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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PARADIGMS: THE BHAHUMONO AGE-GRADE PERSPECTIVE*

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Abstract. Government-led socio-economic initiatives and infrastructural development have frequently fallen short in many developing economies, especially in rural areas. This persistent failure has resulted in widespread poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to essential services, forcing grassroots communities to adopt or re-engage with traditional mechanisms for sustainable development. The nine communities in the Bhahumono tribe share a comparable experiential trajectory. This qualitative case study, grounded in the place-building theory, examines how the age-grade system has been leveraged to mobilise financial resources for Indigenous community infrastructural projects in the face of civic misgovernance in post-colonial Africa, using Usumutong, one of the Bhahumono's communities, as a reference point. The findings highlight the resilience of rural communities in devising self-sustaining development models and how critical it is to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems to achieve comprehensive and lasting socio-economic progress.

Keywords: Age-grade system; community resilience; finance mobilisation; ill governance; inclusive economic development

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JEL Classifications: I31, A14, Q01

1. Introduction

Before slavery and colonialism, African communities were deeply rooted in communal systems that prioritised collective resource mobilisation for the common well-being of the people and their societies (Rodney, 1972). In this era, these societies function on principles of shared resources, mutual aid, and a strong sense of social responsibility. Their cultural orientation centred around contributing to building society rather than extracting from it, fostering a spirit of inclusivity and interdependence (Kanu, 2017; Curran, 2020; Mabele, Krauss & Kiwango, 2022). This social orientation allowed African communities to build progressive economies that were resilient and adaptive to environmental and social changes. Consequently, the intrusion of Western powers through slavery and colonialism caused a significant shift and disruption to these indigenous systems and practices. The imposition of foreign ideologies and economic structures initiated a dependency syndrome

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antithetical to previously existing self-sustaining models (Ali, Fjeldstad & Shifa, 2020). The colonialists introduced and implemented systems of resource exploitation and extraction, prioritising their interests over the well-being of the local African populations. The intrusion resulted in the dismantling of traditional African governance structures and economic systems, replacing them with hierarchical and segregated models designed to maintain colonial supremacy and local communities' dependency. Subsequently, the Western hegemony entrenched economic inequalities and fostered a dependency on foreign aid and imported goods, undermining African societies' capacity to develop.

Colonialism, a system that began in the 15th century, continues to impact and decimate Africa's economies in the 21st century. Many post-colonial African states still grapple with the challenges of economic dependency even after independence, with their economies heavily reliant on the export of raw materials that could potentially enhance growth if refined domestically, while importing finished goods that can also be produced locally (Bjornlund, Bjornlund & van Rooyen, 2022). This colonial dependency has perpetuated a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment of the people and their communities, making it difficult for African nations to harness their resources for the benefit of their populations fully. Beyond economic implications,

Western intrusions-imposed alien cultural values and orientations on Africa, gradually erasing its indigenous practices that once underpinned community resilience and sustainability (Arowolo, 2024). As these traditional African systems falter, and instances of poor governance by the systems that have replaced them in the political spheres and within democratic frameworks, there is a growing concern and recognition of the need to revalorise and integrate indigenous African knowledge systems and traditional economic models into contemporary development strategies to rejuvenate societies. This shift can create more inclusive and resilient economies that better reflect the needs and values of African societies.

In the context of the arguments above, this study examines one of Africa's Indigenous systems harnessed in the pre-colonial era for local economic sustainability. It delves into the age-grade system as an Indigenous African resource mobilisation mechanism for community development and economic resilience. Examining the role of age-grade structures in mobilising resources for sustainable local economies and stability, the study provides valuable insights into self-sustenance strategies in the face of national governance failures. This renewed focus on Indigenous practices offers practical avenues for distilling learning points that can be applied to modern challenges in anticipation of fostering greater community self-reliance and resilience amidst contemporary governance's shortcomings.

The subsequent sections present theoretical discourse of contemporary issues around misgovernance, community resilience in the face of misgovernance, the age-grade system, as well as the conceptual framework which aids understanding of how community structures, such as the age-grade system, individually, can mobilise financial resources to bolster development. In addition, the methodology employed is presented, followed by discussions based on the key findings. The results are twofold: the first relates to age-grade capital mobilisation avenues, while the second phase pertains to community infrastructural development projects initiated by age-grade systems. The conclusion and key recommendations derived from the findings are provided in the final sections.

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2. Misgovernance, a Contemporary Menace

The 21st century ushered in a rise in civic protest, reflecting growing public demand for reforms globally. This upsurge in protests frequently manifests amid widespread misgovernance, lack of social justice and political accountability, especially in governmental institutions (Ortiz, Burke, Berrada & Saenz Cortés, 2022; Leach, Ferguson & Teixeira, 2024). As governments increasingly fail to meet the basic needs of their citizens, such as education, healthcare, employment opportunities and security, public frustration has intensified, resulting in mass mobilisations and protests. This pattern is not isolated to a specific country or continent but is a global phenomenon with deep-rooted causes, mainly due to mismanagement, social inequality, and corruption. The Arab Spring, for instance, which began in 2010, was predominantly motivated by widespread dissatisfaction with authoritarian regimes and bribery across the Middle East and North African regions (Jha & Kırşanlı, 2024). These civic mobilisations, sparked by a combination of political repression, economic hardship and the lack of fundamental freedoms, brought about significant political upheaval in countries such as Egypt, Libya and Tunisia (Ortiz, Burke, Berrada & Saenz Cortés, 2022). Even though some governments were toppled, the aftermath of the protest has frequently been marked by instability and economic impact, highlighting the complex relationship between protest movements, governance and socio-economic wellness.

Civic mobilisation trends continue in various world regions, with protests erupting in response to misgovernance and general dissatisfaction. In Kenya, for example, the rising cost of living and perceived government corruption by the ruling party have led to protests and widespread civic unrest (Barasa, 2025). The demonstrations, championed by opposition parties in collaboration with civil society organisations, reflect deep-seated frustrations with the ruling government's economic policies, which many Kenyans perceived as instrumental to exacerbating poverty and inequality issues in the country. A similar trend was observed in Nigeria. A protest against police brutality in 2020 in the country, known as the #EndSARS movement, quickly evolved into a broader critique of poor governance, mismanagement, lack of accountability, corruption and decline in lifestyle (Adeniyi, 2022). This movement was led by young Nigerians who felt that their government was unresponsive to their needs and had failed to address security issues that average Nigerians confront in their everyday life endeavours. The protest, according to Iwara and Ojakorotu (2025), demonstrated the state of corruption in the country and the growing disconnect between the country's political leadership and its citizens, particularly among the younger generation who are increasingly demanding accountability, transparent governance and attention to the diverse socio-economic nature of the Nigerian population.

This pattern of protest linked to misgovernance is evident in various regions globally. Countries like Chile and Colombia have witnessed large-scale austerity measures, economic inequality, and government corruption in Latin America. In Chile, mass protests erupted in 2019 over a proposed increase in subway fares. The demonstrations quickly expanded to include demands for a more equitable society and ending neoliberal economic policies Chileans felt had deepened inequality (Garcés, 2019; Cox, González & Le Foulon, 2024). The 2019 Lebanon protests were sparked by a proposed tax on WhatsApp calls, metamorphosing into a broader movement against the entrenched corruption and sectarianism that have plagued the country for decades (Makdisi, 2021; Khatib, 2022). Similarly, Belarus and Myanmar protested against electoral fraud and authoritarianism, met with violent crackdowns; the potential for meaningful reform has been severely undermined, leading to further unrest and international condemnation (Amnesty International, 2021). These protests are not only expressions of discontent but also signals of deeper systemic issues that, if left unaddressed, can lead to prolonged political instability and hinder efforts to achieve good governance and sustainable development.

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In an endeavour to explore alternative options to dysfunctional government policies and services, traditional African communities frequently mobilise themselves to undertake economic development by creating local enterprises, cooperatives, and self-help groups. In parts of Southeast Asia, for instance, rural communities introduced microfinance groups and cooperatives to provide credit services and financial products that are otherwise inaccessible in their areas due to the lack of formal banking services (Bezboruah, 2022; Esquivias, Sethi, Ramandha & Jayanti, 2021). The self-established community financial systems enable residents to save and invest in small businesses, agriculture, and other income-generating activities, thus enhancing economic participation and local development. Similar trends exist in many parts of Africa, such as Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Egypt, among a myriad of others. Community-based organisations (CBOs), as well as savings and credit cooperatives (SACCOs), have played a crucial role in providing financial services and supporting small-scale entrepreneurship in many underserved communities (Tumwine, Mbabazize & Shukla, 2015; Mwangi & Wambua, 2016). These schemes demonstrate how grassroots African communities leverage their collective resources and social capital to build resilience, drive development, and sustain the local economy amidst dysfunctional state institutions and systemic governance concerns.

Traditional African communities' daily endeavours go beyond inculcating economic resilience; they also involve natural resource conservation and environmental stewardship for a sustainable economy. This is essential in areas where the ripple effects of misgovernance have cascaded into environmental degradation and unsustainable resource exploitation. The Maasai communities found in countries like Kenya and Tanzania, for instance, have long relied on traditional pastoralism – an economic system involving rotating grazing to prevent overgrazing in specific areas, thus maintaining ecological balance (Kereto, Oywaya Nkurumwa, Obara & Mango, 2022). A similar scenario has been observed in the Amazon rainforest, where indigenous communities develop sophisticated agroforestry systems that integrate crop cultivation with forest conservation to ensure the sustainable use of land and resources (Schmidt, Ikpeng, Kayabi, Sanches, Ono & Adams, 2021; Heredia-R, Torres, Cayambe, Ramos, Luna & Diaz-Ambrona, 2020; Wairimu Ng'ang'a & Crane, 2020). These traditional practices, while enhancing communal livelihoods, contribute to building resilient ecosystems and the preservation of biodiversity. The Bhahumono people of Nigeria are not exempt from economic resilience and self-sustenance – the age-grade system being one of the pivotal remedial mechanisms.

3. The Bhahumono Age-Grade System

The age-grade system (known as 'Ehop' in the Bhahomono language) is a traditional social institution prevalent in many African societies, particularly among the Igbo of Nigeria, the Kikuyu of Kenya, and the Maasai of Tanzania. This system organises individuals into groups based on their age, with each group progressing through distinct stages of social responsibility and leadership as they age (Babalola & Adedayo, 2021). There is no broad consensus on what age range should be considered a mate; some societies resorted to age intervals of four to five years (Babalola & Adedayo, 2021). The primary function of the age-grade system is to foster social cohesion, mutual support, and the transmission of cultural values across generations (Uzoh & Ekechukwu, 2024).

Each age grade is typically responsible for specific duties within the community, such as organising communal labour, defending the community, and performing rituals. Among the Igbo ethnic group, for example, younger age-grades are frequently tasked with physical labour and community service. At the same time, older age-grade structures take on leadership roles, serving as custodians of the community tradition. This system enhances active community participation as members integrate into the social fabric from a young age, learning to contribute to the common good while being recognised and gaining social status through grades.

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In the pre-colonial era, the age-grade structures played a crucial role in African governance and conflict resolution. As globalisation and modernisation in the 21st century gradually nullify traditions, this unique Indigenous practice is becoming extinct. Regardless, African societies, particularly in rural settings, still rely on the system for local governance, with different age-grade structures having specific roles in communal decision-making and the administration of justice. In Maasai Indigenous communities, for instance, the "Moran" (warrior) age grade takes on the responsibility for the defence of the community against external aggression and enforces communal rules (Marmone, 2017; Kovač & Schulz, 2023). The older people in the community handle disputes and make decisions on matters affecting the entire society. This decentralised approach to governance encourages a participatory and inclusive system, where decisions are collectively arrived at based on experience, knowledge and hierarchy.

Comparably, in eastern Nigeria, the age-grade system historically provided security to society by mobilising male warriors for territorial defence (Atuonwu, 2021). In addition to these roles, the system maintained social order by providing clear expectations and responsibilities for each age group. This strives to mitigate possible conflict tensions and ensures that internal disputes are resolved within communal norms and values.

Age-grades are still actively involved in administering local affairs, not limited to organising community development initiatives and communal resources management. In other words, the role of the age-grade system in community development and orderliness, even in the post-colonial era, cannot be overstated. It remains a resilient and relevant institution in traditional African societies' social and cultural life. In this study, we draw on the Place-building Theory to substantiate the discourse, explicitly focusing on the role of the age-grade system in finance mobilisation for community development amidst failed governance.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study examines age-graded systems, financial imperatives, and community development based on Place-building philosophical foundations. This theory is particularly fitting for this case analysis as it offers a structured approach to evaluating how entities contribute to their immediate communities through various forms of social engagement (Kimball & Thomas, 2012). It equally serves as a guide for understanding the dynamics of community engagement and identifying effective resource mobilisation channels for socio-economic development. The Place-building Theory postulates that community engagement structures are integral to place-building practices in every society and are deeply ingrained in the intrinsic beliefs and values that drive engagement strategies.

Grounded in organisational research, the place-building philosophical foundation highlights the interplay between geographical and social spaces, stressing their significance as arenas shaped by the meanings, values, and interpretations assigned to them by individuals or groups. These spaces are not merely physical locations but socially constructed environments that acquire distinct identities through collective and individual experiences and perceptions (Rodman, 1992).

The theory also sheds light on the social relations tied to specific spaces, with "place" as a platform that mediates interactions between individuals, groups, entities, and broader political structures. In other words, "place", in the context of the theory, is not limited to a static or purely local phenomenon but a dynamic construct influenced by multifaceted elements such as human intentions, goals, and values. Within the scope of this paper, age-grade systems assume both physical and social roles, for instance, community development projects in the Igbo ethnic contexts and conflict resolution as in the case of Maasai indigenous communities (Marmone, 2017; Kovač &

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Schulz, 2023). This interpretation aligns seamlessly with the Usumutong context, wherein the current study was conducted.

Usumutong is one of the nine traditional communities in the Bhahumono tribe of Abi Local Government Area in Cross River State, Nigeria. The Bhahumono clan comprises Abeugo, Afafanyi, Bazohure, Ebijakara, Ebom, Ediba, Enong and Igonigoni. Geographically, the Bhahumono area is bordered by Ndibe, Abeomege, and Abriba of Ebonyi State to the east, separated by a river, and Itigidi to the north, with the same river flowing through the shores of Ebijakara, Ebom, Bazohure, Igonigoni, Afafanyi, Abeugo, Ediba, and down to Enong.

To the west, it shares a common boundary with Ekori and Ugep in the Yakurr Local Government Area, extending from Enong and Ediba to Usumutong. To the south, Usumutong borders Ijom in the Biase Local Government Area, which also borders Ebijakara and Ebom.

Usumutong is a rapidly growing village, although it remains predominantly rural, with its economy centred around agriculture, particularly rice farming, cassava production, yam cultivation, and palm oil extraction, in which it excels. Despite its agricultural productivity, the area struggles with inadequate infrastructure, including unstable electricity, a lack of clean water, outdated school facilities, insufficient markets, and a dilapidated road network.

These are common characteristics of Bhahumuno – structural issues exacerbated by government negligence, a lack of political will and accountability, and longstanding communal conflicts over land disputes. In response to these challenges, the community's social structures have taken on a vital role in addressing these evolving challenges.

The people's resilience finds legitimacy in the narrative that the goal of development planning in Nigeria is the achievement of a rapid increase in the nation's productive capacity to improve the people's standard of living (Iheanacho, 2014).

The condition of most rural dwellers, however, has not improved; instead, communities are in depression, degradation and deprivation (Ogundipe, Ogunniyi, Olagunju & Asaleye, 2019), resulting mainly from the government’s negligence on proposals for community development, non-implementation of projects, leadership concerns, insufficiency of financial resources, intra- and inter-communal disputes and corruption.

These matters merit both research attention and policy reforms.

5. Methodology

An exploratory qualitative case study methodology was employed, utilising a participatory community-led action research approach as depicted in Figure 1.

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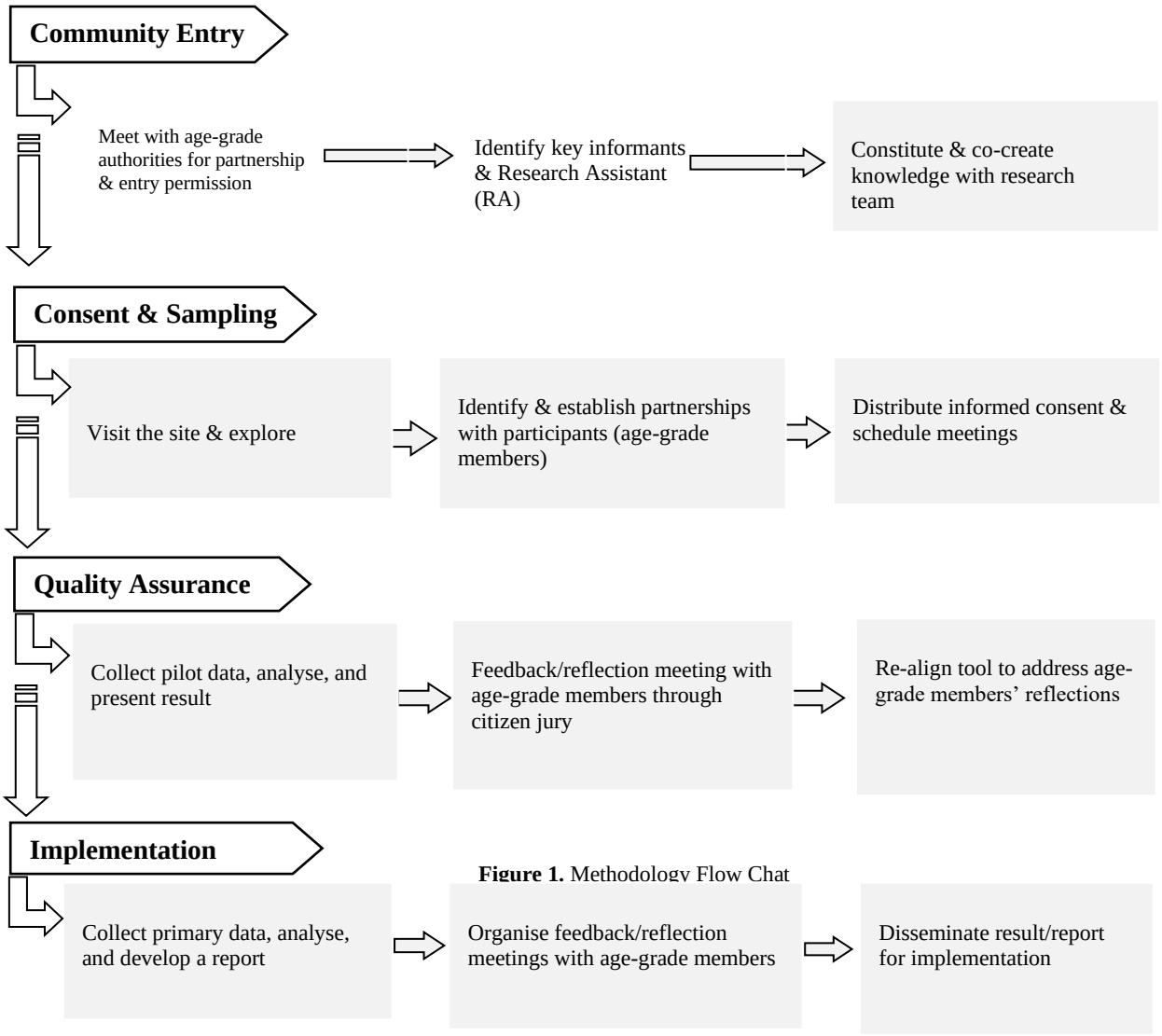


Figure 1. Methodology Flow Chat

Figure 1. Methodology Flow Chat
Source: Authors' consolidation

Participatory action research facilitates robust engagement with grassroots knowledge-holders, specifically members of well-constituted structures, in this case, age-grade groups, to derive essential firsthand insights. Through the purposive sampling technique, ten age-grade systems were selected for the study, ranging from newly inducted groups into adulthood to the recently graduated group into senior citizenship (see Table 1). These groups, having performed the rite of passage, constitute part of the traditional composition of the community and are recognised as such; within the village structure, they are authorised to exercise certain institutional practices and are mandated to contribute to the society's socio-economic fabric and physical domains.

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Table 1. Age-Grade Societies Selected for the Study

S/N	Age grade	English meaning	Age range
1	Redah	Believe	1950-1953
2	Rekpene	Lucky	1957-1959
3	Hovare	Prosper	1962-1965
4	Bhikpengha	Brilliant	1964-1966
5	Hodo	Blessing	1966-1969
6	Rofem-sen	Oneness	1968-1970
7	Razep	Love	1970-1972
8	Bhuyina	Riches	1973-1975
9	Iso-ovia	Dedication	1974-1976
10	Otta-bhuyina	Wealth	1976-1978

Source: Authors' compilation

The purposive sampling technique was complemented by snowball sampling to identify stakeholders within each of the ten sampled age-grade systems for data collection, which was undertaken through one-on-one interactions using a semi-structured questionnaire. Questions such as - *"What are the revenue channels of your age grade?" "How does your age grade maintain financial resilience?" "What are your contributions to the community's development?" and "How do you carry out community development projects in your community?*" were posed to participants for discussion. Data collection was guided by a saturation threshold, which continued until the information obtained from subsequent participants became redundant. In total, 29 individuals participated in the study, representing each age group well. The collected data excerpts were then input into Atlas.ti v8 software, utilising an open coding system for thematic data analysis. This approach facilitated the organisation and interpretation of the data to identify key themes and patterns related to the research focus. In the results and discussion of findings section, the following codes and their respective meanings are used: AG = Age group; F = Female; M = Male; and Yrs = Years.

6. Results and Discussions

The result is structured into two sections. The first section focuses on capital mobilisation avenues within the age-grade system. The second section provides an in-depth exploration of the community infrastructure development projects executed using the resources.

6.1. Age-grade income channels

Seven key financial mobilisation channels were delineated. This includes membership fees, mandatory dues, default fines, group angels, levies, project launch events, and menial labour (Figure 2).

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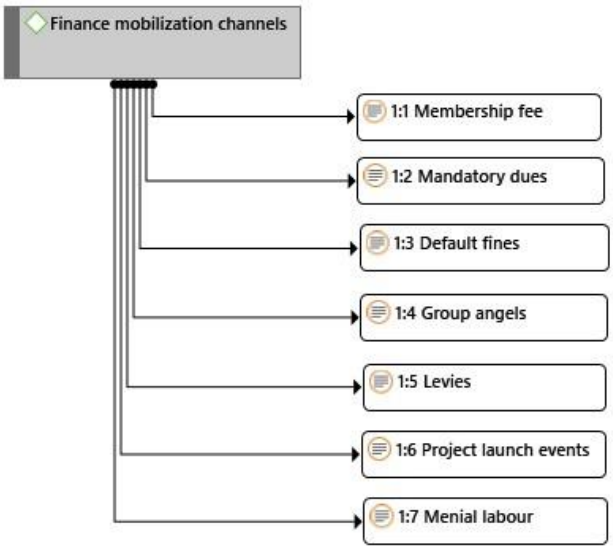


Figure 2. Age-grade finance mobilisation channels
Source: authors' consolidations based on primary data

An age-grade group typically begins with a small cohort of peers, frequently teenagers of the same age range who have been socialised within the same developmental milieu and geographical location. These early members form the group's foundation, bonding over shared experiences and gradually developing the structure, rules, and objectives guiding their collective activities. As a group matures and organises, it is recognised within the community as a traditional entity, formalising its existence through registration with local authorities or community leaders. This formalisation stabilises the group and affirms its role as integral to the community's social fabric.

The age grade system becomes a desirable association for other peers of the same age range who were not part of the original cohort upon an age group attaining formal recognition and full functionality. At this stage, identifying with the group typically involves membership fees and dues, which serve multiple purposes. The proceeds contribute to the group's ongoing expenses, supporting activities, projects, events, and other communal responsibilities. In addition, the membership fee is a commitment to belonging to a well-established, respected and recognised community group, fostering a sense of responsibility and investment in the group's success and societal development. This membership registration fee system not only helps sustain the group's financial health but also ensures that subsequent memberships share in the collective responsibility of maintaining the group's traditions, goals and objectives. A participant narrates:
"...it was a highly seasonal effort, providing an additional income stream for the group... I am mentioning it now because the funds we raised through this initiative played a critical role in completing our mandatory community development project and making the necessary arrangements for our induction. At that time..., the collectively agreed fee for new members was set... ₦7,000 (seven thousand Naira) for those within our age range, mainly people born between 1976 and 1978... We also allowed those slightly outside this range limit - by a year or two - to join us, provided they demonstrated the requisite maturity; however, joining under these circumstances sometimes requires an additional fee. This approach not only helped in raising substantial funds but also ensured that our group remained composed of individuals who were not only age peers but also shared a similar level of life experience and readiness for the responsibilities that came with our community roles" (Ottabuyina AG, 46 Yrs, Female).

6.2. Mandatory Dues

Ensuring financial resilience and stability requires unanimous agreement on the payment of dues, payable monthly, quarterly, annually, or at each meeting. This flexible payment schedule accommodates the members'

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diverse economic backgrounds, ranging from civil servants and businesspeople to farmers and other professionals. The age-grade groups recognised the significance of setting a minimum affordable contribution for every member, regardless of their economic status. This is crucial in ensuring every member is accommodated. Another participant explains:

"…ensuring the financial stability and resilience of our age-grade, there was a collective agreement on a dues system, where each member compulsorily contributes a predetermined amount to the central purse at every meeting… Those with higher incomes may, at their discretion, contribute more. As earlier alluded to, all members reached this arrangement harmoniously during one of our gatherings, recognising that consistent financial contributions to the central purse are essential for the group's financial stability and ability to fund its events, projects, and community responsibilities. Setting these dues enables us to establish a reliable financial foundation to plan and carry out our initiatives effectively. Aside from these benefits, the system also fosters a sense of shared responsibility and accountability, as every member, either rich or poor, contributes to the group's financial health, reinforcing our collective commitment to the age-grades' long-term success and societal impact" (Hovare AG, 59 Yrs, Male).

Participants' excerpts explain the structure of the dues, which is designed not only for income generation but also to encourage inclusivity while allowing for voluntary contributions from those with higher incomes. The age-grade members with greater financial means can contribute more than the minimum amount, reflecting their ability and benevolence to support the group's financial goals more robustly. This approach fosters a sense of equality, unity and mutual support within the age group and reinforces the collective responsibility for the group's financial health, resilience and long-term sustainability.

6.3. Fines for misdemeanour

In the age-grade system, "fines" refer to financial penalties imposed as punishment for breaking regulations. These mandatory penalties are crucial in maintaining resilience, serving as a key source of income generation. In a typical age-grade set-up, fines are imposed for various infractions, including misconduct, tardiness, absenteeism, and failure to adhere to the group's established laws, rules and codes of conduct. In administering fines for these misbehaviours, the age group ensures that members remain responsible and accountable, creating a deterrent against actions that could disrupt the group's harmony and effectiveness. The collected fines contribute to the age group's financial pool, thereby building their overall stability and providing a buffer that can be used for unforeseen expenses and/or to support members in need. It was emphasised that:

"One of the age-grade group's financial sustainability is underpinned by strict regulations and the imposition of fines, which instil discipline among members and ensure the smooth functioning of the organisation. "… despite the seemingly small amounts - ₦100, ₦500, or even ₦1000 - these contributions collectively play a pivotal role in funding our group's central purse and various projects (Hodo AG, 57 Yrs, Female).

"…these fines are levied for a range of infractions in the group, including lateness, absenteeism without valid reasons, the use of offensive language, substance abuse, physical altercations, and other forms of social misconduct in society. …maintaining these standards, we uphold our financial stability and safeguard our moral standing and reputation within the community. …as we support one another in times of need and stress, we closely watch and hold each other accountable for every action taken in society to ensure that no individual's behaviour tarnishes the good name of our age-grade group. This traditional orientation of mutual accountability helps foster a culture of respect and responsibility, essential for any organisation's longevity and success" (Hodo AG, 56 Yrs, Male).

The participants' narrative on implementing mandatory fines shows that this strategy fosters a culture of discipline and responsibility among members within the group and their society. The assumption hinges on the premise that members are more likely to be conscious of their behaviours, inculcate moral decadence, adhere to the group's guidelines and show greater commitment to collective goals when they understand that their delinquencies have financial consequences. Beyond income generation, this accountability system helps maintain orderliness and ethical conduct for the common good.

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6.4. Group Angels

In a typical age-grade system, group angels are wealthier members who frequently provide financial donations to boost the group's resilience. These categories of individuals recognise the collective goals and the varying economic capacities of other members, thus stepping in with generous contributions to sustain and advance the group's activities. It is worth noting that donations of this magnitude are not solicited but given voluntarily at individuals' discretion, reflecting the commitment of these wealthier classes to the group's overall well-being. Their contributions significantly boost the group's financial resources, allowing for the funding of projects and support for members facing financial difficulties or the expansion of the group's initiatives beyond what the regular dues and fines could cover. A member of the Rekpene age grade added:

"The saying - 'All things by law divine are equal' - might hold an idealistic truth, but in practical terms, inequalities inevitably emerge, even within the context of age-grade groups. In my age- grade, for instance, the members' backgrounds are quite diverse, encompassing academic doctors, medical doctors, high-ranking security personnel equivalent to a police commissioner or military general, directors in prominent parastatals, successful businesspeople, civil servants, and farmers. These different professions naturally lead to varying income streams and financial capacities. As a result, when the group needs to pool resources for a common cause, contributions are made according to one's ability. While there is a minimum threshold to ensure inclusivity, set at a level that even those with the lowest income can afford, those with greater financial means often choose to donate significantly more. This voluntary generosity from the wealthier class frequently boosts the group's income without creating a sense of inequality or division. Even though the disparity in contributions is conspicuous, we all maintain a strong sense of unity and camaraderie, ensuring that all of us, regardless of financial contributions, receive deserved respect and value - reflecting the group's collective commitment to supporting each other while acknowledging individual capacities". (Rekpene AG, 65 Yrs, Female).

The presence of group angels demonstrates the diversity within the age-grade groups and emphasises the need for solidarity and mutual support. Voluntary donations are not just acts of generosity but also serve as investments in the group's long-term stability. In sharing their wealth voluntarily, these members contribute to creating a more balanced and equitable environment for every member to function and thrive and ensure that the group functions despite economic challenges. In addition, the culture of receiving unprecedented financial support from the wealthier class reinforces the sense of community within the age-group system, as it reflects a shared commitment to the collective benefit, regardless of individuals' economic status.

6.5. Levies

Like other resources, levies play a significant role in the financial operations of age-grade groups, especially during important events such as weddings, festivals, funerals, and community projects. When, for instance, a group member or a relative experience a life event or when the group undertakes a collective project, other members contribute to a communal pool. Similarly, members contribute to a pool during a community event like the 'New Yam Festival' celebration, coronation, and road maintenance, among other events, facilitating the coverage of immediate expenses. All members' mandatory collective financial contribution reflects a deep sense of solidarity and mutual assistance, ensuring that no member bears the full burden of significant life events alone.

"...whenever our village is in need, for instance, the urgency for road construction and/or maintenance, land disputes resolution with neighbouring villages, or even organising significant events like the New Yam Festival..., levies are typically imposed on all formalised age-grade structures. In our village, the age-grade system is one of the most effective structures for mobilising these meaningful funds for social projects. Because every adult is obliged to be part of an age-grade system, it becomes an effective mechanism for everyone in the community to participate in its development. The community council determines a fixed amount for each age grade to ensure timely compliance with payment deadlines. Once this is established, each age group convenes to decide on the specific amount most convenient for members to contribute to articulate the goal. This pooled fund is then directed towards the community project, ensuring the financial burden is shared equitably among members" (Bhikpengha AG, 58 Yrs, Female).

The funds are initially raised for a specific event; however, any surplus is systematically reserved and channelled into a central account managed collectively by the age grade. This deposit is a foundation for long-term community projects that extend their positive impact beyond the group's members to the broader community. This deliberate practice of finance pooling and prudent allocation illustrates the group's unwavering dedication to

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immediate objectives and future aspirations, cementing its crucial role as one driving force behind the community's sustained growth and overall well-being.

6.6. Project Launch

Age-grade groups frequently organise special launching events to roll out or celebrate their milestones. Strategically designed, these events engage key stakeholders such as community leaders, political representatives, successful businesspeople, and other prominent figures within and beyond the community. The essence is twofold: 1) to showcase the age-grade groups' efforts in community development, 2) to generate support, both in terms of recognition and financial contributions. The presence of dignitaries at these events enables the group to gain public acknowledgement for their initiatives, generate income through donations, and strengthen their support network, which is imperative for successful project implementation.

"…well…, we do organise events to raise funds. Although not very often… These events, specifically project launches, garner significant attention, bringing dignitaries and many community members who attend to show us their support. …we usually experience an appreciable turnout; people participate and demonstrate generosity. To me, such events highlight our community's collective commitment to progress. It also emphasises the value of communal efforts in driving inclusive and sustained development. It goes past just fundraising; the gatherings serve as vital avenues to strengthen social bonds and express our shared dedication to the success of our projects. Also, they serve as platforms for uniting diverse community segments, enhancing a sense of unity and purpose..." (Otta-bhuyina AG, 47 Yrs, Male).

Launching projects and related events set the stage for income generation. The participation of community members, especially influential figures, frequently translates into substantial donations, which are crucial for the financial stability of the age-grade society. These accrued contributions can be directed towards completing an ongoing project or funding the launch of new community development initiatives. These projects ensure that age-grade groups remain financially resilient and capable of taking on massive and more impactful community development projects over time.

6.7. Menial Labour

Evidence emerged that, decades ago, certain age-grade groups were involved in paid jobs as a collective effort to strengthen their financial capacity. These tasks, frequently sourced from within the group, that is, among members, not only enhanced income generation but also fostered a sense of solidarity and strengthened communal bonds within the group. Through collaborative menial work on different undertakings, members could pool their earnings into a central account and strategically manage to pursue the group's shared objectives. This approach provided a sustainable financial foundation, enabling the group to support communal projects, organise social events, and implement initiatives that benefit its members and the broader society. This reflects grassroots experience, as one participant explained:

"I recall an instance in those days where a group assisted one of their age mates in transporting yams. The primary intention was to show solidarity and support, demonstrating the strong sense of community that binds them together. In a gesture of appreciation, he compensated the group far more generously than it would have cost him to hire external labour. This reinforced their bond and exemplified the reciprocal nature of our community's support system, where acts of kindness are acknowledged and valued. While we don't often take on such menial contracts, if they still exist, they provide a valuable means of generating funds for any group. These earnings are crucial in sustaining activities and contributing to collective projects, ensuring the group remains resilient and capable of achieving shared goals. This experience highlights the strength of communal ties and the importance of mutual support in fostering individual and collective progress" (Rekpene AG, 65 Yrs, Female).

Taking on periodic labour inculcates a sense of responsibility and mutual support among members. It emphasises the value of hard work and collective effort, ensuring that all members contribute to the group's financial well-being regardless of their economic standing. The funds generated from these labour activities help to maintain the group's financial stability and empower the age-grade group to undertake larger community projects, thus reinforcing their role as active contributors to the development and welfare of their wider community.

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7. Infrastructure Community Development Through Age-Grade Projects

The ten age-grade groups involved in the study have each contributed to at least one significant community infrastructure development project, demonstrating their crucial role in advancing local development (see Table 2).

Table 2. Infrastructural community development age-grade project

S/N	Age grade	English meaning	Age range	Projects undertaken
1	Redah	Believe	1950-1953	*Roofing zinc donation for the community secondary school building project.* *Culvert construction project along the Ugep-Usumutong major road*
2	Rekpene	Lucky	1957-1959	*Building a magnificent statue of his royal highness, the late King Okpani Osim.* *The construction and mounting of the Ekpokan monument - the community's symbol of strength, resilience and victory.*
3	Hovare	Prosper	1962-1965	*Contributions towards building a classroom block in the community's Primary School II.*
4	Bhikpengha	Brilliant	1964-1966	*Culvert construction in the community town street.*
5	Hodo	Blessing	1966-1969	*Building a classroom block for the community primary school IV project.*
6	Rofem-sen	Oneness	1968-1970	*Building two classroom blocks for the community primary school IV project.*
7	Razep	Love	1970-1972	*Building two classroom blocks for the community primary school IV project.*
8	Bhuyina	Riches	1973-1975	*Building the community's king's palace.*
9	Iso-ovia	Dedication	1974-1976	*Erecting a brick fence for the community's primary school.* *The construction of a culvert along the Comprehensive Ndam Secondary School Road in the community.*
10	Otta-bhuyina	Wealth	1976-1978	*The structuring and building of the community's event centre.*

Source: Authors' consolidation based on primary data

These projects (Figure 3), which have had a notable impact on the social and economic fabric of the community, stem from three primary motivations. First, there are the cultural and traditional procedures associated with the rite of passage to adulthood, where contributing to community welfare symbolises maturity and social responsibility. Second, there is a strong drive for community development, with age-grade groups viewing the improvement of local infrastructure as enhancing the quality of life for all residents, accelerating the community's overall progress. Finally, the rite of passage to senior citizenship is a powerful incentive for individuals to leave a legacy through tangible contributions to the development of the community. These motivations underscore the enduring cultural relevance and developmental impact of the age-grade system, as reflected in the various infrastructure projects they have successfully undertaken.

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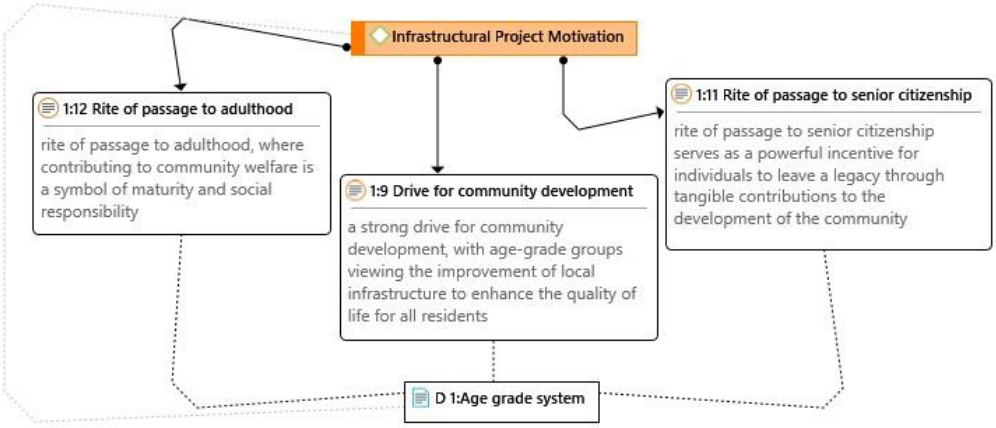


Figure 3. Age-Grade Groups' Motivations for the Infrastructural Project
Source: authors' consolidations based on primary data

7.1. Rite of Passage to Adulthood

The age-grade system's commitment to community development is multifaceted, incorporating mandatory and voluntary components. In the Usumutong community, for example, an age-grade group gains formal recognition as a traditional entity by registering with local authorities or community leaders. This formalisation process stabilises the age-grade and embeds it as a vital component of the community's social structure. In addition, the recognition requires a significant demonstration of responsibility; for instance, members must carry out a mandatory and tangible community development project, usually assigned by the community's council of chiefs or traditional leaders. Evidence shows that such projects are allocated at least two years before the age-grade groups' induction into adulthood, testing the group's maturity, competence and ability to advance the community's development imperatives. As explained, the project implementation is a prerequisite for the age-grades rite of passage into adulthood:

"... it is a longstanding tradition in our community that each age group must complete at least one infrastructural development project before entering adulthood. For our group, we recognised a pressing need within the community - the absence of a dedicated palace for our King, who had been using his family home for official duties. After much deliberation, we constructed a proper King's palace..." (Bhuyina AG, 48 Yrs, Female).

"...between 2016 and 2018, our group of about 60 active members pooled our resources, combining physical labour, moral support, and financial contributions to see the project through to completion. Regardless, our resilience and determination truly embodied the spirit of our age-grade, aptly named "Riches." Completing the palace was a testament to our capabilities and an expression of our deep love and commitment to the community that nurtured us. This project was more than just a building; it symbolised our collective identity and readiness to take on greater responsibilities as we transitioned into adulthood..." (Bhuyina AG, 49 Yrs, Male).

An age-grade induction into adulthood is a pivotal event that occurs once in a lifetime, typically for individuals around the age of 40 years. This grand ceremony is a cornerstone of community life, marked by a week-long festival with various activities. The magnitude of the ceremony is such that it halts other social events, as the entire community convene in harmony to grace the occasion. The induction ceremony is culturally profound and engrained in traditional practices, featuring a grand procession in the community, where the celebrants, well-decorated, are accompanied by their mentors, who would guide them through the transitional rituals, like engaging the group in a traditional targeted shooting game, ushering members out of the youth circle. In this ceremony, various indigenous cultural music displays praise the celebrants and revitalise the festive atmosphere. The ceremonial week culminates over a year of preparation between the age-grade groups, their mentors, and the community's Council of Elders. This event reinforces the age-grade status in society, symbolising their readiness

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to assume greater responsibilities in the community. The event simultaneously acts as a unifying agent, convening different generations in one space to celebrate a shared cultural heritage. The grand procession, rituals, and traditional music reiterate the age-graded connection to the community, ensuring that the transition from youth to adulthood is well celebrated with the respect and honour it deserves.

7.2. Drive for Development

Beyond mandatory projects obligated to age-grade groups as one of the requirements for the rites of passage from youth to adulthood, some groups also frequently demonstrate a strong commitment to community development. It undertakes voluntary projects. As alluded to, these latter projects are not mandated but motivated by the group's sense of responsibility to better their community. Members pool funds and leverage their physical capabilities to carry out independent projects, significantly improving community infrastructure and social services. The funds for these voluntary projects are typically catered for from the group's reserves, accumulated over time through different channels - membership fees, donations, and levies - among other means. Drawing on these reserves, the members ensure they can respond effectively to the community's needs without external support, illustrating dedication to collective welfare.

"…during our passage rituals…, we built a magnificent statue to honour our late Chief Okpani, a revered leader known for his exceptional wisdom and leadership prowess during his era. The late Chief Okpani was celebrated for his ability to conquer communal battles…, drive inclusive development, and foster unity and cohesion among his people... His legacy, which remains influential even 30 years after his demise, is marked by an enduring impact on our community's growth and stability. Recognising the significance of preserving his memory for future generations, we prioritised creating this magnificent statue as part of our mandatory community project…" (Rekpene AG, 64 Yrs, Female)

"…we voluntarily embarked on another monumental task: constructing a structure named after the community's botanical emblem, "Ekpokan." This monument, symbolising the community's strength, resilience, and victories across various spheres, such as communal wars, economic struggles, and traditional sports, was our way of immortalising the essence of our community. Unlike the statue of Chief Okpani, which was a required undertaking, the Ekpokan monument was a voluntary effort, driven by our collective desire to honour the community's enduring spirit and ensure that its name and heritage continue to be celebrated…" (Rekpene AG, 65 Yrs, Male).

Beyond the urge to respond quickly and aptly to the community's needs, voluntary projects reinforce the age-grade role as a vital and active participant in the community's development. Addressing pressing issues, the age-grade group enhances the community's living conditions and strengthens its reputation as responsible and dependable leaders. These efforts often involve extensive collaboration among group members, with everyone contributing according to their abilities through financial donations, labour, or expertise. This collaborative spirit fosters a sense of unity within the age-grade group. It sets a positive example for the younger generations, thus encouraging them to continue this tradition of community service.

7.3. Graduation to Senior Citizenship

Parallel to the passage into adulthood, age-grade systems reaching 70 years of age transition from active adulthood to senior citizenship, marked by significant rituals and grand ceremonies. This transition implies that the group retires from 30 years of active involvement in community engagement and obligatory societal responsibilities. However, the group is now categorised as essential "knowledge-holders". The ritual during the exit recognises the members' lifelong selfless contributions and further signifies their new role as community advisors and custodians of cultural heritage.

"…society certainly benefited from the projects we carried out over the years. Some 30 years ago, during our rite of passage into adulthood…, we embarked on the significant task of constructing part of the community's secondary school, recognising the role of education for our future generations. As we approached 70 years…, the hallmark of retirement, we felt a deep sense of gratitude and responsibility to give back one last time. As a token of our appreciation to God for His blessings and as a final gesture of service to our community, we completed the construction of a culvert on one of the major roads. This project will benefit the community for years to come. This was voluntary. As senior citizens, we proudly reflect on our contributions, knowing that our efforts have left a lasting impact on the community that nurtured us" (Redah AG, 71 Yrs, Male).

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The graduation rituals into senior citizenship closely mirror those of the passage into adulthood, following a similar trajectory with cultural dances and traditional processions. These ceremonies are deeply rooted in the community's cultural practices, hence celebrating the group's transition with the same grandeur and reverence as their previous induction into adulthood. The performance of these rituals – exiting from one level and entering a higher level - symbolises the community's respect for its elders and acknowledges their lifetime of service. The events are often accompanied by festive activities, including the involvement of younger generations who assist in organising the ceremonies, ensuring that the traditions are passed down and preserved for future age-grade groups. Society honours the incoming elders' unwavering experience and wisdom through these rites, integrating their guidance into the ongoing sociocultural framework.

8. Discussion of Findings

Stakeholders' lived experiences demonstrate that community development within African societies, such as the Usumutong, is a complex and holistic process deeply ingrained in traditional practices. This narrative aligns seamlessly with Atisa, Zemrani and Weiss (2021), Bobo and Akhurst (2023), Wardhani, Rahmawati and Pamungkas (2024), and Winati, Utami, Rakhmadani, Hidayatullah and Puddin (2024), who maintained that community development is rooted in empowerment and collective action. In this perspective, community members are not passive recipients of external aid but are recognised as experts and champions of their sustainability. Through their lived experiences, community members identify key issues, map out interventions, and take collective mitigative action, fostering stronger social ties, deeper connectedness, and overall community resilience.

The age-grade system in African societies exemplifies the participatory approach, where different groups operate at various levels of social and economic organisation, however, ultimately coming together to achieve common societal goals that would be unattainable individually (Atuonwu, 2021; Babalola & Adedayo, 2021). This orientation has historically played a significant role in fostering community development, as it organises collective efforts around mandatory and voluntary projects, which are crucial for physical infrastructure and social cohesion. Through age-grade systems, for instance, community members mobilised themselves to contribute to development projects - frequently relying primarily on local resources, with or without external support (Uzoh & Ekechukwu, 2024). This approach to development illustrates self-help and unity, with all community members participating fully in decision-making and implementation.

The research findings further broaden our understanding of the significance of age-grade associations in building a resilient society and fostering community sustainability within the African context. Rooted in place-building theory, which stresses the significance of social and spatial connections (Kimball & Thomas, 2012), age-grade groups' mandatory and voluntary initiatives extend beyond mere physical development. They contribute significantly to strengthening communal identity and solidarity; for instance, infrastructure development initiatives were undertaken before the rite of passage into adulthood transcended their symbolic intention as transitional milestones. These rituals and initiatives serve as tangible mechanisms for establishing and sustaining essential services in society and shared spaces within the community. The shared responsibility and collective action demonstrated by the age-grade societies address immediate societal developmental needs, contributing to the long-term sustainability and resilience of the community.

Age-grade associations, therefore, facilitate cultivating a strong culture of accountability and responsibility among members, which aligns with Atuonwu (2021). The cyclical structure of these associations ensures that each generation is actively involved and contributes to the community's welfare through obligatory and voluntary projects. Mandatory projects, such as school construction, road maintenance and communal facility development, continuously upgrade infrastructure to meet evolving societal needs. Meanwhile, voluntary initiatives, including

monument building and resource mobilisation for unforeseen societal issues, demonstrate these associations' proactive and adaptive nature. Drawing from the place-building theory, the emotional connections members build through these efforts create a profound sense of place attachment and pride. This attachment deepens their commitment to the community's well-being and encourages environmental stewardship, ensuring a resilient and sustainable future for subsequent generations. Additionally, the age-grade system exemplifies a highly effective Afrocentric model for addressing immediate and long-term societal needs in traditional communities.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of the Usumutong people facilitated the conceptualisation of age-grade association as a pivotal finance mobilisation resource for community development amid systemic failure in Africa. The ten age-grade structures sampled for empirical analysis have each undertaken at least one significant tangible community project, demonstrating their critical role in fostering local sustainable development. Seven notable sources of income across the interviewed structures include membership fees, mandatory dues, fines, group angel investors, levies, donations from project-launch events, and menial labour contributions. The initiatives facilitate the implementation of diverse infrastructure projects and social initiatives, including the construction of a school building, community event centres, a king's palace, culverts on major roads, and a symbolic statue, among others. Three fundamental occurrences: rites of passage to adulthood, a strong commitment to community development, and rites of passage to senior citizenship, aided the projects. These motivations collectively illustrate the enduring cultural relevance and developmental power of the age-grade associations, illustrating how they have been effectively harnessed to advance the quality of life for all residents and ensure society's continued progress. The Usumutong case is a compelling example of how indigenous practices are crucial in building a resilient local economy and driving sustainable development, even amidst persistent systemic ill-governance issues.

Subsequent research may explore the age-grade dynamics in different African regions, their capacity to adapt to contemporary socio-economic conditions, and their potential to scale up for broader development applications. Community development practitioners should integrate traditional systems like the age-grade model into modern development frameworks, recognising and leveraging these structures as resilient mechanisms for local resource mobilisation and project execution apparatus, especially in rural areas where civic governance could be insufficient. Policymakers should acknowledge and formalise age-grade structures in national development strategies, ensuring that legal frameworks support these traditional practices, as this would facilitate their contributions to community development.

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