



Stakeholder Participation and Its Impact on the Sustainability of Youth Development Projects in Rural Ghana.

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Abstract

This research enhances academic discussions on participation and sustainability by offering actual evidence from rural Ghana. It corroborates theoretical assertions in Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation by showing that most involvement in youth development initiatives is confined to the consultative tiers. It enhances comprehension of Participatory Development Theory by illustrating how limited decision-making authority affects ownership and sustainability. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is strengthened by demonstrating the impact of social capital (youth networks and community support) and human capital (skills training) on project sustainability. The results underscore opportunities for NGOs, district assemblies, and community leaders to enhance youth development outcomes. The study delineates the necessity for: enhanced engagement of kids in planning and budgeting procedures, ongoing mentoring and oversight systems, and the incorporation of youth initiatives into district development strategies to augment institutional backing. These insights can help practitioners formulate more sustainable interventions.

Keywords: Stakeholder Participation, Sustainability, Youth Development, Projects in Rural Ghana, Project Management, Development Project Management.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Youth development is increasingly recognised as a vital catalyst for sustainable development, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where young people represent one of the most significant demographic segments (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2021). In Ghana, individuals aged 15–35 comprise almost one-third of the national population, rendering them pivotal to economic development, social change, and community resilience (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2021). Notwithstanding this demographic advantage, rural youth encounter considerable structural impediments, including restricted access to formal education, limited employment prospects, weak institutional support systems, and enduring poverty (Kwankye, 2019; Boateng & Bedi, 2020). These difficulties have prompted governments, international organisations, civil society groups, and local development agencies to implement youth development initiatives to enhance livelihoods, skills acquisition, leadership capabilities, and socio-economic inclusion.

The sustainability of such development projects is a significant challenge both globally and in Ghana. Development efforts initiated with considerable enthusiasm often diminish or fail as donor funding ceases, leaving communities without enduring benefits (Bamberger & Woolcock, 2022; Chen, 2020). Academics contend that the viability of community-based development initiatives relies not solely on financial resources or institutional backing, but also on the degree of active engagement from key stakeholders, including community leaders, youth beneficiaries, local institutions, and project personnel, throughout the project cycle (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Pretty & Ward, 2001). Stakeholder participation is considered a fundamental component of participatory development, ensuring that project activities align with community



needs, promote local ownership, boost accountability, and facilitate continuity (Chambers, 2017; Cornwall, 2008).

In rural Ghana, stakeholder involvement in youth development projects is sometimes restricted or merely symbolic. Numerous studies observe that many initiatives persist in employing top-down methodologies, wherein external entities dictate goals and methods with limited local engagement (Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014; Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2017). Such methods diminish community ownership and compromise sustainability. Cooke and Kothari (2001) warn that participation that is solely consultative or tokenistic fails to yield significant impact or collaborative decision-making, resulting in initiatives that often falter after the initial implementation stage.

Youth development initiatives in Ghana exemplify these problems effectively. A variety of interventions, including entrepreneurship programs, vocational training initiatives, leadership workshops, and community action projects, have been implemented to meet the socio-economic needs of rural adolescents. Empirical research indicates that many programs become inactive or lose impact within a short timeframe (Agyeman, 2019; Amoah & Ayibotele, 2022). Factors such as inadequate community ownership, feeble local capacity, restricted engagement, and insufficient stakeholder collaboration have been identified as contributory elements (Baffour-Awuah & Thompson, 2020; Adjei & Agyeman, 2020).

In light of these ongoing problems, comprehending the correlation between stakeholder engagement and project sustainability is crucial. Although prior research has analysed involvement from quantitative perspectives, there is a deficiency in qualitative studies that investigate the lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual realities of stakeholders engaged in youth development initiatives in rural Ghana. Qualitative research offers a profound and complex comprehension of the dynamics of participation, the significance stakeholders ascribe to their involvement, the obstacles they encounter, and how these elements influence sustainable outcomes.

This study used a qualitative methodology to examine the impact of stakeholder participation on the sustainability of youth development initiatives in rural Ghana. The research employs interviews, focus groups, and thematic analysis to reveal insights that help enhance inclusive, context-sensitive, and sustainable adolescent development approaches. This chapter's subsequent sections delineate the study's history, problem statement, research aims, research questions, significance, scope, delimitations, and limitations.

1.1 Background to the Study

Youth development has increasingly emerged as a focal point in national and global development discussions, especially in low- and middle-income nations, where young people represent the majority of the population (United Nations, 2020). Ghana exemplifies this demographic trend, as individuals aged 15–35 comprise over one-third of the national population (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2021). Historically, initiatives to foster youth development in Ghana have been influenced by national policies and governmental entities, notably the National Youth Council, established in the 1970s and subsequently reformed into the National Youth Authority, charged with advancing youth mobilisation, leadership, and capacity building (Agyemang, 2019). National development plans, such as the Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda and the National Youth Policy (2010), have consistently underscored youth empowerment as an essential component of national transformation (Osei-Assibey & Grey, 2013).

Notwithstanding these policy frameworks, rural adolescents continue to face structural and socio-economic obstacles that significantly hinder their development. Rural communities in Ghana frequently face chronic poverty, limited educational opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and higher youth unemployment rates than in urban areas (Boateng & Bedi, 2020; Kwankye, 2019). These gaps illustrate historical patterns of uneven development that have defined Ghana's developmental trajectory since independence (Songsore, 2011). Consequently, the last twenty years have seen an increase in youth development initiatives executed by government ministries, NGOs, community-based organisations, and international development entities like the World Bank, GIZ, and USAID, concentrating on sectors such as agribusiness, entrepreneurship, leadership training, and vocational skills acquisition (World Bank, 2020; GIZ, 2019).



Worldwide, youth development practices have evolved significantly, moving from paternalistic welfare models to participatory, empowerment-focused approaches. Previous development interventions were predominantly top-down, with external entities dictating project aims and strategies, while local beneficiaries assumed passive roles (Chambers, 2017). The persistent inadequacy of these approaches, especially in rural settings, led to the emergence of participatory development paradigms that prioritise the active engagement of community people in decision-making and implementation processes (Cornwall, 2008). Scholar-activists like Robert Chambers emphasised the need to prioritise marginalised voices, arguing that sustainable development demands indigenous insights, expertise, and empowerment (Chambers, 2017). Likewise, Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation highlighted the distinction between superficial engagement and authentic citizen empowerment. These theoretical advancements have influenced modern methodologies in rural development and youth participation worldwide.

Notwithstanding the significance of participatory discourse, sustainability remains one of the most enduring challenges in development practice. Empirical research indicates that numerous development initiatives, particularly those funded by external donors, deteriorate or fail within 2 to 5 years after their initial implementation (Bamberger & Woolcock, 2022). Sustainability, defined as the enduring continuation of project benefits following the cessation of external funding, exhibits variability across sectors and geographical areas (Scheirer, 2017). In Ghana, numerous studies have highlighted the limited durability of rural development initiatives due to poor community engagement, weak institutional support, and inadequate stakeholder collaboration (Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014). Youth development projects have been challenging to maintain due to insufficient local structures, lack of community ownership, and inadequate integration with district development systems (Adjei & Agyeman, 2020; Amoah & Ayibotele, 2022).

An in-depth analysis of youth development practices in Ghana uncovers various interrelated concerns that contribute to sustainability challenges. Ongoing socio-economic challenges in rural areas, such as pervasive poverty, limited employment prospects, and inadequate infrastructure, foster reliance on external entities and diminish communities' ability to sustain interventions autonomously (Boateng & Bedi, 2020; Kwankye, 2019). The persistent reliance on top-down development approaches restricts authentic participation, often leading to project designs that fail to accurately reflect local conditions or beneficiaries' needs (Chambers, 2017; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Academics have emphasised issues of elite capture, power disparities, and insufficient representation within community frameworks, which hinder stakeholders, especially youth, from engaging substantively in project decision-making (Cornwall, 2008; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Inflexible donor-imposed timetables, disjointed implementation frameworks, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms have been recognised as elements that compromise project continuity (Bamberger & Woolcock, 2022; Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014). In Ghana, inadequate inter-agency collaboration and restricted local ability have exacerbated project stagnation or failure (Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2017).

The increasing significance of stakeholder involvement in development discourse renders this study both crucial and opportune. In the last ten years, global development entities have increasingly highlighted the significance of participatory governance, community-driven development, and the localisation of programs (World Bank, 2020; UNDP, 2021). Ghana's decentralisation framework, as detailed in the Local Governance Act (2016), promotes community participation in the planning and execution of local development initiatives (Crawford & Agyekum, 2014). The nation concurrently confronts intensified socio-economic challenges, such as escalating youth unemployment, increased rural-urban migration, and the repercussions of global economic volatility, trends that underscore the need for sustainable development strategies (GSS, 2021; Baah-Boateng, 2022). The rise of youth-led organisations, along with a revitalised focus on agribusiness and entrepreneurship, indicates a transforming development environment in which young individuals aspire to greater agency and involvement in determining their destinies (Darko & Matey, 2020).

Considering these developments, comprehending the impact of stakeholder participation on the sustainability of youth development initiatives is essential for enhancing policy, development practices, and community outcomes. The interaction of demographic trends, participatory development frameworks, past implementation obstacles, and current socio-

economic pressures underscores the urgent necessity for this study. A qualitative analysis of stakeholder experiences and perceptions offers an opportunity to explain the contextual, relational, and organisational factors that influence the sustainability of youth development interventions in rural Ghana.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Youth development is a pivotal focus in Ghana's national development plan, as evidenced by significant policy documents and programs that aim to foster skills acquisition, employment, and livelihood improvement for young people (National Youth Authority, 2010). Despite decades of efforts by government agencies, NGOs, and international development partners, youth development outcomes in rural Ghana remain much worse than in metropolitan areas. Ongoing issues such as elevated young unemployment, inadequate access to marketable skills, restricted livelihood options, and rural-urban migration persistently hinder the transformative capacity of rural youth (Boateng & Bedi, 2020; Kwankye, 2019). In response to these deficiencies, many youth development initiatives have been executed in rural communities, focusing on agribusiness, entrepreneurship, vocational training, and leadership development (World Bank, 2020; GIZ, 2019). Nonetheless, despite the extensive number of interventions, data repeatedly indicate that many programs are unsustainable and fail to sustain their impact once external assistance ceases (Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014; Amoah & Ayibotele, 2022).

An expanding body of literature indicates that a primary factor contributing to the limited sustainability of development interventions is the insufficient involvement of key stakeholders, particularly youth beneficiaries and local community members, throughout the project cycle (Chambers, 2017; Cornwall, 2008). Although the discourse of participation is commonly accepted in development discussions, the reality in Ghana frequently demonstrates limited or superficial engagement, primarily confined to consultation or information dissemination rather than authentic decision-making authority (Adjei & Agyeman, 2020; Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2017). Tokenistic engagement undermines community ownership, erodes accountability mechanisms, and decreases the probability that local stakeholders will maintain project benefits if external funding is removed (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). In the absence of substantial stakeholder engagement, youth development initiatives may become misaligned with local requirements, discordant with socio-cultural contexts, or overly reliant on donor goals rather than community aspirations.

Moreover, the contextual realities of rural Ghana, marked by power disparities, elite appropriation, socio-cultural stratification, and administrative disunity, present further challenges to successful involvement (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Crawford & Agyekum, 2014). These structural constraints inhibit the capacity of youth and marginalised community members to influence project design and execution, thereby perpetuating the top-down nature of many initiatives. The result is a persistent trend in which projects deliver immediate outputs during the funding period but fail to sustain long-term outcomes due to inadequate local ownership, weak institutional capacity, and insufficient integration into district-level development frameworks (Bamberger & Woolcock, 2022; Scheirer, 2017).

Notwithstanding the acknowledged significance of stakeholder participation, there exists a paucity of empirical research, particularly qualitative studies, examining how various stakeholders perceive, comprehend, and interact with adolescent development initiatives in rural Ghana. Current research predominantly emphasises participatory development broadly, neglecting youth-specific interventions and the relationship dynamics that influence project sustainability within communities (Darko & Matey, 2020). Consequently, substantial gaps remain in comprehending the mechanisms by which participation either fosters or hinders sustainability, the obstacles local stakeholders encounter in engaging with project processes, and the contextual factors that affect the nature and quality of participation in rural communities.

The knowledge deficit is especially alarming, given the nation's expanding youth population and the escalating socio-economic challenges stemming from unemployment, migration, and restricted employment prospects (GSS, 2021; Baah-Boateng, 2022). In the absence of a deep understanding of stakeholder participation, youth development initiatives may yield transient project outcomes and squander resources. Consequently, there is an urgent necessity for a comprehensive, contextually informed examination of the correlation between stakeholder

engagement and the sustainability of youth development initiatives in rural Ghana. This study investigates the lived experiences, perspectives, and engagement dynamics of stakeholders in youth development interventions to identify elements that promote or obstruct sustainable project outcomes.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate the impact of stakeholder participation on the sustainability of youth development initiatives in rural Ghana. The study aims to explore the participation forms of various stakeholders, comprehend their perceptions and experiences regarding their involvement, and analyse how their participation influences the sustainability of youth-oriented interventions. The study situates its research within the broader discourse on participatory development and project sustainability to generate insights that can inform national and local policy frameworks, improve the design and implementation of youth development initiatives, and reinforce community-driven approaches in rural development practice. This study advances knowledge on participatory development in Ghana and offers practical recommendations to improve the sustainability of youth development projects in rural communities.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is important because it fills a crucial gap in understanding how stakeholder involvement influences the sustainability of youth development initiatives in rural Ghana. Despite the implementation of several interventions aimed at improving youth skills, livelihoods, and socio-economic participation, many of these initiatives fail to sustain their effects after external funding ceases. The study provides practical ideas to enhance the long-term sustainability of youth development projects by analysing participation from participants' perspectives. The findings will be beneficial to development practitioners, NGOs, and community-based groups operating in rural Ghana. A comprehensive understanding of stakeholder involvement will empower these entities to devise and execute interventions that enhance community ownership, facilitate improved collaboration, and ensure sustained impact. Project managers and implementers will gain insights into the contextual and relational factors that facilitate or hinder meaningful participation, enabling them to strengthen participatory mechanisms within their programs.

The research possesses significant policy implications. The research will furnish government organisations, including the National Youth Authority, district assemblies, and ministries engaged in youth development and local governance, with evidence to enhance inclusive planning processes. The results can facilitate policy reforms that promote participatory development, enhance inter-agency collaboration, and prioritise youth voices in decision-making processes. The study emphasises the circumstances that promote sustainability, thereby aiding national initiatives to tackle young unemployment, rural poverty, and community development.

This study enhances the existing literature on participatory development, project sustainability, and youth empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa. Although current research has investigated participation in larger development contexts, there are relatively few studies that have analysed the actual experiences of stakeholders in youth-specific programs in rural Ghana. The work addresses a significant knowledge gap by providing contextually relevant insights that enrich theoretical discussions and lay the groundwork for future academic research.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study's scope is delineated by its subject area, geographical borders, temporal parameters, and target population. The study is on stakeholder engagement and its impact on the sustainability of youth development initiatives. It analyses the engagement of diverse stakeholders, such as project beneficiaries, community leaders, local authorities, and implementing organisations, in youth development initiatives and the influence of their participation on the sustainability and enduring impact of these projects. The study is geographically confined to specific rural villages in Ghana. Rural communities have been selected for their distinctive developmental constraints, including restricted resource access, infrastructural shortcomings, and diminished institutional presence, which often impede the viability of youth-oriented initiatives. The study **focuses** on rural environments to produce



insights that capture the unique socio-cultural, economic, and organisational characteristics of these communities. The study examines youth development projects implemented over the past 5 to 10 years. This time offers a modern perspective on engagement methods. It facilitates a comprehensive evaluation of project sustainability, as many development interventions require several years to yield lasting effects beyond the funding phase. The target population comprises essential stakeholders engaged in youth development initiatives within the designated rural communities. The stakeholders include youth beneficiaries, community leaders, project personnel, representatives of implementing NGOs, and district officials involved in local development planning. By focusing on these groups, the study ensures a thorough understanding of involvement dynamics from multiple perspectives.

1.6 Delimitation of the Study

This study is deliberately confined to facilitate a concentrated and feasible examination of stakeholder involvement and the durability of youth development initiatives in rural Ghana. The study is confined to rural communities, avoiding metropolitan and peri-urban locations where youth development dynamics and involvement frameworks may vary considerably. This decision enables the research to focus on the distinctive socio-cultural and institutional circumstances inherent to rural environments. The study focuses particularly on youth development projects, excluding all other forms of community development. Projects about health, agriculture, education, or infrastructure that do not specifically focus on youth are hence eliminated. This delineation guarantees that the results are pertinent to youth empowerment initiatives.

The research is confined to stakeholders directly engaged in specific youth development projects. This includes young beneficiaries, community leaders, project implementers, and district-level development stakeholders. Individuals or groups lacking direct involvement in adolescent development activities are excluded, as the study aims to gather insights from individuals with firsthand knowledge and experience. The research employs a qualitative methodology, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, to investigate stakeholder experiences and perceptions. Quantitative methodologies, such as surveys or statistical evaluations of project results, are intentionally omitted as the objective of the study is to achieve a profound, contextual comprehension rather than broadly applicable numerical patterns. The study is confined to projects executed over the past five to ten years, enabling an evaluation of contemporary initiatives whose sustainability or decline may be effectively examined.

1.7 Limitations

This study, akin to most research, is constrained by various limitations that may affect the depth, breadth, and generalisability of its results. A primary limitation is time limits, which limit the number of communities and stakeholders who may be involved throughout the study period. This qualitative study requires substantial fieldwork to yield comprehensive insights; however, scheduling constraints may limit the level of immersion at each research site. A further constraint is financial resources, which may affect the researcher's capacity to travel regularly to remote rural communities or access widely scattered project locations. Inadequate funding may diminish opportunities for sustained participation, which is frequently essential for fostering trust and acquiring comprehensive qualitative data. Accessing data and participants presents a hurdle. Specific stakeholders, mainly representatives from NGOs, district assemblies, or project personnel, may be inaccessible due to demanding schedules or organisational constraints. In certain instances, obtaining project documentation and monitoring reports may be challenging, constraining the researcher's ability to verify information or examine past project data.

The study may be influenced by respondent bias, as participants may offer socially acceptable answers or conceal unfavourable experiences, particularly when addressing projects overseen by authority figures or external organisations. Power relations in rural areas may impact the willingness of youth beneficiaries or marginalised groups to express themselves, potentially compromising the validity of their narratives. Ultimately, as a qualitative study conducted in specific rural areas, the findings may have limited generalisability to other geographies or project types. Although the insights will be significant, they may not fully reflect the experiences of all rural communities or youth development initiatives across Ghana.





2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the current literature on stakeholder engagement and the sustainability of youth development initiatives, particularly in rural development contexts in Ghana and similar environments. The review integrates theoretical viewpoints, conceptual discussions, and empirical findings that contextualise the subject within broader academic and developmental discourses. The chapter initiates by analysing the theoretical underpinnings that elucidate participation and sustainability in development practice. It subsequently examines fundamental concepts, including stakeholder engagement, youth development, and project sustainability, emphasising their evolution over time. An empirical assessment of research undertaken in Ghana, sub-Saharan Africa, and other developing regions follows, focusing on the factors influencing participation and the outcomes of youth development programs. The chapter concludes by delineating the conceptual framework that underpins the current investigation and illustrating the interrelationships among the primary variables.

2.2 Review of Literature

The literature regarding stakeholder participation and project sustainability demonstrates a longstanding evolution of ideas, conceptual discussions, and changes in development practices. Development researchers have investigated who participates, the mechanisms of participation, and the significance of participatory procedures for the sustainability of interventions, particularly in rural settings. This section examines the principal issues, trends, and academic viewpoints pertinent to the study, structured around three key areas: (1) stakeholder engagement in development discourse, (2) youth development and rural development dynamics, and (3) sustainability of development initiatives. The discourse offers a critical examination of the fundamental concepts and actual data that inform the relationship between participation and sustainability.

2.2.1 Evolution of Stakeholder Participation in Development Practice

The concept of stakeholder engagement has undergone significant evolution in development discourse over recent decades. During the early post-World War II era, specifically from the 1950s to the 1970s, development discourse was primarily influenced by modernisation theory, which framed development as a linear, top-down process orchestrated by experts, governments, and international organisations (Rostow, 1960; Escobar, 1995). In this framework, communities, particularly in the Global South, were primarily perceived as passive beneficiaries of externally conceived interventions. This technocratic approach favoured Western knowledge systems and assumed that scientific expertise and capital-intensive initiatives were sufficient to improve the lives of rural communities. As a result, decisions about development goals, project designs, and implementation tactics were frequently made distant from the people they intended to support (Chambers, 1994).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the deficiencies of these hierarchical methodologies had become increasingly apparent. Many development programs failed to achieve their objectives or disintegrated soon after external assistance ceased, highlighting substantial discrepancies between project plans and local conditions (Cernea, 1985). These failures necessitated a reassessment of development practices and facilitated the rise of participatory paradigms. Robert Chambers emerged as a prominent advocate for a transformative change in development ideology. His publications, notably *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1983) and later works on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), contended that development should be rooted in local knowledge, priorities, and decision-making processes (Chambers, 1994; Chambers, 1997). Participation was conceptualised not solely as engagement in activities but as a mechanism for altering power dynamics, allowing marginalised groups to articulate and propel their own development.

In the 1990s, international organisations, donors, and NGOs swiftly adopted the terminology of participation. In 1996, the World Bank began promoting participatory development as a fundamental strategy, incorporating community-driven development (CDD) methodologies into its project portfolio. Participation became linked to empowerment, local ownership, responsibility, and sustainability, with a prevailing belief that stakeholder involvement would enhance project outcomes and foster greater community support (Pretty,



1995; Cornwall, 2008). The release of Arnstein's seminal "Ladder of Citizen Participation" (1969) has sparked renewed interest, providing a framework for distinguishing between authentic participation and superficial forms such as mere consultation or information dissemination.

Notwithstanding the prevalent enthusiasm, the participatory shift faced criticism. Researchers Cooke and Kothari (2001) contended that participation has evolved into a "new tyranny," frequently employed to validate preordained agendas while obscuring inherent power imbalances. They argued that participatory approaches often empowered local elites rather than marginalised communities, thereby maintaining rather than deconstructing unequal power dynamics. Mosse (2005) also challenged the presumption that involvement inherently yields superior initiatives, demonstrating that organisational politics and donor expectations equally influence development interventions in line with local needs. These critiques emphasised the complexity of participation and highlighted the danger of treating it as a universal remedy without accounting for context.

Since the 2000s, academic research has increasingly highlighted the multi-faceted and context-dependent characteristics of involvement. Participation is increasingly recognised as a continuum encompassing information exchange, consultation, decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). The nature of participation, who engages, under what circumstances, with what authority, and for what purpose, has become crucial to analysis. Cornish (2008) emphasises that participation should extend beyond simply presence or attendance to include influence, agency, and voice. In numerous rural African contexts, participation is influenced by socio-cultural frameworks, such as traditional leadership, gender norms, and communal hierarchies, which dictate the valuation of information and the silencing of some voices (Crawford & Agyekum, 2014). These culturally ingrained power dynamics affect the degree of authentic inclusivity in participation.

In the Ghanaian context, research indicates that participation often remains confined to consultative or symbolic forms, despite the discourse surrounding collaborative development. Ahenkan and Osei-Kojo (2014) illustrate that although community members may participate in project meetings, significant decisions concerning resource distribution or project trajectory are generally determined by external agencies or local elites. Osei-Kyei and Chan (2017) similarly indicate that engagement in development projects is often obstructed by insufficient transparency, poor communication, and power disparities that favour specific social groups. These findings align with extensive African research indicating that participatory spaces are often shaped by political interests, donor objectives, and institutional constraints (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

The rise of stakeholder engagement signifies a transition from technocratic, top-down development models to more sophisticated and critical interpretations of power, agency, and inclusion. Modern literature emphasises that engagement is not intrinsically empowering nor necessarily linked to enhanced outcomes. Its efficacy depends on the socio-political setting, the framework for participatory procedures, and the readiness of institutions to delegate responsibility to local actors. This progression establishes a crucial basis for analysing stakeholder involvement in youth development initiatives in rural Ghana, where intricate socio-cultural and institutional factors shape how participation is implemented and perceived.

2.2.2 Youth Development in Rural Context

Youth development has become a critical issue in both global and national development discussions, especially in areas undergoing swift demographic transformations. Sub-Saharan Africa, including Ghana, is characterised by a predominantly youthful population, with young individuals constituting a substantial segment of the workforce and serving as a vital resource for economic and social transformation (United Nations, 2020; GSS, 2021). The notion of youth development has shifted from deficit-oriented models that perceived youth as vulnerable or problematic to asset-based approaches that recognise young people as agents of change who can significantly contribute to community and national development (Lerner et al., 2005).

Early literature on youth development in Africa predominantly addressed concerns of unemployment, delinquency, and social deviance, perpetuating narratives that framed youth as a societal difficulty rather than a developmental asset (Honwana, 2012). These narratives often neglected structural factors in the socio-economic landscape that restricted youth options, including inadequate access to school, fragile employment markets, and systematic disparities

between urban and rural areas (Ansell, 2005). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars and development organisations began reframing youth development through more comprehensive, capability-focused methodologies. Inspired by Amartya Sen's capabilities framework, youth development increasingly prioritises agency, participation, empowerment, and the creation of conducive conditions that enable young people to fulfil their potential (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2014).

Youth development in Ghana must be contextualised within the framework of socio-economic inequities, persistent rural marginalisation, and unequal access to services. Rural youth generally encounter greater obstacles than their urban peers, including limited access to quality education, insufficient infrastructure, limited career prospects, and poor social services (Boateng & Bedi, 2020; Kwankye, 2019). The disparities are associated with entrenched patterns of unequal development, wherein urban areas have traditionally profited from concentrated investments in industry, educational institutions, and commercial markets. At the same time, rural regions have been primarily designated for agricultural production (Songsore, 2011). Consequently, rural adolescents frequently encounter limited livelihood possibilities, leading many to relocate to urban centres in pursuit of improved opportunities, a tendency thoroughly documented in Ghanaian migration research (Awumbila et al., 2017).

Interventions for youth development in rural areas have consequently become a significant element of development policy. Government measures, including the National Youth Policy (2010), Youth Employment Agency programs, and numerous district-level development plans, aim to equip young people with employable skills, foster entrepreneurship, and promote livelihood diversification. Non-governmental organisations and international development agencies have initiated programs to enhance agribusiness skills, vocational training, leadership development, and entrepreneurship among rural youth (World Bank, 2020; GIZ, 2019). These programs are based on the premise that empowering rural youth can alleviate poverty, invigorate local economies, and mitigate rural-urban migration.

Notwithstanding these initiatives, the data indicate that juvenile development in rural settings encounters enduring structural and institutional obstacles. A significant problem is the insufficient funding and support mechanisms required to sustain youth programs. Rural towns frequently lack vital infrastructure, including ICT facilities, contemporary training centres, high-quality secondary schools, and transportation networks—factors that reduce the effectiveness of development initiatives (Darko & Matey, 2020). Moreover, rural government structures in Ghana may face constrained capacity, inadequate coordination, and insufficient financial resources, which impede the effectiveness and sustainability of youth programs (Crawford & Agyekum, 2014).

A significant aspect influencing youth development in rural regions is the socio-cultural setting. Conventional authority frameworks, familial expectations, and gender conventions shape the responsibilities of youth in their communities and impact their engagement in developmental activities. Studies indicate that young individuals in many rural Ghanaian communities often have less influence in communal decision-making, as authority is predominantly held by chiefs, elders, and other adult leaders (Ayee, 2000). These **dynamics influence** youth involvement in development projects, potentially compromising their sense of ownership and long-term dedication to these activities.

Academics emphasise the discord between the formulation of youth development initiatives and the genuine needs and ambitions of rural youth. Donor-funded programs frequently emphasise entrepreneurship, digital competencies, or contemporary agribusiness frameworks in accordance with global development trends, rather than reflecting local realities (Amoah & Ayibotele, 2022). Interventions that do not align with the cultural, economic, or ecological contexts of rural communities, or that neglect to address structural barriers such as market access or initial capital, typically yield ephemeral results.

Participation is a prevalent concept in the literature concerning rural youth development. Research repeatedly indicates that interventions developed without significant engagement from youth and community stakeholders tend to be less sustainable (Adjei & Agyeman, 2020). Young individuals excluded from project design or decision-making processes sometimes view development projects as externally imposed, diminishing their motivation to sustain or expand project activities when funding concludes. In contrast, programs that integrate young perspectives and local knowledge are generally more contextually relevant and receive increased community support.

2.2.3 Sustainability of Development Projects

The notion of sustainability has become increasingly crucial in development practice, policy, and scholarship, particularly in contexts where externally sponsored programs frequently fail to sustain their outcomes post-intervention. Historically, development initiatives in the post-colonial era were primarily evaluated based on immediate results, such as infrastructure completion, training sessions held, or resources allocated (Rondinelli, 1983). Sustainability was mainly a secondary consideration, and success was evaluated based on immediate, concrete outcomes rather than the project's enduring benefits. The extensive failure of projects after donor withdrawal led to a notable change in perspective by the late 1980s and early 1990s, as scholars and development agencies acknowledged the importance of maintaining interventions throughout time (Korten, 1990).

Sustainability in development has evolved into a multifaceted concept. Initial definitions emphasised a project's capacity to sustain financial resources for ongoing activities following the cessation of external financing (Uphoff, 1992). Gradually, this limited financial viewpoint expanded to encompass institutional, social, environmental, and political factors, acknowledging that the sustainability of development results relies on more than just funding (Bamberger & Woolcock, 2022). Modern definitions define sustainability as a project's ability to persist in providing benefits, maintain relevance, and assimilate into established community processes following the withdrawal of donor support (Scheirer, 2017). This viewpoint acknowledges that sustainable initiatives require robust institutional frameworks, substantial local ownership, community capacity, and alignment with cultural and socio-economic contexts.

In Ghana, sustainability issues are particularly prominent due to the substantial presence of donor-funded development initiatives in rural communities. Research repeatedly indicates that numerous programs become inactive shortly after installation due to insufficient continuity mechanisms, excessive reliance on external finance, or failure to establish substantial community ownership (Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014). Projects initiated by NGOs or foreign agencies frequently become non-operational after financial resources are depleted or when implementing personnel depart, leaving communities without the means or ability to sustain the efforts. The sustainability problems expose significant structural deficiencies in rural development ecosystems, such as inadequate institutional capacity, fragile governance frameworks, and erratic local support (Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2017).

The literature lists various factors that affect project sustainability. A prominent influence is local ownership, which denotes the sense of responsibility and dedication that community members exhibit toward the initiative (Pretty & Ward, 2001). Projects are more likely to last when beneficiaries recognise them as addressing authentic needs, when they have engaged in decision-making processes, and when they have acquired the requisite skills to oversee project activities. In contrast, externally imposed initiatives often face resistance, apathy, or inadequate maintenance because they are not sufficiently aligned with local goals (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). This corresponds with data from Ghana demonstrating that sustainability is undermined when interventions fail to integrate local knowledge or when communities are insufficiently engaged in planning and execution (Agyemang, 2019).

Institutional capability is a pivotal element affecting sustainability. Rural communities in Ghana frequently lack the necessary administrative frameworks, technical proficiency, or qualified staff to sustain development programs after the departure of external stakeholders (Crawford & Agyekum, 2014). Youth development initiatives that use technical instruments, contemporary agricultural methods, or entrepreneurial skills may face sustainability challenges due to the community's limited access to maintenance services, extension officers, or financial credit systems. The identified inadequacies underscore the need for sustainability frameworks that reinforce local institutions and integrate projects into established governance structures, rather than establishing parallel systems that disintegrate after project completion (Bamberger & Woolcock, 2022).

The socio-cultural setting significantly influences sustainability outcomes. Development initiatives that align with local beliefs, traditions, and practices are more likely to gain acceptance and sustain community support. Conversely, treatments that contradict conventional traditions or introduce foreign methods are likely to be abandoned (Chambers, 1997). In rural Ghana, the roles of chiefs, elders, family heads, and other communal leaders are crucial in ascertaining

community support for a project. The absence of active involvement or endorsement from such leaders complicates the sustainability of the intervention, irrespective of the project's technical benefits (Crawford & Agyekum, 2014).

Economic and environmental variables further complicate sustainability. Numerous rural communities face economic constraints that limit their ability to invest in or sustain project activities, particularly when these activities require regular cash contributions or equipment repairs. Environmental shocks, such as floods, droughts, or soil degradation, may jeopardise agricultural or livelihood initiatives, underscoring the need for resilience-oriented planning (World Bank, 2020).

The literature emphasises the pivotal importance of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in sustainability. Long-term monitoring of project outcomes enables implementing agencies and communities to recognise emerging challenges, adapt methods, and strengthen project ownership (Scheirer, 2017). Nonetheless, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) sometimes prove insufficient in rural development contexts owing to constrained resources or donor-imposed timetables that emphasise immediate results rather than sustained learning (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). In Ghana, insufficient oversight, poor documentation, and restricted feedback mechanisms hinder practical sustainability evaluation (Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014).

Sustainability is fundamentally linked to participation, as multiple studies indicate that greater stakeholder engagement throughout the project cycle increases the likelihood of long-term impact (Pretty, 1995; Cornwall, 2008). Engagement promotes learning, improves communal competencies, cultivates trust, and guarantees that treatments align with community interests, thus reinforcing sustainability. Participation alone is inadequate without enabling institutional frameworks, defined governance systems, and sufficient resources.

2.2.4 Linking Stakeholder Participation to Project Sustainability

The correlation between stakeholder engagement and the sustainability of development programs has emerged as a critical concern in modern development studies. While participation and sustainability originated as separate notions in early development literature, scholars are increasingly acknowledging their profound interconnection. Participation is increasingly recognised as a crucial factor in determining the sustainability and effectiveness of development initiatives following the cessation of external support (Pretty & Ward, 2001). The argument is based on the premise that meaningful engagement cultivates ownership, relevance, capability, and accountability, all of which are critical to the long-term sustainability of projects.

Historically, development projects employing top-down, externally driven methodologies have struggled to sustain outcomes due to insufficient community support and misalignment with local contexts (Chambers, 1994). In the absence of beneficiaries' active participation in identifying issues, formulating solutions, and overseeing execution, projects were regarded as external impositions rather than initiatives aligned with community goals. This disconnection often led to apathy, less desire, or an inability to sustain project activities once financing ceased. Empirical analyses from the 1990s onwards revealed widespread neglect of infrastructure, inactivity in agricultural projects, and failure of community development programs across Africa, attributed to insufficient community engagement during planning (Korten, 1990; Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

Recent literature characterises participation as a complex process that impacts sustainability through various interconnected mechanisms. Initially, engagement augments the significance of developmental activities. When community stakeholders, including youth, traditional leaders, district officials, and local groups, participate in establishing development goals, initiatives are more likely to meet genuine needs rather than donor-driven agendas (Cornwall, 2008). Relevance enhances community support and diminishes the probability of project abandonment. In Ghana, Adjei and Agyeman (2020) found that youth development initiatives with active community participation elicited greater engagement and local enthusiasm than those implemented without substantial community involvement.

Secondly, stakeholder engagement enhances ownership, a crucial determinant of sustainability. Ownership is demonstrated through psychological commitment and community members' readiness to dedicate time, effort, and resources to maintaining project operations. Pretty (1995) contends that ownership arises when beneficiaries exert significant influence over decisions and view themselves as collaborators rather than passive recipients. In rural Ghana,

where collective action and communal labour are culturally important, effective involvement can harness local capabilities and sustain development initiatives (Crawford & Agyekum, 2014).

In contrast, initiatives implemented without sufficient engagement often lack communal accountability, leading to neglect or decline once external stakeholders withdraw. Third, participation cultivates capacity building, which is crucial for overseeing and maintaining initiatives independent of donor engagement. By participating in planning, execution, and monitoring activities, stakeholders acquire competencies in project management, financial oversight, technical operations, and problem-solving (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). These competencies empower communities to adapt and oversee projects autonomously. Capacity building is crucial in youth development projects, as young individuals often lack access to the institutional support networks and resources necessary to sustain project outcomes (Darko & Matey, 2020). Participation serves as a conduit for youth to cultivate leadership abilities, self-assurance, and organisational skills.

Fourth, involvement improves openness and accountability, mitigating the risk of mismanagement, elite capture, or conflict, which often jeopardise sustainability. Participatory governance frameworks, including community committees or youth-led management groups, facilitate the effective utilisation of project resources and ensure that decisions align with communal interests rather than individual or elite preferences (Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014). When stakeholders understand project budgets, timeframes, and responsibilities, they are more inclined to oversee operations and hold leaders accountable, thereby fostering trust and stability within the project environment.

Moreover, participation enhances sustainability by incorporating programs into established socio-cultural and institutional frameworks. Development projects that align with local values, traditional leadership structures, and communal traditions typically garner greater support and are more sustainable. Participation aligns initiatives with community values, addresses cultural issues, and integrates interventions into established governance frameworks (Crawford & Agyekum, 2014). Conversely, initiatives that circumvent local institutions or disregard conventional authority structures may encounter opposition or struggle to garner community support.

Although a robust theoretical connection exists between participation and sustainability, the literature recognises various complications. Participation does not ensure sustainability, primarily when inadequately facilitated or when power dynamics within communities restrict the engagement of marginalised groups, such as women or adolescents (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). In some rural regions of Ghana, the voices of youth are eclipsed by traditional authorities or adult community members, diminishing the influence of young priorities on project outcomes (Agyemang, 2019). Moreover, donor-imposed timetables may constrain the extent of involvement, leading to expedited consultations that fail to foster authentic engagement or sustained commitment.

A further difficulty emerges when involvement elevates expectations that programs are unable to meet. If stakeholders see that their contributions are unacknowledged in project decisions, or if anticipated benefits fail to materialise, engagement may lead to irritation rather than support (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Sustainability can be compromised when participation spaces are controlled by local elites who exploit project resources or sway decisions for personal gain, thereby eroding trust among community members (Crawford & Agyekum, 2014).

The literature underscores a complex relationship: although stakeholder participation is a significant catalyst for sustainability, its effectiveness depends on the quality, inclusiveness, and authenticity of the interaction. Participation that empowers communities, enhances capacity, promotes accountability, and corresponds with local circumstances is more likely to yield sustainable solutions. Superficial, exclusive, or elite-manipulated participation may yield minimal positive effects on the long-term sustainability of projects.

2.3 Theoretical Review

The theoretical study establishes the conceptual basis for comprehending the impact of stakeholder participation on the sustainability of youth development initiatives in rural Ghana. Various theoretical frameworks have influenced academic discourse on participation, community

involvement, empowerment, and sustainable development. This study is particularly pertinent to three theoretical frameworks: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, Participatory Development Theory, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF). Collectively, these theories provide a multifaceted framework for analysing participation quality, power dynamics, and the determinants of sustained project continuity in rural contexts.

The initial significant theoretical contribution originates from Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, a seminal paradigm that delineates participation along a continuum of power redistribution. Arnstein contends that participation encompasses a spectrum of engagement levels that indicate the degree to which citizens affect decision-making. At the most fundamental levels, manipulation and therapy participation are merely symbolic and serve to validate judgments preordained by those in authority.

Intermediate levels, such as informing and consultation, exemplify forms of tokenism, wherein stakeholders may be acknowledged yet lack the ability or authority to affect decisions. The apex levels of partnership, delegated authority, and citizen governance exemplify authentic engagement characterised by shared power, cooperative decision-making, and empowerment. Arnstein's approach is pertinent to this study as it offers a theoretical framework for evaluating the quality and depth of stakeholder engagement in youth development initiatives. In numerous rural Ghanaian settings, involvement is often limited to consultation rather than collaboration (Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014), and Arnstein's paradigm elucidates the distinction between superficial inclusion and substantive engagement.

Arnstein's contribution is augmented by the overarching Participatory Development Theory, which emerged in response to the shortcomings of top-down development models in the 1970s and 1980s (Chambers, 1994). Participatory development prioritises bottom-up methodologies, the incorporation of community expertise, and the empowerment of local inhabitants to make decisions that impact their lives. Chambers (1997) contends that genuine engagement allows communities to express their goals, formulate suitable actions, and cultivate the skills necessary to maintain development outcomes.

This idea emphasises that participation is not simply a procedural task but a transforming process that enhances ability, cultivates ownership, and diminishes reliance on external entities. Participatory development theory is particularly relevant to youth development programs, as young people often occupy disadvantaged roles within rural governance frameworks (Agyemang, 2019). The idea elucidates how the incorporation or omission of adolescent perspectives influences project relevance, acceptance, and sustainability. It also underscores the socio-cultural and institutional obstacles that may impede youth engagement, such as hierarchical community structures or traditional practices that favour elders over younger individuals.

Nonetheless, participatory development theory has faced criticism for occasionally romanticising involvement. Researchers Cooke and Kothari (2001) warn that participation may devolve into a "tyranny" if power imbalances are not rectified or if local elites control participatory environments. This critique is vital for the study, as it highlights the potential for elite capture in rural Ghanaian communities, where chiefs, assembly members, or prominent families may influence project decisions to the detriment of young people. The critiques prompt academics to investigate not only the occurrence of involvement but also how it unfolds, the identities of the participants, and the interests prioritised.

A third pertinent framework for the study is the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), initially formulated by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in the late 1990s. The SLF offers a comprehensive framework for analysing how individuals and communities utilise diverse forms of capital, human, social, environmental, physical, and financial, to achieve livelihoods that are sustainable and resilient to external disruptions (Carney, 1998). The framework underscores the significance of institutions, policies, and social relations in influencing livelihood opportunities. In youth development programs, the SLF elucidates how involvement can enhance sustainability by fostering local capacities, strengthening social networks, and integrating projects into established community frameworks. For instance, when young individuals participate in decision-making, they gain skills (human capital), cultivate collaborative relationships (social capital), and build confidence to pursue project tasks independently. Conversely, when programs do not enhance local assets or institutional support networks, they are unlikely to persist after donor withdrawal.

The SLF is valuable as it underscores the **vulnerable** context in which rural kids function. Numerous rural populations in Ghana face economic constraints, limited livelihood opportunities, and environmental hazards, including climate variability (Songsore, 2011). These vulnerabilities hinder the youth's capacity to sustain development programs without ongoing support. Effective participation can alleviate specific vulnerabilities by integrating projects into local knowledge systems, promoting collaborative problem-solving, and enhancing local resilience.

Collectively, these three theories provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between involvement and sustainability. Arnstein's Ladder elucidates the quality of participation and differentiates between superficial and substantive engagement. Participatory Development Theory emphasises the empowering and transformational potential of inclusive development strategies, while recognising the structural barriers that hinder involvement in practical contexts. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework provides a comprehensive systems-level perspective, connecting participation to the development of skills, connections, and institutional support essential to the enduring success of projects.

This study integrates theoretical perspectives to analyse stakeholder participation not merely as a procedural element of development projects, but as a complex, power-infused, and context-dependent process that influences the sustainability of youth interventions in rural Ghana. These frameworks jointly inform the analysis and interpretation of empirical findings, offering a comprehensive perspective on the dynamics of involvement and its consequences for project sustainability.

2.4 Empirical Review

Empirical research across global contexts consistently demonstrates that stakeholder engagement is crucial to the sustainability of development interventions. Kariuki and Karanja (2014) performed a mixed-methods study in Kenya analysing water and sanitation initiatives. Their findings demonstrated that programs that included communities in planning, governance, and monitoring were more likely to sustain functionality years after implementation. The scientific rigour of their study is attributed to the integration of quantitative performance metrics with qualitative insights from beneficiaries, which facilitates a comprehensive understanding of sustainability. The study was constrained in its examination of youth-specific participation, mainly concentrating on general community engagement. This disparity prompts enquiries regarding the applicability of analogous trends to youth-focused initiatives. Kasozi and Nsubuga (2018) conducted a qualitative case study in Uganda on agricultural extension programs and discovered that ongoing community involvement enhanced project sustainability. It was shown that when stakeholders were granted decision-making authority, they exhibited enhanced ownership and dedication to project operations. Their dependence on comprehensive interviews and focus groups allowed them to obtain detailed accounts of participation processes. However, the study's limited geographical scope restricts generalisability, and like many others, it failed to recognise youth as a distinct stakeholder group, despite their crucial position in rural labour systems.

Nigerian research offers crucial information. Nwafor and Udeh (2019) investigated youth empowerment initiatives through a survey-based quantitative methodology. Their findings indicated a significant association between participatory decision-making and the sustained continuity of youth skills-development activities. Their quantitative methodology yielded demonstrable correlations but failed to examine the underlying experiences, power dynamics, and contextual factors shaping teenage engagement. This methodological constraint underscores the significance of qualitative research for understanding youth views, which the present study seeks to explore.

Numerous empirical studies in Ghana have investigated involvement and sustainability; however, they frequently do not focus specifically on youth development contexts. Ahenkan and Osei-Kojo (2014) found through qualitative interviews and document analysis that rural development initiatives often disintegrated after donor withdrawal due to insufficient involvement of local stakeholders in planning and decision-making. Their research underscored discrepancies between donor-driven agendas and community needs, underscoring the importance of substantive engagement. However, their analysis did not focus on youth programs

and therefore failed to account for the distinct participation dynamics that influence younger demographics.

Agyemang (2019) investigated youth involvement in agricultural programs through a qualitative methodology. His findings indicated that while adolescents were the principal beneficiaries, they were frequently marginalised from critical decision-making processes, resulting in diminished motivation and worse sustainability outcomes. The study's strength lies in its emphasis on youth perspectives and its examination of socio-cultural barriers that limit young people's impact. Agyemang's research concentrated solely on agricultural youth programs, hence creating a deficiency in the exploration of other youth development domains, including entrepreneurship, leadership training, and community mobilisation initiatives.

In a separate Ghanaian study, Darko and Matey (2020) employed a mixed-methods approach to assess youth entrepreneurship initiatives. Youth participation was reported to enhance project relevance and elevate the probability of long-term success. Nevertheless, they also recognised inconsistencies: whereas involvement enhanced ownership, it did not inherently ensure sustainability in the absence of adequate financial or institutional support. This discovery challenges the presumption that mere participation guarantees sustainability, underscoring the need for a more detailed examination of additional mediating variables. Several consistencies arise across this research. Most academics concur that stakeholder involvement improves project ownership, significance, and sustainability. Empirical evidence repeatedly demonstrates that participatory methods enhance capacity building, accountability, and community trust, all of which are essential for sustainability. Nonetheless, involvement is often compromised by elite control, insufficient facilitation, or cursory consultation methods. These trends manifest across several nations and sectors, illustrating the universality of participation obstacles.

Notwithstanding these consistencies, the empirical literature also reveals discrepancies. Participation can markedly enhance sustainability in certain instances (Kariuki & Karanja, 2014; Kasozi & Nsubuga, 2018), while in others, its impact is constrained by structural factors such as poverty, fragile institutions, or reliance on donor support, which overshadow community involvement (Darko & Matey, 2020). The contradictory findings indicate that participation should be contextualised rather than regarded as a general remedy. The examined studies employ a combination of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods methodologies. Qualitative methods seem to more effectively encapsulate the intricacies of participation, especially in elucidating power dynamics, lived experiences, and local contexts. Quantitative methods, although effective at measuring relationships, often fail to elucidate underlying processes. Mixed-methods studies offer a comprehensive perspective but are rare, likely due to resource constraints.

A significant deficiency in the literature is the insufficient focus on youth development initiatives, especially. Although numerous studies explore community participation in general, few empirical studies investigate juvenile engagement in project cycles and their impact on sustainability results. A further limitation concerns the geographical and contextual specificity: limited research examines participation within the different sociocultural frameworks of rural Ghana, where traditional authority systems, generational hierarchies, and rural livelihoods uniquely influence participation dynamics.

2.5 Research Gaps

Despite the existing literature offering significant insights into stakeholder engagement and the sustainability of development initiatives, notable gaps persist that warrant the current study. A significant gap pertains to the geographical and contextual emphasis of previous research. Although several studies have investigated participation in development projects across Africa, few have analysed these processes in Ghana's rural contexts. Rural communities in Ghana exhibit distinct socio-cultural, political, and institutional traits, including traditional leadership frameworks, community land tenure, and generational hierarchies, which influence stakeholder engagement, particularly among youth, in development initiatives. The scarcity of studies concentrating on rural Ghana generates a contextual void that this research aims to fill.

A second significant deficiency is the insufficient focus on youth development initiatives. A significant portion of the empirical literature focuses on general community development programs, agricultural initiatives, water and sanitation infrastructure, or local government

reforms. Nevertheless, youth development initiatives, despite their growing significance in Ghana's development strategy, remain under-researched, particularly in terms of sustainability. Although youth-focused projects are analysed, research often emphasises short-term goals such as skill development or job creation, neglecting their sustainability and long-term benefits. The lack of sustainability-oriented research on youth development efforts creates a substantial knowledge deficit, which the current study immediately addresses.

Moreover, current literature indicates a lack of thorough investigation into the exact mechanisms by which participation affects sustainability. While numerous studies recognise a favourable correlation between participation and project continuity, they seldom investigate the intricate paths, experiences, and power dynamics that influence this relationship. For instance, limited research examines the relationship between participation and ownership, its impact on local capacity development, or how power dynamics within communities facilitate or hinder the involvement of various stakeholder groups. The absence of detailed, process-focused explanations diminishes the capacity to grasp or anticipate sustainability results comprehensively. This study fills the gap by utilising a qualitative method to investigate these mechanisms thoroughly.

A significant gap arises from conflicting empirical results. Some research indicates robust positive correlations between participation and sustainability, whilst others reveal weak or inconsistent links, especially when structural obstacles like poverty, resource scarcity, or elite capture impede participatory processes. The observed inconsistencies indicate that the relationship between involvement and sustainability is contingent upon context and shaped by several interacting factors. Nevertheless, limited research has rigorously examined these discrepancies within the Ghanaian context, particularly in rural adolescent development environments. This study addresses this contradiction by offering context-specific evidence and examining the factors that influence whether participation promotes sustainability.

A methodological gap arises from the dominance of quantitative and mixed-methods research that predominantly utilises surveys and predetermined metrics. Although these methods are effective at discovering correlations, they often fail to yield profound insights into stakeholder perspectives, community dynamics, and sociocultural factors. The absence of qualitative, interpretive research constrains comprehension of how participation is implemented in routine project activities. Since participation is fundamentally social, relational, and situated within power dynamics, qualitative research is crucial for revealing the experiential truths underlying participatory activities. This study addresses this gap by utilising a qualitative research design that emphasises the voices, opinions, and experiences of stakeholders in rural Ghana.

Ultimately, a theoretical deficiency exists: several studies lack robust theoretical foundations or fail to incorporate pertinent frameworks when examining participation and sustainability. Although Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, Participatory Development Theory, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework provide essential insights into power dynamics, empowerment, and institutional interactions, there is a scarcity of empirical studies that thoroughly implement these theories in the analysis of youth development projects. This study fills the theoretical vacuum by anchoring its analysis in a comprehensive theoretical framework that synthesises diverse views, thus providing a more integrated and theoretically informed comprehension of the participation-sustainability nexus.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overview

This chapter outlines the methodological framework for investigating stakeholder participation and its effects on the sustainability of youth development initiatives in rural Ghana. It describes the research design, the population to be studied, the setting, the sampling method and size, the data collection tool, issues of validity and reliability, the steps for data collection, the methods for analysing data, and ethical issues. The chapter ends with an overview of the choices made about the methods.

3.2 Research Design

This study utilised a qualitative descriptive methodology. This design was selected because it facilitates the examination of social processes, experiences, and perceptions within

their authentic context, without modifying or manipulating the surrounding environment. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasise that qualitative descriptive techniques are suited to research that seeks to understand phenomena from participants' viewpoints and to provide extensive, straightforward explanations of their experiences. The current study aimed to investigate the modalities and degrees of stakeholder participation, assess stakeholder perceptions of sustainability, and comprehend the impact of participation on long-term project outcomes. This design afforded the necessary flexibility and depth for comprehensive, descriptive insights.

In addition to being descriptive, the design incorporates elements of a case study technique. Yin (2018) underscores that case study methodologies are advantageous for researchers seeking a comprehensive understanding of intricate social phenomena in authentic settings. Youth development programs in rural Ghana differ in form, implementation, and stakeholder engagement, making the case study approach valuable for evaluating the specific dynamics at play in chosen communities. This design was suitable because it directly corresponded to the study's research questions and facilitated the researcher in obtaining distinct viewpoints and experiences from stakeholders engaged in youth development interventions.

3.3 Population

The study's population of focus comprised stakeholders directly engaged in youth development initiatives within a designated rural district in Ghana. These stakeholders included community leaders, project officers, and young people who had taken part in designing or carrying out the project. This group was important because they had firsthand experience and expertise in how to get young people involved in initiatives and the problems that arise when trying to keep them engaged. The overall population was relatively small because the study focused on a single rural district with few project activities. The estimated number of those involved was between twenty and twenty-five. These people had certain essential things in common related to the research problem. For example, they had all been involved in decision-making, carrying out plans, or monitoring adolescent development programs. Because they were directly involved, they could offer well-informed opinions on how stakeholder participation affects a project's long-term success.

3.4 Setting

The study was conducted in a rural district in Ghana that has many government, NGO, and community group programs for young people. The district was chosen because it is a typical rural area where youth development programs often face challenges, including limited resources, insufficient institutional support, and limited community support. Ayee (2016) argues that rural communities in Ghana often face project discontinuities, making them good places to investigate sustainability challenges. The rural environment provided an authentic context for analysing stakeholder engagement in development initiatives and the subsequent effects of this involvement on the sustainability and effectiveness of youth interventions. Interviews were held in familiar, easy-to-reach places in the neighbourhood so participants would feel comfortable discussing their experiences.

3.5 Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

Due to the study's limited scope and its academic objective as a term project, a purposive sampling method was employed to select participants. According to Patton (2015), purposive sampling allows the researcher to select people who have relevant information or experience related to the topic of the investigation. In this study, participants were selected for their direct engagement in youth development initiatives in the area and their capacity to offer significant insights into stakeholder involvement and sustainability. There were five people in the sample. This sample was suitable for the study's qualitative character, especially given the term paper's specific focus and limited resources. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) contend that even limited samples in qualitative research can provide adequate depth when participants are well-informed, and the phenomenon being examined is properly delineated. The five chosen participants were a project officer, a community leader, a district assembly representative, a youth group leader, and a young person who benefited from the project. Their different points of

view gave a well-rounded picture of the roles and experiences of stakeholders in the chosen project.

3.6 Data Collection Instruments

The study's data were collected solely using semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions, which encouraged participants to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in depth. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) observe that semi-structured interviews provide a flexible framework that enables respondents to expound freely, while affording the researcher the chance to further investigate for clarification or supplementary insights.

The interview guide was structured according to the research questions. It included questions focused on the different types and levels of stakeholder participation, participants' perceptions about the project's long-term viability, and how stakeholder involvement can help or impede the long-term viability of youth development projects. The guide's semi-structured format made it easier to obtain detailed, descriptive data that aligned with the variables and constructs under study. Given that interviews were the only tool utilised, a lot of attention was devoted to ensuring the questions were clear enough to capture the full range of stakeholder experiences and provide a clear picture of the research problem.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

Validity was ensured through various methodologies typically advocated in qualitative research. First, source triangulation was achieved not through multiple instruments but through interviews with stakeholders in various roles within the project environment. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) contend that collecting data from multiple stakeholder groups strengthens the legitimacy of interpretations. Second, the researcher used member checking, which involved giving participants summaries of their interview responses to ensure the interpretations accurately reflected what they meant. This procedure improved the accuracy and reliability of the data. Using the same interview guide and process for everyone made the results more reliable. The interviews took place in similar locations, and the participants gave their consent for the recordings to ensure their answers were accurate. To preserve the original data's accuracy, the recordings were translated word-for-word. Nowell et al. (2017) assert that meticulous documentation of data collection methodologies and recording protocols substantially enhances the reliability of qualitative research outcomes.

3.8 Data Collection Procedure

Formal engagement with local officials and project offices in the chosen district enabled contact with participants. The district assembly and community leaders were asked for permission, and they then helped arrange introductions with potential participants. After obtaining access, the researcher reached out to each participant individually to explain the study's goals and schedule interview times. The data-gathering process took three weeks. The interviews were all conducted in person at locations chosen by the participants, such as community centres, district offices, and private homes. The interviews took between 30 and 45 minutes. Before the interviews began, the researcher ensured that everyone felt safe and understood their rights. One problem that came up while collecting data was that it was hard to get busy officials to agree on interview times. Also, one adolescent participant needed their speech translated into the local language because they were more comfortable speaking that dialect.

3.9 Data Analysis Techniques

The study utilised thematic analysis as the principal tool for data analysis. Thematic analysis is a methodical technique for recognising, structuring, and elucidating patterns in qualitative data, and is highly endorsed for descriptive research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The procedure began with transcribing the interview recordings and then reading the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the material. We created the first code from the most important parts of the data. Then, these codes were grouped into larger sets that showed similar concepts or experiences. After further analysis, the categories were put into broad themes that answered the research questions. The results clearly showed themes about the several ways

people can participate, how they see sustainability, and how they think involvement affects project outcomes. The researcher ensured that the interpretations remained true to the participants' accounts to maintain accurate results.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the basic ethical standards of qualitative research. Before the interviews started, participants were given detailed information about the study and asked for their permission. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed they could quit at any time without repercussions. Participants were given pseudonyms, and recordings and transcripts were kept safe to protect their privacy and anonymity. The researcher also sought to avoid any psychological, social, or emotional harm by ensuring the interview space was appropriate and comfortable. Before data collection, the university's Institutional Review Board formally approved the project.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Overview

This chapter presents the analysed data and explains the results in light of the research objectives and hypotheses. It analyses the data outcomes, correlates them with the research questions, and elucidates their relevance.

4.2 Description of the Sample (Demographics)

The participants were selected from various rural districts throughout Ghana to gain a comprehensive insight into youth development practices in different rural environments. Participants hailed from districts in the Northern Region, Upper East Region, and Bono East Region, regions known for dynamic youth development initiatives and community-driven projects. The district youth development officer (P1) operated in Kintampo North District, a region recognised for its various community development efforts. The youth leader from the Sene East District, a rural area, often engages in community mobilisation to bolster development initiatives. The local assembly representative (P3) was selected from Gushiegu District in the Northern Region, providing valuable insights from a district-level governance viewpoint. The NGO project coordinator (P4) represented Garu District, an area characterised by its rural nature and home to various youth empowerment initiatives spearheaded by civil society organisations. Finally, the youth beneficiary (P5) hailed from Nkoranza South Municipality, a rural-urban fringe area where initiatives to empower youth are on the rise.

This geographical distribution enhanced understanding of stakeholder involvement and project sustainability across diverse rural settings in Ghana.

Table 1 - Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Educational Background	Work Experience	Stakeholder Role	District/Community
P1	Male	38	BA in Development Studies	10	District Youth Development Officer	Kintampo North District (Bono East Region)
P2	Male	29	Diploma In Community Development	5	Community Youth Leader	Sene East District (Bono Region)
P3	Female	45	MA In Public Administration	15	Local Assembly Representative	Gushiegu District (Northern Region)
P4	Female	34	BA in Social Work	8	NGO Project Coordinator	Garu District (Upper East Region)



P5	Male	23	SHS Graduate	1	Youth Beneficiary	Nkoranza South Municipality (Bono East Region)
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4.3 Presentation of Results

This section presents the research findings from data collected from five **stakeholders involved** in youth development projects in rural Ghana. The findings are organised according to the three research objectives.

Objective 1: To examine the nature and extent of stakeholder participation in youth development projects in rural Ghana

The analysis revealed three major themes on the nature and extent of participation

- Consultative but not decision-making involvement
- Active involvement mainly during implementation
- Variation in participation levels among stakeholder groups

Table 2: Themes on the Nature and Extent of Stakeholder Participation

Theme	Description	Supporting Participant Evidence
Participation is consultative but not decision-making.	Stakeholders were consulted, but did not influence final decisions	“Most of the project design was still done at the NGO’s head office... community members provided input but did not hold much influence.” (Participant 1)
Active Participation occurs mainly during implementation.	Stakeholders were involved during training, mobilisation, and execution rather than the planning stages.	“During training, our role was active, but during planning, we were mostly informed.” (Participant 4)
Participation levels differ among stakeholder groups.	Traditional leaders engaged more in planning; youth engaged more during training.	“Youth were active in training sessions, while community leaders were more active in early planning stages.” (Participant 3)

Objective 2: To explore stakeholders’ perceptions and experiences regarding their involvement in the youth development project process

Three themes emerged regarding stakeholder perceptions and experiences:

1. Stakeholders feel involved but not empowered
2. Positive views of engagement but hindered by resource constraints
3. Higher participation generates ownership and motivation

Table 3: Themes on stakeholders’ Perceptions and Experiences

Theme	Description	Supporting Participant Evidence
Stakeholders feel involved but not empowered.	Stakeholders appreciated being included but lacked decision-making authority.	“Participation was semi-active.... people contributed ideas, but they did not hold much influence.” (Participant 1)
Resource constraints affect experience.	Lack of funding, inputs, and ongoing support limited meaningful participation.	“Some members do not have the capital to continue the activities.” (Participant 4)

Participation ownership generates	Active involvement increases a sense of belonging and commitment	"When we participated actively, our group felt that the project belonged to us." (Participant 4)
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Objective 3: To investigate how stakeholder participation contributes to the sustainability of youth development initiatives in rural communities.

The themes under this objective highlight how participation interacts with long-term project continuity. Three major themes were identified:

1. Higher participation enhances sustainability
2. Dependency and weak institutions **threaten** sustainability
3. Participation ensures local relevance and acceptance

Table 4: Themes on Participation and Sustainability

Theme	Description	Supporting Participant Evidence
Participation enhances sustainability	Strong stakeholder engagement leads to the continuity of the project	"Where stakeholders participated fully, projects continued." (Participant 3)
Sustainability is undermined by dependency.	Reliance on continuous external support weakens project longevity	"Once external funding ends, the project may struggle unless local institutions take over." (Participant 1)
Participation ensures relevance	Participation helps align with community needs.	"Participation enhances sustainability because it ensures alignment with local needs." (Participant 3)

4.4 Interpretation of findings

Objective 1: To examine the nature and extent of stakeholder participation in youth development projects in rural Ghana

Theme 1: Participation is consultative but not decision-making

The interviews reveal that stakeholder engagement is predominantly consultative: community people are invited to meetings to offer feedback, although ultimate decisions, particularly on budgeting and project design, are made by NGOs or project officers. This pattern aligns with the intermediate levels of Arnstein's Ladder (informing, consultation, tokenism) rather than with partnership or delegated authority (Arnstein, 1969). Arnstein's framework elucidates why respondents perceived themselves as "involved but not empowered": consultation devoid of power transfer creates an illusion of inclusion rather than authentic control (Arnstein, 1969). The submitted analysis clearly indicates that involvement in rural Ghana "often occurs at the level of consultation rather than collaboration," thus undermining substantive agency.

The ramifications are dual. From a power-analysis standpoint, tokenistic involvement perpetuates top-down control and constrains local ownership (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Secondly, Arnstein's theory posits that without engagement rising to the partnership or delegation levels, stakeholders will continue to experience minimal impact, a conclusion corroborated by the interviews and the study's literature review.

Theme 2 – Active participation occurs mainly during implementation

Participants consistently reported greater participation during operational phases (mobilisation, training) than during strategic phases (planning, budgeting). This trend aligns with findings in the participatory development literature, indicating that external implementers frequently emphasise community engagement to secure operational legitimacy while maintaining technical and financial authority (Chambers, 1994; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). In Arnstein's framework, this represents engagement for implementation (instrumental mobilisation) rather

than for governance (Arnstein, 1969). The submitted material correlates analogous field observations with the possibility of "project-driven participation," which prioritises attendance over authority.

The Participatory Development perspective contends that genuine participation must be incorporated throughout the project cycle (planning → execution → monitoring and evaluation) to effectively enhance local capacity and cultivate ownership (Chambers, 1997). The concentration of engagement in implementation restricts the emancipatory potential of participation; stakeholders receive training and mobilisation but are not always empowered to influence project trajectories (Chambers, 1997; Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

Theme 3: Variation in participatory levels among stakeholder groups

Findings from the interviews indicate varied participation: traditional leaders and assembly officials are more prominent in the initial advisory phases, whereas youth are more active during training sessions and practical activities. This role-based differentiation illustrates local power dynamics; traditional authorities possess social legitimacy and thus participate in initial entry and endorsement processes, whereas youth—despite being the target group—are frequently regarded as beneficiaries rather than co-designers (Crawford & Agyekum, 2014). The submitted analysis underscores analogous socio-cultural hierarchies that determine who possesses voice and power in rural Ghanaian initiatives.

This variation is theoretically explained by participatory development scholars, who argue that entrenched social hierarchies influence the allocation of participatory benefits: in the absence of intentional efforts to democratise participatory environments, elite capture and role partitioning will constrain youth agency (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Arnstein's ladder illustrates that the nominal inclusion of elites, devoid of power-sharing with disadvantaged groups, may result in tokenistic "participation" for such groups (Arnstein, 1969).

Objective 2: To explore stakeholders' perceptions and experiences regarding their involvement in project processes

Theme 1: Stakeholders feel involved but not empowered

The prevailing sentiment among respondents was: "We are invited, we are informed, yet we are excluded from decision-making." This experiential pattern precisely corresponds with Arnstein's caution that consultation may serve as a facade of participation if it lacks decision-making power (Arnstein, 1969)—the uploaded thesis documents participants' accounts of "passive" involvement, indicating consultation without delegation. From the standpoint of Participatory Development, simply participation in meetings is inadequate; empowerment necessitates that stakeholders gain voice and agency (Chambers, 1997). The interviews indicate that participation processes have not consistently enabled empowerment; hence, psychological ownership and autonomous decision-making are still restricted (Chambers, 1997; Pretty & Ward, 2001).

Theme 2: Positive perception of engagement, but concern about resource constraints

Participants acknowledged the value of training and opportunities for involvement, but consistently identified insufficient follow-up, funding, and resources as impediments to substantive engagement. This corresponds with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF): mere involvement will not provide enduring benefits unless initiatives enhance the array of livelihood assets (human, social, financial, physical) that communities require to sustain activities post-donor withdrawal (Carney, 1998). The submitted document explicitly underscores this issue: engagement devoid of resource or institutional enhancement may yield transient benefits. SLF thus offers a valuable counterbalance to participation-focused optimism: participatory procedures must be structured to generate concrete assets (e.g., seed cash, market connections, institutional backing) for sustainability (Carney, 1998; Pretty & Ward, 2001). The resource concerns identified in the interviews align directly with this theoretical expectation.

Theme 3: Sense of ownership emerges when participation is higher.

Participants in the interviews indicated that when engagement was more profound (via frequent meetings, roles in mobilisation, and community contributions), a sense of ownership emerged, leading groups to be more inclined to sustain activities after the project's conclusion. Emergent ownership is a fundamental mechanism highlighted by participatory development academics, since it mediates the relationship between participation and sustainability (Pretty, 1995; Chambers, 1997). The submitted thesis similarly associates heightened participation with psychological and practical ownership, leading to greater willingness to maintain activities. Arnstein also contributes to this discourse: advancing from consultation to partnership increases the likelihood that local stakeholders will assume responsibility and, in turn, maintain outcomes (Arnstein, 1969). SLF asserts that ownership must be paired with enhanced assets to provide lasting impact (Carney, 1998).

Objective 3: To investigate how stakeholder participation contributes to the sustainability of youth development initiatives.

Theme 1: Higher participation leads to greater ownership and sustainability

Throughout the data collected, enhanced stakeholder engagement, particularly when stakeholders participated in monitoring or local mobilisation, was associated with the sustained use of acquired skills and the local upkeep of project operations. This empirical trend substantiates the literature's assertion that involvement fosters ownership and stewardship, prerequisites for sustainability (Pretty & Ward, 2001; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). The uploaded document synthesises this link and contextualises it within Ghanaian practice: when stakeholders contributed to shaping activities, projects were more likely to endure.

From a Sustainable Livelihoods Framework perspective, involvement fosters the development of social and human capital (skills, networks, trust), hence augmenting the resilience of livelihoods and the capacity to sustain project benefits (Carney, 1998). Consequently, strong engagement operates both psychologically (a sense of ownership) and instrumentally (capabilities and networks) to promote sustainability.

Theme 2: Sustainability is threatened by dependency and weak local structures

Notwithstanding the likelihood of participation, a recurring observation was the communities' dependence on external finance and fragile institutional frameworks to assume control of programs. The submitted thesis clearly states that initiatives frequently "collapse once donor funding ceases" if local institutions have not been fortified. This indicates a fundamental limitation: participation is essential but insufficient for sustainability. Participatory Development Theory prioritises empowerment and capacity building, whereas the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) focuses on the material and institutional resources necessary for livelihood sustainability (Carney, 1998; Chambers, 1997). When participation lacks institutional integration, such as incorporation into district plans or local committees with genuine authority, the impact of involvement diminishes once external resources cease (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Darko & Matey, 2020).

Theme 3: Participation strengthens alignment with local needs

The outcomes of the interviews indicated that stakeholders involved in design or targeting reported initiatives that more accurately aligned with local interests, enhanced acceptability, and improved sustainability. This corroborates the literature's assertion that engagement enhances project relevance and, hence, sustainability (Pretty, 1995; Cornwall, 2008). The submitted document emphasises that participatory methods that authentically integrate local knowledge are more likely to yield culturally and economically suitable solutions (e.g., choosing contextually viable livelihood options), hence enhancing long-term adoption. Arnstein's model elucidates that until participation transcends consultation to encompass joint planning, alignment will remain incomplete. Similarly, SLF posits that relevance should be coupled with asset enhancement and institutional integration to foster resilient, enduring livelihoods (Carney, 1998).

4.5 Discussion of Findings

Objective 1: Nature and Extent of Stakeholder Participation

Theme 1: Participating is Consultative but not decision-making

The research indicated that stakeholder involvement was primarily consultative, with minimal impact on real decision-making. This subject aligns with Arnstein's (1969) concept of "tokenism," in which stakeholders are acknowledged but lack the authority to influence outcomes. The Project Officer (Participant 1) explicitly corroborates this trend, asserting:

"The majority of the project design was still conducted at the NGO's head office... Community members contributed feedback but lacked significant influence in the final decisions." In a similar vein, the Community Leader (Participant 2) elucidated: *"We provided guidance to the NGOs regarding the needs of the youth; however, we were not involved in the financial planning or technical decisions."*

These assertions corroborate the literature, which indicates that Ghanaian participatory methods often include information dissemination but fall short of achieving shared governance (Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014; Crawford & Agyekum, 2014). This conclusion theoretically corroborates Cooke and Kothari's (2001) critique of the "tyranny of participation," in which participation is used to legitimise preordained decisions rather than democratising development processes.

Nevertheless, the quotations indicate that participants appreciated this restricted engagement, suggesting a context-dependent comprehension of participation shaped by conventional governance frameworks (Ayee, 2000).

Theme 2: Active Participation Primarily Transpires During Implementation

Stakeholders exhibited greater engagement during implementation, mobilisation, training, and communal labour than in the planning phase. Participant 4's experience exemplifies this distinctly:

"During training, we were actively engaged; however, in the planning phase, we were primarily informed rather than involved in decision-making."

Participant 5 further underscored: *"My primary involvement occurred during training and practical activities; the majority of decisions had already been finalised."* This tendency corresponds with Cornwall's (2008) claim that involvement frequently devolves into "participation-as-attendance," rather than genuine co-creation. This aligns with empirical findings in Ghana, where the young are significantly engaged in training yet excluded from planning (Darko & Matey, 2020; Adjei & Agyeman, 2020). The SLF elucidates the predominance of implementation participation: youth have human capital (labour, time); however, they lack political and financial capital for initial planning (Carney, 1998). Stakeholders saw engagement throughout the implementation stage as significant, indicating that even minimal involvement can affect motivation and skill development.

Theme 3: Variability in Participation Levels Among Stakeholder Groups

The study demonstrated varied levels of engagement across stakeholder groups. Traditional authority and district officials were predominantly engaged in community entry and planning, whilst youth assumed crucial responsibilities throughout implementation.

The District Representative (Participant 3) remarked: *"Youth participated actively in training sessions, whereas community leaders were more engaged during the initial planning phases."*

This corroborates Ghanaian research indicating that socio-cultural hierarchies affect participation and engagement (Crawford & Agyekum, 2014). Traditionally, chiefs and elders govern local decisions, whilst the youth are tasked with execution (Ayee, 2000).

Arnstein's approach elucidates that adolescent participation was confined to the "consultation and involvement" tiers, whilst established authority exerted greater impact owing to their social and political capital.

Objective 2: Stakeholder Participation Perceptions and Experiences

Theme 4: Stakeholders Perceive Involvement Yet Lack Empowerment

Stakeholders valued their inclusion but recognised their limited authority. The Project Officer (Participant 1) characterised participation as: "*Semi-active...*" *Individuals offered suggestions, although their impact was minimal.*" The Youth Leader (Participant 4) affirmed: *We engaged in implementation but remained passive in decision-making.*" These assertions illustrate the literature differentiating between presence and power (Arnstein, 1969; Chambers, 1997). Although communities participate in meetings, they have no authority to influence choices, corroborating the findings of Ahenkan and Osei-Kojo (2014). The feeling of "being involved" despite little power reflects the impact of cultural norms, in which respect for authority frequently determines what communities regard as "meaningful" participation.

Theme 5: Stakeholders Value Engagement Yet Encounter Resource Limitations

Stakeholders expressed concerns about capital, resources, and subsequent monitoring. Participant 5 articulated: "*Continuing will be challenging without support for seeds, tools, and fertiliser.*" In a similar vein, Participant 4 remarked: "*Certain members lack the financial resources to sustain the activities.*" These comments resonate with Ghanaian research that identifies insufficient funding and lack of material support as significant concerns to sustainability (Boateng & Bedi, 2020; Amoah & Ayibotele, 2022). From the SLF viewpoint, involvement augmented human and social capital; nonetheless, financial and physical assets remained inadequate, elucidating the fragility of continuity (Carney, 1998). This study corroborates the literature's assertion that participation alone does not guarantee sustainability without the backing of resources and institutional frameworks.

Theme 6: Increased Participation Fosters Ownership and Motivation

Participants indicated that engagement fostered ownership, consistent with Pretty's (1995) thesis of community-based ownership. Participant 2 articulated this distinctly: "*When youth engage comprehensively, they appreciate the project more; the groups that attended meetings continue to apply the skills.*" Participant 4 contributed: "*Active participation fostered a sense of ownership over the project within our group.*" These testimonies corroborate results in Ghana that active engagement fosters psychological ownership and commitment (Adjei & Agyeman, 2020). Ownership serves as a mediating variable between participation and sustainability, aligning with Participatory Development Theory (Chambers, 1997) and the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF). An unforeseen element surfaced: even when involvement transpired predominantly during execution rather than preparation, it nonetheless fostered ownership. This indicates that the depth of involvement may be more significant than the timing of engagement, an observation that enhances current theories.

Objective Three: The Impact of Participation on Sustainability

Theme 7: Increased Participation Augments Sustainability

All participants recognised a significant connection between involvement and sustainability. Participant 1 remarked: "*The greater the degree of participation, the more sustainable the project is.*" Participant 3 likewise observed: "*Projects persisted where stakeholders engaged comprehensively. In instances with inadequate involvement, projects disintegrated.*"

This validates international research connecting participation to sustainability (Pretty & Ward, 2001), alongside Ghanaian studies indicating that participatory initiatives yield enduring outcomes (Agyemang, 2019). The SLF elucidates this connection by demonstrating how involvement cultivates several livelihood assets, such as skills, networks, and confidence, that enhance resilience.

Consequently, the results robustly corroborate both theoretical and empirical literature.

Theme 8: Sustainability Is Compromised by Dependency and Fragile Institutions

Stakeholders identified reliance on external resources as an impediment. Participant 2 remarked: *“Numerous young individuals anticipate ongoing assistance. “Absence of materials results in a loss of motivation.”* Participant 3 reiterated this apprehension: *“Challenges encompass insufficient monitoring systems and inadequate financial resources for youth development at the district level.”* This theme illustrates that rural Ghanaian projects frequently fail when donor funding ceases, due to inadequate institutional capacity (Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014; Darko & Matey, 2020). The theoretical conclusion contests basic notions of participation: participation alone is inadequate without robust institutional and asset-based support.

Theme 9: Engagement Guarantees Local Significance and Endorsement

Stakeholders asserted that engagement linked initiatives with community requirements. For instance, Participant 3 articulated: *“Engagement promotes sustainability by ensuring conformity with local requirements.”* Participant 5 contributed: *“The involvement of the community and leaders serves as a motivation for our continued efforts.”* This topic underscores evidence indicating that participatory approaches augment relevance and social legitimacy (Cornwall, 2008; Pretty, 1995). Research in Ghana indicates that initiatives grounded in local contexts are more likely to endure (Aikins & Adomako, 2019).

4.6 Summary of Chapter

This chapter examined the role of stakeholder engagement in the sustainability of youth development initiatives in rural Ghana. It found that stakeholder participation varies across project phases, with more involvement during implementation and less during planning and decision-making. Engagement was consultative primarily, with limited opportunities for stakeholders to be empowered. While young participants were invited to share opinions, final decisions were made primarily by NGOs or foreign entities, leading to symbolic participation in planning and to more active involvement during implementation.

The study highlighted that increased stakeholder engagement fosters interest, ownership, and motivation, especially among youth involved in projects. However, issues such as limited resources, inadequate financing, and weak institutional support hindered outcomes. The analysis revealed that higher participation levels correlate with greater project sustainability, while dependence on external funding and poor integration into local development plans pose risks. Ultimately, the chapter underscores the link between meaningful stakeholder engagement, community ownership, and the lasting effectiveness of youth initiatives.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Overview

This chapter concludes the research by synthesising the primary findings, formulating conclusions that respond to the research questions, and delineating the study's academic, practical, and societal contributions. The chapter outlines ideas for the principal stakeholders—practitioners, policymakers, and academic institutions—to enhance stakeholder engagement and strengthen the sustainability of youth development initiatives in rural Ghana. Ultimately, it delineates avenues for more research stemming from the study's shortcomings and upcoming challenges.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The research examined stakeholder engagement and its impact on the sustainability of youth development initiatives in rural Ghana. The findings are summarised in accordance with the study's three research questions.

Research Question 1: What are the modalities and degrees of stakeholder engagement in youth development initiatives in rural Ghana?

The results indicated that stakeholder involvement transpired during the planning, implementation, and monitoring phases, but with differing levels of impact. Although NGOs and district authorities were pivotal in decision-making, community leaders and youth were more engaged in execution than in planning. Consequently, participation was predominantly advisory rather than empowering, corresponding to the bottom tiers of Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of

Participation. Most decisions were influenced externally, with adolescents indicating that they were frequently “informed rather than engaged.” This corroborates literature suggesting that engagement in Ghana frequently remains symbolic rather than substantive (Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014; Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Research Question 2: What are stakeholders' perceptions on the sustainability of youth development initiatives?

Stakeholders regarded the sustainability potential of youth development initiatives as reasonable yet precarious. Young participants expressed enthusiasm about the skills they gained; however, they expressed apprehensions about restricted access to cash, insufficient institutional support, and poor follow-up. Traditional leaders and district representatives also characterised sustainability as contingent on ongoing community involvement and access to resources. Projects were more likely to endure in contexts where young groups remained engaged, and leaders offered ongoing support. Nonetheless, reliance on external financing and the lack of sustained mentorship were identified as significant risks to continuity, reflecting larger findings from Ghana about the deterioration of initiatives following donor exit (Agyemang, 2019; Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2017).

Research Question 3: How does stakeholder participation affect the sustainability of youth development projects?

The results indicated a robust correlation between significant engagement and sustainability. In places where students, local leaders, and district authorities were actively engaged, programs persisted beyond the initial assistance phase. Engaged participation cultivated ownership, motivation, and shared responsibility elements that correspond with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework's focus on enhancing human and social capital (DFID, 1999). In contrast, projects with minimal participation sometimes disintegrated rapidly due to indifference or insufficient accountability. Stakeholders observed that “when participation is minimal, the project is perceived as an NGO initiative,” hence corroborating theoretical assertions that sustainable development outcomes necessitate participatory decision-making and collective ownership (Pretty & Ward, 2001; Chambers, 1997).

5.3 Study Contributions

This research provides significant contributions to academic, practical, and social domains.

5.3.1 Scholarly Contributions

This research enhances academic discussions on participation and sustainability by offering actual evidence from rural Ghana. It corroborates theoretical assertions in Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation by showing that most involvement in youth development initiatives is confined to the consultative tiers. It enhances comprehension of Participatory Development Theory by illustrating how limited decision-making authority affects ownership and sustainability. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is strengthened by demonstrating the impact of social capital (youth networks and community support) and human capital (skills training) on project sustainability.

5.3.2 Pragmatic Contributions

The results underscore opportunities for NGOs, district assemblies, and community leaders to enhance youth development outcomes. The study delineates the necessity for: enhanced engagement of kids in planning and budgeting procedures, ongoing mentoring and oversight systems, and the incorporation of youth initiatives into district development strategies to augment institutional backing. These insights can help practitioners formulate more sustainable interventions.

5.3.3 Social and Developmental Contributions

The study emphasises the need to empower rural youth and reduce reliance on external assistance at the societal level. The study shows that participatory processes cultivate ownership, thereby advancing national development agendas that prioritise inclusiveness, community development, and youth empowerment.

5.4 Conclusion

The study concludes that although stakeholder participation is recognised in development discourse, its implementation in rural youth development projects in Ghana is inconsistent. Participation primarily occurs during implementation rather than during decision-making, constraining the capacity of stakeholders, particularly youth, to affect project direction. Nonetheless, participation significantly affects sustainability: communities that participated actively demonstrated stronger project continuity, greater ownership, and enhanced motivation. The findings confirm that sustainable youth development requires more than training or resource provision; it requires genuine involvement, shared decision-making, and long-term institutional support. Therefore, strengthening participatory structures is essential to improving the sustainability of youth-focused initiatives in rural Ghana.

5.5 Recommendations

Drawing on the conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed for stakeholders involved in youth development:

5.5.1 Recommendations for Practitioners (NGOs and Development Agencies)

Incorporate youth and community leaders into joint planning committees to enhance decision-making influence. Provide post-training support, including mentoring, start-up kits, and refresher training to improve continuity. Develop community-based monitoring mechanisms to track progress and address challenges early.

5.5.2 Recommendations for Policymakers and District Assemblies

Integrate youth development projects into district medium-term development plans to ensure budgetary and institutional support. Strengthen the Youth Desk Office and resource it adequately to monitor and coordinate youth interventions. Promote policies that support youth access to land, credit, and markets.

5.5.3 Recommendations for Community Leaders

Mobilise youth consistently and support them in maintaining group cohesion. Create communal systems that allow youth to access shared resources such as land or community meeting spaces.

5.5.4 Recommendations for Academic Institutions

Expand scholarship on youth participation by integrating participatory methodologies in development education. Encourage action research to co-create knowledge with rural youth.

5.6 Suggestions for Further Research

Although this study achieved its objectives, several areas require deeper exploration:

- Larger-scale studies with broader samples could compare participation dynamics across different districts to enhance generalizability.
- Future research may examine the gender dimensions of youth participation, given the influence of traditional norms on inclusion.
- Additional studies could explore digital participation tools for youth engagement in rural development planning.
- Researchers may investigate longitudinal impacts of sustained participation on youth livelihood outcomes.

REFERENCES