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Community Engagement, Participatory Leadership and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract: Community engagement and participatory leadership are critical to sustainable development. However, collective decision-making that fosters inclusiveness and cohesion in these approaches is inadequately considered in many developing countries. Against this background, this paper explored the perception and experience of Abuja residents concerning the place of community engagement and participatory leadership in sustainable development. Six Focus Group Discussions were conducted in different communities around Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory, and thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns, themes, and variations in participants' responses. Using Putnam's social capital theory, this paper argues that the absence of participatory leadership that promotes community engagement is at the centre of Nigeria's sustainable development crisis. Based on the findings, this study recommends a widespread adoption of community engagement and participatory leadership that use the mechanisms of town hall meetings, community surveys, and participatory budgeting as a panacea for sustainable development. For sustained participation of community members in development initiatives, it recommends that security, trust and accountability should be prioritised

Keywords: Community engagement, participatory leadership, sustainable development, empowerment, town hall meetings, inclusivity, cohesion, and participatory budgeting.

Introduction

Since the First Republic, Nigeria has been making concerted efforts towards achieving sustainable development. This has resulted in the formulation of various developmental plans and programmes such as the First National Development Plan (1962-1968), the Second National Development Plan (1970 – 1974), the Third National Development Plan (1975 – 1980), the Fourth National Development Plan (1981 – 1985), Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) 1986, Vision 2010, Seven-Point Agenda and Vision 2020.

These plans and programmes have failed as reflected by various indices including the country's Human Development Index (HDI), Sustainable Development Index (SDI), unemployment rate and poverty level. In the Global Sustainable Development Report 2023, Nigeria ranked 146 out of 166 countries. Subsequently, the Human Development Report 2023/2024 also ranked the country very low at 161 out of 193 countries, with an HDI score of 0.548.

Between 2018 and 2023, the number of poor Nigerians increased by 24million, culminating in an estimated 104million poor Nigerians (The Cable News 2023). This trend earned Nigeria the title of "Poverty Capital of the World" in 2018 by the Brookings Institution (The Cable News, 2018). This trend is also replicated in Nigeria's unemployment rate, which rose from 23.1% in 2018 to 27.1% in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics 2020).

Consequently, scholars have researched on the factors that contribute to the impediment of sustainable development in Nigeria. These include poverty, inequality, corruption, political instability, food insecurity, insufficient

infrastructure, poor framework for policy implementation, inadequate communication channels and poor leadership (Olukoju, 2014; Ogbonnaya et al, 2015; Tsegyu, 2015; Rasaki & Olusola, 2021; Budnukaeku, et al 2022). The identification of the above causative factors resulted in the emergence of various recommendations that were proffered in order to resolve the problem. These include investment in health and education, combating corruption, effective policy implementation, improved leaders' commitment, revamp of the agricultural sector, improved research and electoral reform (Rasaki & Olusola, 2021; Budnukaeku, et al 2022). However, one vital, yet neglected factor, in achieving sustainable development in Nigeria is community engagement. Its poor practice in Nigeria has made several efforts of the government towards attaining sustainable development unsuccessful. It is against this background that this study examines community engagement, participatory leadership, and sustainable development. This study will be guided by the following questions:

- 1) Is there a causal relationship between community engagement, participatory leadership, and sustainable development?
- 2) Given the hitherto unsuccessful quest for sustainable development in Nigeria through various plans, programmes and policies, is participatory leadership a viable solution?
- 3) What specific strategies of engagement should be adopted to facilitate sustainable development?

This study is significant because it will provide specific measures that can be implemented towards the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria. It is

aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- i. To highlight the causal relationship between community engagement, participatory leadership, and sustainable development?
- ii. To underscore the significance of participatory leadership as a viable solution for the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria.
- iii. To provide specific strategies of engagement that should be adopted to facilitate sustainable development.

The study details the adopted methodology, the clarification of key concepts, the underlining theoretical exposition, literature review, and discussion of findings. It ends with recommendations for effective community engagement and participatory leadership for the achievement of sustainable development.

Methodology

To explore the perceptions and experiences of residents of Abuja about community engagement and participatory leadership, this qualitative study employed Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to generate primary data. FGDs were conducted in six locations within the territory, namely; Wuye (W), Kubwa (KU), Lugbe (LU), Jaji (J), Kado (KA), and Lokogoma (LO). This study lends itself to purposive sampling for many reasons. First, purposive sampling facilitates the collection of rich data from targeted experts (Flick, 2023), in this case, community leaders, active participants in community programs within Abuja, and development practitioners with Non-

Governmental Associations (NGOs). This was used to select 64 participants who have relevant experience and knowledge about the subjects of investigation, namely community engagement and participatory leadership. Second, it was adopted because Cresswell and Poth (2021) opine that it is useful in exploring the depth of qualitative insight from a well-specified demographic category with vast knowledge about the phenomenon of a study. In cognizance of this, the FGDs were composed of six community leaders, four development practitioners with NGOs, eighteen officials of residents' associations of estates in the communities of study, seven public servants in the development sector, and twenty-nine members of the general public. The discursive trajectories of the FGDs were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol. Also, a moderator facilitated the discussions around the two dominant themes of this study.

All participants in the FGDs were appropriately informed about the purpose of the study and their consent was obtained. Similarly, they were told they could withdraw consent during the study. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, codes were used as identity markers and to capture the narrative interventions of participants. For example, FGDW denotes the focus group discussion held in Wuye, while FGDW001 is used to describe the first participant to contribute. The six FGDs were audio-recorded. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim through an iterative process of playing and replaying them. To foster accuracy, the transcripts were double-checked to ascertain fidelity to participants' responses.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns, themes, and variations in participants' responses. This was manually done through a process of iterative reviews of the transcripts. Furthermore, for consistency, the inter-coder reliability techniques were used to ensure credible data interpretation. Data interpretation for this study necessitated synthesis and contextualization. In other words, to draw valid conclusions regarding the focal areas of this study, findings were synthesized. Also, Nigeria's socio-political and economic context was examined, using literature, to interpret the findings appropriately. The findings are organised into a coherent narrative, and short quotes from participants were used to highlight key points. It is important to state the findings do not lend themselves to generalisability. They are geo-specific and context-determined.

Conceptual Clarification

These concepts are critical to the discursive orientation of this study, they are: sustainable development, community engagement, and participatory leadership.

Sustainable Development

To understand sustainable development, it is important to first examine development. Development encompasses economic growth and improvement in the quality of life of the people (Naomi, 1995; Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). This signifies a quantitative and qualitative change and includes measures, such as low rates of poverty, unemployment and inequality, which impact on the standard of living (Todaro, 1981; Rabie, 2016).

Sustainability refers to the ability to maintain a process or an outcome over

time (Basiago, 1999; Sakalasooriya, 2021). It connotes continuity. Sustainable development is described as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland Report, 1987:43).

It entails continuous improvement (Fischhoff, et al 2021). It is forward-looking and emphasises current conditions and future trends. It encompasses programmes and policies that are implemented to achieve current desired outcomes without forfeiting future priorities (World Health Organisation).

Sustainable development incorporates economic, social, and environmental sustainability (Budnukaeku, et al 2022). Economic sustainability involves effective decision-making on economic activities to achieve efficiency and economic growth over an extended period. (Mensah & Casadevall, 2019; Jeronen, 2020).

Social sustainability emphasises the long-term wellbeing of the community and people, which includes reducing poverty and inequality (Fischhoff, et al 2021). Environmental sustainability focuses on protecting the integrity of the ecosystem by conserving natural resources both for the present and the future (Mensah & Casadevall, 2019; Henderson & Loreau, 2023).

Community Engagement

Community engagement refers to the process of collaborating with and including members of the community in decision-making aimed at addressing issues that relate to the community. It entails collaborating with the community for the achievement of sustainable outcomes (Born, 2012). It empowers

members of the community so that they can effectively take decisions and address common challenges, thereby ensuring that their voices are heard (Bappi, et al, 2018). Therefore, it is a form of participatory leadership, which facilitates inclusiveness, collaboration and ownership. Community engagement facilitates sustainable development. Through engagement, policies that will support the long-term needs of the community are formulated (Obiomah, 2023).

Participatory Leadership

The term was coined by Kurt Lewin, to describe a leadership style in which members of a team are involved in the process of decision-making (Lewin, et al 1939). This leadership style prioritises collaboration, sincere communication, inclusivity, accountability, ownership, and trust. It prescribes that members of a community are involved in decision making and shared responsibility in addressing identified issues. Furthermore, the leader makes required resources available to facilitate the decision-making process (Wang, et al 2022).

Participatory leadership facilitates empowerment, engagement, transparency, innovation and various perspectives for an enhanced decision-making process (Itodo, 2016; Wang, et al 2022). It is also vital in achieving development, such that non-participation undermines development (Bappi, et al 2018; Mela & Bello, 2023). Participation in the decision-making process results in people-focused development (Ogali, 2014).

This study conceptualises community engagement and participatory leadership as a deliberate process of involving and

supporting members of the community in decision-making and collaborative efforts about issues that impact the community, to achieve sustained desired results.

Theoretical Exposition

There are three major theories of social capital suitable to provide a frame of analysis for this study. These are Pierre Bourdieu's theory, James Coleman's theory, and Robert Putnam's theory. They represent different perspectives on social capital. Bourdieu viewed social capital from an individualistic rather than a collective perspective. Coleman construes social capital from its impact on human capital, while Putnam viewed it from a collective and democratic perspective (Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009; Tsounis and Xanthopoulou, 2024). Both Bourdieu and Coleman's theories on social capital ignored the political or democratic components, which are essential to driving sustainable development. This paper adopts Putnam's social capital theory, which provides a collective, democratic or civic perspective to the study of social capital (Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009; Claridge, 2018; Egbonu, 2022).

Robert Putnam's theory of social capital views social capital as shared traits within a community. The basic assumption of this theory is that social capital is collective and engenders trust and reciprocity among members of the community (Tsounis and Xanthopoulou, 2024). Trust is an important component of this theory and the level of cooperation among members of a community is dependent on it (Fahmy, 2006). This will facilitate community members working together to achieve common objectives, thereby fostering development within the

community (Tsounis and Xanthopoulou, 2024).

Putnam defined social capital in terms of interconnectedness among people (social networks), which results in trust and reciprocity, for the achievement of mutual objectives (Claridge 2018; Putnam, 2000). Social capital enables “Mutually Beneficial Collective Action, MBCA” (Uphoff and Wijayaratra, 2000; Fahmy, 2006). Therefore, social relations are seen as valuable assets (Claridge, 2018; Egbonu, 2022). Claridge (2018) noted that social capital could be used to describe shared norms and values essential in building trust and enabling collaboration and coordination within society. It is described as a public good (Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009; Claridge, 2018; Tsounis and Xanthopoulou, 2024). Egbonu (2022) notes that it is the invisible glue that enables cohesion, promotes community engagement and is required to achieve sustainability.

Social capital can be classified into bonding, linking and bridging social capital. Bonding describes relationships within a similar group (for example, family), while bridging describes relationships between various socio-demographic peculiarities (for example, religion and race). Linking is used to describe relationships between people in different hierarchies (for example, Government establishments) (Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009; Adams, 2017; Egbonu, 2022; Tsounis and Xanthopoulou, 2024). Social capital fosters unity amidst diversity (Egbonu, 2022).

Social capital underscores the positive impact of social-cultural factors on development. One important aspect of this is community participation

(Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009). Community engagement and participatory leadership engender social capital. It fosters trust and collaboration towards achieving collective goals. Egbonu (2022) explained social capital as integrating socio-cultural factors into the determinants of economic and social development. Putnam’s theory highlights its importance in facilitating political participation, economic development, and the wellbeing of the community (Claridge, 2015). It emphasises the significance of social connectedness and collaboration in fostering trust, as a basis for achieving collective interests and socio-economic development (Egbonu 2022).

Empirical studies have been conducted, which show the positive correlation between social capital and sustainable development, either at the micro or macro level (Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009; Tsounis and Xanthopoulou, 2024). It was applied to civic engagement in the United States, youth engagement and participation in the United Kingdom and community development in Kenya (Fahmy, 2006). Therefore, social capital facilitates engagement, participation and sustainable development.

Putnam, with other scholars, applied the concept to community relations and good governance in Italy (Putnam, et al 1994). A study conducted in North-Eastern Bangladesh by Islam and Alam (2018), confirmed that the existence of the various components of social capital including reciprocity, community participation and trust resulted in poverty reduction, which is one of the indicators of development. Furthermore, Zhang, et al (2024) studied the impact of social capital on sustainable development in China and the findings showed a positive

impact of social capital on economic growth, quality of life and environmental conservation.

Therefore, trust, reciprocity and collectiveness, as embedded in Putnam's social capital theory, thrive within community relations, engagement, and participatory leadership. This facilitates the achievement of mutual objectives, for the sustained wellbeing of the community.

Community Engagement, Participatory Leadership and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Head (2008) noted a global trend towards community engagement and participatory leadership for good governance and sustained development. Consequently, various Western countries have adopted participatory leadership, through community engagement, for decision-making, information dissemination and public consultation (Ako & Ojo, 2021). In a poll conducted by GALLUP on 130 countries, the prevalence of community engagement in developed countries was observed to be higher than in developing countries (GALLUP, 2011).

Therefore, scholars (Head, 2008; Kutalek, 2023, Mela and Bello 2023) have emphasised the need for community engagement, especially in low and middle-income countries, in fostering trust and compliance, rather than an autocratic or top-down approach.

According to Arowolo (2019), the existing detachment between leaders and citizens in Nigeria, impacts negatively on democracy. Poor community engagement and participatory leadership in Nigeria has resulted in top-down decision making and poorly implemented policies (Ako & Ojo,

2021). These are exemplified by the various developmental programmes and plans introduced, including the first national development plan (1962-1968), the second national development plan (1970-1974), the third national development plan (1975-1980), the fourth national development plan (1981-1985), and the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) 1986. These recorded less than desired outcomes (Dzever, et al 2020).

Ogali (2014) attributed failure in policy implementation and project completion in Nigeria to lack of community engagement and participation. He advocated for the active participation of members of the community in the decision-making and policy formulation process on issues that involve them, given their vast knowledge about the peculiarities of their environment.

Community engagement in developing, implementing and monitoring development programmes and projects will drive development in Nigeria (Ako & Ojo, 2021). This would result in a sense of ownership of such project, programme or policy, which would bring about easy buy-in, while preventing sabotage. To ensure a successful outcome, it is therefore important that the proposed beneficiaries of a service or project are involved in its planning and implementation (Bappi, et al 2018; Mela and Bello, 2023). This would ensure full commitment from all relevant stakeholders (Kutalek, 2023). Community engagement will help to ascertain the needs of the citizenry, prioritise these needs and allocate resources, among conflicting needs, for the wellbeing of Nigerians.

Challenges militating Against Community Engagement through Participatory Leadership for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Some identified challenges of community engagement and participatory leadership in Nigeria include the lack of awareness campaigns, poor communication, marginalisation, cultural diversity, and poor empowerment (Ogali, 2014; Mela and Bello, 2023). Addressing these challenges will ensure effective community engagement and participation from stakeholders (Kutalek, 2023).

Firstly, the extent of citizens' involvement is dependent on the extent of their enlightenment. Enlightenment fosters participatory leadership and the demand for a responsive and accountable government (Ako & Ojo, 2021). Therefore, honest communication and effective information dissemination are critical in engaging the community and achieving sustainable outcomes (Bappi, et al, 2018; Mela and Bello, 2023).

In 2018, Bappi, et al conducted a study to assess the impact of community engagement and participation on development, using a case study of Gombe Local Government Area in Gombe State, Nigeria. Their findings underscored the need for increased enlightenment and improved community engagement and participation in decision making, project planning and implementation on areas that affect the standard of living of the people. This is because enlightenment encourages community involvement in projects that would improve standard of living (Ako & Ojo, 2021).

Furthermore, Eleberi, et al (2014)

emphasised the importance of enlightenment, through adult education, in stimulating participatory leadership in rural communities for the attainment of sustainable development. Enlightenment fosters participatory leadership, demand for good governance and accountability in leadership towards realising sustainable development in Nigeria (Bello & Garba, 2022)

Secondly, the issues of cultural diversity and marginalisation. Nigeria is a heterogeneous country, with over 250 ethnic groups and diverse cultures. Such diversity results in inter-ethnic tension, segregation and social exclusion (Nwachi, 2021) Therefore, there is a need for cultural intelligence based on respect and understanding of the specific culture of the community to be engaged. This would determine particular strategies for engagement (Obiomah, 2023).

Community engagement underscores inclusivity. Accordingly, effective strategies that would incorporate marginalised groups into community engagement should be adopted (Kutalek, et al 2023). This is vital for it to play its role as a tool for social transformation for members of the society, including the underprivileged. Social inclusion facilitates the dismantling of barriers to participatory leadership, which leads to socially inclusive developmental projects. Social inclusion is achieved for vulnerable groups when all members of the community are engaged and participate in the decision-making process (Nwachi, 2021).

Thirdly is lack of empowerment. Empowerment can be at the individual, group or community level. One level could impact on the other levels. It is vital for the achievement of sustainable

development through participatory leadership (McCloskey, et al; 2011). Therefore, members of the community should be equipped with the necessary tools, skills, and resources that would enable them to effectively participate in decision-making on issues that affect them. Empowerment fosters collaboration instead of a top-down approach (McCloskey, et al; 2011).

Strategies For Community Engagement and Participatory Leadership

There are various strategies for community engagement and participatory leadership. However, three strategies are of importance to this study. These are town hall meetings, community surveys, and participatory budgeting.



Figure 1:Leadership Conceptual Model

First, town hall meetings refer to a gathering of community members for the purpose of engaging with government officials to express their concerns on pertinent issues. It provides a forum where members of the community can exchange ideas, be part of the decision-making process, discuss resource allocation and provide input to policy formulation and project planning. Decision-makers should be present to actively listen to feedback from community members. These feedbacks

become inputs in policy formulation and project development. Post-meeting action plans should also be communicated to the community as assurance that their feedbacks were valued. This fosters transparency and accountability (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2002).

Due to the evolution of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT), the process of community engagement is being digitised, resulting in virtual town hall meetings. This would enable online engagement and participation of members of the community who could not be physically present (Kloby and Sadeghi, 2014). Irrespective of whether virtual or physical, regular town hall meetings would promote community engagement.

The second strategy for community engagement and participatory leadership is community surveys. These refer to lists of questions sent to members of a specific community to gain insights into their concerns, needs and opinions. Given that a community's best resources are the members of that community, it provides an avenue to collect inputs on issues and to assess the community's reaction to issues thereby ensuring that the voices of the community members are heard. (Serrat, 2017; Dorosh, 2019). The third strategy is participatory budgeting. It is a strategy for community engagement in which members of the community take decisions regarding the allocation of a percentage of the government's budget, whether on the local, state or federal level, by identifying priority needs and projects that the funds should be expended on and monitoring the public spending (Fennel, et al 2009;Iloh and Nwokedi, 2016). It

therefore also provides a platform for the community members to be part of the decision-making process and to make their voices heard on issues that affect them.

Iloh and Nwokedi (2016) opined that the absence of participatory budgeting in Nigeria is detrimental to the wellbeing of the people, as implemented projects do not positively impact citizens. It undermines accountability due to the non-involvement of citizens in monitoring the process. Furthermore, they argued that participatory budgeting could facilitate development. This is because citizens can best communicate their needs and concerns, which would guide policy formulation and implementation, enabling funds to be expended in the identified areas. This would enhance accountability since citizens are involved in planning and monitoring the budget. This would guide the actions of government officials. They therefore concluded on the need to institutionalise participatory budgeting in Nigeria so that its benefits can accrue to citizens.

Discussion of Findings

The FGD participants expressed optimism about the potential of community engagement and participatory leadership to drive sustainable development in Nigeria. However, there was consensus that they were inadequately practiced in Nigeria. Most of the participants underscored the fact that there was a noticeable distance between bureaucratic drivers of development and community actors. This distance, which constitutes an impediment to people-centric development, stems from the non-

involvement of principal agents of community governance in development planning, implementation, evaluation, monitoring, and feedback. A participant noted that where there seems to be involvement, it is usually pseudo as their input and identified needs do not influence the trajectory of community development. Cornwall (2008) describes this form of participation as impedance to people-driven development.

The discussions showed that the notion of town hall meetings, surveys, and participatory budgeting as strategies of engagement are not popular in Abuja communities. The findings of the FGDs also indicate that active participation in decision-making processes is uncommon for most members of different communities in Abuja. According to FGDJ003: *"I have never shared my opinion about government's projects in my community and I speak for quite a number of people. Most of the projects done in local government areas are done by the government, not putting in mind the opinions of the people living in the particular community."*

They merely notice the emergence of development projects in their communities, which compel them to make inquiries. FGDW02 succinctly captured this non-involvement in decision-making processes: *"Well, we just see projects spring up in communities. They don't really seek our opinion. There is no referendum to determine what we want or not. You just wake up and see structures or projects. You have to even find out who are the people doing it. I won't say we are part of the community project."*

It was also observed that there is no

equality of access to participatory development forums in Abuja. This point was highlighted by FGDW005: *“So I wouldn't say that we have been given equal rights to making decisions about projects that we see every day. We are just there as citizens of the country. But we don't really partake in the decision-making process.”*

One of the subthemes of the findings is the interplay between class and voice in development practice. Some members of the lower-middle class feel they belong to the class of unheard voices. They think the elite political class do not prioritize inclusivity because of hubristic tendencies. This sentiment was well buttressed by FGDJ 009: *“No, I don't feel like I have a say in this country because they feel they are superior, they are higher than us. So, our say is not relevant to them.”*

One of the key themes of the FDGs is the differentiation of community engagements based on the form of project sponsorship. Some discussants noted that they have not participated in any project funded by any of the three tiers of government. However, they have been involved in community-funded projects. Discussant FGDKU012 aptly buttressed this thematic variant: *“I do not have a say in community projects funded by governments whether federal, state, or local. However, I have been actively engaged in community-funded projects.”*

It is also pertinent to note that there were non-categorical responses. Some discussants had indecisive notions about community engagement in the pursuits of sustainable development. They noted that participation in decision-making

processes is knowledge-determined and context-specific. The input of FGDW004 captured this: *“Well, my opinion is kind of ambivalent. It is not a yes or a no. This is because sometimes we do have a say and at other times we do not have a say. I feel like it differs. It depends on the community. It depends on the kind of projects and stuff like that.”*

One of the participants who offered a dissenting opinion noted that community engagement is a common practice in development planning, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring activities, which aligns with Hendricks' (2023) claims. However, its gains are elusive due to power imbalance as community leaders exert self-serving influence during needs identification to the detriment of genuine community needs.

According to FGDLU007: *“My opinion may be a bit different. I think sometimes we do have a say, but it is usually indirect. This is because sometimes surveys are conducted and leaders of communities are consulted. Sometimes, during consultation, the leaders of communities give not-so-honest opinions about projects that they want based on their interests. At the end of the day, when those projects are being executed in communities, they are not majorly what the community wants to see. Community leaders influence projects maybe because it is going to favour them or maybe there is going to be a “share”. Most times from my experience, working with the government for needs identification, you hear some community leaders saying, you know, maybe they might want this but this is the priority for me. I feel sometimes even though they may not come to our doors one after the*

other, our community leaders make decisions for us."

The above observation by FGDLU007 agrees with the finding of a study by Pretty (1995), which highlights how local power dynamics create limited participation opportunities in the United States. It inhibits the active participation of less powerful community members in development projects, leading to less equitable outcomes. Similarly, Cornwall (2008), posits that unequal power relations can undermine collaborative efforts by creating participatory spaces where certain voices are often marginalized

Furthermore, drawing from personal experience, discussant FGDJ007 iterated how power imbalance drives corrupt practices: *"The community leaders made compromises with contractors and government officials such that on paper, the project had been carried out, but nothing in reality."*

FGDL003 highlighted conflicting priorities as a challenge in achieving sustainable development through community engagement. The interest of community leaders often conflicts with that of the people. This leads to community needs being subordinated to that of community leaders. According to Gaventa (2006), power imbalances can skew grassroots democratic processes, leading to governance structures that do not adequately reflect the diversity of community needs.

The FGDs show that participatory community events like town hall meetings are not an integral part of the mechanisms of development governance in Abuja. Therefore, town hall meetings

are sporadic and not mandatory at various stages of a development effort. Nonetheless, most participants expressed willingness to participate in such community engagement initiatives when the opportunity arises.

One of the themes that emerged from the transcript is the motivation for engagement. Community members are desirous to engage in development enterprises because it promotes a sense of belonging and ownership. However, there is a paucity of leaders who facilitate participatory decision-making and community engagement in Abuja. The participants noted that implementing participatory leadership is challenging due to hierarchical structures and seeming resistance to changing systems of governance. It is further complicated by non-adherence to and non-integration of sustainability principles into local policies, projects, and budgetary practices.

Another subtheme is oriented towards the theoretical nexus between social capital and political systems of participation (Putnam, 2000). Some discussants expressed the view that democracy is weak in Nigeria, which inhibits multi-level engagements in development enterprises. The remarks of discussant FGDKA002 illustrate this: *"Any thriving democratic structure is supposed to be participatory, and there is supposed to be community engagement. And for these parts of the world, talking about Africa, Nigeria in particular, I would not say our democracy is participatory because it is only participatory during the elections...So, if democracy is not participatory, then the governance is not participatory. Therefore, there is no community engagement. They need to*

improve on that."

The findings of the FGDs show that trust is the bedrock of community engagement. This supports Claridge's (2018) view that shared norms are imperative in facilitating collective action. When there is a trust deficit the mechanisms for community engagement cannot function properly. Some of the discussants underscored the need to curtail aversion to engagement by building trust and ensuring accountability. According to discussant FGDJ006, accountability is an ethical prerequisite for sustained engagement: *"Government must be accountable to the people, while the people hold them accountable."*

Similarly, the findings indicate that pseudo-engagement is a disservice to development. The government deters community engagement when people articulate their development-related needs and thereafter government does the opposite. This motif of the findings is not geo-specific as Chambers (2002) noted; it is a widespread phenomenon that undermines engagement. The FGD participants advocated that implementation must reflect consensus-based planning. Discussant FGDJ009 encapsulates this: *"If we provide input the first time in a town hall meeting and it's not taken into consideration during implementation and it happens again; we would stop attending such meetings. So, government must be ready to not just listen, but also act on what was said."*

The FGD participants had a positive view of the possible impact of widespread participatory leadership. According to FDGKU001, it leads to community empowerment and the development of next-generation

leadership. This view reinforces the desirability of participatory leadership as espoused by Chase (2023). Furthermore, discussant FGDKU004 noted that participatory leadership promotes cost-effectiveness throughout a project cycle. Also, the findings indicate that participatory leadership is desirable because it is a means of bridging intergenerational capacity gap. It creates a learning platform for the younger generation to enhance their leadership capital. According to FGDLU002: *"Well, my views about participatory leadership is that it will enhance good leadership. It will help leadership to give back to the younger generation and learn how leadership works. So, participation should not just be for elderly people."*

Building the leadership capacity of the next generation inevitably enhances social cohesion and social capital, which Dallas (2023) and Obiomah (2023) opined are central to community engagement.

Another theme that was manifest in the transcript is the implications of community engagement for sustainable development. The FDGs participants consider it an instrument for collective empowerment. This notion is supported by Bappi, et al 2018. There was consensus across the six FGDs that active community engagement leads to enhanced social capital (Tsounis and Xanthopoulou, 2024). Discussants noted that it is a remedy for abandoned projects and the wastage of scarce public resources. According to discussant FGDLU006: *"I was part of some projects some time ago. People were given things that they did not need. In one instance, a hospital was built. The hospital was left for more than four or five years, it was not in operation. There*

was no single doctor. There was no nurse. After spending millions of Naira to build it."

The findings also highlighted imperatives of participatory leadership in Nigeria, which include empowerment and inclusivity (Itodo, 2016). Participants noted that inclusivity in decision-making is a stimulus of community empowerment. They opined that to strengthen democratic processes and sustainability efforts, community engagement should be mandatory.

Some participants expressed concern in community engagement initiatives as it may endanger their security. FGDKA 002 buttressed this point: *"So long as my safety was guaranteed."* Also, discussant FGDKA 007 noted that a condition for participation is security: *"I will enthusiastically participate as long as there is security at the town hall meeting."*

The foregoing indicates that insecurity is a deterrent to meaningful community engagement. In an environment of fear, people cannot freely participate in multi-level engagement forums and express their development needs, as they may be targets of attack.

Discussants had positive views about the roles of surveys in promoting community engagement for sustainable development, as underscored by Dorosh (2019). According to discussant FGDLO011: *"It will be good for surveys to be conducted before embarking on any community project because if you conduct a survey, you will know what that community really needs."* However, some participants expressed aversion to surveys that are too formal and replete with obscurities. Discussant FGDLU006 noted: *"We want surveys to be conducted*

within our community to determine our priority needs and execute them accordingly. So that decisions are not made concerning our community without us. But it should not be academic. It should be down to our level. When academic they detach you from the realities of the communities."

Conclusion and Recommendations

As seen in the foregoing sections, participatory leadership and community engagement are drivers of sustainable development. They aid the development of social capital within the community, resulting in a more informed, engaged, empowered, and interconnected community.

The findings underscore the importance of participatory mechanisms that include community events like town hall meetings, surveys, and participatory budgeting for strategic engagement. First, to promote the operational efficiency of such participatory mechanisms, government should ensure measures are in place for the security and confidentiality of grassroots mobilisers of development. Second, to address capacity gap in participatory budgeting, public institutions and NGOs should develop and implement robust educative programmes aimed at empowering citizens to play important knowledge-based roles in the budget cycle.

Third, to foster sustained engagement, government should promote a culture of trust by ensuring accountability mechanisms. People are averse to participation where there is lack of trust. To abate the eroding trust between the governed and the governing authorities, the ethics of transparency must be entrenched in the practices of community

engagement, participatory leadership, and people-involved budgetary processes. Fourth, surveys should be free of technical jargons that impede the ability of community members to understand their essence and questions. Lastly, future research efforts should seek to examine emerging digital applications for participatory e-governance in Nigeria and budgetary practices. Similarly, future research should explore the strategic role of stakeholders like NGOs and the formal private sector in promoting sustainable development through collaborative partnerships with community-based organizations.

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