COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT SUSTAINABILITY IN SOME SELECTED COMMUNITIES OF EDO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Addressing rural underdevelopment has been a major challenge to the Nigerian government since independence. To that extent, previous initiatives were created to address it. However, they failed to yield the desired positive outcomes, necessitating further refinement of robust initiatives that would address this challenge, until the Community and Social Development Projects (CSDPs) were established. This initiative was designed to address the challenge that the previous initiatives encountered, namely, centrism that obscured community participation and project sustainability. This study, therefore, aimed to examine the extent to which communities participated in the CSDPs and whether their participation contributed to project sustainability in Edo State, Nigeria. The study utilised an in-depth interview method to elicit responses from 109 participants across the selected communities in the state. The study found that the communities were involved in both the planning and implementation stages of the project execution. Their involvement translated into efforts at sustaining the projects, namely in providing funds and manual skills such as clearing weeds around the projects and cleaning and maintaining them. The study, therefore, recommends that there should be sustainable mechanisms for checking continued maintenance of projects, greater government involvement in project sustainability, and improved and sustained women's involvement in community participation in CSDP in rural communities of Edo State, and by extension, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Rural development has garnered more attention in recent times, given reports of an increasing number of rural poor in developing countries comparable with urban centres. Reports indicate that 65% of people living in developing countries reside in rural areas (Okafor & Chikalipah, 2021). More concerning is that the most adversely affected by the rising poverty levels are women and children, who are often burdened with domestic responsibilities traditionally assigned to men, thereby exacerbating their vulnerability in society. The rising level of rural poverty has prompted governments to search for solutions. For instance, since independence, the Nigerian government has initiated various policies aimed at addressing rural poverty, such as the National Policy on Rural Development (2004), the Green Revolution Programme (1980), the Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) (1986), the Rural Infrastructural Development Scheme (RIDS) and the National Rural Roads Development Fund (NRRDF) (Ahmed, Gbadebo, Iselobhor & Tokede, 2021). These policies failed to achieve their intended goals chiefly due to a lack of community participation. The policies adopted a top-down approach that prioritised the interests of policymakers and policy executors over those of the people they were meant to benefit. Moreover, because communities were not involved in the policies, executed projects were either abandoned during implementation, hijacked by corrupt elites, suffered inadequate financial backing, or failed to endure (sustainability) (Odishika & Adedeji, 2016).

In this study, sustainability refers to the ability of executed projects to continue functioning effectively and deliver tangible benefits to communities long after external, government and donor support has ceased. In the Global South, such as Nigeria, sustainability goes beyond the physical existence of infrastructure. It includes community ownership, maintenance support, institutional support and resources required to keep infrastructure functioning for the benefit of communities. This conceptualisation is significant because many rural projects have deteriorated after implementation due to neglect, corruption, weak institutions, insufficient financial support, and reduced rural participation.

The failure of the top-down approach triggered a policy retooling to a bottom-up approach that prioritised people's participation. However, it is one thing to execute a project; it is yet another for the project to be sustained. In the context of rural development, project sustainability is equally important as its execution. Rural development sustainability is a collaborative approach that involves both recipient rural communities and the government. According to Aga, Noorderhaven, & Vallejo (2018), rural development sustainability encompasses end-users' attitudes toward maintaining project operations and continuing project services after completion. Beyond community participation and ownership, sustainability also includes technocratic dimensions, such as institutional capacity, human capacity, funding, maintenance capacity and technical expertise to keep the projects functioning. In the Nigerian context, ensuring the sustainability of completed projects is challenging, as evidenced by numerous abandoned projects nationwide. Community participation can help tackle this issue by fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility in communities, which is vital for sustaining rural projects.

This study examines the relationship between community participation and the sustainability of rural development in Edo State, Nigeria. Although previous studies have established a significant positive relationship between community participation in rural development and project sustainability, many of the studies have focused on measuring the extent of participation or how participation produced tangible outcomes (Marzo, Chen, Anuar, Abdul Wahab, Ibrahim, Ariffin, Ahmad, Kawuki, & Aljuaid, 2023; Mia, Islam, Sakin, & Al-Hamadi, 2022; Yusuf et al., 2020; Ugwu & Aruma, 2019). As a result, there is a limited scholarly attention to how communities engage in project sustainability after completion through maintenance capacity, resource mobilisation, leadership capacity and monitoring activities. This paper aims to bridge this gap in scholarship by arguing that while community participation can be an effective strategy for rural development, it is important to study specific ways in which development projects, in this case Community and Social Development Projects (CSDPs), are sustained.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on identifying significant measures through which communities sustain projects and challenges that hinder project sustainability in rural communities in Edo State. By offering practical empirical evidence, the study hopes to contribute to growing scholarship on community participation in rural development, providing a nuanced perspective on project sustainability through coalitions and how projects can be sustained for long-term community benefits.

2. Conceptual Clarification

Community participation involves the active involvement of community members in the decision-making processes and initiatives that affect their lives. It is a bottom-up approach that involves a symbiotic process of engagement and implementation involving communities and the state government or its representative. The essence of community participation is to ensure that projects align with community needs and, in turn, promote sustainability (Lucky, 2016). Community participation involves various activities, including needs assessment, planning, training, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Shetunyenga, 2024). However, for community participation to emerge, factors such as economic benefits, mutual understanding, recognition, motivation, and motives can serve as incentives (Wehn & Almomani, 2019). People must perceive the likely benefits, both individual and collective, that would accrue from participating in any community activity. This is particularly important in developing countries like Nigeria, where corruption, neglect, state-centric policies, and policy inconsistencies are commonplace (Suleiman, Daura & Liberty, 2023; Spyromitros & Panagiotidis, 2022).

The concept of sustainability is contested, and consequently approached from different disciplinary and contextual perspectives. It has been conceptualised as meeting the needs of this generation without compromising the future needs of generations by ensuring a balance among economic growth, environmental care, and well-being (Santandar, 2023). The idea of sustainable development, which has become a common concept among scholars and within academia, is to sustain activities and programmes that encourage human development and well-being. Ben-Eli (2015) conceptualised sustainability as a dynamic equilibrium in the interaction between people and the environment, such that people develop their full potential

without adversely affecting the capacity of the environment upon which their needs depend. It connotes the capacity of human activities to avoid harming the environment's productive capacity (Thomas, 2015).

In the context of this study, rural development sustainability, which is integrated into project management, is operationally defined as the process and capacity to initiate, execute and manage a project for future use. Project sustainability encompasses economy, environment, and society (Klöpffer, 2003). Projects that are not sustained often decay and go extinct. The task of sustaining projects, particularly rural projects, is not only the responsibility of the executing body, but also of the beneficiary communities. In the CSDP Implementation Manual (2019), although the task of sustaining projects is not expressly stated, it is deemed embedded in the project monitoring and evaluation stage. Meanwhile, sustainability is a more enduring task that must be sustained beyond project monitoring and evaluation, which may cease once a project has been executed.

3. Methods

The study was conducted in Edo State. The state was selected for convenience and because it is one of the states implementing the CSDP, an initiative of the World Bank and the Nigerian government, implemented at the sub-national level. The study employed an in-depth interview to elicit responses from eight Community and Social Development Agency (CSDA) officials and 101 individuals from the sampled communities between June and November 2023. In total, 109 persons participated in the study (see Table 1). The interview process took into consideration the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants to ensure the collection of credible and reliable data.

A simple random sampling technique was used to select the CSDA officers. It was anticipated that the information provided by these officers would offer valuable insights into the CSDA's operations and its role in alleviating poverty in rural communities through critical development interventions. A convenience sampling technique was used to select members of the sampled communities. This approach was considered appropriate because many of the CSDP project sites were located in remote communities in Edo State. In addition, given the rising scourge of insecurity, which manifests through kidnapping and violent killings, communities needed to be selected based on their level of safety and convenience to avoid or minimise the risks of harm to both the researchers and participants.

The interviews were guided by an interview guide concerning questions for the CSDA officials and community members. The questions bordered on ascertaining the degree of participation in projects and mechanisms for project sustainability in rural communities in Edo State. Throughout the interview process, the researchers considered participants' socio-economic backgrounds, such as education, sex, religion, occupation, and years of experience, because these characteristics can shape individuals' experiences, worldviews, perceptions and levels of participation in community development projects. In addition, direct observation was used to assess the reported projects in each surveyed community. This was important to verify the authenticity of the project reports and ascertain their standard, quality, size, actual location, possible costs, and maintenance levels.

Table 1. The selected Senatorial districts, local government areas, and communities

Senatorial Districts	**LGAs**	**Communities**
Edo North	Akoko-Edo	Ekpedo, Ekpe, Uneme-Osu and Makeke
	Etsako-West	Ikholo, Iyamoh, Afashio and Ikabigbo
Edo Central	Esan Central	Eguare-Ewu, Agua, Ugbegun and Idunwele.
	Esan West	Eguare, Ogwa, Ugiogba and Emaudo.
Edo South East	Ovia North East	Uhiere, Utekon, Okhunmwun and Ebvoneka
	Ikpoba-Okha	Evboriaria, Erediauwa, Uteh, and Ohovbe

Source: Field Survey (2023)

Ethical considerations were observed before the interviews commenced. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, participants' identities were kept confidential. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of the study's purpose. They were also assured of their right to withdraw at any stage of the interview process and to decline answering questions they considered detrimental to their personal and privacy rights.

The interviews were audio-recorded, and the recordings were destroyed after use. Only the authors had access to the information provided by participants. Field notes were also taken to capture observations relating to participants' verbal and non-verbal cues. Participants consented to the publication of their responses on the condition that their names or any other identifying information would not be disclosed. Although flexibility was allowed for insightful responses, the researchers ensured participants remained focused on the study's objective by guiding participants back to the relevant questions where necessary.

The Thematic Analytical Method (TAM) was adopted for data analysis. TAM is widely utilised across disciplines, including social sciences, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, as well as in fields such as the health sciences (Cernasev & Axon, 2023). It is a qualitative analytical technique that enables researchers to systematically organise, interpret and analyse complex datasets (Dawadi, 2020). The responses collected were organised into themes and analysed accordingly. The large dataset generated from the interviews was categorised into two broad themes corresponding to the study objective: community participation in the CSDP and the sustainability of CSDP projects. In analysing each theme, direct quotations from participants were included where necessary to enrich the discussion and provide empirical support for the findings.

4. Finding and Discussions

4.1 Community Participation

During the study, it was discovered that the communities participated in the CSDPs by being involved in decision-making processes and implementing project plans.

4.1.1 Decision-making process

As gathered by the researchers, the communities participated in decision-making regarding the nature of the projects that met their needs. With the assistance of the CSDA officials, committees comprising mainly community members, regardless of gender, religion, or socioeconomic status, were set up. These committees served as go-betweens between the state, represented by the CSDA, and the communities. A series of community meetings was held across the communities to ascertain the most important need (s) to be addressed before the CSDA's approval. The meetings were held at community town halls and other open places agreed upon by the community members. Each project was deliberated upon, even at the family level, before being articulated at the committee level. As observed, the projects included boreholes, lock-up stores, town halls, police stations, rural electrification, schools, and maternity centres.

However, a disturbing trend was the dominance of men in the committees. Patriarchy (male domination) is a phenomenon that has continued to hold Nigerian society back despite several findings showing that women are active agents of development. In Nigeria, patriarchy manifests through socio-cultural norms and traditional institutions that assign leadership and decision-making roles to men, while subordinating women to peripheral roles in both public and private spheres. While the concept is yet to gain local nomenclature in Edo State and elsewhere in Nigeria, it is a constructed reality that places men as superior to women. In communities, it is not difficult to see men assume decision-making roles, such as the council of elders and the council of chiefs, as well as existing structures that prevent women from inheriting property. As observed in the study, most committees with at least seven members were all-male, while a few had only one woman. When asked the reason for this trend, the chairman of Ikhollo community, who also doubled as the chairman of the committee, had this to say:

"When it comes to community deliberations, women are often reluctant to participate. They always think it is an all-men affair. I believe that lack of exposure and a low level of education are factors that hinder their full participation. For instance, the financial secretary of the project committee was a woman. She is bold and educated, which possibly must have motivated her voluntary participation. Generally, there are few women like her in the community." (Participant 34)

This view was also alluded to by another participant, a woman who served as the financial secretary of the project committee in Ikhollo Community:

"I think our women always believe that politics and community meetings are all about men. This was indeed the case in the past, but nowadays, men are willing to accommodate

women; however, the latter seem unwilling, maybe because of fear, lack of confidence, and/or lack of interest." (Participant 29)

These excerpts show that, contrary to the popular insinuation that patriarchy, poor socioeconomic conditions, and lack of support are solely responsible for women's reluctance to participate in the decision-making processes, other factors, such as lack of confidence, unwillingness, and resignation to fate, are also important. According to Kebede (2024) and Muktasha (2023), factors such as chauvinism, low socioeconomic status, negative perceptions, lack of confidence and lack of interest can inhibit at the local level.

Women are critical agents of rural development, particularly in food security, poverty reduction, and sustainable development (Ali & Kamraju, 2023). Rural development is a key dimension of development that requires concerted efforts from both men and women. Given the diverse challenges associated with improving education, the rural economy, healthcare, mortality rates, infrastructure, and rural security, the role of women becomes particularly significant (Etebom & Fagbewesa, 2024). According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD] (2011), development projects achieve better outcomes when women's roles and needs are incorporated into project design from the outset. Furthermore, empowering women produces positive outcomes, including improved health and education for themselves and their families (Ali & Kamraju, 2023).

The authors observed that most of the executed projects appeared to reflect men's interests, including lock-up stalls, markets, rural electrification, schools, and boreholes. Women appeared to be fringe beneficiaries of these projects, while men seemed to derive the greatest benefits. Except in the Uhiere community, women-centred projects, such as maternity centres, which would have directly addressed women's unique challenges, were scarcely mentioned despite the alarming rate of maternal mortality, particularly during childbirth, resulting from the inadequate availability of maternity facilities. Consequently, the need to ensure women's active participation in decision-making at the rural level should be given serious consideration for effective rural development.

4.1.2 Implementation Proces

The implementation phase of rural development is crucial because it not only translates plans into action but also ensures the success of the entire development process. It essentially emphasises pooling resources, implementing policies, and ensuring that projects are delivered on time to the target population (Amina Ogu, Oranekwu, & Okoye, 2025). The communities not only participated in the decision-making processes but also oversaw the implementation of the agreed-upon projects. The communities were involved in the implementation stage in two ways: by providing funds through counterpart funding and labour.

Counterpart funding is a cost-sharing initiative in which communities and the government share project costs. In this case, the communities are expected to contribute 10 per cent of the total project costs while the government provides the remainder (Pallage & Robe, 2015). The aim is to promote ownership and commitment. As found, the project committees ensured that this fund was raised. Also, as observed in most of the communities visited, CSDP signposts strategically stated the cost of any project: the amount provided by the state government and

the amount provided by the communities as counterpart fund. This could be attributed to the new CSDP strategy of including detailed expenditure information on its signposts as a mark of transparency. Nevertheless, this was mostly observed in communities in Akoko-Edo and partly in Etsako-West than in other communities. On the other hand, it was gathered that the meaning of counterpart funding differed significantly from community to community. For instance, in Akoko-Edo LGA, it was found that in communities such as Ekpedo and Uneme-Osu, there were levies to raise the counterpart fund. In Ikhollo Community, the Chairman had this to say in this regard:

"There are two projects: lock-up stores and a town hall. In the lock-up stores, I cannot remember anybody telling us to pay any counterpart fund. All that the community did was to provide a piece of land for the project. However, for the town hall, the community paid one million naira, and I supervised the collection. Everybody in the community was levied for it." (Participant 34)

In other communities, such as Afashio, Makeke, and Enwan, the people provided free labour during the execution as part of their counterpart fund. A woman from the Afashio community had this to say in this regard:

"My brothers (referring to the researchers), I don't think we paid anything like money for the borehole (water scheme). I heard from my husband that what the community provided was labour. The community was not paid for the labour." (Participant 40)

The use of the term *labour* does not suggest that community members were employees or workers receiving wages or salaries. Instead, it refers to the voluntary contribution of time and physical effort during project implementation. Such voluntary labour is common in rural Nigerian communities where collective effort is often interpreted as a demonstration of shared ownership, commitment and responsibility for development projects.

Yet, in other communities across the surveyed LGAs, such as Ekpe, Uhiere, Eguare, and Agua, philanthropists provided the counterpart fund for the respective communities. A participant, the Prime Minister of Ekpe Community, corroborated this assertion thus:

"…after voting, we chose the town hall with lock-up stores and a water scheme. Thereafter, CSDP asked us to deposit one million naira as a counterpart fund before the project could commence. It was the former chairman of Akoko-Edo LGA who paid the counterpart fund for us. We are grateful to him." (Participant 15)

Therefore, across the communities, those that provided their counterpart fund through monetary contributions constituted 38 per cent, philanthropy 17 per cent, and manual labour 45 per cent. By senatorial districts, more communities in Edo North provided their counterpart funding through philanthropic support due to a higher concentration of prominent individuals than in other communities in Edo South and Edo Central. Meanwhile, more communities in Edo South contributed their counterpart funding through manual labour than the communities in Edo North and Edo Central.

In addition to counterpart funding, the communities also provided labour. This type of labour differs from the previous one, which was meant to offset the counterpart fund. This

labour involved communities engaging in every aspect of the project services, and the labourers were paid for the services rendered. The projects discussed in this study were implemented between 2009, when CSDP was initiated in Edo State and 2021. As part of CSDP's core mandate**,** the communities were required to provide the labour services needed to implement any approved project. It is believed that through this inclusive strategy, the communities would follow up on every aspect of the project execution. It is also seen as a strategy in empowering communities. Participants agreed that community members were adequately engaged throughout project execution. A participant in the Emaudo community had this to say in this regard:

"I am one of those who benefited from the project (town hall). From digging the foundation to roofing, we provided the required services, and we were duly paid for them. Women were engaged in fetching water. Tipper drivers were engaged in providing hardcore materials. Everybody was involved in one way or another." (Participant 83)

In all three senatorial districts, communities provided all the labour needed. This finding is consistent with that of Lucas & Targema (2015) that out of 95% of respondents who participated in the rural development projects, 50% contributed manual labour, while 20% contributed materials or working tools. By manual labour, this study refers to the voluntary or paid physical work undertaken by community members during project implementation. It includes clearing, cleaning, masonry, roofing, moulding of blocks, fetching water, mixing of concrete and transportation of construction materials. Participatory development entails engaging skilled rural residents to contribute their skills, such as moulding blocks, supplying sand, gravel, chippings and other building materials, and participating in masonry, roofing and other activities to complete projects (Riswan & Beegom, 2021). Others may provide security for the acquired materials to prevent theft.

Engaging communities in project execution by providing labour is a viable tool for capacity building. Capacity building has been defined as a process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes, and resources that communities need to thrive, adapt, and survive in a fast-changing world (Lopez & Pastor, 2015). Indeed, it seems that the originators of the idea of community participatory development envisaged a process not only for solving communities' needs but also for encouraging those with skills to contribute meaningfully to their development and in their respective communities (Zhang & Wang, 2024).

It should be noted that the labour contributions encompass both artisanal and professional skills. In the course of project execution, health professionals can provide health services; engineers can provide professional and technical expertise; lawyers and surveyors can provide guidance on the legal and environmental implications of such projects, and seasoned administrators can provide advisory services where necessary. Overall, every community member seems to have a role to play in implementing projects. This not only creates a sense of belonging but also fosters communal harmony as people with diverse skills interact in developing their communities (Pallage & Robe, 2015). As observed in the communities surveyed, the sense of fulfilment among community members resulting from their individual and collective contributions to project completion knew no bounds. In the

Ekpedo community, the village youths (those between 12 years and 40 years) were happy that the market stalls they contributed their labour to build were structurally stronger than those previously erected by politicians. A member of the youth unequivocally stated:

"You can see that I am happy because I supervised the market stalls. The ones built by politicians in this community were not constructed to the same standard, despite paying an overly huge amount, because they contracted them out to people outside this community. I am both a trader and an Okada rider, but I am also skilled in building. This has proven that we can do more than what outsiders can do, and we are happy with that." (Participant 12)

The multiplier effect of engaging community members in project execution was immense. For instance, during project construction, community members who were selling food, sachet water, snacks, and other edible items enjoyed significant patronage. Furthermore, the payments made to labourers not only increased their income base, but also increased the revenue base of the community and local government through taxes. This was evident when some labourers who participated in building the projects showed off the new motorcycles they bought and the new stalls they had rented from the pay they received. Some were able to complete their private houses that they started some years ago.

5. Sustainabilty of Projects

5.1 Implementation Proces

Although CSDP officers, in conjunction with local government authorities, were legally empowered to supervise and monitor the projects, the communities were also involved. As gathered from the participants, this was the most crucial stage of project implementation because it allowed them to observe and ensure that the approved projects were the same as executed. It enabled them to detect any possible diversion of projects or misappropriation of funds meant for the communities. In the communities, the projects were primarily monitored by the Community Project Management Committee (CPMC), which was composed of elected community members, including community leaders, youth representatives, women representatives, and other key stakeholders. These community members made regular visits to the construction sites, supervised and observed the standard of work. Their observations were reported to the CSDA and the relevant Local Government authorities. Apart from the formal committees, ordinary community members supervised the progress of work, given that projects were located within their communities. Their local knowledge of community needs, terrain and project requirements enabled them to identify deviations from approved plans more easily than external supervisors would.

Participants acknowledged that community-based monitoring promoted transparency and accountability, as contractors and project managers knew community members were monitoring their activities at every stage of project execution. By so doing, opportunities for misappropriation and embezzlement were significantly reduced. One of the participants had this to say in this regard:

"When the project commenced, we (the community members) were happy. However, all of a sudden, the nature of the project changed. It was initially approved as an open market because we lacked one here in Ikhollo. But it was later discovered that just a few lock-up stores

had very small spaces. We protested until the stores were expanded, and we monitored them to completion to avoid a recurrence of the previous experience." (Participant 38)

On the other hand, observations revealed that some community members lagged in monitoring project quality, leading to substandard or abandoned projects. Possible explanations for this include over-reliance on government authorities for supervision, inadequate financial resources to support monitoring activities, elite capture of project committees, weak community mobilisation and intimidation from government authorities. For instance, in Eguare-Ewu, it was observed that in an attempt to expand the existing maternity ward in the community, two more rooms were added. However, a lack of proper monitoring and supervision, coupled with the use of substandard roofing materials and inexperienced roofers, resulted in leaking buildings. A health assistant in the maternity ward had this to say:

"Initially, we were very happy with the development. But after the roofing work was completed, which was badly done, the leakages damaged many items in the maternity, including beds. If it starts raining, pregnant women and nurses on duty would be severely inconvenienced. It was a poorly executed project by the community, and nobody cared to supervise them when they were doing it." (Participant 59)

The responsibility for monitoring and supervising project execution is shared between the recipient communities and the government. Policy reversals, substandard projects, and the diversion of funds occur when monitoring and supervision are inadequate (Umurungi & Rusibana, 2021). Unfortunately, this is one of the major challenges confronting Nigeria. While projects may be initiated, corruption, lack of transparency, and weak community ownership undermine full implementation of such projects (Eja & Ramegowda, 2020). Oftentimes, the officials responsible for monitoring project execution engage in private ventures while neglecting the projects they are paid to oversee with taxpayers' money.

Information gathered from communities where supervision and monitoring were inadequate revealed that CSDA officials' failure to lead the monitoring process contributed to a lethargic attitude among community members. Those entrusted with leadership responsibilities should demonstrate commitment, integrity, and resilience to achieve project objectives.

4.2 Maintenance of the Projects

In all the projects surveyed, there was a remarkable level of maintenance by the communities across the three senatorial districts: Edo North, Edo Central and Edo South. The markets, schools, and lock-up stores observed were clean. However, with regard to the water scheme, the borehole largely operated depending on the communities' financial buoyancy. For instance, in most communities in the Edo North Senatorial District, boreholes were functioning because the communities had generator sets that pumped water during power outages. However, the researchers could not ascertain whether the generator sets were purchased with community donations or by the government. In other senatorial districts, particularly in Ovia North East, and in the Evboneka community, they were heavily dependent

on light to pump water. This means that any long-period power outage would definitely render the borehole dormant until the electricity supply is restored.

It can therefore be concluded that the communities were engaged in various rural projects by CSDP, participating in various ways, such as providing counterpart funding, providing labour, monitoring and supervising projects, and maintaining the project. This finding is supported by several studies that examined the extent to which rural communities participated in implementing the CSDPs (Yusuf & Adekunmi, 2020; Sidi et al, 2020). For instance, Yusuf & Adekunmi (2020) found that communities in Kwara State participated in CSDPs by attending meetings, making financial contributions (counterpart funding), choosing projects, sharing information and experiences, volunteering for manual labour, and evaluating projects.

As a result of community participation, the communities sustained the projects through regular maintenance and upkeep, voluntary community contributions, regular utilisation after completion, and protection from vandalism or theft. For emphasis, project sustainability is a shared responsibility of both government and communities. In this way, responsibilities can be shared according to the parties' capacities. For instance, communities may not be able to bear certain financial responsibilities, just as the government is not expected to monitor the continuous use and functioning of projects. It was discovered that communities sustained the projects through monitoring and maintenance. Depending on the type of project, maintenance activities ranged from financial contributions to cleaning and clearing exercises in town halls, market stalls, and schools, to fixing damaged project parts. For instance, in the Makeke community, youths were seen wielding machetes, clearing grass surrounding the town hall premises. It was gathered that this is done on the last Saturday of every month. In Ikhollo, the rental income from the stalls was used to repair them whenever damage occurred. One of the participants had this to say in this regard when asked whether his community sustained the projects:

"Yes, we sustain it. We usually contribute money to so many things in the community. Once those things are done, the remainder is kept in the community purse for future purposes. I believe that, given the manner in which we suffered before getting the project done, no one would want it to deteriorate." (Participant 91)

From this response, it appeared that the communities planned for project sustainability through community purses. Whether the funds would sustain the projects in the long term remains unclear. While there has been some form of maintenance of executed projects in most communities, it remains unclear how changes in government or community institutions may affect project sustainability. When governance becomes overly dependent on individuals, it may affect the development objectives of the incoming government, or the institutions may lack the effectiveness of the previous administration (Chiamogu, 2020). It is more complex when both the past and present governments are engulfed in a battle for supremacy, thereby creating fertile ground for sabotage, patronage, policy manipulation, resource diversion, or policy reversal.

Sabatier (1998) explained policy success or failure in terms of coalition dynamics and external factors. In the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the author argued that virtually all

political systems and sub-systems are involved in various coalitions at all levels within and outside a country. External factors such as the structure of the constitution, socio-cultural values, and natural resources can be critical determinants of the success or failure of any public policy. Coalitions usually have deep core beliefs that unite them, as well as their resistance to change. Once core beliefs are resistant to change, policy change becomes unlikely.

In the context of Nigeria, Sabatier's argument merits consideration. Programmes and policies are often initiated in respect to political exigencies or the government in power (Bolarinwa & Osuji, 2022). Often, policy distribution is influenced by primordial considerations (Ugbudu, 2017) rather than by the exigencies of time and need. It is important to acknowledge the widespread implementation of CSDPs across the country. However, it remains unclear whether it is a temporary departure from the longstanding etnicisation of project allocation.

Coalitions are crucial to rural development when they act in accordance with the national interest, rather than ethnic, class, religious, and cultural affiliations (Mitlin, 2022). In the context of this study, coalitions comprised officials of the CSDA and Local Government authorities, Community Project Committee members, political elites, traditional rulers, youth representatives and women representatives. The key actors worked together, beginning from project planning, fund allocation, implementation, monitoring and supervision. Their activities were guided by the CSDP rules and guidelines, which emphasised community participation, inclusiveness, transparency, accountability and sustainability. The effectiveness of the coalitions produced projects that aligned with the communities' felt needs, although there were variations among communities in commitment, resources and leadership capacity. Consequently, project sustainability is guaranteed when all stakeholders, including the people irrespective of socio-cultural backgrounds, are involved in every phase of the project implementation *(*Zikargae, Woldearegay, & Skjerdal, 2022*)*. A bottom-up approach can be mere rhetoric to attract attention within and without, unless it is backed by a serious commitment to involve all stakeholders from policy initiation through the monitoring phase.

Parkinson (2004) supports this argument, arguing that every successful policy is based on the deliberative process within institutional frameworks. By this, he acknowledged the importance of institutions in championing rural development and development at all levels. Parkinson proposes adopting gatekeepers during the deliberative process. Again, while this might sound plausible, caution is necessary when this is applied in contexts such as Nigeria. Gatekeepers can function effectively in a setting where collective interest is paramount (World Economic Forum, 2021). However, when politics determine the process of policy initiation and execution, gatekeepers may deliberately or forcefully align with the most influential faction within a group for economic, social, or political reasons (Raleigh & Carboni, 2023).

Deliberation is a process aimed at formulating appropriate policies, identifying possible challenges in project execution, and suggesting ways to remedy them (Abelson, Forest, Eyles, Smith, Martin, & Gauvin, 2003). Institutions such as CSDA, traditional rulers, community-based institutions (CBOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local government-based institutions, security agencies, civil society groups, women and youth associations, and other

relevant groups can sustain rural projects through collective deliberations. Projects are more likely to be sustained when participatory development approaches are adopted.

While it was clear how communities intended to sustain the projects, the same could not be said of the government, represented by the CSDA. It appears that the concept of sustainability is equated with the programme's continuation. For instance, one of the staff members of the CSDA had this to say in this regard:

"The sustainability of the programme is what I cannot ascertain for now, but it is possible if the relevant stakeholders are willing to continue with it. The programme is intended to continue indefinitely, even though the World Bank has pulled out." (Participant 1)

From the excerpt above, it can be concluded that sustaining CSDP in Edo State and indeed across the federation is uncertain, given the World Bank's withdrawal as a major funding provider for projects (Odishika & Adedeji, 2016). The World Bank is a participating agency that provides capital in the form of loans to the states. To that extent, its exit from the programme, in addition to the perennial fiscal challenges of the Nigerian government at the federal, state, and local government levels, makes it doubtful if the programme can be sustained.

This is not peculiar to Nigeria; developing countries face the challenge of programme sustainability for many reasons. While they might be given credit for creating policies that deserve commendation for their intended objectives, the actual implementation and programme sustainability suffer some hiccups. Scholars have attributed policy failures in Africa, including Nigeria, to pervasive corruption, bureaucratic bottlenecks, under-funding, primordial sentiments, and lack of political will (Bolaji, Grey & Campbell-Evans, 2015; Parkinson, 2004; Sabatier, 1998; Rose, 1990). For instance, Rose (1990) argued that the success or failure of policies is influenced by the succession of governments and changes that occur afterwards. Politicians often inherit policies and commitments from previous governments. Most of the time, these policies are non-negotiable as new governments are not afforded time to choose whether to implement the inherited policies. Moreover, institutions tend to institutionalise previous governments' policies, thereby creating a foundation for policy failure (Rose, 1990).

While Rose's argument is insightful, it appears to reflect political realities in advanced countries. This is because, in developing countries like Nigeria, policy discontinuity appears commonplace. Given the zero-sum political mentality of politicians (Obadare, 2019) and a lack of quality leadership and long-term planning (Campbell, 2016), any new government is usually quick to condemn and abandon inherited policies, regardless of their impact on public interest. Furthermore, due to the personalisation of developmental projects and governance systems in most developing countries for public recognition (Chiamogu, 2020), continuing and completing previous policies is usually seen as giving undue credit to the previous government, particularly when the government is in opposition. Personalisation of development projects and governance systems derives incentives from public applause, and the public often reinforces this perception. Therefore, any new government seeks to create a new system of policies that would legitimise its existence, earn it re-election, and suffocate the opposition (Okereke, 2017). Ideally, it is a complex system in which leaders seek to balance

their future public image and personal interests. Consequently, it is doubtful whether Rose's argument could hold in the context of a complex society like Nigeria.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to demonstrate that community participation could foster project sustainability. In a country like Nigeria, where sustaining projects in rural areas is a major challenge due to the personalisation of governance, corruption, exclusion of critical stakeholders, and weak institutions, the bottom-up approach to rural development is key. The major challenge confronting rural areas in Nigeria is poverty and poor infrastructure. Sometimes, these challenges are peculiar when compared to those in urban settings, suggesting that communities must be involved in their development. Previous attempts at rural development in Nigeria prioritised the interests of certain political elites, neglecting the target population. The establishment of the CSDP was designed to address these issues.

As the study has shown, the adoption of community-led rural development was evident in the communities at the planning and implementation stages of projects. Consequently, this participation promoted project sustainability, as evidenced by fundraising efforts, clearing activities, and repairs of damaged projects for the continued benefits of the communities. Whereas the government had no clear-cut plan for sustaining the projects, the communities had a clear path to sustain them. This clearly shows that community participation is an indispensable tool for rural development in Nigeria. Even though men dominated the project planning and implementation phases due to women's poor socio-economic backgrounds and lack of self-confidence, the projects were seen to be beneficial to all.

The findings of this study might not represent the views of the entire population of Edo State, as the sample utilised was small. As such, readers should be cautious with over-generalisation. Moreover, while the use of interviews was commendable as it elicited in-depth responses, additional methods, such as questionnaires, could help reach a larger proportion of the population within the shortest period. Truthfully, time and financial constraints were largely responsible for the researchers' choice of methods and study location. The researchers encourage future researchers to extend the study to other parts of Nigeria to unravel similarities and differences in community participation and project sustainability. This would help take proactive steps to strengthen policy for improved rural development.

7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the study's findings. Firstly, there should be a framework to monitor and report whether communities participate in rural projects in Nigeria. Since the community approach has demonstrated that it is a vital approach to rural development, it is important that sustained monitoring by groups, institutions, or individuals, such as civil society groups, whistle-blowers, traditional rulers, and the media, be encouraged by the Nigerian government to report potential elite capture or diversion of projects and funds. The authors believe that when these bodies are integrated into the project accountability reporting system, recurring rural corruption that undermines rural development will be exposed and tackled.

Secondly, there should be increased advocacy for greater women's participation in implementing community projects. Possibly, a certain quota should be reserved for women to be filled compulsorily by them. This is because systemic and cultural barriers may continue to deter their full participation, a problem that can be addressed through an effective quota system. It is believed that with improved advocacy and the socio-economic well-being of community members, more women would have access to education, jobs, and finances necessary to motivate their participation. Project sustainability requires a concerted effort by both genders and should therefore be encouraged.

Lastly, the government should devise a clear-cut strategy to sustain the projects they executed. This can begin with at least a quarterly, on-the-spot assessment of the conditions of executed projects. Agreed that communities should bear part of project sustainability; however, highly capital-intensive rural projects may require maintenance, which only the government can shoulder. Furthermore, when the government is involved, communities will be motivated to monitor, evaluate, and maintain projects. An efficient community-state communication system should be established to enable the government to intervene promptly when required. As commendable as the projects observed were, without robust, sustainable efforts from the government, the communities might become worse off in terms of poverty and infrastructural deficit.

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