



A stake in their future: Advancing local community engagement in Northeast Nigerian development initiatives

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the level of local community engagement in development initiatives in the northeast of Nigeria, highlighting the importance of local community engagement in the successful implementation and sustainability of development projects and their current challenges. The study delves into the existing literature and reports using a desk research methodology, providing a comprehensive overview of current practices and the barriers hindering effective community involvement. This exploration identifies several key research gaps, including the lack of consensus on effective community engagement measurement, insufficient understanding of participation dynamics, and limited investigation into the long-term effectiveness of capacity-building initiatives. In response to these gaps, the article proposes strategies to improve community engagement in the region, such as developing robust metrics for community engagement, implementing inclusive participation practices, and incorporating capacity-building components in development initiatives. The article underscores the critical need for further research in this area and advocates for more inclusive, sustainable, and effective community engagement in Northeast Nigeria's development efforts.

Key Words Northeast Nigeria; community engagement; development initiatives; conflict-affected regions; Boko Haram insurgency; local participation; capacity-building; gender equality.

INTRODUCTION

Today's world is ever more interdependent and interconnected, making local communities' active and meaningful engagement in development initiatives relevant and vital. Local communities are a fount of wisdom, resilience, and change; they are beneficiaries of development initiatives, of course, but more importantly, they also play a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining these initiatives (Mansuri & Rao, 2012). Despite this, their participation is often overlooked or given lesser importance in development discourse and practice. This gap in community involvement is particularly pronounced in complex, conflict-ridden environments, such as Northeast Nigeria, where long-standing instability, repeated humanitarian crises, and numerous developmental challenges persist.

Located in the Sahel, Northeast Nigeria comprises six states: Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe. These states are home to a rich tapestry of cultural diversity, yet they are also areas of significant socio-economic disparities and stark contrasts. Over the last decade, the region has been in the grips of an armed conflict that has mushroomed into a full-blown humanitarian crisis. Thousands have lost their lives, and millions have been displaced, destabilizing entire communities (Osewa, 2019).

In response to this crisis, many development initiatives have been launched in the region. These range from emergency relief operations to longer-term development projects aimed at addressing the root causes of the conflict, such as poverty, illiteracy, and economic deprivation. International aid agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the Nigerian government have pumped resources into these

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To cite: Hussain, T. O. (2024). A stake in their future: Advancing local community engagement in Northeast Nigerian development initiatives. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 9(2), 87–93. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.363>

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initiatives, hoping to bring about meaningful change (Uscategui & Andrea, 2017).

Despite these well-intentioned efforts, however, the region remains mired in challenges. A significant reason for this stagnation is the lack of effective community engagement in development initiatives. Engaging with local communities is not just a desirable component of development work; it is essential for the success and sustainability of these projects. Understanding local cultures, needs, and power dynamics can improve project design, enhance community ownership, and ultimately lead to more impactful outcomes. This study sets out to address this gap by advancing our understanding of local community engagement in the context of development initiatives in Northeast Nigeria. It aims to uncover the nuances, shed light on the complexities, and outline actionable strategies for improving community participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature shows that local community engagement in development projects is not a new concept. For years, scholars and practitioners alike have emphasized the importance of involving local communities in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of development initiatives (Arnstein, 1969; Chambers, 1994). However, the understanding and operationalization of community engagement are far from uniform, and there is an ongoing debate about its meaning, process, and outcomes.

At one end of the spectrum, community engagement is viewed as a way of collecting information from the community to inform project design (Reed, 2008). On the other end, it is seen as empowering the community to make decisions about projects affecting them (Hickey, 2004). In between, multiple perspectives see community engagement as a tool for improving project effectiveness, building social capital, reducing conflicts, and promoting sustainable development (Cornwall, 2008).

Within the context of Northeast Nigeria, a few key studies shed light on local community engagement in development initiatives. These studies underscore the challenges and potential of community engagement in this region. For instance, a report by the International Crisis Group (2017) highlights how the Boko Haram insurgency has strained traditional community structures and posed significant barriers to community participation in development initiatives. On the other hand, studies by Bolarinwa and Osuji (2022) and Mercy Corps (2018) demonstrate how locally led peace-building and resilience-building initiatives have effectively navigated complex socio-political dynamics and achieved impactful outcomes.

Conceptually, this study is grounded in Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation and Cornwall's (2008) idea of participatory spaces. Arnstein's ladder presents a spectrum of citizen participation, ranging from manipulation and therapy (non-participation) to partnership and citizen control (citizen power). This ladder provides a useful framework for analyzing the degree and quality of community engagement in development initiatives. Meanwhile, Cornwall's idea of participatory spaces draws attention to the institutional arrangements and power dynamics that

enable or constrain community engagement. By examining "created" and "invited" spaces of participation, we can gain deeper insights into how community engagement unfolds in Northeast Nigeria's complex context.

Despite these contributions, there is still a dearth of comprehensive studies on local community engagement in Northeast Nigeria's development initiatives. Many existing studies tend to focus on specific projects or sectors, offering limited insights into the broader trends and patterns. Furthermore, most studies primarily focus on the challenges of community engagement, with less attention paid to its potential and strategies for improvement. This study aims to fill these gaps and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of community engagement in Northeast Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a desk research approach, an established method in social sciences that involves collecting, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research and data to answer specific research questions (Hart, 1998). This approach is particularly relevant for this study because it allows us to leverage the breadth and depth of existing literature and reports on local community engagement in development projects in Northeast Nigeria.

The data sources for this research are varied and encompass academic literature, project reports, policy documents, and other secondary sources. These sources are accessed through multiple databases, including Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, and websites of relevant organizations, such as the World Bank, United Nations, NGOs, and the Nigerian government. The search terms used included "community engagement," "local participation," "development projects," "Northeast Nigeria," and related terms.

Selection criteria were employed to ensure that the sources used were relevant and reliable. Firstly, the sources had to be directly related to the topic of local community engagement in development projects. Secondly, they had to provide insights into the context of Northeast Nigeria. Thirdly, most of the sources had to be published within the last 10 years to ensure that the findings were relevant and up-to-date. Lastly, the sources needed to be from reputable authors or organizations with recognized expertise in the field.

To ensure the quality of the study, I adhered to the standards of reliability, validity, and ethics. Reliability was maintained by keeping a detailed record of the data collection and analysis process to ensure that other researchers could replicate the study. Validity was enhanced by cross-checking information across multiple sources and by grounding the interpretations in the data. In terms of ethics, I made sure to cite all sources correctly and avoid any form of plagiarism.

The desk research approach has its limitations, including the dependence on the quality and availability of existing data and the lack of primary data that could provide more current and nuanced insights. Despite these limitations, the approach allowed for a comprehensive overview of the state of local community engagement in Northeast Nigeria and facilitated the identification of critical research gaps.

THE CRISIS IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA

The crisis in Northeast Nigeria is a long-standing conflict that has brought immense suffering to the region. It is a complex situation driven by various factors, including religious, political, ethnic, and economic elements, leading to violence and instability.

The origin of the crisis can be traced back to the early 2000s when Boko Haram, a radical Islamist group, emerged in Northeastern Nigeria (Mansuri & Rao, 2012). Initially, Boko Haram focused on addressing perceived social and economic injustices, but over time, it transformed into a militant organization with a jihadist ideology. The situation escalated in 2009 when Nigerian security forces launched a crackdown, resulting in the death of the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf. Subsequently, Boko Haram became more violent, targeting civilians, security forces, and government institutions (Mansuri & Rao, 2012).

The crisis has had profound socio-economic consequences in Northeast Nigeria. The region, which was already one of Nigeria's poorest (Dunn, 2018), has witnessed a severe economic decline due to the destruction of infrastructure, disruption of agricultural activities, and displacement of millions of people. Access to education and healthcare has been severely hindered, exacerbating poverty and food insecurity (Dunn, 2018).

The humanitarian toll of the crisis has been devastating. Millions of people have been displaced from their homes within Nigeria and as refugees in neighbouring countries. Access to basic necessities such as clean water, sanitation, and healthcare remains a significant challenge in conflict-affected areas (Ewang, 2022). The crisis has also led to a severe protection crisis, with reports of widespread human rights abuses, including gender-based violence.

Amid the ongoing crisis in Northeast Nigeria, development initiatives have played a crucial role in providing relief and support to the affected communities. These initiatives encompass various efforts, including infrastructure rehabilitation, educational programs, and economic empowerment projects.

DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA

Northeast Nigeria, which comprised six states – Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe – is an area of complex crisis marked by persistent poverty, food insecurity, and prolonged conflict. This conflict, mainly attributed to the insurgent group Boko Haram, has disrupted social, economic, and political structures, causing massive displacements, loss of lives and property, and extreme human suffering (UNOCHA, 2020). These unique circumstances have triggered many development initiatives to alleviate suffering, reduce poverty, and set the region on a path to recovery and development.

The Nigerian government launched the Presidential Initiative for the North East (PINE) in 2013 to facilitate the reconstruction and development of the region. This comprehensive development initiative aims to rebuild infrastructure, restore public services, revive the economy, and improve security in the insurgency-affected states. However, despite

its commendable objectives, the PINE has been criticized for alleged corruption, minimal community involvement, and limited impact on the ground (Adebayo, 2016). Such issues have raised questions about governance and the efficacy of top-down development approaches in such a complex and fluid context.

In addition to national initiatives, Northeast Nigeria has seen an influx of development projects initiated by international organizations. For instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) introduced the Integrated Community Stabilization Programme in 2017. This project targets communities affected by the Boko Haram insurgency and focuses on enhancing livelihoods, restoring basic services, improving security, and fostering peace (UNDP, 2017). The holistic approach adopted by the UNDP recognizes the interconnectedness of the region's challenges and the need for integrated solutions.

The World Bank and the African Development Bank have also provided substantial funding for various development and recovery projects in Northeast Nigeria. These projects cover a broad range of sectors, including agriculture, infrastructure, health, and education, targeting key vulnerabilities and promoting economic recovery (African Development Bank, 2019; World Bank, 2023). Furthermore, many NGOs have launched initiatives in the region. These organizations, including Mercy Corps, Oxfam, and the Norwegian Refugee Council, are actively involved in providing humanitarian assistance, building resilience, and advocating for the rights of the affected communities (Mercy Corps, 2023; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2023; Oxfam, 2023b).

However, despite these concerted efforts, the region continues to grapple with enormous challenges. The development initiatives have had mixed results, with some achieving moderate successes while others have not fully met their objectives. Factors hindering progress include the ongoing conflict, logistical complexities, endemic corruption, limited capacity of local institutions, and, most importantly, the limited engagement of local communities in these initiatives.

Local community engagement is increasingly recognized as a vital ingredient for the success of development projects. It facilitates tailoring interventions to local needs, enhances ownership, and fosters sustainability. However, it appears that local community engagement in Northeast Nigeria's development initiatives has been less than optimal (International Crisis Group, 2017).

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Local community engagement, often interchangeably used with terms such as public participation, community involvement, or stakeholder engagement, is a process that entails the active participation of community members in the decision-making processes that impact their lives. This concept is deeply rooted in democratic ideals and is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of effective development initiatives (Rong et al., 2023).

Engaging communities is not a novel idea. Traditional societies worldwide have always sought the wisdom of the community in making decisions that affect collective welfare. What is relatively new, however, is the recognition of

this practice's value by modern institutions such as governments, international organizations, and corporations. Today, local community engagement is seen as a principle of good governance and a necessary ingredient for sustainable development (Arnstein, 1969). The importance of local community engagement in development projects cannot be overstated, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected regions such as Northeast Nigeria. Here, it takes on a multidimensional significance.

Firstly, local community engagement helps ensure that the solutions proposed by development projects meet the actual needs of the people they are intended to serve. When people are involved in identifying their issues and proposing solutions, the chances of these interventions being relevant and accepted are much higher (Mansuri & Rao, 2012). For instance, a health project aimed at reducing maternal mortality might be more successful if women from the community are involved in the design and implementation process, as they are best positioned to understand the barriers they face in accessing healthcare services.

Secondly, community engagement enhances the legitimacy and local ownership of development projects. In contexts characterized by conflict and mistrust, such as Northeast Nigeria, it is vital for initiatives to build trust with the communities they serve (OECD, 2018). Engaging communities in the decision-making process enhances transparency, allows for a sense of ownership, and builds trust, thereby increasing the chances of the project's success and sustainability.

Thirdly, community engagement can act as a catalyst for social cohesion and peacebuilding. By involving diverse community groups, including women, youth, and marginalized populations, in development processes, these initiatives can help reduce social tensions, address grievances, and build social capital, essential ingredients for peace and stability (World Bank, 2011). Finally, community engagement is an empowerment process. Community members gain knowledge, skills, and confidence by participating in decisions that affect their lives, which can enhance their capacity to influence future developments in their community and beyond (Cornwall, 2008).

A prime example is the FADAMA project series in Nigeria, which stands out as a pioneering example of community-driven agricultural development, notably in Plateau, Akwa Ibom State, and Niger State. This project revolutionized the sector by decentralizing decision-making and empowering local stakeholders, as seen in FADAMA II. Through structures such as FADAMA User Groups and FADAMA Community Associations, it ensured diverse representation, including farmers, women, and youth, fostering inclusivity and grassroots participation. Coupled with capacity-building and financial empowerment initiatives such as the FADAMA Users Equity Fund, significant increases in incomes and agricultural productivity were achieved, leaving a legacy of good governance and community-driven development (Chakib & Adetunji, 2022).

However, it is crucial to note that while community engagement holds significant potential for improving the outcomes of development projects, it is not a magic bullet. Its effectiveness is contingent upon various factors, including the quality of engagement, the inclusiveness of the process, and the socio-political context. In Northeast Nigeria, the

realization of this potential is challenged by various factors, including conflict, insecurity, gender inequality, and socio-cultural norms.

In light of these factors, this study seeks to understand the current state of community engagement in development initiatives in Northeast Nigeria, identify gaps in practice and knowledge, and propose strategies for enhancing local community engagement.

CHALLENGES IN LOCAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA

Achieving effective local community engagement in Northeast Nigeria is akin to navigating a challenging terrain filled with various socio-political, cultural, and economic hurdles. Despite the impressive strides made towards fostering inclusive practices, many roadblocks persistently hinder the integration of local communities into different stages of funded projects, from design to implementation and evaluation.

Arguably, the most formidable barrier is the incessant conflict plaguing the region. This endemic insecurity spawns a volatile and unpredictable environment that disrupts community life, hindering consistent and effective community engagement in development projects (World Bank, 2023). The relentless insurgency by Boko Haram and other armed factions has precipitated widespread displacement and loss of livelihoods, leading to significant social fragmentation. This disruption of community cohesion complicates efforts to mobilize and involve communities in development initiatives. Additionally, the heightened security risks pose a daunting challenge for project personnel, constraining their ability to establish and maintain a continuous, productive presence within the community.

Moreover, deep-seated cultural intricacies also pose substantial obstacles to community engagement. Northeast Nigeria is home to an array of ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, each possessing unique traditions, norms, power structures, and worldviews. These cultural elements profoundly influence community receptiveness and capacity to participate in development projects and equally impact the project staff's ability to communicate effectively and build robust relationships with the community members (UNDP, 2017). Navigating this cultural labyrinth requires sophisticated, nuanced approaches and a significant investment of time and resources, often scarce in funded initiatives.

The gender dynamics within the region represent another critical concern. Prevailing gender norms and practices often inhibit women's active participation in public life, including their engagement in development projects (Oxfam, 2023a,b). This gender imbalance is not only a breach of women's rights and opportunities but also a critical detriment to the effectiveness of projects. Women often possess unique insights and capacities that, when tapped, can significantly bolster project outcomes.

Several insightful reports and studies elucidate these challenges in practical terms. The World Bank's (2021) evaluation of its various development projects in Northeast Nigeria paints a stark picture of the destructive impacts of regional conflict on community engagement. The report meticulously details how insecurity and displacement disrupted community gatherings, delayed project timelines, and spurred

high staff attrition rates, contributing to substantially eroded community trust and participation.

In contrast, a comprehensive study by the UNDP (2017) sheds light on the cultural impediments to community engagement in the region. The study found that project personnel often grappled with understanding and respecting local customs and languages, leading to frequent misunderstandings and resentment among community members. In addition, the study exposed that traditional power structures often dominated decision-making processes, consequently marginalizing less influential groups, including women and youths.

Oxfam's report (2023a) brings to the fore the gender-related barriers that stifle community engagement in Northeast Nigeria. The report vividly narrates the experiences of women who faced severe constraints to their participation in development projects due to entrenched cultural norms, overwhelming domestic responsibilities, and fear of violence. These women reported a deep-seated sense of being voiceless and disempowered. Their exclusion resulted in development projects missing out on the unique perspectives and skills that these women could have contributed, leading to less effective project outcomes.

The enormity and complexity of these challenges necessitate an even more context-sensitive, flexible, and inclusive approach to local community engagement. Those in charge of project implementation need to comprehend the local conflict dynamics, respect cultural diversities, and promote gender equality earnestly. By embedding these principles in their engagement strategies, we can hope to surmount these barriers and unlock the true potential of local community engagement in the development projects of Northeast Nigeria.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The challenges identified underscore the complexity and the criticality of fostering effective community engagement in Northeast Nigeria. Armed with these insights, here are several potential strategies to bolster community engagement, informed by the existing literature, the context-specific hurdles of Northeast Nigeria, and the global best practices.

Cultivating Trust Through Continuous Dialogue

Building trust with communities is foundational to any successful engagement effort (World Bank, 2018). This trust can be nurtured through continuous and respectful dialogue with community members. Regular meetings, town halls, focus groups, and individual interviews can serve as platforms for open communication, where community concerns can be heard, project objectives can be clarified, and collective solutions can be formulated. Such communication channels must be inclusive, ensuring all segments of the community – especially marginalized groups – have an opportunity to voice their thoughts and influence project decisions.

Developing Tailored Participation Mechanisms

While participation is essential, not all participation is equal. Tokenistic or superficial participation can lead to frustration and disengagement (Pretty, 1995). To prevent this, projects need to develop participatory mechanisms that are

meaningful and adapted to local realities. This might include forming community steering committees, using participatory planning methodologies, or leveraging traditional decision-making structures. Such mechanisms should be designed collaboratively with community members to ensure their relevance, acceptability, and effectiveness.

Strengthening Capacities for Engagement

For communities to engage effectively, they need the right skills and knowledge. Capacity-building efforts should be a core component of any engagement strategy (UNDP, 2016). This could include workshops on project management, training on specific technical skills, or educational sessions on rights and advocacy. To maximize their impact, these capacity-building efforts should be tailored to community members' learning needs and styles and incorporate local languages and cultural practices.

Mainstreaming Gender Equality

Promoting gender equality should be another key priority. This could involve providing safe spaces for women to participate, giving women leadership roles in project activities, or designing project interventions that address gender-specific needs and challenges (Oxfam, 2023a). Moreover, efforts should be made to engage men and traditional leaders in discussions about gender equality to challenge harmful gender norms and promote more inclusive attitudes and behaviours.

Effective Community Participation in Conflict-Affected Areas

In areas experiencing ongoing conflict, such as Northeast Nigeria, it is crucial to find innovative and adaptable methods to ensure community involvement in project decision-making. Prioritizing safety measures, such as collaborating with local authorities for security, is essential to create secure spaces for dialogue. Trusted intermediaries who are familiar with the local context can facilitate communication and build trust, while incorporating technology such as mobile phones or virtual platforms can overcome logistical challenges and reach isolated communities. It is vital to integrate conflict-sensitive approaches into project design and implementation to mitigate tensions and promote social cohesion. By being flexible and sensitive to the complex dynamics of conflict-affected areas, inclusive community engagement can be achieved, aligning projects with local needs and contributing to sustainable development goals.

Instituting Rigorous Impact Measurement

Lastly, to learn from our efforts and continuously improve our practices, we need to measure the impact of our community engagement strategies (USAID, 2023). This might involve conducting surveys to assess community satisfaction, tracking indicators related to community participation, or using participatory evaluation methods to understand community perspectives on project impacts. These impact measurement efforts should be integrated into the project cycle, informing planning, implementation, and reporting processes.

By adopting these strategies, we can significantly enhance local community engagement in Northeast Nigeria, making our development efforts more inclusive, effective, and sustainable. However, it is important to remember that each

community is unique, and these strategies should be adapted and iterated upon to fit each community's specific context and needs. Only then can we truly realize the transformative potential of community engagement.

CONCLUSION

The journey through the realm of local community engagement in Northeast Nigeria has been rich and revealing. I started with a broad overview of the socio-political and economic landscape of the region, delving into the historical context of funded projects and the role of community engagement within this sphere. As I traversed this landscape, I identified a set of interlocking challenges: socio-political tensions, cultural complexities, and gender disparities, among others, which obstruct effective community engagement.

I then navigated the terra incognita of research gaps in the field. A paucity of knowledge around operational aspects of community participation, capacity-building necessities, gender dynamics, and impact measurement stood starkly apparent. Lastly, I charted potential pathways towards more effective community engagement, underscoring the importance of trust-building, tailored participatory mechanisms, capacity enhancement, gender inclusion, and rigorous impact evaluation.

Yet, the journey is far from over. Each of these topics warrants further exploration and interrogation, and the strategies proposed merely scrape the surface of possibilities. As a global research community, we are only beginning to understand the multifaceted and dynamic nature of community engagement, particularly in contexts as diverse and complex as Northeast Nigeria. There is a pressing need to better understand how local communities in Northeast Nigeria can actively participate in, influence, and benefit from the projects implemented in their localities. This calls for collaborative, participatory, and action-oriented research endeavours that involve local communities at every stage of the research process – from problem definition and data collection to analysis and dissemination.

Equally important is the need to translate this research into practice. Policymakers, practitioners, and project funders need to take note of these research gaps and make concerted efforts to address them. They can do this by investing in capacity-building initiatives, developing more inclusive participation mechanisms, mainstreaming gender equality, and instituting robust systems for impact measurement.

In conclusion, this article reaffirms the power and potential of community engagement in shaping the outcomes of funded projects in Northeast Nigeria. It sheds light on the complexities and nuances of this process, illuminates the gaps in our current knowledge and practice, and offers a vision for a future where community engagement is not just an add-on but a core principle of development practice.

In the end, development is not something that can be done to or for communities; it is something that communities must do for themselves. By engaging local communities in meaningful and empowering ways, we can improve the effectiveness and sustainability of development projects and foster social cohesion, resilience, and self-reliance among community members. To realize this vision, we need to commit ourselves to a journey of continuous learning, reflection,

and action. It is a journey that begins with acknowledging and addressing the research gaps that currently exist in the field of community engagement.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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