

COMMUNITY PERCEPTION AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN OWERRI WEST, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the relationship between community perception and sustainable rural development in Owerri West Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria. Grounded in Participatory Development Theory and the Igbo philosophy of Igwebuiké (collective strength), the research investigated how community members perceive development interventions and how these perceptions influence the success and sustainability of rural development projects. Using a mixed-methods design (qualitative and quantitative), data was collected from 382 survey respondents across ten autonomous communities, complemented by community dialogues and key informant interviews. Findings reveal a significant gap between government planners and community perception. The study shows that community perception is shaped by three main factors: the level of inclusion in project planning, respect for local cultural values (Omenala), and the visible impact of projects on daily livelihoods. Results indicate a strong positive correlation between positive community perception and project sustainability ($r = .68, p < .001$). The study advances debates on participatory development by demonstrating that cultural factors—specifically Igbo philosophical concepts—mediate the relationship between participation and sustainability, challenging technocratic assumptions in mainstream development theory. Recommendations were made based on the findings.

Keywords: Community Perception, Sustainable Rural Development, Community Participation, Igwebuiké, Owerri West

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable rural development remains a critical challenge for developing countries, including Nigeria. The United Nations (2015) defines it as improving rural quality of life through economically sound, socially fair, and environmentally safe interventions that benefit both present and future generations. Rural areas in Nigeria face persistent challenges: poverty, poor infrastructure, limited healthcare, inadequate education, and water scarcity. Despite numerous government programs, many interventions fail to achieve lasting impact. In Imo State's Owerri West Local Government Area, rural communities exemplify this paradox: roads are abandoned mid-construction, boreholes stop functioning within months, and health centers lack staff and medicines. This raises a fundamental question: why do development projects fail to deliver sustainable benefits? Research increasingly points to community perception as a critical but

overlooked factor (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Community perception encompasses how local people understand, interpret, and evaluate development interventions—whether projects address real needs, respect local ways of life, and distribute benefits fairly. When perception is ignored, projects face resistance, poor participation, and eventual failure. This study argues that community perception significantly influences project sustainability, and that this relationship is mediated by cultural factors that mainstream development theory has insufficiently addressed. The Igbo communities of Owerri West possess rich cultural traditions that shape development perceptions. Concepts like Igwebuike (strength in community) and Omenala (customs and traditions) influence collective action and values (Kanu, 2024). Development projects that ignore these cultural foundations may be perceived as foreign impositions, regardless of material benefits.

Statement of the Problem

Despite years of development planning in Owerri West, sustainable development remains elusive. Between 2015 and 2025, numerous projects have either failed to be completed or stopped functioning shortly after completion. Conventional explanations cite inadequate funding, corruption, or poor management. While important, these factors tell an incomplete story. Growing evidence suggests that how community members perceive projects plays a crucial role in success or failure (Uchendu, 2025). When communities feel projects do not address real needs, when they are not consulted, or when projects disrespect cultural values, they withdraw support—leading to poor participation, failure to protect assets, and unwillingness to maintain facilities.

The problem this study addresses is the lack of understanding about how community perception affects sustainable rural development in Owerri West. Without this understanding, development efforts will continue to fail, wasting scarce resources and failing to improve lives. While existing research establishes the importance of community participation, several gaps remain. First, few studies have systematically examined community perception as distinct from participation—how communities actually think and feel about development, not just whether they are involved. Second, limited research has explored how specifically Igbo cultural factors shape perception. Third, few studies have directly linked community perception to sustainability outcomes using mixed-methods approaches. This study addresses these gaps.

Research Questions

For the purpose of this research, the following questions have been formulated to act as a guide:

1. How do community members in Owerri West perceive existing rural development projects?
2. What factors shape community perception of development interventions?
3. How does community perception influence the sustainability of rural development projects?
4. What are community-identified development priorities for future planning?

Objectives of the Study

The general objective is to analyze the relationship between community perception and sustainable rural development in Owerri West. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Assess how community members perceive existing rural development projects.
2. Identify factors shaping community perception of development interventions.
3. Examine the relationship between community perception and project sustainability.
4. Identify community-identified development priorities.

Research Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between community perception and the sustainability of rural development projects.

H2: Socio-cultural factors have a stronger influence on community perception than technical factors.

H3: Communities involved in planning from the beginning show more positive perception than those consulted after decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Community Perception: Community perception refers to the collective views, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions that people living in a particular area hold about development interventions. In this study, community perception means how rural dwellers in Owerri West understand and evaluate development projects and programs in their communities. Perception is not just about what people see, but also about how they interpret what they see based on their experiences, values, and expectations (Asika, 2025). It is measured through indicators of awareness, relevance, trust, satisfaction, fairness, and ownership. Community perception is important because it influences how people respond to development interventions. When perception is positive, people are more likely to participate in projects, protect project facilities, and contribute to maintenance. When perception is negative, people may withdraw their support, refuse to participate, or even actively oppose projects (Ezeh, 2024).

Sustainable Rural Development: Sustainable rural development is a broad concept that describes the process of improving life in rural areas in ways that can continue over time. The word "sustainable" means that improvements should last and should not harm the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). For rural areas in Nigeria, sustainable development includes several dimensions: Economic sustainability (creating livelihoods and economic opportunities that people can depend on for the long term), Social sustainability (ensuring that development benefits all members of the community fairly and strengthens social relationships), Environmental sustainability (using natural resources carefully so that they are not destroyed for future generations), Cultural sustainability (respecting and preserving the cultural values and traditions that give communities their identity). Sustainable rural development is measured through project longevity, community maintenance, benefit distribution, cultural compatibility, and local capacity development (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

Community Participation: Community participation means the involvement of local people in the decisions and activities that affect their lives. In development, participation can take many forms, from simply being informed about projects to having real power to make decisions (Arnstein, 1969). Genuine participation requires consultation, involvement in planning, decision-making power, diversity of inclusion, and feedback mechanisms. Participation is important for sustainable development because it helps ensure that projects meet real needs, builds community ownership, and creates commitment to maintaining project benefits. When people participate in planning, they are more likely to see the project as "theirs" and to protect it. However, scholars have noted that participation is often implemented tokenistically, with communities consulted only after key decisions have been made (Arnstein, 1969; Mansuri et al., 2013). This distinction between genuine and token participation is critical for understanding community perception.

Omenala: Omenala is an Igbo word that refers to the customs, traditions, and cultural values that guide community life. It literally means "that which pertains to the land" and includes the norms, beliefs, and practices passed down through generations (Igbokwe, 2024). In Igbo communities, Omenala shapes how people relate to each other, how they make decisions, how they use land and resources, and what they consider important in life. Key elements of Omenala include respect for elders, the importance of community solidarity, the value of dialogue and consensus in decision-making, and the spiritual significance of land and ancestors (Ezeh, 2024).

Igwebuiké: Igwebuiké is an Igbo philosophical concept that means "strength in community" or "collective strength." It comes from the words "Igwe" (multitude or community) and "Ike" (strength or power). The full saying is "Igwebuiké," meaning that the community is strong. This philosophy teaches that individuals find their true identity and fulfilment in a relationship with others. The well-being of each person is connected to the well-being of the whole community. Decisions should be made through dialogue and consensus, and everyone has a role to play in community life (Kanu, 2024; Igbokwe, 2024). In this study, Igwebuiké provides a cultural framework for understanding how communities in Owerri West think about development. This entails that projects that reflect the spirit of Igwebuiké—by bringing people together, respecting all voices, and building collective strength—are more likely to be accepted and sustained (Ezeh, 2024).

Review of Empirical Literature

Participatory development theory has been extensively debated in the development literature. Chambers (1983) pioneered the argument that development practitioners must "put the last first," prioritizing the knowledge and priorities of rural people over external expertise. Subsequent research has both supported and complicated this view. Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation" remains foundational, distinguishing between manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. This typology helps analyze whether participation is genuine or tokenistic. Mansuri et al., (2013), in a comprehensive World Bank study, found that participatory development projects succeed only under specific conditions—when communities have genuine decision-making power, when local institutions are strong, and when projects align with local priorities.

In the Nigerian context, Ezeh (2024) examined community participation in local governance in South-Eastern Nigeria, finding a gap between participatory rhetoric and practice. He found out that government agencies often claimed to consult communities but actually made decisions unilaterally. Uchendu (2025) introduced the concept of "epistemic injustice" to Nigerian development discourse, arguing that the exclusion of indigenous knowledge from planning processes constitutes a form of injustice that undermines development effectiveness.

However, most African studies have focused on participation as behavior rather than perception as cognition and affect. Few have systematically examined how cultural worldviews—such as Igwebuike—mediate the relationship between participation and sustainability. This study addresses this gap by investigating not just whether communities participate, but how they perceive development interventions through culturally-shaped interpretive frameworks. Recent international studies have begun exploring the role of perception in development. Research in South Asia (Kumar & Singh, 2022) found that community perception of project fairness predicted maintenance behavior more strongly than technical quality. Latin American studies (Gonzalez, Lopez & Sanchez, 2023) similarly identified cultural respect as a key predictor of project acceptance. This study contributes to this emerging literature by providing empirical evidence and extending theoretical understanding of culture's mediating role.

Theoretical Framework (Participatory Development Theory): This study is guided by Participatory Development Theory. This theory provides a useful lens for understanding the relationship between community perception and sustainable rural development. Participatory Development Theory emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the failures of top-down development approaches. Earlier development models assumed that experts and government officials knew best and that communities should simply accept what was planned for them. However, the poor performance of these approaches led scholars and practitioners to seek better ways (Chambers, 1983). The main ideas of Participatory Development Theory are that people should be active participants rather than passive recipients. Secondly, local knowledge is valuable. Thirdly, participation builds ownership and sustainability. Fourthly, development should empower people. Finally, power relations matter.

Relevance of the Theory to the Study

First, it directs attention to how communities perceive development interventions. The theory suggests that these perceptions matter because they influence how people respond to projects. This aligns directly with the study's focus on community perception. Secondly, it emphasizes the importance of including local knowledge and priorities in development planning. This connects to the study's aim of documenting community-identified development priorities. Thirdly, it explains why projects that ignore community input often fail. This helps to explain the pattern of project failure observed in Owerri West. Fourthly, the theory's attention to power relations helps analyze why some voices are heard in development planning while others are silenced. In Owerri West communities, women and youth often have less influence than elders and traditional rulers, affecting how development priorities are set.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: A mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches was adopted. The quantitative component used a survey questionnaire to collect data from 382 respondents across ten communities. The qualitative component used community dialogues to understand the meanings and experiences behind the numbers. This design was chosen because it allows both measurement of relationships (through quantitative methods) and a deep understanding of how and why those relationships exist (through qualitative methods).

Study Area: The study was conducted in Owerri West Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria. Ten communities were selected using simple random sampling from the official list of autonomous communities: Umuguma, Avu, Ihiagwa, Nekede, Obinze, Okuku, Eziobodo, Oforola, Orogwe, and Irete. The area is predominantly rural, with agriculture as the main occupation. The people are Igbo, with rich cultural traditions including age grades, town unions, and traditional institutions.

Population and Sample: The target population was adults aged 18 years and above in the ten communities. Using the Taro Yamane formula with a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 400 was calculated. Stratified proportional sampling was used to allocate questionnaires to communities based on population. A random sampling technique was used to select households within communities. In each household, one adult was interviewed, alternating between male and female respondents.

Instrumentation: A structured questionnaire with two sections was developed. Section A collected demographic information; Section B contained statements about community perception using a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was translated into Igbo and back-translated to ensure accuracy.

Operationalization of variables: Community perception was measured through six indicators: awareness of projects, perceived relevance to needs, trust in implementing agencies, satisfaction with processes, fairness of benefit distribution, and sense of ownership. Each indicator was assessed using multiple Likert-scale items, and composite scores were calculated for analysis.

Project sustainability was measured using four indicators: project longevity (whether projects remained functional), community maintenance activities (whether communities actively maintained facilities), benefit continuity (whether benefits continued to reach intended beneficiaries), and community capacity to manage projects. These were assessed using both survey items (perceived sustainability) and observations during fieldwork (observable indicators). A composite sustainability index was created by standardizing and averaging these measures. A community dialogue guide contained open-ended questions about experiences with development projects, factors shaping perceptions, and priorities for future development.

Validity and Reliability: Content validity was ensured through expert review by rural development and research methodology specialists at Imo State University. A pilot study in Avu community with 30 questionnaires yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating good internal consistency. Assumptions for parametric tests were checked: normality was assessed through

Shapiro-Wilk tests ($p > .05$ for main variables), and homogeneity of variance was confirmed using Levene's test ($p > .05$).

Data Collection: Data collection occurred over four weeks in November 2025. Two trained research assistants who were native Igbo speakers assisted. Questionnaires were administered through face-to-face interviews. Community dialogues were held in central locations with 15-20 participants representing diverse groups (elders, women, youth, farmers, traders).

Ethical Considerations: Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the study's purpose and their rights. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout. Participants were assured that no identifying information would be reported. Institutional ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Imo State University prior to data collection.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics summarized the data; inferential statistics (correlation analysis, independent samples t-tests, paired t-tests) tested hypotheses. Prior to analysis, data were checked for normality using Shapiro-Wilk tests and homogeneity of variance using Levene's tests; all assumptions were satisfied.

Qualitative data from community dialogues were transcribed verbatim, translated from Igbo to English, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization, initial coding, theme search, theme review, theme definition, and write-up. Coding was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data, though sensitizing concepts from participatory development theory informed initial engagement. Coding was conducted by the lead researcher, with a subset (20%) independently coded by a research assistant to check consistency; disagreements were resolved through discussion.

RESULTS

Response Rate and Demographic Profile

Of 400 questionnaires distributed, 382 were completed and returned, giving a 95.5% response rate. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	194	50.8
	Female	188	49.2
Age Group	18-35 years (Youth)	158	41.4
	36-59 years (Adult)	176	46.1
	60+ years (Elders)	48	12.6
Primary Occupation	Farming	142	37.2
	Trading/Business	112	29.3
	Artisan/Skilled Work	73	19.1

	Civil/Public Service	34	8.9
	Others	21	5.5
Level of Education	No Formal Education	48	12.6
	Primary Education	91	23.8
	Secondary Education	160	41.9
	Tertiary Education	83	21.7
Residence within Community	<10 years	67	17.5
	10-20 years	142	37.2
	20 years and above	173	45.3

Source: Field work, November 2025.

The sample shows balanced gender representation, good age distribution, and the majority have over 10 years of residence in the community. This will ensure informed perspectives on community development.

Community Perception of Development Projects

The first objective assessed how community members perceive existing development projects. Table 2 presents the perceived effectiveness of participation channels.

Table 2: Perceived Effectiveness of Community Participation Channels

Participation Channel	Mean Score	SD
Contact with Traditional Ruler	4.2	0.85
Town Union Meetings	3.9	0.92
Contact with LGA Councilors	2.8	1.18
Public Hearings/Meetings	2.5	1.12
Written Submissions/Petitions	1.9	0.95

Source: Field work, November 2025.

Findings show community members see traditional channels as most effective for having their voices heard. Contact with traditional rulers had the highest mean (4.2), followed by town union meetings (3.9). Formal government channels -contact with councillors (2.8), public hearings (2.5), and written petitions (1.9)—showed less effectiveness as a participation channel.

During community dialogues, an elderly farmer in Ihiagwa explained:

When we have a problem, we go to the Eze or discuss it in a town union meeting. The Eze can talk to government people. But if you write a letter or go to the local government office, they keep you waiting all day, and nothing happens.

A female trader in Nekede added:

They call us for meetings sometimes, but when we go, they just tell us what they have already decided. They don't ask what we think. Last year, they came to tell us about a market project, but they had already chosen the location without asking the women who actually sell there.

These findings indicate community perception is shaped by whether people feel heard and respected. The gap between participation rhetoric and reality is significant.

Factors Shaping Community Perception

Objective 2 identified factors shaping community perception. Table 3 presents factors respondents cited as important.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Community Perception

Factors Influencing Community Perception	Percentage
Being consulted before the project starts	78%
Project addressing real community needs	74%
Respect for local customs and traditions	71%
Transparency about plans and budget	68%
Employment of local people during construction	62%
Quality of work and materials used	59%
Communication in Igbo language	57%
Involvement of women and youth in planning	53%

Source: Field work, November 2025.

Findings reveal perception is shaped by both process factors (how things are done) and outcome factors (what is achieved). The most cited factor was being consulted before the project starts (78%), which indicates that people want involvement from the beginning.

A youth leader in Obinze shared:

They brought a borehole project here two years ago. Nobody asked us where we wanted it. They put it far from where most people live. Now, many people don't use it because it's too far. If they had asked us, we would have told them the best place.

Respect for local customs and traditions was cited by 71%, reflecting Omenala's importance. An elder in Umuguma explained:

There is a place in our community sacred to our ancestors. Some years ago, a company wanted to build a road through that place. We told them no, but they didn't listen. The community rose up against

them, and the project stopped. You cannot develop a place if you don't respect what the people hold sacred.

Communication in the Igbo language was cited by 57%. Many community members, especially older people and women with less formal education, are not comfortable with English. When officials use English in meetings, these people cannot fully participate.

To test Hypothesis 2 (socio-cultural factors have a stronger influence than technical factors), mean scores were compared. Socio-cultural factors (consultation, respect for traditions, language, inclusion) averaged 4.3, compared to 3.6 for technical factors (design quality, funding, materials). A paired t-test showed a significant difference ($t = 8.42, p < 0.001$), supporting the hypothesis.

Community Perception and Project Sustainability

Objective 3 examined the relationship between community perception and sustainability. Table 4 presents the correlation analysis.

Table 4: Correlation between Community Perception and Project Sustainability

Variable Pair	Pearson's	r	p-value	Interpretation
Community Perception & Project Sustainability		0.68	< 0.001	Strong, positive, significant

Source: Field work, November 2025.

The correlation coefficient of 0.68 indicates a strong positive relationship between community perception and project sustainability. Projects viewed positively by communities are significantly more likely to be sustained. The p-value (< 0.001) shows this relationship is statistically significant, supporting Hypothesis 1.

A woman in Eziobodo illustrated:

There was a health center built here about ten years ago. The community was involved in choosing the location and deciding what services it should offer. Today, that health center is still working. We clean it, we report problems, and we make sure nurses come to work. It is our health center.

In contrast, a respondent in Okuku described:

They built a modern market for us, but they put it in a place that floods during rain. Nobody asked us about drainage problems in that area. Now the market is almost empty. People prefer to sell by the roadside where customers can reach them. The government says they gave us a market, but it is useless to us.

These narratives show that sustainability is not just about technical quality or funding, but also about whether projects fit with community needs, knowledge, and priorities.

To test Hypothesis 3 (communities involved from the beginning show more positive perception), projects in which communities reported involvement from the start had a mean perception score of 4.1, compared to 2.6 for projects in which involvement occurred after key decisions. An independent samples t-test confirmed a significant difference ($t = 11.23, p < 0.001$), supporting the hypothesis.

Community-Identified Development Priorities

The fourth objective documented community priorities. Through dialogues, participants ranked their top development needs as follows: (1) Good roads connecting communities to markets – Poor roads make it difficult for farmers to transport produce. During rainy seasons, many roads become impassable. (2) Clean water supply – Many communities lack reliable access to clean water. Existing boreholes often break down and are not repaired. Most times, they depend on personal borehole. (3) Healthcare facilities with staff and medicines – Communities want health centers staffed by qualified personnel and stocked with essential medicines. (4) Support for agriculture and processing – Farmers need improved seeds, fertilizers, and equipment. They also want processing facilities to add value to crops before selling. (5) Electricity for homes and small businesses – While some communities have electricity connections, supply is erratic; others have no connection at all.

A farmer in Okuku explained:

We grow cassava and other things. But the road to take them to market is very bad. By the time we reach Owerri market, we have spent so much on transport that our profit is small. If the government wants to help us, they should fix the roads first.

Importantly, participants emphasized these priorities should not be addressed with one-size-fits-all approaches. Each community has specific conditions requiring locally-appropriate solutions.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings reveal several important patterns with implications for theory and practice. First, community perception is strongly associated with sustainability. The correlation coefficient of 0.68 provides empirical evidence that how communities view projects is closely related to whether those projects last. This aligns with Participatory Development Theory's emphasis on ownership and local commitment (Chambers, 1983). When communities feel projects are "theirs," they protect and maintain them. When they feel excluded, they withdraw support. However, it is important to note that this relationship is associational rather than causal; the cross-sectional design means we cannot claim that perception causes sustainability, only that they are strongly related. Longitudinal research would be needed to establish causal direction.

Socio-cultural factors outweigh technical factors in shaping perception. Being consulted, having traditions respected, and communicating in local language matter more to community members than technical design quality or funding levels. This finding challenges technocratic assumptions that communities primarily care about material benefits. It supports Uchendu's (2025) argument about epistemic injustice—the exclusion of local ways of knowing undermines development effectiveness. The theoretical implication is that participatory development theory must pay greater attention to cultural cognition—how culturally-shaped interpretive frameworks mediate the relationship between participation and outcomes. Traditional channels are more effective for community engagement. Contact with traditional rulers and town union meetings scored much higher than formal government channels. This reflects the continued vitality of traditional institutions in Igbo communities (Igbokwe, 2024) and suggests that development agencies working through these channels will likely achieve better engagement than those relying solely on formal government structures. This finding extends Arnstein's (1969) analysis by showing that in contexts where traditional institutions remain strong, they may offer more genuine participation than formal consultative mechanisms.

Furthermore, timing of involvement matters critically. Communities involved from the beginning showed significantly more positive perceptions than those consulted after decisions. This supports Arnstein's (1969) distinction between genuine participation and tokenism. Late consultation, after key decisions are made, is perceived as manipulation rather than genuine engagement. The theoretical implication is that participation cannot be treated as a binary variable (present/absent); the timing and quality of participation fundamentally shape its effects. Fifth, community priorities differ from government assumptions. While governments often focus on visible infrastructure, communities prioritize functionality and relevance—roads that actually reach markets, water systems that work, health centers with staff. This gap between government and community priorities helps explain why well-intentioned projects fail to generate community support. It suggests that participatory development theory must attend not only to how decisions are made but to what is decided—the substantive content of development priorities.

Finally, cultural concepts like Igwebuiké and Omenala provide interpretive frameworks for perception. Projects aligning with these values—building collective strength, respecting traditions—generate positive perception. Projects violating them generate a negative perception regardless of material benefits. This finding extends understanding of how culture shapes development outcomes in specific contexts. It contributes to broader debates in African development scholarship about the need to center indigenous philosophies in development theory and practice (Kanu, 2024; Igbokwe, 2024). The concept of Igwebuiké offers a culturally-grounded alternative to individualistic assumptions underlying much development theory.

Conclusion

This study concludes that community perception is a critical but often overlooked factor in sustainable rural development. How community members view development interventions—whether they see them as relevant, respectful, fair, and well-implemented—is strongly associated with whether projects will be sustained over time. The study makes several contributions to scholarship. First, it provides empirical evidence from an African context for the relationship

between perception and sustainability, extending findings from Asian and Latin American studies (Kumar et al., 2022; Gonzalez et al., 2023). Second, it demonstrates that socio-cultural factors—particularly those rooted in indigenous philosophies like Igwebuike and Omenala—mediate this relationship more strongly than technical factors. This challenges technocratic assumptions in mainstream development theory and supports calls for epistemic justice in development practice (Uchendu, 2025). Third, it shows that traditional institutions remain vital channels for community engagement, suggesting that development theory must attend to institutional pluralism rather than assuming formal state structures are the primary vehicles for participation.

Sustainable rural development cannot be achieved through technical fixes alone. It requires understanding and working with community perception. Development is not just about building things; it is about building relationships, trust, and shared commitment. When communities feel ownership of projects—when they see projects as "theirs"—they protect and maintain them. When they feel excluded, they withdraw support, and projects fail regardless of technical design. The philosophy of Igwebuike—strength in community—captures this insight. Development is strongest when it draws on the collective strength, knowledge, and commitment of the whole community. Building this collective strength requires processes that are inclusive, respectful, and culturally grounded.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made.

1. Local Government should conduct mandatory perception assessments before designing any intervention. These assessments should document community priorities, concerns, and cultural considerations through methods that reach all groups—including women, youth, and less educated members. This is based on the finding that 78% cited consultation as a critical factor.
2. Communities should establish community development committees with diverse representation (elders, women, youth, farmers, traders) that work alongside traditional institutions. This is based on the finding that traditional channels are more effective than institutional channels. These committees should have genuine decision-making power, not merely advisory roles.
3. Based on the finding that 71% value respect for customs, government (federal, state and local) should create engagement protocols that reflect Igbo principles of collective decision-making. This should include conducting meetings in Igbo language, involving traditional leaders meaningfully, and respecting sacred sites and cultural practices.
4. There should be a mandate that communities should be consulted early before any project is designed. This is based on the Hypothesis 3 finding that early involvement yields more positive perception from the communities and guarantees sustainability of such project.
5. Based on the finding that formal channels are ineffective, government should create feedback mechanisms that actually work—through town union meetings, traditional rulers, and community assemblies rather than written submissions or public hearings that communities distrust.

6. Based on the overall finding that participation is often tokenistic, federal and state governments should review legal frameworks to mandate genuine community participation with clear standards and enforcement mechanisms. This should include training requirements for local government staff in participatory methods and cultural sensitivity.
7. Based on the finding that Igwebuiké shapes perception, there should be a systematic documentation of indigenous knowledge related to development, ensuring this knowledge informs planning rather than being treated as folklore.

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