

# Reimagining community participation in community projects: The role of theatre for development in inclusive planning

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## Abstract

Community participation is critical to effective development planning, yet remains a challenge in many parts of Nigeria. This study explores Theatre for Development (TfD) as a participatory tool for fostering inclusive community engagement. Drawing on qualitative data from three university-led TfD projects in Edo State – Ulemon, Okada, and Ekpoma – this paper examines how culturally grounded theatrical interventions influence community participation. Using focus group discussions and unstructured interviews with 90 purposively selected participants (lecturers, students, and community members), the study found that TfD can bridge communication gaps between planners and local populations, especially when delivered in local languages and traditional performance styles. In Ulemon, responsiveness to community priorities resulted in revived cultural practices and strong engagement. In Okada, the exclusion of women from planning led to resistance and non-participation. In Ekpoma, inclusive practices prompted open discussion of road safety issues and contributed to institutional policy change. The closing paragraph now clearly states the paper’s contribution: that TfD facilitates co-production, challenges power, and should be integrated into Nigeria’s planning frameworks. Key findings are explicitly highlighted – cultural revival, gender exclusion, and policy influence – and the final sentence articulates the study’s core argument and practical implication.

**Keywords:** *theatre for development, community engagement, inclusive planning, participatory development, Nigeria*

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## 1. Introduction

Community development empowers people to collectively identify and address challenges, fostering local agency through inclusive dialogue and capacity-building. It fosters local agency and sustainable transformation through inclusive dialogue and capacity-building (Veta, 2024; Ledwith & Springett, 2023). The role of participatory theatre in strengthening civic engagement aligns with global commitments to inclusive development, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 (UN, 2015; UNDESA, 2023). This goal emphasises the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, accountable institutions, and responsive decision-making at all levels. Recent research suggests that localised, creative approaches such as Theatre for Development (TfD) can serve as tools for deepening participatory governance and fostering inclusive civic spaces (Idebe et al., 2024; Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2023). In Nigeria, community development remains central to government strategy, particularly as reflected in policy frameworks such as the National Development Plan (2021–2025), which emphasises grassroots participation, cultural relevance, and inclusive service delivery (FGN, 2021; World Bank, 2022). However, a persistent challenge lies in the disconnect between official policy and actual implementation. Many development initiatives still rely on externally imposed, top-down models that overlook the insights and lived experiences of local communities.

A major barrier is the continued reliance on secondary data and bureaucratic planning approaches that fail to reflect ground realities (Ayeni & Asaju, 2021; Ovwasa & Onimisi, 2021; Asabe Shehu Yar'Adua Foundation, 2020). As a result, communities are often treated as passive recipients of development rather than as active stakeholders. This has led to increasing calls for participatory approaches that are culturally embedded, inclusive, and locally driven. More importantly, effective participation must transcend consultation and ensure that community voices are central in identifying problems, shaping priorities, and co-producing solutions. This requires methods that are not only inclusive but also contextually relevant and engaging.

One such model is TfD – a participatory and culturally rooted communication strategy that uses drama to stimulate dialogue, deepen awareness, and empower communities (Chinyowa, 2022; Abah, 2023). TfD aligns strongly with participatory development principles, offering a medium through which marginalised voices can be amplified and local concerns directly addressed. Though widely recognised for its educational and mobilising capacity, few

studies have systematically assessed how Tfd contributes to community participation in the design, negotiation, and ownership of development projects, especially when implemented by academic institutions engaging directly with rural or peri-urban communities. Furthermore, in a country as diverse as Nigeria, the ability of Tfd to adapt to multiple linguistic, cultural, and political contexts positions it as a highly flexible and accessible model for citizen engagement. It represents not only a pedagogical or performative tool, but also a potential channel for participatory governance.

This study seeks to explore how Tfd can facilitate inclusive community engagement in development projects in Nigeria. Drawing on case studies from three communities in Edo State – Ulemon, Okada, and Ekpoma – it examines the degree to which Tfd practices promote local participation, reflect cultural relevance, and influence planning outcomes. The core research questions guiding this study are:

How do community members participate in university-led Tfd projects?

What role does cultural context play in shaping participation outcomes?

How do inclusive or exclusive Tfd practices affect the success of development initiatives?

## **2. Theatre for Development (Tfd): Theory, Practice, and Critical Perspectives**

### ***2.1. Conceptual Foundations: Theatre and Participatory Development***

Recent literature has positioned participatory arts within the broader discourse of inclusive governance and social accountability (UNDP, 2025; Annahar et al., 2023). The UNDP's latest framework on participatory governance highlights community-led dialogue, local ownership, and creative civic engagement as critical tools in achieving the SDGs (UNDP, 2025). Similarly, current work by Silaban et al. (2022) argues that performative civic interventions, such as those employed in Tfd, can generate 'citizen-centred feedback loops' that enhance institutional responsiveness. These align with the principles of SDG 16.7, which emphasises participatory, representative, and inclusive decision-making (UNDP, 2022). It also aligns with the empirical work by Islam and Rahaman (2025), which investigated the extent and quality of people's participation in Union Parishads (the lowest tier of local government) in Bangladesh.

TfD is grounded in participatory development theory, which emphasises that communities must be actively engaged in shaping the decisions that affect their lives (Asante & Yirenkyi, 2018; Ife, 2020). Participatory development resists externally imposed planning and instead advocates for inclusive, bottom-up approaches that recognise community agency, cultural knowledge, and social capital. TfD operationalises these ideals by using culturally rooted dramatic forms, dialogue, song, dance, improvisation - to foster dialogue and collective action (Abah, 2023; Mlama, 2023).

Rather than treating local populations as passive recipients of information, TfD enables them to function as co-creators of knowledge and solutions. Through iterative performance-reflection cycles, communities are empowered to articulate concerns, interrogate dominant narratives, and co-develop strategies for transformation (Chinyowa, 2022; Balme & Hakib, 2023). This places TfD at the intersection of education, mobilisation, and democratic communication. Importantly, participatory development also challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge, elevating lived experience as central to the design and evaluation of development interventions (Veta, 2024). This shift is critical in contexts where marginalised communities possess deep contextual insight despite lacking formal institutional representation.

## ***2.2. TfD in Practice: Process and Methodology***

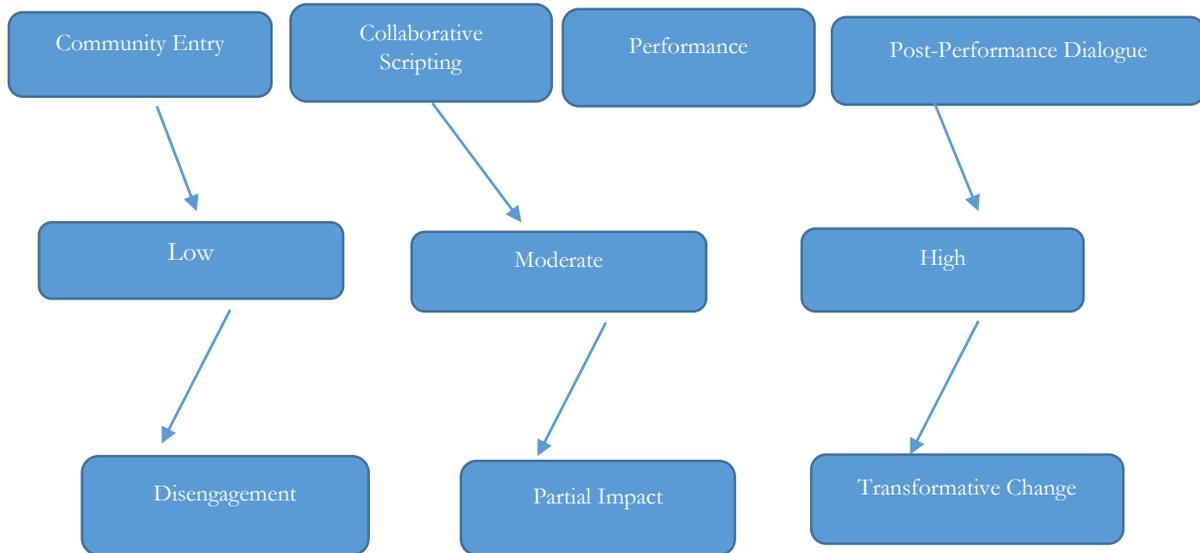
TfD typically follows a structured yet flexible process, beginning with ethnographic immersion. Practitioners conduct field visits, interviews, and cultural mapping to surface values, taboos, and community-defined concerns (Pink, 2024; Asante & Yirenkyi, 2018). This stage is foundational to trust-building and cultural relevance.

The production phase involves collaborative issue identification, followed by improvisation and scene development through community storytelling. Rehearsals become dialogic spaces for feedback and message refinement (Koppett, 2013; Sawyer, 2004). This process transforms performance into a shared text, shaped by local narratives and priorities.

Performances are usually staged in familiar communal settings and conclude with structured reflection sessions, such as public forums or focus groups. These forums enable further meaning-making and the co-creation of potential solutions. As Hakib (2022) argue, TfD thus becomes both a method of engagement and a platform for grassroots knowledge production.

**Figure 1**

*A conceptual model of the Theatre for Development (TfD) process and its impact pathway*



### ***2.3. Cultural Adaptation and Local Legitimacy***

TfD’s effectiveness is closely linked to its cultural legitimacy. Scholars emphasise that impactful community theatre must resonate with indigenous performance aesthetics and communication norms (Mlama, 2023; Abah, 2023). The use of proverbs, storytelling, local language, and ritual enhances comprehension and emotional connection (Chinyowa, 2022). Yet, this cultural embeddedness must be navigated critically. Traditional practices may also reflect or reinforce gender inequality and social exclusion (Etherton, 2012; Uwawah, 2020). TfD practitioners must therefore balance cultural fluency with a commitment to equity and ethical engagement. Etherton (2012) describes this as “culturally intimate performance” – where communal identity is affirmed but also interrogated. The revival of the Ugba dance in Ulemon, for example, highlights how TfD can serve as both a medium of public health education and a vehicle for cultural preservation. However, the same cultural tools must be scrutinised for their inclusiveness and social consequences.

### ***2.4. Gender Inclusion and Structural Exclusion in TfD***

Despite its participatory promise, TfD can inadvertently reproduce structural inequalities. In patriarchal contexts, traditional leadership structures often marginalise women’s and youths’ voices, and TfD may reflect these dynamics if not carefully designed

(Holgersson & Romani, 2019; Chanda & Ngulube, 2024). Studies reveal that Tfd projects consulting only male elders risk tokenism, alienating key stakeholders such as market women, youth, and other underrepresented groups. This was evident in the Okada case studied in this paper, where the absence of women from planning led to active disengagement. Conversely, when intersectionality informs Tfd design, the process yields deeper community buy-in, richer performance content, and more sustainable outcomes (Uwawah, 2023). Inclusion is not only an ethical imperative but a practical requirement for community legitimacy and project success.

### ***2.5. Evolving Terminology and Global Relevance***

Tfd intersects with broader global practices like Popular Theatre, Community Theatre, and Theatre for Social Transformation (Ekwunife 2021; Inyanda & Atule, 2022). These models vary in their origins and institutional affiliations but share a commitment to performance as collective empowerment.

Tfd's relevance is growing within global development and humanitarian programming, particularly in civic education, environmental sustainability, and post-conflict recovery (Shehu & Abba, 2020). Its low resource demands and cultural flexibility make it an attractive tool in settings with limited infrastructure. Importantly, Tfd aligns with international policy frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 16, for instance, calls for inclusive institutions and participatory decision-making at all levels, an agenda that Tfd can help operationalise at the grassroots.

### ***2.6. Synthesis of Gaps in the Literature***

Although the literature affirms Tfd's value in mobilisation and awareness creation, gaps remain in its analysis as a participatory planning tool. Very few comparative studies examine how Tfd facilitates inclusive governance outcomes in university-community partnerships. Research also under-theorises how cultural adaptation and gender dynamics intersect to shape participation quality and project legitimacy.

This study addresses these gaps by analysing three university-led Tfd interventions in Nigeria through a participatory development lens. It offers insight into the conditions that enable or undermine inclusive planning through performance, contributing to both Tfd scholarship and participatory development discourse.

Despite the expanding scholarship on Tfd as a participatory and inclusive engagement tool, significant gaps remain in the literature.

First, there is limited integration of Tfd with inclusive planning frameworks. While numerous studies highlight Tfd's role in mobilising communities, raising awareness, and fostering dialogue, few explicitly analyse how Tfd can be embedded within formal participatory planning structures, either in Nigeria or globally. Much of the existing work focuses on isolated interventions rather than sustained, system-level integration into governance processes and institutional planning models (Veta, 2024; Ledwith & Springett, 2023).

Second, there is scarce attention to cross-gender participation in Tfd beyond African contexts. Gender inclusion remains a critical determinant of participatory legitimacy, yet scholarly engagement with this dimension is often geographically restricted. Most gender analyses in Tfd literature are based on African case studies, leaving a gap in understanding how gender dynamics operate in other cultural and socio-political environments.

Evidence from Asia and Latin America demonstrates the value of broadening this scope. In India, the Jana Sanskriti Forum Theatre has been linked to shifts in gender norms and reductions in domestic violence, with evaluations showing a 25% decline in physical abuse and a marked reduction in the number of men who considered wife-beating acceptable (Chaudhuri et al., 2025). Similarly, participatory theatre and speculative design workshops in rural Bihar have facilitated women's active involvement in envisioning and articulating community futures, challenging structural marginalisation (Rao et al., 2020). In Nepal, Forum Theatre interventions have brought together audiences across gender and caste lines, fostering empathy, prompting critical reflection on entrenched norms, and initiating localised actions towards gender equity (Grollios et al., 2015). In Latin America, participatory theatre projects in El Salvador have been deployed to address gender-based violence among adolescents, offering a model for transforming masculinities and reducing interpersonal violence through culturally resonant performance (Tsapalas et al., 2023).

These examples illustrate that integrating Tfd into inclusive planning frameworks, while ensuring cross-gender participation, remains an underexplored but vital area for further research. Addressing these gaps would not only strengthen the theoretical foundations of Tfd but also enhance its practical relevance for participatory governance and social transformation in diverse contexts.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Design and Case Selection***

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in participatory inquiry. This approach was selected to explore the complexities of TfD as a tool for inclusive community engagement. Given the cultural, social, and interpersonal dynamics that shape participation, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for capturing local voices, lived experiences, and community narratives in their own terms (Annahar et al, 2023; Ife, 2020). Rather than testing pre-defined hypotheses, the goal was to explore how different participatory strategies either facilitate or inhibit meaningful inclusion in community planning initiatives.

Qualitative research is particularly suited for studying community theatre interventions because it allows for the interpretation of nuanced meaning, symbolism, and cultural signifiers embedded in both the performance process and the audience responses (Collins & Stockton, 2022). It enables a reflexive, context-sensitive exploration of values, relationships, and power dynamics that may not be captured by quantitative methods.

The study adopted a comparative case study design, focusing on three university-led TfD projects conducted between 2016 and 2020 in different communities of Edo State: Ulemon, Okada, and Ekpoma. These sites were purposively selected to reflect contrasting levels of inclusivity and participation, offering a rich basis for comparative analysis. All three projects were initiated by students and faculty in university theatre departments, but they varied in thematic focus, community structure, and participatory outcomes.

The case study method is widely used in social research where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred (Stake, 2005). In this study, the cases enabled in-depth examination of TfD as a situated, culturally embedded practice that operates within distinct social, institutional, and geographic environments.

#### ***3.2. Sampling and Participant Composition***

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants with direct involvement in the TfD projects. The sample comprised three stakeholder categories: university lecturers, student performers, and community members who either participated in or witnessed the performances. Inclusion criteria required that participants be directly involved in at least one of the three phases of TfD (planning, performance, or post-performance dialogue). This

ensured that all respondents could provide first-hand reflections on the participatory dynamics and outcomes of each project.

In total, 90 participants were engaged across the three sites. Table 1 outlines the breakdown:

**Table 1**

*Participant breakdown by site and role*

<b>Community</b>	<b>Lecturers</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Community Members</b>	<b>Total</b>
Ulemon	2	8	16	26
Okada	1	9	21	31
Ekpoma	2	7	24	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>90</b>

The sampling strategy provided a diversity of perspectives across gender, occupation, and generational status. Although participants were not equally represented by gender in all groups, deliberate effort was made to ensure women's participation in focus group discussions (FGDs), particularly in Ekpoma and Ulemon, where gender-based reflections were critical.

### **3.3. Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected using six FGDs and fifteen unstructured interviews, supplemented by review of scripts, photographs, and performance notes. Each case site hosted two FGDs, one with university-affiliated participants (students and lecturers) and one with community members. FGDs allowed for group-based meaning-making and reflection, while unstructured interviews provided deeper individual perspectives, particularly among traditional leaders and women.

The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation and improved credibility of findings. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in either English or the local language (e.g., Esan, Edo) depending on participant comfort. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with translations provided where necessary.

Data collection occurred between June and September 2022, after obtaining ethical clearance and community consent. The research team included fluent speakers of the local dialects and trained facilitators to ensure inclusive and respectful dialogue.

Saturation was reached when no new themes emerged from additional FGDs or interviews. Thematic repetition across participant groups and sites confirmed that key issues, such as cultural ownership, gender exclusion, and institutional response, had been sufficiently explored.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking was conducted with selected participants during follow-up visits, allowing them to verify the accuracy of transcripts and interpretations.

### ***3.4. Data Analysis: Thematic Approach***

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase model of thematic analysis: Familiarisation with transcripts; Initial coding of meaningful units; Theme generation through clustering of codes; Theme review for coherence and relevance; Theme definition with supporting data; and Final analysis and reporting.

Coding was conducted manually using Excel spreadsheets, allowing the team to map themes across stakeholder categories and communities. Examples of core themes included: "performance as dialogue," "cultural identity," "gender exclusion," and "institutional responsiveness." To enhance intercoder reliability, three researchers independently coded the same subset of transcripts and met to reconcile differences through consensus. This collaborative process improved analytic rigour and reduced researcher bias. Themes were subsequently aligned with the theoretical framing, particularly participatory development theory, to explore how community knowledge and agency were enacted or undermined in each case.

### ***3.5. Ethical Considerations, Reflexivity, and Positionality***

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to fieldwork. Community entry followed established cultural protocols, beginning with courtesy visits to chiefs, elders, and women leaders, who granted permission for the research to proceed. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were used for individuals and communities in all transcripts, reports, and publications. Sensitive content from performances and FGDs was anonymised to prevent potential harm or reprisals.

Reflexivity was central to this study, given the dual roles of the researchers as academic facilitators and cultural mediators. As feminist and participatory research traditions emphasise, reflexivity requires researchers to interrogate their own positionality, privilege, and influence on the research process (England, 2020). In this case, the research team comprised insiders (local university staff and students) and semi-outsiders (urban-based academics), a dynamic that shaped both access and interpretation.

Field notes captured moments of power negotiation during FGDs, especially where younger women deferred to male elders. Acknowledging and analysing such dynamics were critical for maintaining analytic transparency and methodological rigour.

Positionality also intersected with language use: facilitators who spoke local dialects gained deeper trust from participants, while those who did not had to rely on translators. This highlighted how linguistic competence is not a neutral factor but an element of researcher positionality that can influence depth of engagement and authenticity of responses.

#### **4. Context of the Study**

Between 2016 and 2020, three university-led projects were implemented in three communities of Edo State, Nigeria – Ulemon, Okada, and Ekpoma. These initiatives, facilitated by students and lecturers from the University of Benin (UNIBEN), Igbinedion University Okada (IUO), and Ambrose Alli University (AAU), sought to promote community engagement in addressing public health, sanitation, and road safety issues. While all three projects adopted TFD methodologies, they differed significantly in participatory approach, cultural grounding, and project outcomes.

To aid cross-case analysis, Table 2 presents a comparative overview of key themes and outcomes by site.

**Table 2***Comparative participation metrics and outcomes by project site*

Community	Level of Participation	Gender Balance (% Female Participants)	Community-Led Decisions	Cultural Sensitivity	Key Outcomes	Exclusion Issues
<b>Ulemon</b>	High – Collaborative planning and performance	42%	Yes – community redirected focus from Lassa Fever to general hygiene	Strong – integration of local beliefs, revival of Ugba dance	Increased ownership, cultural documentation, shift to relevant hygiene issues	None reported
<b>Okada</b>	Low – Women excluded from planning	28%	No – decisions made solely by male elders	Moderate – traditional authority consulted, but gender voices absent	Limited engagement; dissatisfaction expressed during feedback	Gender exclusion; perceived collusion with elders
<b>Ekpoma</b>	High – Inclusive engagement with bikers, students, staff	39%	Yes – performance shaped by multi-stakeholder consultation	Context-sensitive – addressed local accident causes	University implemented dress code policy; reduced road accidents	Gender bias concerns in policy response

*Note:* Gender balance data are based on approximate proportions derived from participant composition in focus groups and interviews.

## 5. Findings and Analysis

### *Case 1: Ulemon – Reviving Cultural Identity and Participation*

The Ulemon project centred on the revival of the Ugba dance, a traditional performance form that had declined in recent years. Community members identified the neglect of cultural practices as both a symptom and a driver of disengagement from collective problem-solving. The Tfd team, drawing on local performance traditions, incorporated the Ugba dance into the performance narrative as a catalyst for participation. Performances were staged in the village square and attracted large audiences, including elders, women, and youths. The cultural framing created familiarity, which encouraged community members to openly share concerns during post-performance dialogues. Issues raised included lack of access to potable water, the need for agricultural support, and the preservation of local heritage.

Participants reported that the blending of Tfd with local culture enhanced trust and legitimacy, making them feel that their voices were valued. Elders viewed the revival of the Ugba dance not only as entertainment but as a reaffirmation of identity and continuity. This

alignment of cultural revival with problem-solving strengthened the project's legitimacy in ways that extended beyond theatre. Importantly, the process of integrating the Ugba dance was not merely symbolic. It provided a context in which participants could negotiate intergenerational knowledge and values, positioning the performance as both a cultural archive and a participatory planning tool.

The Ulemon case illustrates how cultural relevance is not just a methodological consideration but a theoretical one. By situating TfD within participatory development discourse, the case demonstrates how culture and performance can become vehicles for inclusive governance.

### ***Case 2: Okada – Exclusion, Resistance, and Participation Breakdown***

The Okada project focused on environmental sanitation and waste management. However, the participatory process was marked by significant exclusion. Women were not invited to planning meetings, and their perspectives were largely absent from the initial script development. This exclusion created a perception that the project primarily served male interests and neglected pressing concerns identified by women, such as market hygiene and waterborne diseases.

During performances, the absence of women's voices in the storyline was evident. Female participants reported feeling marginalised and disengaged, which undermined audience reception and participation. Women questioned the legitimacy of a "community play" that did not reflect their realities.

The Okada case underscores the risks of tokenistic participation. Exclusionary practices not only diminished community trust but actively produced resistance. Some women boycotted post-performance discussions, while others voiced frustration publicly, challenging the project's credibility. This illustrates that TfD, if not inclusively designed, can replicate structural inequalities rather than transform them.

The exclusion of women thus emerged as a critical factor in the breakdown of participation. Unlike Ulemon, where cultural revival facilitated broad engagement, Okada demonstrates that TfD's participatory promise is contingent on inclusivity. Without it, projects risk alienating the very groups they intend to empower.

From a theoretical perspective, this case highlights the intersection of participatory development and feminist critiques. Genuine inclusion requires attention to power

asymmetries and recognition of marginalised voices as central to planning. The Okada case therefore illustrates how TfD outcomes depend not only on cultural adaptation but also on equity-oriented design. It highlights the tension between invited participation (top-down) and claimed participation (community-driven), a crucial issue in participatory development discourse (Islam & Rahaman, 2025).

### ***Case 3: Ekpoma – Inclusion, Dialogue, and Institutional Influence***

The Ekpoma project addressed road safety, a concern raised by both students and residents due to frequent accidents near the university community. Unlike Okada, the planning phase here was intentionally inclusive. Women, youth, and traditional leaders were all involved in script development and rehearsals. Their contributions shaped the storyline, which depicted multiple perspectives on reckless driving, alcohol abuse, and community responsibility.

Performances were held in open community spaces and attracted diverse audiences. Post-performance dialogues created a platform where young people challenged elders on issues of accountability, while women highlighted the disproportionate impact of unsafe roads on children and families. This multi-voiced exchange expanded the scope of deliberation beyond the initial script.

The project demonstrated that inclusive participation enhances both legitimacy and sustainability. Because multiple voices were represented, the performance was widely accepted as reflective of collective reality. Participation extended into the post-performance stage, where community members proposed concrete actions such as traffic wardens and local bylaws to regulate alcohol sales.

Importantly, the Ekpoma case illustrates how TfD can influence institutional actors. University administrators, who were present at the performances, subsequently incorporated road safety campaigns into their student orientation programmes. This outcome demonstrates the potential of TfD not only to foster community dialogue but also to shape institutional policy.

The Ekpoma project thus contrasts with Okada by showing how inclusivity can convert participatory performance into actionable governance outcomes. It reinforces the argument that TfD's success depends on equitable involvement across gender and generational lines.

### ***Cross-Case Analysis and Thematic Findings***

A comparative reading of Ulemon, Okada, and Ekpoma reveals patterned relationships between inclusivity, cultural adaptation, and perceived legitimacy of Tfd processes.

#### ***Theme 1: Inclusivity as the Engine of Legitimacy***

Across cases, breadth of participation predicted audience trust and downstream engagement. Ulemon and Ekpoma incorporated women, youth, and elders in planning and performance, which audiences recognised as “our story,” fuelling dialogue and follow-through.

Okada’s exclusion of women exposed how power asymmetries travel into Tfd, converting a participatory form into a site of resistance. This affirms feminist participatory theory that legitimacy derives from voice distribution, not merely the presence of a public performance.

#### ***Theme 2: Cultural Grounding Enables Dialogue - But Requires Critical Screening***

Embedding local forms (e.g., Ugba dance) lowered barriers to participation and anchored collective memory, but required screening for exclusionary residues within tradition. The cases show that “cultural intimacy” can both affirm identity and open it to critique; Tfd’s theoretical value lies in holding this tension productively during deliberation.

#### ***Theme 3: Language Choice Shapes Depth of Participation***

Use of local languages during rehearsal, performance, and post-show forums increased precision of testimony and reduced deference effects, especially among women and youth. Linguistic competence is part of researcher/practitioner positionality; when facilitators shared dialects, the dialogic exchange deepened, aligning with participatory knowledge production frameworks.

#### ***Theme 4: From Dialogue to Action - Institutional Responsiveness***

Only the inclusive case (Ekpoma) translated forum proposals into concrete steps (e.g., campus orientation on road safety), indicating that representational inclusivity can be a precursor to actionable governance outcomes. This movement from deliberation to policy

echoes participatory development theory's claim that citizen voice must intersect with decision nodes to achieve impact.

***Theme 5: Gender as a Structuring Variable, Not a Demographic Detail***

Where women's voices were missing upstream (Okada), participation broke down downstream; gender operated as a system property that organised access, topics, and perceived fairness. Intersectional design (Ekpoma) expanded the thematic range (care labour, child safety) and diversified solution repertoires, reinforcing theory that inclusive design improves both epistemic quality and outcome durability.

Taken together, the cases suggest a conditional model: cultural adaptation → perceived relevance → broader voice distribution → legitimacy → actionability. Breaks in any link (e.g., exclusion) degrade outcomes. Positioning TfD within participatory development clarifies why these links matter theoretically: TfD is not only communicative performance but an institutional interface where power, knowledge, and action co-produce development outcomes.

## **6. Discussion and Implications**

The three case studies reveal that TfD is not a neutral performance technique but a participatory planning tool whose success depends on inclusivity, cultural grounding, and institutional responsiveness.

***Policy implications.*** First, findings suggest that government agencies and universities must institutionalise TfD as a recognised tool for participatory governance. Its low-resource requirements and adaptability to local contexts make it a practical mechanism for extending grassroots voice into planning processes, particularly in rural or marginalised communities. However, inclusivity must be structurally guaranteed. Without deliberate frameworks to ensure women's, youths', and minority groups' participation, TfD risks reproducing existing inequities. Policy design should therefore embed intersectional criteria as a condition of participatory programming.

***Practice implications.*** Practitioners should treat TfD as more than cultural performance. Effective facilitation requires careful attention to power relations, language use, and representation during every stage, planning, performance, and dialogue. Capacity-building programmes for university facilitators and local artists are necessary to improve skills in ethical

facilitation, gender-sensitive design, and participatory evaluation. The practice of Tfd should also be repositioned as a partnership model rather than an intervention model. By framing communities as co-researchers and co-designers, Tfd aligns with participatory development theory's insistence that agency and knowledge are locally situated. This approach enhances both legitimacy and sustainability of outcomes.

***Theoretical implications.*** The findings refine participatory development theory by showing how performance can operationalise deliberative spaces where communities co-create knowledge and negotiate power asymmetries. Tfd thus extends participatory theory beyond textual or workshop-based forums into embodied, cultural arenas. Additionally, feminist and intersectional perspectives help reveal that Tfd's participatory promise is contingent on the redistribution of voice. The Okada case demonstrated that exclusion undermines legitimacy, while Ekpoma demonstrated that intersectional design broadens problem definition and solution generation. Theoretically, Tfd must therefore be read not only as participatory communication but also as an institutional site where inclusion and exclusion are performed and contested.

***Broader relevance.*** Beyond Nigeria, these insights are transferable to other Global South contexts where participatory planning is undermined by hierarchy, exclusion, or resource constraints. Tfd provides a low-cost, scalable, and culturally resonant pathway for grassroots communities to engage with development agendas and governance frameworks. At a global level, this study contributes to debates on how participatory tools can address the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16.7 (inclusive decision-making). By linking Tfd with both cultural identity and institutional responsiveness, the findings highlight its potential to transform not only community dialogue but also policy frameworks.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper examined three university-led Tfd projects in Edo State, Nigeria, to explore how participatory theatre functions as a tool for inclusive planning and community engagement. The cases reveal that Tfd's effectiveness is shaped by inclusivity, cultural adaptation, and institutional responsiveness. Where inclusivity was ensured (Ekpoma and Ulemon), Tfd facilitated trust, dialogue, and the co-creation of solutions that extended beyond the performance. Where exclusion prevailed (Okada), Tfd's legitimacy was undermined,

leading to disengagement and resistance. These findings confirm that TfD's participatory promise is contingent on equity in voice distribution.

Theoretically, this research situates TfD within participatory development discourse, showing how embodied performance expands the spaces in which deliberation and planning occur. Feminist and intersectional critiques further reveal that inclusion is not a peripheral matter but central to the credibility and sustainability of participatory processes.

Practically, the study calls for TfD to be institutionalised as part of community development and governance frameworks. This requires deliberate design strategies that foreground inclusivity, especially of women and marginalised groups, as well as mechanisms for translating performance outcomes into policy action.

Globally, the study underscores TfD's relevance for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16 on inclusive institutions. Its low-cost, culturally resonant model offers lessons for participatory planning in diverse contexts where formal consultation mechanisms remain limited.

In conclusion, TfD is more than an artistic tool: it is a participatory planning methodology capable of bridging cultural identity, grassroots agency, and institutional accountability. Future research should deepen comparative analysis across regions to refine our understanding of how TfD can advance inclusive governance on a global scale.

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