



“When Culture Speaks, Does Development Listen?” Cultural Integration in Development Projects

An inquiry into the process in diverse rural Nigerian settings

Folake Fashakin

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Folake Fashakin

Supervisor:	Linda Engström, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Urban and Rural Development.
Examiner:	Linley Chiwona Karlton, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Urban and Rural Development
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Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences
Department of Urban and Rural Development
Division of Rural Development

Abstract

In rural Nigeria, several development projects have been implemented by government agencies and private organisations over the years, aimed at driving economic growth and poverty reduction through agricultural productivity, entrepreneurship, healthcare, climate adaptation, and education. However, many of these programs have been rigged with overwhelming challenges and have raised critical questions about rural development strategies in the country. Some investigations have indicated the lack of cultural sensitivity and adaptation as a central contributing factor in the poor delivery of desired outcomes for rural community residents. While local culture may be inherent in some discussions, analyses, and even intuitive practices, it is usually not explicitly considered as an aspect, element or lens critical in rural development endeavours.

This study investigates the process of cultural integration in the design and implementation of development projects targeting rural communities across the southwest and northern Nigeria.. It provides an understanding of how culture and its integration process are perceived by both the project implementing organisation and rural community residents in these parts. Using the concept of culture, the post-development theory and the capability approach, the study engages with findings on development practice, how development providers engage with local culture and what role culture plays in shaping development objectives for rural communities in Nigeria.

The study takes a qualitative approach, using in-person semi-structured interviews and non-participatory observation to collect data across four rural communities, four project implementing organisations, and perspectives drawn from several ongoing and past projects spanning 12 states in Nigeria.

The results suggest that while culture is indeed considered crucial for meaningful, lasting, and desired outcomes in rural communities, in the parts of Nigeria considered in this study, its practice remains intuitive, inconsistent, and often superficial; constrained by an enduring top-down decision-making approach, and near invisibility of cultural priorities in project budget allocations, and a lack of inter-organisational coordination within the development landscape.

Though the reality shown within the context and scope of this study is that external funder-priorities and top-down approach of decision making and design tend to override local culture, identities, and voices, and result in disparities between what is desired by rural communities and what is produced by development projects, I highlight that community voices, when genuinely heard, offer rich insights that can shape outcomes which fit their cultural contexts, and are desired and meaningful for rural communities.

Keywords: Culture, Integration, Rural, Development, Project, Design, Implementation

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Abbreviations

ARMTI	Agricultural and Rural Management Training Institute
BCT	Beneficiary Cash Transfer
KPI	Key Performance Index
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
REDD+	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, plus the conservation, sustainable management, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks.
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation

1. Introduction

In understanding the path towards developing rural communities, policy and empirical research commonly reference elements such as the economy, history, politics, natural resources, capital, social structures, market forces, and organisations around labour and production. However, local culture is rarely considered to hold much significance in development outcomes. (Brennan 2023). Reflecting on the central literature and articles that have played a vital role in building my knowledge and understanding of rurality and rural development in the past two years, and my practical experience working in the Nigerian development space, my thoughts about local culture in development align with Brennan's.

While local culture may be inherent in some discussions, analyses, and even intuitive practices, it is usually not explicitly considered as an aspect or lens critical in rural development endeavours worldwide. However, a critical look at the outcomes and ripple effects from several international sustainability and development projects at community levels, worldwide, and particularly in Africa, underscores the necessity of integrating local culture. Local culture integration is essential because there is no contextual framework where development can be truly ingenious without local knowledge and culture being active agents in shaping outcomes (Ziai 2017a). For instance, a critical assessment of the UN program REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) one of Africa's most extensive international climate mitigation programs, showed outcomes of community resistance and distrust among stakeholders which stemmed from inadequate understanding of cultural beliefs and systems around land use and appropriation in many target communities (AFDB Knowledge Series, 2016).

I begin this study with an encompassing understanding of culture as used by T.N. Jenkins - a concept embodying observable elements (including material expressions of a society such as institutions, objects and tools which are representative of livelihoods and modes of living, religious and ceremonial pieces and sites, clothing and arts, etc., and the social practices that surround them) and non-observable elements (including shared values, perceptions and beliefs which shape cultural identity and belonging) (2000).

Nigeria, located in West Africa and fondly called the 'Giant of Africa' by its citizens, mainly for its population size and reputation as a commercial hub in Africa, has seen a steady decline in its rural population over the years.

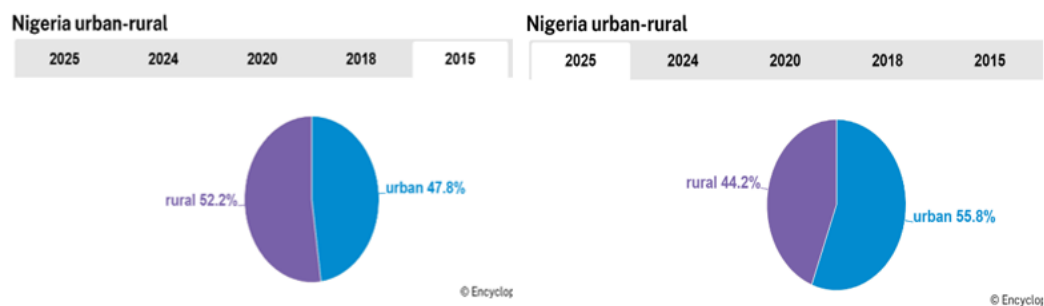


Figure 1 Showing Nigerian urban-rural population for the years 2015 and 2025 (Udo & Ajayi 2025)

As of 2023, the rural population in Nigeria was over 107 million people, this being 47% of the total population. (*Nigeria Population (2025)*). The rural population dropped from a high of 84.59% in the last 40 years, and this decline was driven by the inherent problems of poverty escalation, political neglect, and limitation in access to social amenities and services, negatively affecting livelihoods and wellbeing in rural Nigeria (Bello & Roslan 2010). This out-migration from rural to urban locations is traceable to the rise in multidimensional poverty in rural Nigeria, which as of 2022 was at 72% compared with 42% in urban areas (NBS 2022). The Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS), in November 2022, launched its use of the multidimensional poverty index (MPI), which measures deprivations across several indicators other than monetary poverty, including sanitation, education, healthcare, and housing, etc. (2022).

Also, conflicts arising from resource access (especially land) (Adebayo & Oriola 2016), and the intensifying clashes between farmers and herdsmen in rural communities, resulting in widespread loss of life and livelihoods, have, in recent times, increased rural suffering in many areas, escalating the population drain (Victor et al. 2025).

This outflow from rural areas is particularly problematic for Nigeria as rural areas are the primary site for agriculture and food production (Effiong et al. 2022), with 80% of households being primarily engaged in agriculture, compared with 40% in urban areas (RuLIS, FAO 2022).

Several rural development programs have been implemented by government agencies and private organisations over the years to drive economic growth and poverty reduction through agriculture, climate adaptation, entrepreneurship, healthcare, and education. However, many of these programs have been rigged with overwhelming challenges and have raised critical questions about rural development strategies in the country. (Nenpomingyi & Gowon 2013) Political neglect as one of the root causes of rural population decline doesn't stick on hard, as this study discusses research papers that have presented and analysed several

rural development programs driven by the Nigerian government. Rather, the need for government and actors across the development sector to rethink the approach to rural development practice, as Ashley and Maxwell (2001) call for, is critical.

As Laura German argues in her book ‘Power/Knowledge/Land’, many times, even where desired outcomes are achieved, the corresponding change in the conditions of rural communities is often disproportionately lower, short-lived, and in some cases, worsens the circumstances of locals (2022).

Some investigations and research findings have indicated the lack of cultural sensitivity as a central contributing factor in the failure of development intervention in rural Nigeria, and call for a more integrated approach that considers and accounts for cultural contexts in the design and implementation of rural-community development projects. For instance, in a detailed analysis of four rural development programs in Nigeria, from the 1980s to 2000s, Madu et al. show that for almost every impact delivered, some counter-challenges or outcomes worsened the circumstances of rural communities (2023). The paper further shows that this dilemma was not for a lack of adequate funding, working partnerships, political will, local agency, or foreign experts, rather it concludes that poor assessment plans, gaps between theoretical models of these programs and actual reality at community and execution levels, and improper monitoring mechanisms were central in their failure, associated problems, and the negative impacts they created. More critically, the failure of one of such programs – The Integrated Rural Development Program, was attributed to it being mainly planned by foreign experts who did not adequately understand the attributes of the local communities in which the program was designed to operate (Madu et al, 2023). This unfortunately happened, despite these programs spanning years and costing much capital and resources. More such research findings are discussed in the study’s review of existing related literature.

1.1 Thesis aim and research problem

In my view, based on interactions with stakeholders within the Nigerian development landscape over five years, especially in the agriculture and food sector, development practitioners often claim to be culturally aware, especially in consideration of the cultural diversity in Nigeria. Bearing this in mind and drawing from research papers such as (MADU et al. 2023) Investigations focused on understanding what ‘culture’ means to these actors, how this meaning differs among actors, and how this ‘culture awareness, sensitivity or understanding’ is being translated into the conceptualisation and design of development projects are critical.

In addition, attention should also be given to how the implementation and outcomes of this process are perceived by the different actors involved, especially rural community residents. I seek to understand what the process of culture

integration in development projects looks like for rural Nigeria. I aim to provide a Nigerian context on how local culture integration is practised in development project design and how this practice and its outcomes are perceived.

I will carry out my research inquiry using the following questions:

1. How is culture understood by project implementers and residents in rural Nigeria?
2. How is cultural sensitivity translated into rural development project design?
3. How do project implementers and rural residents perceive the process and outcomes of local culture integration in rural development projects?

I intend that the findings and insights generated in this study will contribute valuably to showcasing how global calls for local culture integration in development across the world are being understood, translated, and practiced, and more importantly, what seems to be working well in the eyes of the targets of rural development interventions and what isn't.

1.2 Definition of study scope and terms

This section explains consisely how the study uses and engages with key aspects and terminologies in order to define its scope.

1.2.1 Culture

In this study, my use of culture is broad, referring to it as encapsulating the belief systems, norms and practices, values, worldviews, and traditional knowledge systems of rural communities, especially as they shape and influence community members' behaviour, social structures and hierarchies, and their responses to development interventions. This closely resonates with Gabriel Idang's (2015) view of culture as what marks a people out distinctively from other societies in the human world. He describes culture as entailing traits and characteristics which include language, dress, music, work, art, religion, etc., and also social norms, taboos and values.

During my fieldwork, I found both similarities and disparities in all that is considered culture and otherwise, for instance, religion and livelihood practices are included by some, while considered separate entities by others. In my literature review, I show how perceptions about culture have evolved over the years and their recent re-contextualization for development.

1.2.2 Rural Communities (RC)

The study approaches rurality with the understanding that its definition can be subjective. In his paper – the structure and pattern of rurality in Nigeria – Ignatius Madu highlights that while 'rural' seems clearly to be the counterpart for 'urban', in reality, it is difficult to draw a precise line between both components (2010), and

this is critical to bear in mind. Even in the Nigerian context, Ashley and Maxwell's arguments that rural areas as we understand them are changing, concerning demography, diversification and links to or influence from external and broader economies (2001) agree with the subjectivity of rurality. This study uses the terms 'rural communities' and 'rural Nigeria' to depict settlements that are often mostly (but not always) agrarian, usually characterised by limited infrastructure and modern social services (such as roads, healthcare, sanitation, education) at varying degrees, and that are deeply rooted in cultural traditions and heritage. Rurality in Nigeria differs from one region of the country to another, and also from state to state. It differs based on how closely or distantly located such communities are from the nearest city or urban sites, as urban influence and access shape rurality. In the methodology, the different communities selected for this study are described to elucidate similarities and differences concerning rurality. Ultimately, these communities are often the target of various development initiatives and interventions in Nigeria.

1.2.3 Rural Development

In Nigeria, development interventions targeting rural communities are often aimed at producing change in rural structures in a manner that achieves increased productivity and output. (Akhimien et al. 2018). This is because most of rural Nigeria is considered agrarian. Development is tailored towards socio-economic growth, market access, openness to urban life and infrastructural modernisation. In this study, I use rural development to imply a 'good life', especially from the perspective of rural communities. Drawing from scholars like Rodney (1972:9), who define "development" as: "a many-sided process, implying increased skills and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being", and Mabogunje (1981) who explains that rural development involves the self-sustaining improvement of rural areas and requires a broad-based mobilisation of the rural population to enhance their capacity to effectively manage daily life and adapt to the changes that come with it. The study's use of the post-development theory is not with a general focus or critique of the development practice in Nigeria, but rather in understanding and assessing the relevance of cultural considerations in development practice.

1.2.4 Project Implementers/Implementing Organisations

In this study, Project Implementers (also referred to as PIs) are local organisations and agencies within the development landscape in Nigeria that are involved in conceptualising, designing and implementing development efforts and activities for rural communities. They mostly occupy the middle place between development funders and target rural communities, but can also be funders of

development projects, as with the social enterprise discussed in the study findings. They include organisations within the private and public sectors.

1.3 Outline of the Study

Following the introduction above, the study, in five more chapters, respectively, reflects on past and ongoing discussions and findings related to the research problem using existing academic literature from across the world and in Nigeria. Chapter 3 describes and discusses the theoretical framework used in the analysis of the data gathered in this study and the interpretation of the findings. Chapter 4 details the step-by-step description of the methods used in the study alongside the motivation for my choices and their limitations. Chapter 5 captures key data themes, alongside their analysis, drawing from the theoretical frameworks stated, and my (the researcher's) reflections and interpretation. Finally, in Chapter 6, the study puts forward a conclusion, stating key discoveries, emphasising particular reflections and limitations, while making relevant recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

“Cultural diversity is as necessary for human progress as biodiversity is for nature” - UNESCO, 2005

This chapter provides a detailed and contextual background and information about the study area. It focuses on existing global views and academic conversations about culture, its integration in development globally and in Nigeria.

2.1 Evolving Views on Culture

The perception of culture as a concept has evolved over the years, shifting, expanding, and changing focus. Though several elements in its description have remained the same, its definitions and use today have become more dynamic and relevant to development.

Anthropologist Edward Tylor understood and conveyed culture in an ethnographic sense as ‘a complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, morals, customs, and habits learned (or capabilities acquired) by man (a person) from living in (being a member of) a society’ in his book *Primitive Culture*, where he also used ‘civilisation’ as a synonym for culture. (Taylor 1920). His conceptualisation of culture implies that it shapes how people in the same society do things, e.g., farm, celebrate, build houses, run their households, etc. Clifford Geertz emphasised culture as a social phenomenon, a set of symbolic systems and meanings (like codes) understood and used by a group of people to interpret their world. (Geertz 1973). I believe he means that how a group of people do a thing or an activity (e.g., where and how the older ones interact with the children) goes beyond the act and site itself, but depicts how these people see the world. In his book *The Interpretations of Culture* (1973), he details descriptions and arguments of culture as put forward by several scholars of his time, one of those referenced was Clyde Kluckhohn’s piece, *Mirror for Man*, where he breaks culture into several parts, including culture as ‘the total way of life of a people’, ‘an acquired social legacy’, ‘a way of thinking, feeling, and believing’, ‘a storehouse of pooled learning’, and ‘a set of standardised orientations (dispositions) to recurrent problems’, ‘a precipitate of history’, and ‘a mechanism for normative regulation of behavior’ (Geertz 1973).

Another early scholar of cross-cultural research, Geert Hofstede, in his piece – ‘Dimensionalising Culture’, published as far back as 1984, introduced culture as ‘the collective programming of the mind’ (of a group or people belonging to a society) (Hofstede 2011). The word programming reflects the workings of the Operating System (OS) of a phone today or the Operating Manual that comes with a new gadget. It embodies pre-set ways, manners, rules, guidelines, problem-solving, and how to be.

Today, modern scholars, like Arjun Appadurai, Amartya Sen, Naila Kabeer, and also the UNESCO, have built on these earlier ideas and redefined culture in ways that are relevant and practicable for desired social changes or progress at the community level, bringing in new and sometimes broader perspectives to it, along the themes of their interest or scholarship. Some of these new descriptions include: culture as how people imagine their future and what they think is possible for themselves – ‘the capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai 2004). With this, Arjun implies that culture influences or affects how a group of people feel about change or progress and how they weigh their ability to strive for it. UNESCO argues that culture is not merely about the preference of a group of individuals, but something that shapes public life and development outcomes (UNESCO 2001). Naila Kabeer defines culture through a gender lens, arguing that culture is inherently interconnected with power dynamics in any community, being not just what people believe, but how that belief can affect (reinforce or challenge) existing power structures (particularly with regards to inclusion and exclusion) (Kabeer 2015). In this study, I engage with and apply culture in ways that align most with Appadurai and Sen’s views, as they most closely reflect the essence and necessity of culturally-rooted and community-led development.

2.2 Cultural Integration in Development Strategies

The integration of culture into development strategies has gained increased recognition over the past decades. The United Nations (UN) formally acknowledged the importance of cultural contexts in development efforts after a decade of implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Bandarin et al., 2011). This recognition marked a gradual departure from development proponents viewing culture as an obstacle to progress, and instead, as an essential factor in equitable and sustainable development. UNESCO played a crucial role in this transformation by gathering international evidence to support its claim, advocating for cultural integration, and establishing frameworks that support local communities in developing their capacity. Recognising cultural diversity as a fundamental element in sustainable development is reflected in UNESCO’s stance that cultural diversity is as necessary for human progress as biodiversity is for nature (UNESCO, 2005). This means that even when development goals are agreed

upon globally or nationally, their implementation should reflect different communities' unique cultural identity and heritage.

Vasstrom and Normann, referring to Lysgaard (2016) in their paper 'The role of local government in rural communities,' note that culture-integrated strategies in socio-economic development have widely influenced urban development policies and strategies but have been poorly explored in rural communities. I intend to contribute to filling this gap with the findings from this study. Using case studies from Norway, Vasstrom and Normann prove that when development strategies are rooted in and built up from local culture, they yield desired outcomes and long-term benefits. (Vasstrøm & Normann 2019).

Along similar lines, the seminal work by Tania Murray Li narrates events from a state-implemented resettlement project in rural Indonesia, which had a problematic run and resulted in conflicts between existing villagers and resettlers, on issues of land rights claims. She describes the project as one designed (by the state officials) in ignorance of the local cultural understandings (beliefs and practices) about rights and claims. She explains how the government's official claims about land rights (on paper) were far different from local realities, resulting in resistance to their allocation of land for resettlement. In the case above, she notes that the government, rather than seeing the local practices for what they are, and accounting for them in their conceptualisation of a 'supposedly well-intended' development project, chose instead to impose a standardised solution, following what is on paper rather than what has been the norm on ground, and that resulted in worsened situations for the villagers (Li 1999:313). The project design and implementation process was rooted in rationality, logic, and bureaucratic order, overlooking cultural nuance and complexities in the targeted area. In this instance, the outcomes were undesirable not only for the resettled groups but also for the existing communities, who experienced dispossession, shocks to their livelihood, and disruption of their lived realities.

This case becomes even more interesting when we ask, from whose perspective was the resettlement project a necessary intervention? As Tania Murray Li explains, the initiative was driven by the state's perception of certain communities as "isolated, deficient, and backwards", in need of modernisation through resettlement. She highlights the deeper issue of how cultural identities are misread or outrightly ignored in development planning. This study explores similar framings within the Nigerian context, using mainly post-development theory to interrogate how rural interventions are framing and reflecting local culture or otherwise.

In a collaborative project by UNESCO, WHO, and UNICEF in Tanzania, where local beliefs and practices were valued and integrated into healthcare initiatives, the intervention is said, by the project implementers, to have significantly reduced maternal and neonatal mortality. Simple considerations, such as understanding how

communities receive and process information, were found to have resulted in desired outcomes. Similarly, using traditional arts, community museums, and radio soap operas was said to have raised awareness about public health issues, including HIV/AIDS, in another community (Bandarin et al., 2011).

Beyond public health, cultural integration has been critical in post-conflict reconciliation and disaster recovery. UNESCO-led projects centred on cultural heritage management have fostered social cohesion in communities recovering from crises. Cultural festivals and community-led initiatives have facilitated dialogue and helped rebuild trust among previously divided groups, highlighting the role of culture in peacebuilding (UNESCO 2010). UNESCO's 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions reiterates that cultural diversity expands people's choices (of livelihoods) and nurtures their capacities and values.

2.3 Overview of Cultural Integration Processes Globally

As indicated above, historical evidence suggests that development strategies aligned with local culture tend to be more effective. Bandarin et al. (2011) argue that imposing global visions without local adaptation frequently leads to project rejection and minimal lasting benefits, as shown also by Murray Li. Instead, development efforts should begin with a thorough understanding of local practices, beliefs, and knowledge systems.

Sisto et al (2018), in their paper 'Stakeholder participation in rural development strategies', detail the process of designing the goals and activities for a development project in 'Daunia Rurale' in Italy. They use an approach referred to as 'backcasting' and, more importantly, they do this, from the very beginning, with the local stakeholders. Back-casting as described in the paper involved determining or deciding what the future of the community should look like, and then building back down into the activities that need to take place to achieve the desired outcomes (or depicted future). In this intervention, the local stakeholders helped define their development trajectories. Their involvement ensured that relevant local culture, traditions, values, beliefs, modes of living, and other contexts informed the plans, potentially enhancing the effectiveness of the project. The authors highlight how the stakeholders (community residents) involved during a planning activity emphasised that the agreed milestones set between the organisers, the community, and other stakeholders should be obtained by actions and activities that are aimed at spreading the local culture.

This study by Sisto et al. (2018) also revealed that culture integration should be seen as a dynamic and negotiated process, rather than a rigid and fixed one. They also highlighted the importance of recognising the presence of different social

groups within a community as opposed to it being homogenous, and ensuring an inclusive involvement of local stakeholders, to ensure all voices are heard.

No one knows the lived realities of rural communities better than rural residents, not only how they live, but why they live the way they do, how and why they hold certain values, and have certain dominant livelihood sources as opposed to others. Sisto et al (2018) mention the European Commission's encouragement that development projects should follow a community-led approach and be delivered by local action groups, and hence, this support guides how development projects are conceptualised and how actors are involved.

2.4 Cultural Integration in rural Nigerian settings

Enyi Egbe (2014) in his paper asserts that efforts made by both the Nigerian government and international organisations have not led to meaningful development nor produced significant improvements in the living conditions of rural Nigeria. From his findings, the paper attributes this challenge to the top-down approach of planning, one that neither values nor includes the target communities, their identities, beliefs, preferences, and capabilities. It also asserts that this faulty approach to planning is due to the pursuit of colonial and neo-colonial economic and social policies; this, Egbe describes as the bane of the Nigerian development process. Egbe (2014) concludes with a call for change in the orientation of development practices, urging development proponents to move away from modern/western/urban-based processes to more community(culture)-rooted and defined.

In showing that the worsening condition of rural life in Nigeria hasn't been due to a lack of government commitment, Olageke et al. (2022) List 24 programs that have been implemented by the government with multi-sector partners, targeting rural life, all hindered in their delivery of intended outcomes. The paper opines that the exclusion of local contents (contexts) in terms of the peculiarities of the people targeted was not prioritised.

Iwuchukwu et al., in their paper (2014) Provide an analysis of the contributions of NGOs to rural development in some selected communities in eastern Nigeria. Their findings show disparities in the perception of outcome between the providers and beneficiary communities, which the paper concludes are largely due to a lack of beneficiary involvement in the program planning. According to the paper, rural residents claimed the NGOs did not contribute to the areas that they valued, such as livelihoods (work). Their study noted that 88.6% of NGO staff claimed rural residents participated in their program, yet 77.1% of rural residents claimed they did not participate. While the paper neither focuses on culture nor uses the word, a clear lack of understanding of the local contexts and culture of these communities, perhaps owing to their exclusion from the program planning, is shown.

Additionally, Madu et al. (2023), in the analysis of four rural development programs in Nigeria spanning the 1980s to 2000s, for almost every intended impact delivered by these projects, some counter challenges or outcomes worsened the circumstances of the rural communities.. The funders and partners of these programs, the Rural Infrastructure Development Scheme, the Rural Water Supply Scheme, the Rural Electrification Scheme, and the Integrated Rural Development Program, included the Federal Government of Nigeria, Trust Fund, African Development bank, the World Bank, the Agriculture and Rural Management Training Institute (ARMTI), some NGOs, and other international agencies. The paper concludes that the problems of these programs and their inability to produce desired outcomes and instead create negative impacts was not for a lack of funding, partnerships, political will, or foreign expertise but rather due to poor assessment plans, gaps between theoretical models of these programs and actual reality at community levels, and improper monitoring mechanisms. Also worthy of note in their paper is that they attributed the failure of one of these programs, the Integrated Rural Development Program, to it being mainly planned by foreign experts who did not adequately understand the attributes of the local communities in which the program was designed to operate. These problems happened despite these programs spanning years and costing much capital and resources, where the integration of local culture and attributes could have prevented many of the unintended outcomes.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this section, I detail not only a description of the theories and concepts that will guide the analysis of findings in this study, but also my understanding of them, why I find them applicable and useful for this study, and what limitations I anticipate in my application of them.

3.1 The Concept of Culture

In the context of development, the conceptualisation of culture evolved. For instance, at the 1982 World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico, UNESCO expanded its definition of culture to include not only arts and language but also modes of living, value systems, traditions, and beliefs. This aligns with broader definitions found in the works of Williams (1970) and Flora et al. (1992), which describe culture as the entire way of life of a people, encompassing their rules, values, and norms (Brennan et al., 2009).

Idang, referencing Fafunwa (1974), poses that culture embodies the tangible and intangible items passed down from generation to generation and acquired through the process of socialisation (for instance, how a child knows what is appropriate to say or do) (2015). This perspective, in my view, provides insight as to why, very often, Nigerians perceive their culture as something that endears them to their ancestors, their roots, the choices and sacrifices of their fore-fathers/mothers, people who lived before them and shaped their lives as they know it. Also referencing Antia (2005) and Etuk (2002), Idang discusses the dynamic nature of culture, highlighting that it is continually changing and not static; it is modified through contact with and absorption of other people's cultures, assimilation. He posits that culture is an adaptive system – a critical character in the context of development. Idang also highlights how in Nigeria and most African societies, religion, morals, and political values are not separate from culture, but are rather aspects of it. (2015).

In his paper 'Bringing together local culture and rural development', Brennan categorises culture as being either homogeneous, rooted in a predominant way of life, or heterogeneous, representing diverse social groups and classes. He argues that development strategies grounded in a heterogeneous cultural perspective tend to yield more effective and sustainable outcomes (2009). For instance, Idang shares

an illustration of the New Yam Festival among the Ibibio people of South-South Nigeria, where hard work and famine control are checked by the expectation that every household should have harvested and stored enough yams to last them through the early period after the festival (2015). It was considered a shameful behaviour for any man or household to buy yams within the first two weeks following the festival. Doing so exposed such a person as being lazy, someone who likely did not farm or harvest enough as at when due. This shows a shared value of self-sufficiency and agricultural diligence in these communities. Development approaches must understand these existing cultural structures, respect them, and build upwards from/with them.

3.1.1 Linking local culture and contexts

While this study focuses primarily on local culture, it does so with an awareness of its deep connection with local contexts. Like two sides of a coin, or roots and soil, culture and context shape and sustain each other. Culture reflects how people respond to their surroundings - geographical, environmental, historical, and political - while those responses, in turn, shape local contexts over time. For example, how houses are built (cultural practices) may be shaped by climate (context), while taboos around certain crops (cultural beliefs) may reflect past experiences like drought or conflict. Conversely, cultural values can shape contexts, such as how reverence for elders in Nigerian society influences leadership structures at all levels.

This framing of culture and context helps clarify questions like whether “systems of land use” are cultural or contextual. I believe they are often both, because while emerging from environmental realities, over time they become part of a community’s cultural identity, and are shaped by their norms, beliefs, and joint experiences.

The study emphasises culture not because context is secondary, but because culture remains underexamined in rural development implementation, even as its importance gains policy attention. Culture is often reduced to either a barrier or a checkbox, rather than explored as fundamental for local agency and autonomy. By focusing on culture, this study seeks to understand how development aligns, or misaligns, with people's lived realities. Culture mediates how people interpret context and engage with interventions. In practice, this also brings context into view, since culture cannot be fully understood apart from the environment in which it evolves. Hence, while the study centres on culture, it implicitly captures local contexts, because understanding culture in development necessarily involves attending to the wider forces that shape and are shaped by it.

3.2 Post-Development (PD) Theory

Post-Development (PD) theory challenges the underlying principles of conventional development thinking. It does not propose alternative models within mainstream development, but rather promotes alternatives to development - locally rooted, culturally grounded approaches to wellbeing that reject the dominance of Western economic and capitalist ideals across the world. It theorises the practices of social movements, especially those that protect cultural uniqueness and community autonomy (Ziai 2021). It opposes the idea that development is a neutral or universal good, but rather that it is an ideology grounded in the capitalist expansion of the West and its cultural dominance. A key moment in the genesis of development, according to PD scholars, is U.S. President Truman's 1949 inaugural address, in which he introduced a program for the development of 'less developed regions' (Ziai 2021). This part of his speech is often cited as the invention of underdevelopment, a narrative used to justify and legitimise intervention into the Global South.

3.2.1 Rethinking poverty

PD scholars critique how development reduces well-being to economic growth and material wealth, often measured using tools like the Gross National Product (GNP) or per capita income. These indices, they say, fail to reflect the richness, ingenuity, diversity, and resilience of local life-worlds.

Development in Nigeria is largely funded by foreign institutions, foundations, and agencies, and as a Nigerian who has lived almost 3 decades in Nigeria, worked within the development sector in Nigeria, and studied within the fields of agriculture and rural development in and outside Nigeria, I illustrate my understanding of these critiques of the ideology and practice of development below.

In community A, somewhere in Africa, household income is lower than a certain (expert-determined) income threshold (usually of a foreign currency, e.g. the USD). Hence, this community is regarded as poor or underdeveloped, needing interventions to alleviate poverty. It is not considered that in this community, most households have a home garden and keep poultry on a subsistent scale. These provide a significant portion of their dietary requirements. In community A the residents have a farm-labor structure that is based on kinship help, they have a culture of reciprocal exchange and sharing of farm produce (crops and animals) with extended family and neighbors, they live on own (inherited) land and their mud houses regulate the temperature inside the hut regardless of the weather. The children in community A attend a public (free) school about a few meters from the community, and they have midwives and herbalists who practice traditional medicine. If applying PD to this example, one could argue that the standards by

which community A is defined as poor are neither accurate nor encompassing. It asks what social changes occur when capitalist development approaches are introduced into such communal arrangements? Will they enhance or disrupt existing ways of living? Can residents make informed decisions about whether and how to engage with agents and forces of development? Do community residents have autonomy about their desired change in this ideology and practice of development?

PD urges a different way of thinking, one that values cultural diversity, respects local knowledge systems, and resists modelling all societies after the Western economic blueprint. It calls for development that values and builds on indigenous practices rather than erasing them.

3.2.2 Culturally rooted alternatives to development

Post-Development theory emphasises that viable alternatives already exist and are being practised. These alternatives are culturally informed, community-driven, and holistic. Aram Ziai, in a digital lecture, speaks about the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. Where the residents have created autonomous governance structures rooted in indigenous traditions (Ziai 2021). These people practice rotation of political offices and make the positions voluntary; continue to prioritise subsistent farming whilst participating in fair trade markets; uphold prominently the role of women's cooperatives in shaping their economic and social life, sustain belief of the soil as 'mother earth' with whom they cultivate a relations by how they use the land, establish and operate schools where their children are taught in indigenous languages and learn a curriculum tailored to the community needs. They also operate a healthcare system that combines both traditional and modern medicine in autonomous clinics. As a people, they believe in a world where many 'worlds' (cultures) fit (Ziai 2021).

Ziai, in his lecture, also spoke about the concept of Buen Vivir (good living) enshrined in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador. It emphasises traditional knowledge, values, and practices of living in harmony with nature as opposed to exploiting it, collective (communal) wellbeing over individualism, reciprocity and solidarity, values that oppose the central principles of Western capitalism and universal values.

3.2.3 Development, power, and the loss of autonomy

Post-development canvases for social change in a way that is power-sensitive. It argues that 'development' as conceptualised and practised is not neutral, natural, or objective. Instead, it is contingent on assessments that societies are relative, one to another, on the level of development (Ziai 2017b:2551). It highlights how the

practice of development creates and recreates an ‘othering’ process. A system where there is what is ‘normal’ and what is not, and how a region practising a certain ‘normal’ is the standard, while every deviating society or group is the other, the less, the inferior, the deficient. PD criticises development as a means to westernise ‘othered’ countries, using so-called ‘universal values’ which promote international capitalism, market-driven growth, neoliberal ideologies, under the guise of ‘helping’, ‘intervening’, ‘aiding’, etc. (Frediani 2010:174).

PD scholars draw from the works of early thinkers like Illich, Foucault, Fanon, and Gandhi, who warned against systems that make people dependent on foreign aid and expertise.

3.2.4 The Nigerian Context

In Nigeria, development financing often comes from foreign donors, including governments and foundations. These actors shape the models, objectives, and ideologies of interventions, often leading to top-down approaches that may undermine local knowledge systems and cultural identity. Such donor-driven projects may strip communities of their agency to define development on their terms - what they value, how they perceive wellbeing, and how they assess the sustainability of their livelihoods. This makes PD theory particularly relevant to research focused on local cultural integration in rural development.

Limitations and Reflexive Application of Post-Development Theory

PD is not without critique. It has been challenged for offering romanticised or unrealistic views about the self-sufficiency of local communities, and for not adequately addressing the question of extreme deprivation.

Speaking from experience in Nigeria’s development space, I have seen communities without basic needs and amenities, nourishing food, portable water, waste disposal, clinics, or toilets. Should these people be left to themselves until they can come up with and apply local solutions for themselves, or should external help be offered? Opponents of PD argue that tagging the ideology ‘Western development’ perpetuates hate and intolerance of other cultures (in this case, Western cultures), insisting that this capitalist model isn’t representative of the Western world but rather the one that became hegemonic, despite it being contested even in the West.

3.3 Capability Approach (CA)

Despite having some similar fundamental principles, a central one being the critique of mainstream development that uses external, predefined metrics and models of measuring and defining human or community progress and wellbeing,

disregarding diversity and culture and local realities, the Capability Approach is selectively used in this study to analyse certain kinds of arrangements or conditions that fosters cultural identity and enabling local people to define and express their well-being, though risking the possibility of liberal infusions. Additionally, one of the main critiques of the post-development theory is that it does not put forward any real templates as ‘alternatives to development’, for instance, Frediani asks – “what is the solution, since even community-based organisations can be instrumentalised by neo-liberals for market-enabling practices and objectives?” (2010:174). He describes the CA, as put forward by Amartya Sen, as one that moves away from income-led assessments of determining a household or community’s wellbeing to their capability to achieve the things they value for their wellbeing. Hence, it focuses on the freedom and choices of a community, or even individuals within a community, rather than what they earn or consume (2010:175).

What people value is shaped by their contexts, including and especially their cultural beliefs, traditions, norms and way of life. While overlaps may exist, one can assume that there are likely notable differences between what is considered a good life in a rural community in Northern Nigeria and what is considered the same in the countryside of Sweden. Defining wellbeing, as what matters, how it matters to a people, and their ability to choose how to be well or thrive, is, in my opinion, a culturally rooted approach. The very central principle of the CA – ‘capabilities’ – is also its major critique, as Sen does not provide a list or range of capabilities and functions; however, this reinforces his argument that communities are culturally and contextually diverse and, as such, value different things. Proponents of change must work with and within such communities to know them and allow these capabilities to spring up from the community’s interactions.

The analysis of findings in this study includes a discussion of the work of a social enterprise in a farming community in Lagos state. In my interpretations, I reflect and infer that some of their work depicts and aligns with principles of the CA, and is perhaps worth emulating and replicating in the Nigerian development practice.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative approach in conducting its fieldwork. Data collection across all study sites and selected respondents lasted six weeks, from February to March 2025. It followed an explorative design, aimed at capturing broad perspectives on respondents' experiences and perceptions of culture integration in rural development processes. Rather than carry out a case study of any specific project or community, the study gathered views and experiences drawn from several rural-community-targeted projects and interventions. This approach helped broaden and enrich the findings of the study, using experiences and examples drawn from multiple communities and development projects in the country. Notwithstanding, a case study of one or two projects may have provided the opportunity for comparisons and to discover trends and other salient issues that could go unnoticed in the more general explorative approach taken in this study. A restraint in the consideration of the case study approach was the need for access to relevant project documents within a limited time, guaranteed commitment from select project implementation organisations and the project team, and access to the communities hosting the project.

4.1.1 Qualitative Data Collection

I collected data for this study primarily using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The open-ended questions helped generate detailed views from respondents and an in-depth exploration of their experiences and perceptions (Creswell et al. 2018:54). Stemming from the broader research questions stated in the study's introduction, the interview questions were designed using what McCracken in Creswell et al. refers to as non-directional language (Creswell et al. 2018:179). This helped me guide against prodding respondents' answers in certain directions (Creswell et al. 2018:179), or moving the respondents, to provide responses they think I want to hear, as inferred by the question.

The interviews were conducted within six weeks, and each interview lasted an average of 45 minutes. In two communities, the interviews were conducted as group

interviews; in one of these communities, this was due to time constraints for the farmers, and in the other, it was a way of accommodating the several enthusiastic community residents who desired to be interviewed and share their views on the study area.

I led all the interviews myself and used an interpreter in two communities. This way, it was easy to moderate and ensure all voices were heard and contributed to the study. The interviews took a casual and relaxed tone as the interpreter and I managed to have some ice-breaking conversations before the interviews began. This allowed the respondents to freely raise areas of concern within the context of the study that weren't initially presented to them as questions. I used an interview protocol, detailing every step and question, backed with a flexible delivery. This made working in tune with the interpreter seamless, and also ensured all important areas were covered. This is particularly critical within the rural Nigerian context, where reaching respondents over the phone afterwards may have proven difficult. In triangulating, I had a few questions that sounded different but aimed at affirming responses or detecting disparities, and I explained these in advance to the respondents. This was important to make the research findings as authentic and credible as possible.

I complemented these interviews with non-participatory observation, in Ibadan-oyo state, of a planning workshop for a foreign-funded project in its first year. I did not interact with the participants, but listened and took notes from their interactions with the project coordinator. This gave me some practical insight into the process of project planning and consultation.

4.2 Methods

4.2.1 Study sites

In mapping out my respondents, I focused on two groups of actors within the development sector in Nigeria: project/program implementers and rural-community (RC) residents who have been or are targeted by development interventions. A total of 26 respondents were interviewed in this study: 19 rural community residents (as shown in the table above) and 7 project implementing respondents. While extending the interviews to other actor groups, such as donors/funders, government officials, and perhaps relevant local university researchers, may have been logical and provided additional valuable insights into the study's focus, the limitation imposed by time and access made this impossible. However, I firmly believe that the two groups of actors selected and from whom data have been gathered in this study are the most crucial and representative of the issues within the scope of this study.

most common. The name is said to have come from an old Yoruba folk tale that people in this town often lived very long, due to the presence of the Ore tree – a tree said to be as scarce as finding a lion in a rat hole (Ojo 2022). It is famous for its cultural activities and tradition (e.g. its annual Ore festival). Having a population density of 390.3 km², Aiyedire LGA population as of 2022 was projected as 99,100, and it spans a 253.9 km² area (*city population 2022*).

Nalende-Bola, Ibadan North, Oyo State



Figure 4: Map of Ibadan showing Nalende - study site (National Population Commission 1991)

infrastructure and social services, including sanitation, portable water, road access, healthcare, and education relative to communities around it. According to residents and LGA officers, this community has been targeted by several rural development initiatives in the past years.

Mojoda, Epe, Lagos state



Figure 5: Map showing Epe LGA and it's location in Nigeria Source: (Ogbu & Irughe 2020)

fast changing with the rise of infrastructural development, especially by residential

Inalende, referred to by residents simply as Nalende-Bola, is located within the Ibadan North LGA of Oyo State. Though a Yoruba site, this LGA is also home to Hausas, Igbos and people from many other Nigerian tribes. Its residents engage mainly in trading, farming, artisanship and civil service. Though the LGA is predominantly urban, Nalende-Bola is a small, close-knit, and dense community that has maintained its traditional outlook, being described by residents as one of the only localities in Oyo state that has stayed the way it was established by warriors of the old Oyo empire. It is characterised by poor

Mojoda is located in Epe LGA, on the outskirts of Lagos state, near villages like Agboju, Odo Ragun, Eredo, and bordering Ogun state (*Mapcarta.com* n.d.). Epe Yoruba town, situated along the Lagos Lagoon, and home to 294 rural communities and 24 semi-urban communities (Omojola n.d.). Fishing is the major occupation of its residents, although some communities, like Mojoda, engage more in crop farming. Mojoda is a semi-rural/urban locality

estate developers and road network to the neighbouring state, Ogun. Its serene environment and lush green environment are fast making it desirable for a location for urban-rural movements.

Idode, Oyo East, Oyo state

Idode is a locality in Oyo East LGA, Oyo state, situated near Alayin and Alowo Esin localities.

Table 1: Overview of selected rural communities and respondents

Selected Community	Gender of Respondents	Occupation of respondents	Selection of respondents
Majoda, Epe-Lagos	Women (2)	Farmer, Trader	Identified through an NGO contact as a farming community currently participating in an ongoing development project run by a social enterprise
Nalende-Bola, Ibadan-Oyo	Women (8) Men (3)	Trader, miller, religious teacher, politician, and disc jockey	Identified by a local government (LGA) official as a non-farming community where the LGA has executed several development projects.
Ile-Ogbo, Iwo-Osun	Men (3)	Farmer	Identified through a private project-implementing organisation as a farming community currently participating in an ongoing development project.
Idode, Oyo-Oyo	Men (3)	Farmer	

Abuja-Federal capital Territory

Only one project implementing organisation was interviewed in this state; no rural communities were considered here. Abuja is a hub for numerous development actors, including the headquarters of most government agencies, international organisations, NGOs and private sector consultants. (Abuja 2024). It is the capital city of Nigeria and largely urban.

4.2.2 Selection of rural community (RC) respondents

These different communities, their similarities and differences, especially considering Nalende-Bola, which was mostly non-agrarian, provided broad and rich perspectives about the study area.

Of the 19 RC residents interviewed, the median age was 52, with the youngest being 27 and the oldest being 71. Also, ten were women, and nine were men. The overall balance in gender of rural respondents proved highly valuable also because during the interviews, there were distinct issues and priorities depicted in the perspectives they shared. In response to my question on why there wasn't any female present for the interview in Idode-Oyo community, one of the respondents shared that women are not commonly involved in the planting/cultivation activities

for yam, due to the physical strength required for land preparation, mulching and staking, weeding and harvesting, they functioned more in the post-harvest activities. He further shared that even where women owned yam farms, they often hired men to help with these activities. While I did not ask this question in the Ile-Ogbo community, I reflect that the reason is likely the same. =For instance, at the location where the interviews were held in Ile-Ogbo communities, women were peeling and washing harvested cassava roots, a post-harvest activity

The respondents in Idode, Oyo, were participating in a project that had been ongoing (through different phases) for over eight years. The project was internationally funded, being implemented by both local and international implementing partners, and said to be aimed at increasing the productivity and income income as yam farmers in the community. In Ile-Ogbo, Iwo, the farmers were participating as out-growers for a privately owned food processing company, under an internationally funded project aimed at productivity and profitability across cassava seed systems. In Epe, the respondents were users of the facilities and infrastructure made available under a project aimed at eliminating post-harvest losses for farmers cultivating highly perishable crops like leafy vegetables, sweet corn, tomatoes, and peppers. The project also included training on the agronomic process to ensure high and consistent yields, with optimum water management. Unlike the other three communities, Bola-Nalende was not a farming community, and the respondents were supposed beneficiaries of several community development projects, implemented mainly by the Local government with international funding, and philanthropic individuals. Put together the projects from which the RC respondents shared their experiences were or are being funded and implemented by actors, including the Nigerian government, local political aspirants (who performed philanthropic acts), the private sector (Consulting firms, NGOs and social entrepreneurs), and international agencies.

4.2.3 Selection of project implementing (PI) respondents

Table 2: Table showing PI respondent details. (Folake Fashakin 2025)

PI Organisations	Number of PI Respondents	Communities, Regions Referenced	Project(S) Description	Funding Source
International Non-Profit Research Institute	Female (2)	Northern Nigeria, Ibadan-North and Ayilara (Oyo State)	Training and capacity building towards improving food safety and nutrition	International

Private Manufacturing Firm	Food	Male (1)	Ile-Ogbo (Osun State)	Agricultural productivity, income growth, cassava biofortification and seed systems development, etc.	International
Private Consulting Firm		Female (1) Male (2)	Northern Nigeria South- Western Nigeria	Dairy value chain development, backwards integration, women empowerment, income growth, etc.	International
Social Enterprise		Male (1)	Mojoda-Epe (Lagos state)	Post-harvest loss elimination, increased productivity and income, water management, renewable energy for irrigation, training and capacity building, etc.	Local & International

Respondents from the project implementers (PI) group were selected from across four different organisations, located in Lagos, Osun, Oyo, and the FCT-Abuja. These organisations include: a private food manufacturing company, a social enterprise, a consulting firm, and a non-profit international research Institute. In common, they design and implement projects funded by international bodies and partner with several local and community-level actors to implement their projects. A total of seven PI respondents were interviewed, including three women and four men. These respondents have had relevant experience as active participants and contributors in the design and implementation of rural-targeting projects within their different organisations. Data collection involved in-person interactions across four Nigerian states—Lagos, Oyo, Osun, and the FCT-Abuja. However, many respondents, particularly those in the PI group, shared reflections based on professional experiences with projects spanning a broader geographical scope, including Adamawa, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Plateau, Bauchi, Kogi, and Taraba states. I believe this approach provides a more general Nigerian context. In FCT-Abuja, only PI respondents were interviewed.

4.2.4 The inquiry process

To effectively address the overarching research questions in this study, I developed tailored sub-research questions for each of the respondent groups. I conducted a total of ten in-depth interviews, and two of these were held virtually via Zoom. These online interviews were held with two respondents from the project implementer group who were not physically available. The interviews with them went smoothly without connectivity challenges. In two communities, I engaged the services of a local interpreter, despite my fluency in Yoruba. This decision was made to minimise potential misinterpretation arising from dialect or religious nuances embedded in the local language, which could influence meaning and clarity during the interviews.

During the interviews, I used a recording app on my mobile phone, and also scribbled notes of things like links and documents they offered to share, or areas I wanted to probe further into during the interviews. The interviews were conducted in various locations; at Nalende-Bola, we used an area in a mosque, which was often used to hold community meetings. Respondents at the interview included both Christians and Muslims; at Idode-Oyo, the farmers preferred to be interviewed in a group and chose a central location in the city; At Majode-Epe, I interviewed one of the respondents' farms, and two others, separately, with a PI and RC resident within the PIs office. Two interviews were conducted with PIs via Zoom, and another two were conducted inside PI offices.

I kept a field diary where I noted most of my observations from the planning workshop in Ibadan, and other observations about contexts, body language, and cues during my interview. I also noted a casual interaction on the field in the Ile-Ogbo community, where a PI (who wasn't a respondent) was assessing project progress alongside a PI respondent. I asked informal questions and had conversations that are not directly referenced in this study, but contextualised my interpretation of some responses and findings within the community.

4.2.5 Data analysis

I started the study with an idea of the relevant themes, direction, and theory; however, I remained open to it being shaped and redefined by my findings and experiences in the field. One result of this was the inclusion of the Capability Approach in addition to the central theory – Post Development, as a way of understanding the unprecedented findings around the social enterprise in the Majoda-Epe Community.

I transcribed the interviews that were conducted in only English using the restream website, while those in Yoruba (the local language in the different rural communities selected), I transcribed manually. I used thematic coding in my analysis, and this was done partly manually and partly using the unpaid version of QDA Miner Lite software. Using a Word document, I drew out themes that

addressed the three research questions in this study, but also included themes that seemed possibly relevant, though not fitting into any of the research questions, to get an insight into possible future areas of research.

4.3 Ethical considerations and reflexivity

All participants in this study voluntarily agreed to participate and provided either written or verbal consent for the use of their responses in this thesis. I prepared and administered a generic consent form (printed in English) to respondents who could read and write in English. For other respondents who were literate in their local language, the consent form was read out in the local language, and their consent was captured in a phone recording. Their interviews were also conducted using the local language, which was Yoruba. In Nigeria, the official and corporate language is English, and hence, with PI respondents who are all staff within corporate institutions, interviews were naturally held in English. Using an interpreter in addition to my fluency in the Yoruba language ensured no meanings were lost and the nuances of the language were captured as accurately as possible, fostering the validity of findings drawn in the study. To protect their privacy and ensure confidentiality, I have omitted the names of individuals, projects, and organisations of respondents and those mentioned during interviews.

This decision reflects not only ethical considerations but also the interpretive nature of the analysis, which includes my reflections on the material and immaterial contexts in which these interviews occurred. As such, the findings represent a situated understanding shaped by both the participants' responses and my interpretive lens.

Given the time-bound nature of this study, I acknowledge that both the responses and my interpretations may not fully capture the complexity of the issues discussed. Nonetheless, I made every effort to represent the voices and insights of participants as respectfully and responsibly as possible.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study is approached through three key objectives (research questions) - to investigate and understand (1) the prevalent views about culture and its relevance, (2) ongoing practices and processes of integrating local culture in the design and execution of rural-community development projects, and (3) how the implementers and participating communities perceive the process and its outcomes. In this chapter, I first detail results, responses drawn from the two separate respondent groups considered in this study. – project implementers and rural community residents across thematic areas, and then I show my findings side-by-side with comprehensive interpretations and discussions, addressing the different research questions of this study. I discuss the findings, applying theory and relevant literature. I end the chapter with a discussion of challenges to cultural integration drawn from interview responses, and finally, I give a clear summary of the key findings in the study.

5.1 Results

Table 3: Showing results from the rural community (RC) residents group (Folake Fashakin 2025)

Rural Community Respondents			
Research Question	Sub-	Thematic Area/Analysis	Example of responses

<p>‘How would you describe your community and culture as a people?’</p>	<p>Cultural understanding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Similarities and differences in perspectives held - Aspects of culture (e.g. gender roles, marital relationships, shared beliefs, property ownership) - Culture is fluid/evolving, not rigid 	<p><i>“Our history and traditions”, “our language”, “the things we value”, “the way we do things together, including live and work”, “what things are forbidden”, “who does what in the family and community (gender roles)”, and “hierarchy within the community”</i></p> <p><i>“Our community is ancient, it is tied so much to the origin and history of Ibadan city. Old area, not new communities or sites. The warriors of Ibadan founded these areas. It has stayed traditional and not gotten modern. We still speak the local language and wear traditional clothes. We try to sustain our culture and ways of life as we relate here. It is so dense and spans so wide that it feels like a city” – Nalende-Bola community.</i></p> <p><i>“In this community, it is forbidden to plant beans. ...I don’t know why. It is simply forbidden. If you want to, you must go outside of the community to do so.” – Ile-Ogbo community respondents.</i></p> <p><i>“We send our children to school so that they can be up to date on what is changing in society. We compare this with what we know and practice, and determine what to imbibe or disregard. A ma’n mu ogbon ologbon fi se ogbon” (we take from the wisdom of others and add to ours) – Idode community respondent</i></p>
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<p>What are your thoughts about whether and how development projects fit into your local culture?</p>	<p>Perceptions about process and outcomes of culture integration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consultation, co-creation, relationships - Desire for organic and local value-centred development 	<p><i>“As long as they are not asking us to do things we believe to be against our shared morals as a community, we are happy to participate in anything that advances our lives.” – Idode-Oyo & Mojoda-Epe Community respondents.</i></p> <p><i>“That project turned out well because they let us choose those among us who would coordinate it. We voted for someone we knew cared truly for the community – if there is anyone in our community who is lame, sick, or unable to come out to participate and benefit from the project, this man will take the project (benefit) to their house and make sure they are included. We know ourselves, we know community members who simply play politics within the community, and those who truly care.” – Nalende-Bola.</i></p>
<p>In what positive and/or negative ways have development projects (or a particular one) changed your life and the way of doing things in your community?”</p>		<p><i>“My husband and I fought every day! The hand-operated water pump was difficult for me and most women to use – it was as though we were paying for water with our blood. After pumping to get enough water to do the laundry, and then fetching water for household use, he would still expect me to cook, because women did the cooking. But I was always tired. If they had asked us, we would not have asked for a hand-operated pump. Other communities had the kind with taps. But they rarely come to ask us these things.”- Female respondent, Nalende-Bola community.</i></p> <p><i>“A ma’n fi nkan le aturu low oni, Ai ju nkan si igbo aturu – (we put things in people’s hands, we don’t throw things at people). If they spoke with us before making decisions, our</i></p>

conversations would cover areas beyond installation – male respondent, Nalende-Bola community.

Table 4: Showing results from the PI respondent group (Folake Fashakin 2025)

Project Implementer (PI) Respondents		
Research Sub-Question	Thematic Area/Analysis	Example of responses
‘What do culture, culture sensitivity, and local culture integration mean to you?’	Cultural understanding:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Similarities and differences in perspectives held 	<p><i>“how things are done in a community”, “who is who and what their relationships with one another is”, “who they are – their identity”, “not just who they are as a tribe, but also as a generation”, “the norms and traditions”, “what they cherish”, “existing knowledge and practices held by different social groups (e.g. genders, peers) in the community”.</i></p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aspects of culture (e.g. gender roles, marital relationships, shared beliefs, property ownership) 	<p><i>“We realised that the women own the milk and the men own the cow. So we know whom (which gender) to target for some interventions.”</i></p> <p><i>“...and you would see a separation between male and female. I'm talking more about gender now, male and female in their sitting arrangement.”</i></p> <p><i>“...you can't have one peer group member jump into and sit in meetings with another peer group”</i></p> <p><i>“It is not possible for a man to speak where his father-in-law is. Even though he might have something important to say. It's a sign of respect that he must never speak there. So we need to understand all these things to be</i></p>

		<p>able to design our activities because even if we are delivering a training to these people, this person will still find it very difficult to ask questions or seek clarity. After all, his father-in-law is there.”</p> <p>“So some of the Fulanis believe that milk should never be sold. Whatever you get from your cow should be consumed or freely given.”</p>
How do you or your organisation consider/apply these concepts (cultural awareness & local culture integration) when you design or plan your projects? How?	<p>The process of culture integration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tools and frameworks - Implicit/intuitive practice - Methods (stakeholder consultation, co-creation, monitoring, flexibility) 	<p>“We conducted a needs assessment and a business study to understand what the community needs and what their current practices are so that we can use that to gauge our success, so far in the program.”</p> <p>“We ask, who are we designing for? Not just what they need, but who are they?”</p> <p>“I’m beginning to try to include more of sign language for people who are hearing impaired so that our message gets to the community, across different people groups.”</p> <p>“...there isn’t an actual framework here or with our partners that we are using to formally structure and integrate culture into programming”</p> <p>“We do desk research, then also learning from previous projects that have interacted in those communities or been held in those communities and also interactions with people broadly in the development space that may have done one or two projects in those communities.”</p>

	<p><i>"The leadership in the community, you know, we meet with them..."</i></p> <p><i>"We engage with them regularly"</i></p> <p><i>"We also have diversity (of gender, religion, language) in our groups, so we're able to reach the differences. It's not always possible"</i></p> <p><i>"We have to go outside of the project budget to hire probably a female ad hoc staff, train her to disseminate that message to them (the women). If it will be a lot of trouble, we will just postpone it till we can get a female."</i></p> <p><i>"Stop speaking the language of the UN to me. Stop speaking the language of ECOWAS to me on the field. You can use them when you are programming, when you are designing. We want to increase women's economic empowerment. What does that mean to Salamatu? Stop saying Carbon credits, what does that mean?"</i></p>
<p>'How was this knowledge about your target communities' cultural contexts generated?</p>	<p><i>"...need assessment that we did, and also through the constant interaction with farmers. That's how we get to know certain things."</i></p> <p><i>"We developed sets of questionnaires that speak to the objective of the program; infrastructure, capacity development, farmers of organisations, etc. Also, to know what they need, what they are</i></p>

		<p><i>currently doing, how we can come in and ask them directly what they need to enhance their dairy business.”</i></p> <p><i>“First, our desk research, then also learning from previous projects that have interacted in those communities or been held in those communities and also interactions with people broadly in the development space that may have done one or two projects in those communities.”</i></p> <p><i>“We meet leaders in the community”</i></p>
‘Using an example of one or more projects you have participated in, please share how local culture considerations were/are being integrated’	[Consultation, co-creation, monitoring, Flexibility, tailored staffing, budgeting, challenges]	<p><i>In one community, the leaders (men) said - If you don't have a woman in your team, then you cannot engage with our wives - I'm sure they are speaking from experience, whatever has happened before (past events – history). We had to now train somebody else, who is a woman, to engage with the women. Otherwise, we were never going to have women in the room.”</i></p> <p><i>“It did not matter if we agreed with them or not. We need to respect people's beliefs, opinions, and practices”</i></p>
“Have you received feedback (positive/negative) from beneficiaries/participants regarding the cultural relevance of some interventions? If yes, which project and what were they?”	Outcomes [intended/unintended]	<p><i>“So now we did not consider this while developing the program - that Fulanis in that target community do not sell milk, so they could not participate. If we had known earlier, something might have been planned for them.”</i></p> <p><i>“A youth representative on a project mentioned that they had to give training, as part of a food safety project, in a particular</i></p>

	<p><i>community in northern Nigeria that was Muslim dominated. And you know how we usually have souvenir cups and face caps? Well, they gave hijabs instead, and they were very well received by the beneficiaries. Imagine if they had gone with something else, I mean, something different that was not even acceptable to the culture”</i></p>
Challenges/Constraints	<p><i>“International donors will say they have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to engage a consulting firm to develop the strategy for us (the local PI organisation). They believe in the work of their foreign consultants and expect nothing to change in the plan; we should just implement it as it is. This is problematic – did the consulting firm do a good job and understand the cultural perspective of the target communities?”</i></p> <p><i>“So one challenge is seeing a community as one. They're not. The fact that they live in the same environment does not mean they are culturally the same”</i></p>

5.2 The understanding of culture and cultural integration by rural-community respondents and project implementers

In understanding the views held by project implementers about ‘culture’, ‘cultural sensitivity’, ‘culture relevance’ and ‘cultural integration’ in development projects, the question *‘What do culture, culture sensitivity, and local culture integration mean to you?’* was asked. In the PI group, no translation of these concepts was needed, as they understood and communicated clearly in English.

In response to the question above, all seven PI respondents claimed, acknowledged, and emphasised that local culture is a critical factor to consider in the design and execution of development projects, and they attested that their organisations understood this and practised it. Some specific descriptions of local culture as used by project implementers were *‘how things are done in a community’*, *‘who is who and what their relationships with one another is’*, *‘who they are – their identity’*, *‘not just who they are as a tribe, but also as a generation’*, *‘the norms and traditions’*, *‘what they cherish’*, *‘existing knowledge and practices held by different social groups (e.g. genders, peers) in the community’*. Furthermore, they shared views about culture integration as the practice of treating culture as something to be understood and not judged, of respecting culture, seeing as it can facilitate the ease of a project’s execution and vice versa, and of applying cultural learnings to make a community feel seen – *‘Oh! You see us.’* A PI respondent working within the international research NGO referenced in this study narrated a community sensitisation activity, a component of an internally funded food safety project, implemented across Northern Nigeria. She mentioned how, in producing souvenirs to be distributed to community attendees at one training program, the team made caps and hijabs. This was rather uncommon, as caps were often considered generally fitting for men and women. However, the special attention and consideration given to who the different members of the community were and what their mode of dressing was informed the decision to make something specifically fitting for muslim women in those communities. The PI explained that the enthusiasm and commitment this garnered within the community were unprecedented.

From these views, I gathered that local project implementers are approaching culture and cultural diversity as important in their work, something to be learned and integrated to succeed. This position contrasts with the approaches Gorlach Krzysztof speaks about in his work, where culture is handled as an obstacle to development, or cultural change as a prerequisite for economic growth (2014:7).

The views about culture, what it is or means, as held by the project implementers, were quite aligned with the perception and description of culture as held by respondents (residents) within the four rural communities included in this study.

Some specific responses included; *'Our history and traditions'*, *'our language'*, *'the things we value'*, *'the way we do things together, including live and work'*, *'what things are forbidden'*, *'who does what in the family and community (gender roles)'*, and *'hierarchy within the community'*. In their simple terms, these perceptions clearly line up with several seminal views held on culture and put forward by historic and modern-day scholars, from Edward Tylor who saw culture as that complex whole including knowledge, beliefs, customs and habits learned collectively from being a member of a society (Tylor 1920) to Pierre Bourdieu and Naila Kabeer who spotlight culture as a complex tool of power (e.g. *'hierarchy within the community'*, *'what things are forbidden'* - by whom and for whom?) (Kabeer 2015). One respondent explained that often these local beliefs and practices that may seem strange to us (project implementing teams) stem from collective past experiences of the community and are how they maintain order and seamless interactions among themselves and with external persons. This view, in some way, alludes to Geertz's argument that culture is not only or merely *'what people do'* but, more importantly, it is *'why'* (Geertz 1973).



Figure 6: Interview respondents at the Nalende-Bola, community in Ibadan, Oyo state.(Folake Fashakin 2025)

One of the many interesting views expressed by respondents in two of the communities included in this study (Idode-Oyo and Nalende-Bola) was the perception of culture as something that can and should evolve, rather than be rigid. One of the residents said, *'We cannot allow our culture to adversely affect our work, and neither should our work affect our culture.'* From this response, I deduce that the respondent understands culture and work (livelihood) as two connected but separate concepts/aspects of their community. And that, both concepts matter enough to them in a way that they can revisit their culture; knowledge, beliefs, and

norms, to ensure their ‘work’ (this being the closest translation of ‘Ise’, the Yoruba word used) thrives side-by-side with it. This perception of culture as fluid rather than rigid is a relevant detail in the discourse of ‘culture and development’, as it is common to read and hear of local culture being portrayed as something rigid and a potential hindrance to progress (Gorlach et al. 2014:7). This is not to imply or impose that this view of ‘culture as fluid’ is universal, but rather to inform proponents of development that there are better ways to approach culture than as rigid and impeding.

This respondents, while addressing the question – *‘How would you describe your community and your culture as a people?’*, said that they (the community) send their children to school so that they can be up to date on what is changing in society, compare this with what they know and practices, and determine what to imbibe or disregard. This perhaps suggests an understanding of parallel cultures, different knowledge, advancements in technology, and an openness to assess these or change by choice. It implies the potential for growth and social change that is organic, negotiated, and prioritised as a community or individuals within a community. An adage they used is – *‘A ma’an mu ogbon ologbon fi se ogbon’*, its translation being ‘we take the wisdom of another and add it to our wisdom.’ This cultural view resonates with the studies by Sisto et al. (2018) and (Li 1999), which suggest that culture integration should be seen as a dynamic and negotiated process, rather than a rigid and fixed one. Post-development theorises the practice of cultural uniqueness, and there is a tendency to imagine that it presents culture as rigid, but that is not the case. By uniqueness, it refers to respect for cultural diversity and difference without ranking one relative to another. Post-development argues for organic change, one where local communities have autonomy over how they want to change, what they want to imbibe, and what their priorities are, rather than the imposition of interventions with pre-decided objectives. There is a further deep dive into this in the sections below.

In describing local culture, there were some responses given both by project implementers and rural community residents, which I perceived as being more descriptive of the broader concept of local contexts. Some of these were prominent livelihood strategies within those communities, local governance or hierarchical systems, and market access. An example is one of the projects being implemented by a private social enterprise, which works with farmers and food traders in parts of Epe, Lagos, and aims to eradicate post-harvest loss (of fast-perishing foods – leafy vegetables, tomatoes, peppers, and sweet corn) and increase the profitability of local farmers in that community. This illustration is to recall readers' minds to my reflections on the connectedness of local culture and local contexts. While academically, culture and context are often described as interlinked but also differing, the study shows that practitioners and residents alike understand them as the same concept.

This prompt to the project implementers – ‘Using an example of one or more projects you have participated in, please share how local culture considerations were/is being integrated’ generated responses that showed specific aspects of culture that seem more visible and were more prominently considered as important for ease of project execution and the likelihood for achieving desired outcomes. These aspects included: gender-related norms, age-related norms, norms around marital ties and interactions, and cultural beliefs. Also, in answering the question – ‘How would you describe your community and culture as a people?’ RC respondents gave answers that reflected their recognition and value of the same aspects of culture. It was also notable that while respondents in the PI groups spoke of religion as an aspect of culture, RC respondents spoke of it as something separate from culture, and belonging instead to the broader contexts of the community.

Some examples of incidents depicting these aspects are paraphrased below, and they highlight the importance of cultural learning for integration in project design. They prove insightful, placed within the context of the projects targeting those communities, and their intended objectives, activities or components.

‘...so, some of the Fulanese (in some northern communities) believe that milk (from their cows) should never be sold. Whatever is milked must either be consumed or gifted’ – PI Respondent.

The project here was focused on value chain development and funded by international partners, aiming to ensure backwards integration in the dairy value chain by connecting local milk producers to local processors of dairy products. For this PI organisation, the practice of ‘not selling milk’ was a critical cultural insight. Though they were aware of shared ownership in local milk cattle rearing, where the husbands own the cow and the wives own the milk, they weren’t aware that in some communities, milk was not for sale. Knowledge about who owns what was valuable for the PIs in the project design, as they could target the different genders with appropriate interventions. With no project provision for communities where milk could not be sold, these communities had to be excluded. One of the activities in the project included solar-powered borehole installations, providing portable water infrastructure within target communities. However, the installation was predicated on these dairy communities supplying private dairy processors with their cow milk; a well-intended design built on the structure of conditionality.

‘In this community, it is forbidden to plant beans. ...I don’t know why. It is simply forbidden. If you want to, you must go outside of the community to do so.’ – RC respondent (Ile-Ogbo, Iwo)

Further showcasing the importance of cultural learning, knowing that it was forbidden to grow beans (cowpea) in the community was a critical insight for the project referenced by the PI here. It was funded by international partners and aimed at improving nutrition in some communities through biofortification and agricultural productivity.

‘...we realised that the women own the milk, while the men own the cow.’ - PI Respondent.

“They do not allow free mixing (interaction) of men and women in the community.” - PI Respondent.

Here, the project had a component aimed at empowering women. The PIs' awareness of these practices, taken into the project design and allocation of resources, ensured they had sufficient female team members to interact with women in the communities. As mentioned by one of the PI respondents, cultural beliefs and practices are not to be debated and judged, but rather to be accounted for in design and execution, as these practices may have sprung from past experiences and problems within the community.

Other notable practices included:

‘...while engaging with the men (e.g. a meeting with only men present), it is not possible (not acceptable culturally) for a man to speak where his father-in-law is present, even though he might have something important to say. It is a sign of respect.’ - PI Respondent.

‘To speak with the women in the community, we must get permission, not only from the community leaders, but also from the husbands. That is the way the culture operates. Otherwise, you will not have the women attending those sessions.’ - PI Respondent.

One respondent shared that there was a community that had initially agreed to supply a processor, and after the borehole was installed, they refused to make the supplies, and the PI organisation removed the installed infrastructure, because that was a term clearly stated. This case highlights an important argument by post-development theorists against Western frameworks and ideologies, including conditionality, which is practised as a way to shape people's behaviour in conformance to certain 'higher' ideals (behavioural and cultural) by rewarding them with aid. In this case, the community is reshaped for market orientation and provided with supportive infrastructure, among other things.

5.3 The process of cultural integration in rural development project design

The following questions, in addition to those above, were asked: ‘Do you or your organisation consider/apply these concepts (cultural awareness & local culture integration) when you design or plan your projects? How so?’, ‘Using an example of one or more projects you have participated in, please share how local culture considerations were/are being integrated?’, and ‘How was this knowledge about your target communities' cultural contexts generated?’.

Tools and frameworks

Technical terms such as needs assessment, business study, gap analysis, and field survey were frequently used by project implementers during interviews. For instance, within one organisation, these tools were highlighted as central to understanding beneficiary-community needs. However, one respondent made a critical distinction, that while these tools are designed to collect data on ‘what people need’, they do not necessarily account for ‘who the people are’. According to this respondent, understanding cultural identity (who a people are) goes beyond identifying needs, and it informs how needs can be effectively addressed within a community. This resonates with Arturo Escobar’s (1995) argument that the development discourse often views people on the basis of needs (what they lack), ignoring who they are. Through the lens of the capability approach, a focus on needs is not opposed to, however, it frames true well-being as more than survival needs, but rather freedom to choose to be or to do (Demals & Hyard 2014).

Notably, this organisation, as with the other PI organisations referenced in this study, does not have a formal framework dedicated to cultural integration in project work. Instead, there is an implicit assumption that existing frameworks for Gender, Diversity, Inclusion, and Equality (GDIE) also cover cultural considerations. Yet, drawing from earlier discussions above, where cultural elements such as food, age hierarchies, and in-law relationships were recognized by PI respondents and shown to be valued by RC respondents, it is evident that culture is more complex, embedded and context-specific, and its nuances may be largely underexplored in GDIE frameworks, which tend to prioritize more visible forms of diversity (e.g., race, gender, disability). Quite positively, the study shows that all respondents, especially PIs, believe that culture is crucial in defining development outcomes, unlike Brennan's (2023) suggestion that local culture is rarely considered to hold much significance in development outcomes. However, it also appears that in spite of this acknowledgement of the relevance of culture, its integration is being practised intuitively and implicitly, without a structure or format for accountability. Therefore, in my view, while GDIE frameworks offer an important foundation in community work, they may not serve as a proactive or sufficient approach to cultural integration. It bears the risk of handling culture as a happenstance rather than as something central in rural development practice. This may reveal a gap in the Nigerian development practice; the need for localised frameworks tailored for cultural learning and aiding cultural integration.

Flexibility as a recourse

Perhaps stemming from the lack of actual dedicated tools for gathering data on cultural contexts, or from their (project implementers’) view (which I feel inclined to agree with) that even with dedicated tools, there may always be aspects about the culture in a community that go unobserved or undiscovered at the design stage of any project, the strategy in this organisation according to three respondents (staffs) is to build up project activities in a way that they are flexible. This, in my opinion,

is a critical requirement in development practice anywhere in the world, and Bamberger suggests that it (flexibility in planning) is necessary for true community participation.(1988).

Flexibility in activities design, however, does not seem sufficient as an alternative to cultural considerations/integration in project design. For instance, there was no way to incorporate the Fulani's who do not sell their milk into a development project focused on developing that value chain (dairy) and the local producers (communities/people) involved, because supplying (selling) milk to at least one local processor was a mandatory Key Performance Index (KPI) for the community to be included (or qualify) for development supports (training, infrastructure, etc.). Six of the seven respondents from the project implementer group of actors noted the rigidity of project goals and objectives as defined and proposed by project funders. Hence, it appears that project implementers are almost powerless in changing or modifying the direction and purpose of a project and can only get creative in the design of activities at the community level.

This reveals a challenge with the practice of development where the decision about development goals is made at or from the top, rather than from down (by the community). PD urges a different thought process and practice, one that values cultural diversity and respects local knowledge systems enough to focus on enabling their autonomy in decision making, choosing their change based on who they are as a people. Like the Zapista community, Aram Ziai (2021) describes, all levels of actors in the development industry, including donor groups, should believe in and work towards a world where many 'worlds' (cultures) fit.

Communication in the development landscape

Communication and information sharing among different project implementing organisations was another strategy towards integrating cultural dimensions detailed by the PI respondents. One of the respondents described their organisation as being 'open to sharing', but that this wasn't commonplace in the Nigerian development space. Instead, organisations tend to be covert about their operations, and getting information from a different organisation may only be possible by leveraging personal relationships within such an organisation or by inviting such an organisation to co-create and co-execute a project. When the latter is done, for instance, such organisations will freely share relevant data and information that they have gathered over the years. The PI respondents opined that currently, implementing organisations, alongside their funders, were working in silos (isolated pockets), and a resulting problem from this was that gathering data in communities had to be done over and over again, even though it was often the case that another organisation had made development efforts in the past there and could have data (including lessons learnt) about the people (their culture and priorities), that is relevant and helpful for any organisation doing something new or related in such community.

Local stakeholder (community) engagement

A recurring response by PI respondents to how they (and their organisation) were integrating culture in their project design and implementations, across the four different organisations included in my interviews, was stakeholder engagement within the communities. This was described by PI respondents as knowing who to meet at the community entry, how and when to consult with residents, and following up and monitoring implementation processes by asking questions. On ‘how’ to consult with residents, one of the PI respondents explained that it was critical to understand the cultural nuances guiding social interactions, to create material environments where everyone can freely contribute. This was noted, referencing one of the aspects of culture mentioned previously, forbidding a man from speaking in a gathering where his father-in-law is present.

RC respondents described this as development agents knowing how to reach everyone, i.e. including every social group and status within the community. In the Bola-Nalende community, Ibadan-North Local Government Area, Oyo state, there was a project mentioned by the RC respondents (in a group interview) with great excitement. They called it the Beneficiary Cash Transfer (BCT) Project. Their excitement stemmed from their belief that it achieved desired results for the community, and also that every member of the community benefited. They attributed this to the approach of community entry used by the officials from the local government (LG) office. In implementing the BCT project, the LG officials came to their community, and through the community leader, they called out everyone within the community to attend a town hall meeting. At the town hall meeting, they asked everyone present to nominate and vote for those they want to lead (coordinate) the project within the community. One of the respondents said - *“There and then, as a community, we voted for this man (he said, pointing to an elderly man in the group) and a few others. We voted for him because we know that if there is anyone in our community who is lame, sick, or unable to come out to participate and benefit from the project, this man will take the project (benefit) to their house and make sure they are included. We know ourselves, we know community members who simply play politics within the community, and those who truly care.”* This example aligns with the description of culture by both groups of respondents as being ‘who is who and what their relationships with one another are’, and ‘hierarchy within the community’. Cultural contexts include the shared knowledge and understanding of a people about themselves, those who can speak to specific issues and certain social groups, those who wield influence (without even holding any governance titles), hierarchy in households and among different social groups, e.g. the matriarchs within communities. It is unlikely that the local government officials mentioned above would have been able to draw as many

people as possible out of their homes for an organised town hall meeting without the help of a community leader. It is also unlikely that the community leader alone could have made the right decision about the people to coordinate the project internally. I infer that culture integration includes paying attention to people dynamics within a community; leaders of the community and different social groups, non-positional leaders who influence different social groups, champions, politically inclined people, etc.

Reconciling these with the views held by the community that the BCT (or National Cash Transfer) project was beneficial for them may seem contradictory through the lens of the PD theory. It was a project administered by the Nigerian government and supported by the World Bank. It involved providing technical support for livelihoods and bi-monthly transfer of money (cash) to 'poor' households based on conditions such as their children's school attendance and healthcare participation. The official website of the implementing agency details the activities involved, and it clearly shows a top-down design, with no indication of community participation. Though the project was implemented across several select communities, this top-down design ignores possibilities for cultural integration as it focuses on needs defined by funders and the federal government. ,

However, what PD argues is not whether mainstream development in practice may or may not confer benefits, but rather it highlights the power dynamics involved, raising questions about *'who gets to decide about who needs development?'*, *'How are they framing the needed development?'*, *'Whose voices are included in this framing?'*, *'whose knowledge (cultural) systems count?'*, *'In what ways are these top-down approaches reinforcing dependency?'* etc. (Aram Ziai 2007). This is highlighted to show that though the study draws a critical insight about a cultural integration process that worked, according to RC respondents, the project and similar designs like it are considered problematic from the lens of the PD theory.

Another example of community involvement was the self-help groups formed within northern communities targeted by the diary-focused project. It fostered consultation and ease of cultural learning between development agents and community groups, capacity building as pictured and desired by the group, and community-led innovations. This resonates with Bamberger's definition of community participation in his work, *The role of community participation in development planning*. (1988:5).

Gathering cultural insights through consultation



Figure 7: PI visit and consultation concerning project activities on farmland at Ile-Ogbo community, Iwo. Picture credit: (Folake Fashakin 2025)

All PI respondents mentioned that interacting and speaking directly with community residents through interviews, focus group discussions, or town hall meetings was a practice they imbibed to learn about the people and determine how to adapt the project objectives to their cultural contexts. In responding to the question *“Have you received feedback from beneficiaries/participants regarding the cultural relevance of some interventions? If yes, which project and what were they?”*, one PI respondent shared an incident that I found interesting because.... One of their project's activities was installing solar-powered boreholes (water pumps). They had gotten to the stage where one such borehole would be installed in a community, and in determining where to install the borehole, they asked the community during their routine visits to the self-help groups. The women in the community told them to install it some distance from the community. Baffled by their response, since making portable water more easily accessible was their (project implementers) desired outcome, they asked why. The women explained that it was mostly when their children were sent to fetch water from the distant stream that they and their husbands had the time and privacy for intimate relations.

It is probable that if the project implementers hadn't conferred with the community in a way that they felt comfortable enough to talk about this very private routine and had brought an expert surveyor to consider landscape suitability, and positioned the borehole close to their homes, the residents may have insisted on the continued collection of water from long distance streams.

A direct opposite outcome was detailed by residents in the Bola-Nalende community, who painfully described their experience using a hand-operated water pump installed in the community years ago. The women in this community were primarily responsible for cooking, fetching water, and doing laundry (manually) for

their households. Because of the physical strength (energy) required to lift and press the metal hand pump repeatedly to pump water into their buckets, they would get home tired and cranky and often engage in bickering and fights with their husbands when confronted with the need to still cook for the family. They shared that if they had been consulted before the decision on what pump to install was made, they may have spoken about how much a hand-operated pump would worsen the situation of women who, by cultural practice, were responsible for water-related chores. Before installing the pump, they only had to walk far to fetch water from taps or streams at neighbouring communities. Installing a hand-operated pump in their community did not improve their life as women. In addition, it contributed to the strain in marriages in the community.

These contrasting accounts and experiences depict how cultural integration (through dialogues that enable and encourage RC residents to share cultural insights without restraint) can affect outcomes of development interventions. In the Bola-Nalende community, a well-intended project reproduced hardship and adversely affected marital (household) relations. This stemmed mainly from the fact that the community (and its women) were not consulted. One can infer that cultural insights cannot be brainstormed and pre-discovered primarily by desk research or corporate meetings, but by consultation with target communities. Through the lens of the capability approach, we see that though both communities were targeted for similar resources (access to portable water), only one community had freedom and choice in determining what/access to portable water should mean/be. The undesired outcomes produced in the Bola-Nalende community underscore CA's arguments that alternatives to development must be those that enable and uphold the freedom and agency of the community rather than undermine it. (Nussbaum 2011). CA, unlike PD, does not radically reject the whole ideology of development, instead, it argues for a reform of the practice of development, to be more people-centred (more about the people of the community – who they are and what they value, how they see their lifeworld and desire it to be).

Beyond leadership and hierarchical structures

While speaking directly to (or interviewing) community residents was described recurrently as a method used understanding who they are and what beliefs and practices needed to be considered in the projects design or execution, a few a project implementing respondents also noted that ‘champions’ - persons within the community who seemed to command respect and or wield influence, were instrumental as well in learning about the culture and norms in several communities. These champions were often different from the leaders in the community and could surprisingly belong to younger age groups. One project had a component that involved establishing self-help groups, an avenue for members to receive targeted training, self-innovate, and co-create solutions for their community. They had put community residents in groups primarily based on their

proximity (e.g., being neighbours) as this would make meeting easier for them. However, for almost one year, a group refused to meet. Speaking to one of the group members, they (project implementers) asked why they were not meeting and if there was an existing conflict. The resident insisted there was no conflict and that his children were playing at the neighbour's house. Only with the help of 'an influencer' within the community did they learn that these people already had cliques (peer groups) before the project's inception, and the residents did not want to belong to new groups that matched them with younger or older people. The PI organisation had inquired about this issue about a year ago and had received no helpful response before this.

This example, as shared by one PI respondent, shows that in consulting with rural communities especially where the goal is to learn the beliefs, norms and practices guiding specific actions and dispositions to components of a project, asking the right questions alone may not always be enough, and knowing who within the community can make it possible or easier can make yield positive outcomes. Culture is not straightforward; it is complex and multi-faceted, making it difficult for external actors to engage. This community was not outrightly opposed to self-help groups; however, they were unwilling to restructure their deep-rooted and longstanding social groups (cliques) to fit into the project's design. Again, this aligns with CA's argument for the community's agency in determining its capabilities and functions.

One of the key questions of this study is, *'How do project implementers and rural residents perceive the process and outcomes of local culture integration in rural development projects?'* The findings discussed under the sub-headings in this section - 'The Process and Practice of Local Culture Integration' offer rich and notable insights in response to this question, within the context and limitations of the study. These include reflections on the tools and frameworks commonly employed by project implementers, the constraints imposed by the rigidity of donor objectives and requirements, and efforts to design interventions with enough flexibility to accommodate cultural nuances. The findings also explore how communication occurs among development actors across implementing organisations in the development industry, and how ongoing consultation and monitoring serve as vital mechanisms for cultural responsiveness. Also highlighted in the findings is the importance of engaging informal influencers (within a community) alongside formal leaders as a deliberate strategy for grounding development in local realities.

5.4 Local Perceptions of the cultural integration process and outcomes in Development Projects

In two different communities, the respondents - yam farmers in Oyo town and the more occupation-varied group in Bola-Nalende, Ibadan, expressed a perspective that I found particularly interesting and critical for dialogues about development and local culture.

In Bola-Nalende, they spoke a lot about how much they desired modern facilities, social amenities, and infrastructure. Such as schools for their children closer to the community, water pumps with faucets, public W/C toilets rather than the existing pit latrines they had, and better road connections to scale their petty trades. However, they also emphasised the pride they take in knowing that their community has remained 'traditional' (in appearance and ways) over the years, as it is one of the only such communities that has stayed almost intact, having been established by the ancient warriors of the old Oyo. They identified their community based on their history and ties with their ancestors. One of the groups commented about how proud the community was to have several successful and affluent people in the big cities and the country who were raised in their community. The way they shared this joy, I imagined them as 'old guards' of their community. This was a group of respondents whose ages spanned from the early thirties to the early seventies.

My interpretation of their comments and exchange was that, in simple terms, they have a strong desire for 'ease of life', without the altering of the other things they value – their close-knit, traditional appearance and norms (as depicted by the type of housing, language, social interactions, and roles). I believe this 'ease of life' is the outcome they expect when a group approaches their community with development strategies in mind. Hence, going to such a community with development interventions, without first knowing who they are (as they see themselves), and what they value, could produce undesired outcomes for both project implementers and the community (regardless of the intended good).



Figure 8: Interview with three yam farmers, alongside an interpreter, in the Idode-Oyo community. (Folake Fashakin 2025)

In the Ido-Oyo community, three farmers (respondents) were enthusiastic about any project that could demonstrate better ways to increase their yield and profitability. They shared their experience with an ongoing project focused on their productivity as a yam farming community. When these experts first came, the farmers greatly doubted them—the period for planting yams had passed. These experts came in April, when yams should have been planted in October of the previous year. In addition, these experts came with yam mini-sets as their planting material, something very different from what the farmers used. The experts started with demonstration plots, and when the farmers saw how much their yield outweighed theirs, they bought into it.

“As long as they are not asking us to do things we believe to be against our shared morals as a community, we are happy to participate in anything that advances our lives.”

Local communities want to progress, appreciate it, and canvass for it. Ziai critiques development as a concept that legitimises interventions in the lives of those labelled as ‘less developed’ - or, in more recent euphemistic terms, ‘the Global South’ - to achieve a so-called common good, as defined by global experts (2017:2548). In my experience working in agricultural development in Nigeria, I have seen what Ziai describes as donor groups - whether foundations or foreign

government institutions - arriving with predetermined development goals that reflect their institutional priorities and policy frameworks. Their funding allows them to enforce these externally defined objectives, shaping development efforts worldwide according to their agenda. But while Ziai is right, my findings show that rural residents, people in local communities, are desirous of interventions, or better still, support from their government or international parties. This agrees with Ziai's description of Sachs' admission that though development is understood as a Western invention, the global south has come to appreciate and desire it (2017:2550). It is essential to question what drives this need or desire for change (as produced by development interventions): a gradual response to having different institutions come with one project or another and become reliant over the years? Becoming conditioned to see themselves (their culture and way of life) as inferior and in need of expert help? Or is it something else?

Again, the findings here contribute to understanding the perceptions of rural community residents in four different locations within Nigeria about cultural integration in development projects. The findings show that these rural residents appreciate and look forward to interventions that are genuinely meaningful for them and can be proven to be so. Also, that culture integration is primarily recognised through the extent to which development interventions reflect their everyday realities and respect their social values; that cultural integration means having a genuine say in how interventions are shaped, what it delivers or enables in the community, and that it doesn't disrupt the social models they value, even if external actors do not understand those models.

"Who a people are is just as important as what a people need" – PI respondent.

Co-Creating with Community Residents to Achieve Cultural Integration

'Why would I want to be at the decision table? What do I know about all that?'
– RC respondent (Idode - Oyo community)

This response was a moment of epiphany for me, not just as a research student, but as one who is in the Nigerian development practice and has heard and talked a lot about co-creating with target communities and local stakeholders. In previous discussions above, the study has shown the relevance of local consultation in the cultural integration process, having the voice of local communities shape their progress. Recently, co-creation and representation have become buzzwords for this, bringing RC residents to the table, but we do not clearly define what that means. Do we mean to get them to physically sit at a dialogue table for planning, design, and decision-making? Do we know that they want to sit at that table? Do we know that co-creation means the same thing to PIs and local communities?

This comment also exposed a subtle, but powerful insight: that what we often call 'inclusion' can easily take on the form of symbolic participation, where project actors determine the structure, tempo, expectations, and even language of engagement, while residents are expected to fit in and feel enabled to contribute.

The assumption that co-creation means formal inclusion, or physical representation, without asking what forms of participation align with local values and social dynamics, can become a barrier to cultural integration. This is especially crucial in rural contexts, where roles, respect, and power are often distributed differently from modern/corporate institutional frameworks. Have existing ideas and patterns worked out well in popular examples of gender inclusion or merely resulted in tokenism? A situation where, in the media (through pictures), the marginalised appear represented at tables of dialogue, but do not necessarily have a voice or power to shape outcomes meaningfully for their well-being.

Alongside all other respondents in this study, the respondent quoted above, though showing disinterest in top-level interactions and representation, still expresses the desire to be consulted, heard, and understood. One PI respondent regretted not having the community represented at the high-level meetings with management officials and the donor group, as this blindsided them (the PI organisation) to something they later realised was crucial. Another project implementer from a different organisation felt that high-level conversations could often go over the heads of RC residents, making them uncomfortable and unable to contribute.

These views, alongside the quoted RC response, raise questions about how to co-create for culturally relevant strategies and projects how to get the voice of the community to the deliberation tables and ensure that concepts such as ‘participation’ (or co-creation) are not reproducing, but rather challenging existing processes of exploitation in local communities (Frediani 2010). One project implementer gave an example of how their organisation put out a post on several social media platforms, informing the public about a project they were planning targeting youths. They were calling for ideas, perspectives, experiences, anything anyone thought could be relevant, or if they thought they could collaborate. This yielded helpful feedback grounded in local realities for the organisation as they gathered broad insights about the social group they were targeting. This respondent also opined that it was more efficient to visit communities, engage with them, conduct interviews or town hall meetings, take the findings generated and use them to guide discussions at planning tables, than to insist on their physical representation or other modern co-creation constructs.

In this way, co-creation becomes more than including RC residents in development planning; it is about engaging community members on their terms and in familiar spaces, allowing development to be shaped by their cultural identity.

Cultural integration – a social enterprise’s¹ perspective

¹ A social enterprise is a for-profit organization that operates a market-oriented model in achieving socio-cultural and environmental goals (*fundsforngos.org* 2024). It is similar in function to an NGO, but aims to make profit and can sustain itself financially.

In the Majoda-Epe community, a private business, founded and funded by Nigerians, operates a model that both serves and benefits from the community, an arrangement that is not charity, but enterprise. The organisation runs a cold chain service that allows market traders and farmers of varying scales to book space and preserve their produce. Beyond this, it trains residents on optimal leafy vegetable production. It installs solar-powered irrigation systems directly on their farms at an initial zero cost, which will be repaid over time in flexible instalments. The PI respondent from this organisation shared - *'We train them and support their farm work, we take their produce so that all they have to focus on is production.'* A female respondent whose farm has grown with the enterprise's support recalled, *'Several years back, they installed a solar-powered irrigation system at zero initial cost, and we paid in small instalments. Now they've upgraded it because we've expanded.'*

This enterprise connects deeply with the community in a network of mutual value: hiring residents to process produce, purchasing poultry waste from animal farmers in the community to produce subsidised fertiliser for participating farmers, and ultimately reducing post-harvest losses, cutting emissions by replacing fossil fuel generators with solar water pumps, and enabling diversified and increased incomes for both participating and non-participating farmers. This illustrates the fundamental principles of the capability approach: enabling individual definitions of well-being, strengthening people's freedom of choosing how to engage with development provisions and support, and expanding people's livelihood choices. (Demals & Hyard 2014).

The study only interviewed two RC participants in the Majoda-Epe community and perhaps this is too little a figure for generalisation, nonetheless, this was the only community of the four covered in this study where in response to the question: *"In what positive and/or negative ways has this project changed your life and the way of doing things in your community?"* the RC respondents confidently reported only positive changes.

This is notable not because the organisation gave anything away for free, but because it created a platform where individuals could engage on their terms by selling waste, preserving produce, earning income from processing, or becoming part of the enterprise's structured farming scheme. When I interviewed the project implementer respondent after speaking with local participants, I was curious to know how such a model earned the community's trust. *'We show them that we genuinely care,'* the respondent said. *I try to know people personally. I don't judge what I don't understand. For instance, when I see voodoo (juju) on a farm, I understand it's their way of protecting their land. I visit every farm multiple times weekly and am always just one phone call away.'* This PI also shared that the organisation's entry into the community involved understanding what the people predominantly did, and determining how to fit a business model into that. One of

the RC residents mentioned that the community had a WhatsApp group where the farming association shared information and discussed challenges. This group's deliberation contributed to determining what aspects of their process the enterprise could support and enable the community's functions.

This experience prompted a critical reflection: *'Is there a depth of engagement that only for-profit social enterprises are willing and able to reach in rural development?'*

The PI respondent shared that field-based insights are quickly translated into action by the organisation's central team, a degree of responsiveness often hampered in donor-funded models constrained by rigid frameworks and external accountability. Unlike many external actors, this PI had relocated from the city to the community, where the organisation also situates its office - an intentional integration that likely stems from, but also transcends, the motivation for profit.

This level of integration raises complex questions. While post-development theorists often critique capitalist pathways as exploitative or misaligned with local needs, the Majoda-Epe model suggests that under certain conditions, social enterprises, driven by both the market and community co-dependence, might be uniquely positioned to respond more accurately and respectfully to local contexts and cultures. In Nigeria, where agricultural productivity continues to be the vehicle for rural development efforts, this discovery challenges us to reassess which models truly enable social change as desired by local communities, and whether social enterprises, by necessity and design, are better equipped to ensure culturally integrated, responsive, and sustainable outcomes.

5.5 Challenges with Cultural Integration

'We saw the community as one. They are not!' – PI Respondent.

This candid admission from a PI respondent underscores a recurring challenge: the assumption that communities are homogeneous. When asked about difficulties in integrating local culture into project design and implementation, several PI respondents echoed a similar realisation: communities are far more socially complex than initially presumed. Aspects of culture and identity are drawn across gender, age, religion, migration history, and more, making the cultural integration process far from straightforward. This diversity, though rich, complicates the process of engaging communities respectfully; It demands more time, more nuanced understanding, and inevitably, more resources.

Financial Constraints

Despite the above, cultural integration remains invisible mainly in project budgets, setting up PI organisations with the inability to adequately learn the unique

cultural contexts of their target communities and apply those learnings in their design and implementation. As one respondent relayed about a challenge that arose from cultural norms in a community, the community resisted male staff engaging with women, so they were forced to hire and train a female ad hoc staff outside of their budget provision. In other cases, when cultural sensitivities exceeded what could be absorbed financially, they suspended the entire intervention component indefinitely. This response reflects a system where culture is treated as an afterthought, something to ‘work around’ rather than an essential framework for shaping actions from the onset. Several PI respondents attributed this lack of cultural prioritisation to the donor groups. This comes in contrast with the responses of PIs about their belief that culture and its integration are critical to ensuring the delivery of desirable outcomes for rural communities, as captured in the earlier sections of this chapter.

Framing culture differently

Interestingly, many respondents, particularly those working in Northern Nigeria, tended to frame cultural integration primarily through the lens of gender and inclusion. While significant, this narrow framing risks overlooking deeper cultural dimensions. Findings from this study reveal that culture in rural communities encompasses not just gender roles, but also property ownership norms, beliefs around specific crops, marriage customs, in-law dynamics, spiritual taboos, age-based hierarchies, informal cliques, and even sexual norms. These dimensions span beyond the scope of even the most well-intended inclusion frameworks. No universal ‘gender strategy’ or ‘social inclusion toolkit’ can adequately account for these communities’ embedded and context-specific nature of culture. According to a respondent, this challenge is being managed by efforts to design project activities at the community level with some flexibility. However, this is not always possible or easy, as donor objectives and expectations matter the most in budget utilisation.

Fragmented Development Ecosystem

Another significant challenge lies in the fragmented nature of the development ecosystem itself. As indicated, respondents spoke of how organisations operate in silos, with little data sharing or collaboration. As a result, new projects must often “start from scratch,” even in communities where other development actors have previously worked. Cultural insights, which could serve as invaluable entry points, are rarely shared unless a personal connection exists within the previous implementing organisation. And since donor agendas often shape project goals before any local engagement begins, PI organisations are frequently left to adapt these goals to the local context without the flexibility or support to rethink or reconstruct them in culturally relevant terms.



Figure 9: Simple depiction of the structural hierarchy of the development project delivery in Nigeria based on study findings. (Folake Fashakin 2025)

This points to a broader structural issue: cultural integration often happens at the PI level, while the power to set priorities and allocate resources lies elsewhere (the project funders). The goals and objectives of development projects, especially those designed by foreign consultants and funded by foreign donors, are rarely rooted in local realities. This disconnect weakens the potential for meaningful engagement and increases the risk of unintended outcomes. One PI respondent stated, ‘*We need to decolonise development by allowing local practitioners to set the goals and objectives.*’

5.6 Summary of key findings

In addressing the central objectives of this study, captured as three different but related research questions, I drew from the voices of both rural community residents and project implementers across four distinct communities and four distinct organisations.

Concerning how local culture and cultural integration are understood, the study showed that both actors give broad definitions of the concept, but are mostly aligned in their perceptions about it, and these perceptions also align with prominent views in existing literature. Disparities in understanding of culture occur not as regards its relevance but in certain aspects which are either seen as part of or separate from culture, e.g. livelihood and religion. Other notable findings about cultural perceptions include the view held by two of the communities, Nalende-Bola and Idode-Oyo, about their openness to new cultural learnings and modifications, re-establishing central views of post-development theorists that culture should be treated as fluid and evolving, rather than static.

In understanding the process of cultural integration by project implementers in the landscape, the study reveals that cultural integration is practised more intuitively

than explicitly. PI respondents explain that often, the first interaction of PIs with communities starts with learn the administration of a needs assessment and gap analysis, and while these may capture some cultural insights, they are tailored towards generating perspectives of the *needs* within a community, more than a description of the people, their beliefs, knowledge systems and practices. No dedicated frameworks or tools in cultural learning were mentioned, indicating that such frameworks are rare or even lacking. At best, it was gathered that often, Gender, Diversity, Inclusion and Equality (GDIE) frameworks were assumed to cover cultural considerations.

The study also showed that PIs were attempting to design the projects flexibly, to accommodate discoveries (especially cultural) that may impact the project's ability to achieve desired outcomes. However, they struggle with this, as decisions on project objectives and intended outcomes were often rigidly defined by project funders. Findings revealed that while the cultural integration process could benefit immensely from inter-organisational sharing across the development landscape, in reality, organisations operate covertly, increasing the effort required for cultural learning and integration, and also effort duplication across communities.

While establishing the importance of cultural hierarchies and community leaders, the study highlighted the importance of non-titled influencers within rural communities in gathering cultural insights, building trust across social groups.

The study spotlights the difference in how PIs perceive co-creation or stakeholder involvement in shaping culturally-grounded decisions, and how rural residents do so, with the latter desiring the recognition and value of their voice, as opposed to physical presence at dialogue table where they may or may not understand the narratives, and may or may not be heard though present. The findings also highlighted the dynamic interaction between a social enterprise and a rural community in Epe². This for-profit organisation operates a market-oriented model, seemingly at odds with the core tenets of the Post-Development (PD) theory, which critiques market-driven and externally defined/imposed development. According to the RC resident, the enterprise paid attention to its local realities. The enterprise's activities were not seen as imposing, but rather as enabling, supporting the freedoms and choices that the community members value and define for themselves. This alignment positions the enterprise not as a contradiction to PD but as an example of how culturally-grounded initiatives can defy theoretical tenets.

While the PD theory helped frame the critique of imposed development models, the Capability Approach (CA) offered a lens to understand how this enterprise, despite its profit orientation, functions in ways that expand people's real opportunities and agency. Together, the use of both theories reveals that meaningful development does not lie in rigid adherence to ideological groups, but in how

² Epe is famous for being one of the few areas in Lagos (a largely urbanised stated) where arable land is still plenteous and farming still ongoing.

initiatives, like this social enterprise, embed themselves within local contexts and respect community-defined goals. This underscores the growing importance of social entrepreneurs in the development landscape: not as neutral actors, but as potential bridges between market mechanisms and culturally respectful, choice-expanding development.

6. Conclusion

This study explores how local culture is being perceived and integrated into rural development project design and implementation in Nigeria, the implications of these for project implementers, and the outcomes for rural community residents. The study revealed that while cultural awareness is increasingly acknowledged in conversations by practitioners in the development landscape, its actual practice remains implicit: intuitive, inconsistent, and often superficial.

The findings highlight that community voices, when genuinely heard, offer rich insights that can shape outcomes which fit the cultural contexts and are desired by both community residents and project implementers. Though the reality shows that external funder-priorities and top-down approach of decision making and design tend to override these voices and result in disparities between what is desired by rural communities and what is produced by development projects.

Constrained by time and scope, this study did not cover the perspectives of donors and the government, both of whom significantly influence development thinking and practice. The study, however, opens up further possibilities for inquiry and action. It suggests the need to explore participatory models of consultation and co-creation that go beyond representation to recognition. It calls for research in project design and implementation that is more granular, context-specific and grounded in cultural dynamics and complexities in different regions of Nigeria and beyond. It highlights the importance of understanding local culture integration processes across the world and invites more research into understanding and shaping how development practitioners can think and engage with culture more explicitly. The study also does not explore possible differences in government-led and private-led culture integration processes. However, it explores a distinct model within the development landscape, social entrepreneurship, which, though following a market-oriented approach, was proven to be culturally-rooted in its initiatives and operations, enabling freedom and agency of the locals on their engagements, raising further questions about if certain models and institutions are better positioned for delivering desired outcomes in rural communities than others.

These are all areas fit for future research within and outside Nigeria.

Ultimately, this thesis offers a reminder that meaningful development (impact, social change, progress) is not simply about delivering needs, but also recognising, respecting and integrating unique identities, knowledge systems and practices, and

enabling community agency. When development strategies fail to engage with who people are, rather than just what they need, it will likely produce or reproduce exclusions, suffering, and undesired outcomes, especially for members of the community. Cultural integration is not a 'component'; it is a starting point, and perhaps even a pathway towards just and sustainable impact.

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Popular science summary

While several development programs are targeting rural communities in Nigeria, and making immense efforts to deliver positive outcomes for the welfare and growth of such communities, statistics show that the rural population is constantly reducing as living conditions continue to worsen. Several reasons have been attributed to the failure of these programs, and this study focuses on the lack of attention to local culture as one central reason. Many programs, even though implemented by local institutions, attempt to copy-paste foreign models and designs into local community lives, and this is alarming when one considers the diversity of culture and people in Nigeria.

My study explores how the understanding and respect of cultural identity and values, and specific ‘everyday life routines’ in rural communities in Nigeria, matter to the outcome of development projects. Using interview responses from community residents and project implementers, I found that project planners acknowledge the relevance of culture to the success of development efforts, however, they do not have formal and structured policies or processes on how to generate and use cultural insights in planning and executing development projects. They try to plan projects flexibly to accommodate cultural insights and dynamics along the way, but they are limited in their ability to do this, as foreign donors often decide the direction projects can take.

Using data, views from and experiences of rural residents and project implementing professionals, collected from diverse rural communities and project implementing organizations in Nigeria, my study concludes that development strategies in rural communities must start out with an understanding of who the target people are, and not only what the community seems to lack or need. It shows that Cultural integration is not merely a component in development but a pathway towards achieving just and sustainable impact and social change.

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Appendix 1

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – Rural Community Respondent Group

Cultural Integration in Rural Development Projects - an inquiry into the process in diverse Nigerian settings

Location.....Date & Time.....Gender.....
Interviewee Name & Role.....Other details.....

Interviewer's Guide:

Introduce self: I am Folake Adebote. A 2nd year master's student of Rural development and Natural Resource Mgt. at the Swedish university of Agricultural science, Uppsala-Sweden. I am Yoruba. I began working in the Nigerian development sector 8 years ago, and my greatest desire is to see everyone able to collaborate, but also take ownership, for their development. **Introduce study:** The purpose of my study is to understand what the process of culture integration in development projects looks like for rural Nigeria. I aim to provide a Nigerian context on how local culture integration is being practiced, and how this practice and its outcomes are being perceived. **Consent form:** Thank you for giving your consent to being included in this study. I have received a copy of the signed form from you. Please feel free to call me at any time if you have concerns about your involvement. **Interview structure:** I have 6 questions for you and expect that we can be done in about 40 minutes. They are open ended questions, because I really want to get a broad view of your perspectives and experience on the focus areas. I will ease us into it with one or two general questions and then wrap up by getting your recommendations. **Opening Question:** Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

1. Why are you participating in this project (name project)?
2. How would you describe your participation in the design and planning of this project?
3. Were you or any member of your community involved in the decision about what the project should offer?
4. How would you describe your community and your culture as a people?
5. Are there any aspects of your community that you think or feel are important, and were considered or ignored by the project?
6. In what positive and/or negative ways has this project changed your life, and also the way of doing things in your community (as a farming community)?

Closing Question: Is there any further information or experience you would like to share that we haven't covered? **Appreciation:** Thank you so much for your time and commitment, having only met me so recently. **Follow-up:** Even if via a phone call, I hope it would be ok to reach out If I needed to do a follow up interview to clarify anything? **(Where requested) Access to my publication:** I will ensure to send you at the very least an abstract of the study, and possibly a link to full paper.

Appendix 2

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – Project Implementers Respondent Group

Cultural Integration in Rural Development Projects - an inquiry into the process in diverse Nigerian settings

Location.....Date & Time.....Gender.....

Interviewee Name & Role

Interviewer's Guide:

Introduce self: I am Folake Adebote. A 2nd year master's student of Rural development and Natural Resource Mgt. at the Swedish University of Agricultural Science, Uppsala-Sweden. I am Yoruba. I began working in the Nigerian development sector 8 years ago, and my greatest desire is to see everyone able to collaborate, but also take ownership, for their development. **Introduce study:** The purpose of my study is to understand what the process of culture integration in development projects looks like for rural Nigeria. I aim to provide a Nigerian context on how local culture integration is being practised, and how this practice and its outcomes are being perceived. **Consent form:** Thank you for agreeing to be included in this study. I have received a hard/digital copy of the signed form from you. Please feel free to call me at any time if you have concerns about your involvement. **Interview structure:** I have 8 questions for you and expect that we can be done in about 40 minutes. They are open-ended questions, because I really want to get a broad view of your perspectives and experience on the focus areas. I will ease us into it with one or two general questions and then wrap up by getting your recommendations. **Opening Question:** Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Content Questions:

1. What does culture awareness and local culture integration mean to you?
2. Do you or your organisation consider/apply these concepts when you design or plan your projects? How so?
3. Using an example of one or more projects you have participated in, please share how local culture considerations were/is being integrated?
4. How was this knowledge about cultural context generated?
5. Have you received feedback from beneficiaries regarding the cultural relevance of some interventions? Which project and what were they?
6. What challenges have you or the team encountered in your attempt at local culture integration in your projects?
7. Your recommendation on CI for other project planners?
8. Which other actor in the development space within do you have a recommendation for, and what is it?

Closing Question: Is there any further information or experience you would like to share that we haven't covered?**Appreciation:** Thank you so much for your time and commitment having only met me so recently. **Follow-up:** Even if via a video call, I hope it would be ok to reach out If I needed to do a follow up interview to clarify anything?(**Where requested**) **Access to my publication:** I will ensure to send you at the very least an abstract of the study, and possibly a link to full paper.

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