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STAKEHOLDERS' PARTICIPATION AND SUSTAINABILITY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN CROSS RIVER STATE

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Abstract

Many community development projects in Cross River State decline soon after completion, yet the part played by stakeholders' participation in this decline is poorly understood. This study examined how stakeholders' participation influences the sustainability of community development projects in the state. An exploratory qualitative design was adopted. Six Local Government Areas (Ikom, Abi, Ogoja, Yakurr, Akamkpa and Obudu) were purposively selected across the three senatorial districts. Data were collected through eight focus group discussions with 52 participants, comprising young and adult men and women, literate men and women, traditional leaders and persons with visual impairment. The discussions followed a semi-structured guide, were audio-recorded and transcribed, and were analysed thematically. Decision making was largely dominated by elders and community leaders. Women, youths and persons with visual impairment attended meetings but had limited influence, and the pace and format of meetings made it difficult for some to speak. Involvement was strongest during planning and implementation but fell after completion, leaving maintenance to a few people. Participants and leaders linked early and continuous involvement to ownership and care of projects, while projects introduced without community involvement were described as unused or not working. The study concludes that participation sustains projects only when it carries real influence and continues beyond construction. It recommends that government agencies and non-governmental organisations make inclusive participation, including defined post-completion roles for marginalised groups, a condition of every community development project.

Keywords: Stakeholder Participation, Sustainability, Community Development Projects,

Introduction

Sustainability of community development projects refers to the ability of interventions to remain functional, relevant and in use beyond initial funding cycles, with communities able to maintain their benefits and services over time (Putnam, R. (2020). Stakeholders' participation is the extent to which community members, traditional leaders, local authorities and implementing agencies are involved in decision making and project processes, from need identification to monitoring

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after completion (Tinashie, 2021). The two are closely linked. Projects shaped by the people who will use and maintain them tend to reflect local priorities, which builds shared responsibility, accountability and ownership (Cornwall, 2021). Where participation is weak or confined to a few actors, projects are more likely to be treated as external interventions and left without maintenance. This places sustainability at the centre of development discourse, since projects that fail to endure weaken the intended transformation within rural areas. Evidence shows that many projects decline shortly after completion, as maintenance structures weaken and community commitment reduces over time (Mansuri et al, 2021; Tufte, 2020). This condition is linked with recurring problems such as project collapse, weak continuity, poor maintenance culture and limited long-term impact, which call the value of development investments into question. When projects fail to remain functional, the anticipated improvements in livelihoods, infrastructure and social organisation are disrupted, while repeated failures damage trust between communities and development actors and create scepticism toward new interventions. Sustainability is therefore not only a technical matter but also a social process tied to how far stakeholders take part in the projects meant to serve them.

Globally, the sustainability of community development projects shows uneven patterns across regions, with reports indicating that between 30% and 60% of projects fail to sustain operations beyond five years of completion (World Bank, 2021; OECD, 2022). These figures point to a persistent gap between project initiation and long-term continuity, which remains a central concern in development practice. Studies have shown that infrastructure projects such as rural water supply schemes record sustainability rates of about 50%, while social intervention projects often fall below 40% due to weak institutional support and disengagement of key actors (Harvey and Reed, 2020; UNDP, 2021). Disengagement of this kind is a participation problem, since

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projects that depend on the continued involvement of community members, local leaders and implementing agencies lose their support base when those actors step back. This variation indicates that sustainability is influenced by sector-specific factors, broader governance conditions and the extent to which stakeholders remain involved in project processes. The global distribution also reveals disparities between high-income and low-income regions, with developing regions recording higher rates of project failure. This pattern raises questions about how stakeholder participation and implementation approaches shape whether interventions can maintain relevance and functionality over time (Morrisson, 2022).

Regional figures showed the same unevenness, and in each region the level of stakeholder participation moves with project outcomes. In Europe, 65% to 80% of projects stay functional beyond five years in Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands, where inclusive participation keeps communities and institutions engaged after completion. In parts of Eastern Europe, where actors are less involved, only about 50% do (European Commission, 2021; EEA, 2022; Batory et al, 2020). In the United States and Canada, 60% to 75% of projects persist where stakeholder involvement is coordinated, whereas inconsistent engagement in Brazil and Peru coincides with lower rates of 40% to 55% (Putnam, 2020; Bebbington et al., 2021). In Asia, Japan and South Korea exceed 70% through strong coordination among actors. India and Bangladesh (45% to 60%) and Indonesia and the Philippines (about 55%) are held back by weak local governance and uneven stakeholder engagement, which reduce the support projects receive after handover (ADB, 2021; World Bank, 2022). In Africa, only 30% to 50% of projects remain functional after five years, falling below 40% in Uganda and Malawi, where limited involvement in planning leaves communities with little stake in maintaining what is built (AfDB, 2021; Nabunya et al.,

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2021). Across regions, projects last longer where stakeholders are involved in decisions and remain engaged, and decline faster where they are not.

In Nigeria, sustainability of community development projects varies across geopolitical zones, reflecting differences in governance, project management practices and the level of stakeholder participation (Adeniran, 2024). Studies showed that sustainability rates range between 35% and 60%, with higher rates observed in the South West and lower rates in parts of the North East, where security challenges and institutional weaknesses restrict community and stakeholder involvement (Adewale et al., 2021; NBS, 2022). In states such as Lagos and Ogun, sustainability levels approach 60% due to stronger planning systems and stakeholder coordination, which keep communities and institutions engaged in project upkeep, while states like Borno and Yobe record rates below 40% (UNDP, 2021). In the South- South region, including Rivers and Akwa Ibom, sustainability is estimated at around 50%, influenced by planning structures and resource management practices, which suggests that the extent to which stakeholders take part in these processes may be decisive (Ibok et al 2020). These variations indicate that sustainability is uneven across the country, shaped by how projects are assessed, planned and implemented within local settings and by how far stakeholders are involved at each stage.

Statement of Problem

In Cross River State, community development projects are visible across rural areas, particularly in sectors such as water supply, education and rural infrastructure. These projects are often implemented through government programmes and non-governmental organisations, yet concerns about sustainability remain evident, as some projects decline after initial completion (CRS Ministry of Economic Planning, 2022). Observation suggests that stakeholder participation varies across communities, with some projects reflecting structured approaches while others

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appear externally driven. This variation raises uncertainty about how stakeholder participation relates to the sustainability of community development projects in Cross River State. It is against this backdrop that this study examines this relationship within the study area.

Research Questions

How does stakeholders" participation influence sustainability of development projects in Cross River State?

Research Objective

The main objective of the study was to find out how stakeholders' participation influence sustainability of development projects in Cross River State.

Research Assumption

Stakeholders' participation is assumed not to provide opportunities for marginalized and lee-heard community members to express their need and perspectives during community development project.

Conceptual Clarification

Stakeholder participations: Stakeholder participation is the involvement of community members, traditional leaders and local authorities in project decisions across stages. Odoom et al. (2021) stress stage-wise involvement, González Pérez and García Díaz (2021) institutional coordination; Barasa et al. (2021) sustainability outcomes; Ige and Amusa (2022) and Aguene (2024) exclusion of marginalised groups.

Sustainability of Community Development Projects: Sustainability of community development projects is the continued functioning, relevance and use of interventions through community maintenance. Agyeman (2020) stresses balance of social, economic and long-term concerns; Eversole (2021) local ownership and engagement; Banks and Hulme (2020) institutional support and governance.

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Empirical Review

Empirical studies generally support a link between stakeholder participation and sustainability of development projects, but they differ on what kind of participation matters. Janssen (2021) surveyed 240 respondents on community infrastructure projects. Participation explained 58% of the variation in sustainability, and projects with high participation were 73% functional after four years. Janssen argued that participation strengthens accountability and shared responsibility. However, participation was measured mainly at implementation, so its effect across project stages remains unclear.

Juetting (2020) analysed panel data from 85 governance-related projects using fixed effects regression. Projects with institutionalised participation recorded 69% sustainability against 44% for those without such structures. This adds structured mechanisms to Janssen's general involvement, though reliance on governance indicators leaves grassroots engagement unexamined. Morrisson (2022) used mixed methods with 180 respondents and interviews on rural projects. Active community participation was linked to 64% sustainability, but this fell where participation declined after implementation. Morrisson therefore argued that institutional structures alone cannot sustain participation, which makes continuity of engagement a critical issue, although participation intensity across stages was not quantified.

WLSA (2021) studied six gender-focused programmes qualitatively. Inclusive participation sustained engagement at 71%, while sustainability dropped to 48% where marginal groups were excluded. WLSA agrees with Morrisson on the importance of sustained engagement and makes inclusion a defining factor, a point Juetting did not address, but the qualitative design limits

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generalisability. Meek (2020) surveyed 210 respondents on environmental projects. Participation had a regression coefficient of 0.61 ($p < 0.05$), and sustainability reached 68% where engagement was active. This supports Janssen, but Meek treated stakeholders as uniform, unlike WLSA, which raises the question of whether different groups influence sustainability differently. Together, the studies show that participation is associated with sustainability across sectors. Gaps remain in stage-by-stage measurement, grassroots engagement, continuity after completion and differences among stakeholder groups.

Theoretical Framework

Participatory Development Theory is associated with Chambers (1994) and was later developed by Andrea Cornwall (2008). It holds that development should be driven by the people it affects, not imposed by outsiders. Its main tenets are respect for local knowledge, inclusive decision making, shared responsibility and a shift of power from experts to community members. It assumes that people who help make decisions about a project feel ownership of it and are more willing to maintain it. In this study, the theory explains why stakeholder participation should influence sustainability of community development projects in Cross River State. Where community members, traditional leaders and project committees take part in deciding what is built, how it is run and who looks after it, projects are more likely to reflect local priorities and attract continued use and upkeep. The theory also supports the research assumption that participation may fail to give marginalised and less-heard members real opportunities to express their needs, since it treats unequal voice as a threat to ownership and accountability. Its weakness is that it tends to assume participation leads naturally to sustainability. It also says little about power imbalances, differences in capacity among stakeholders or the risk of participation becoming tokenistic, which are the very issues this study investigates.

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Methods

Design: The study adopted an exploratory qualitative design to understand how different groups experienced stakeholder participation in community development projects.

Study Area: The study was conducted in Cross River State. Six Local Government Areas were purposively selected across the three senatorial districts: Ogoja and Obudu in the Northern district, Ikom, Abi and Yakurr in the Central district and Akamkpa in the Southern district.

Participants: The study population comprised adults aged 18 years and above with direct or indirect experience of community development projects. They included community members, traditional leaders and persons with visual impairment. Participants were purposively selected for their involvement in, or experience of, such projects.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique: Participants were selected purposively. Eight focus group discussions were held with 52 participants. Each group was formed around a social category so that differences in voice and influence could be compared. The groups were young men (8 participants), adult men (10), young women (8), adult women (8), literate men (6), literate women (6), traditional leaders (4) and persons with visual impairment (2). Three discussions took place in Ikom (young men, traditional leaders and persons with visual impairment). One each took place in Abi (adult men), Ogoja (young women), Obudu (adult women), Akamkpa (literate women) and Yakurr (literate men). Twenty-eight participants had direct involvement in project processes, while 24 were beneficiaries with indirect involvement. The number of groups was guided by data saturation, judged to have been reached when further discussions produced no new themes.

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Method of Data Collection: Data were collected through focus group discussions using a semi-structured discussion guide with open-ended questions. The guide covered stakeholder involvement in decision making, inclusiveness, participation across project stages and the relationship between participation and project sustainability. Specialists in community development and research methodology reviewed the guide. A pilot discussion outside the selected areas then informed revisions to question clarity and flow.

Procedure: Discussions were audio-recorded and supported by field notes, with consent obtained beforehand. The recordings were transcribed. Discussions held in local languages were translated into English.

Method of Data Analysis: The data were analysed thematically through repeated reading, coding and grouping of related codes into themes. Analysis focused on differences in participation across stakeholder groups and on how involvement related to project continuity, functionality, maintenance and community support. Selected statements are reported as illustrations, attributed by participant code, gender and Local Government Area.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical procedures included official permission, informed consent, voluntary participation and the removal of identifying information from transcripts. Participants were identified by group, code, gender and Local Government Area to protect their identities.

Results/Findings

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The socio-demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table1 to show the composition of discussants across the selected communities. The distribution reflects variation in

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age, gender and participation roles. Participants were drawn from different categories such as youths, adults, community leaders and special groups.

Table 4.1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18–30 years	18	34.6
	31–50 years	22	42.3
	51 years and above	12	23.1
Gender	Male	30	57.7
	Female	22	42.3
Participant Category	Young Male Group	8	15.4
	Adult Male Group	10	19.2
	Young Female Group	8	15.4
	Adult Female Group	8	15.4
	Literate Male Group	6	11.5
	Literate Female Group	6	11.5
	Traditional Leaders	4	7.7
	Physically Challenged persons	2	3.8
Level of Involvement	Direct involvement	28	53.8
	Indirect involvement (beneficiaries)	24	46.2
Total		**52**	**100**

The table shows that participants were fairly distributed across age groups, with the highest number falling within 31–50 years, which indicates active involvement in community development activities. Gender distribution reflects representation of both male and female participants, which ensured that discussions captured different experiences relating to project processes and sustainability. The variation across participant categories shows that the study engaged multiple social groups within the communities, while the level of involvement indicates that both active participants and beneficiaries contributed to the discussions. This distribution strengthens the credibility of the data, as responses were drawn from individuals with direct and indirect experiences of development projects within the study area.

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Presentation of Findings by Themes

This section presents findings from the Focus Group Discussions using a thematic structure aligned with the research objectives, which centres on need assessment, stakeholder participation, project planning and strategic implementation as dimensions influencing sustainability of community development projects. The presentation follows patterns identified during coding, where participants' responses were organised into themes that capture shared experiences across the selected communities. These themes were not treated in isolation, as responses often showed links between development processes and sustainability. Participants' voices are presented through selected statements to illustrate how these processes operate within real situations, while the analysis interprets such narratives in relation to project continuity, functionality and maintenance over time.

Stakeholders' Participation and Sustainability of Development Projects

The discussions held across the selected communities' show who took part in project decisions, at which stages they were involved, and how the level and structure of that involvement shaped whether projects were looked after once they were completed.

> A young man from the Ikom discussion group explained: "When it comes to decisions about projects, it is mostly the elders and some strong voices in the community that sit down to decide. We the youths are called sometimes, but our own role is not always strong in the final decision. Even when we speak, it is not everything that is taken seriously, so at the end, we just accept what they have agreed." **(P1, Male,Ikom, 2026)**

Objective two asks how stakeholder participation affects sustainability, and this account shows participation without influence. The phrase "called sometimes" confirms that youths were

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present, but “our own role is not always strong in the final decision” shows where power sat. The closing words, “we just accept what they have agreed”, describe consent given by default and not by choice. That matters for sustainability, because people who accept a decision are less likely to feel responsible for what follows. The speaker also describes a few “strong voices”, which points to influence concentrated in a small group. This is one group’s own view of its position, so it shows perception and not a measured imbalance.

> From the adult male group in Abi, another contributor described how participation occurred across different stages of project development: “We are involved more when the project is about to start, especially during planning and sometimes during execution, but when it comes to monitoring after the project is completed, only a few people are left to handle it. Many people lose interest after the work has been done, so participation reduces as time goes on.” **(P2, Male, Abi, 2026)**

This participant adds the dimension of time, which bears directly on objective two. “Involved more when the project is about to start” places participation at planning and early execution, while “only a few people are left to handle it” shows who carries the burden afterwards. The explanation offered, “many people lose interest after the work has been done”, treats the decline as a loss of motivation and not as a lack of opportunity. That suggests sustainability depends on keeping people engaged after completion, which most projects do not plan for. The account does not say whether any mechanism existed to keep monitoring open to the wider community.

> Among young female groups in Ogoja, participation was described in relation to inclusion and influence, where women were present but not central in decision making processes. One woman shared: “We attend meetings and we talk about what we feel is important, especially issues that concern the home and children,

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> but when decisions are taken, it is mostly the men that decide what will be done. Our own contributions are there, but they do not always carry weight." **(P3, Female, Ogoja, 2026)**

The participant separates attending from deciding, which is the distinction that matters most for objective two. "We attend meetings and we talk" shows active presence, but "it is mostly the men that decide" places the final say elsewhere. Her description of women's concerns, "issues that concern the home and children", suggests that the priorities being set aside are the ones tied to daily life. The phrase "they do not always carry weight" is carefully worded, since it allows that some contributions count. For sustainability, the implication is that projects may miss what women regard as essential, and so attract less commitment from them. This view comes from women in one Local Government Area, so it should not be read as general.

> In Akamkpa, among literate female participants, the discussion brought out concerns about exclusion of vulnerable groups within participation processes. One respondent explained: "Even among us, there are people who are not always carried along, especially those who are not educated or those with challenges. Meetings are held, but not everyone feels free to speak, so some important issues are not raised during discussions." **(P4, Female, Akamkpa, 2026)**

This speaker describes exclusion that remains hidden behind the existence of meetings, which is useful for objective two. "Meetings are held, but not everyone feels free to speak" shows that the opportunity to participate is not the same as being able to use it. She is also speaking about others, "those who are not educated or those with challenges", so her account is second-hand and describes how she saw the exclusion of other people. The consequence she names, "some important issues are not raised", is a loss to the community's picture of its own problems. This

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matters for sustainability because projects shaped without those issues serve fewer people and may be less widely defended. It also sits alongside the experience reported by participants with visual impairment below.

> Among traditional leaders in Ikom, participation was linked directly to project ownership and maintenance, as leaders emphasised that involvement from the beginning influenced how communities treated projects. One of the leaders explained: “When people are part of the discussion from the beginning, they see the project as their own. They will not allow it to spoil because they know how it started and why it was brought. But if they are not involved, they will not take it seriously.” **(P5, Male, Ikom, 2026)**

The leader gives the clearest causal statement in the section for objective two. “They know how it started and why it was brought” suggests that understanding the origin of a project is part of what makes people protect it, so participation works partly by giving people knowledge. The contrast, “if they are not involved, they will not take it seriously”, states the opposite case plainly. Two cautions apply. The speaker holds authority and may prefer to describe community processes as open, and the claim that people “will not allow it to spoil” is a prediction and not an observation of a specific project. It still agrees with what the Ikom youths said about being left out.

> Among participants with visual challenges in Ikom, participation was described as limited, particularly in relation to accessibility and recognition within community discussions. One individual shared: “Sometimes we are present during meetings, but the way discussions are carried out does not favour us. People speak fast,

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> decisions are taken quickly, and we are not always asked for our opinion, so we feel left out in the process." **(P6, Ikom, 2026)**

This participant identifies the barrier in the way meetings are run and not in any decision to exclude. "People speak fast, decisions are taken quickly" describes a format that depends on speed, while "we are not always asked for our opinion" shows that nobody adjusted for that. For objective two, this means participation can be limited by procedure as much as by attitude, so it can be addressed by changing how meetings are held. The closing phrase, "we feel left out in the process", describes the effect on belonging. If these participants feel left out of the decisions, they have less reason to share responsibility for the project. The account is from a very small group and should be read as an illustration.

> Across adult female groups in Obudu, participants explained that when communities were not involved in project decisions, there was a clear decline in commitment toward such projects. One woman described: "There are projects that came without us knowing anything about them, and when they finished, people did not even bother to use them well. Some of them are there now but not working because nobody feels responsible for them." **(P7, Female, Obudu, 2026)**

This account moves from exclusion to its result, which is the link that objective two examines. "Came without us knowing anything about them" describes projects that arrived without any participation at all, and "nobody feels responsible for them" gives the consequence in the plainest terms. The participant also notes "people did not even bother to use them well", which shows that the decline in commitment appeared at the stage of use before any breakdown. "There now but not working" shows that the physical structures survive while their function does not, a

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distinction worth keeping in the analysis. The statement is general and does not identify which projects are meant, so it supports a pattern and not a specific case.

> From Yakurr, among literate male participants, participation was linked directly to long term sustainability, as respondents emphasised that consistent involvement across all stages influenced how projects lasted. One respondent explained: “If people are involved from planning to execution and even monitoring, they will always check on the project and make sure it is working. But when they are only involved at one stage, they may not follow up, and the project can fail after some time.” **(P8, Male, Yakurr, 2026)**

This participant states the argument for sustained participation that the Abi account raised, from the opposite side. “Planning to execution and even monitoring” names the full cycle, and “they will always check on the project” links involvement to follow-up action. The warning, “when they are only involved at one stage, they may not follow up”, matches the Abi description of interest fading after completion. For objective two, this suggests that the stage at which people take part matters, and that involvement ending at execution leaves maintenance without owners. The wording “may not” and “can fail” is cautious, which fits the evidence, since the speaker is describing a likelihood and not a certainty. The account is a view held by one group.

the accounts suggest that stakeholder participation affected sustainability through three features: who was included, how far their views shaped decisions, and whether involvement continued after construction. Participants in Ikom, Ogoja and Obudu described being present without influence, and those with visual impairment and the literate women described barriers to speaking at all. Abi and Yakurr participants stressed that interest fell after completion, leaving upkeep to a few people. Where participants felt involved from the beginning, leaders and others

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linked this to ownership and care of the project, while those excluded described neglect. For the study, this indicates that presence at meetings is not enough: participation supported sustainability when it carried influence and lasted through the project cycle. These conclusions rest on what groups reported about their experience and cannot show how many projects actually failed.

Confirmation of Research Assumption

This section tests the four research assumptions stated in Chapter One against what participants said in the focus group discussions. Because the study is qualitative, an assumption is judged by whether participants' accounts support or contradict it, and not by a statistical test.

ResearchAssumption: *Stakeholders' participation does not provide opportunities for marginalised and less-heard community members to express their needs and perspectives.*

The discussions show that this assumption does not fully hold, but they also show that the opportunity was unequal. Women and youths reported that they attended meetings and spoke (P5, P13), and an Ikom youth said, "Everybody talks about the problems we are facing" (P1). Participation did therefore open a space for expression. However, participants with visual impairment said that "not all of us are given the chance to speak" (P2) and that the pace of meetings left them "left out in the process" (P16). Literate women in Akamkpa said that people who are uneducated or have challenges are not always carried along (P14). Women and youths also said that being heard did not mean being followed, since "it is the elders that decide" (P5). The assumption is therefore rejected in part: participation gave marginalised members a place in discussions, but the less-heard groups did not have equal opportunity to express their needs or to see them reflected in decisions. Participants linked this unevenness to weaker commitment to the projects that followed (P6, P7).

Discussion of Finding

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The findings of this study show that stakeholder participation influenced sustainability through the extent to which different groups were involved in decision making, which shaped how projects were accepted and maintained within the communities. Participants explained that when involvement was broad and inclusive, projects attracted stronger commitment, as people felt connected to the decisions that led to implementation. This aligns with Gaventa (2021), who argued that inclusive participation strengthens legitimacy of development processes and encourages sustained engagement. However, the present study shows that participation was not only about inclusion but about influence, as communities sustained projects where their contributions shaped final decisions. This reinforces Participatory Development Theory by showing that engagement linked directly with sustained project use, though it also indicates that participation must translate into decision influence to affect sustainability.

The study further found that participation varied across project stages, as community members were more involved during planning and implementation but less engaged during monitoring and post completion phases, which weakened sustainability. Participants explained that interest reduced after implementation, leaving responsibility to a few individuals, which affected maintenance over time. This finding is consistent with Williams (2020), who observed that declining participation after project completion weakens long term functionality of development interventions. However, the present study extends this argument by showing that sustainability depends on continuity of participation across all stages rather than initial involvement alone. This challenges the assumption within Participatory Development Theory that early engagement is sufficient, as sustained participation appears necessary for maintaining project functionality.

Another important finding shows that participation was structured along social lines, where certain groups such as elders and community leaders dominated decision processes, while

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women, youths and vulnerable persons had limited influence despite their presence in discussions. Participants explained that this imbalance affected how decisions were made and how projects reflected community needs. This aligns with Agarwal (2020), who argued that participation often reproduces existing power relations within communities. However, the present study demonstrates that such imbalance affects sustainability directly, as projects that do not reflect diverse interests fail to attract collective responsibility. This introduces a critical dimension into Participatory Development Theory by showing that participation must be examined in terms of equity and not only presence.

The findings also revealed that exclusion from decision making weakened community commitment toward projects, as participants explained that projects introduced without adequate involvement were not treated as collective responsibility. This led to weak maintenance and eventual decline of such projects over time. This finding agrees with Cooke and Kothari (2021), who argued that imposed participation or token involvement undermines community ownership and engagement. However, the present study shows that the absence of meaningful participation affects sustainability beyond initial acceptance, as disengagement persists into the maintenance phase. This links directly with Empowerment Theory, which explains that lack of control over decisions reduces responsibility toward outcomes.

The study further shows that participation influenced sustainability through its role in shaping accountability within the community, as participants explained that involvement created a sense of obligation to monitor and maintain projects. Where participation was active, community members checked project conditions and addressed emerging issues, which supported continuity. This finding aligns with Cornwall and Coelho (2022), who linked participatory governance with local accountability mechanisms. However, the present study extends this by showing that

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accountability emerged not only from formal structures but from shared involvement in project processes, which influenced how communities responded to challenges affecting sustainability.

The findings also indicated that stakeholder participation influenced sustainability through its connection with community ownership, as participants explained that involvement created a sense of belonging that encouraged protection and maintenance of projects. Where participation was weak, projects were treated as external interventions and received limited attention after completion. This aligns with Mansuri (2021), who linked participation with ownership and project continuity. However, the present study shows that ownership developed through consistent involvement across stages rather than isolated participation, which strengthens Empowerment Theory by showing that control and responsibility are built over time through engagement. This indicates that stakeholder participation influenced sustainability not only through involvement but through the depth and continuity of that involvement within the project cycle.

Conclusion

Stakeholders' participation supports the sustainability of community development projects in Cross River State only when it carries real influence and lasts beyond construction. Attendance at meetings gives communities a presence, but it does not give them ownership, and ownership is what keeps a project in use once the implementing agency has left. The study therefore concludes that sustainability depends less on whether communities are consulted than on who is allowed to shape decisions and who stays responsible afterwards. Where influence stays with a few leaders and involvement end at completion, projects are likely to be completed but not maintained.

Recommendations

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Government agencies and non-governmental organisations should make inclusive participation a condition of every community development project, with women, youths and persons with disabilities holding a real say in project committees. These stakeholders should keep defined roles in monitoring and maintenance after completion. Meetings should also be run in ways that let every member follow and contribute.

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