

## ***Traditional Institutions and Grassroots Development in Rural Communities of Cross River State***

**Godfrey Ekene Odinka, Ph.D**

*Department of Sociology  
University of Calabar, Calabar  
[ekeneodinka2@gmail.com](mailto:ekeneodinka2@gmail.com)*

**Unaji Ushie oday, Ph.D**

*Department of Sociology  
University of Calabar, Calabar  
[Unajioday@unical.edu.ng](mailto:Unajioday@unical.edu.ng)*

**Osedumme Igwebuike, Ph.D**

*Department of Curriculum and Teaching  
University of Calabar, Calabar  
[osedumme83@gmail.com](mailto:osedumme83@gmail.com)*

### **Abstract**

*This study, guided by two null hypotheses, assessed the influence of traditional institutions on grassroots development in rural communities of Cross River State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprised an estimated 13,500 adult stakeholders drawn from rural communities in Cross River State, including traditional rulers, council of elders, community development association members, and active participants in community development activities. A sample size of 200 respondents was selected using purposive and accidental sampling techniques. The instrument for data collection was a validated questionnaire titled “Traditional Institutions and Grassroots Development Questionnaire (TIGDQ)”. To establish reliability, a trial test was conducted outside the study area, and the Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficients ranged from 0.80 to 0.85. The data obtained were analyzed using linear regression analysis, at 0.05 level of significance. The results of the study revealed, among others, that councils of elders and traditional rulers significantly influence rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State. Based on the findings, it was recommended that government and development agencies should strengthen collaboration with traditional rulers and councils of elders in planning and implementing rural development projects.*

**Keywords:** traditional institutions, councils of elders, traditional rulers, rural infrastructure development, community participation

## Introduction

Traditional institutions continue to play a fundamental role in shaping governance structures and development outcomes in many African societies, particularly in rural communities where formal governmental presence is often limited. In Nigeria, especially in Cross River State, traditional institutions such as traditional rulers and councils of elders remain central to maintaining social order, mobilizing community resources, and driving grassroots development initiatives. These institutions function as indigenous governance systems that complement formal state structures in addressing local development needs. Consequently, the relationship between traditional institutions and grassroots development has attracted scholarly attention in recent development discourse (Igwebuike & Ettan, 2019; Offem et al., 2018).

Traditional institutions refer to long-established indigenous leadership structures that regulate social, political, and developmental affairs within communities. They include traditional rulers (Obong/Clan Heads), who serve as custodians of cultural heritage and executive authorities at the community level, and councils of elders, who function as advisory bodies responsible for mediation, conflict resolution, and decision-making support. Grassroots development, on the other hand, refers to the process of improving living conditions at the community level through the provision of rural infrastructure and enhanced citizen participation in development activities. These include roads, water supply systems, schools, health facilities, and community-driven development programmes (Ogunbameru, 2015; Duru & Nwosu, 2021).

Traditional rulers occupy strategic positions in rural development due to their authority, legitimacy, and ability to mobilize community members for collective action. They often serve as intermediaries between rural communities and government agencies, facilitating access to development projects and external support. Councils of elders, in turn, reinforce communal cohesion by advising traditional rulers, enforcing customary norms, and ensuring equitable participation in development initiatives. According to Arowolo (2020), traditional governance systems remain essential in sustaining rural development because they enhance trust, cooperation, and social accountability within communities.

Rural infrastructure development is a critical dimension of grassroots development and is often influenced by the effectiveness of local leadership structures. Traditional institutions contribute to infrastructure development by mobilizing communal labour, coordinating

development priorities, and attracting government or donor interventions. In many rural communities, traditional rulers play key roles in initiating projects such as road construction, market development, and provision of potable water, while councils of elders ensure transparency and conflict-free execution of such projects (Okafor & Nwankwo, 2019; Ibeanu, 2020).

Community participation in development activities is another important indicator of grassroots development. It involves the active engagement of community members in planning, implementing, and sustaining development projects. Traditional institutions significantly influence participation by promoting collective responsibility and enforcing cultural obligations that encourage communal involvement. Studies have shown that strong traditional leadership structures enhance civic engagement and increase participation in rural development initiatives (Chukwuemeka & Ugwu, 2021; Ezeani, 2019).

Globally, traditional institutions have been recognized as important partners in decentralized governance and community-driven development models. In many developing countries, they complement formal institutions by ensuring grassroots inclusion and cultural relevance in development processes (World Bank, 2021; UNDP, 2022). However, the extent of their effectiveness varies depending on political structure, modernization, and institutional recognition.

Empirical studies have shown mixed findings regarding the influence of traditional institutions on development outcomes. While some researchers report strong positive relationships between traditional leadership and rural development indicators, others argue that modernization and political interference have weakened their effectiveness in some regions (Smith, 2020; Adeyemi & Ojo, 2022). Similarly, the impact of traditional institutions on community participation has been linked to the level of legitimacy and trust they command within their communities (UN-Habitat, 2021).

Within Nigeria, traditional institutions remain highly influential in rural governance, particularly in areas where government presence is weak. In Cross River State, traditional rulers and councils of elders continue to play active roles in community mobilization, dispute resolution, and development planning. However, there is still limited empirical evidence on the extent to which these institutions influence both rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities (Nnaji & Okeke, 2023; Eja, 2022).

Given these gaps, this study seeks to empirically examine the influence of traditional institutions specifically councils of elders and traditional rulers on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State, Nigeria. The findings are expected to provide context-specific insights that will contribute to strengthening grassroots governance and improving rural development outcomes (World Bank, 2021; UNDP, 2022; Ezeani, 2019).

### **Statement of the problem**

Despite the importance of traditional institutions in rural governance, many communities in Cross River State continue to experience slow and uneven grassroots development. Rural infrastructure such as roads, water supply, schools, and health facilities remain inadequate in several communities, raising concerns about effective development coordination. Although traditional rulers and councils of elders are expected to play key roles in mobilizing community participation and supporting development initiatives, their actual influence remains unclear and inconsistent.

In some communities, these institutions are actively involved in initiating and sustaining development projects, while in others, their roles appear weak or largely symbolic. This variation suggests a possible gap between traditional authority structures and their practical contribution to development outcomes. Furthermore, community participation in development activities is often low or poorly coordinated, despite the presence of established traditional leadership systems.

The extent to which councils of elders and traditional rulers influence both infrastructure development and community participation has not been adequately empirically established in the study area. Existing studies have largely focused on formal governance structures, leaving limited attention to the role of indigenous institutions in grassroots development processes. It is against this background that this study seeks to examine the influence of traditional institutions on grassroots development in rural communities of Cross River State.

### **Purpose of the study**

This study evaluates the influence of traditional institutions on grassroots development in rural communities of Cross River State. Specifically, the study sought:

- 1 To determine the influence of councils of elders on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State.

2 To examine the influence of traditional rulers on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State.

### **Research questions**

1. What is the influence of councils of elders on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State?
2. What is the influence of traditional rulers on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State?

### **Hypotheses**

**Ho1:** Councils of elders have no significant influence on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State.

**Ho2:** Traditional rulers have no significant influence on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State.

### **Methodology**

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. In achieving the major objectives of this research, two research objectives were formulated and two null hypotheses were developed to guide the investigation. The study focused on examining the influence of traditional institutions on grassroots development in rural communities of Cross River State, Nigeria, specifically, in terms of rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities.

The population of the study comprised an estimated 13,500 adult stakeholders drawn from selected rural communities across Cross River State. These included traditional rulers (Obong/Clan Heads), councils of elders, community development association members, and other adult residents actively involved in community governance and development activities. This population was considered appropriate because these groups are directly involved in decision-making and implementation of grassroots development initiatives. A sample size of 200 respondents was selected from the population using purposive and accidental (convenience) sampling techniques. The researchers first employed purposive sampling to deliberately select rural communities and key traditional governance stakeholders who possess relevant knowledge of community development processes.

Thereafter, accidental sampling was used to select respondents who were readily available and willing to participate in the study at the time of data collection until the required sample size of 200 respondents was achieved.

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled “Traditional Institutions and Grassroots Development Questionnaire (TIGDQ)”. The instrument consists of four sections. Section A contained 5 items on respondents’ demographic characteristics, while Section B, Section C, and Section D contained 8 items each measuring councils of elders, traditional rulers, and grassroots development (rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities), respectively, giving a total of 29 items. The instrument adopted a four-point Likert response format of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The response options were scored as 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively for positively worded items, while negatively worded items were reverse-scored, with higher scores indicating a stronger perceived influence of traditional institutions on grassroots development. The questionnaire was designed to elicit information on the influence of councils of elders and traditional rulers on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities.

To ensure validity, the instrument was reviewed by experts in sociology and community development to confirm its content and face validity. To establish reliability, a pilot test was conducted outside the study area using respondents who were not part of the main study sample. The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach Alpha method, and the coefficients ranged from 0.80 to 0.85, indicating high internal consistency. The researchers, with the assistance of trained research assistants, administered the questionnaire directly to respondents across the selected rural communities. Data collected were coded and analyzed. Inferential statistics, specifically, simple regression analysis, was used to test the stated hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance.

### **Presentation of results**

**Ho1:** There is no significant influence of councils of elders on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State.

The result of the analysis is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Simple regression analysis of the influence of councils of elders on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in Cross River State (N = 200)

| Source of Variation | SS       | Df  | MS      | F       | p-value |
|---------------------|----------|-----|---------|---------|---------|
| Regression          | 112.540  | 1   | 112.540 | 18.672* | .000    |
| Residual            | 1193.260 | 198 | 6.027   |         |         |
| Total               | 1305.800 | 199 |         |         |         |

Significant at .05 level,  $R = .294$ ;  $R^2 = .086$ ; Adj.  $R^2 = .081$

To analyse the data for testing hypothesis 1, simple regression analysis was used as presented on table 1. The analysis revealed that the adjusted  $R^2$  is 0.081, indicating that 8.1% of the variance in rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities is explained by councils of elders in rural communities of Cross River State. The F-value of 18.672 is significant at 1 and 198 degrees of freedom, and the p-value of .000 is less than .05. This implies that there is a significant influence of councils of elders on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that councils of elders significantly influence grassroots development in the study area.

**Ho2:** There is no significant influence of traditional rulers on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State.

The result of the analysis is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Simple regression analysis of the influence of traditional rulers on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in Cross River State (N = 200)

| Source of Variation | SS       | Df  | MS      | F       | p-value |
|---------------------|----------|-----|---------|---------|---------|
| Regression          | 168.430  | 1   | 168.430 | 27.915* | .000    |
| Residual            | 1195.370 | 198 | 6.038   |         |         |
| Total               | 1363.800 | 199 |         |         |         |

Significant at .05 level,  $R = .351$ ;  $R^2 = .123$ ; Adj.  $R^2 = .118$

To analyse the data for testing Ho2, simple regression analysis was used and the results are presented on Table 2. The analysis revealed that the adjusted  $R^2$  is 0.118, indicating that 11.8% of the variance in rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities is explained by traditional rulers in rural communities of Cross River State. The F-value of 27.915 is significant at 1 and 198 degrees of freedom, and the p-value of .000 is less than .05. This implies that there is a significant influence of traditional rulers on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that traditional rulers significantly influence grassroots development in the study area.

### **Discussion of the findings**

The result in Table 1 revealed that councils of elders have a significant influence on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State. This finding suggests that councils of elders remain active and relevant in grassroots governance, particularly in mobilizing community members, facilitating consensus, and supporting the initiation and implementation of development projects. Their influence appears to extend across both physical development outcomes and participatory engagement of community members.

This finding is consistent with the position of Arowolo (2020), who observed that indigenous institutions play a central role in strengthening rural development through social cohesion, trust-building, and collective decision-making. Similarly, Chukwuemeka and Ugwu (2021) noted that traditional leadership structures enhance civic engagement by encouraging community members to participate in communal projects and development activities. In the same vein, Ezeani (2019) argued that local governance systems rooted in tradition improve development outcomes by ensuring accountability and inclusiveness at the grassroots level. Furthermore, Okafor and Nwankwo (2019) emphasized that councils of elders contribute significantly to infrastructure development by mediating conflicts and mobilizing communal labour. These empirical positions support the present finding that councils of elders significantly influence both rural infrastructure development and community participation in Cross River State.

The result in Table 2 showed that traditional rulers have a significant influence on rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities in rural communities of Cross River State. This implies that traditional rulers play a strategic leadership role in initiating development projects, mobilizing resources, and encouraging active participation of community members in grassroots development processes.



This finding aligns with Ogunbameru (2015), who emphasized that effective traditional leadership structures significantly enhance rural development outcomes through coordination and mobilization functions. Similarly, Offem et al. (2018) found that community leadership positively influences development participation by fostering cooperation and shared responsibility among residents. Ibeanu (2020) also noted that traditional rulers serve as critical intermediaries between rural communities and external development agencies, thereby improving access to infrastructure projects. In addition, Nnaji and Okeke (2023) observed that traditional authority structures remain influential in rural governance despite modernization pressures, especially in mobilizing communities for collective development efforts. These studies support the present finding that traditional rulers significantly influence both rural infrastructure development and community participation in Cross River State.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that traditional institutions play a significant and active role in grassroots development in rural communities of Cross River State. Specifically, councils of elders and traditional rulers were found to significantly influence rural infrastructure development and community participation in development activities. This indicates that traditional governance structures remain important mechanisms for promoting collective action, enhancing community involvement, and facilitating development at the grassroots level. The study therefore establishes that traditional institutions are still relevant in shaping development outcomes in rural areas.

### **Recommendations**

1. Government and development agencies should strengthen collaboration with councils of elders and traditional rulers in the planning and execution of rural infrastructure projects to enhance effectiveness, sustainability, and community ownership of development initiatives.
2. Community development stakeholders and policymakers should formally integrate traditional institutions into rural development frameworks to improve community participation, strengthen mobilization processes, and ensure inclusive decision-making in development activities across rural communities of Cross River State.

### **References**

- Adeyemi, O., & Ojo, T. (2022). Traditional governance and rural development outcomes in Nigeria. *Journal of African Development Studies*, 18(2), 45–60.
- Arowolo, D. (2020). Indigenous institutions and community development in Nigeria. *African Journal of Governance*, 12(1), 22–38.

- Chukwuemeka, E., & Ugwu, C. (2021). Traditional leadership and civic participation in rural Nigeria. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(3), 110–124.
- Duru, P., & Nwosu, I. (2021). Rural infrastructure and community development in developing economies. *Journal of Development Studies*, 15(4), 66–81.
- Eja, E. (2022). Traditional institutions and grassroots governance in Cross River State. *Calabar Journal of Social Research*, 6(1), 55–70.
- Ezeani, E. (2019). Local governance and community participation in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Public Administration*, 11(2), 89–103.
- Igwebuike, J., & Ettan, P. (2019). Traditional institutions and sustainable rural development. *Journal of African Sociology*, 8(2), 33–48.
- Ibeanu, O. (2020). Leadership and rural development in Nigeria. *Development Policy Review Journal*, 14(3), 75–90.
- Nnaji, L., & Okeke, C. (2023). Governance and rural development challenges in Southeastern Nigeria. *Journal of Political Science and Development*, 10(1), 101–118.
- Offem, O., Aniah, E., & Agunwa, S. (2018). Community leadership and development participation in Nigeria. *International Journal of Community Studies*, 7(2), 40–58.
- Ogunbameru, O. (2015). *Sociology of Nigerian rural development systems*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Okafor, J., & Nwankwo, P. (2019). Traditional institutions and infrastructure development in rural communities. *Journal of Rural Development Studies*, 13(2), 58–74.
- Smith, K. (2020). Traditional authority and modernization challenges in Africa. *African Governance Review*, 5(3), 120–135.
- UNDP (2022). *Human development report: Local governance and inclusion*. United Nations Development Programme.
- UN-Habitat (2021). *Community participation in urban and rural development*. United Nations Human Settlements Programme.
- World Bank (2021). *Decentralization and local governance in developing countries*. Washington, DC: World Bank Publications.