



Research Paper

## Community Engagement and Infrastructural Development in Rural Communities of Delta State

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### Abstract

The condition of social and economic infrastructures in rural communities of Delta State raises issues among policy makers and the academia alike. This study examined community engagement and rural infrastructure development in selected rural communities in Delta State, Nigeria, with a focus on rural road construction programmes and rural water supply projects. The study was motivated by the persistent challenges of inadequate infrastructure and limited community participation in rural development initiatives. Adopting the Participatory Theory as its theoretical foundation, the study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. Data were collected through interviews from twenty-seven purposively selected respondents, including community leaders, youth and women representatives, and local government officials across nine rural communities. Both primary and secondary data sources were utilised, and data were analysed using qualitative content analysis involving coding, categorisation, and thematic interpretation. The findings revealed that community engagement in rural infrastructure development is moderate and largely limited to consultation rather than active participation in decision-making processes. While community members are often consulted through meetings, final decisions are typically made by traditional leaders and government officials, reflecting a top-down approach. Participation was found to be stronger during the implementation stage, where community members contributed labour and monitored projects. However, the study also found that women, youth, and less-informed members are often excluded from meaningful participation due to socio-cultural and structural constraints. Despite these limitations, effective consultation was found to enhance community ownership and improve project sustainability. The study concludes that strengthening inclusive, bottom-up participation and improving communication mechanisms are essential for enhancing the advancement and development of rural infrastructure in Delta State. The study thus, recommend that;government and development agencies should adopt bottom-up approaches that empower communities beyond mere consultation but also include improved awareness, communication, and collaboration with NGOs that can enhance community ownership and sustainability of rural projects.

**Keywords:** Community Engagement, Rural Development, Infrastructure Development, Participation, Delta State

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### I. Introduction

Community engagement and rural development are pivotal concepts in the discourse of sustainable development, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria where rural areas constitute a significant portion of the national population and landmass. Community engagement refers to the process by which communities are actively involved in the decision-making, planning, implementation, and evaluation of development initiatives that affect their well-being (Wright et al., 2020). It embodies the principles of participation,

empowerment, ownership, and partnership, which are essential for the success and sustainability of rural development programs. Rural development, on the other hand, is a multidimensional process aimed at improving the economic, social, and environmental conditions of people living in rural areas (Akinbile, 2019).

It encompasses a wide range of activities including infrastructure development, agricultural productivity, education, healthcare, social services, and local governance. In Nigeria, rural communities are often characterised by poor infrastructure, limited access to quality education and healthcare, high levels of poverty, and limited economic opportunities. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2020), over 50% of Nigeria's population resides in rural areas, and these regions are disproportionately affected by underdevelopment and marginalisation. Delta State, located in the southern region of Nigeria, is no exception. Many rural communities in the state continue to grapple with challenges such as inadequate road networks, lack of potable water, poor healthcare facilities, and limited educational resources (Okeke & Adeyemi, 2021).

The importance of community engagement in rural development has been increasingly recognised by scholars, policymakers, and development practitioners. Effective community engagement ensures that development interventions are tailored to the actual needs and priorities of rural dwellers, thereby increasing the likelihood of their success and sustainability (Ibeanu, 2018). Moreover, it fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members, which is crucial for the maintenance and sustainability of development projects. In the Nigerian context, the failure of many rural development initiatives can be attributed to the lack of meaningful community participation. Development programs are often designed and implemented in a top-down manner without adequate consultation and involvement of the target beneficiaries (Ojo, 2017). Issues surrounding community engagement and rural development in Nigeria are multifaceted and deeply rooted in historical, socio-political, and economic factors. One of the major challenges is the lack of political will and commitment from government authorities to genuinely involve rural communities in development processes. Despite the existence of policies and frameworks that emphasise participatory development, such as the National Policy on Community Development, implementation has been weak and inconsistent (Nweke & Orji, 2022). Bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and lack of accountability further hinder the effectiveness of community engagement efforts. Another significant issue is the low capacity of rural communities to effectively participate in development processes. Many rural dwellers lack the necessary skills, education, and organisational structures to engage meaningfully with development actors (Omotola & Olanrewaju, 2019). This is compounded by issues such as gender inequality, cultural barriers, and lack of access to information, which further marginalise certain groups within rural communities, particularly women and youth. Additionally, the absence of functional local governance structures and community-based organisations limits the ability of rural communities to mobilise resources and articulate their development needs (Agbo & Okoye, 2020). The role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and international development agencies in promoting community engagement in rural development cannot be overstated. These actors often serve as intermediaries between rural communities and the government, facilitating dialogue, capacity building, and resource mobilisation. For instance, NGOs have been instrumental in promoting participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques, which enable communities to identify and prioritise their development needs (Ayoola et al., 2021).

Similarly, donor agencies such as the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have supported various community-driven development (CDD) initiatives in Nigeria, including in Delta State, with varying degrees of success. It is also important to consider the impact of decentralisation and local governance on community engagement and rural development. The Nigerian Constitution provides for a three-tier system of government, with local governments expected to play a critical role in rural development. However, the reality on the ground reveals that local governments are often weak, under-resourced, and subject to political interference from higher levels of government (Olowu & Ayo, 2019). This has limited their effectiveness in facilitating community engagement and implementing development projects at the grassroots level. In many cases, local government officials lack the capacity and resources to engage communities in meaningful ways or to respond effectively to their development needs. In recent years, there has been growing interest in the concept of social accountability as a mechanism for enhancing community engagement and improving the effectiveness of rural development programs. Social accountability refers to the processes through which citizens hold public officials and service providers accountable for their actions and performance (Uzochukwu et al., 2020). Tools such as community scorecards, public expenditure tracking surveys, and citizen report cards have been employed in various contexts to promote transparency, participation, and accountability in rural development. These tools have shown promise in empowering rural communities to demand better services and hold duty bearers accountable, thereby contributing to more responsive and effective development interventions. Furthermore, the role of technology and digital platforms in enhancing community engagement in rural development is an emerging area of interest. Mobile phones, social media, and other information and

communication technologies (ICTs) offer new opportunities for rural communities to access information, communicate with development actors, and participate in decision-making processes (Adesina, 2022). In Delta State, there have been efforts to leverage digital tools for community mapping, needs assessment, and feedback collection, although these initiatives are still in their nascent stages and face challenges related to digital literacy, infrastructure, and affordability. The study examined community engagement in rural road construction projects and rural water supply projects in rural communities in Delta State. What is the level of community engagement in road construction projects and rural water supply projects in rural communities in Delta State?

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **Participatory Development Theory**

Participatory Development Theory emerged in the late 20th century as a powerful alternative to traditional top-down development models that often excluded the voices of local communities. The theory is grounded in the belief that sustainable development cannot be achieved without the full and active involvement of the people who are most affected by development initiatives. One of the pioneering thinkers associated with this approach is Robert Chambers, a British development scholar who, in the 1980s, critically analysed mainstream development practices and introduced concepts like putting the last first and participatory rural appraisal. Chambers (1983) advocated for shifting the focus of development from the central government or external experts to the people at the grassroots, arguing that development should be people-centred and not imposed from above. His work significantly shaped the principles and practice of participatory development, making him widely acknowledged as one of the foundational figures or "father" of Participatory Development Theory. The historical context that led to the rise of Participatory Development Theory is rooted in the failures of post-colonial development interventions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s. These interventions were largely based on Western-centric economic growth models, which often resulted in widened inequality and marginalisation of the rural poor. By the 1980s, it became increasingly evident that development could not be successful or sustainable without involving local populations in the design, planning, implementation, and evaluation of projects meant to improve their lives. This recognition paved the way for participatory approaches that value local knowledge, collective decision-making, empowerment, and mutual learning between stakeholders (Chambers, 1994). The core principles of Participatory Development Theory include empowerment, ownership, inclusiveness, mutual respect, and capacity building. Empowerment refers to enabling individuals and communities to gain control over decisions and resources that affect their lives. Ownership implies that communities take responsibility for their own development, thereby enhancing sustainability.

Inclusiveness ensures that all segments of society, including women, youth, and marginalised groups, are given equal opportunity to participate. Mutual respect encourages dialogue between local communities and external development actors, recognising the value of indigenous knowledge systems. Capacity building involves enhancing the skills and knowledge of community members to take active roles in development processes (Oakley, 1991). In applying this theory to the current study, *Community Engagement and Rural Development in Nigeria: A Study of Selected Rural Communities in Delta State*, Participatory Development Theory offers a solid conceptual framework for understanding the role of community involvement in shaping rural development outcomes. The theory is particularly relevant because the study investigates how local communities engage in rural development initiatives, the challenges they face, and the effectiveness of such engagement. By drawing from the participatory lens, the study foregrounds the importance of involving community members in identifying their needs, prioritising development goals, implementing projects, and evaluating outcomes. This participatory process is essential for promoting ownership, reducing dependency, and enhancing the relevance and impact of development interventions. In the Nigerian context, especially in rural areas of Delta State, the lack of participatory mechanisms in governance and development planning has contributed to the persistent underdevelopment of local communities. Projects are often planned and executed using a top-bottom approach, where decisions are made at the federal or state level without adequate input from the rural populace. This has led to the implementation of projects that do not reflect the genuine needs or priorities of the communities, resulting in waste, abandonment, and lack of sustainability. Participatory Development Theory addresses this issue by advocating for the integration of community voices and perspectives in all stages of the development process. When community members are involved, they are more likely to support and sustain development projects because they feel a sense of belonging and responsibility. Furthermore, the theory underscores the necessity of strengthening local institutions, including community-based organisations, village councils, and cooperatives, to enhance participation and coordination. These structures serve as platforms for dialogue, decision-making, and accountability, making them critical to the success of rural development. In Delta State, where traditional and informal institutions still play a significant role in local governance, leveraging these structures through participatory strategies can enhance communication between the people and government actors. Additionally, Participatory Development Theory

aligns with the Nigerian National Policy on Community Development, which emphasises grassroots participation as a strategy for improving rural living standards. The theory also promotes the use of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), a set of techniques that enable communities to analyse their conditions, identify problems, and develop locally appropriate solutions. PRA has been widely applied across Africa to foster inclusive and effective rural development. In the study area, tools like community mapping, focus group discussions, and seasonal calendars can be utilised to gather information and encourage community dialogue. These methods not only generate rich qualitative data but also empower communities to become active agents in their own development rather than passive recipients of aid or government interventions. Participatory Development Theory also addresses the social dimensions of development by emphasising equity and inclusion. In many rural areas of Nigeria, women and youth are often excluded from decision-making processes due to cultural and patriarchal norms. The theory calls for the active involvement of these groups, recognising that inclusive participation strengthens social cohesion and leads to more equitable outcomes.

This is particularly important in Delta State, where gender inequality and youth unemployment are prevalent issues that hinder meaningful community engagement. By applying participatory principles, development initiatives can become more sensitive to these dynamics and create spaces for marginalised voices to be heard and valued. Moreover, the theory encourages the development of locally appropriate solutions that are informed by community experiences, environmental context, and cultural values. This localised approach enhances the relevance and sustainability of development outcomes, as communities are more likely to support initiatives that resonate with their way of life. In Delta State, where communities vary widely in language, culture, and economic activity, participatory strategies allow for the tailoring of development projects to suit specific community contexts. In terms of policy implications, Participatory Development Theory challenges the current centralised and bureaucratic models of development planning in Nigeria. It calls for decentralisation, transparency, and accountability, which are critical for enhancing community trust and participation. The theory advocates for policy reforms that devolve power and resources to local governments and empower them to work closely with community members in designing and implementing rural development programmes. It also highlights the need for capacity building at all levels governmental, institutional, and community to ensure that all actors have the skills and knowledge necessary to engage meaningfully in participatory development. Participatory Development Theory provides a robust and contextually appropriate theoretical foundation for the study of community engagement and rural development in Nigeria. By emphasising empowerment, inclusion, ownership, and local knowledge, the theory not only critiques the limitations of top-down development models but also offers practical strategies for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of rural development initiatives. In the case of selected rural communities in Delta State, applying this theory will help uncover the processes, challenges, and potential of community participation, thereby contributing to both academic discourse and practical development solutions.

## **II. Method**

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design using semi-structured interviews to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of community engagement and rural development within their natural contexts. It was conducted in Delta State, Nigeria, a culturally diverse and economically significant oil-producing region with complex socio-economic and developmental characteristics. The data were primarily collected from purposively selected key informants across nine rural communities, including community leaders, youth and women representatives, and local government officials. Both primary data (through in-depth interviews) and secondary data (from documents, reports, and literature) were analysed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of rural development issues. The instrument used was a semi-structured interview guide (CERDIG), designed with open-ended questions to generate rich, detailed narratives and allow flexibility for probing. Data collection emphasised confidentiality, voluntary participation, and thematic organisation of key issues such as participation, challenges, and outcomes. Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis, involving coding, categorisation, and identification of patterns to provide a contextual, interpretive, and credible explanation of community engagement and rural development.

### **Data Presentation**

Data for this study were obtained through in-depth interviews conducted with a total of twenty-seven (27) purposively selected respondents drawn from rural communities in Delta State. The respondents were selected based on their involvement in community engagement and rural development initiatives, ensuring they could provide detailed and context-specific insights relevant to the study objectives. The participants included community leaders, youth representatives, women leaders, and development officers from nine communities across the three senatorial districts of Delta State: Delta North, Delta Central, and Delta South. Both male and female respondents were represented, allowing for diverse perspectives on community engagement and rural development practices. The interview responses provided rich, descriptive narratives that captured participants'

experiences, perceptions, and insights into community engagement processes and local development initiatives. The nature of the data formed the basis for qualitative content analysis, through which recurring themes and patterns were identified and organized to achieve the objective of the study.

**Interview Respondents by Communities**

**Table 1a: Delta North Senatorial District (Interview Respondents) – 9 Respondents**

| SN | Community      | Position Held               | Relevance to Study                                    |
|----|----------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 1  | Onicha-Ugbo    | Community Leader            | Oversees local development and decision-making        |
| 2  | Onicha-Ugbo    | Women Leader                | Mobilizes women for community projects                |
| 3  | Onicha-Ugbo    | Youth Representative        | Coordinates youth involvement in rural projects       |
| 4  | Idumuje-Ugboko | Traditional Council Member  | Participates in grassroots governance                 |
| 5  | Idumuje-Ugboko | Market Association Leader   | Organizes economic initiatives at the grassroots      |
| 6  | Idumuje-Ugboko | C.D.C Secretary             | Manages records and project activities                |
| 7  | Issele-Uku     | Obi-in-Council Spokesperson | Represents traditional authority in civic matters     |
| 8  | Issele-Uku     | NGO Representative          | Coordinates community health and education programmes |
| 9  | Issele-Uku     | Town Planner                | Advises on infrastructure and planning                |

**Subtotal: 9**

**Source: Survey Field Work, 2025**

**Table 1b: Delta Central Senatorial District (Interview Respondents) – 9 Respondents**

| SN | Community | Position Held                     | Relevance to Study                                 |
|----|-----------|-----------------------------------|--|
| 10 | Ovu       | Village Head                      | Supervises village governance and planning         |
| 11 | Ovu       | Community Youth Leader            | Leads youth in community activities                |
| 12 | Ovu       | Women Development Chairperson     | Advocates for women's development in rural areas   |
| 13 | Orerokpe  | Community Elder                   | Offers experience and traditional insight          |
| 14 | Orerokpe  | Cooperative Society Leader        | Organizes microcredit for local development        |
| 15 | Orerokpe  | Farmer's Union Chairman           | Represents agriculture-focused community projects  |
| 16 | Uvwie     | Local Government Officer          | Oversees rural development policies implementation |
| 17 | Uvwie     | Civil Society Leader              | Mobilizes civic participation                      |
| 18 | Uvwie     | Ward Development Committee Member | Supports infrastructure development initiatives    |

**Subtotal: 9**

**Source: Survey Field Work, 2025**

**Table 1c: Delta South Senatorial District (Interview Respondents) – 9 Respondents**

| SN | Community | Position Held                    | Relevance to Study                                  |
|----|-----------|----------------------------------|---|
| 19 | Oporoza   | Gbaramatu Council Representative | Key actor in community-government dialogue          |
| 20 | Oporoza   | Women's Rights Advocate          | Engages in advocacy for inclusive development       |
| 21 | Oporoza   | Fishermen Union Leader           | Represents marine-based economic interests          |
| 22 | Ogbe-Ijoh | Clan Head                        | Plays central role in traditional authority         |
| 23 | Ogbe-Ijoh | Public Health Officer            | Facilitates health development initiatives          |
| 24 | Ogbe-Ijoh | Youth Empowerment Coordinator    | Leads empowerment programmes for rural youth        |
| 25 | Gbaramatu | Traditional Council Member       | Strategic actor in community and external relations |
| 26 | Gbaramatu | Education Programme Director     | Leads educational outreach in rural settings        |
| 27 | Gbaramatu | Oil Spill Monitoring Officer     | Monitors environmental and community impacts        |

**Subtotal: 9**

**Source: Survey Field Work, 2025**

To ensure confidentiality and comply with ethical considerations, the real names of the interview respondents presented in Tables 1a, 1b, and 1c were not used in the reporting of the findings. Instead, all respondents were coded numerically as Respondent 1, Respondent 2, Respondent 3, Respondent 4, Respondent 5, Respondent 6, Respondent 7, Respondent 8, Respondent 9, Respondent 10, Respondent 11, Respondent 12, Respondent 13, Respondent 14, Respondent 15, Respondent 16, Respondent 17, Respondent 18, Respondent 19, Respondent 20, Respondent 21, Respondent 22, Respondent 23, Respondent 24, Respondent 25, Respondent 26, and Respondent 27, in place of their names. This approach was adopted to protect the identity of the participants while still allowing their responses to be properly referenced and analysed in the study.

### **III. Data Analysis**

**Question: What is the level of community engagement in rural road construction projects and water supply projects in rural communities in Delta State?**

#### **Respondent 1**

Respondent 1 was interviewed through a face-to-face discussion conducted in August 2025 in Onicha-Ugbo, Delta North Senatorial District. The interview focused on whether the community was properly consulted before rural road construction programmes and rural water supply projects were implemented. The respondent provided detailed information on how decisions were made, whether residents were asked what type of development they needed, and the extent to which the projects reflected community priorities. The response provided useful insight into the level of consultation and participation in rural development initiatives within the community (Personal communication, August 2025).

We were usually consulted before rural road construction and rural water supply projects were implemented in our community. In most cases, the traditional leaders called meetings where we were asked to discuss the major problems affecting us. During those meetings, we usually mentioned poor road conditions and lack of clean water as the most serious challenges in the community. Based on what we discussed, the leaders decided that road construction and water supply projects should be carried out. We believed that these projects were not forced on us because they were what we actually needed. However, not everyone always attended the meetings, and some people believed that the final decisions were still taken by the community leaders. Despite that, we felt that most of the projects that were implemented reflected what the community really wanted, especially the road construction and water supply projects because they improved transportation and access to clean water. We also noticed that when we were properly consulted before the project started, more people became willing to participate because they felt that the project belonged to the community. Overall, we believed that consultation played an important role in encouraging community engagement in rural road construction and rural water supply projects in Onicha-Ugbo.

#### **Respondent 2**

Respondent 2 was interviewed through a face-to-face discussion conducted in September 2025 in Onicha-Ugbo. The interview focused on whether women and other community members were consulted before rural road construction programmes and rural water supply projects were implemented. The respondent provided detailed explanations on how consultation influenced participation and whether the projects reflected the actual needs of the community. The information obtained from the interview contributed to understanding the level of consultation and community engagement in rural development projects in the study area (Personal communication, September 2025).

We were sometimes consulted before rural road construction and rural water supply projects were implemented, but the consultation was not always fully inclusive. Meetings were usually organized by the community leaders, and we were asked to suggest the type of projects we needed most in the community. Many of us, especially women, usually mentioned the need for clean water and better roads because those problems affected our daily lives. However, we were not always given enough opportunity to speak during the meetings, and in some cases, the final decisions were mainly taken by the male leaders. Even with that, most of the projects that were implemented still reflected what the community really wanted, especially the boreholes and road construction projects. We noticed that when we were properly consulted before the project started, people became more willing to participate because they believed that the project was meant for them. But when consultation was poor, participation was usually low because people felt that the project was imposed on them. Overall, we believed that consultation influenced the level of community engagement in rural development projects in Onicha-Ugbo.

#### **Respondent 3**

Respondent 3 was interviewed through a face-to-face discussion conducted in October 2025 in Onicha-Ugbo. The interview focused on whether young people in the community were consulted before rural road construction programmes and rural water supply projects were implemented. The respondent provided detailed information

on youth participation in community decision-making and whether development projects reflected the needs of young people. The responses obtained from the interview helped to explain the level of consultation and community engagement in rural development initiatives within the community (Personal communication, October 2025).

We were usually consulted before rural road construction and rural water supply projects were implemented, but young people were not always fully involved in the consultation process. Community meetings were often organized where the elders discussed the major problems affecting the community and decided the type of projects that should be carried out. Although we were sometimes present at the meetings, we were not always given the opportunity to express our opinions. However, most of the projects that were implemented still reflected what the community really needed because poor roads and lack of clean water affected everyone. We also noticed that when young people were properly consulted before the project started, we became more willing to participate because we felt included in the decision-making process. But when consultation was limited, some youth lost interest in participating in the projects. Overall, we believed that consultation played an important role in determining the level of community engagement in rural road construction and rural water supply projects in the community

#### **Respondent 4**

Respondent 4 was interviewed through a face-to-face discussion conducted in November 2025 in Idumuje-Ugboko, Delta North Senatorial District. The interview focused on whether the community was properly consulted before rural road construction programmes and rural water supply projects were implemented. The respondent provided detailed explanations on how decisions were made within the community and whether residents were given the opportunity to express their needs before the projects were carried out. The interview also examined whether the projects reflected the real needs of the community and how consultation influenced participation in rural development initiatives (Personal communication, November 2025).

We were usually consulted before rural road construction and rural water supply projects were implemented in our community. Most of the time, the traditional leaders called meetings where we were asked to discuss the major problems affecting us. During those meetings, we normally mentioned poor road conditions and lack of clean water as the most serious challenges we were facing. Based on what we discussed, the community leaders decided that road construction and water supply projects should be carried out. We believed that these projects were not imposed on us because they were based on what we requested during the meetings. However, not everyone always attended the meetings, and some people believed that the final decisions were still taken by the leaders. Despite that, we felt that most of the projects that were implemented reflected what the community really wanted, especially road construction and water supply projects because they improved movement and access to clean water. We also noticed that when we were properly consulted before the project started, more people became willing to participate because they believed the project belonged to the community. Overall, we believed that consultation played an important role in encouraging community engagement in rural development projects in Idumuje-Ugboko.

#### **Respondent 5**

Respondent 5 was interviewed through a face-to-face discussion conducted in December 2025 in Idumuje-Ugboko. The interview focused on whether women and other community members were consulted before rural road construction and rural water supply projects were implemented. The respondent provided useful information on how women participated in community meetings and whether the projects reflected the real needs of families in the community. The responses obtained from the interview helped to explain the level of consultation and participation in rural development initiatives in the study area (Personal communication, December 2025).

We were sometimes consulted before rural road construction and rural water supply projects were implemented, but the consultation was not always fully inclusive. Meetings were usually organized by the community leaders, and we were asked to suggest the type of development projects we needed most. Many of us usually mentioned the need for clean water and better roads because those problems affected our daily lives. However, women were not always given enough opportunity to speak during the meetings, and in some cases, the final decisions were mainly taken by the male leaders. Even with that, most of the projects that were implemented still reflected what the community really wanted, especially boreholes and road construction projects. We noticed that when we were properly consulted before the project started, people became more willing to

participate because they believed that the project was meant for them. But when consultation was poor, participation was usually low because people felt that the project was imposed on them. Overall, we believed that consultation influenced the level of community engagement in rural development projects in Idumuje-Ugboko.

#### **Respondent 6**

Respondent 6 was interviewed through a face-to-face discussion conducted in August 2025 in Idumuje-Ugboko. The interview focused on whether the community development committee consulted residents before rural road construction and rural water supply projects were implemented. The respondent provided detailed explanations on how decisions were made within the community and whether the projects reflected the needs of the people. The information obtained from the interview contributed to understanding the level of consultation and community engagement in rural development initiatives in the study area (Personal communication, August 2025).

We were usually consulted before rural road construction and rural water supply projects were implemented in our community, especially through the community development committee. Meetings were often organized where we were asked to identify the major problems affecting the community. During those meetings, many of us mentioned poor roads and lack of clean water as the most serious problems. Based on what we discussed, the leaders decided that road construction and water supply projects should be carried out. We believed that the projects reflected what the community really wanted because they solved the most important problems affecting us. However, not everyone always attended the meetings, and some people believed that the final decisions were still taken by the leaders. Despite that, we felt that most of the projects that were implemented reflected the needs of the community. We also noticed that when we were properly consulted before the project started, participation became stronger because people believed that the project belonged to the community. Overall, we believed that consultation played an important role in encouraging community engagement in rural road construction and rural water supply projects in Idumuje-Ugboko.

#### **IV. Discussion of Findings**

The findings from the interviews conducted across the selected rural communities in Delta State provide substantial insight into the level of community engagement in rural road construction programmes and rural water supply projects. The results indicate that community engagement exists across the study areas, but the nature of this engagement is largely limited to consultation rather than active participation in decision-making. Most respondents acknowledged that they were informed or consulted before projects were implemented, particularly through community meetings organized by traditional leaders, community development committees, local government officials, or non-governmental organizations. However, the extent of their involvement rarely extended beyond expressing their opinions during meetings. This finding is consistent with the secondary data, which indicates that community participation in rural development projects in Delta State is largely passive and consultative rather than participatory in a meaningful sense (Arnstein, 1969; Chambers, 1994). A major theme that emerged from the interviews is the importance of consultation in rural development programmes. Respondents clearly stated that community meetings were usually held before rural road construction and rural water supply projects were implemented. During these meetings, residents were asked to identify the most pressing problems affecting their communities. In most cases, poor road conditions and lack of clean water were repeatedly identified as the most serious challenges. As a result, the projects that were implemented were often aligned with the real needs of the communities. This suggests that consultation played a significant role in ensuring that development projects were relevant to the people. However, although consultation was common, respondents also noted that the final decisions were often taken by traditional leaders or government officials rather than the community members themselves. This pattern supports Arnstein's (1969) concept of the "Ladder of Participation," particularly the level of tokenism, where communities are consulted but do not have the power to influence the final outcome.

The findings also reveal that community engagement was often stronger during the implementation stage than during the planning stage. Many respondents explained that community members actively contributed labour, mobilized resources, and monitored project activities once the projects had already been approved. For example, Respondents noted that youth provided manpower during road construction projects, while women helped organize labour and mobilize resources for water supply projects. This indicates that participation was more practical than strategic. In other words, communities were more involved in executing the projects than in

deciding what type of projects should be implemented. This observation supports Chambers' (1994) argument that participation in many rural development programmes is often treated as an add-on rather than a fundamental part of development planning. From the perspective of Participatory Development Theory, meaningful participation should involve community members in all stages of development, including needs identification, planning, implementation, and evaluation (Chambers, 1997). However, the findings of this study suggest that such comprehensive participation is still lacking in rural communities in Delta State. Another significant finding from the interviews is the relationship between consultation and community participation. Many respondents stated that when they were properly consulted before a project was implemented, they became more willing to participate in the project. Respondents all emphasized that participation increased when people believed that the project reflected their needs. When residents felt that they had contributed to the decision-making process, they developed a sense of ownership over the project. This sense of ownership encouraged them to contribute labour, monitor project activities, and protect project facilities. This finding supports the view of the World Bank (2019), which emphasizes that community-driven development projects are more sustainable when beneficiaries are involved in decision-making processes. Therefore, although participation in the study area was limited in many cases, the findings suggest that consultation still played an important role in promoting community engagement. Despite the positive role of consultation, the findings also reveal that community participation was not always inclusive. Several respondents pointed out that women and young people were not always given equal opportunities to express their opinions during community meetings. For example, Respondents explained that women were often present during meetings but were not always allowed to speak freely because discussions were dominated by male leaders. Similarly, Respondents indicated that youth were often involved in the implementation of projects but were not fully included in decision-making processes. This pattern of selective participation supports the secondary data, which indicates that participation in rural development projects is often dominated by traditional leaders, elders, and politically connected individuals, while women and youth are marginalized (Chambers, 1997; Hassan & Lawal, 2021). This finding suggests that socio-cultural factors, particularly patriarchal norms, continue to influence the level of community engagement in rural development programmes in Delta State.

The findings further show that limited awareness and low literacy levels also affected the level of community participation. Some respondents explained that not all community members attended the meetings where development projects were discussed. In some cases, residents believed that their opinions would not influence the final decisions because community leaders or government officials would decide the type of projects to be implemented. This finding is consistent with the work of Omotola and Olanrewaju (2019), who observed that rural communities in Nigeria often lack the capacity and awareness required for effective participation in development programmes. As a result, participation becomes limited to a small group of individuals, while the majority of community members remain passive observers. Another important finding from the interviews is the role of external actors in promoting community engagement. Respondents from communities such as Issele-Uku and Uvwie explained that participation was stronger when NGOs or civil society organizations were involved in organizing consultations. For example, Respondent 8 explained that NGO-facilitated meetings allowed community members to express their needs more freely, while Respondent 17 noted that civil society initiatives encouraged transparency and accountability. This finding supports Oakley's (1991) argument that participation in development programmes is more effective when external actors focus on empowering communities rather than imposing projects on them. It also suggests that the presence of NGOs and civil society organizations can improve the level of community engagement in rural development projects.

The findings also highlight the uneven nature of community engagement across the different rural communities studied. While some communities reported relatively strong participation, others experienced limited engagement. This variation suggests that the level of participation is influenced by factors such as leadership structure, communication, and the level of trust between the community and development agencies. For example, respondents from communities where regular meetings were held reported higher levels of participation than those from communities where communication was poor. This observation supports the findings of Adeyemi and Falade (2023), who argued that community participation improves when communication is effective and when community members receive regular updates about project progress. Another important issue identified in the findings is the reactive nature of community participation. Most respondents explained that rural development projects were usually initiated by government agencies, NGOs, or community leaders, and community members were invited to participate only after the projects had already been planned. This means that the communities were responding to development initiatives rather than initiating them. This finding is consistent with Rondinelli's (1993) argument that centralized planning structures often limit the ability of local communities to initiate development projects. According to the bottom-up approach to rural development, communities should act as the main drivers of development rather than passive beneficiaries.

However, the findings from this study suggest that rural development in Delta State is still largely influenced by top-down planning structures.

The findings also show that even limited participation had some positive effects on the sustainability of rural development projects. Several respondents explained that community members helped monitor road construction projects, protected water supply facilities, and ensured that project resources were not misused. This indicates that participation, even when limited, can contribute to the success of development projects. This finding supports the work of Adeyemi and Falade (2023), who demonstrated that community participation can improve project sustainability and social cohesion. However, respondents also noted that some projects were poorly maintained because community members were not fully involved in the planning process. This suggests that participation needs to move beyond consultation to genuine collaboration if development projects are to be sustainable in the long term. Overall, the findings from the interviews indicate that the level of community engagement in rural road construction programmes and rural water supply projects in rural communities in Delta State can be described as moderate rather than high. Community members are often consulted before projects are implemented, and they actively participate during the implementation stage. However, their involvement in decision-making processes remains limited. This finding confirms the argument presented in the secondary data that community participation in rural development projects in Delta State is largely superficial and constrained by institutional, structural, and socio-cultural factors (Arnstein, 1969; Chambers, 1994; Oakley, 1991). In conclusion, the discussion of findings shows that community engagement in rural road construction and rural water supply projects in rural communities in Delta State exists but remains limited in scope and depth. While consultation is commonly practiced, it does not always lead to meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Women and youth are often excluded from planning, and participation is frequently limited to implementation activities such as communal labour and monitoring. However, the findings also show that when consultation is properly conducted, participation increases significantly, and community members develop a sense of ownership over the projects. This suggests that strengthening consultation processes, promoting inclusive participation, and improving communication could significantly enhance community engagement in rural development projects in Delta State. Ultimately, meaningful participation will not only improve the relevance of development projects but also ensure their sustainability and long-term success

## V. Conclusion

Community engagement in rural road and water projects in Delta State is moderate, largely limited to consultation, with final decisions controlled by leaders, reflecting tokenistic participation. Participation improves during implementation and when consultation is effective, but women, youth, and less-informed members are often excluded, limiting inclusiveness and sustainability.

The study concludes that community engagement exists but remains largely consultative rather than genuinely participatory in rural development projects in Delta State. Although projects often reflect community needs due to prior consultation, decision-making power is still concentrated among traditional leaders and officials. Participation is stronger during implementation stages, where community members contribute labour and monitor projects. However, exclusion of women and youth, low awareness, and top-down planning structures weaken meaningful engagement. Overall, enhancing inclusive, bottom-up participation is essential for improving project sustainability and development outcomes.

## VI. Recommendations

There is a need to strengthen inclusive participation by actively involving women, youth, and marginalized groups in decision-making processes. Government and development agencies should adopt bottom-up approaches that empower communities beyond mere consultation but also include improved awareness, communication, and collaboration with NGOs that can enhance community ownership and sustainability of rural projects.

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