

Beyond Tokenism: Quantifying the Participation-Sustainability Nexus in Rural Community Development Projects in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

Despite decades of investment in Community-Driven Development (CDD) to facilitate post-conflict recovery, the longevity of rural projects in Sierra Leone remains a significant challenge. This study investigates the empirical link between multidimensional community participation and project sustainability in Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach (N=200), the research evaluates how different rungs of participation—ranging from consultation to resource contribution—affect long-term viability. The results indicate a "participation paradox": while symbolic engagement (consultation) is high (M=4.11), functional engagement (resource contribution) is significantly lower (M=3.71). Crucially, cross-tabulation analysis reveals that 81.4% of respondents reporting high participation levels perceived high project sustainability, compared to only 1.2% in the low-participation cohort. The study concludes that moving beyond tokenistic involvement toward active co-investment is a mechanical necessity for ensuring that development benefits endure beyond external funding cycles.

Keywords: Community Participation; Project Sustainability; Community-Driven Development (CDD); Nongowa Chiefdom; Sierra Leone; Arnstein's Ladder; Rural Infrastructure; Post-Conflict Reconstruction.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991–2002), the government and international partners pivoted toward community-centric models to rebuild infrastructure and social cohesion. However, a persistent "gap" exists between the immediate completion of projects and their long-term survival. In Nongowa Chiefdom, a central economic and administrative hub, numerous initiatives in health, education, and water sanitation have been launched by NGOs and government agencies. While these projects often meet technical specifications at handover, they frequently fall into disrepair or abandonment once external support is withdrawn. This study posits that the depth and quality of community participation during the planning and implementation phases serve as the primary determinant of post-project sustainability.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is grounded in **Arnstein's (1969) Theory of Community Participation**, which conceptualizes engagement as a ladder of eight rungs. At the bottom lie "Manipulation" and "Therapy" (non-participation), progressing through "Informing" and "Consultation" (tokenism), and culminating in "Partnership," "Delegated Power," and "Citizen Control".

The study argues that sustainability in rural Sierra Leone is often undermined because participation remains trapped at the level of "tokenism". While community members are consulted, they often lack the delegated power to influence budget allocations or technical designs. This creates a "sense of ownership" that is psychological rather than functional, leading to a failure in maintaining assets post-completion.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a mixed-methods research design to triangulate quantitative breadth with qualitative depth.

- **Sample:** A representative sample of 200 stakeholders was selected, including 134 beneficiaries, 41 project staff, and 25 government officials.
- **Instrumentation:** Data were collected via structured questionnaires (administered via Kobo Toolbox) and semi-structured interviews.
- **Reliability:** The instrument demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values of **0.971** for Community Participation and **0.965** for Sustainability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Participation Paradox: Consultation vs. Contribution

The data reveals a stark contrast between symbolic and functional participation:

- **Consultation Success:** There is high agreement that community members were consulted before project commencement ($M=4.11$) and that a sense of ownership exists ($M=4.07$).
- **Inclusivity:** Both youth ($M=4.00$) and women ($M=3.99$) were reported as actively involved in the planning stages.
- **The Contribution Deficit:** However, the mean score for "Households contributed labor, money, or materials" was notably lower ($M=3.71$).

This suggests that while the "social" aspects of participation are strong, the "material" investment required to cement a commitment to maintenance is lacking. Qualitative responses support this, with beneficiaries noting that livelihood pressures, such as farming, often prevent deeper engagement.

Quantifying the Sustainability Nexus

The most significant finding of this study is the statistical relationship between the level of engagement and perceived sustainability:

- **High-Engagement Outcomes:** 81.4% of beneficiaries who reported high participation also perceived high sustainability for their projects.
- **The Risk of Exclusion:** Conversely, 88.5% of those who felt participation was low categorized the project as having low sustainability.
- **Correlation Coefficients:** Pearson correlation results show a strong positive relationship ($r=0.721$, $p < 0.01$) between participation and overall success.

These figures quantify the "Participation-Sustainability Nexus," proving that the lack of meaningful involvement is not just a social oversight but a mechanical driver of project failure.

Challenges to Meaningful Agency

Despite high participation scores, qualitative analysis reveals that engagement is often limited to "receiving information" rather than "influencing decisions". Furthermore, government officials highlighted **Elite Influence** ($M=3.76$) as a factor that distorts the distribution of project benefits. This "Elite Capture" can alienate the broader community, leading to a decline in collective responsibility for asset maintenance.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The success of community development in Nongowa Chiefdom is tethered to the depth of participatory agency. The study concludes that the current model of engagement is effective at generating initial “buy-in” but insufficient for long-term “stay-in”.

Key Recommendations:

1. **Transition to Co-Investment:** Implementers should move from asking for "opinions" to requiring community "co-investment" in labor or materials to deepen the sustainability bond.
2. **Institutionalize Maintenance Training:** Education on post-project management must be integrated into the planning phase, not added as an afterthought.
3. **Audit for Elite Capture:** Donor agencies must introduce transparency mechanisms to ensure that participation is not dominated by traditional or political elites at the expense of the marginalized.

Note: This paper is derived from the author’s Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Project Management dissertation titled “Determinant Factors for the Success of Community Development Projects: The Case of Nongoma Chiefdom, Kenema District,” submitted to the School of Postgraduate Studies, Njala University, Sierra Leone (2026).

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