



COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVES AND SOCIAL INCLUSION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: NIGERIAN AND SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

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Community initiatives are becoming a critical tool for achieving sustainable development and social inclusion in Africa since the top-down development strategies failed to respond to the socio-economic realities of the marginalized group in the society and hence contribute to inequality and marginalization. Community-driven development, by contrast, puts local actors in a position to define priorities, organize resources, and apply solutions that meet the unique circumstances of the community. The article examines the transformational nature and involvement of grassroots in addressing socio-economic inequalities, increasing civic engagement, and resilient communities. Based on theoretical and empirical experiences in Nigeria and South Africa, the study identifies the role of grassroots efforts, local knowledge systems, and participatory processes in making communities more resilient and self-reliant. The article analyses the overlap of cultural norms, policy frameworks and development agendas on the development of inclusive community development practices. The study concludes that community agency, combined with inclusive policies, would improve the ownership, accountability, and sustainability of development outputs. The article recommends adoption of community-based development models, which prioritise inclusivity, capacity building, and long-term resilience. These are necessary for the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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1. INTRODUCTION

Community-based programs are now recognised as central to sustainable and inclusive development, especially in the socio-economic realms of African countries like Nigeria and South Africa. These efforts enable local communities to directly participate in developing their community planning agendas and economic paths, ensuring that development agendas are locally oriented and address community needs. Such localised practice is crucial in addressing historical inequities and enhancing the equitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and services in both physical and social contexts. Grassroots campaigns are critical towards the changes of top-down participatory governance, where communities can take charge of their land, resources, and societal development. This paradigm shift sees local knowledge and institutions as the core of the success of conservation and the sustainable development of urban areas, confronting more systematic problems that are typically disregarded by traditional top-down approaches¹.

The desire for sustainable cities and communities, as reflected in United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11, highlights the universal need to make human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable due to the significant rate of growth in the global urban population². As a result, community-based planning strategies gained central importance in urban planning to resolve the issues of urbanization, including poor housing, limited access to infrastructural facilities, and high social inequalities, among others³. However, the effectiveness of community involvement in the urban planning process is directly related to the attainment of sustainable development goals, as case studies have proved to be more

¹ AK Limaki, 'The Potential of Community-Led Development Initiatives for Addressing Urban Inequality: Strategies and Challenges of Successful Models in Practice' (2024) 4(1) *International Journal of Architecture and Planning* 13.

² RM Kajiita and SM Kang'ethe, 'Socio-Economic Dynamics Inhibiting Inclusive Urban Economic Development: Implications for Sustainable Urban Development in South African Cities' (2024) 16(7) *Sustainability* 2803.

³ C Madell, 'Inclusionary Housing Policy and Practice in South African Cities: Planning as a Spatial Transformation Tool' (2024) 40(2) *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 741

effective based on participatory engagement⁴. The model acknowledges the potential that local communities must fight urban inequality and build more inclusive spaces using their knowledge and community mobilization. The technical aids, capacity building, and sound regulatory frameworks, which constitute the institutional support, are thus essential to cultivating the long-term success and expansion of these community-based activities. However, these attempts are constantly hampered by major challenges, including the lack of financial support, fundamental politics, and the danger of repeating the already existing social inequalities without proper attention. These problems require a reconsideration of conventional participatory patterns, supported by approaches that empower marginalized groups to co-design and co-manage community resources⁵.

The effectiveness of community-based programs depends on their ability to meet urgent demands as well as establish resilient and responsive frameworks that can address the compounding effects of socio-economic problems (Lawrence et al., 2020)⁶. Therefore, this article examines the critical role of community-based programs in promoting social inclusion and sustainable community development in Nigeria and South Africa, and how they can be used to mitigate environmental and socio-economic issues affecting communities due to their local and participatory nature. It analyses existing methods of community engagement and offers practical suggestions for enhancing cooperation between policymakers and the communities they serve to achieve more sustainable, liveable environments that meet the diverse needs and desires of the people.

The article is divided into nine (9) main interconnected sections that provide a logical progression of the study, and each section has a specific purpose in developing the argument of the study. The introduction

⁴ G Deep, 'Evaluating the Impact of Community Engagement in Urban Planning on Sustainable Development' (2023) 20(3) *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews* 1633.

⁵ AT Amorim-Maia and others, 'Intersectional Climate Justice: A Conceptual Pathway for Bridging Adaptation Planning, Transformative Action, and Social Equity' (2021) 41 *Urban Climate* 101053.

⁶ J Lawrence, P Blackett and NA Craddock-Henry, 'Cascading Climate Change Impacts and Implications' (2020) 29 *Climate Risk Management* 100234.

establishes the background of community-led initiatives and explains their relevance to social inclusion and sustainable development in Nigeria and South Africa. The literature review examines existing studies and debates on community-led development, participation, and inclusion. The conceptual clarification defines the major concepts, including community-led initiatives and social inclusion, to establish the study's foundation. The empirical framework and country perspectives draw on practical experiences from Nigeria and South Africa, highlighting the achievements and challenges of community-based approaches. The methodology explains the research design, data sources, and analytical approach used in the study. The theoretical framework presents the theories guiding the research, including participatory development theory, empowerment theory, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. The discussion of findings interprets the evidence by examining how community-led initiatives contribute to empowerment, inclusion, and sustainable development while identifying limitations. The recommendations propose strategies for strengthening community-based initiatives through improved governance, financing, capacity building, and inclusive practices. Finally, the conclusion summarises the major arguments and emphasises the importance of community participation and supportive institutional frameworks in achieving sustainable and inclusive community development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Community-led initiatives (CLIs), also referred to as community-led development (CLD), participatory community development, or locally led programming, are strategies that place community actors at the forefront of problem identification, decision-making, and implementation to achieve developmental goals. Over the past two decades, researchers and professionals have suggested that CLIs can enhance social inclusion and a community's sustainable development by increasing the relevance, legitimacy, and sustainability of interventions⁷. In the meantime, empirical research of the African case, or rather Nigeria and South Africa,

⁷ N Dube, L Mnguni and A Tschudin, 'Community Participation and Governance in South African Municipalities: Lessons from Mbizana' (2021) 12(3) *Journal of African Local Governance* 45–67.

demonstrates that trade-offs are not always positive; as much as CLIs may be able to bring empowerment and social cohesion, they often face structural barriers, including poverty, patronage, weak institutions, and gender discrimination, limiting their growth and sustainability⁸. This review summarises both the conceptual debates, empirical results, and policy implications of the current literature with special reference to Nigeria and South Africa, with a view to how the concept of social inclusion has been conceptualised and operationalised in the context of community-led work and the research evidence of how the concept has led to sustainable development.

3. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Community-led Development and Social Inclusion

Community-led initiatives are characterized by three overlapping characteristics: local initiation or leadership, participatory decision-making, and local control of at least some resources or processes⁹. The focus of Community-led initiatives (CLIs) is basically on local ownership, empowerment of the downtrodden majority, and decision-making by the majority to address sustainable development issues.¹⁰ These models differ from top-down models in that they focus more on the knowledge, priorities, and agency of their community members. Social inclusion, which is part of CLIs, provides fair and equitable involvement of all genders, ages, and ethnicities, which increases social cohesion and minimize inequalities¹¹.

Various community development models inform CLIs worldwide, including in the African region. The rights-based community development focuses on the idea of empowerment via assertion of rights

⁸ E Utuk, 'Community Participation and Rural Development in Nigeria' (2014) 29(2) *Journal of Rural Studies* 112–127.

⁹ MCLD (Making Community-Led Development Work), *Unpacking Community-Led Development: Report 1* (MCLD 2021)

¹⁰ T Henfrey, 'Community-Led Initiatives and Sustainable Development: Local Ownership and Collective Empowerment for Systemic Change' (2023) 58(4) *Journal of Community Development* 512–528.

¹¹ R Kajiita, 'Social Enterprises and Inclusive Development in South Africa' (2022) 7(1) *Social Economy Review* 21–39.

and entitlements, while asset-based community development (ABCD) is a strategy that utilizes local resources and skills to achieve capacity and resilience¹². The sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) is a combination of economic, social, and environmental aspects aimed at assisting in the planning of holistic development through structures that facilitate the organisation of the CLIs in a democratic, context-sensitive, and sustainable manner.

Another related yet different concept is social inclusion. Instead of simply being part of the community, social inclusion focuses on eliminating structural obstacles that impede the social, economic, and political existence of specific groups (women, youth, disabled persons, migrants, ethnic minorities)¹³. The new frameworks view social inclusion as having many parts, such as financial access (jobs, credit), societal acceptance (voice, dignity), political representation (decision-making), and geographical integration (access to services and land). Bringing together the two literatures, researchers believe that CLIs have a bright prospect of being vehicles of social inclusion, as they can restructure local government, create inclusive local organizations, and target interventions to the needs of marginalized populations, should such programs be clearly oriented to social inclusion and engage in structural power redistribution^{14, 15}.

4. EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK

Judging by the empirical studies undertaken in Nigeria and South Africa, several beneficial outcomes are replicated in the successful CLIs cases: improved service provision, enhanced social cohesion, locally appropriate solutions, and subsequent capacity building to sustain and expand^{16, 17}. Community engagement in community government structures, including public hearings, ward committees, and community-based budgeting

¹² H Wlokas, *Community Benefits from Renewable Energy Projects: South African Lessons* (Energy Research Centre, University of Cape Town 2017).

¹³ G Mir, 'Social Inclusion and Sustainable Development: Findings from a Conceptual Framework' (2024) 16(11) *Sustainability* 4859.

¹⁴ Ibid 11

¹⁵ Ibid 7

¹⁶ Ibid 7

¹⁷ Ibid 8

efforts, has been shown through case studies to correlate with peacebuilding processes as well as local-level governance in South Africa. As an example, participatory approaches adopted in the Mbizana Municipality supported conflict management and contributed to strengthening the perceived legitimacy of governmental operations¹⁸. One example of social innovation and locally driven efforts to alleviate poverty and foster adaptation strategies in urban slums and rural regions has been reported in Nigeria, where local social entrepreneurship and community organizations were in the lead in design and execution^{19, 20}.

The literature suggests sustainability pathways, such as: (a) the establishment of local ownership via inclusive decision-making; (b) the combination of technical support and local capacity development; (c) the alignment of CLIs with the local governance systems to ensure the flow of resources and institutional support; (d) continuous monitoring and adaptive management, which reacts to local feedback^{21, 22}. The MCLD report summarises a broad spectrum of programmatic experience, and highlights that participation and inclusion are achieved in most successful CLD projects, and accountability and sustainability are less often fulfilled, indicating the significance of long-term support over first project cycles²³.

According to the consistent criticism of the literature, engagement in CLIs frequently does not go beyond surface-level and can even recreate the existing inequalities until inclusion is planned and designed^{24, 25}. Many gendered expectations, clientelist politics and elite takeover of community structures often restrict meaningful participation of women and youth in

¹⁸ Ibid 8

¹⁹ Ibid 7

²⁰ S Olanrewaju and others, 'Towards Climate Resilience: Assessing the Impact of Community-Based Environmental Planning on the Well-Being of Residents in the Slums of Osogbo, Nigeria' (2025) 3(5) *Journal of Inclusive Cities and Built Environment* 17.

²¹ Ibid 11

²² HP Zulu, TM Lukhele and PT Sabela, 'A Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Participation in Communal Land Development: Feminism Perspective' (2025) 7 *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities* 1467650.

²³ Ibid 11

²⁴ Ibid 15

²⁵ Zulu, Lukhele and Sabela (n 22).

Nigeria^{26, 27}. Using the example of rural development initiatives, it has been found that when societies are organized into cooperatives and formal community groups, where access to rural innovations and credit is often mediated by men, membership of cooperatives and formal community groups has been shown to favour men or better-connected households unless it is specifically targeted or affirmative action is implemented²⁸.

In South Africa, there are formal systems of engaging the public, yet their application differs widely across the municipalities; poor and more rural municipalities usually have fewer resources, administrative capacity and political will to convert participation into inclusion²⁹. Informal settlements and fringe self-built housing projects demonstrate not only the potential, but also the constraints of community-led upgrading: community self-organisation can be faster and more suitable than top-down solutions in providing housing and services, but marginalised inhabitants are still likely to be marginalised in decision-making, and may end up with disadvantageous prices³⁰.

The political economy analysis indicates that patronage, fragmented governance, and inadequate funding cycles are among the issues that inhibit CLIs' capacity to deliver sustainable development in the long run. In Nigeria, poor local government capacity, unreliable decentralisation of roles, and defective fiscal transfers prevent communities from institutionalising locally driven projects beyond pilot phases^{31, 32}. Likewise, on a national scale, in South Africa, even though progressive policies are present (e.g., the models of local economic development), the inadequate capacity of municipalities and the politicised service delivery may prevent the inclusion of community initiatives into the formal

²⁶ A Oyewo, 'Gendered Norms and Community Participation in Nigeria: Barriers to Inclusive Development' (2024) 18(1) *Journal of African Development and Social Policy* 55.

²⁷ Ibid 10

²⁸ Ibid 10

²⁹ Ibid 8

³⁰ M Georgiadou and C Loggia, 'Community-Led vs. Subsidised Housing: Lessons from Informal Settlements in Durban' (2025) 40(11) *Housing Studies* 2335.

³¹ Ibid 10

³² Ibid 28

system^{33, 34}. To sustain CLIs and avoid dependence or takeover, the literature suggests hybrid financing that includes community contributions, municipal budgets, donor flexibility, and private-sector partnerships.

The Nigerian experience of Community-led Initiatives

The story of CLIs in Nigeria highlights the importance of community involvement in facilitating access to social services and infrastructure, as seen in the Community and Social Development Project (CSDP)³⁵. The CSDP operates on a bottom-up strategy whereby communities make decisions and implement, and it ensures ownership and accountability. Some of the reported advances are the improvement of water supply mechanisms, electrification of villages, and welfare services, all of which are beneficial to vulnerable populations, including women and children³⁶. Such national policy frameworks, such as the Renewed Hope program, include the concept of inclusive development, in which the national government can address systemic inequalities by investing in infrastructure, education, and social protection in neglected areas. The proposed agenda advocates for grassroots empowerment through participatory legal practices and targeted economic assistance. This includes the Renewed Hope Ward Development Programme, which aims to support the growth of local production and business activities³⁷.

In Nigeria, social inclusion has been a challenge, because of overlapping inequalities, but CLIs have potential, because they involve the use of excluded groups in planning and resource distribution^{38, 39}. The

³³ Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), *National Framework for Local Economic Development (LED) in South Africa (2013–2018)* (Government of South Africa 2013)

³⁴ Ibid 8

³⁵ World Bank, *Nigeria: Community and Social Development Project (CSDP), Implementation Completion and Results Report* (World Bank 2021).

³⁶ Ibid 37

³⁷ A Essiet, 'The Renewed Hope Agenda: Advancing Inclusive Development through Participatory Governance in Nigeria' (2025) 19(1) *Journal of African Development Studies* 45–62.

³⁸ Ibid 39

³⁹ Ibid 37

cooperation between communities and government institutions makes it easier to see and keep developmental gains. The enabling policy environments that allow the development and maintenance of community-led initiatives, coupled with technical, financial, and institutional support provided by the government, cannot be underrated. The successful example of state-community collaboration is the Nigerian CSDP, in which local governments and sectoral agencies engage with communities in the process of co-designing and tracking the projects⁴⁰.

The South African experience of Community-led Initiatives

The community development situation in South Africa is characterized by the presence of a variety of different models, such as renewable energy, social enterprises, NGOs-led programs and so on, which reflect the principles of CLI⁴¹. The Renewable Energy Independent Power Production Procurement Program (REIPPPP) includes community renewables to provide socio-economic advantages with energy access. REIPPPP analysis demonstrates that community development can be successful only in cases where it is based on the principles of good practice, which include authentic multi-stakeholder involvement and long-term governmental support. In South Africa, social enterprises play one of the most important roles in the development of communities, as they encourage job creation, economic inclusion, and social innovation⁴². As an illustration, social enterprises in the *Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality* enable women and youth by building capacity and offering alternative services to ensure socio-economic liberation and decrease inequality.

The social development policies of the South African government focus on community empowerment by building communities and cooperatives, as well as subsidizing sustainable community businesses to reduce poverty and reliance on social grants⁴³. Such endeavours are in line with the inclusive development agendas because they strengthen social capital and

⁴⁰ Ibid 37

⁴¹ Ibid 14

⁴² Ibid 13

⁴³ South African Government, 'Social Development' (2024) <https://www.gov.za/about-sa/social-development>.

solidarity, making sure that development gains are realized among the marginalized groups. The strategy via the National Department of Social Development entails the establishment of policies to reinforce community structures and invest in community-owned enterprises, which exhibit an investment in social inclusion and poverty alleviation⁴⁴. These policies also aim at institutionalizing and extending community involvement beyond informal interventions by institutionalizing development as an ongoing process.

Therefore, Nigeria and South Africa understand that social inclusion can strengthen community development in terms of equitable access to resources, inclusion, and decision-making. Researchers have found that discrimination grounded in gender, socioeconomic status, or place of residence weakens the unity of the community and traps people in poverty⁴⁵. Therefore, the introduction of social inclusion toward the formulation and implementation of CLI is essential. For instance, in South Africa, both asset-based and rights-based frameworks can be integrated so that marginalized groups can reap the benefits and be effective agents of development. On the same note, the policies of the Renewed Hope agenda in Nigeria are also based on the intersectional approach to minimizing spatial and social disparities through specific interventions and the empowerment of citizens⁴⁶.

Nigeria and South Africa Perspectives: Case studies and comparative insights

Nigeria and South Africa have strong examples of community-driven initiatives in their quest to achieve sustainable development; both countries possess different socio-political and economic distinctiveness⁴⁷. Nigeria's ethnicity and rich culture may be translated into diverse ways of managing the community and social welfare through community-based ways of resource management, whereas in South Africa, the post-

⁴⁴ Ibid 45

⁴⁵ Ibid 13

⁴⁶ Ibid 39

⁴⁷ DT Chibvongodze, 'Ubuntu is Not Only about the Human! An Analysis of the Role of African Philosophy and Ethics in Environmental Management' (2016) 53(2) *Journal of Human Ecology* 157.

apartheid environment has special challenges and opportunities for promoting inclusion and equal development by means of local agency⁴⁸. Such comparative analysis will enable examining how these different historical and cultural paths determine the performance and inclusivity of the community-based development paradigm, which will provide indications on transferable approaches and context-dependent solutions. As an example, the role of indigenous people and local communities in conservation is a sensitive but frequently overlooked factor in sustainable development in both countries, and it can be improved through national strategies. This kind of integration is often connected with revising governing frameworks to give participatory methods more importance so that local ecological knowledge and traditional practices are not just recognized but also implemented in policymaking and implementation⁴⁹.

Despite this, literature on CLIs in Nigeria shows a lot of different things, like rural agricultural initiatives based on cooperatives and urban social innovation programs, as well as community adaptation in slums^{50, 51}. Community-based programs are a method of enhancing access to basic services and strengthening local capacities, but the outcomes have been mixed, and in most cases, due to their governance weaknesses and under the pressure of elite groups⁵². Recent research in Nigeria is an area where local organizations are driving social innovations, especially women's organizations and social entrepreneurs, whose focal point is inclusiveness by adapting services to suit the desires of marginalized groups. These initiatives are also joining local expertise to microfinance and small businesses in creating solutions that are responsive to local needs⁵³.

South Africa gives good instances of institutionalised forms of participation (ward committees, participatory budgeting) entrenched in

⁴⁸ H Dawson, T Moyo and P Maseko, *Inclusive Development and Local Agency in Africa* (University of Cape Town Press).

⁴⁹ S Akalibey and others, 'Integrating Indigenous Knowledge and Culture in Sustainable Forest Management via Global Environmental Policies' (2024) 70(6) *Journal of Forest Science* 265.

⁵⁰ Ibid 7

⁵¹ Ibid 22

⁵² Ibid 10

⁵³ Ibid 7

post-apartheid local governance reforms. *Mbizana* is an example of a case where participation has facilitated the process of peacebuilding and better governance, provided there is meaning in participation, but where participation fails to convert into inclusion, because of tokenism in local structures or lack of resources⁵⁴. Community-led upgrading and self-built housing in Durban demonstrate how communities can generate housing outcomes within a short time with a high level of sensitivity but also demonstrate the need to have municipal support for infrastructure and tenure security to maintain gains in case of self-built housing⁵⁵. The implementation is uneven since different municipalities have different abilities to carry it out. On the other hand, national LED frameworks and pledges to sustainable development policy create an atmosphere that makes it easier to do so⁵⁶.

The most important issues in both countries are those of gender and youth inclusion. Existing studies revealed that, with a lack of cautious efforts, community settings reproduce patriarchal values^{57,58}. Nigeria and South African literature reveal that community-based efforts can indeed be real in ensuring social inclusion and sustainable community development, especially when such programs are designed with local voice as a priority, capacity building, and inclusion as a design feature. Community-Led Initiatives are necessary but not enough to achieve balanced sustainability; to be effective, they need to be incorporated into supportive policy frameworks, be able to flexibly redistribute resources, have explicit governance mechanisms and be tailored to reach marginalised groups. The longitudinal, disaggregated, participatory monitoring and evaluation, as well as comparative research, are all areas that should be prioritized in future research to determine what combinations of design factors and institutional facilitators are most effective to convert local agency into sustainable and inclusive development results.

⁵⁴ Ibid 8

⁵⁵ Ibid 32

⁵⁶ United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, *South Africa: Sustainable Development Country Profile* (United Nations).

⁵⁷ Ibid 27

⁵⁸ Ibid 28

5. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive research design to analyse the relationship between community-led initiatives, social inclusion and sustainable community development in Nigeria and South Africa. The design was deemed appropriate for the assessment and analysis of the existing theoretical and empirical literature on the role of community-led approaches in achieving inclusive and sustainable development outcomes under socio-economic, political and environmental conditions. Secondary data from journal articles, books, government publications, policy documents, and reports. A comparative approach using a desk-based method was used to review, synthesize and compare evidence from Nigeria and South Africa. This helped to identify similarities, differences, and emerging trends in community participation, local empowerment, governance, service delivery, social inclusion and sustainable development outcomes. Data were presented using a thematic approach, and themes were assigned according to the study objectives. The thematic approach allowed for a holistic representation to understand community transformation and sustainable development that has resulted from community-led activities in the two countries. However, the study has limitations as the methodology is based on a desk-oriented approach and secondary data sources have been used. This is subject to the influence of the availability, quality, scope and accuracy of the literature. Additionally, differences in the context, methods, and period of time studied in the sources reviewed can impact the ability to compare results. Yet, the diversity of and credibility of sources available offers a strong foundation for analysing community led initiatives and their implications for social inclusion and sustainable community development.

6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is based on the theoretical premise of three theories that interact with each other: the participatory development theory, the theory of empowerment and the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA). These frameworks offer a strong prism through which the effects of community-led initiatives (CLIs) in enhancing social inclusion and sustainable community development in the socio-political environments of Nigeria and South Africa can be analysed.

The participatory development theory supports the notion of community-led efforts, because it lays stress on local agency, group decision-making, and community ownership of the development process^{59,60}. This theory claims that development interventions are better and more sustainable when beneficiaries are directly incorporated in the identification of problems, development of solutions and resource management. It criticises the elitist approaches to development whereby the local voices are often sidelined in favour of bottom-up development approaches based on local realities and knowledge systems⁶¹. In the African context, participatory development is particularly relevant in terms of the history of externally imposed development agendas and the centralized governance in Africa that tended to marginalise the participation of grassroots actors in decision-making⁶². In Nigeria and South Africa, institutions of local governance that incorporate the notion of participation, like the Community and Social Development Project in Nigeria and the ward committee system in South Africa, are indicative of this theoretical orientation because both institutionalize participatory approaches and promote inclusive forms of local governance⁶³.

The empowerment theory focuses on empowering people and communities to be able to impact the choices that are being made in their lives⁶⁴. It is empowered both psychologically, organizational and community levels, enabling autonomy, self-efficacy and collective action⁶⁵. Community-based development may empower marginalized people, especially women, youth, and the rural population, by equipping them with the necessary tools to pursue development initiatives instead of

⁵⁹ R Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (Intermediate Technology Publications 1997).

⁶⁰ A Cornwall, 'Unpacking Participation: Models, Meanings and Practices' (2008) 43(3) *Community Development Journal* 269–283.

⁶¹ *Ibid* 61

⁶² A Adeye, 'Local Governance and Participatory Planning in West Africa' (2023) 35(2) *African Development Review* 145–162.

⁶³ *Ibid* 8

⁶⁴ DD Perkins and MA Zimmerman, 'Empowerment Theory, Research, and Application' (1995) 23(5) *American Journal of Community Psychology* 569–579.

⁶⁵ MA Zimmerman, 'Empowerment Theory' in J Rappaport and E Seidman (eds), *Handbook of Community Psychology* (Springer 2000) 43.

passively accepting aid⁶⁶. The theory of empowerment also fits the objectives of social inclusion, because it facilitates equity and fairness in the distribution of resources, opportunities, and decision-making arenas⁶⁷. For example, women's associations and youth-led organizations in both Nigeria and South Africa have used empowerment-based approaches to question the structural inequalities, become more active in the governance system and become resilient to the local economies.

Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) further supplements these frameworks, because it offers a comprehensive picture of how communities integrate and exploit resources and potentials to attain sustainable well-being⁶⁸. The SLA highlights five fundamental types of assets: human, social, natural, financial, and physical capital, and how communities integrate these assets to deal with risk and enhance their living conditions under changing socio-political and economic environments. The framework applies to community-led development analysis in Africa, the intersection of poverty, environmental stress, and institutional weaknesses⁶⁹. In Nigeria, a typical example of this is community-based extension of livelihoods via agricultural cooperatives and micro-enterprises. These show how communities get stronger by using local resources. Likewise, in South Africa, there are renewable energy and social enterprise community-based projects under the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme that provide an example of how the SLA focuses on sustainability by optimizing resources and managing common assets⁷⁰.

Consequently, combining these three theoretical perspectives leads to the conclusion that building sustainable communities requires participatory frameworks. These frameworks permit the marginalized groups to use their resources fairly and effectively to support their livelihoods. The inclusion and contextual relevance of the theory of participatory

⁶⁶ Ibid 15

⁶⁷ Ibid 13

⁶⁸ I Scoones, 'Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A Framework for Analysis' (1998) IDS Working Paper 72.

⁶⁹ A Medayese, 'Community-Led Development and Sustainability in African Contexts: Challenges and Opportunities' (2023) 15(2) *Journal of African Development Studies* 45.

⁷⁰ Ibid 14

development, agency and control of the theory of empowerment, and the combination of these dimensions into a long-term vision of development are ensured by the sustainable livelihoods approach. This theoretical trifle offers a holistic understanding of how community-based programs in Nigeria and South Africa can promote social inclusion, resilience, and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

7. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings indicate the significant role of community-led initiatives in ensuring social inclusion and sustainable community development in Nigeria and South Africa. In both countries, it is shown that CLIs are effective in addressing the needs of the region, building social capital, and coming up with context-sensitive solutions if local agencies, participatory decision-making, and inclusive governance processes are prioritised⁷¹. In Nigeria, initiatives, such as the Community and Social Development Project have enabled communities to play a prominent role in making decisions on infrastructure, service delivery, and resource allocation. This empowerment has contributed to the enhancement of rural electrification and the provision of welfare services to the marginalized groups^{72,73}.

Accordingly, in South African society, the ward committees and community-led monitoring, as participatory processes in health and environmental domains, have also empowered local institutions and accountability and resulted in more responsive and equitable outcomes^{74,75}. These results are consistent with the empowerment theory that focuses on the empowerment of communities to affect the decisions impacting their lives and develop collective self-efficacy^{76,77}. Although Community-Led Initiatives (CLIs) have potential, there is evidence that

⁷¹ P Naidoo, *Community-Led Development and Inclusive Governance in Africa* (University of Cape Town Press 2018).

⁷² Ibid 37

⁷³ Ibid 22

⁷⁴ Ibid 8

⁷⁵ Ibid 13

⁷⁶ Ibid 15

⁷⁷ Ibid 14

actual social inclusion remains a challenge. The current structures of both Nigeria and South Africa tend to frustrate meaningful participation of women, youth and other marginalized groups. This is explained by gender-based norms, systems of patronage, and elites^{78,79}. As an example, male cooperatives and formal community groups in Nigeria are more likely to include members of rural communities or larger or are more likely to remain inclusive unless inclusion is specifically designed.

In South Africa, the same can be said: participatory frameworks are present, but there is no effectiveness, and marginalized residents might continue to pay unequally^{80,81}. The results are also in agreement with the findings of *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities* and underscore the need to employ intentional inclusion policies, including quotas, gender-sensitive beneficiary selection, and culturally sensitive facilitation, so that CLIs would not replicate the available inequalities. The long-term sustainability of Community-Led Initiatives hinges essentially on the existence of institutional support, monetary flexibility, and incorporation in institutional structures of governance. In the Nigerian context, a lack of strong powers in local government and unreliable fiscal allocations has hindered the growth of community-based projects in stages beyond pilot stages. Fragile municipal capacity and politicized service delivery in South Africa are a barrier to community efforts being fully incorporated into formal systems, given that the country has an enabling environment, with progressive national policies and frameworks⁸². The results of the literature review indicate that hybrid financing is one which involves community contributions, municipal budgets, flexibility of the donors and collaboration with the private sector, which is necessary to sustain CLIs and prevent dependency on the development agenda.

Moreover, a comparative study of Nigeria and South Africa shows that there are both similarities and differences. The two nations have used CLIs to solve the urbanization issue, poverty and degradation, but the success of these programs depends on unique historical, cultural and institutional

⁷⁸ Ibid 10

⁷⁹ Ibid 28

⁸⁰ Ibid 32

⁸¹ Ibid 8

⁸² Ibid 35

conditions⁸³. The multifarious ethnicity and deep cultural background of Nigeria, for example, have resulted in differentiated community-based approaches to resource management and social welfare, and the post-apartheid environment of South Africa has given its own challenges and prospects of encouraging inclusion and equitable development using local agency. Among lessons that can be transferred, one may distinguish the significance of local knowledge, the necessity of planned inclusion policies, and the worth of institutional support and flexible funding, as suggested by^{84,85}.

The results are significant to both policy and practice implications. The establishment of enabling environments to facilitate local agency, meaningful participation and social inclusion should be of concern to policymakers and practitioners. This is through the creation of national participation frameworks, technical and financial assistance and the provision of specific inclusion mechanisms to mitigate structural impediments. Also, longitudinal, disaggregated studies and participatory monitoring and evaluation are required to determine what combinations of design factors and institutional facilitators optimally can transform local agency into sustained and inclusive development performance.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this research contain some important policy implications and suggestions on how the effectiveness and sustainability of community-led initiatives in Nigeria and South Africa can be improved. These suggestions will help to solve some of the long-term issues like elite dominance, gendered exclusion, and ineffective institutional support and ensure the potential of CLIs to enhance social inclusion and sustainable development is fulfilled. With these policy suggestions, Nigeria and South Africa would be able to establish enabling environments to foster the development and sustainability of community-based initiatives and

⁸³ Ibid 49

⁸⁴ Ibid 11

⁸⁵ Ibid 24

ultimately produce a more inclusive, resilient and sustainable community. Hence, the following are to be prioritized.

Municipalize Community-Based Development

The policymakers are expected to institutionalise community-led development at all levels of government such that CLIs are captured in the national, state, and local policies and programs. It means that the top government officials must dedicate themselves to community-led solutions and work to come up with clear implementation plans that cut across the partisan divide and political disagreements. Having a special ministry or department to manage and coordinate the activities of communities should aid in ensuring continued support and accountability.

Enhance Local Government and Capacity

The local governments ought to be given the resources and technical and administrative capacity to facilitate and maintain community-led initiatives. This involves offering training and capacity-building courses to the local leaders and community members and setting up mechanisms to conduct periodic monitoring and evaluation of CLI results. Enhancing the local government institutions can be used to avert elite capture and to ensure that the gains of CLIs are fairly allocated.

Encourage non-discrimination

Inclusion should be clearly stated in the policies, and this means that all the marginalized groups, like women, youths and ethnic minorities, should be included in decision-making. This may be done using specific inclusion criteria, which include quotas in leadership, gender sensitive beneficiary selection, as well as culturally responsive facilitation. Childcare and adjustable meeting hours can also serve the agenda of the caregivers and other disadvantaged communities.

Ensure Elastic and Long-term Financing

Community-Led Initiatives financial policies must be flexible and sustainable. They must also incorporate community inputs, local government funding, adaptable donor support and the role of the private

sector. Such a hybrid solution can be used to prevent external funding and make CLIs sensitive to local needs and priorities. The impact of CLIs should be maintained over the long term to ensure the impact of the project even after the first cycles.

Create a Team Spirit and Learning

The policymakers and practitioners are advised to encourage different stakeholders to collaborate and share their knowledge, such as government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community groups. This could assist in developing a conducive ecosystem of CLIs and the sharing of best practices and lessons learned. Creating forums to conduct frequent discussions and coordination will promote the efficiency and expansion of community-based programs.

Monitor and Evaluate Impact

Monitoring and evaluation of the results of CLIs regularly is important in determining their effects and, where necessary, measures to improve them. This covers the gathering of disaggregated data on participation, outcomes and sustainability and the participation of the community members in the monitoring and evaluation process. Open reporting and feedback systems may be used to establish trust and accountability so that CLIs are sensitive to the needs and priorities of the community.

9. CONCLUSION

This article explored the link between community-led initiatives and social inclusion and showed the significance for sustainable community development in Nigeria and South Africa. The analysis revealed that fostering community ownership, participation, and accountability is achieved by placing communities at the centre of development processes and can be supported by community-led initiatives. These mechanisms enable communities to become more empowered to identify community needs, to develop context-specific solutions, and to track development results. It showed that community-based programmes have helped to bring about better access to basic services, improve social cohesion and strengthen equitable development, in both countries. Simultaneously, however, these efforts are constrained by ongoing problems of elite

capture, gender-based exclusion and the lack of institutional support. These issues persist and continue to affect the inclusiveness and sustainability of community-driven development initiatives. The comparative analysis also concluded that community-based approaches remain a powerful tool for achieving sustainable development and social inclusion in Nigeria and South Africa, given the differences in their socio-political and economic environments. The utility of localized participation and indigenous knowledge, as well as connection to larger development support systems, is highlighted by evidence from both countries. The overall findings of the study are that community-led initiatives are a crucial tool for building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable communities, and that they play a significant role in achieving broader development goals and enhancing quality of life.