

Edo State Women Association

Laying strong foundations



**1987
Mrs Maryam Babangida sets up the Better Life Programme (BLP) for Rural Women**

Women were organised into economically-active groups; provided with appropriate literacy and numeracy training

Cover photo: laying the first foundation stone of the under-fives daycare centre in Benin City

Better Life Programme (BLP) for Rural Women

In 1987, the then First Lady of Nigeria, Mrs Maryam Babangida, instituted the Better Life Programme (BLP) for Rural Women. She wanted to empower and emancipate rural women, especially market women, and her belief was that this would be done most effectively at the grassroots level, enabling women to help themselves by using and building on the skills and resources they already had.

Within each state, women were organised into productive units in their individual communities, and each unit was engaged in an income-generating activity that would provide some income to the women. The vast majority of these women were ill-educated, and so literacy and numeracy teaching was linked to the income-generating activity. In this way, the women could immediately apply what they were learning to their economic activity. This had two benefits:

■ As producers of marketable farm goods, the women needed to be able to keep accurate accounts and records of their income and expenditure to make sure they were not being swindled;

■ The immediate and obvious application of what they were learning to what they were earning ensured that the drop-out level was much lower than had the women been enrolled in conventional adult literacy and numeracy classes where what they were being taught might have been regarded as irrelevant to their daily needs and activities.

The next step concerned skills acquisition and skills transfer. The goods produced by BLP units from a variety of Nigerian states were put on display and talks were given by the women on how they were produced, what their uses were and how marketable they were. There were

also seminars in which other women were taught these skills, which often took the form of 'training the trainers' workshops so that the skills learnt could be transferred back to members of other local units.



As a direct result of the Better Life Programme for Rural Women, the perception of Nigerian women's role and importance in wider society changed: from being regarded as the property of their husbands, and as second-class citizens who contributed nothing but took everything, Nigerian women came to be seen as producers and providers of food, both for their own families, and more generally for the entire nation.

Under Mrs Babangida's leadership, the BLP launched 7,635 co-operatives, 997 cottage industries, 1,751 new farms and gardens, 487 new shops and markets, 419 women's centres and 163 social welfare programmes. Mrs Babangida's work was recognised in 1991 when she was awarded the Africa Prize for Leadership.

Edo State Women Association (ESWA)

In 1991, Mrs Maryam Babangida visited all the Home Town Associations in London and asked them to join the BLP scheme by setting up women's groups who could help women in their various home towns.

Eki Ogbeide and other women from the Benin Union (an informal social grouping) attended

Women's produce put on display; transfer of knowledge and skills via 'training of trainers' workshops and seminars

General perception of women's role and importance transformed

Photo: one of the market women in Benin City

**1991
Mrs Maryam Babangida visits London Home Town Associations; asks them to join BLP and establish women's groups**

**December 1991
Setting up
of Edo State
Women
Association
(ESWA)**

**ESWA supports
the leprosarium
in Abudu**

**ESWA
approached by
market women
from Benin City**

the meeting and reported back to their association who agreed that they could set up a women's group. Having got permission to use the name Edo to represent all the relevant tribes, they formed the Edo State Women Association (ESWA) in December 1991. Eki Ogbeide was made the manager and she negotiated with the Nigerian High Commission in London to use its basement office for their monthly meetings.

ESWA's first project was to support a leprosarium in Abudu, which included buying items of food, toys and clothing for the children there. The London group had been shocked to find that Nigerians were suffering like that – in Nigeria, as elsewhere, leprosy tends to be a hidden disease because of the social taboo and exacts a terrible price of its victims and their families. Those suffering from the disease are ostracised and end up living in the bush in informal 'communities'. They go on to have families there, but their children, even if they are unaffected directly by leprosy, are also shunned simply because their parents once suffered from the disease. The hospital is supported by charities in Germany and other countries, but all it can do is provide medicine for the sick – it cannot help those who are healthy.

It was while they were supporting the Abudu leprosarium that members of ESWA were approached by some of the market women in Benin City from whom they were buying supplies for the children. The women wanted to know whether ESWA could help them too.

Although it is Nigerian men who own the farms – and they often marry more than one wife in order to increase their land-holding – it is the women who are the farmers and the women who go to market to sell the produce. Unfortunately, the conditions in which they have to set up and run their markets are very poor. Typically, the 'market' is not so much a place as an activity: women frequently find a spare patch of land in an open field in which to display their



Photo: a child wandering off alone in the open air Santana Market, Benin City

wares. The fields are often next to main roads and they have no facilities – no protection from the sun or rain, and no toilet or washing facilities. Married Benin women have to suffer the indignity of urinating in public and there is raw sewage and all kinds of waste everywhere.

In addition, the women have no childcare facilities and have to take sometimes very young children with them to market. Although education for the over-fives in Nigeria is free, in many states, including Edo State, there is no free, public pre-school provision, or else it is prohibitively expensive. In addition, the traditional Nigerian welfare structure, based on the extended family, has been seriously eroded by Western-style poverty, although there is now a growing trend for family elders to take control and provide support.

But one cannot keep an eye on boisterous children every minute of the day – especially if one is trying to deal with a customer – and all too often toddlers wander out into the busy road and are tragically killed. Even if the roads were safe, the unhygienic conditions of the market combined with their compromised immune systems due to malnutrition mean that the death rate of children under the age of five is very high, especially from diseases such as malaria.

To make matters worse, corruption and bribery are still rife in Nigeria, and despite the best efforts of successive governments, the market women

No affordable pre-school provision

Toddlers killed after running into busy roads

Under-fives' death rate very high; poor immune systems due to malnutrition

Women are victims of corruption and bribery; also harassed and abused by

Nigerian 'Mafia' in operation; demand protection money

ESWA registered as UK charity in 2001; also joined The African Families Foundation (TAFF)

Market women needed childcare facilities and financial support; problem youths needed training that would lead to jobs

osusu: traditional banking system found throughout West Africa, based on saving and borrowing in turns

were being charged 'taxes' on everything they sold – money that frequently did not find its way into state or federal coffers. The women were also being harassed by the local authorities and 'godfathers' in the ruling political party, who employed gangs of youths and boys to oppress and abuse them, and often to destroy their produce if they did not pay them protection money – in effect, there was a Nigeria 'Mafia'.

Back in England, the Edo women in London also needed support. The majority of Nigerians come to the UK to study, to get married, to make money and go home. However, changing circumstances – e.g. the fluctuating political situation in Nigeria – means that many end up having to stay in the UK and in the meantime have children of their own. These women also need childcare facilities, and Eki realised that the best way to assist both groups of women – in London, in Benin City – was to register ESWA as a UK charity so that they could access available funds. This they did in 2001. ESWA also joined The African Families Foundation (TAFF), and from 2001 to 2002 conducted informal survey discussions to find out what the market women wanted and how they could achieve it.

Then in 2004, Eki Ogbeye and Nana Ama Amamoo, director of TAFF, went to Nigeria and organised a three-day workshop and conference for the Benin City market women to assess their needs. The most crucial was childcare facilities, but they also needed financial support because most of the market women could not even open a bank account, they were not educated, and were not used to the Western-style banking system because they had their own traditional way, called **osusu**.

A workshop was also held for the youths who had been harassing the market women. They complained that it was mainly because they had no jobs, no education and no skills, and what they really wanted was training that would lead to employment.

Under-fives' daycare centre

Immediately after the three-day workshop, ESWA launched a fundraising drive to build a daycare centre for the children of women who traded in the Santana Market of Benin City. Thanks to a generous donation by the French Embassy, the kindergarten was built, and, at his own request, officially commissioned by the French Ambassador, His Excellency M. Yves Gaudeul on 29 April 2005.

The Ambassador was amazed and impressed by what ESWA had managed to do with the funds. The daycare centre boasts:

- Four classrooms, each with a toilet and shower en suite;
- An adult toilet and shower for the staff;
- Two offices;
- A large hall for functions and activities;
- Its own electricity provided by solar power;
- Its own borehole, with pump and water treatment system.

The daycare centre also functions as a community resource centre and offers training courses and apprenticeships for young



French Embassy in Benin City funds the building of a daycare centre for the under-fives

Officially opened by the French Ambassador in April 2005

Photo: The under-fives' daycare centre for the women of Santana Market, Benin City

Centre offers training courses for young people to help them find employment

Photo: 'sleeping beauties' at the under-fives' daycare centre

ESWA sets up a micro loan scheme for the market women, based on rotated borrowing and saving, similar to the traditional osusu banking system

people in housekeeping, childcare, computers, hairdressing, carpentry and other skills which will help them find employment. The first group of children is due to graduate on 3 August 2007.

Setting up a micro loan scheme



The daycare centre ran well for a year, but then the money for staff wages ran out. ESWA tried to raise funds from a variety of sources, such as Comic Relief, but the applications to date have been unsuccessful. In the end, Eki Ogbeide was forced to use her own money – or, rather, that of her eldest son, Etionsa!

Etionsa was born in the UK, so Eki was entitled to receive Child Benefit, which she paid into an insurance scheme. Fortunately, the policy matured just at the right time and, with her son's generous and insightful permission, Eki used some of the money to set up a micro loan scheme, designed by and for the market women of Benin City.

The scheme works rather like the traditional banking system with which the market women were familiar. There are three categories of loan – 100,000 Naira, 50,000 Naira, or 25,000 Naira – and the groups of women (there are 67 in all in the ESWA network) take it in turn to take out a loan. Borrowers also have to take out life insurance and sickness and accident insurance.

The loan is repaid in 30 weekly instalments, which covers the capital plus interest, at which point the next group of women is eligible for a loan. So far, three groups of market women have taken part in the scheme and the interest raised over the year will go towards the running costs of the daycare centre.

Activities in the UK

At present, Edo State Women Association operates in two London Boroughs – Hackney and Harrow – where it runs a variety of recreational and self-development schemes for women and their children. For example:

- An After-school club: At their own request, this was set up to help children born in the UK reconnect with the culture of their parents. It includes African story-telling and dance sessions held at Holmleigh Primary School in Hackney;
- Working with Middlesex FA, football matches are held every Saturday evening as part of a wider programme of recreational activities for young people. It is hoped that the teams will eventually play in various leagues, both inside and outside the Borough
- ESWA runs a Saturday school to prepare local children for their Maths and English SATs



UK activities include an After-school club; regular football matches; a Saturday school to help with Maths and English SATs

Photo: some of the youngsters playing football

Photo: Some of the children enjoying African dance classes as a way of reconnecting with their parents' culture



■ There is also a Youth Leadership scheme, and several young members of ESWA's youth club, set up in the summer of 2005, have participated in British Youth Council seminars. One of the youth club's first activities was a trip to Legoland in Windsor, since some of the young people had never travelled outside London!

■ Other activities include African Dance Aerobics classes, as a non-medical intervention for the prevention and management of cardio-vascular health problems. This is aimed at people who would not normally use their local sports facilities. This project is being developed further with The African Families Foundation.



Photo: Parents and children learning about Nigerian traditions and culture

Plans for the future

Like many immigrant communities, Edo women in London would dearly love to have their own community centre. So ESWA's plan is to find an old building that they could buy and do up – perhaps an old pub or church. Several members of ESWA now own their own homes and they are exploring ways in which they could use their equity for this very purpose. The idea is then to set up a community café and other small businesses, the proceeds from which could contribute to the centre's running costs. Some of the ESWA members have already taken part in a three-day training scheme held in Trafford Hall, Chester, learning how to set up and run a community café.



Another idea is to set up an exchange programme between London and Benin City, whereby children born in the UK can visit the homeland of their parents and learn more about their cultural inheritance.

In Nigeria, ESWA has been offered a three-bedroom bungalow as a gift in order to raise money. The group plans to sell lottery tickets, at £10 a go, with the prize being the bungalow. If ESWA can sell 100,000 tickets, they can make £1 million. Just think how many daycare centres that would buy in Nigeria and how many market women would be able to access loans and training for their business development!

Photo: Some of ESWA's members (and their families) went on a three-day course at Trafford Hall in Chester, learning how to set up and run a community café



Edo State Women Association

UK

12 Somervell Road
Harrow
Middx HA2 8TU
T/F: 020 8423 6669
M: 07944 469554
E: info@edowomen.org

Nigeria

40 Country Home Motel Road
Off Sapele Road
Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria
T: (+234) 803 3037 358

www.edowomen.com

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