

POLICY INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT DEFICIT IN NIGERIA: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY AS A PANACEA

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian development ecosystem is denuded with a litany of innovative policies that have been purportedly geared towards the sustainable development of the state, particularly, the rural areas and rural livelihoods. However, there has been a huge gap between these innovative policies and their practical outcome reflecting a negative trend in impacts and purposes. To this extent, rural areas in Nigeria continue to wallow in abject poverty, hunger, poor facilities, and extreme negligence emanating from inadequate community participation. It is against this background that this paper posits that bridging the gap between policy innovation and sustainable development outcomes requires a paradigm shift toward community engagement as a core strategy for rural development drive. The paper relied on quantitative analysis of data sourced from the field through survey methods and the instrumentality of the questionnaire. As an analytical lens, the study dwelled on the theoretical framework of Participatory Development Theory while the hypotheses were tested using the Pearson's correlation coefficient. Findings from the study revealed that there is a positive significant relationship between Community Engagement and Sustainable Rural Development on the one hand and a high positive relationship between policy innovation and implementation gap on the other hand. Therefore, the study concludes that Nigeria's rural development trajectory can only be galvanised toward sustainability if innovative policies are coupled with genuine grassroots engagement. By institutionalising participatory mechanisms, aligning interventions with local realities, and strengthening accountability, Nigeria can move from policy rhetoric to practical transformation in its rural sector.

KEYWORDS: Policy Innovation, Rural Development, Implementation Gap, Community Engagement, Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The past few decades in Nigeria have witnessed a litany of programmes and reforms whose purposes have been directed at alleviating the deplorable conditions of the rural economy, rural livelihood, poverty alleviation, and rural community development. As Abasilim, Adelusi & Mudau (2025:45) noted, "government at different times have set up various programmes and specialised credit institutions in an attempt to transform and develop rural areas in all its ramifications thereby moving rural dwellers from abject poverty and squalor to economic and social prosperity". This view was corroborated by the Document of Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) at 50 (2010:618) when it asserted that "majority of these programmes developed various degree of complications over the years due to severe non alignment with rural needs". While a number of these initiatives have persisted with several name changes, others have become extinct with the administrations that formulated them (Joseph, Kehinde & Ogunnaike, 2025).

Despite successive regimes in Nigeria making several efforts towards ensuring poverty alleviation and enshrine development at the rural level, the approaches have usually been undermined by the mundane interpretation attributed to rural development by the various individuals or officials that man them (Musa, Horsfall & Kabiru, 2025).

Notable innovative programmes over the years in Nigeria are: Operation Feed the Nation, established in 1976 to train rural farmers on the use modern farming tools towards agricultural enhancement. Also, in 1979, the Green Revolution Programme was formulated in order to discourage the importation of food items while encouraging local production through rural food enhancement. In 1986, the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFFRI) was created to improve rural living standards, boost food production, and enhance rural infrastructure through community mobilization, road and water supply programs, and promotion of economic activities. Furthermore, in 1986, the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) was established to design and implement programs to combat mass unemployment, articulate policies for labor-intensive work programs, maintain a data bank on employment and vacancies to link job seekers with jobs with special emphases on the rural areas (Oyeleke, 2021). In 2001, the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) was formulated to replace the previously failed Poverty Alleviation Programme.

The aims were to create income-earning opportunities, provide vocational training and micro-credit, foster employment in various sectors, and enhance the social and material well-being of Nigerians, especially rural populations, by addressing economic challenges and improving access to essential resources like education, healthcare, and infrastructure. With the consolidation of the return to democracy, in the year 2004, the National Economic Empowerments and Development Strategy (NEEDS) was established so as to attain a remarkable decrease in poverty by acute investment in wealth creation leading to a huge employment generation and value re-orientation (Ojiako, Nwafor & Oju, 2024).

Unfortunately, evidence abound that none of these programmes have been able to provoke radical transformation in the standard of rural livelihoods in Nigeria as most of them continue to dwell in abject poverty and increasing unemployment (Oke et al, 2025). Additionally, Hafizu, Sule & Yahaya (2025:112) opined that these policies are clear indicators of the commitment by successive governments to pursue sustainable rural development that would lead to a holistic national development framework. Despite the huge financial and material resources employed towards actualisation, Nigerians have experienced more losses than gains in the context of rural development programmes. A number of studies over the years have continued to reveal the gaps between policy formulation and strategic implementation that has constituted a clog in the sustainable development of the rural areas. Notably, the National Bureau of Statistics, NBS (2022) revealed that multidimensional poverty is higher in the country's rural areas, where 72% of people are poor, compared to 38% of people in urban areas. The report added that the intensity of rural poverty is also higher in the rural areas (42%) compared to 37% in urban areas. The World Bank (2022) corroborated this statistical inundation when it added that 84.1 percent of poor Nigerians live in rural areas. This, in itself, is a marker of Nigeria's spatial inequality and a clear indication that successive efforts towards rural development have yielded low output.

This paradox manifests a wide gap between acute innovative policy formulation and policy implementation, a phenomenon often attributed to weak institutional capacity, corruption, top-down planning approaches, and the exclusion of local voices in development processes (Okolie, 2015). Thus, Nigeria presents a compelling case of "policy innovation without practical transformation, where ambitious initiatives fail to address the structural realities of rural life of the citizens. In this regard, community engagement has emerged as a corrective mechanism to bridge the gap between policy intent and developmental outcomes. Scholars (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Ajayi, 2020) have argued that sustainable rural development requires participatory approaches that empower local communities to identify priorities, co-design interventions, and contribute to the monitoring and evaluation of projects that pertain to their localities. This does not only enhance local ownership of development initiatives but also strengthens accountability, ensures cultural relevance, and mobilises indigenous knowledge for sustainability.

Against this background, the paper sets out to: examine some factors that impede policy innovations and implementation in Nigeria; highlight the significance of community engagement as a corrective framework for implementation deficiency in Nigeria; and, propose pathways towards ensuring sustainable rural development in Nigeria through community-driven approaches.

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS

Policy Innovation:

Having discussed the terms in isolation, it is necessary to unite them so as to achieve a wholistic conceptualization of the subjected matter, policy innovation. According to the Brookfield Institute (2018), “definitions of policy innovation differ but there is general consensus that policy innovation encompasses both the what (the policy instrument or artifact that gets created) and the how (the processes and tools by which policy is created and developed)”. In that regard, policy innovation connotes the act of creating new frameworks or regulations, programmes and services that could lead to a very significant improvement in outcomes or experiences for the public. These may include innovative methods of engaging the public in policy, program and service development (e.g., participatory budgeting, crowdsourcing), innovative methods of evaluating the efficacy of policies, programs and services (e.g., behavioural insights, service design methods) and innovative methods of funding (e.g., social finance).

Sustainable Rural Development: Sustainable rural development is a multidimensional concept that integrates economic, social, environmental, and institutional dimensions of progress within rural communities. At its core, it involves enhancing the livelihoods and economic well-being of people locals domicile in relatively isolated and sparsely populated habitation, while ensuring that development processes are environmentally sound and socially inclusive (Ojiako, Nwafor & Oju, 2024; World Bank, 2004). Unlike traditional notions of rural development that emphasized agricultural productivity alone, the sustainable approach recognizes the interdependence of livelihoods, ecological balance, and social equity (Chambers, 2010). The United Nations (1987), through the Brundtland Report, laid the foundation for sustainability discourse by defining sustainable development as that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Applied to rural settings, sustainable rural development implies interventions that reduce poverty, enhance access to social services, foster participatory governance, and preserve natural resources for long-term resilience (United Nations Development Programme, UNDP (2021).

Community Engagement: Community engagement is both a process and a strategy aimed at fostering participatory inclusion of local people in decisions that affect their lives and environments. According to the International Association for Public Participation [IAP2] (2018), it is defined as the collaborative interaction between institutions, government, or development agencies and community members to identify needs, mobilize resources, design solutions, and implement initiatives in a manner that reflects local priorities and aspirations. It reflects a shift away from top-down development paradigms, which often alienate rural dwellers, toward more inclusive, participatory approaches that recognize communities as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries. Existing literatures distinguish community engagement from top-down approaches to development, noting that the former emphasizes shared responsibility, mutual respect, and empowerment (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). In practice, it involves mechanisms such as participatory rural appraisal, stakeholder consultations, co-design of interventions, and community-based monitoring and evaluation (Cornwall, 2008). Through such participatory processes, communities become active partners in development, rather than passive recipients of externally imposed projects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of policy innovation and sustainable rural development deficiency has generated an avalanche of scholarly discourse thereby pointing to the potency and vast nature of the area. This scholarly literature flooding of the area has become necessary against the background that majority of the third world

or developing countries, particularly Nigeria, have barely lacked innovative developmental projections on paper. However, the issues have bordered on the fact these policy innovations usually translate to poor outcome for the rural people who are supposed to be the major beneficiaries. Hence, the paper attempted a bold empirical review of literatures in order to establish the literature gap to be filled.

In their study titled “Implementation of rural development programmes/policies in Nigeria: a sustainable development perspective”, Atairet, Atairet & Joseph (2021) argued that Nigeria since independence has birthed numerous development initiatives but abandoned due to the lack of proper supervision, non-release of budgeted funds, corruption, lack of qualified staff and so on. Their position lays credence to the general idea of this paper that the government efforts aimed at ensuring development in the rural areas in Nigeria did not just start. Prior to the conception of the various initiatives, Nigeria, was known to have been characterised by low output, poor capital formation, distorted economics, and poverty, manifested in a low standard of living (Abah et al, 2022). While noting that majority of these policies did not bear the required fruits by serving their purposes, Atairet, Atairet & Joseph (2021:100) opined that there were others that met their objectives with benefits still being felt till present. On their part, Ojong & Anam (2018) evaluated the agriculture promotion policy and how it has impacted rural development in Nigeria in their study “Agriculture promotion policy 2016-2020 and rural development in Nigeria: challenges and prospects” The policy marks another innovative framework that was formulated to boost the rural economy in Nigeria thereby facilitating sustainable rural development on the long run. It has been argued that Nigeria faces several challenges with regards to its agricultural sector and these challenges have hindered sustainable rural development. Notably, (Adeyemi et al, 2023; Shittu, 2017; Fatokun, 2015 and Ayodele, Obafemi, and Ebong, 2013) pinpointed two key challenges in this regard. Firstly, the country is faced with the inability to meet domestic food requirements, and secondly, an inability to produce for export at the level required for market success.

While the former issue borders on productivity deficiency driven by an input system and farming model that is largely inefficient, the latter challenge is driven by an equally inefficient system for setting and enforcing food quality standards (Ojong & Anam, 2018:25). Ajulor & Etim (2019) provided a rather brother evaluation of policy innovations in Nigeria in their study titled “Innovative agricultural policy and rural poverty reduction in Nigeria”. While the (Atairet, Atairet & Joseph, 2021) dedicated its focus to agricultural policies and how they have impacted sustainable rural development in the rural areas, Ojong & Anam (2018) prioritised the evaluation of the Agricultural promotion policy in a bit to assess its challenges and the prospects towards ensuring rural development in the general term. Ajulor & Etim (2019) took a different dimension by redirecting the conversation about innovative agricultural policy to an aspect of rural development, poverty reduction. For emphases sake, their article provided a critical analytical framework for the understanding of how innovative policies can yield better result by drawing comparison from China. All over the world, the manifestation of poverty has continued to dominate affairs of the rural areas where records have shown that about 79% of poverty inflicted persons reside in rural areas. In the Sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 413 million people have been ascertained to be living below the poverty line (Ajulor & Etim, 2019:40).

With these, it became pertinent to focus on innovative agricultural policies such as National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), National Special Programme on Food Security (NSPFS), Root and Tuber Expansion Programme (RTEP) and National Food Security Programme (NFSP) towards the eradication of poverty at the rural areas in Nigeria. As Ajulor & Etim (2019: 43) noted, these policies encountered numerous challenges bothering on only political instability, poor research and development (R&D) allocations, monitoring and evaluation failure, inadequate involvement of relevant stakeholders, etc. these challenges hindered the effective actualisation of the innovative rural policies when compared to China with long term development planning initiatives. A common denominator in the foregoing literature review addresses the fact that successive governments in Nigeria have embarked on the formulation of innovative policies towards sustainable rural development. They have however been marred by weak or poor implementation thereby prolonging the dearth of rural development.

While the litany of literatures beamed their search lights on the failure of policy programmes in the delivery of sustainable rural development while hammering on a barrage of issues, other scholars attempted to provide varying degree of solutions with major focus on community engagement. In his article titled “Community Participation in the Implementation of Education Policy in Northern Nigeria”, Dantata (2025) opined that a crucial, yet often underestimated, aspect of effective policy implementation is the meaningful engagement of local communities. While projecting the importance and centrality of local participation, his specific aim was to situate it on inadequate policy in education with particular reference to the northern region of Nigeria with emphasis on Kaduna state. Apart from Dantata, Hussain (2024) in his study “a stake in their future: advancing local community engagement in Northeast Nigerian development initiatives” also delved into realities of community participation in the North east of Nigeria. Findings from both papers revealed that the extant policy frameworks made ardent avenue for local involvement but the practical realities are shaped by a “complex interplay of awareness levels, socio-economic factors, prevailing power dynamics, and the specific needs of the community” (Dantata, 2025:42 and Hussein, 2024:89). On this note, effective participation transcends mere attendance at townhall meetings, and other forms of local awareness campaign which constitutes the true nature of extant participation. This study aligns with the view of Jimoh (2025) in his article “Influence of Community Engagement on Sustainable Development of Tourism in Nigeria: A Review”.

The point of departure stems from the fact that while Dantata (2025) focused on educational policy in northern Nigeria, Jimoh (2025) concentrated on a review of the existing tourism practices, communities’ level of understanding and their attitude towards existing tourism development in Nigeria. Tourism has become a viable venture that provides alternative means of revenue generation among countries of the world and it demands urgent attention that will be accentuated through large scale local involvement. That is why Yazid (2025:18) posited that “that community engagement can influence tourism policy, leading to more representative governance that considers local needs, priorities.” Recognizing this fact, Jimoh (2025:70) concluded that policy document and policy implementers often exclude local communities’ causing conflicts and reduced trust. In addition to the empirical review above, Ibrahim, Magaji & Musa (2026), in their study “Effect of Community Engagement Policies on Environmental Sustainability of Niger Region of Nigeria” also viewed the role of community engagement from the prism of environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. they highlighted that the lingering crisis of crude ownership in the region is fueled by the inadequate or partial involvement of the local people. They concluded that inclusive representation has emerged as the most influential factor in the environmental sustainability strategies that has significantly shaped the Niger delta environment. Their position is in consonant with the work of Liman, Magaji & Ismael (2025:15) who opined that “community engagement policies (constituted by mechanisms that involve local populations in formulating, implementing, and monitoring environmental initiatives) are increasingly recognised as essential to sustainable environmental outcomes.”

The foregoing review lays credence to the suggestion that the field of innovative policy failures due to poor community involvement has generated a wide array of scholarly interests. This is important judging from the overwhelming role of local participation in driving home the dividends of policy frameworks all over the world, Nigeria inclusive. For decades now, the local people of Nigeria have continually yearned for their involvement on issues that concern them; attempts to remedy the situation have either towed the elitists routes, like in the Niger Delta (Ibrahim, Magaji & Musa, 2026) or abandonment like the National Food Security Programme (NFSP) (Ajulor & Etim, 2019). Several scholarly attempts to provide solutions have ranged from one academic view points to the other. Some studies focused in the norther parts of Nigeria, with varying degrees of specific policies while others concentrated on selected states in Nigeria, particularly the Niger Delta region. Such concentration on selected states and regions without acute generalisation leaves other parts of the country lagging. Such research gap represents the pivotal motive behind this paper’s intent to use Edo state, Nigeria, as a springboard. By selecting major local governments and communities across different senatorial districts of the state, the paper conjugated the entire views of

rural inhabitants' feelings about government initiatives and how they are either ostracised from or allowed to participate in them. This will create a larger avenue for wholistic generalisation.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts the quantitative technique of data analysis using the cross-sectional research design. It combines the duo of primary and secondary sources of data; the primary data source includes the administration of a structured questionnaire to the sampled respondents while the secondary data embodies the study of available literatures, internet sources, journals, print media, government official release, etc.

Population

The population of the study is made up of selected Local Government Areas across two Senatorial districts of Edo State, Nigeria. They are: Edo South and Edo North Senatorial Districts. In order to ensure specificity and direction, Ovia South-West (135,356 population size) and Ovia North-East (153,848 population size) local government areas were selected from Edo-South while Akoko-Edo local government (262,110 population size) was selected from Edo-North. The total population (551,314) was drawn from the 2006 population census figure of 2006. These local government areas were further stratified into various rural communities so as to elicit further information that is based on rural mindset. In Akoko-Edo, Ososo and Somorika communities were selected, whereas in Ovia North-East, Odighi, Okokhuo, and Odiguetue communities were selected. In Ovia South-West, Nikorogha and Ofunama communities were selected for the research. The choices of these locations were informed by the large sizes of the various local government areas and their active involvement in farming and agricultural activities.

They are the target respondents when the question of rural communities is asked and therefore pose grater benefits in responding to questions of this research. Beyond the rural dwellers, questionnaire will also be administered to some elite academics in the field of public policy in two renowned Universities (University of Benin, Benin city and Edo University, Iyamo) domiciled in the two senatorial districts.

Sample size

The sample size (400 respondents, drawn with the Taro Yammane formular) was shared across the various local government areas for onward distribution to the various communities and the institutions. Thus, with 26%, Ovia South-West got a sample distribution of 104 respondents, Ovia North-East, with 28% got 112 respondents, and Akoko-Edo, with 46% got 184 respondents. This percentage distribution was done using Microsoft Excel work sheet. The simple percentage technique was used to determine the sample spread across the local government areas while the hypotheses were tested using the Pearson's Correlation Coefficient.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The core discussion of policy innovation and rural development is anchored on numerous theoretical strands. However, for the purpose of specificity, the paper utilizes the Participatory Development Theory which emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the limitations of modernization and dependency theories that dominated earlier development paradigms. The theory postulates that people are not dormant or static beneficiaries of development initiatives but active agents with abundant possession of knowledge, experiences, and priorities that are critical to shaping sustainable interventions. Therefore, the theory advocates for inclusive processes where communities are directly involved in identifying problems, setting priorities, designing solutions, implementing projects, and evaluating outcomes (Cornwall, 2008; Chambers, 1997). By the theoretical underpinnings and postulation, development practice is moved from a linear, technocratic exercise to a participative process deeply grounded in empowerment, inclusiveness, and local ownership (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Scholarly

contributions by different scholars indicate that at its foundation, the theory rests on three interconnected principles or assumptions which are:

- 1 development should empower marginalized groups by ensuring that their voices influence decision-making processes (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012);
- 2 community knowledge, traditions, and life experiences are recognized as valuable inputs that ensure interventions are culturally appropriate and relevant (Mansuri & Rao, 2013); and
- 3 by involving communities in co-design and implementation, development becomes a shared responsibility, fostering transparency and accountability (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

In the context of rural development, rural communities across different countries often face unique socio-economic challenges, including poverty, poor infrastructure, environmental degradation, and social exclusion. The extant conventional vertical policies frequently fail to capture the realities of these communities, resulting in a mismatch between policy intentions and actual needs (Okolie, 2015). In order to mitigate this perpetual debacle, there is need to adopt a more encompassing strategy of community participation and engagement so as to ensure that development reflects the aspirations and priorities of rural dwellers. As Ajayi (2020) argued, when communities constitute a part of project design and implementation, they are more likely to sustain and maintain interventions, thereby reducing the problem of “white elephant” projects common in rural Nigeria and other developing contexts. Corroborating this view, Gaventa & Barrett (2012) asserts that community participation in development strengthens accountability and trust between governments, development agencies, and rural populations. This is true because by involving community representatives in monitoring and evaluation, the risks of corruption, elite capture, or mismanagement are reduced.

RESULT

In the analysis of the result, 400 (four hundred) questionnaires were distributed while a total of 388 (three hundred and eighty-eight) were returned marking a return rate of 97%. In terms of location, majority of the sampled population have resided in the various communities and local government areas for a period of between eleven and thirty years with 49.2% (191 respondents) affirming that. Only 35 (thirty-five) respondents have lived in the location for over thirty years while 162 (41.8%) have stayed for less than ten years. Further analysis revealed that 236 (60.8%) of the respondents are engaged in farming activities while 82(21.1%) are Teachers and 70 (18.1%) are engaged in trading activities. The high number of farmers in the population entrenched the fact that the study was conducted in rural communities. Beyond the occupation category, 204 (52.6%) of the respondents possess educational qualification up to secondary school, 100 (25.8%) have up to tertiary education while 84 (21.6) respondents are educated up to the primary education level. The implication is that a large proportion of the sampled population can read and write with basic understanding thereby making it a bit easier for the author to explain the questionnaire’s intent. Also,

HYPOTHESES TESTING

The arguments around the literatures evaluated generated a few hypotheses in the paper that were tested from the available data

Hypothesis One:

H₀: there is no significant relationship between policy innovation and implementation gap in Nigeria.

H₁: there is a significant relationship between policy innovation and implementation gap in Nigeria.

Correlations

	POLICY INNOVATION	IMPLEMENTATION GAP
POLICY INNOVATIONS		
Pearson Correlation	1	.738**
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
N	388	388
IMPLEMENTATION GAP		
Pearson Correlation	.738**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
N	388	388

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table above depicts the correlation between policy innovation and implementation gap. The hypothetical statements are aimed at unravelling the factors (if any) that have contributed to negative outcome of policy innovation. Thus, the table established that the both variables are highly and significantly related (correlation equal to .738) at the significant level of 0.01. Therefore, the study rejects the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between policy innovation and implementation gap in Nigeria. Conversely, the study accepts the research hypothesis which states that there is a significant relationship between policy innovation and implementation gap in Nigeria.

Hypothesis Two:

H₀: there is no significant relationship between community engagement and sustainable rural development in Nigeria.

H_r: there is a significant relationship between community engagement and sustainable rural development in Nigeria.

Table 2: Showing the Correlations between Community Engagment and Sustainable Rural Development

	COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT
COOMUNITY ENGAGEMENT		
Pearson Correlation	1	.647**
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
N	388	388
SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT		
Pearson Correlation	.647**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
N	388	388

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 above reveals the correlation between community engagement and sustainable rural development. It aimed to situate sustainable rural development in the context of community engagement and the kind of relationship that exist between them. The table shows that with a correlation coefficient of 0.647 at a significant level of 0.01, there is a high significant relationship between the two variables. Therefore, the study rejects the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between community engagement and sustainable rural development in Nigeria. alternatively, the study accepts the research hypothesis which states that there is a significant relationship between community engagement and sustainable rural development in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the paper, as depicted by the first hypothesis indicate that there is a high positive significance between policy innovation and implementation gap in Nigeria. This means that innovative developmental policies of the government have resulted in low success rate. No doubt the Nigerian development trajectory has witnessed a litany of rural development policies. The overbearing issue has been the lack of sustainability accentuated by the prevailing practical deficiency in implementation. This practical deficiency or implementation gap manifests in several dimensions notably:

Weak bureaucratic structures and inadequate institutional capacity: the RBDAs struggled with poor coordination, overlapping mandates, and inefficient management, resulting in underutilized infrastructure. Similarly, DFRRI's ambitious infrastructural drive collapsed under bureaucratic inefficiency and lack of sustainability mechanisms orchestrated by the problem of inappropriate coordination between NAFPP activities and other related government agricultural programs created inefficiencies (Olukotun, 2017; Ekpo & Olaniyi, 2012).

Political patronage and elites' corruption: the diversion of project funds, politicisation of appointments, and elite capture of benefits are recurrent problems within the Nigerian rural development policy framework (Okolie, 2015). This was evident in the distribution and awards of contracts under DFRRI and the selection of beneficiaries for other conditional cash transfer programmes (Onah & Ugwuanyi, 2018).

Poor consultation with rural stakeholders: innovative policies are often designed by urban-based technocrats and experts without adequate consultation and collaboration with rural communities which results in policy programmes often failing to reflect local realities. According to Olukotun & Adeleye (2018), many rural farmers were excluded from irrigation schemes under the RBDAs due to limited access to land or high costs, while rural dwellers prioritised basic healthcare and potable water over some of the large-scale infrastructure that the policy earmarked for provision.

Weak and inefficient monitoring mechanisms: innovative policies in Nigeria often lack weak or totally absent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms thereby leading to waste, duplication, and abandonment of projects (Okolie, 2015). This menace impacted a significant proportion of rural roads constructed under DFRRI which later fell into disrepair within a few years due to lack of adequate monitoring and maintenance plans (Olukotun (2017).

The discussion above, as exemplified in hypothesis one and the related literature evidently suggests that, historically, policy innovations in Nigeria have been quite ambitious by successive governments aimed at transforming livelihoods, particularly in the rural areas. However, the results have often fallen short of expectations signaling unending level of poor collaboration and synergy between policy design and practical outcomes thereby creating a significant relationship between policy innovation and implementation gap. Despite policy frameworks that appear well-crafted on paper, deficiencies in execution, institutional capacity, and political commitment have consistently undermined their effectiveness.

Hypothesis two established that, at the significant level of 0.01 and a correlation coefficient of 0.647, there is a significant relationship between community engagement and sustainable rural development which implies that when localities, who are the major recipients of government innovative policies, are engaged in the planning and execution processes, tendency exists that effective implementation will be high which will consequently translate into sustainable rural development. This was also reflected in the responses from the respondents when they were asked that the degree of collaboration between policymakers and community members affects policy implementation outcomes; three hundred and fifty (350) marking 90.2% agreed while only 38 (thirty-eight) respondents, marking a paltry 9.8% expressed disagreement. The consequences of engaging local participation in policy implementation comes with numerous advantages as the hypothesis unraveled. When communities actively participate in designing and implementing projects, they develop a sense of ownership, which reduces the risk of project abandonment and enhances long-term maintenance (As Onah & Ugwuanyi, 2018). Community engagement plays a crucial role in ensuring that decisions are made collectively, considering the needs, aspirations, and

knowledge of community members thereby enhancing legitimacy, acceptance, and effectiveness of the decisions.

Another manifestation of the relationship between community engagement and effective policy implementation for sustainable rural development is that policies or programmes to be formulated aligns with local realities of the local people. This is a derivative of the fact that projects that align with community priorities are more likely to endure the test of time as they respond to genuine needs of the people and integrate local knowledge base. This is quite critical in rural Nigeria where top-down interventions frequently collapse after donor or government withdrawal (Olayiwola & Adeleye, 2018) whereas, when community engagement and participation is properly ensured, the tendency that there will be neglect or abandonment completely disappears. Additionally, effective implementation of community participation ensures that every facet of the local population is adequately represented because various participants in the decision-making process are pragmatic individuals with acute understanding of their local developmental needs. As such, non would want to subvert their collective endeavour for personal gain. To this extent, participatory processes promote transparency and accountability by enabling communities to monitor development expenditures and outcomes, thereby reducing corruption and elite capture of resources (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

According to Akinola (2010), empowering communities through participation strengthens local institutions, leadership structures, and problem-solving capacities, thereby positioning rural dwellers to become long-term drivers of their own development. Grassroot governance serves as a means or avenue for rural communities' education. Therefore, community engagement in development process helps to consolidated the education that would ensure future self-determination in local development practices. When they are empowered, the people can begin to facilitate development initiatives with little or no external interference (Akinola, 2010). Beyond that trust building is quite essential in government-locals' relation. By this correlation, community members and various stakeholders, including local authorities, organisations, and other institutions can collaborate without fear of exploitation. When such collaborative venture becomes institutionalised, trust building is thought to have reached a crescendo.

CONCLUSION

The study pointed out that despite decades of innovative frameworks, the realities of rural communities remain largely unchanged. This persistent underdevelopment highlights the implementation gap (a disconnect between well-crafted policy frameworks and the practical outcomes they generate on the ground). The result of the research provides a revelation of the nuances that that while policy innovations have often been ambitious in scope and objectives, their impacts have been undermined, majorly, by limited integration of rural communities in the decision-making processes. Also, elite-driven agendas, inadequate institutional capacity, and poor monitoring have also accentuated the debacle. As a pathway to redemption, the paper proffered community engagement as a corrective mechanism to bridge this gap between innovative policy formulations and the concurrent practical deficiency in the area of sustainable rural development.

The paper concludes that by shifting from a top-down, technocratic approach on rural issues to one that prioritises participation, collaboration, and empowerment, development policies can become more responsive to local needs, thereby fostering ownership, long term projects execution, transparency and justice. Only through this synergy of innovative policy and meaningful community engagement can rural communities in Nigeria achieve the sustainable development they urgently yearn for.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This synergy of innovative policy and meaningful community participation that will drive sustainable development in the rural areas can be attained through adherence to the following recommendations:

Institutionalisation of Community Participation in Policy Formulation: There should be an unrelenting effort towards building a structure that institutionalises community participation in rural developmental

programmes. This can be achieved through the establishment of legal frameworks that mandate the inclusion of rural communities in the design and review of development policies.

Provision of Adequate Funding: Finance is the livewire of any development discourse across the world. As such, any development policy without any roadmap for funding is dead on arrival. This is the bedrock of the past project failures in rural development initiative; majority of the innovative policies in the past lacked funding to the extent that they became moribund.

Policy Alignment with Local Demands: The government should conduct needs assessments before rolling out rural development programs, to ensure interventions reflect the socioeconomic and cultural realities of rural dwellers.

Capacity-Building and Empowerment: Government should invest in leadership training and skills development for rural community leaders, including men, women, youths and civil society groups, to strengthen their ability to engage in policy dialogue and project management.

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