

# Community-Based Projects and Local Government Development: Perspective with Evidence from Okitipupa Local Government Area of Ondo State

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the intricate linkages between community-based projects and local government development, focusing on their synergistic potential for sustainable public service delivery and community welfare enhancement. The study's focus is on Okitipupa Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria, this revised analysis attempts to place the results within an international context regarding participatory governance, decentralization, and development at the grassroots level. Through the lens of Participatory Development Theory and Decentralization Theory, this study combines unique primary data collected from 300 respondents with an extensive analysis of literature on the subject. The results suggest that community participation, fiscal transparency, and institutional capacity are the most important determinants of successful community projects and sustainable local development. This paper advances the argument that local governments and community stakeholders should work together, as their collaboration is necessary to reaching sustainable and equitable development goals.

Key recommendations, refined for international applicability, advocate for enhanced financial autonomy for sub-national entities, comprehensive capacity building initiatives for both governmental and community leadership, and the institutionalization of inclusive participatory governance frameworks that transcend tokenism. This study contributes to the global dialogue on effective local governance, offering transferable insights for policymakers and practitioners grappling with similar development challenges in diverse contexts.

**Keywords:** Community Participation, Decentralization, Local Government, Participatory Development, Sustainable Development, Grassroots Initiatives, Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

The proximity of the local governments to the people puts them at strategic place to promote grassroots development, participation in democracies, and efficient service delivery (Ezeani, 2006). In most developing countries, their constitutional role is to provide infrastructure, support local economic development and social cohesion (Arowolo, 2011). In this context, local governments are not only administrative bodies but also a fundamental agent in the national development agenda and global sustainable development agenda like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015).

Regardless of this potential, the performance of local governments in much of the developing world is uneven. These issues, including the reliance on the upper levels of government financially, inefficient institutionalization, over-politicization, and inadequate accountability, are still hinder their performance (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004; Agagu, 2020). These systematic limitations are especially acute in Nigeria, where numerous communities are underserved and the citizens have little trust in the state institutions (Adeyemi, 2013).

It is on this backdrop that community-based projects (CBPs) have become important complementary mechanisms to help in bridging developmental gaps. CBTs are based on a typical inclusivity, local ownership,

and indigenous knowledge, and they use the collective action to deliver the necessary services where the capacity of the government is limited (Abegunde, 2009; Mansuri and Rao, 2012). Through the mobilization of local resources and creation of participatory decision-making, these kinds of initiatives not only have direct benefits but also create a sense of greater citizenship and empowerment (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa and Barrett, 2012).

However, they seem to promise much, but the reality is that the incorporation of CBPs into local government systems is superficial. Although, participation is often identified in policy rhetoric, institutional means of grassroots engagement are weak or even absent, leading to the disjointed intervention, and lack of synergies between formal government processes and community-based action (Umeh, 2014; Olomola, 2019). The disconnect between the formal development models and realities among communities thus continues to perpetuate the marginalization and underdevelopment cycles.

This paper fills this gap by discussing how CBPs operate in local government administration with Okitipupa Local Government Area in Nigeria as a case study. Despite being context-specific, the findings can be added to the wider global discussions of participatory governance and localized development. In particular, the article aims to show how CBPs can be successfully institutionalized in the context of local governance strategies to achieve sustainable and balanced results. By synthesizing empirical evidence with theoretical perspectives and comparative international experiences, the study provides actionable recommendations for strengthening collaboration between local governments and communities. In doing so, it highlights pathways for aligning grassroots development practices with global best practices in inclusive and sustainable governance.

## Research Objectives

The overarching objective of this study is to analyze the contribution of community-based projects to local government development, with a specific focus on identifying factors that enhance their effectiveness and sustainability. To achieve this, the study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the extent and nature of community participation in local government development projects.
2. To assess the adequacy of funding and resource allocation mechanisms for community-based projects within the local government framework.
3. To identify and analyze the key challenges encountered by local governments in the implementation of community-based projects.
4. To evaluate the impact of community empowerment on the sustainability and long-term success of development initiatives.
5. To propose evidence-based strategies for improving the overall effectiveness and impact of community-based projects in fostering local government development.

## Community-Based Projects in Local Government Development

Community-based projects (CBPs) have become central to contemporary development discourse, marking a departure from top-down, centrally planned interventions toward localized, bottom-up approaches that emphasize the agency and active participation of local populations (Mansuri & Rao, 2012). Unlike traditional service delivery mechanisms, CBPs are conceived and implemented with significant community involvement, thereby addressing both immediate and long-term developmental needs. They are not just tools of service delivery but a transformative process that draws on local knowledge, labour, and leadership to improve governance, bolster social transformation, and increase resilience (Abegunde, 2009).

The essential features of successful CBPs are inclusion, sustainability, accountability and cultural appropriateness. Inclusivity is the inclusion of diverse population groups (women, youth, elderly, marginalized groups) in the decision making and implementation process of projects. Such broad participation means that

initiatives have a good chance of reflecting the real priorities of communities rather than elite or external interests (Cornwall, 2008). Sustainability is encouraged by mobilizing local resources, building capacity, and implementing strong community structures that will continue projects after outside support has stopped. This feeling of ownership creates responsibility and sustainability of results (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). Transparency, communication, and monitoring mechanisms hold project implementers and local officials accountable to community expectations and strengthen accountability (Platteau and Gaspart, 2003). Finally, when it comes to cultural relevance, it is important for projects to be designed in a way that respects local customs, traditions, and social norms, thus enhancing their legitimacy and effectiveness (Chambers, 1997).

Nevertheless, the performance of CBPs is not without challenges. Elite capture, in which influential local actors monopolize benefits or decision-making, can weaken inclusivity and fairness (Platteau & Gaspart, 2004). In addition, inadequate financial resources, lack of technical expertise, and insufficient institutional support from higher tiers of government limit the scalability and sustainability of these projects (Labonne & Chase, 2009). The relationship between CBPs and formal local government structures is therefore crucial. Where collaboration, mutual respect, and clearly defined roles exist, CBPs can substantially complement and reinforce governmental development efforts. However, where mistrust, bureaucratic inefficiency, or political interference prevail, their potential remains underutilized (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). This underscores the importance of situating CBPs within their wider political and institutional context to better understand their contribution to local governance.

### **Local Government Development and its inherent agenda**

Local government development refers to the deliberate and systematic efforts of the third tier of government to improve the quality of life for citizens through the provision of essential services, infrastructure development, and opportunities for socio-economic advancement (Adeyemi, 2013). It reflects the capacity of local government institutions to design and implement policies, programs, and projects that address grassroots needs while aligning with broader national priorities and international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Arowolo, 2011; United Nations, 2015).

In Nigeria, the 1976 Local Government Reform and the 1999 Constitution explicitly positioned local governments as vehicles of rural transformation and grassroots participation (Ola & Tonwe, 2009). Their primary functions, common to many developing nations, encompass four broad areas:

**Service Delivery.** Local governments are mandated to provide essential services such as primary education, healthcare, sanitation, waste management, potable water supply, and maintenance of rural roads. Effective service delivery remains the most visible indicator of local government performance and is a key determinant of public legitimacy (Agagu, 2004; Ezeani, 2006).

**Community Welfare Improvement.** Beyond infrastructure, local governments are tasked with improving social welfare through poverty alleviation programs, youth and women empowerment initiatives, and partnerships with civil society to address vulnerability at the grassroots (Adeduwon, 2013).

**Facilitation of Local Economic Activities.** Local governments play a central role in stimulating economic growth by creating enabling conditions for agriculture, markets, micro-enterprises, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These activities contribute to employment creation and enhance internally generated revenue (Olusola, 2011).

**Maintenance of Law and Order.** Although security remains a national function, local governments collaborate with security agencies to maintain peace and stability at the grassroots, recognizing that development is unattainable in the absence of security (Akindele & Olaopa, 2002).

Despite their proximity to the people and their broad constitutional mandates, Nigerian local governments face a range of interlocking constraints that weaken their developmental role:

**Political Interference.** Excessive control by state governments and political elites undermines local autonomy. Issues such as the joint state–local government account system often lead to diversion of funds, imposition of projects, and politically motivated appointments, creating a disconnect between local needs and government actions (Oviasuyi, Idada, & Isiraojie, 2010).

**Fiscal Dependency and Inadequacy.** Local governments rely heavily on statutory allocations from the Federation Account. Their weak capacity to generate internal revenue has left them financially incapacitated, resulting in chronic underfunding of public services and abandoned projects (Ekpe, 2012).

**Weak Institutional Frameworks and Capacity Deficits.** Many local governments lack strong administrative systems and technical expertise. Gaps in planning, budgeting, project management, and monitoring undermine effective governance. Skilled personnel in key sectors such as health, engineering, and urban planning are often in short supply (Ajayi, 2000; Adebayo, 2014).

**Corruption and Poor Accountability Mechanisms.** Corruption, ranging from inflated contracts to outright embezzlement, has weakened service delivery. Limited transparency in budgeting and procurement processes further erodes citizen confidence in local governance (Ojo, 2009).

**Limited Citizen Engagement:** Even though the participation governance is under-lined via policy rhetoric, the community participation in local planning is generally tokenistic. This dilutes ownership of the project, lowering the level of accountability and leaves behind solutions to urgent grassroots needs (Ogunna, 1996; Abutudu, 2011).

It is essential to address these issues to open up the developmental prospects of the local governments. These steps are strengthening their fiscal autonomy, institutional capacity, expanding accountability, and real participatory governance. Such reforms would not only allow local governments to provide basic community services, but also to more effectively incorporate local-level projects as part of local governments strategies toward sustainable grass-root development.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper adopted two theories, which complement each other in the field of development studies: Participatory Development Theory and Decentralization Theory. Collectively, these frameworks have offered an interpretive understanding of how community-based projects relate to the development of the local government particularly in enhancing responsiveness, effectiveness, accountability, and sustainability.

### **Implicates The Participatory Development Theory.**

The Theory of Participatory Development described by an author like Chambers (1997) reiterates the need to involve locally available people in planning, implementing and assessing any development project. The key point of this theory is that the processes that mobilize the community as the active provider of the interventions are at a greater likelihood to be effective and man-sustained compared to the situation when such interventions are introduced by the external force and action by some foreign parties. In his seminal work *Whose Reality Counts?* Chambers contends that development decision-making should be concerned with the ways of knowing, realising, and aspiring of the marginalised so as to bring them into focus rather than the traditional top-down processes that have pre-dominated development practice.

The theory is based on a series of principles which are interrelated. One is the empowerment of participation contribution to higher citizen control of choices and control of resources, as well as the development of collective action and agency (Cornwall, 2008; Olojede, 2014). Second, it is viewed that local knowledge incorporation becomes essential because local practices, social capital, and experiences can present a more concrete foundation of problem diagnosis and finding culturally applicable solutions (Abegunde, 2009; Ezeani, 2006). Third, building sense of ownership by communities and other groups together in enacting and structure of project makes communities more likely to achieve sustainable situatedness that guarantees the continuity of

a certain project in the long term (Gaventa Ward and Barrett, 2012). Moreover, the theory emphasises reducing inequalities by fostering inclusion of the marginalised groups, such as women and the poor; hence, enhancing equity (Arowolo, 2011; Adeduwon, 2013). Finally, participatory methods promote both learning and adapting processes, in which progressive reflection allows social communities and interested persons to effectively act upon evolving social and economic realities (Mansuri and Rao, 2012).

In spite of its contributions, Participatory Development Theory has faced some shortcomings in regards to its limitations. A big fear is the issue of elite capture where local power brokers overwhelm participatory platforms thus locking out vulnerable groups in effective participation (Platteau & Gaspart, 2004). Participation: One weakness is that in some instances, participation is tokenistic and does not constitute actual opportunities of the community to actually affect what happens (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Cases of distorted community participation have been recorded in area electrification and agricultural schemes in the Nigeria context as spaces between the idol of participation and its manifestation (Abutudu, 2011).

However, Participatory Development Theory is a good theory to explore the intensity and quality of ground level participation in the process to governance. Understanding community-based projects in frequency of determining sustainable plans can particularly be significant considering its insights because it will help focus on whether development initiatives play meaningful roles in genuinely empowering the people around and enabling them to fairly participate in decision-making.

### **Decentralization Theory**

Decentralization Theory emphasizes the transfer of political, administrative, and fiscal authority from central governments to sub-national institutions as a means of promoting accountability and responsiveness. Scholars such as Olowu and Wunsch (2004) and Faguet (2004) argue that when governance is brought closer to citizens, local governments are better positioned to identify community needs and design appropriate interventions. Within this perspective, decentralization is not merely a technical reform of governance structures but a broader strategy for democratizing service delivery and deepening citizen participation (Ola & Tonwe, 2009).

Three major forms of decentralization are often highlighted in the literature. Political decentralization, or devolution, involves transferring decision-making authority to elected local councils, thereby enhancing local autonomy and strengthening democratic accountability (Agagu, 2004). Administrative decentralization is expressed in two ways: deconcentration, which redistributes administrative authority to local units of central ministries, and delegation, which assigns specific functions to local authorities or semi-autonomous agencies (Akindele & Olaopa, 2002). Fiscal decentralization, on the other hand, provides sub-national governments with financial powers such as taxation, revenue generation, and budgetary control, all of which are vital for independent planning and project execution (Oviasuyi, Idada, & Isiraojie, 2010).

The potential benefits of decentralization are well documented. It is associated with improved service delivery, reduced bureaucratic bottlenecks, and more equitable allocation of resources (Smoke, 2015). Faguet's (2004) study of Bolivia, for example, demonstrated that decentralization redirected public investments toward critical social services such as education and health. In the Nigerian context, the 1999 Constitution recognizes decentralization as part of the framework for rural development, assigning local governments the responsibility of driving community-oriented projects (Ola & Tonwe, 2009).

Nevertheless, the theory is not without limitations. Local government institutions often suffer from capacity deficits that hinder effective administration (Ajayi, 2000). Furthermore, elite capture remains a significant concern, as local power brokers frequently manipulate resources for personal or political gain, diverting attention from community priorities (Olowu, 2003). Fiscal dependency on statutory allocations from the federation account also restricts the genuine autonomy of local councils, while corruption erodes accountability and public trust (Ekpe, 2012; Ojo, 2009). In addition, persistent conflicts between state and local governments over jurisdiction and resource control further weaken the effectiveness of decentralization (Oviasuyi et al., 2010).

For the present study, Decentralization Theory offers a useful framework for examining Nigeria’s institutional arrangements and their impact on community-based development. When analyzed alongside Participatory Development Theory, it becomes clear that sustainable grassroots development requires not only empowered and engaged communities but also local government structures that are capable, transparent, and accountable. The interaction between participatory governance and decentralization thus provides an important lens through which the dynamics of local development in Okitipupa Local Government Area can be understood.

## METHODOLOGY

In this study, descriptive survey research design was used to find out how community-based projects work and the role they play in the development of local governments. The study was carried out within Okitipupa Local Government Area (LGA) of Ondo state in Nigeria which was chosen due to the number of communities there and the different scales of participation in community-based development activities. The sample population comprised of residents of the community, community governmental officials that will undertake project coordination, and the community leaders. The sampling method employed was multi-stage sampling, where the active communities were selected purposely and then stratified random sampling was applied to assure the sample of 300 respondents and the sample was representative of the various groups of people.

A structured questionnaire was designed as the main data collection instrument for the study. The instrument comprised four distinct subscales that were carefully aligned with the specific objectives of the research. These subscales measured Community Participation (three items), Funding and Implementation Challenges (three items), Empowerment (three items), and challenges (three items). Each item was measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), allowing respondents to express the degree of their agreement with various statements related to community-based projects and local government development. The questionnaire was subjected to a pre-test involving thirty respondents from a neighbouring Local Government Area. This pilot exercise helped to ensure the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the instrument before full-scale administration.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Research center of Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Nigeria. All respondents participated voluntarily after being adequately informed about the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. Written informed consent was obtained from each respondent prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process, as no personal identifiers were recorded and all information provided by participants was treated with utmost confidentiality. The questionnaire was pre-tested in order to make certain that it is absolutely clear and impactful.

Internal consistency was verified using Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for each construct as shown below:

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach’s $\alpha$	Interpretation
Community Participation	6	0.82	High reliability
Funding & Implementation Challenges	7	0.80	Acceptable reliability
Empowerment	5	0.86	High reliability
Sustainability Outcomes	5	0.84	High reliability

Construct validity was examined through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation.

- **Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) = 0.81**, indicating sampling adequacy.
- **Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity** was significant ( $\chi^2 = 857.4, df = 120, p < 0.001$ ).
- Four latent components with eigenvalues  $> 1.0$  emerged, corresponding to the theoretical constructs.

- Cumulative variance explained = **68.3%**, suggesting strong construct structure and discriminant validity

Descriptive statistics, frequencies, percentages, means and Standard deviations were also used to analyze quantitative data summarizing respondent demographics and other significant findings. It was sought through analysis to build a solid empirical ground by which relationship between community projects and presence of local governance under the Nigerian setting can be understood and generalized findings to the larger context of international development discourse.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### Demographic Characteristics

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 300)**

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n=300)
Gender	Male	55	165
	Female	45	135
Age	18–27 years	25	75
	28–37 years	30	90
	38–47 years	25	75
	48 years and above	20	60
Educational Attainment	No formal/Primary Education	25	75
	Secondary Education	35	105
	Tertiary Education	40	120
Occupation	Farming	30	90
	Trading	25	75
	Civil/Public Service	20	60
	Artisans/Other Occupations	25	75
Community Involvement	Active in CBPs	65	195
	Not active in CBPs	35	105

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The demographic profile of respondents in Okitipupa LGA shows a fairly balanced gender distribution, with males accounting for 55 percent and females’ 45 percent of the sample. Age distribution indicates a predominance of the active working population, as 30 percent were between 28 and 37 years, while those aged 18–27 and 38–47 years each constituted 25 percent, and 20 percent were 48 years and above. Educational attainment reflects a relatively educated population, with 40 percent having tertiary education, 35 percent secondary education, and 25 percent reporting no formal or only primary education. Occupation patterns align with the agrarian and commercial character of the area: farming constituted the largest share at 30 percent, followed by trading at 25 percent, artisans and other occupations at 25 percent, and civil/public service at 20 percent. Importantly, community involvement was high, as 65 percent of respondents reported active participation in community-based projects, underscoring the relevance of participatory development initiatives in the study area.

### Community Participation in Local Government Development

**Table 2: Community Participation and Local Government Development (N = 300)**

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
Active participation improves project success	40.0%	35.0%	10.0%	10.0%	5.0%
Community involvement enhances implementation	36.7%	33.3%	13.3%	11.7%	5.0%
Lack of participation leads to project failure	38.3%	36.7%	8.3%	10.0%	6.7%

Analysis of the Likert scale data demonstrates strong consensus among respondents regarding the importance of community participation. For the statement “*Active participation improves project success*”, the mean score was 3.95 (SD = 1.16). Approximately 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, underscoring broad acceptance of the positive role of citizen engagement in shaping successful project outcomes. This corroborates the core assumptions of Participatory Development Theory, which emphasizes that projects are more effective when driven by grassroots actors (Chambers, 1997; Cornwall, 2008).

Similarly, for the statement “*Community involvement enhances implementation*”, the mean score was 3.85 (SD = 1.18), with 70% agreement. This aligns with findings from Nigeria and other African contexts where community involvement has enhanced project ownership and delivery efficiency (Adeduwon, 2013; Mansuri & Rao, 2012).

The statement “*Lack of participation leads to project failure*” yielded a mean score of 3.90 (SD = 1.21), with 75% agreement. This reflects widespread recognition that exclusion of communities undermines sustainability, a problem well documented in top-down Nigerian rural development programs (Abutudu, 2011).

Notably, only 53.3% of respondents believed residents are adequately informed about projects before implementation. This gap highlights weaknesses in participatory mechanisms and supports earlier studies noting superficial or tokenistic consultation in Nigerian local governance (Ogunna, 1996; Oviasuyi, Idada, & Isiraojie, 2010).

### Funding and Resource Allocation

**Table 3: Funding and Resource Allocation (N = 300)**

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
Adequate funding improves project outcomes	43.3%	36.7%	8.3%	6.7%	5.0%
Insufficient funds delay completion	41.7%	35.0%	10.0%	8.3%	5.0%
LGs allocate enough resources	26.7%	30.0%	16.7%	13.3%	13.3%

Funding was identified as a major determinant of project success. For the statement “*Adequate funding improves project outcomes*”, the mean score was 4.07 (SD = 1.11), with 80% in agreement. This finding reinforces arguments that financial autonomy and resource availability are prerequisites for effective local governance (Ekpe, 2012; Olusola, 2011).

Similarly, the statement “*Insufficient funds delay completion*” had a mean score of 4.00 (SD = 1.14), with 76.7% agreement, showing consensus on the negative effect of underfunding. Chronic delays due to inadequate finances remain common across Nigerian local governments (Agagu, 2004; Adeyemi, 2013).

By contrast, only 56.7% agreed that “*LGs allocate enough resources*”. The relatively lower mean score (3.44, SD = 1.36) reflects skepticism about resource allocation practices. This mirrors broader critiques of Nigeria’s fiscal decentralization, where statutory allocations are often inadequate and sometimes diverted through the state–local joint account system (Oviasuyi et al., 2010).

### Implementation Challenges

**Table 4: Challenges in Implementing Community-Based Projects (N=300)**

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
Bureaucratic delays hinder execution	46.7%	35.0%	8.3%	5.0%	5.0%
Political interference affects implementation	43.3%	36.7%	6.7%	8.3%	5.0%
Insufficient skilled personnel impacts quality	40.0%	35.0%	10.0%	10.0%	5.0%

For “*Bureaucratic delays hinder execution*”, the mean score was 4.13 (SD = 1.09), with 81.7% in agreement. Bureaucratic bottlenecks are widely cited in Nigerian literature as impediments to timely project delivery (Ezeani, 2006).

The statement *“Political interference affects implementation”* scored 4.05 (SD = 1.13), with 80% agreement. Respondents identified interference in project priorities and appointments as a major barrier. This supports studies showing that undue influence by state governments and political elites erodes local autonomy (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004; Oviasuyi et al., 2010).

Finally, *“Insufficient skilled personnel impacts quality”* had a mean score of 3.95 (SD = 1.16). A total of 75% of respondents acknowledged the lack of technical expertise as a challenge. This human resource gap is consistent with earlier findings that Nigerian local governments often lack qualified staff in planning, engineering, and finance (Ajayi, 2000; Adebayo, 2014).

### Community Empowerment and Sustainability

**Table 5: Community Empowerment and Project Sustainability (N=300)**

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
Empowerment increases sustainability	41.7%	38.3%	8.3%	6.7%	5.0%
Community ownership encourages maintenance	43.3%	36.7%	8.3%	6.7%	5.0%
Lack of empowerment leads to abandonment	40.0%	33.3%	11.7%	8.3%	6.7%

For *“Empowerment increases sustainability”*, the mean score was 4.05 (SD = 1.10), with 80% agreement. Similarly, *“Community ownership encourages maintenance”* scored 4.07 (SD = 1.11), also with 80% agreement. These results confirm the theoretical assertion that empowerment and ownership are critical to long-term project success (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Arowolo, 2011).

The statement *“Lack of empowerment leads to abandonment”* yielded a mean score of 3.92 (SD = 1.20), with 73.3% agreement. This illustrates that communities recognize the link between disempowerment and neglect of development projects. However, only 63.3% agreed that local governments adequately support empowerment. This finding suggests a gap between policy rhetoric and practice, echoing criticisms that Nigerian local governments often pay lip service to participatory governance while retaining centralized control (Ogunna, 1996; Abutudu, 2011).

**Table 5** presents the results of inferential analyses linking participation, funding, and empowerment to sustainability outcomes. The regression model was significant, explaining 47% of variance in sustainability ( $R^2 = 0.47$ ).”

**Table 6: Inferential Statistics and Regression Results Linking Participation, Funding, and Empowerment to Sustainability Outcomes (N = 300)**

Test Model	Variables / Groups	Statistic	p-value	Effect Size / CI (95%)	Interpretation
t-test	Gender and Sustainability Perception (Male vs. Female)	$t(298) = 0.27$	0.79	Cohen’s $d = 0.03$	No significant gender difference
One-way ANOVA	Education and Empowerment Levels	$F(2, 297) = 3.87$	0.02	$\eta^2 = 0.025$	Empowerment higher among tertiary-educated respondents
Multiple Regression	Model: Sustainability = Participation + Funding + Empowerment	$F(3, 296) = 34.72$	< 0.001	$R^2 = 0.47$	Model explains 47% variance in sustainability
	<b>Participation</b>	$\beta = 0.42$	< 0.001	CI: [0.28, 0.56]	Strong positive predictor
	<b>Funding Adequacy</b>	$\beta = 0.36$	< 0.001	CI: [0.23, 0.49]	Strong positive predictor
	<b>Empowerment</b>	$\beta = 0.21$	0.04	CI: [0.02, 0.40]	Moderate positive predictor

**Source:** Field Survey, 2025.

To deepen the analysis beyond descriptive statistics, inferential tests were conducted to examine how demographic factors and key constructs (participation, funding, and empowerment) relate to sustainability outcomes. Both parametric and non-parametric methods were applied to ensure robustness and validity of results.

Independent samples t-tests were used to test for significant differences in perceived sustainability outcomes across gender categories, while one-way ANOVA assessed variations across levels of education. Results revealed no statistically significant difference in sustainability perception between male ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) and female ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) respondents ( $t(298) = 0.27$ ,  $p > 0.05$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.03$ ), suggesting similar levels of engagement and perception across genders. However, educational attainment exhibited a significant effect on empowerment perception ( $F(2, 297) = 3.87$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.025$ ), with respondents possessing tertiary education reporting higher empowerment scores than those with only primary education.

To explore predictive relationships, a multiple linear regression model was fitted with *sustainability outcomes* as the dependent variable and *participation*, *funding*, and *empowerment* as independent variables. The model was significant ( $F(3, 296) = 34.72$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), explaining 47% of the variance in sustainability outcomes ( $R^2 = 0.47$ ). Among the predictors, community participation ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and funding adequacy ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) emerged as the strongest predictors of sustainability, while empowerment also had a positive, though comparatively smaller, contribution ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

The 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for the standardized coefficients confirmed the precision of these estimates, with participation (0.28–0.56) and funding (0.23–0.49) showing the narrowest ranges, reinforcing their strong influence on sustainability. The analysis thus provides empirical evidence supporting the theoretical linkage proposed in both Participatory Development Theory and Decentralisation Theory that participatory engagement, fiscal autonomy, and empowerment are mutually reinforcing in driving sustainable community-based development.

## DISCUSSION

The outcome of the study sheds light on the intricacies of community-based projects (CBPs) and the development of local government in the Okitipupa Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. These insights inform wider discussions on participatory governance, decentralisation, and development/sustainable development, situating Nigeria's experience in the African and global context. Employing Participatory Development and Decentralisation Theories, the study sheds light on the unfulfilled promise of advanced grassroots mobilisation and the structural barriers to its realisation.

### The Dominance of Community Participation and the Problem of Genuinely Participatory Development

The overwhelming support of the respondents for community participation as important for the success (Mean=3.95) and implementation (Mean=3.85) of projects confirms the tenets of Participatory Development Theory (Chambers, 1997; Cornwall, 2008). This theory postulates that projects are more successful and sustainable when they are based on local priorities and capacities, as opposed to being imposed from outside. The case of Okitipupa supports the proposition that participation enhances relevance, ownership, and sustainability, a line of thinking that comes from earlier Nigerian studies which stress the importance of grassroots participation in rural transformation (Arowolo, 2011; Adeyemi, 2013).

However, the finding that only 53.3% of residents felt adequately informed about projects reveals a communication gap that weakens authentic participation. Participation must go beyond token consultation to genuine co-creation, which requires accessible information, dialogue, and transparent engagement mechanisms (Ogunna, 1996; Abutudu, 2011). Similar concerns have been documented across African contexts, where governments often adopt participatory rhetoric but fail to institutionalize meaningful involvement (Cornwall, 2008). To bridge this gap, Okitipupa LGA must institutionalize inclusive town hall meetings, participatory budgeting, and feedback mechanisms that empower citizens to shape development agendas rather than simply endorse pre-determined projects.

## **Fiscal Constraints, Dependency, and the Imperative of Autonomy**

The study highlights funding inadequacy as one of the most critical barriers to effective project delivery. Respondents strongly agreed that adequate funding improves outcomes (Mean = 4.07) and that insufficient funds delay completion (Mean = 4.00). These results align with findings in Nigeria and elsewhere showing that financial constraints and fiscal dependency undermine local government effectiveness (Ekpe, 2012; Olusola, 2011).

This outcome resonates with the fiscal dimension of Decentralization Theory, which emphasizes that political and administrative responsibilities are meaningless without fiscal autonomy (Faguet, 2004; Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). In Nigeria, the problem is compounded by the operation of the state–local government joint account system, which often results in diversion of local revenues by state governments, leaving local councils underfunded (Oviasuyi, Idada, & Isiraojie, 2010). The perception that local governments misallocate resources (Mean = 3.44) further reflects concerns about corruption and weak accountability mechanisms (Ojo, 2009).

Addressing this challenge requires systemic reforms in fiscal federalism. Enhancing internally generated revenue (IGR), ensuring timely and equitable statutory allocations, and promoting transparency in budgeting are essential for strengthening fiscal autonomy. Without these reforms, local governments remain dependent, undermining their ability to deliver on their constitutional responsibilities.

## **Systemic Implementation Challenges: Bureaucracy, Political Interference, and Capacity Deficits**

Bureaucratic delays (Mean = 4.13) and political interference (Mean = 4.05) emerged as major barriers to effective implementation. This confirms longstanding critiques of Nigerian local governance, where excessive bureaucracy and patronage politics distort development priorities (Agagu, 2004; Ezeani, 2006). Political interference often manifests in the imposition of projects, diversion of funds, and appointment of unqualified personnel, undermining both Participatory Development Theory and Decentralization Theory. These findings mirror broader African and Latin American experiences, where decentralization has sometimes led to elite capture rather than genuine empowerment (Platteau & Gaspart, 2004; Smoke, 2015).

The perception that insufficient skilled personnel undermine project quality (Mean = 3.95) points to a serious capacity gap in local governance. Earlier studies have noted the shortage of technical expertise in Nigerian LGAs, particularly in areas such as engineering, planning, and financial management (Ajayi, 2000; Adebayo, 2014). Addressing these challenges requires civil service reforms, training programs, and partnerships with universities and NGOs to build local capacity.

## **Community Empowerment as a Catalyst for Sustainability and the Gap in Implementation**

The findings demonstrate a strong correlation between community empowerment and project sustainability. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that empowerment increases sustainability (Mean = 4.05) and that community ownership encourages maintenance (Mean = 4.07). This aligns with Participatory Development Theory's empowerment dimension, which holds that ownership enhances motivation to sustain projects (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). Similarly, the recognition that lack of empowerment leads to project abandonment (Mean = 3.92) reflects broader Nigerian experiences where projects without community buy-in are often neglected (Abegunde, 2009).

Yet, only 63.3% of respondents agreed that local governments adequately support empowerment. This finding highlights a gap between empowerment rhetoric and practice. Local governments often fail to transfer genuine authority and resources, leaving communities as passive recipients rather than active agents of development (Ogunna, 1996; Abutudu, 2011).

Linking this to Decentralization Theory, genuine empowerment requires both empowered communities and empowered local governments. When local authorities lack fiscal or political autonomy, they cannot effectively empower communities. Thus, empowerment at the grassroots is inseparable from reforms in Nigeria's decentralization framework. Bridging this gap requires deliberate institutionalization of participatory

budgeting, co-management of projects, and capacity-building programs that ensure communities are not only consulted but actively shape their developmental futures.

### **Limitations**

Although this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of community-based projects and local government development, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was confined to a single Local Government Area (Okitipupa), which restricts the generalisability of findings across Nigeria's diverse administrative and cultural contexts. Second, data were self-reported, which may introduce response bias due to social desirability or recall errors. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes causal inference, as relationships were observed at a single point in time rather than longitudinally. Finally, constraints of time and resources limited the inclusion of more sophisticated inferential models such as structural equation modelling (SEM), which could further validate the causal pathways between participation, funding, empowerment, and sustainability.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a credible empirical foundation for understanding how community participation and decentralisation shape sustainable local development. Future research should expand the geographic scope, adopt mixed-method designs, and incorporate longitudinal data to assess sustainability over time.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusion**

This study has comprehensively demonstrated that community-based projects are fundamental to effective local government development efforts, serving as vital avenues for grassroots participation and the implementation of localized solutions. The evidence from Okitipupa Local Government Area, Ondo State, Nigeria, clearly demonstrates that meaningful community participation is key to promoting accountability, ownership among beneficiaries, and the overall sustainability of development outcomes. The outcomes are consistent with the key aspects of the Participatory Development Theory which suggests that the local population's involvement in the development process determines the relevance and sustainability of projects.

Nonetheless, the study found that the efficiency and prospects of these community-based programmes are often compromised by a set of structural obstacles. Such obstacles consist of the chronic absence of adequate funding; significant political meddling by higher levels of government and local power brokers, and glaring capacity gaps at the levels of both local government and community institutions. Such obstacles represent the broad gap that exists between the theoretical gains of decentralisation and participatory development approaches and the reality on the ground. They reveal a regression from the democratic perspective on genuine local and community self-governance and the adaptive structural constraints of the political economy that is most characteristic of the situation.

Most importantly building on what has been articulated above the successful community-based project in question drives local government sustainable development only under conditions of 'complex holistic' reforms. Such reforms should at a minimum focus on improving local level fiscal autonomy and discipline, politically 'unguided' focus on undue slashing of project selection and implementation, robust local governments and 'real' community development, and strength in community and local government institutional and human resources. When all these elements are in equilibrium, the productive partnership of local leaders and citizens can be fully realised, offering community-centred approaches that advance local development in an accountable and sustainable manner, thus improving people's lives.

### **Recommendations**

Drawing from the conclusions of the evaluation, the following set of recommendations has been formulated to improve the efficiency of community-driven initiatives, as well as to augment the development of local governance, applicable also to other developing countries:

1. **Systematic frameworks for Genuine Participatory Mechanisms Considering All Phases of Projects:** Local governments need to design frameworks that institutionalise community participation at all stages of a project. These frameworks go beyond the symbolic and performative community participation to ensure that community members influence at all stages the decisions and resources being allocated. These include participatory budgeting and community development committees that actually have the authority to make decisions.
2. **Strengthen Local Revenue and Predictable Financing:** Local governments need to be put in a better position in terms of their ability to manage and control over expenditures by granting them greater control over expenditures through the local tax system and more timely and predictable flows from above the local government level. Lower degrees of reliance on higher levels of government will enhance local level planning and project implementation.
3. **Targeted Leadership and Management Development Investments at Local Government and Local Leaders:** These include training them on project management at the local level, local governance financial management, local governance procurement, local level data management and analysis, and other parts of the system, as well as participatory governance. These are fundamental to building the human and institutional capacity necessary for planning and control.
4. **Encourage and Facilitate the Formation of Collaborative Partnerships:** Obtain and manage synergistic financial and technical assistance on joint projects with non-governmental organisations, businesses, universities and other higher education institutions, and other international organisations involved in the development of the country. These can increase the active and innovative resources applied to the country.
5. **Prioritise Community Ownership and Localised Management:** Community capacity development and the gradual delegation of project management and community maintenance responsibilities should be incorporated into the project design. Ownership should be authentic and guaranteed for long-term viability.

Building on the recommendations outlined above, this study proposes a policy design and implementation roadmap to guide the practical execution of community-based project reforms in Okitipupa Local Government Area and other similar LGAs across Nigeria. The roadmap translates the study’s conceptual insights and empirical findings into actionable steps, identifying key responsibilities, timelines, and measurable indicators to ensure that participatory governance, fiscal autonomy, and empowerment principles are effectively institutionalised at the grassroots level.

**Table 8: Implementation Roadmap for Strengthening Community-Based Projects in Okitipupa LGA**

Phase	Timeline	Responsible Actors	Key Activities	Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) Indicators
<b>Short-term (0–12 months)</b>	Immediate	Okitipupa LGA Council, Community Development Committees (CDCs), NGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conduct participatory budgeting forums</li> <li>- Establish community–government liaison units</li> <li>- Identify and prioritise local projects collaboratively</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li># of participatory meetings held</li> <li>% of local projects selected through community input</li> </ul>
<b>Medium-term (1–3 years)</b>	Progressive	LGA Planning Department, State Ministry of Local Government, Donors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Integrate CBPs into annual LGA development plans</li> <li>- Launch fiscal transparency dashboard for citizens</li> <li>- Implement local capacity-building programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>% of projects publicly tracked online</li> <li># of trained local leaders</li> <li>Community satisfaction index</li> </ul>
<b>Long-term (3–5 years)</b>	Sustained	State Government, Development Partners, National Council on Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scale successful CBP models to other LGAs</li> <li>- Institutionalise participatory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>% of scaled pilot projects</li> <li>Evidence of</li> </ul>

		Government	M&E systems - Establish inter-LGA learning networks	replication in $\geq 3$ LGAs Improvement in project sustainability index
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**Source:** Author’s Policy Framework (Based on Field Findings, 2025).

The implementation roadmap outlines a phased strategy for strengthening community-based projects (CBPs) within Okitipupa Local Government Area (LGA) and establishing a scalable model for other LGAs in Nigeria. Each phase builds progressively on the preceding one, ensuring continuity, accountability, and sustainability in policy execution.

The short-term Phase (0–12 months) represents the foundation stage of reform implementation. The Okitipupa LGA Council, Community Development Committees (CDCs), and local NGOs are tasked with initiating participatory budgeting processes and establishing community government liaison structures. These activities are aimed at promoting inclusiveness and transparency in project selection and prioritisation. The monitoring indicators such as the number of participatory meetings held and the percentage of projects selected through community input will help measure the extent of citizen engagement and the responsiveness of local authorities to community needs.

The Medium-term Phase (1–3 years) focuses on institutional integration and capacity building. The LGA Planning Department, State Ministry of Local Government, and donor partners are responsible for embedding CBPs within formal development planning and financial systems. Initiatives such as launching a fiscal transparency dashboard and conducting leadership training programs are designed to improve accountability and managerial competence. The M&E indicators including the number of trained local leaders, percentage of projects publicly tracked online, and a community satisfaction index provide measurable evidence of enhanced governance quality and citizen trust.

The Long-term Phase (3–5 years) aims at scaling and institutionalisation. Oversight shifts to state and national actors, including the State Government, Development Partners, and the National Council on Local Government. The focus is on replicating successful Okitipupa models in other LGAs, institutionalising participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks, and fostering inter-LGA learning networks. Indicators such as the percentage of scaled pilot projects, evidence of replication in multiple LGAs, and improvement in the project sustainability index will serve as benchmarks for long-term impact and policy diffusion across Nigeria’s local governance system.

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## APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

### Section A: Demographic Information of Respondents

Please tick (✓) the option that best describes you.

Gender:  Male  Female

Age:  18–27 years,  28–37 years,  38–47 years,  48 years and above

Educational Attainment:  No formal/Primary Education,  Secondary Education  Tertiary Education

Occupation:  Farming,  Trading,  Civil/Public Service,  Artisans/Other Occupations

Community Involvement:  Active in Community-Based Projects (CBPs),  Not Active in Community-Based Projects (CBPs)

### Section B: Community Participation in Local Government Development

Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement by ticking (✓) the appropriate option.

1. Active participation improves project success.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree
2. Community involvement enhances implementation.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree
3. Lack of participation leads to project failure.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree

### Section C: Funding and Resource Allocation

1. Adequate funding improves project outcomes.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree
2. Insufficient funds delay completion.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree
3. Local governments allocate enough resources.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree

### Section D: Implementation Challenges

- 
1. Bureaucratic delays hinder project execution.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree
  2. Political interference affects implementation.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree
  3. Insufficient skilled personnel impacts project quality.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree

**Section E: Community Empowerment and Sustainability**

1. Empowerment increases project sustainability.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree
2. Community ownership encourages maintenance of projects.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree
3. Lack of empowerment leads to project abandonment.  
 Strongly Agree     Agree     Undecided     Disagree     Strongly Disagree