly policies and this often leads to misappropriation of public funds; embezzlement and financial mismanagement; unrealistic goals and economic waste of the state resources. Hence, the incessant political instability in the state can attributed poor leadership which often caused marginalization of some groups, inequalities and frustrations on the part of the masses, and often leads to aggression. The collective frustration occurs as a result of the inability of the people in the state to meet their needs and satisfy their aspirations, this is support by (Ekpo et al., 2023)

Poverty and unemployment are the major economic challenges in Akwa Ibom State, many scholars agree to the fact that unemployment in the state is one of the direct cause of poverty. Unemployment is a situation in which persons with skills for employment are unable to get jobs. Lack of employment in the state contributes to high rate of poverty, hunger, brain drainage, capital flight. Data revealed that AKS poverty rate as at November, 2021 was 28.82% and unemployment rate of 67.69% (BudgIT Research, 2021); infrastructural underdevelopment; urban decay; economic dependency upon western nations for financial aids, loans, technical assistance, and technical expertise all have negative implications on the economy of the state; domestic debt of N230.81bn external indebtedness of \$47.9 and debt growth from 2016 – 2020 was 48.06%; debt size position in the country 5th out of 36 states; fiscal performance AKS is ranked 24th out of 36 states in Nigeria (BudgIT Research, 2021).

Studies shows practice experience here in Akwa Ibom state, were reports from the beneficiaries of the cash transfer unit of programme of an unexplainable deductions at the point of payment of the N5, 000.00 monthly stipend for the upkeep of Poor and Vulnerable Household (PVHH), which we are yet to know the purpose of the deduction and the objectives these surcharges are meant to serve, as we are speaking the implementers of the social safety net programme have not explain to the beneficiaries. Scholars see this act of unnecessary deduction as an avenue for self-enrichment by the political class and exploitation of the poor masses.

Scholars also argue about poor implementation of the National Social Safety Net Coordinating Office (NASSCO) under the federal ministry of humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development in collabouration with the State Operation Coordinating Unit (SOCU) of Social Safety Net programmes under the Ministry of Economic Development in partnership with the Local Government Areas. The National Social Safety Net Programme is a social intervention programmeme aimed at establishing National Social Register of the poor and vulnerable household with the aim of keeping track or statistical record of the poor for purpose of planning national development.

Scholars' observation, the NASSP was well designed and apply computerized data base in enumeration of the Poor and Vulnerable Household (PHVHH) across the state. It also make use of Geographic Community Based Targeting System (CBTS), and Proxy Means Testing (PMT) to identify the poor beneficiaries and to ascertained reliability. The community checklist was used to determine and differentiate disparity among communities using the indicators of development such as market, road network, Hospital, School and other infrastructure etc. in ranking to know the poorest community in various Local Government Areas.

The facilitators of the programmes were also trained on means of identifying the poor in the community that would make up the national social register to enable the government to carry out implementation of social protection programmesthe such as N-care, cash transfer and empowerment across the state and nation.

The objectives of NSIP included registration of PVHH in State and National Social Safety Net Programme to enable the provision of social intervention programmes; to foster community ownership and partnership for transparency and accountability; to establish internal checks mechanism to prevent frauds and address grievances, and above all to reduce poverty level in the community and this was well designed but in actual practice it has been facing the challenges that other past social protection programmes encountered and this manifest in the area of poor performance due to insincerity of the implementations agents; weak co-ordination of the programme; weak partnership between the federal, state, local government areas, communities and other NGOs; inadequate monitoring and evaluation by the managers of the programme open room for corruption and other irregularities by key officials, making issues of accountability and transparency of the NSIP questionable by Akwa Ibomite, some scholars argue that NSIP policy just like other poverty alleviation programme is an avenue for the political class and their associate to embezzle and misappropriate public fund in pretense to provide for well-being of the poor in the society (Ekpo, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The social protection policy of the state is a welcomed efforts capable of impacting positively on the lives of millions of the unemployed people in the state. The major findings revealed there is significant direct relationship between social protection programmes and job creation to reduce unemployment in Akwa Ibom State; Social protection programme (SPP) reduces poverty by promoting economic activities leading to human capital development, employment, economic growth in AKS; Poor monitoring and evaluation, inadequate funding and administrative corruption by implementers of social protection programmes serve as drawback poverty reduction in Akwa Ibom State.

Therefore, it proper implementation helps to open up the economy for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). But our concern is, do we see Akwa Ibom state as a destination for direct foreign investment or as a bus stop? Taking into consideration the environment and the economic situation, as well as the high level of poverty and unemployment rate in the state. The state's becoming a destination requires sound and vibrant public policies implementation that would provide enabling environment for private sector-driven economy that helps to expand the economic sphere to create more jobs that benefit more families, and improve the standard of living of the people in the state.

Recommendations are as follows:

1. There is need to establishment of poverty scheme (social safety register) that enable proper identification of the poor and vulnerable persons for palliatives and conditional cash transfer such as physically challenged benefit, pension scheme, health insurance, education grant, credit facilities such as loan, grants and subsidy with low interest for entrepreneurs, vocational and skills acquisition training for small and medium businesses for job creation to address economic problems of poverty, hunger and unemployment in the state.
2. There is a need for policy reforms that encourage more investment in human capital development and other major economic sectors such as agriculture, health, education, infrastructures and industrialization backed up by political goodwill and commitment on the part of the leaders to implement these policies to the later.
3. There should be introduction of entrepreneurship education into school curriculum and it should be made compulsory for primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State. Also, there is need for more budgeting for social protection programmes to meet up 19% to 27%



baseline of the International Labour Organization (ILO) as a case of Britain and USA and other advanced nations.

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