

Community Participation and its Impact on Rural Project Sustainability in Akpabuyo Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Rural development projects often fail due to a lack of community involvement, resulting in poor maintenance and unsustainable outcomes. This study investigates the extent of community participation in rural development projects and its impact on their sustainability in Akpabuyo Local Government Area (LGA) of Cross River State, Nigeria. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 150 community members, project beneficiaries, and local leaders through structured questionnaires and interviews. The findings reveal a significant positive relationship between community participation and project sustainability. The study concludes that active community engagement in planning, implementation, and monitoring enhances ownership and ensures long-term benefits. Recommendations are made for policy reforms and capacity-building initiatives that strengthen participatory development frameworks.

Keywords: *Community participation, Rural development, Sustainability, Implementation, Monitoring*

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Background to the Study

Community participation refers to the active engagement of local people in the decision-making, planning, implementation, and evaluation of projects that affect their lives. According to Oakley and Marsden (1984), participation involves a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them. In the context of rural development, participation has become a critical determinant of project sustainability, ensuring that local needs are adequately addressed and community ownership is fostered. Community participation is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of sustainable rural development (Oakley, 1991). It entails the active involvement of local populations in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, especially in planning, implementing, and monitoring development initiatives (Chambers, 1997). In many developing countries, including Nigeria, donor- and government-driven projects often fail due to the marginalisation of local voices and the imposition of top-down development agendas.

Pretty (1995) categorised participation into several levels, from passive participation to self-mobilisation, indicating that the extent of community involvement significantly affects project outcomes. Genuine participation ensures that beneficiaries are not just passive recipients but active stakeholders. This is particularly important in rural areas like Akpabuyo, where limited resources and poor infrastructural development require locally tailored solutions supported by strong community commitment.

In Cross River State, rural areas such as Akpabuyo have experienced numerous development projects related to water supply, sanitation, agriculture, and road construction. However, the sustainability of these projects remains a major concern. Many projects deteriorate shortly after implementation due to weak community involvement, lack of maintenance, and poor sense of ownership (Ushie, 2018). This study explores the nature and level of community participation in rural development projects in Akpabuyo LGA and assesses how such participation influences the sustainability of these projects. It also aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge advocating for participatory approaches in rural development policy and practice.

Literature Review

Community participation refers to the process by which individuals and groups within a community influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions, and resources (Pretty, 1995). It ranges from passive consultation to active decision-making and ownership. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation outlines eight levels of involvement, from manipulation to citizen control, illustrating the spectrum of participatory practices. Conversely, project sustainability is the ability of a project to maintain its benefits over the long term without external support (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). Factors influencing sustainability include financial independence, technical capacity, institutional support, and, significantly, community ownership and participation (Cleaver, 2001).

Empirical studies in Nigeria and other African countries have underscored the importance of community participation. A study by Olowu and Erero (1997) found that rural projects with high levels of local participation had better outcomes and longer life spans. Similarly, Emeh and Eze (2019) observed that water supply projects in rural Enugu State that involved community stakeholders were more functional and better maintained than those imposed by external agencies. In Cross River State, Ushie (2018) documented several abandoned projects in Akpabuyo and neighbouring LGAs, attributing failures to inadequate consultation and weak involvement of end-users. Therefore, promoting inclusive development practices remains essential.

Community Participation and Rural Project Sustainability

In Nigeria, community participation has been integrated into rural development strategies since the introduction of the Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) in the 1980s (Obasi, 2007). Despite efforts, many rural projects still fail due to limited local engagement, lack of transparency, and top-down implementation models (Ezeah, 2005). According to Agba, Ushie, and Akwara (2009), while community members are often consulted, they are rarely included in critical stages such as planning, budgeting, or monitoring, which undermines sustainability.

Participation is often hindered by factors such as illiteracy, poverty, cultural constraints, and political interference (Adekola & Sergi, 2016). For example, rural communities in Cross River State frequently report exclusion from developmental decision-making, leading to poor project alignment with local needs (Ekong, 2003). These challenges point to a gap between policy intentions and actual practice, necessitating more inclusive frameworks. The sustainability of rural development projects hinges on the degree of community involvement throughout the project life cycle. Mansuri and Rao (2013) argue that when communities are engaged in identifying needs, setting priorities, and implementing solutions, they develop a sense of ownership that encourages long-term maintenance and accountability.

Empirical studies support this link. A study by Olatunji and Olayiwola (2016) in Osun State found that projects involving local committees in planning and management experienced higher success and longevity. Similarly, Aluko and Agbonlahor (2018) reported that participatory water projects in rural Ekiti State were better maintained and had higher community satisfaction. In Akpabuyo Local Government Area, where many development initiatives are donor-driven or government-sponsored, participation is often limited to labour provision during implementation phases, without sustained engagement in project design or post-completion monitoring. This partial involvement compromises sustainability and leads to premature project failure (Etim & Ekanem, 2018).

Challenges and Prospects for Effective Community Participation in Akpabuyo

Several challenges affect community participation in Akpabuyo. Some of these include:

1. **Inadequate Awareness and Low Literacy Levels:** There is often limited awareness about development processes, coupled with low literacy levels, which restrict meaningful engagement (Effiom & Ubi, 2020). Many community members are unable to comprehend project documentation, attend training sessions, or participate in meetings due to low literacy (Ezeah, 2005). Consequently, they often feel unqualified to contribute meaningfully or voice their opinions on development issues. Inadequate civic education further compounds this problem. Without proper orientation and information about the importance and mechanisms of community participation, many residents remain disengaged and perceive development projects as external or elite-driven initiatives (Obasi, 2007). This detachment diminishes the likelihood of sustained community involvement.
2. **Conflicting Traditional Structures and Governance:** Traditional leadership structures sometimes conflict with formal governance systems, leading to power struggles and the exclusion of marginalised groups such as women and youths (Udoh & Ajake, 2017).
3. **Political Patronage and Lack of Trust in Public Institutions:** Political patronage and institutional distrust discourage community involvement, as residents often perceive projects as elite-driven ventures rather than inclusive development efforts (Essien & Inyang, 2019). Insufficient feedback mechanisms reduce accountability, with communities rarely consulted for post-project evaluations. In Akpabuyo, political actors sometimes use development projects as tools of patronage, favouring loyal supporters while neglecting non-aligned groups. This practice alienates community members and discourages broad-based participation. Additionally, the absence of transparency in decision-making has fostered a general distrust of government and non-governmental actors. When communities perceive projects as corrupt or mismanaged, their willingness to participate declines (Ekong, 2003).
4. **Socio-Cultural Constraints:** Cultural norms and traditional practices significantly shape participation dynamics. Patriarchal systems often limit women's involvement in decision-making, despite their central role in community life and economic activities (Udoh & Ajake, 2017). Traditional leadership bodies, such as village heads and clan councils, typically dominate project-related decisions, sidelining youths and women. Deference to authority and the belief that development is solely the government's responsibility also inhibit proactive citizen engagement (Effiom & Ubi, 2020).
5. **Economic Hardship and Poverty:** High poverty levels limit people's ability to contribute time, resources, or energy to community development efforts (Agba, Ushie & Akwara, 2009). For subsistence farmers and daily wage earners, participation in meetings or communal labour may lead to loss of income or food insecurity. As a result, economic survival takes precedence over community engagement, making it difficult to mobilise voluntary service or maintain development projects, especially without direct financial incentives (Mikkelsen, 2005).

6. **Inadequate Institutional Support:** Weak institutional frameworks exacerbate the challenges of participation. Community Development Associations (CDAs) and local governance structures often lack the training, resources, and autonomy to coordinate participatory processes effectively (Nwagbara, 2011). Poor integration between traditional institutions and formal government agencies leads to conflicting agendas and limited coordination. The absence of mechanisms for regular dialogue, feedback, and grievance redress also restricts sustained community engagement (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).
7. **Poor Project Design and Top-Down Planning:** Most rural development projects in Akpabuyo follow top-down models. External agencies—such as government ministries or international NGOs—often define project goals and strategies without meaningful community input (Adekola & Sergi, 2016). This disconnect leads to initiatives that do not reflect local priorities or realities, resulting in low interest and ownership. Without participation in planning and monitoring, residents are less likely to commit to the long-term success of projects (Olatunji & Olayiwola, 2016).
8. **Gender Inequality:** Systemic barriers such as limited access to land, credit, education, and leadership roles hinder women's participation. Even when included, their roles are often symbolic or limited to subordinate activities (Aluko & Agbonlahor, 2018). This gender imbalance undermines inclusivity and neglects the unique perspectives women bring to development efforts.
9. **Lack of Monitoring and Feedback Mechanisms:** Effective community participation requires ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and feedback. Most projects in Akpabuyo, however, lack these mechanisms. After implementation, communities are seldom consulted for assessments, resulting in disillusionment and disengagement (Etim & Ekanem, 2018). The absence of feedback loops prevents learning from past experiences and hinders improvements to future projects.

Given the challenges listed above, the scholars have identified that following as possible prospects,

1. **Inclusive and Participatory Planning:** Stakeholders must adopt participatory tools such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Community Score Cards, and Social Audits to empower communities to articulate needs and monitor development outcomes (Chambers, 1994).
2. **Capacity Building:** Training in leadership, budgeting, and project management is vital to strengthen local institutions and enhance accountability (Nwagbara, 2011). Integrating traditional structures into formal development frameworks can also bridge gaps between policy and practice.
3. **Transparency and Trust-Building:** Government agencies and NGOs should ensure transparency by disseminating timely information and involving community

representatives throughout all project phases. Adequate funding and systematic monitoring are essential for sustaining participatory practices and making projects resilient to socio-economic changes.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Participatory Development Theory as its guiding framework. Participatory Development Theory advocates for the direct involvement of community members in all phases of development initiatives—planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. It emphasises empowerment, capacity building, local ownership, and the decentralisation of decision-making processes to enhance project effectiveness and sustainability (Chambers, 1997).

The relevance of this theory to the present study is multifaceted. Firstly, it provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how community involvement influences the long-term functionality and maintenance of rural development projects. By placing communities at the centre of development interventions, the theory asserts that projects are more likely to succeed when beneficiaries contribute to their design and execution. In Akpabuyo LGA, this is particularly pertinent as many rural projects have historically failed due to top-down approaches that excluded local input, leading to limited ownership and poor sustainability.

Secondly, Participatory Development Theory underlines the importance of inclusive engagement, particularly of marginalised groups such as women and youth. The study reveals that projects which integrated these groups in planning and decision-making were more likely to be maintained. This aligns with the theory's emphasis on equity and social justice as prerequisites for sustainable development outcomes.

Furthermore, the theory supports the notion that participation fosters a sense of responsibility and accountability among local stakeholders. As evidenced in the study, projects that had higher community involvement were more likely to be preserved, as communities felt morally and socially obligated to safeguard what they had helped to create. This sense of ownership is a key tenet of Participatory Development Theory, which posits that local people are not merely beneficiaries, but active agents of change.

Finally, the theory guides the study's policy recommendations, encouraging the institutionalisation of participatory mechanisms such as community development committees and regular stakeholder consultations. These structures are essential for translating theoretical principles into practical strategies that improve the sustainability of rural development projects. Participatory Development Theory is not only conceptually aligned with the objectives of this study but also provides practical insights into why and how community participation enhances project sustainability in rural settings like Akpabuyo LGA.

Methodology

A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The population comprised residents of Akpabuyo LGA who had benefitted from rural development projects in the last five years. A

sample of 150 respondents was selected through stratified random sampling, ensuring representation across various wards. Data collection instruments included a structured questionnaire and key informant interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were thematically analysed.

Data Analysis, Results, and Discussion

Sample Characteristics

A total of 150 respondents were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure fair representation across the wards in Akpabuyo LGA. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 150)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	88	58.7
	Female	62	41.3
Age	18–30	32	21.3
	31–45	60	40.0
	46–60	42	28.0
	61 and above	16	10.7
Educational Status	No Formal Education	22	14.7
	Primary	30	20.0
	Secondary	58	38.7
	Tertiary	40	26.6
Occupation	Farming	55	36.7
	Trading	43	28.7
	Civil Service	28	18.7
	Artisans/Others	24	16.0

Source: Field work, 2024

Descriptive Analysis of Community Participation

Table 2 shows the levels of community participation in rural projects.

Table 2: Respondents' Level of Participation in Rural Projects

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Community members are involved in planning of projects	50 (33.3%)	60 (40%)	25 (16.7%)	15 (10%)
Community members contribute financially/materially	42 (28%)	48 (32%)	38 (25.3%)	22 (14.7%)
Projects are executed with local labour	58 (38.7%)	47 (31.3%)	30 (20%)	15 (10%)
There is regular feedback and evaluation by community	40 (26.7%)	55 (36.7%)	35 (23.3%)	20 (13.3%)

Source: Field work, 2024

Inferential Statistics: Chi-Square Test of Independence

To determine the relationship between community participation and rural project sustainability, a Chi-Square test was conducted.

Hypothesis:

- H₀:

There is no significant relationship between community participation and rural project sustainability.
- H₁:

There is a significant relationship between community participation and rural project sustainability.

Table 3: Chi-Square Test Result

Variable	Chi-square (χ^2)	df	p-value
Community Participation \times Project Success	18.67	3	0.0003**
(Significant at $p < 0.05$)			

Source: Field work, 2024

The Chi-Square Result and Thematic Analysis (Qualitative Data)

The Chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 18.67$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.0003$) indicates a statistically significant relationship between community participation and the sustainability of rural development projects.

Thematic Analysis (Qualitative Data)

Interviews and open-ended responses were analysed thematically. The major themes identified include:

1. **Sense of Ownership**
Many respondents emphasised that community involvement fostered a strong sense of project ownership. Findings reveal that 68% of respondents were involved in the

implementation phase, while only 34% participated in the planning stage. This suggests a predominantly top-down approach to project initiation, which limits the community's influence on design and priority setting.

2. Sustainability Challenges

Respondents noted challenges such as inadequate funding, political interference, and a lack of maintenance culture. Over 75% of participants indicated that projects in which they were actively involved remained functional, whereas 61% of projects without community involvement had deteriorated or ceased operations. Interviews with community leaders highlighted that involvement fostered a sense of ownership and accountability, motivating communities to maintain and protect projects.

3. Inclusive Planning

Projects that included women and youth in decision-making were more sustainably maintained. This supports Oladipo's (2021) argument that inclusive planning enhances sustainability when community members are empowered to participate in development processes. Moreover, the study reaffirms Pretty's (1995) typology, which asserts that functional participation leads to more sustainable outcomes.

4. Capacity Building

Communities that received training and skills transfer demonstrated better retention and maintenance of infrastructure. This strengthens participatory mechanisms by institutionalizing community development committees at the ward level.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data affirm that community participation is critical to the sustainability of rural projects in Akpabuyo Local Government Area. Most respondents reported a fair to high level of involvement in project planning, implementation, and evaluation. This aligns with the findings of Mansuri and Rao (2013), who argue that local participation enhances the ownership and maintenance of public goods. The statistically significant relationship between participation and sustainability further reinforces the participatory development model, emphasising the importance of bottom-up governance (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). Qualitative insights also revealed that community-driven projects tend to outlast government-imposed initiatives due to the heightened sense of responsibility and local oversight. However, barriers such as inadequate funding, limited training, and elite capture were noted—consistent with Cleaver's (2001) observations on the limitations of participation in practical settings.

Conclusion

This study concludes that active community participation significantly influences the sustainability of rural development projects in Akpabuyo LGA. Projects that incorporate community members in decision-making, execution, and evaluation are more likely to be maintained over time. Policymakers and development agencies must, therefore, prioritise participatory frameworks, build local capacity, and ensure inclusive engagement to improve project outcomes.

Recommendations

To enhance project sustainability, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Capacity Building:** Train local leaders and community members in participatory tools, project management, and civic responsibilities.
2. **Inclusive Planning:** Ensure that all segments of the community, particularly women and youth, are adequately represented in decision-making bodies.
3. **Economic Incentives:** Provide stipends or integrate livelihood components into development projects to reduce economic disincentives to participation.
4. **Transparency and Accountability:** Establish clear communication channels and feedback mechanisms to foster trust and reduce corruption.
5. **Partnerships:** Strengthen collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and traditional institutions to ensure coherent and culturally appropriate interventions.

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