Grassroots Initiative and Community Based Development Projects in Onopa Community, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State

By

Egba Diyemeze Joy
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria
egbadjoy@gmail.com: +234(0)8037327301
&
Ofili, Frederick Iwendi
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria
Email: ofili112002@yahoo.com Phone: 08036769377,

Abstract

Grassroots development and community-based projects are vital to Nigeria's socioeconomic growth, empowering local communities through participatory governance, inclusive decision-making, and resource mobilization. This study examines the role of grassroots initiatives in the development of Onopa Community, Yenagoa L.G.A., Bayelsa State, using the participatory development theory. A mixed-method design was employed using questionnaires (n = 347) and key informant interviews (n = 20), having a total sample size of 400 determined via the Taro Yamane formula. Findings reveal that grassroots initiatives significantly address community needs, with relatively high levels of participation and ownership. However, challenges such as low participation, poor leadership, inadequate maintenance, and insufficient technical skills limited their effectiveness. Recommendations include capacity building, improved transparency, stronger government–community collaboration, and sustainable funding mechanisms.

Keywords: Grassroots initiatives, community-based development, Onopa Community,

Introduction

Grassroots initiatives and community-based development projects are increasingly recognized as critical strategies for promoting sustainable development in Nigeria, particularly within local communities. These approaches emphasize bottom-up participation, where development is driven by the people and tailored to their specific needs (World Bank, 2021). As a vital component of Nigeria's socioeconomic growth, grassroots development seeks to empower local populations through effective governance, equitable resource allocation, and participatory decision-making processes.

Community-based development projects, in particular, enable residents to actively identify, plan, and implement interventions, fostering ownership and long-term sustainability. Evidence from the World Bank-supported Community and Social Development Project (CSDP) demonstrates that grassroots participation can significantly improve access to social services and enhance social inclusion across several Nigerian states, including Bayelsa (World Bank, 2021).

Local governments, as the third tier of governance, play a pivotal role in facilitating these initiatives by addressing the unique needs and challenges of their constituencies (Wechie, Ajieh, & Egobueze, 2020). However, the effectiveness of such projects is often constrained by poor funding, inadequate technical support, political interference, and weak institutional capacity. Limited financial autonomy and corruption further undermine the ability of local governments to support community-led projects effectively (Nwaoburu, 2024).

In the Niger Delta region, where Onopa Community in Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State is located, the urgency for grassroots and community-based development is amplified by socioeconomic and environmental challenges, including poverty, infrastructural decay, and environmental degradation. Given the community's reliance on subsistence farming, fishing, and small-scale trading, empowering residents through locally driven development remains a crucial pathway to sustainable growth.

Statement of the Problem

Community-based development is widely promoted as a strategy for achieving sustainable development, particularly in rural and semi-urban settings. In Nigeria's Niger Delta region, grassroots initiatives grounded in local knowledge, cultural relevance, and participatory governance are considered vital for addressing persistent challenges of underdevelopment, environmental degradation, and socio-economic marginalization (Akinbode & Olayemi, 2021; Ibaba & Akpan, 2022). Despite the implementation of numerous community-based projects over the years, many communities, including Onopa in Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, continue to experience infrastructural deficits, poor health outcomes, youth unemployment, and limited access to essential services. This paradox where grassroots initiatives exist alongside persistent developmental challenges raises critical concerns about their effectiveness and sustainability. Empirical evidence indicates that many community-based projects in Nigeria are hindered by inadequate community engagement, elite capture, weak coordination, and the absence of sustainability frameworks (Okafor et al., 2023). In some cases, projects are externally imposed without genuine consultation or fail to endure due to insufficient community ownership (Eze & Obasi, 2020).

In Onopa, the degree to which grassroots initiatives are inclusive, participatory, and truly community-driven remains largely undocumented. Without systematic research assessing their roles, levels of local participation, and the barriers they face, it is challenging for policymakers, development agencies, and local leaders to design effective interventions. This study therefore seeks to investigate the role of grassroots initiatives and community-based development projects in Onopa Community by evaluating the extent of community involvement, assessing project outcomes, and identifying challenges affecting their sustainability.

Purpose of the Study

The study seeks to assess the role of grassroots initiatives in community-based development projects in Onopa Community. In specific terms, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the type and role of grassroots initiatives implemented in Onopa Community.
2. Assess the level of community participation and ownership in the planning and implementation of development projects in Onopa Community.

3. Identify the challenges hindering the effectiveness of community-based development projects and strategies that will enhance the sustainability of these initiatives in Onopa Community.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted as its theoretical framework the participatory Development Theory. The theory emphasizes the active involvement of local populations in the planning, execution, and evaluation of development initiatives. This theory emerged in response to the limitations of traditional top-down development models, which often failed to produce lasting or equitable outcomes, particularly in marginalized or rural communities (Chambers, 2014).

At its core, Participatory Development Theory posits that meaningful and sustainable development is only possible when beneficiaries are not just recipients of aid or services but active co-creators in the development process. The theory shifts the power dynamic in development discourse, positioning local people as experts of their own realities, capable of identifying needs, setting priorities, and mobilizing resources. The theory has as its assumption that; local knowledge is readily available, people should decide their development paths, participation builds ownership and accountability and that development must be context-specific and not one -size-fits-all (Hickey & Mohan, 2005).

This theory is relevant to the study in that it aids in evaluating the extent and quality of community participation in identifying, planning, and executing development projects; secondly, how participation fosters local ownership, transparency and sustainability. More so, it aids in identifying the barriers to meaningful participation and how these can be mitigated.

In the Nigerian context where centralized planning has frequently overlooked the unique needs of local communities Participatory Development Theory provides a strong foundation for analyzing community-led initiatives. Grassroots development efforts, such as those seen in Yenagoa LGA, are often characterized by self-help, communal labor, collective decision-making, and the mobilization of local resources (Agba et al., 2022).

By framing grassroots development through this lens, the study aims to understand how participatory mechanisms influence the success or failure of community-based projects in a socio-politically complex environment like Bayelsa.

Review of empirical literature

The empirical literature on grassroots initiatives and community-based development reveals a wealth of evidence on their significance, challenges, and outcomes across various geographic and institutional contexts. This section reviews empirical studies that highlight the nature, performance, and sustainability of community-led development in Nigeria and other comparable regions, with a particular focus on participatory approaches, institutional support, and development impacts.

Agba, Akwara, and Nnamani (2022) conducted a study on community development practices in selected rural areas of Cross River and Benue States, showing that grassroots projects significantly improved access to clean water, rural roads, and market infrastructure. However, the authors noted that community enthusiasm was often undermined by inadequate government support, elite interference, and project duplication. Similarly, Ebiware (2020), in a study focusing on Bayelsa State, discovered that many community-based initiatives emerged out of frustration with the state's weak infrastructure and governance systems. The study showed that in communities like Swali and Amarata in Yenagoa, youth associations and women's cooperatives-initiated sanitation, healthcare, and small-scale credit schemes. Despite their efforts, lack of institutional linkages and technical support limited scalability.

Ibe and Nwachukwu (2021) examined the functionality of Local Government Authorities (LGAs) in facilitating grassroots development in Imo and Abia States. Their study concluded that while the 1999 Constitution empowered LGAs to coordinate grassroots development, fiscal dependence on state governments and political interference rendered them ineffective. Additionally, a study by Okechukwu and Umeh (2022) concluded that the lack of synergy between community development efforts and local government structures often leads to project redundancy, policy disconnects, and inefficient resource allocation.

A study of the challenges to grassroots development in the Niger Delta reveals the influence of environmental, socio-political and economic factors. Ekumaoko (2020) found that environmental degradation from oil exploration, lack of access to credit, and communal conflicts significantly hindered development efforts in riverine communities in Bayelsa and Rivers States. Nonetheless, the spirit of self-help and communal solidarity remained strong, with diaspora networks playing an increasing role in fundraising and project sponsorship.

The study on donor-supported grassroots projects reveals the roles of donors in grassroots development. The study noted the roles of the world Bank in community and social development programmes (CSPD) and how that has contributed immensely in the development of local communities but this is dependent on the collaboration with the locals. The World Bank (2022) implementation report indicated that over 5,000 micro-projects were successfully executed in Nigerian communities between 2009 and 2021, focusing on health, education, and water access. However, the sustainability of these projects depended heavily on continued community involvement and alignment with local government plans.

Methodology

The mixed method research design was employed to assess the roles, contributions, and challenges of grassroots initiatives in community-based development projects in Onopa Community, Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State.

The population of the study comprised of the residents directly or indirectly involved in grassroots initiatives. A purposive sample of 400 was determined, with 380 respondents selected for the survey using simple random sampling across Bunas Street, School Road, Egemuze Street, and New Road. Twenty key informants including community leaders, women's representatives, youths, religious leaders, business owners, political representatives, and school administrators were purposively chosen for interviews.

The instruments for data collection were structured questionnaires and interview guides which were designed based on the research questions raised. In addition,

the secondary data were sourced from literature, journals, and credible online materials. Questionnaires captured the quantitative measures of participation and perceptions, while interviews provided in-depth qualitative insights.

The data obtained from the Survey were analyzed using simple percentage statistics. The information however gathered through the administration of interview were first transcribed and then analyzed thematically to identify key patterns and contextual factors.

Results:

Objective 1: Types and Roles of Grassroots Initiatives

Table 2: Distribution of responses on types and roles of grassroots initiatives

Question	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Types and Roles of Grassroots Initiatives	Yes	272	78%
	No	55	16%
	Maybe	20	6%
Types of initiatives	Environmental	80	23%
	Health	61	18%
	Education	45	13%
	Infrastructure	123	35%
	Youth empowerment	38	11%
Initiators	Community leaders	84	24%
	NGOs	91	26%
	Government agencies	127	37%
	Youth associations	45	13%
Main role	Addressing local needs	109	31%
	Improving infrastructure	86	25%
	Enhancing health/education	79	23%

Analysis of data in Table 2 shows that most respondents (78%) are aware of grassroots initiatives in their community, which shows high visibility of such projects. Infrastructure initiatives (35%) dominate, reflecting urgent needs for physical development. Government agencies (37%) are the leading initiators, followed by NGOs (26%), suggesting that while community leaders are involved, external actors play a significant role. The most recognized role of grassroots initiatives is addressing local needs (31%), showing alignment with community priorities.

Objective 2: Community Participation and Ownership

Table 3: Distribution of responses on community participation and ownership in the planning and implementation of development projects

Question	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Involved in planning/decision-making	Yes	216	62%
	No	108	31%
Forms of participation	Meetings	142	41%
	Resource contribution	98	28%
	Implementation	107	31%
Level of participation	Very high	83	24%
	High	114	33%
Sense of ownership	Yes	153	44%
	No	115	33%

Analysis of data in Table 3 shows that majority (62%) have been involved in planning or decision-making, which is a positive indicator of participatory governance. The most common form of involvement is attending meetings (41%), followed by direct participation in project execution (31%). While 44% feel a sense of ownership over completed projects, a significant portion (33%) do not, suggesting room for improving engagement strategies to strengthen ownership.

Objective 3: Challenges and Sustainability

Table 4: Distribution of responses on the challenges hindering the effectiveness of community-based development projects and strategies to enhance the sustainability of these initiatives

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of funds	56	16%
Poor leadership	85	24%
Low participation	113	33%
Political interference	93	27%

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Promote transparency/accountability	93	27%
Establish monitoring teams	77	22%
Regular engagement/feedback	69	20%
Capacity building for leaders	57	16%

Analysis of data in Table 4 shows low participation (33%) emerged as the top challenge, followed by political interference (27%) and poor leadership (24%). This indicates that social and political factors are as significant as resource limitations. For sustainability, promoting transparency (27%) is considered the most

important strategy, closely followed by establishing monitoring teams (22%). This suggests that trust and accountability are central to long-term project success in Onopa.

Findings

This study examined the role of grassroots initiatives and community-based development projects in Onopa Community, with a focus on their types, roles, levels of participation, ownership, and challenges to sustainability. The analysis of data collected based on all the issues raised and examined in the course of this study has revealed several findings. In the first place, findings revealed that infrastructure-related projects dominate grassroots initiatives in Onopa, with 35% of respondents identifying such interventions. These include borehole water projects, rural electrification, and the construction of footbridges, all of which directly address pressing community needs. This finding aligns with Mansuri and Rao (2013), who argue that physical infrastructure tends to be prioritized in communities where basic amenities are lacking. Government agencies emerged as the primary initiators of projects (37%), followed by NGOs (26%) and community leaders (24%). This pattern supports Nwaoburu's (2024) observation that while local actors are essential for mobilization, external organizations often provide much of the technical and financial support. However, when government agencies dominate project initiation, there is a risk of "top-down" approaches unless community consultation is fully integrated. The fact that the majority of respondents (31%) identified "addressing local needs" as the main role of these initiatives suggests that, at least in many cases, project objectives align well with community priorities, which Tandon (2020) identifies as a critical factor in project success.

Secondly, findings showed that the participation levels in Onopa are relatively high, with 62% of respondents reporting involvement in planning or decision-making processes. Common forms of engagement include attending meetings (41%) and participating in implementation activities (31%). However, while 44% of respondents expressed a sense of ownership over completed projects, a significant 33% did not feel such ownership. This indicates that while many residents are involved, not all are engaged deeply enough to feel a personal stake in outcomes. Arnstein's Ladder of Participation helps explain this gap,

distinguishing between mere attendance and actual decision-making power. The findings echo Njunwa's (2010) assertion that true participation fosters a sense of ownership that motivates communities to safeguard and maintain projects. In Onopa, projects with high engagement, such as the footpath rehabilitation that involved community labor, tend to be better maintained than those with limited involvement, such as the externally initiated fish-drying facility.

Furthermore, it was discovered that challenges to grassroots initiatives in Onopa are significant. Low participation (33%) emerged as the most pressing issue, consistent with Yusuf et al. (2020), who found that limited engagement beyond initial mobilization can undermine project sustainability. Political interference (27%) was also a major concern, reflecting the influence of local politics on project leadership and resource allocation. This often results in elite capture, as documented by Okafor et al. (2023). Poor leadership (24%) and lack of funds (16%) further point to weaknesses in local institutional capacity, in line with Adewole and Osabuohien's (2022) finding that financial constraints and leadership deficiencies are persistent barriers to grassroots success. Respondents' emphasis on transparency and accountability (27%) as the leading strategy for sustainability underscores that governance issues are as critical as financial or technical considerations.

Finally, the findings strongly affirm the principles of the Participatory Development Theory, which holds that sustainable outcomes require active involvement of intended beneficiaries in every stage of a project's life cycle from needs assessment to design, implementation, and monitoring. The experiences in Onopa show that when projects are shaped by local priorities, when communities have genuine decision-making power, and when transparency is prioritized, initiatives are more likely to endure and achieve their intended goals. Conversely, projects that bypass local input or lack inclusive governance structures tend to struggle with maintenance, relevance, and long-term viability.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of data obtained and the findings that emanated from it, the study therefore concludes that grassroots initiatives in Onopa have had a positive impact on infrastructure, health, education, and youth empowerment. While

community participation is relatively high, project sustainability is threatened by inadequate maintenance and governance challenges.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions from the study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Selected community members should be trained by the government and concerned agencies in project planning, management, and technical maintenance for capacity building.
2. Strengthen linkages between the government and community to align local needs with official development plans.
3. Establish community-managed development funds with clear accountability measures.
4. Engage all demographic groups women, youth, elders at the design stage.
5. Form community-based monitoring teams to ensure project continuity.

References

Adewole, A. O., & Osabuohien, E. S. (2022). Financing grassroots development in Nigeria: Institutional challenges and policy options. African Journal of Economic Policy, 29(1), 59–75.

Agba, M. S., Nnamani, D. O., &Akwara, A. F. (2022). Local government and community development in Nigeria: Bridging the gap. *Journal of Public Administration and Development Research*, 11(1), 23–38.

Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35(4), 216–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225

Chambers, R. (2014). *Rural development: Putting the last first*. London: Routledge.

Ebiware, P. (2020). Community participation and development challenges in Bayelsa State. *Niger Delta Journal of Policy and Development Studies*, 9(1), 58–72.

Hickey, S., & Mohan, G. (2005). Relocating participation within a radical politics of development. *Development and Change*, 36(2), 237–262.

Ibaba, S. I., & Akpan, F. (2022). Community participation and development in the Niger Delta: Between rhetoric and reality. African Journal of Public Policy and Administration, 9(3), 112–129.

Ibe, K. J., & Nwachukwu, T. (2021). Fiscal challenges and governance failures in Nigerian local governments. *Nigerian Journal of Political Economy*, 8(3), 48–59.

Mansuri, G., & Rao, V. (2013). Localizing development: Does participation work? Washington, DC: The World Bank. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-8256-1

Njunwa, M. (2010). Community participation as a tool for development: Local community's participation in primary education development in Morogoro, Tanzania. Journal of Adult Education and Development, 75, 77–92.

Nwaoburu, L. (2024). Grassroots development in Nigeria: Analysing local government finance and resource management. International Journal of Innovative Legal & Political Studies, 12(4), 29–38.

Okafor, C., Williams, B., & Igbokwe, E. (2023). Elite capture and the failures of grassroots development in Nigeria. Development Practice Journal, 17(4), 65–78.

Okechukwu, M., &Umeh, C. (2022). Disconnects in grassroots and local government development initiatives. *Nigerian Journal of Urban Studies*, 7(1), 29–42.

Tandon, R. (2020). Participatory research and evaluation: Tools for grassroots development. New Delhi: Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA).

World Bank. (2021). Nigeria: The community-led approach that is helping inclusive development. Retrieved from https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/10/27/nigeria-the-community-led-approach-that-is-helping-inclusive-development

World Bank. (2022). *Nigeria Community and Social Development Project: Completion and Results Report*. Washington, DC: *World Bank Group*.

Yusuf, O. J., Adekunmi, A. O., & Ayanda, I. F. (2020). Community participation and sustainability of the Community and Social Development Projects in Kwara State, Nigeria. Journal of Agricultural Extension, 24(2), 84–93.