**CITIZEN’S ENGAGEMENT AS A CATALYST FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN AKUNGBA AKOKO ONDO STATE, NIGERIA**

**ABSTRACT**

Community development is an inherent shared responsibility between the government and the citizens. Nigeria has been riddled with several factors associated with her underdevelopment. Therefore, this study argues that to achieve meaningful and sustainable development at the grassroots level requires active participation and initiative from both the government and the citizen. Underdevelopment across many communities in Nigeria can be attributed, in part, to the limited involvement of citizens in initiating and sustaining development-oriented programs. This study is anchored on participatory development theory to explain the need for citizens to participate in the development of their community, not merely as beneficiaries but as active agents in the planning, execution, and monitoring of development projects. The paper made use of quantitative methods of data collection whereby a structured questionnaire was used to elicit information from 97 respondents in Akungba Akoko using a purposive sampling technique. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, the study found that 60.8% of respondents agreed strongly that citizen-led initiatives like the recent streetlight project inspired wider community participation, while 57.7% believed such projects enhance sustainability, 54.6% indicated that citizen efforts aid community ownership, and 57.7% agreed that they address immediate local needs. Nonetheless, barriers such as inadequate awareness (52.5%), political apathy (50.5%), and financial constraints (61.9%) were identified as limiting factors. To strengthen the findings, a one-sample t-test was conducted, which showed a t-value of 9.48, which was greater than the critical value of 2.015 at 0.05 significance levels, which led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The study concludes and recommends that enhancing citizen-initiated programs, strengthening participatory structures, and creating collaborative governance between government 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). 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). 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. 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 with a focus on Akungba Akoko Ondo state, Nigeria.

 **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 Akungba Akoko Ondo State, Nigeria; and

2. The influence of citizen initiation on community development in Akungba Akoko Ondo state, Nigeria

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

**Research Questions**

In a pitch to achieve the purpose of this paper, the following research questions are formulated:

1. What are the factors that limit citizen participation in community development in Akungba Akoko Ondo State, Nigeria?

2. What are the influences of citizen initiation on community development in Akungba Akoko Ondo State, Nigeria?

 **Hypothesis**

 A null hypothesis is formulated in this study and tested at 0.05 level of significant.

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between community development and citizen initiative in Akungba Akoko, Ondo state, Nigeria.

 **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

**Citizen**

Citizen as a concept 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.

**Development**

The concept of development is subject to diverse’ interpretation or definition, and it are 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, 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. 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 programs of their national development.

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-sectoral 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 (Abegunde, 2009). 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 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. The growing body of research 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 that sparks a ripple effect in community transformation, as their work highlighted those grassroots initiatives often outlive external 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.
However, literature still identified that there exist some notabe barriers to citizen participation in Nigeria, which include socio-economic constraints, weak institutional frameworks, and a pervasive perception that development is the exclusive responsibility of the government (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.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 explained with participatory development that was developed by Paulo Freire back in the 1970s. The key idea of this theory was that development works best when people can actually participate and have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Freire, in his theory, believed that development should not only be a one-way approach, where only the government is expected to pilot programs and initiatives that address the developmental state of the nation. However, development should be a two-way or dual responsibility where everyone works together to figure out the best way to make positive changes. The idea gained prominence in the 1970s because he showed how important it is to empower people and orient citizens on the impact of their initiation on their community development. He said development should be a collaborative effort, where the community members are involved from formulation and implementation that brings changes. This paper follows Freire's participatory development theory as it argues that for Nigeria to develop, the government needs the citizens to be involved and take ownership of the process.

**METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a descriptive survey design, which involves a selected sample from a population. Akungba Akoko in Akoko South-West Local Government Area of Ondo state was purposively selected as the study area because it presents rich tapestry of citizen-led initiatives, dormant and communal efforts in the community. Moreover, Akungba Akoko has witnessed both governmental and non-governmental developmental activities, which positions it as a microcosm of the Nigerian local development scene. The population for the study comprised 100 respondents which were purposively selected among the dwellers of Akungba Akoko in Akoko South-West Local Government Area of Ondo state of whom 97 of the questionnaire were retrieved for the study. The instrument used to gather data collection for this study was a structured questionnaire with 11-items constructed to elicit responses on the objective of the paper. The instrument employed a four-point Likert scale; Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1) and validity and reliability was a core part of the methodological process. Two experts in political science validate the instrument to make sure the questions were clear, relevant, and matched the study's focus. Reliability test was conducted to check if the questionnaire gives consistent results over time. 0.89 is the reliability result which shows that the questionnaire is reliable. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, with the mean serving as the main statistical tool. Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).
**3.50 – 4.00 =** Strongly Agree

**2.50 – 3.49 =** Agree

**1.50 – 2.49 =** Disagree

**1.00 – 1.49** = Strongly Disagree

**RESULT**

**Table 1: Factors that Limit Citizen Participation in Community Development in Akungba Akoko, Ondo State.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **S/N** | **Statement** | **Strongly Agree** | **Agree** | **Disagree** | **Strongly Disagree** | **Mean** | **Remarks** |
| 1 | Citizens ‘limit their involvement in community development projects because of lack of adequate information. |  Frequency 24 Percentage (24.7%) |  Frequency 27 Percentage (27.8%) |  Frequency15 Percentage (15.5%) |  Frequency 12 Percentage (12.4%) | 3.37 | Agree |
| 2 | Political apathy limit the involvement of citizens in community development in Akungba Akoko |  Frequency 24 Percentage (24.7%) | Frequency 25 Percentage (25.8%) | Frequency 19 Percentage (19.6%) | Frequency 10 Percentage (10.3%) | 3.35 | Agree |
| 3 | Financial constraints limit individuals from contributing meaningfully to community projects in Akungba Akoko | Percentage26 Frequency (26.8%) | Percentage34 Frequency (35.1%) | Percentage10 Frequency (10.3%) | Percentage10 Frequency (10.3%) | 3.58 | Strongly Agree |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 4 | Traditional leaders and elites limit individual participation in Akungba Akoko. | Frequency 18 Percentage (18.6%) | Frequency 33 Percentage (34.0%) | Frequency 12 Percentage (12.4%) | Frequency 17 Percentage (17.5%) | 3.24 | Agree |
| 5 | Lack of trust in local leaders discourages citizens from initiating or supporting development efforts. | Frequency 34 Percentage (35.1%) | Frequency 23 Percentage (23.7%) | Frequency 8 Percentage (8.2%) | Frequency 14 Percentage (14.4%) | 3.57 | Strongly Agree |

**Source: Field Survey, 2025**

The data analysis in this table highlights several factors that limit citizen participation in community development in Akungba Akoko. Twenty-four respondents (24.7%) showed their decision to strongly agree, and 27 (27.8%) agreed that a lack of adequate information and awareness limits community involvement, with a mean of 3.37, which indicates general agreement. while, 49 respondents (50.5%) acknowledged political apathy as a major impediment to participation, with a mean of 3.35, suggesting that citizens often feel disconnected or disillusioned with their local governance. Moreover, 26 (26.8%) showed financial constraints were the most agreed-upon limitation, and 34 (35.1%) agreed. This yielded a high mean of 3.58, indicating strong agreement that economic hardship restricts people from contributing to development efforts. In terms of governance dynamics, 33 respondents (34.0%) agreed and 18 (18.6%) strongly agreed that traditional elites dominate decision-making, excluding ordinary citizens (mean = 3.24). Nonetheless 34 respondents (35.1%) strongly agreed and 23 (23.7%) agreed that distrust in local leadership was a huge factors that limit citizen to initiate development in their community.

**Table 2: Influence of Citizen Initiation on Community Development in Akungba Akoko, Ondo State**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **S/N** | **Statement** | **Strongly Agree** | **Agree** | **Disagree** | **Strongly Disagree** | **Mean** | **Remarks** |
| 1 | The recent street light installation, positively impact local living conditions in Akungba Akoko. | Frequency  12 Percentages (102.4%) | Frequency 28 Percentage (28.9%) | Frequency 27 Percentage (27.8%) | Frequency 10 Percentage (10.3%) | 3.05 | Agree |
| 2 | Initiative led by citizens creates a stronger sense of ownership in the community. | Frequency 27 Percentage (27.8%) | Frequency 26 Percentage (26.8%) | Frequency 20 Percentage (20.6%) | Frequency 4Percentage (4.1%) | 3.54 | Strongly Agree |
| 3 | Immediate and most relevant needs of the Akungba Akoko community are led by the citizen. | Frequency 20  Percentage (20.6%) | Frequency 36  Percentage (37.1%) | Frequency 16 Percentage (16.5%) | Frequency 8  Percentage (8.2%) | 3.45 | Agree |
| 4 | The deficiency of government in the community can be addressed by citizen involvement in development. | Frequency 18 Percentage (18.6%) | Frequency 26 Percentage (26.8%) | Frequency 19 Percentage (19.6%) | Frequency 12 Percentage (12.4%) | 3.20 | Agree |
| 5 | The street light project initiated by a community member motivated other residents in Akungba Akoko | Frequency 30  Percentage (30.9%) | Frequency 29 Percentage (29.9%) | Frequency 12 Percentage (12.4%) | Frequency 11 Percentage (11.3%) | 3.57 | Strongly Agree |
| 6 | Initiations by citizen are durable in Akungba Akoko | Frequency 30  Percentage (30.9%) | Frequency 26 Percentage (26.8%) | Frequency 17 Percentage (17.5%) | Frequency 9 Percentage (9.3%) | 3.53 | Strongly Agree |

**Source; Field survey, 2025**

The data analyzed revealed that positive perception of citizen-led initiatives drives community development in Akungba Akoko as 40 respondents (41.3%) agreed strongly that citizen-initiated projects like the recent street light installation have positively impacted living conditions. Moreover, 53 respondents (54.6%) affirmed this view also while 56 respondents (57.7%) believed that citizen-led initiatives often address the most immediate and relevant community needs. Furthermore, 44 respondents (45.4%) agreed that active citizen involvement helps bridge the gap between the people and government (mean = 3.20). The most strongly supported statement was that the streetlight project has inspired other residents, with 59 respondents (60.8%) agreed with mean value of 3.57. fifty-six respondents (57.7%) felt that citizen-led projects are more sustainable due to their alignment with community priorities (mean = 3.53).

**Table 3**: **One-Sample t-Test Result on the Relationship between Citizen Initiative and Community Development**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variable** | **N** | **Mean (M)** | **Test Value (μ)** | **Std. Deviation (SD)** | **Std. Error Mean** | **t-value** | **df** | **Sig. (2-tailed)** | **Decision** |
| Citizen Initiative & Community Development | 6 | 3.39 | 2.50 | 0.23 | 0.0939 | 9.48 | 5 | 0.000 | Reject H₀ (Significant) |

**Source; Field survey, 2025**

The one-sample t-test shows that the observed mean score of **3.39** for citizen initiative is significantly higher than the test value of **2.50** (t = **9.48**, p < 0.05). Therefore, we **reject the null hypothesis**, concluding that there is a **significant relationship between community development and citizen initiative** in Akungba Akoko, Ondo State.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study affirmed that citizen initiative drives community development in Akungba Akoko, particularly through locally initiated projects such as street lighting. The responses indicated strongly that such initiatives improve living conditions, aid community ownership and motivate broader participation in development activities. This was supported by Ojuah (2012), who argued that community development is most effective when citizens actively unite to drive it, rather than relying solely on government interventions. The practical involvement of residents in initiating and executing development projects, as shown in this study, reflected Oyebamiji & Adekola's (2008) view that community organization functions as a coordinated human network, which, when mobilized effectively, can realize shared goals.
This study is in line with Wami (2022), who described community development as an integrative process that involves both governmental support and grassroots participation. The findings in this study lined with what the United Nations Development Programme found back in 2004 when the community gets involved, the projects tend to do better and last longer. Although some other studies have shown that a community's culture might not be the biggest factor in how much people participate but placed emphases on other, things like poverty, and poor leadership can be bigger obstacles.

**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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