**EVALUATING CITIZEN’S ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES AS A STRATEGIC CATALYST FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

**ABSTRACT**

Community development is an inherent shared responsibility between the government and the citizens. To achieve a meaningful and sustainable development at the grassroots level requires active participation and initiative from both parties. In Nigerian, the persistent state of underdevelopment across many communities can be attributed, in part, to the limited involvement of citizens in initiating and sustaining development-oriented programs. This study explores the strategic role of citizen engagement initiatives in catalyzing sustainable community development in Nigeria with a particular focus on how individuals within communities can spark transformative change; a citizen may champion local development by mobilizing resources to establish a vocational training center, launching a private enterprise that generates employment, or forming a community-based organization that addresses local needs. This study is anchored on participatory development theory to explain the need for citizen to participate in the development of their community and not merely as beneficiaries but as active agents in the planning, execution, and monitoring of development projects. The paper made use of qualitative methods of data collection and content analysis of scholarly literature was used to explore citizen engagement initiatives as a catalyst for sustainable community development in Nigeria. The paper finds that citizen-led initiatives serve as powerful catalysts for transformation, promoting community ownership, accountability, and long-term sustainability. The paper further reveals that limited grassroots participation, socio-economic constraints and weak institutional frameworks remain significant barriers to effective community development. However, where citizens actively engage and where community-based organizations are there is evidence of improved development outcomes and stronger communal cohesion. The study concludes that enhancing citizen initiated programs, strengthening participatory structures, and creating collaborative governance between state and citizen are essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable development in Nigerian communities.

**Keywords;** Citizen, Citizen Engagement, Initiative, Strategies, Sustainable, Community Development

**INTRODUCTION**

Development tends to be systematic; it emanates from the local and advances to the national level. In Nigeria, development has been worrisome, and scholars have looked into various variables to explain the underdevelopment of Nigeria, depicting her richness in natural resources. Many of the Nigerian thinkers that took cognitive measures to explain the mystery behind the underdevelopment of Nigeria have narrowed it to the corruption that encapsulates our governmental system (Ovwasa & Onimisi, 2021; Usman, Deepali, and Kabiru, 2018: Raheem 2014; Uche & Uche, 2014; Mohammad, 2010). Yet few concerns have been made on how underdevelopment of Nigeria can be traced to a lack of citizens initiating developmental programs in their community. Nigeria is not only blessed with natural resources but has also been blessed with resourceful men whose impact is yet to be felt in their community. Usman, Deepali, and Kabiru (2018) express how important it is for community members to participate in the developmental programs of their communities. If development is viewed as a collective responsibility, citizens will actively be involved. But in Nigeria, development is only viewed as government functions.

Development in any community is determined by the level of involvement of the immediate citizenry who come together as a community to achieve common goals (Usman et al., 2018). Mohammad (2010), as cited in Usman et al. (2018), explained further that people's participation is an indispensable element for effective community development. People's participation cannot be dispensed with in development efforts (Mohammad, 2010). These show how important it is for Nigerian citizens to see development as their responsibility. Permit me to say this: there is a Yoruba proverb that says, Agbajo owo la fin soya, Ajeji owo kan ko gbe eru de ori.” Meaning “one hand cannot lift a load; it takes two or more hands to lift it.” This proverb literally explains that development has a collective responsibility; government is the first hand and citizens are the second hand, as this proverb implies.

The term citizen initiation in this paper emphasizes the execution of community development programme initiated by members of the community. Historically, Ovwasa & Onimisi (2021), Raheem (2014), and Uche & Uche (2014) traced the trends of community development in Nigeria from 1946 during the colonial rule. They also traced it to the activities of non-governmental organizations that sprang up immediately after political independence in 1960 and the protest against military regimes by civil society organizations from 1966 to 1999. In fact, the Centre for Constitutional Governance the initiative of late Dr. Beko Ramsom Kuti was among the first vibrant Nongovernmental organizations that campaigned against the military, unconstitutional government and the need for community development in Nigeria. These shows that little or no effort has been made on the need for citizens to initiate development in their community geared towards achieving a developmental state and federation (Nigeria). This paper is concerned majorly with creating conscious effort in the hearts of Nigerians to look inwardly to what they can give back to their community to enhance development in their community and Nigeria as a whole.

**Purpose of the Paper**

The purpose of this paper, as it aligns with the central theme of this study, is to show:

1. Factors that limit citizen participation in community development in Nigeria;

2. The influence of citizen initiation on community development in Nigeria; and

3. How citizens can initiate development in their communities.

The above aimed to explore both the impact and the limitations of citizen-driven efforts on Nigeria’s developmental challenges.

**CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

**Citizen**   
The concept of citizen extends beyond legal identity to encompass active participation in civic and communal life. In the context of development as it relates to this paper, a citizen is not merely a recipient of state services but a co-creator of societal progress. As Ovwasa and Onimisi (2021) emphasize, true development occurs when citizens engage in shaping their environments through collective action and responsibility. This paper proffers Nigerian citizens as agents of change in driving sustainable community and led development in their communities.

**Initiation**   
Initiation in this paper and in relation to community development in Nigeria refers to the proactive commencement of actions or projects aimed at improving communal well-being. It signifies the shift from passive expectation to active engagement. According to Raheem (2014), sustainable development is often rooted in local initiatives that emerge from within the community rather than being imposed externally. This paper argues that encouraging such grassroots initiation fosters ownership, relevance, and long-term impact in development efforts.

**Catalyst**   
A catalyst in development refers to any factor or agent that accelerates change without being consumed in the process. Citizens can serve as catalysts when their actions inspire broader participation and drive community transformation. Uche and Uche (2014) noted that individual and collective grassroots efforts often trigger ripple effects, motivating others and prompting institutional responses. In this sense, citizens are not just participants but vital sparks for sustainable development.

**Development**  
The concept of development is subject to diverse’ interpretation or definition, and it is a difficult concept to give a specific definition. According to UNDP (2004), development is a form of social change involving new concepts in a social system to improve people's livelihoods. While, according to Oduaran (1994), development implies some form of change, usually from a prior bad or poor condition to a better one. Some of the notable African men also give definition to the concept of development; for instance, Nyerere (1978) maintained that development is summed up as man's capacity to expand his own consciousness and, therefore, his power over himself, his environment, and his society. To him (Nyerere, 1978), man is the central peg around which development revolves. Hence he concluded that development is for man, by man, and of man.   
Development implies change in different capacities; this means that man is not only the recipient or beneficiary of development efforts but must also initiate the effort to develop himself (Usman et al., 2021). In other words, the opportunities created by development are generated or induced through human efforts. Man must show the desire to develop before development can come. Besides, true development is that which leads to expansion and growth of man's inner qualities, as submitted by Usman et al. (2021). Put in another way, development must raise man’s ability to dominate himself, become less dependent and more proficient in what he is doing, and become critical in outlook.

**Community development**

The primary purpose of community development is to bring about change for better living within the community. As has been observed, because this can be deliberately induced or willingly modified by the people themselves, community development remains an object or tool for purposive change. It is the tool for involving people in their communities to help their own economic and social conditions and thereby to become effective working groups in programmes of their national development (Anyanwu, 2009).

Nwankwo (2011) posited that community development means better living both materially and socially. It can be said that community development is a process whereby people are taught to improve themselves not only by doing things together but also by planning together with a view to providing the actual techniques for doing the job or finding suitable solutions to their problems. Ugochukwu (2010) conceived community development as a “restructuring mechanism directed at the economic and social bases in order to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the rural masses and to promote individual and collective energy to participate in the process of development. This further involves a host of multi-sectorial activities, including improvement of agriculture, the promotion of industries, creation of required infrastructure and social overhead, and the establishment of a decentralized structure to allow mass participation.

The issues this definition highlighted clearly illustrate community development as deliberated by people, need- and aspiration-driven, anticipatory improvement, and sustainability over time. This accentuates Arnold's opinion that community development is not a haphazard venture but rather systematic initiatives well thought out (Adejumobi, 2010). Hillman (1960), however, has defined community development as the method of helping local communities to become aware of their resources in such a way as to satisfy some of their needs and, in so doing, acquire the attitudes, experiences, and cooperative skills for repeating this process using their own initiatives.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Studies have been conducted on citizen engagement as a vehicle for sustainable community development in Nigeria. Scholars such as Mohammad (2010), Uche and Uche (2014), Raheem (2014), Zayyanu (2016), Usman, Deepali, and Kabiru (2018), Makinde & Olabode (2019), and Ovwasa & Onimisi (2021) have made a quality contribution to the discussion around community development and citizen participation. However, there is a growing body of research that explores the transformative role of citizen-led initiatives. Usman, Deepali, and Kabiru (2018) argue that the success of any developmental intervention hinges largely on the extent to which citizens are engaged not as passive beneficiaries but as proactive stakeholders. They maintain that people’s participation is an “indispensable element” for any meaningful progress in community development efforts.

Uche and Uche (2014) view citizen engagement as a catalyst, a spark that initiates a ripple effect in community transformation. Their work highlights how grassroots initiatives often outlive externally imposed projects due to their rootedness in local needs and ownership. Raheem (2014) adds to this by tracing the historical significance of citizen action in Nigeria, noting that civil society movements and local associations have frequently stepped in to fill governance and developmental gaps, particularly during periods of political instability.

Despite these insights, literature still identifies significant barriers to citizen participation in Nigeria, including socio-economic constraints, weak institutional frameworks, and a pervasive perception that development is the exclusive responsibility of the government (Mohammad, 2010; Usman et al., 2018). These challenges have stifled the full potential of citizen engagement, reducing it to sporadic acts rather than a strategic, sustained practice.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper is anchored on participatory development theory developed by Paulo Freire in 1970. Paulo Freire is widely credited with propounding the theory of participatory development, particularly through his concept of "Participatory Communication Theory". This theory emphasizes dialogue and two-way communication as key components of development, allowing individuals to actively participate in decisions that affect their lives. Freire's work, which gained prominence in the 1970s, highlighted the importance of empowering marginalized communities and facilitating their active participation in development processes. He argued that development should not be a top-down process but rather a collaborative one where people are involved in the planning and implementation of change. His ideas influenced the rise of participatory action research, which focuses on creating learning environments where people can express their needs and contribute to their own development. In essence, Freire's participatory development theory shifted the focus from traditional, top-down development approaches to a more collaborative, people-centered model.

This study aligns closely with Paulo Freire’s participatory development theory, as it advocates for the active engagement of Nigerian citizens in initiating and executing community development efforts. Freire’s emphasis on dialogue, empowerment, and bottom-up change mirrors the paper’s core argument that sustainable development in Nigeria cannot be achieved through government efforts alone but requires the collective participation of community members. By positioning citizens as key agents rather than passive recipients, the study echoes Freire’s call for inclusive development driven by those directly affected. This theoretical framework reinforces the need to create consciousness among Nigerians to take ownership of development at the grassroots level.

**METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION**

This paper adopts qualitative content analysis, as the concept under discussion is well-researched by some notable scholars. In this paper, data were obtained from secondary sources of data collection, which include related books, journals, reports, newspapers, and published documents. The study systematically examined scholarly literature to explore citizens’ involvement in community development and how it has addressed development in Nigeria. The study identifies meanings related to citizen initiation programs, community development, and development in Nigeria.

**THE FACTORS THAT LIMIT CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

There are numerous factors that limit the involvement of citizens to initiate development in their community. Below are certain factors that have discovered in this paper:

**1. Socio-Economic Constraints**

Although Nigerians have been victims of an attitude of not giving back to their community, nonetheless, socioeconomic constraints contribute to their low level of involvement in initiating developmental programmes in their community. Many Nigerians are trapped in the daily struggle for survival, rendering them less inclined to engage in community-driven initiatives. According to Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012), poverty diminishes the capacity of citizens to make a meaningful contribution to development processes. This economic strain disproportionately affects rural populations, where subsistence living and lack of access to basic social services dominate daily life (Ovwigho, 2014).

**2. Weak Institutional Frameworks**

Development has been proscribed as the function of government and NGOs, but little consideration has been given to how individual citizens can initiate development in their communities. The institutional backbone required to support participatory development is often frail or altogether absent in many Nigerian communities. The lack of effective local governance structures combined with poor coordination mechanisms between the community and local government weakens the platform for citizens to organize and influence decision-making. As Eme and Onyishi (2014) point out, the absence of well-established participatory frameworks leads to exclusion and disempowerment, particularly among marginalized groups.

**3. Pervasive Perception that Development is the Exclusive Responsibility of the Government**

Nigerians have seen development as the sole responsibility of government actors. This mentality has been reinforced over decades by centralized governance practices and top-down policy implementations. Adekoya (2014) notes that many Nigerians remain passive recipients of development rather than proactive participants due to this entrenched belief. The status of development in Nigeria can be attributed to this perception.

**4. Lackadaisical Attitude**

Closely related to the previous point is the general apathy or indifference among citizens, which further hampers participation in community development. This attitude is often rooted in historical disappointments and unfulfilled promises by government officials, creating a sense of futility around communal efforts. As stated by Abegunde (2009), the disinterest in public affairs among citizens is symptomatic of a broader crisis of trust and social cohesion, leading to disengagement from civic responsibilities.

**5. Corruption at the Community Level**

While much attention is often given to corruption at the national level, community-level corruption is equally detrimental to participatory development. Misappropriation of communal funds, nepotism in community leadership, and lack of accountability in local projects discourage citizens from contributing their resources or time.

**THE INFLUENCE OF CITIZEN INITIATION ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

The level by which citizens initiate development in Nigerian communities is very low, and below are the influences of citizen initiation on community development in Nigeria.

**1. Local Relevance and Problem Identification:** Local governments are created to monitor and administrate local activities geared toward providing basic amenities in the locality and promoting grassroots development. Nonetheless, these functions are not the sole responsibility of the local government, but citizens can also initiate projects that reflect on the community’s most pressing needs.

**2. Sense of Ownership and Accountability:** When citizens lead development efforts, they are more likely to maintain and sustain the outcomes due to personal and communal investment. The local infrastructure and development are for the local consumption, but when a certain project or programmes is initiated by the community members, such project tends to be durable because it will be well managed by the community.

**3. Social Cohesion and Collective Action:** Citizen Participation strengthens community bonds, encourages teamwork, and builds trust among members.

**4. Empowerment and Democratic Participation:** More likely on the above influences, initiatives enhance civic consciousness, giving individuals a voice and enabling grassroots democracy.  
5. Supplementation of Government Efforts: Citizen-driven projects often fill critical gaps left by government inaction or inefficiency.

**HOW CITIZENS CAN INITIATE DEVELOPMENT IN THEIR COMMUNITIES**

Summarily, on this part of the paper, let me briefly discuss some basic and practical ways citizens can initiate development in their communities.

**1. Form Community-Based Organizations (CBOs):** Nigeria is blessed with lots of wealthy and responsible citizens that can form a community-based organization with the intention of deliberating on how the community can be developed alongside the local agencies and the community leaders in place. Community-based organizations such as creating local groups that focus on development goals like education, health, sanitation, or infrastructure.

**2. Initiate Volunteer Programs:** A responsible citizen can set up clean-up drives, literacy programs, youth mentorship schemes, or health outreach events in their communities. It is high time for Nigerians to look inwardly at what they can contribute to their communities to warrant development across the nation of Nigeria.

**3. Partner with NGOs and the Private Sector:** Lastly, in this paper, citizens can seek collaboration with external organizations for technical support, training, or funding to coordinate and execute certain progrmmes for the development of their community and Nigeria.

**CONCLUSION**

Development initiation in Nigeria has been one-sided; this paper therefore raises consciousness in the hearts of Nigerians to take an active part in determining the status of development in this country (Nigeria). Citizen initiation plays an important role in driving sustainable community development in Nigeria because when individuals take ownership of development, projects tend to reflect local needs and are more impactful. The bottom-up of this approach is that it fosters accountability, empowerment, and social cohesion. Although there are certain challenges that can limit citizens’ involvement in community development. Therefore, this paper then concludes by recommending strengthening citizen participation as an essential need for achieving long-lasting progress and development at the grassroots level.

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