Youth Participation and Social Equity in Local Development Planning: A Survey of Youth Perspectives in The Owerri Zone of Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract
Youth constitute a significant proportion of Nigeria's population and represent a critical resource for advancing equitable and sustainable development. Despite policy frameworks such as the National youth policy and the African youth charter respectively, youth engagement in local development planning remains limited, particularly in rural and semi-urban contexts. This paper examined the extent and nature of youth participation in local development planning in the Owerri zone of Imo state, Nigeria, and its implications for promoting social equity. Guided by participatory governance and social equity theories, the research employed a descriptive survey design involving 900 youth respondents selected through cluster sampling technique across nine local government areas. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analysed using frequency count and percentages. Findings indicate that while youth demonstrate high willingness and capacity to contribute to development planning, their actual participation is constrained by political marginalization, inadequate institutional frameworks, and limited access to information. The paper concludes that meaningful youth engagement is essential for advancing social equity in local governance. It recommended strengthening participatory structures, mainstreaming youth in decision-making bodies, and implementing targeted capacity-building programmes to enhance their contributions to local development outcomes.
Keywords: Youth participation, social equity, local development planning, governance, Owerri zone.

Introduction

Youth constitute a critical segment of Nigeria's population, representing both a demographic majority and a dynamic social force. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2020), individuals aged 15–35 account for over 60% of the Nigerian population. Despite this demographic advantage, youth participation in local governance and development planning remains marginal across many Nigerian communities. Their exclusion from critical decision-making processes not only weakens the sustainability of local initiatives but also perpetuates systemic inequities, thereby undermining the principles of inclusive governance and social equity (Adelekan & Fapohunda, 2019).

Local development planning is intended to reflect the specific needs and aspirations of community members through participatory mechanisms. However, in Nigeria, these processes are often dominated by hierarchical and top-down approaches, where traditional leaders, elected officials, and adult stakeholders monopolize develop mental discourse. Consequently, youths are often viewed as passive recipients of development interventions rather than active contributors. Most authors feel that the youths have lost their value in the scheme of things in the present-day society. According to Nnajieto & Iwejuo (2024), today, it is crystal clear that the centre can no more hold, the moral stakes seem to be completely fallen apart. Morality and integrity are becoming things of history among the present generation of youth, and even among the elders and leaders of our time. This imbalance constrains the potential for innovative, youth-driven solutions and fosters intergenerational inequality. Social equity, which demands the fair and just distribution of opportunities and resources, cannot be actualized without the inclusion of youth voices in the planning and execution of development projects (Olaniyi, 2018).

The imperative for youth inclusion is strongly supported by both national and international frameworks. Nigeria's National Youth Policy (2019) emphasizes the integration of youth into every facet of national development. Similarly, the African Youth Charter (African Union, 2006) advocates for youth participation as a right and a necessary condition for sustainable development. At the global level, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 10 and 16, highlight the importance of inclusive institutions and reduced inequalities. However, these policy frameworks have not consistently translated into meaningful youth engagement at the grassroots level, where local development plans are conceptualized and executed (Edewor, 2019). The Owerri zone of Imo State, comprising nine local government areas; Owerri North, Owerri West, Owerri Municipal, Aboh Mbaise, Ahiazu Mbaise, Ezinihitte Mbaise, Mbaitolu, Ikeduru, and Ngor Okpala, presents a relevant case for examining youth engagement in local development. While the region has benefited from various development initiatives led by governmental and non-governmental actors, the extent to which youth are included in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation remains largely undocumented. Additionally, there is a paucity of data regarding how youth themselves perceive their roles in governance and the extent to which their participation contributes to, or is constrained by, the quest for social equity.

This paper investigated youth participation in local development planning in the Owerri zone and assesses how such involvement (or its absence) affects access to equitable opportunities across educational, economic, political, and social domains. It aims to uncover systemic challenges, map patterns of exclusion or inclusion, and recommend practical pathways for promoting youth-responsive and equity-driven local governance.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, the need for inclusive and equitable local development planning has become increasingly recognized as a key strategy for sustainable community growth. Despite the growing youth population in Nigeria and the pivotal role young people can play in community transformation, their participation in local development processes remains limited, particularly in

sub-national regions such as the Owerri zone of Imo State. Youths are often marginalized in decision-making processes, planning frameworks, and policy implementation, leading to developmental outcomes that do not adequately reflect their interests, needs, or innovative potential.

This limited engagement raises critical questions about the extent to which youths are aware of, involved in, or empowered to influence local development planning. Additionally, it highlights potential social inequities, where access to participation is skewed toward older or elite segments of the population. While national and state policies in Nigeria advocate for inclusive governance and youth empowerment, the practical realities in many local government areas suggest a disconnect between policy intentions and actual practice.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore youth perspectives on their level of participation in local development planning in the Owerri zone of Imo state, and examine how this participation, or non-participation affects the pursuit of social equity. By identifying the gaps and barriers in youth inclusion, the study aims to offer insights into how local governance structures can become more responsive and inclusive in their planning processes.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study;

1. To what extent do youths in Owerri zone believe they are involved in local community development efforts in Imo state?
2. To what extent do youths in Owerri zone believe that they are capable of influencing social equity in their communities in Imo state?
3. What are the challenges hindering youth participation in community development in the Owerri zone of Imo state?

Literature Review

Youth Participation in Community Development in Nigeria

Youth participation in community development has gained increasing recognition as a cornerstone for sustainable grassroots transformation in Nigeria. Empirical studies from various regions of the country have consistently highlighted that active involvement of young people enhances the relevance, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability of community-based projects. However, the nature and extent of youth participation remain uneven, with several structural and contextual barriers limiting their full engagement.

For example, in Rivers State, findings indicate that youths often play positive roles in rural and infrastructural development. Their active involvement has been linked to improved project outcomes and community ownership, as youths are able to mobilize local resources and promote social buy-in. Despite this, youth participation is often limited during the initial phases of project cycles, especially in needs assessment, planning, and decision-making. These early stages are typically dominated by political or community elites, leaving young people in more passive or labour-oriented roles during implementation. This selective involvement undermines the potential

650

for projects to fully reflect the priorities and aspirations of the younger population (Harry & Enoch, 2022).

Similarly, in Ebonyi State, a study focusing on youth groups in Ivo Local Government Area found that young people contributed significantly to community development through the provision of physical labour, security services, and support for infrastructure projects such as road maintenance and school rehabilitation. However, their role in project conception, budgeting, monitoring, and evaluation was found to be minimal. The study identified several factors limiting youth participation, including lack of institutional frameworks for inclusion, low access to financial resources, inadequate education on participatory governance, and limited trust from older community leaders. These barriers reflect broader systemic issues, such as hierarchical power structures and generational divides, that marginalize youth voices in local governance and planning processes (Ezeh, Nwibo, Umeh, & Eze, 2018).

In both cases, the studies underscore a recurring trend: while youth are often mobilized for manual or support roles, they are seldom empowered to influence strategic decisions that shape the direction and priorities of community development. Moreover, education is a powerful tool for promoting social cohesion and reducing conflict. Improving access to quality education can equip individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to engage constructively in the political process (Nnajieto & Nnajieto, 2024). This has significant implications for equity and representation, as excluding youth from key stages of development planning not only limits their personal empowerment but also results in community outcomes that may fail to address the needs of the most dynamic segment of the population.

Moreover, the lack of meaningful youth engagement in development discourse has been linked to rising feelings of alienation, distrust in public institutions, and the erosion of civic responsibility among young people. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate policy reforms, including the establishment of youth-inclusive governance structures, capacity-building programmes, and targeted funding mechanisms that facilitate active youth involvement at all stages of community development.

Patterns and Constraints of Youth Engagement

Youth engagement in local development varies significantly across geographical and socio-economic contexts in Nigeria. Comparative studies between rural and urban settings reveal distinct patterns in the nature and quality of youth participation, often shaped by structural inequalities, resource availability, and local governance frameworks.

In Southwest Nigeria, particularly Oyo State, research has shown that rural youths tend to participate more actively in community meetings and grassroots decision-making processes than their urban counterparts. This increased involvement may be attributed to the more communal nature of rural life, where local traditions emphasize collective participation and where youth are often relied upon for organizing local events and supporting communal initiatives. However, despite this relatively higher visibility, rural youth participation remains significantly hindered by limited access to financial resources, poor awareness of formal civic rights, and a general lack of

empowerment tools. Many youths are unaware of how to navigate formal development planning systems or how to demand accountability from local authorities. These limitations, rooted in broader socioeconomic disparities, contribute to a form of "token participation," where youths are present but not influential in shaping decisions (Adekoya, 2009).

In Rivers State, specifically in Omoku, similar trends have been observed among youth organizations involved in agricultural development projects. Although youth groups express interest and commitment to participating in agricultural ventures, their actual involvement is often limited and sporadic. Studies point to insecure land tenure, which discourages long-term investment and planning; lack of cooperation among youth groups and community leaders; and insufficient funding as major barriers. In many cases, youth groups lack the organizational capacity, legal recognition, and access to grants or extension services that could support sustainable agricultural participation (Oguzor, Odinwa & Amugo, 2023).

Additional research from African-British Journals confirms that even where opportunities for involvement exist, youths face institutional exclusion, including lack of representation in local councils, weak integration into policy-making bodies, and cultural attitudes that question the capacity or maturity of young people to contribute meaningfully. These structural constraints not only limit youth involvement but also reinforce social hierarchies that prioritize the voices of elders, political elites, and urban professionals over those of rural and marginalized youth.

Furthermore, the fragmentation of youth organizations, often divided by political affiliations, ethnic loyalties, or personal rivalries, weakens their collective bargaining power and limits their ability to engage effectively with government and development partners. Without strong, unified platforms, youth voices are often drowned out in policy forums and local development dialogues. To address these constraints, scholars and practitioners recommend a shift from symbolic participation, where youths are invited but not empowered, to substantive engagement, where young people are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and institutional access needed to influence development outcomes. This includes capacity-building initiatives, reform of land tenure systems, inclusion in local development councils, and youth-focused development funding. Such reforms are essential for ensuring that youth engagement goes beyond participation in physical labour or implementation, to include planning, monitoring, and governance roles that reflect their needs and aspirations.

Determinants and Drivers of Youth Participation

Understanding the factors that influence youth participation in community development is essential for designing inclusive and effective local governance strategies. Several studies have identified a complex interplay of individual, household, socio-economic, and institutional factors that either motivate or hinder youth involvement in developmental initiatives.

A study conducted in Ondo State focusing on youth involvement in agricultural programmes sheds light on some of these critical determinants. The study revealed that household characteristics, such as family size, parental occupation, and income level, play a significant role in shaping youth engagement. Youths from larger or less economically stable households were more likely to

participate in agricultural ventures as a means of supplementing household income. In contrast, those from relatively comfortable households often lacked the economic incentive to engage in such initiatives, particularly when they had access to alternative income streams or educational opportunities (Tijani & Eforuoku, 2016).

Another influential factor was farming experience. Youths who had been exposed to farming at an early age, either through family tradition or vocational training, showed higher levels of confidence and willingness to participate in agricultural development programmes. Their familiarity with agricultural practices made them more receptive to innovation and better equipped to contribute meaningfully to community-based projects. This underscores the importance of early exposure and informal learning in shaping development behaviour.

Youth attitude also emerged as a strong determinant. Positive perceptions of agriculture and development work, such as viewing them as viable career paths or avenues for community leadership, encouraged active participation. Conversely, where agriculture was seen as outdated, labour-intensive, or economically unrewarding, youths were less inclined to participate. This highlights the role of social perceptions and cultural narratives in shaping youth engagement.

However, the study found that despite moderately high levels of overall participation, the lack of adequate training infrastructure stood out as the most significant barrier. Many youths lacked access to specialized training centres, demonstration farms, extension services, and technical support. Without this foundational support, their participation remained limited in scope and effectiveness. As a result, even when interest levels were high, the absence of capacity-building mechanisms restricted their ability to make sustained contributions or to scale up their involvement beyond basic or subsistence-level activities.

These findings underscore a broader reality: while youths may have the interest and potential to engage in local development initiatives, structural constraints such as poor infrastructure, limited access to finance, inadequate training opportunities, and weak policy support continue to suppress their full potential. Moreover, institutional frameworks often fail to recognize or integrate youth-driven ideas into formal planning processes, further alienating them from meaningful participation. Therefore, effective youth participation requires more than rhetorical inclusion. It necessitates the deliberate creation of supportive environments, including vocational training centres, startup grants, mentorship programmes, and youth-targeted policy reforms. Only when these enabling structures are in place can youths be expected to shift from passive beneficiaries to active stakeholders in the development of their communities.

Participation and Social Equity Concerns

One of the fundamental promises of democratic governance and sustainable development is the principle of inclusion, ensuring that all segments of society, particularly marginalized groups, have a voice in shaping the decisions that affect their lives. However, in practice, top-down development models have continued to dominate the Nigerian local governance landscape, systematically marginalizing vulnerable populations, including youth, women, persons with disabilities, and the rural poor. Youths, in particular, are frequently excluded from both formal and informal decision-

making processes, despite being among the most demographically significant and socially active groups in the country.

This exclusion has profound implications for social equity, which refers to the fair and just distribution of resources, opportunities, and decision-making power across different social groups. In many local communities, including those in Imo State, equity is undermined by deeply entrenched hierarchical structures that prioritize age, political affiliation, economic status, and social connections. As a result, youths often lack access to platforms where they can express their developmental needs, influence planning decisions, or monitor implementation outcomes.

Although tools such as participatory budgeting, a model that allows citizens to engage directly in deciding how public funds are allocated, have been introduced in some parts of Nigeria, evidence shows that their impact on enhancing youth participation and equity is limited. According to Ako, Unegbu, Oyelude, Oyalabu, & Osah, (2024), participatory budgeting initiatives often become elite-driven exercises, where only well-connected individuals or politically active citizens' benefit. Youths, particularly those from low-income or rural backgrounds, are rarely invited or meaningfully involved in these processes. When they are present, their contributions are often overlooked or undervalued.

Furthermore, social equity is compromised when resources and opportunities are distributed through patronage networks, which often exclude youth-led organizations that lack political backing or financial leverage. Even when youth groups exist, their capacity to advocate for equity is weakened by limited access to information, lack of leadership training, and institutional barriers such as age-restricted membership in decision-making bodies or councils. Findings suggest that people really come out to participate in programmes, but projects that rely on community participation have not been particularly effective in reaching the less privileged. Evidence revealed that such projects could lead to development of effective community infrastructures, but their outcomes do not correlate with participatory elements (Wordu, 2018).

Research also shows that gendered dynamics intersect with age-based marginalization, further disadvantaging young women, who face double exclusion on the basis of both age and gender. These intersecting inequalities demonstrate the urgent need for more deliberate mechanisms that promote inclusive participation and equitable outcomes.

To address these social equity concerns, scholars and policy advocates recommend the institutionalization of youth-inclusive governance frameworks, capacity-building for young leaders, the creation of youth desks in local governments, and legal reforms that ensure youth representation in planning committees. Additionally, greater efforts must be made to deconstruct elitist participation models and replace them with genuinely participatory systems that are accessible to youths across educational, economic, and geographic divides.

Ultimately, if local development planning is to achieve its goals of sustainability, fairness, and responsiveness, it must consider the lived experiences and aspirations of all citizens, especially the youth, whose future is most directly affected by today's development decisions.

Youth Organizations and Broader Social Inclusion

In the face of persistent exclusion from formal governance and development processes, youth advocacy organizations have emerged as powerful platforms for advancing youth inclusion and social equity in Nigeria. These organizations play a critical role in bridging the gap between young people and decision-making institutions, by promoting civic education, leadership development, policy engagement, and accountability at local, national, and international levels.

Notable among these organisations are YIAGA Africa, the Nigeria Youth SDGs Network, and the National Youth Council of Nigeria (NYCN). These bodies serve as collective voices for Nigerian youth, pushing for reforms that guarantee the inclusion of young people in planning, governance, and sustainable development.

YIAGA Africa, for example, is renowned for its work in election monitoring, civic engagement, and policy advocacy. Through initiatives like the "Not Too Young To Run" campaign, YIAGA Africa successfully influenced legislative reforms that reduced age requirements for political candidates, thereby expanding political space for youth representation. The organization also facilitates youth-led dialogues and policy briefings, ensuring that young people can contribute meaningfully to national and local development agendas.

Similarly, the Nigeria Youth SDGs Network (NGYouthSDGs) mobilizes youth across the country to engage with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This network empowers young advocates to localize the SDGs by participating in community development, environmental sustainability, gender equity, health education, and social accountability projects. Through partnerships with government agencies, private institutions, and international donors, NGYouthSDGs has helped elevate youth voices on issues of poverty, climate change, and inclusive education, issues that are central to both development planning and social equity.

The National Youth Council of Nigeria (NYCN), officially recognized by the government as the umbrella body for youth organizations in the country, plays an institutional role in representing youth interests in policy formulation and national planning. Although sometimes criticized for political interference or bureaucratic inefficiency, NYCN remains a critical stakeholder in youth development advocacy and has been involved in shaping youth-related policies, including the National Youth Policy and various youth employment initiatives.

These organizations contribute significantly to broadening the scope of social inclusion by targeting marginalized and underserved youth populations, such as young women, rural youth, persons with disabilities, and those affected by conflict or poverty. They also provide platforms for capacity-building, policy engagement, and digital activism, equipping young Nigerians with the tools and knowledge necessary to influence change in their communities. Moreover, these networks play a vital role in promoting intergenerational dialogue, where youths are encouraged to collaborate with older generations rather than being sidelined by them. This collaboration fosters mutual respect and builds inclusive governance models that are both democratic and developmentally responsive.

Despite their progress, these youth organizations face several challenges. Many operate with limited funding, inconsistent government support, and lack of access to decision-making tables at

the grassroots level. Furthermore, the fragmented nature of youth organizing, often marked by competition for resources or political influence, sometimes weakens the collective power of youth advocacy. To maximize their impact, there is a need for stronger institutional frameworks, increased investment in youth-led initiatives, and more formal mechanisms to integrate youth organizations into local development planning structures, particularly in underserved regions like the Owerri Zone of Imo State.

In summary, youth organizations are not only agents of empowerment and inclusion but also critical partners in driving equity-focused development. Civic education programmes should also be developed to empower citizens, especially the youths, with knowledge about their privileges and rights (Nnajieto & Ihejieto, 2024). This is because, their sustained engagement, if properly supported, holds the potential to transform Nigeria's development landscape by ensuring that young people are not just beneficiaries of development, but co-creators of it.

Educational and Analytical Gap in the Owerri Zone

Although the literature highlights general patterns across Nigeria, there is scant research specific to Imo state, especially regarding how youth perceive their own role in local planning and whether that role correlates with perceived social equity. Most existing studies focus on workforce participation or rural agricultural engagement, but fewer address youth agency in formal development planning processes. This gap underscores a need for focused local-level inquiry, including an exploration of youth self-perception, barriers experienced, and the extent to which youth feel their participation influences equitable outcomes for their community.

Theoretical Framework

The study on Youth Participation and Social Equity in Local Development Planning draws upon several interrelated sociological and political theories that help to explain the dynamics of youth involvement in development and the pursuit of social equity within local governance. Chief among these are Participatory Development Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Equity Theory.

1. Participatory Development Theory

Participatory Development Theory emphasizes the active involvement of all stakeholders, particularly marginalized groups such as youths, in the decision-making processes of development projects. The theory posits that meaningful participation leads to more relevant, sustainable, and equitable outcomes (Matous, 2013). In the context of Owerri Zone, this theory provides the rationale for investigating the extent to which youths are integrated into planning, execution, and evaluation stages of community development. It also interrogates whether their inclusion (or exclusion) influences the legitimacy and fairness of development interventions. As such, the theory supports the study's focus on gauging the depth of youth engagement and how this relates to their perception of equity in local governance.

2. Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory, as advanced by scholars such as Robert Putnam, suggests that networks of relationships, trust, and civic engagement are essential for effective governance and community development. Youths who are socially connected through formal and informal organizations are

more likely to contribute to and benefit from collective action (Chong, 2020). This theory is useful for understanding the role of youth associations, advocacy groups, and informal networks in enhancing participatory planning and social inclusion in Owerri Zone. The theory also helps to explain the disparity in participation across different localities, which may be due to varying levels of social capital among youth populations.

3. Equity Theory

Equity Theory, rooted in social justice and organizational psychology, holds that individuals evaluate fairness in terms of the balance between their contributions and the rewards they receive (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2021). Applied to development planning, it means that when youths feel their voices are heard and their efforts recognized, they are more likely to view governance structures as fair and inclusive. Conversely, perceived inequities can lead to disillusionment, apathy, or resistance. This theory informs the study's investigation of how youth perceive their influence on issues like education, economic opportunities, and political representation within their communities.

Together, these theories offer a robust conceptual lens through which to analyse youth participation and social equity in local development planning. They provide insight into not only the structural and institutional dimensions of inclusion but also the psychological and relational factors that shape youth engagement. Grounding this study in these theoretical perspectives allows for a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities for empowering young people in the Owerri zone and promoting equitable community development.

Methods

The study is a descriptive survey of opinions of the youth in Owerri zone, Imo State, on the extent of their participation in development of their communities, their influence on social equity in their communities and factors hindering their participation and influence on social equity. The population for the study includes every youth of 17 years and above across gender and who are residents of the nine (9) Local Government Areas making up Owerri Zone.

To derive sample for the study, cluster sampling technique was used to sample a total of 900 male and female youths of the above age range. Specifically, using Cluster Sampling Technique, a sample of 100 respondents were drawn from each of the 9 LGAs making a total of 900, which is the sample size. The youths' cluster were accessed at their schools, religious centres and official community activities. To ensure the reliability of the sampling procedure, the researcher engaged a team of carefully selected Research Assistants (RA). The RA were residents of the LGAs. They were contacted, briefed and allowed to voluntarily decide to assist in the study. The major roles of the RA were to administer the questionnaire on the respondents across research locations and return those responded to, to the researchers.

To elicit the needed data, a self-made research instrument titled Participation in Community Social Development and Social Equity Questionnaire (PCSDSEQ) was used for data collection. The questionnaire has three sections. Section A requested the respondents to provide their biographical data such as age, residence and level of education. Section 'B' has items structured to elicit youths'

657

opinions on the extent and type of their participation in the development of their community. The Section C of the questionnaire sought responses to respondents' opinions on how they influence social equity in their individual community. The questionnaire was validated using content and face validity approaches. Copies of the questionnaire were given to experts in Sociology and Measurement and Evaluation. They were asked to assess the items of the questionnaire to determine whether the items were adequate and relevant in gathering the needed data. A reliability co-efficient of 0.68 was obtained for the questionnaire using test-re-test approach. This was done by administering the questionnaire on selected respondents with similar attributes of the originally intended respondents in Owerri metropolis. The data collected from the test-re-test were correlated using Pearson Moment Correlation Co-efficient. To answer the research questions, the data collected were analyzed using frequency count and percentages. To determine high or low level of youths' participation in community development and on social equity, a percentage score lower that 50% was taken to mean low participation and above 50% was taken to mean high level of participation. Thus, ≤ and ≥ 50 are taken as the statistical benchmark of decisions.

Results

1. To what extent do youths in Owerri Zone believe they are involved in local community development efforts in Imo State?

Table 1: Opinions of youths in Owerri Zone on their participation in local community development

Extents of Total Participation %	OWERRI		MBAISE		MBAITOLU		IKEDURU		NGOR	
	n	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
Planning of. Project 4.6%	14	**4.6**	8	2.6	4	4	11	11	5	5
Execution of Project 36.4%	157	52.3	89	29	23	23	40	40	19	19
Beneficiary of Project 56.1%	211	70.3	184	61.3	31	31	44	44	35	35
Monitoring of Project 10.4%	29	9.6	11	3.6	16	16	13	13	25	25
Assessment of Project 12%	59	1.96	27	9	5	5	11	11	6	6

Key: OWERRI= The three Owerri LGAs (i.e. Owerri North, West and Municipal) MBAISE = The three Mbaise LGAs (ie, Aboh, Ahiazu and Ezinihitte) MBT= Mbaitolu LGA, IKE= Ikeduru LGA and NGOR= Ngor Okpala LGA

As shown on Table 1, the various levels of data analysis indicate that youths in Owerri Zone, specifically across the 9 Local Government Areas making up the zone have low extent of participation in the community development, except in the area of being beneficiary of the community development project (56.1% ≥ 50%). Specifically, the low levels of participation were expressed in the area of project planning, 4.6% also which is ≤ 50%.; execution of project, 36.4%; monitoring of community development projects 10.4% and assessment of community development projects, 12%; also lower that 50%. The youth's participation in community development was adjudged to be mostly low in all aspects except being beneficiary of the community development project because the gradients percentages did not exceed 50% chosen benchmark score.

2. To what extent do youths in Owerri Zone believe that they are capable of influencing social equity in their communities in Imo State?

Table 2: Opinions of youths in Owerri Zone on how they influence social equity in their communities

Level of Total Influence %	OWERRI		MBAISE		MBAITOLU		IKEDURU		NGOR	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Educational Growth 72%	279	93	204	68	61	61	58	58	52	52
Economic Growth 63%	211	70	185	61	59	59	62	62	57	57
Political Participation 75%	269	89	228	76	64	64	58	58	61	61
Religious Participation 11 7.7%	27	9	10	3.3	7	7	15	15	11	

Key: OWERRI= The three Owerri LGAs (i.e. Owerri North, West and Municipal) MBAISE = The three Mbaise LGAs (ie, Aboh, Ahiazu and Ezinihitte) MBT= Mbaitolu LGA, IKE= Ikeduru LGA and NGOR= Ngor Okpala LGA

Based on the data on Table 2, out of the sampled respondents, 72% were of the opinion that they can influence and be influenced educationally by social equity in their community. On the other, 63% of respondents believed that social equity in their community influenced their individual and collective economic growth. Another 75% of the sampled respondents were of the opinion that the social equity in their community can influence their political participation in the governance of their state. However, only 7.7% of the respondents across the 9 local government areas were of the opinion that social equity can influence their religious participation. Generally, the data point

to the fact that social equity in Owerri Zone has influence on educational, economic and political but not on their religion (7.7% ≤ 50%).

3   What are the challenges hindering youth participation in community development in the Owerri Zone of Imo State?

Table 3: Challenges hindering youth participation in community development in Owerri Zone

Challenges Total %	OWERRI		MBAISE		MBAITOLU		IKEDURU		NGOR	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Security Challenge 53%	111	37	174	58	76	76	51	51	68	68
Political Discrimination 69 42%	90	30	153	51	45	45	23	23	69	
Political Representation 51 52%	136	45	168	56	52	52	61	61	51	
Education deficiencies 31 13.6%	21	7	17	5.6	41	41	13	13	31	
Government bureaucracy 61%	215	71.6	179	59.6	57	57	48	48	50	50

Key: OWERRI= The three Owerri LGAs (i.e. Owerri North, West and Municipal) MBAISE = The three Mbaise LGAs (ie, Aboh, Ahiazu and Ezinihitte) MBT= Mbaitolu LGA, IKE= Ikeduru LGA and NGOR= Ngor Okpala LGA

Data on Table 3 shows that 53% of sampled respondents believed that security challenges hindered youths' participation in community development in Owerri Zone. On the other hand, 61% of them attributed the hinderance to government bureaucracy, while 52% of the youths blamed the low participation on poor political representation of youths in government. However, while 42% of the youths in the zone believed they were unable to participate because of political discrimination, only 13.6% of the sampled population blamed low participation of youths on educational deficiencies.

Discussion

The results of this study provide valuable insight into the extent of youth participation in community development, their perceived influence on social equity, and the challenges they face in the Owerri Zone of Imo State. The discussion is organized around the three key research questions addressed in the study.

1. Extent of youth participation in local community development efforts

The findings, as presented in Table 1, reveal that youth participation in local community development across the nine Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the Owerri Zone is generally low, except in the area of being beneficiaries of development projects. While 56.1% of respondents acknowledged benefiting from community development initiatives, youth engagement in critical areas such as planning (4.6%), execution (36.4%), monitoring (10.4%), and assessment (12%) of these projects remains significantly below the 50% benchmark.

This pattern suggests that youths are largely excluded from decision-making and implementation processes in local development. Their involvement tends to be passive and peripheral, rather than strategic or policy-driven. This aligns with previous studies carried out by scholars (Okhankhuele, 2022; Onyesom et al, 2025) that have documented the tokenistic nature of youth involvement in community planning across Nigeria. When young people are limited to the role of beneficiaries, their ability to shape outcomes, contribute innovations, or build leadership capacity is constrained. This exclusion also weakens the potential for youth ownership of development projects, which is vital for long-term sustainability.

2. Youth perceptions of their ability to influence social equity

As shown in Table 2, a majority of respondents believed that they were capable of influencing social equity in their communities, particularly in the areas of education (72%), economic growth (63%), and political participation (75%). These findings reflect a strong sense of civic potential among youths in the Owerri Zone, suggesting that young people recognize their role as agents of change in the pursuit of a more equitable society.

However, only 7.7% of respondents believed that social equity influenced their participation in religious affairs, indicating that religious spaces may remain largely hierarchical and less open to youth-led reforms or inclusion. The significantly higher percentages in the domains of education, economy, and politics suggest that youths perceive structural and policy arenas as more accessible and transformative for their aspirations. These findings align with the work of scholars such as Ekpiken & Ukpabio (2015) and Chima, Onyebuchi & Idowu (2024), who emphasized the role of education and economic empowerment in enhancing youth agency and social justice.

3. Challenges hindering youth participation in community development

The analysis of Table 3 identifies several key challenges that inhibit effective youth participation in community development across the Owerri Zone. The most frequently cited obstacles were government bureaucracy (61%), security challenges (53%), and poor political representation (52%). These challenges reflect broader systemic issues that undermine youth engagement, such as lack of transparency, administrative delays, and restricted access to political platforms.

Political discrimination (42%) was also reported as a major barrier, highlighting how age-based exclusion and elite dominance in political structures continue to disenfranchise younger populations. Interestingly, educational deficiencies (13.6%) were the least cited constraint, which may imply that although educational access is improving, it is not translating directly into increased civic participation. It may also reflect the presence of educated but politically

marginalized youth, an issue documented in related studies (Edewor, 2019; Kabiti, Francis & Simbarashe, 2019).

The dominance of bureaucratic and political barriers suggests that structural reforms are necessary to create more youth-friendly governance systems. The creation of youth development councils, reform of participatory budgeting processes, and increased transparency in local administration could provide pathways to address these constraints and enhance youth inclusion in meaningful ways.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings demonstrate a significant disconnect between youth capacity and opportunity in local development planning in the Owerri zone. While the youth express confidence in their ability to influence social equity and recognize their role in societal progress, their actual participation in decision-making processes remains limited. This disconnect is exacerbated by institutional, political, and administrative barriers that hinder their full inclusion.

To address these gaps, it is essential for local governments, civil society organizations, and development partners to intentionally integrate youth voices into planning and execution frameworks. Providing training, access to leadership opportunities, and mechanisms for youth accountability in governance will be critical steps toward achieving inclusive and equitable development in Imo State and beyond.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, we therefore recommend as follows;

1. Local governments in Owerri zone should establish inclusive youth councils to actively involve young people in all stages of community development planning and decision-making.
2. Civic education and leadership training programmes should be implemented to equip youths with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective participation.
3. Bureaucratic processes should be reformed to ensure transparent and equitable access to development opportunities for all youth, regardless of social or political background.

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