

## Appraisal of Cross River State rural development policy: An assessment of implementation strategies and outcomes

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### Abstract

Rural development has remained a critical policy concern in Nigeria, given the persistent challenges of poverty, infrastructural deficits, and weak agricultural productivity in rural communities. In Cross River State, various rural development policies have been initiated with the aim of improving livelihoods, enhancing access to social services, and promoting inclusive growth. This study appraises the Cross River State Rural Development Policy by assessing its implementation strategies and outcomes. The analysis focuses on institutional frameworks, stakeholder participation, resource allocation, and the integration of innovations in rural development. It also evaluates the outcomes in terms of socioeconomic improvements, infrastructure development, agricultural productivity, human capital enhancement, and poverty reduction. Findings reveal that while notable achievements have been recorded in areas such as road construction, agricultural support programs, and educational access, gaps remain in sustainable financing, community ownership, and effective monitoring mechanisms. The study highlights the persistent policy–practice divide, which undermines long-term development gains. By drawing comparative insights from similar interventions in other Nigerian states and African contexts, the paper underscores the importance of participatory governance, sustainable resource mobilization, and evidence-based policymaking. The appraisal contributes to policy discourse by reflecting on the future of rural development in Cross River State and offering recommendations for more inclusive, sustainable, and technology-driven development pathways.

**Keywords:** Implementation strategies, rural development policy, policy outcomes

### Introduction

Rural development has remained a central concern of national and sub-national governments in Nigeria due to the predominance of rural settlements and their crucial role in the country's socioeconomic development. Nigeria, like most developing nations, has historically grappled with deep-rooted rural poverty, underdevelopment, infrastructural deficits, and limited access to essential services. More than 50 percent of the Nigerian population resides in rural areas, engaging predominantly in agriculture and small-scale informal economic activities (World Bank, 2020). However, these communities are characterized by poor road networks, limited access to healthcare and education, low income levels, inadequate electricity, and weak institutional support systems, all of which contribute to persistent poverty and migration to urban centers (Adewale & Oyeyemi, 2019). Against this backdrop, rural development policies and programmes have emerged as critical instruments aimed at addressing the rural-urban divide and fostering inclusive growth.

In Cross River State, the significance of rural development cannot be overstated. The state is predominantly agrarian, with over 70 percent of its population residing in rural communities and depending on subsistence farming and petty trading for livelihood (Ekpe, 2020). The state's rich endowment in arable land, forest resources, and tourism potential underscores the importance of sustainable rural development strategies in harnessing these resources for economic growth and poverty reduction. Successive administrations in Cross River State have initiated policies and programmes intended to uplift rural dwellers through improved agricultural production, infrastructural development, and empowerment schemes. Examples include rural road construction, community electrification, smallholder farmer support, and initiatives targeted at enhancing rural markets (Okoi & Eja, 2021). Despite these efforts, rural communities in the state still face daunting challenges, including weak implementation of government policies, inadequate funding, corruption, and limited community participation, thereby undermining the expected outcomes of rural development interventions.

The rationale for rural development policies is rooted in the need to create equitable opportunities for all citizens, irrespective of geographic location. Scholars argue that rural development not only reduces poverty but also enhances national food security, curbs rural-urban migration, and fosters national cohesion (Adewale, 2018; Olayemi, 2020). In Cross River State, rural development policies are designed to achieve inclusive socioeconomic transformation by promoting agricultural modernization, providing rural infrastructure, encouraging small-scale enterprises, and empowering marginalized groups, especially women and youth. By targeting these areas, rural development becomes a tool for achieving both state and national development goals, including Nigeria's Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

However, a persistent challenge in Nigeria and Cross River State in particular is the gap between policy formulation and implementation. While policies are often well-crafted and ambitious, their execution has

frequently been hindered by weak institutional frameworks, inadequate budgetary allocation, political interference, lack of accountability, and absence of community ownership (Akinwale, 2019; Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2020). For instance, rural electrification projects may be initiated on paper but left uncompleted due to mismanagement of funds, or agricultural input distribution schemes may be hijacked by elites at the expense of genuine rural farmers. This disconnect between policy intentions and actual outcomes has raised concerns about the effectiveness of rural development interventions and has prompted the need for critical appraisals of their strategies and results.

It is within this context that the appraisal of Cross River State's rural development policy becomes pertinent. An assessment of its implementation strategies and outcomes provides valuable insights into the extent to which stated objectives have been realized, the challenges encountered, and the opportunities for improvement. Such an evaluation is critical for informing future policy decisions, ensuring efficient resource utilization, and promoting sustainable rural transformation in the state. Moreover, it helps to bridge the knowledge gap on how rural development initiatives are executed at the sub-national level, contributing to broader discussions on governance, development policy, and poverty alleviation in Nigeria. This study therefore situates itself within the ongoing discourse on rural development by critically appraising the Cross River State rural development policy. By examining its implementation strategies and outcomes, the study seeks to determine whether the policy has achieved its intended objectives, identify the gaps in practice, and make recommendations for more effective rural development programming.

### **Conceptual clarification**

The paper clarifies certain concepts below:

#### ***Rural development***

Rural development refers to the process of improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people living in relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas. It involves implementing policies, programs, and strategies that aim to reduce poverty, create employment opportunities, enhance social services, and provide access to infrastructure in rural communities. Unlike urban development, rural development is more concerned with agricultural productivity, rural industries, and the provision of basic amenities such as clean water, electricity, education, and healthcare (Ellis & Biggs, 2001). The concept of rural development has evolved over time. In the early post-independence period in Africa, including Nigeria, rural development was largely equated with agricultural development, given that the majority of the rural population depended on farming. However, scholars argue that rural development is multidimensional, encompassing not only economic growth but also social transformation, institutional strengthening, and environmental sustainability (Todaro & Smith, 2015). Rural development is crucial because rural areas often suffer from infrastructural deficits, low income levels, poor access to markets, and limited political representation. According to the World Bank (2020), more than 75% of the poor in developing countries live in rural areas, making targeted interventions essential for achieving inclusive growth and sustainable development. Policies aimed at rural development typically focus on agricultural modernization, rural electrification, road construction, access to credit facilities, and community participation in decision-making (IFAD, 2016). In the Nigerian context, rural development is seen as a strategic tool for reducing poverty, curbing rural-urban migration, and enhancing food security. For instance, programs such as the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) of the 1980s, and more recent initiatives under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasize the need to close the gap between rural and urban areas (Adebayo & Olagunju, 2015). In summary, rural development is a holistic approach to uplifting rural populations through economic, social, infrastructural, and institutional improvements. It not only addresses material needs but also promotes social justice, inclusiveness, and empowerment of marginalized rural communities.

#### **Policy implementation**

Policy implementation refers to the process of translating policy decisions and plans into concrete actions that achieve the intended objectives (Howlett, 2019). It is often described as the most critical phase of the policy cycle because it determines whether well-formulated policies yield the desired impact. Implementation involves mobilizing resources, coordinating institutions, building capacities, and ensuring compliance with set guidelines. In developing contexts such as Nigeria, challenges of policy implementation often arise due to weak institutional frameworks, bureaucratic bottlenecks, corruption, inadequate funding, and political interference (Adebayo, 2020). For example, rural development policies may be well-articulated on paper but fail to achieve impact due to poor execution strategies and lack of stakeholder participation. Effective implementation therefore requires not only technical and financial capacity but also political will, stakeholder engagement, and continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Sabatier and Mazmanian's top-down and bottom-up approaches remain useful lenses for analyzing implementation, with contemporary studies highlighting the importance of hybrid models that integrate grassroots participation with state-driven efforts (Matland, 2021).

## Development outcomes

Development outcomes refer to the tangible and intangible results that emerge from policy interventions, programs, or projects aimed at improving living standards and societal progress. These outcomes go beyond immediate outputs to assess broader impacts such as poverty reduction, improved access to education and healthcare, enhanced food security, gender equality, and inclusive growth (World Bank, 2017; UNDP, 2020). Andrews et al., (2017) emphasize that development outcomes must be evaluated not only in quantitative terms but also in qualitative dimensions, including social justice, empowerment, and institutional trust. For instance, the success of a rural development initiative should not only be measured by the number of infrastructure projects completed but also by how these projects improve local livelihoods, reduce inequalities, and strengthen community resilience. Importantly, development outcomes are shaped by contextual factors such as governance quality, cultural values, political stability, and the capacity of local institutions to absorb and utilize resources effectively. In Africa, weak linkages between policy implementation and expected outcomes often result in developmental gaps, leaving communities underserved despite huge government expenditure (Adeola & Evans, 2019).

## Sustainability

Sustainability has emerged as a central concept in global development debates, largely propelled by the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. At its core, sustainability refers to the capacity to meet present developmental needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (Brundtland Report, 1987). Contemporary definitions, however, emphasize a balance between three dimensions: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection (Sachs, 2015; UN, 2021). In practice, sustainability in development requires policies and projects to integrate long-term considerations rather than short-term gains. For example, agricultural development policies should not only focus on increasing yields but also on soil conservation, climate change adaptation, and rural empowerment. Similarly, urban development projects must incorporate inclusive housing, renewable energy, and equitable service delivery to avoid future vulnerabilities (Mensah, 2019). The challenge of sustainability in policy outcomes lies in ensuring continuity across political regimes and institutional stability. In many developing countries, projects are abandoned once new governments emerge, undermining long-term benefits. Hence, embedding sustainability principles requires building institutional resilience, promoting participatory governance, and integrating local knowledge into policy processes (Mbah, Nzeadibe & Nwokolo, 2021).

## Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on the Implementation Theory and the Rural Development Theory. Implementation Theory, developed by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) and later refined by numerous scholars, provides a framework for understanding the complexities involved in translating policies into action. The theory emphasizes that successful implementation requires clear objectives, adequate resources, competent implementation structures, and supportive political and administrative environments. The Rural Development Theory, as articulated by scholars like Todaro and Smith (2020), posits that rural development is a multifaceted process requiring integrated approaches that address economic, social, and environmental dimensions simultaneously. The theory emphasizes the importance of local participation, appropriate technology, and sustainable resource management in achieving rural transformation. This theory is applicable to this paper because it provide the lens through which this study analyzes Cross River State's rural development policies, examining how implementation processes influence outcomes and identifying factors that promote or hinder policy success

## Overview of Cross River State Rural Development Policy

Rural development in Cross River State (CRS) has evolved from ad-hoc colonial and post-independence interventions to more formalized state institutions and multi-partner programmes. The state government established the Cross River State Rural Development Agency (CRSRDA) by law in 2007 to provide an institutional home for planning and coordinating rural development efforts, an important legal milestone that signalled a shift from project-level activities to a statutory agency responsible for rural development policy and programming. Earlier decades relied heavily on federal agricultural initiatives such as the Agricultural Development Programme (ADP) and World Bank-assisted projects to boost food production and rural livelihoods; these shaped local capacity and expectations but also revealed sustainability and funding challenges that CRS has tried to address through state structures and partnerships.

From the 2000s onward, Cross River combined national programmes with state strategic plans and donor-backed infrastructure projects (for example, rural access and mobility initiatives) to improve market access and service delivery in rural areas. More recently the state's medium-term expenditure frameworks and sectoral strategies emphasise agro-industrial value chains (cocoa, coffee, oil palm), rural road rehabilitation, and

community-based poverty reduction reflecting a trend toward linking production, processing and market access rather than focusing solely on subsistence agriculture ( African Development Bankcrossriverstate.gov.ng, 2025).

### **Policy objectives and target areas**

Cross River State rural development policy is multi-dimensional. Across official documents and programme descriptions, the major policy objectives include:

1. Improving rural infrastructure and connectivity by upgrading feeder roads, bridges and rural mobility to reduce transport costs and link farmers to markets, as implemented under rural access projects and state investment plans.
2. Modernizing agriculture and promoting commercial value chains increasing productivity and shifting from subsistence farming to commercial production of high-value crops (notably cocoa, coffee, oil palm) through extension services, support to Agricultural Development Programmes, and participation in federal agro-industrial schemes.
3. Poverty reduction and community development using community-level social development agencies and targeted poverty-reduction programmes to strengthen livelihoods, improve micro-enterprises, and deliver small infrastructure and social services.
4. Health, water and sanitation by improving basic services in rural settlements (e.g., sanitation campaigns, rural water points, and health outreach), often implemented with UNICEF and other partners in priority LGAs.
5. Education and human capital by supporting rural schools, vocational training, and youth engagement to reduce migration pressures and build skills relevant to agro-processing and agribusiness.

### **Key actors and stakeholders**

Successful rural development in Cross River depends on a constellation of public, private and civil society actors. The key stakeholders are:

1. State government bodies and statutory agencies: The CRSRDA (established by law in 2007) is the central coordinating agency for rural development. Line ministries such as Agriculture, Works/Public Works (roads), Health, Education and Budget/Planning play implementation, financing and oversight roles, often reflected in the state MTEF and sectoral strategic plans.
2. Local government councils: Local Government Areas are critical for delivering basic services, maintaining local roads, and facilitating community engagement. Many community-level investments are planned and executed with Local Government Area participation, though capability and resource constraints remain a common challenge.
3. Federal agencies and national programmes: Federal initiatives such as ADP components, Special Agro-Industrial Processing Zones (SAPZ), and World Bank-supported projects provide technical funding and coordination that intersect with state priorities. These national programmes have shaped CRS's approaches to commercialization and value-chain development.
4. Development partners and financiers: International financial institutions (African Development Bank, World Bank), UN agencies (UNICEF), and bilateral donors fund infrastructure, sanitation, and agricultural innovation projects. Their financing and technical assistance have underpinned major rural access and sectoral interventions.
5. Non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations (CBOs): NGOs and CBOs implement community mobilization, training, sanitation, and small enterprise programmes. The Cross River State Community and Social Development Agency (CRSCSDA) and similar bodies collaborate with grassroots groups to ensure local ownership and to channel conditional grants.
6. Private sector and agribusiness: Emerging private investors in cocoa, coffee, and palm oil processing are important for creating off-farm employment and for stabilising demand for rural produce, especially under the state's agro-industrial strategic push.

## **Implementation strategies of rural development policy**

The success of these policies depends largely on well-structured strategies that integrate institutional frameworks, sustainable funding, community participation, and technological innovations discussed below:

### **Institutional frameworks for policy execution**

Institutional frameworks provide the organizational structures, legal backing, and administrative mechanisms for the successful execution of rural development policies. In many developing nations, rural development has been implemented through centralized planning frameworks, ministries, and specialized agencies. For example, in Nigeria, the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) was established in the 1980s to coordinate rural development. More recently, rural development initiatives are often handled through ministries of agriculture, rural development, and local government councils (Okafor & Anugwom, 2018). These frameworks facilitate coordination between national, state, and local governments, ensuring that policies are aligned with national development strategies such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Institutional frameworks also help in mobilizing resources, setting implementation standards, monitoring projects, and ensuring accountability. However, their effectiveness depends on bureaucratic efficiency, inter-agency collaboration, and reduced political interference.

### **Funding mechanisms and resource allocation**

Funding is a major determinant of rural development policy success. Rural development is capital-intensive, covering areas such as road construction, rural electrification, agricultural subsidies, healthcare, and education. Governments employ several funding mechanisms, including annual budgetary allocations, donor assistance, international development funds, and public-private partnerships (PPPs). According to Olayiwola and Adeleye (2019), inadequate funding and misallocation of resources have historically undermined rural development projects in Nigeria and other African countries. To enhance resource allocation, there is a growing shift toward participatory budgeting and fiscal decentralization, where local governments and rural communities directly influence how resources are allocated. Transparent funding mechanisms not only ensure equity but also enhance community trust in government interventions.

### **Community participation and stakeholder engagement**

Community participation is a critical success factor in rural development policy implementation. It involves engaging local people in decision-making, project design, execution, and monitoring. Rural communities often possess indigenous knowledge and social capital that can significantly improve the relevance and sustainability of development projects (Chambers, 2014). Stakeholder engagement also extends to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society groups, and the private sector. For example, NGOs often complement government efforts by providing technical assistance, advocacy, and grassroots mobilization. Studies show that projects that incorporate community input are more likely to succeed because they align with local needs and foster a sense of ownership (Afolayan & Adeoye, 2021).

### **Use of technology and innovations in rural development**

Technological innovations have transformed rural development approaches in recent years. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) plays a critical role in agricultural extension services, e-governance, rural banking, and educational outreach. For instance, mobile phones enable farmers to access real-time market prices, weather forecasts, and training programs, thereby improving agricultural productivity (World Bank, 2019). Innovations such as solar-powered electrification, digital financial services, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and telemedicine are bridging the rural-urban development gap. Mechanization and precision farming technologies also enhance agricultural efficiency, while e-learning platforms promote inclusive education in rural areas. These technological tools not only reduce rural poverty but also make rural communities more resilient to economic and environmental shocks.

### **Outcomes of the policy**

The outcomes of such strategies can be observed across several key dimensions, including socioeconomic impacts, infrastructure development, agricultural productivity and food security, human capital development, and overall quality of life improvements presented as follows:

#### **Socioeconomic impacts on rural communities**

One of the primary outcomes of rural development policy implementation strategies is the improvement of socioeconomic conditions in rural communities. By providing access to credit, promoting rural enterprises, and enhancing local markets, these policies create income-generating opportunities that directly impact household earnings. According to Ocheni and Nwankwo (2021), rural development initiatives such as cooperative societies, microfinance schemes, and vocational training have empowered rural dwellers economically, particularly women.

and youths, by enabling them to engage in sustainable businesses. Employment creation is another significant outcome. The implementation of rural development policies often emphasizes skills acquisition, agro-processing, and small-scale industries that provide both formal and informal employment opportunities. For instance, policies targeted at rural entrepreneurship have contributed to reducing rural–urban migration by engaging the rural labor force productively (Eze & Anigbogu, 2019). Improved livelihoods arising from these opportunities have enhanced social cohesion, reduced crime, and improved the standard of living in rural communities.

### **Infrastructure development**

Infrastructure development represents a cornerstone outcome of rural development policy implementation. Roads, water supply, electricity, schools, and health centers are essential to improving rural living conditions. Policies that prioritize rural electrification have enabled communities to access modern amenities and promote small-scale enterprises such as milling, welding, and cold storage businesses (Adeniyi & Ogundipe, 2020). Similarly, the provision of rural water schemes has reduced the burden of water scarcity, particularly for women who often bear the responsibility of fetching water for household use. Rural road development is another significant outcome, facilitating access to markets, healthcare services, and educational institutions. According to Nwachukwu and Ezeh (2020), improved transportation infrastructure reduces post-harvest losses, enhances mobility, and stimulates rural commerce by connecting remote villages to urban centers. Additionally, investments in rural schools and health centers have contributed to reducing disparities in education and healthcare access, thereby improving human development indicators.

### **Agricultural productivity and food security**

Agriculture remains the backbone of most rural economies, and rural development policies often prioritize agricultural interventions. Policy outcomes in this regard include improved crop yields, livestock production, and enhanced food security. Access to modern farming technologies, fertilizers, extension services, and credit facilities has boosted agricultural productivity in many rural areas (Ogunniyi et al., 2020). Moreover, initiatives such as the distribution of improved seedlings, irrigation schemes, and mechanization programs have enabled farmers to increase output and diversify agricultural production. These outcomes have contributed to ensuring household and national food security, while also generating surpluses for commercial purposes. According to Adeoti and Akinola (2021), rural development policies that integrate agricultural innovation with market access have not only improved food availability but also raised farmers' incomes, thereby reducing poverty levels in rural communities.

### **Human capital development**

Another critical outcome of rural development policy implementation strategies is the improvement of human capital through expanded access to education and healthcare. Rural education policies that support the construction of schools, teacher recruitment, and adult literacy programs have significantly increased school enrollment and literacy levels among rural populations (Okoli & Nwosu, 2021). Such outcomes are essential for equipping rural youths with the skills necessary for productive employment and active participation in economic activities. Healthcare outcomes are equally significant. Rural development policies that focus on building health centers, training healthcare personnel, and providing essential drugs have improved healthcare access for rural dwellers. Immunization programs, maternal healthcare initiatives, and HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns have reduced mortality rates and enhanced the general health status of rural populations (Nnamani, 2020). These outcomes directly contribute to improved productivity and social well-being, as a healthier population can participate more effectively in development processes.

### **Poverty reduction and quality of life improvements**

Ultimately, the overarching outcome of rural development policy implementation strategies is poverty reduction and improvement in the quality of life. By addressing the multidimensional aspects of poverty including lack of income, poor access to infrastructure, inadequate health care, and limited educational opportunities rural development policies have contributed to reducing inequalities between rural and urban areas. Household surveys indicate that communities benefiting from rural development interventions often report improved housing, nutrition, access to safe water, and reduced vulnerability to economic shocks (Akinwale & Adeyemi, 2021). For example, empowerment initiatives for women and youth have reduced dependency ratios and improved household decision-making power. These outcomes cumulatively enhance the overall quality of life in rural areas and contribute to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs).

### **Critical appraisal of rural development policy**

Rural development policies across Nigeria, including Cross River State and other regions, have been formulated with the overarching aim of transforming rural communities through poverty reduction, infrastructural development, agricultural productivity, and enhanced quality of life. However, the implementation of such

policies has produced mixed outcomes, with successes recorded in certain areas and persistent challenges in others. A critical appraisal of rural development policy implementation strategies reveals the achievements, limitations, policy–practice gaps, and comparative lessons from other Nigerian states and African contexts which this paper examined thus:

### **Successes and achievements of the policy**

One of the notable successes of rural development policy implementation in Nigeria has been the improvement of rural infrastructure. In states like Cross River, the state government and donor agencies have invested in rural road networks, electrification projects, and the provision of water supply systems (Okereke, 2018). These initiatives have improved accessibility to markets and reduced isolation of rural communities, thereby fostering agricultural trade and social integration. Another significant achievement has been the promotion of agricultural productivity through rural development policies. Programs such as the Growth Enhancement Support Scheme (GESS) and Anchor Borrowers Programme (ABP) introduced by the federal government have had spillover effects on states like Cross River, enabling smallholder farmers to access improved seeds, fertilizers, and credit facilities (Nwaleji & Uzuegbunam, 2020). These interventions have contributed to higher yields and increased food availability, reducing the vulnerability of rural households to hunger. Additionally, rural development policies have led to modest improvements in human capital development, particularly in education and healthcare access. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme and rural health initiatives have enhanced literacy levels and increased immunization coverage in rural communities. These outcomes are central to improving the productivity and resilience of rural populations (Adefila, 2019). Furthermore, community-driven development approaches, such as the Community and Social Development Project (CSDP), have recorded achievements by encouraging local participation and ownership of development projects. This bottom-up strategy has enabled rural dwellers to identify their pressing needs, ranging from borehole water systems to health centers, thereby ensuring sustainability and relevance of interventions (Ogunleye & Olagunju, 2020).

### **Limitations and weaknesses in design and implementation**

Despite these successes, several limitations undermine the effectiveness of rural development policies in Nigeria. First, poor institutional frameworks and weak governance structures often result in inadequate monitoring, coordination, and accountability. Many rural development projects are characterized by duplication of efforts, poor supervision, and mismanagement of resources (Akinola, 2020). Secondly, funding constraints remain a critical weakness. Although budgets are frequently allocated for rural development, disbursement is often irregular and insufficient. Corruption and political interference exacerbate the problem, with resources diverted away from intended beneficiaries (Agba et al., 2019).

Another significant limitation is the top-down approach in policy design, which often neglects the voices of rural communities. Many rural dwellers remain passive recipients of interventions, resulting in projects that are poorly adapted to local realities and therefore unsustainable (Olaleye & Adekola, 2021). For instance, rural electrification projects in parts of Cross River and Benue States have failed due to lack of local capacity to maintain facilities, leading to project abandonment. Furthermore, infrastructural interventions have been unevenly distributed, with some rural areas receiving significant attention while others remain marginalized. This uneven implementation fosters regional inequalities and limits the overall effectiveness of rural development initiatives (World Bank, 2020).

### **Policy–practice gaps**

There is a glaring disconnect between policy intentions and actual practice in rural development strategies. While policies often emphasize inclusivity, sustainability, and poverty reduction, implementation is plagued by inefficiency and politicization. For example, the National Rural Development Policy underscores participatory governance, yet in practice, rural communities are rarely consulted in the planning stages (Okonkwo, 2019). Additionally, while agricultural support programs have been widely publicized, many rural farmers, particularly women and marginalized groups, face bureaucratic bottlenecks in accessing inputs and credit facilities. This exclusion weakens the transformative potential of such interventions (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2020). Moreover, gaps exist in monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Policies are rarely followed by rigorous impact assessments, making it difficult to measure progress and identify areas requiring adjustment. This weakens accountability and perpetuates cycles of policy failure (Akinola, 2020).

### **Comparative insights from other Nigerian States and African contexts**

Comparisons with other Nigerian states and African contexts provide valuable lessons. In Lagos State, for example, rural development strategies have been more integrated with urban economic planning, leading to better connectivity and market access for rural farmers (Adefila, 2019). Similarly, in Kaduna State, the use of technology in agricultural extension services has enhanced productivity and strengthened rural resilience. In an

African context, Kenya's devolved governance system has offered more autonomy to counties, enabling tailored rural development programs that reflect local priorities. The success of Kenya's rural electrification and community-driven health programs underscores the importance of decentralized governance and accountability (World Bank, 2020). Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) also provides a comparative model, as it combines food aid with community asset building, thereby linking immediate poverty alleviation with long-term rural development (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019). These examples suggest that Nigeria, and by extension Cross River State, could strengthen rural development outcomes by promoting decentralization, enhancing transparency, leveraging technology, and ensuring genuine community participation.

## **Recommendations**

Rural development policies are crucial instruments for addressing the socioeconomic disparities between urban and rural areas in Nigeria. However, the success of such policies depends on the effectiveness of their implementation strategies. While many rural development programs in Nigeria and across Africa have achieved notable results, challenges such as weak institutional capacity, poor funding, lack of community participation, and inadequate monitoring systems continue to hinder sustainable outcomes. To address these issues, the following recommendations are presented with a focus on improving policy design and implementation, enhancing stakeholder collaboration and community ownership, strengthening financing and monitoring mechanisms, and integrating technology and evidence-based policymaking.

### **1. Strategies to improve policy design and implementation**

One of the fundamental challenges of rural development in Nigeria is the gap between policy formulation and practical execution. To overcome this, policy design must be based on comprehensive needs assessments that reflect the realities of rural communities. Policymakers should adopt a participatory approach during the design stage by engaging local leaders, farmers' associations, women's groups, and youth organizations to ensure inclusivity. This ensures that the identified strategies respond directly to the socio-economic and infrastructural needs of the people. Furthermore, implementation should be decentralized to reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks. Local government authorities should be given more autonomy to tailor development initiatives to suit local contexts while still aligning with national priorities. Clear roles, responsibilities, and accountability frameworks must be established to prevent overlapping mandates among implementing agencies. In addition, periodic review of rural development policies is necessary to ensure flexibility and responsiveness to emerging challenges such as climate change, population growth, and rural-urban migration.

### **2. Enhancing stakeholder collaboration and community ownership**

Effective rural development requires the active collaboration of multiple stakeholders, including government institutions, civil society organizations, private sector actors, traditional rulers, and the rural population itself. To strengthen stakeholder engagement, mechanisms such as multi-stakeholder platforms and rural development councils should be institutionalized at local, state, and national levels. These platforms can serve as spaces for dialogue, joint planning, and decision-making to ensure inclusiveness and reduce conflicts. Community ownership is also critical for the sustainability of development interventions. Policies should incorporate community-driven development (CDD) approaches where beneficiaries participate in project planning, resource allocation, and monitoring. This fosters accountability, reduces resistance, and promotes long-term sustainability. Empowering traditional institutions and grassroots organizations can further reinforce ownership, given their proximity to local realities and their ability to mobilize people for collective action.

### **3. Sustainable financing and monitoring mechanisms**

The inadequacy and inconsistency of funding remain major obstacles to rural development implementation in Nigeria. To address this, a sustainable financing strategy must be developed. Governments should allocate dedicated funds for rural development in annual budgets and ensure timely disbursement to avoid project delays. Beyond government allocations, partnerships with private investors, development partners, and donor agencies should be strengthened to mobilize additional resources. Innovative financing mechanisms such as community cooperatives, microfinance schemes, and public-private partnerships (PPPs) can also support rural infrastructure, agriculture, and social services. Equally important is the establishment of strong monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. Monitoring should not only assess financial accountability but also evaluate the impact of policies on livelihoods, infrastructure, and poverty reduction. Community-based monitoring mechanisms should be encouraged, where local residents actively track the progress of projects and report outcomes. This participatory monitoring approach enhances transparency and ensures that development interventions remain relevant and impactful.

#### 4. Integration of technology and evidence-based policymaking

Modern rural development strategies must integrate technology to enhance efficiency, transparency and accountability. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and satellite mapping can be used for rural planning, especially in the allocation of resources for infrastructure development. Mobile technology can also improve service delivery in areas such as agricultural extension, health, and education. For example, farmers can receive weather updates, market prices, and access to credit through mobile platforms, thereby boosting productivity and income. Equally important is the adoption of evidence-based policymaking. Data-driven approaches should guide decision-making to ensure that policies are aligned with real community needs and global development standards. Governments should invest in research institutions and encourage collaboration with universities and think tanks to generate reliable data for policy design and evaluation. Regular impact assessments should also be conducted to identify best practices and replicate successful models across different regions.

#### Conclusion

The appraisal of the Cross River State Rural Development Policy has revealed both commendable achievements and persisting challenges in its implementation strategies and outcomes. While notable progress has been made in areas such as rural infrastructure, agricultural productivity, and social service delivery, gaps remain in terms of sustainable financing, inclusive participation, and effective monitoring mechanisms. The persistence of policy–practice disconnects, coupled with issues of weak institutional capacity, inadequate resource allocation, and limited community ownership, underscores the need for more adaptive and participatory approaches to rural development. Looking into the future, rural development in Cross River State must embrace an integrated and people-centered strategy that leverages local knowledge, participatory governance, and innovative technologies. Strengthening the collaboration between government, non-governmental actors, and rural communities will be central to achieving sustainable outcomes. Furthermore, the incorporation of evidence-based policymaking, climate-resilient agricultural practices, and digital innovations can significantly enhance the resilience and productivity of rural areas. As rural communities continue to grapple with socioeconomic vulnerabilities, the future of rural development in the state will depend on how effectively policies address equity, inclusiveness, and long-term sustainability.

This study makes a valuable contribution to policy discourse by providing an empirical assessment of the successes, limitations, and opportunities inherent in the Cross River State Rural Development Policy. By highlighting both achievements and shortcomings, it offers practical insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and community stakeholders seeking to refine strategies for rural transformation. More importantly, it enriches the broader conversation on rural development in Nigeria by emphasizing the need for context-specific, participatory, and adaptive policy frameworks. Ultimately, the findings reinforce the imperative of moving beyond policy rhetoric to actionable, community-driven, and evidence-based rural development interventions that can transform livelihoods and enhance the quality of life in Cross River State and beyond.

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