



From Adult Education to Community Transformation: Evidence of Social and Economic Change in Tanzania

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Abstract: *This study examined evidence of social and economic transformation attributable to adult education programmes in Tanzania. The study adopted a qualitative research approach using a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of adult learners' and programme facilitators' experiences. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions involving three programme facilitators and fifteen adult learners purposively selected from Dar es Salaam, Ruvuma, and Mbeya regions. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data following Braun and Clarke's procedures. The findings revealed that adult education contributes significantly to community transformation through livelihood improvement, income diversification, strengthened social cohesion, enhanced civic engagement, practical application of knowledge in daily life, and increased empowerment and self-confidence among learners. Adult learners reported improved household incomes through agriculture, small-scale enterprises, and vocational activities, alongside greater participation in community decision-making and collective problem-solving. The study further demonstrates that adult education fosters social capital and active citizenship, enabling learners to translate individual learning into broader community development outcomes. These findings align with Transformative Learning Theory, which emphasizes critical reflection, empowerment, and collective action as pathways to social and economic change. The study contributes empirical evidence to the limited body of knowledge on community-level transformation through adult education in Tanzania and recommends strengthened policy support, skills-based participatory training, mentorship, and continuous monitoring to enhance the transformative potential of adult education programmes.*

Keywords: *Adult education, Community transformation, Livelihood improvement, Civic engagement, Transformative learning*

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, adult education has increasingly been recognized as a critical driver of social and economic transformation, particularly in developing countries where large segments of the adult population lack formal education and employable skills (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2022). Adult education is now widely framed beyond basic literacy to include livelihood skills, civic competencies, health awareness, entrepreneurship, and digital literacy, all of

which are essential for inclusive and sustainable community development (UNESCO, 2022; Torres, 2023). Despite this growing recognition, empirical evidence linking adult education interventions directly to measurable community-level transformation remains uneven across regions, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (Aderinoye & Rogers, 2021; UNESCO, 2024).

In developed economies, adult education has demonstrated tangible social and economic outcomes. In the European Union, participation in adult learning has been associated with improved employability, higher

income mobility, and increased civic engagement, particularly among marginalized groups (OECD, 2023). Similarly, in Canada and Australia, community-based adult education programmes have contributed to reduced unemployment, improved social cohesion, and enhanced lifelong learning pathways (Schuller & Watson, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). In the United States, adult education initiatives focusing on workforce development and community colleges have been linked to improved household income and local economic revitalization, particularly in rural and post-industrial communities (Jacobson & Mokher, 2021). However, despite these positive outcomes, participation rates in adult education remain socially stratified, with disadvantaged communities benefiting the least from high-quality programmes (UNESCO, 2022).

In Asian contexts, adult education has increasingly been positioned as a tool for poverty reduction and social inclusion. In India, adult literacy and skill-based education programmes have contributed to women's economic participation, improved health outcomes, and greater community leadership, although regional disparities persist (Sharma & Gupta, 2022; Singh, 2024). In China, adult education, often linked to vocational training and digital skills, has supported rural transformation and small-scale entrepreneurship; however, access remains limited for older adults and remote communities (Li & Huang, 2023). Similarly, studies from Bangladesh and Pakistan indicate that while adult education enhances income-generating capacity and social awareness, its transformative potential is constrained by inadequate funding, weak policy coordination, and limited monitoring of long-term outcomes (Khan, 2023; Riaz et al., 2022).

Likewise, evidence from Africa suggests that adult education plays a significant role in community empowerment, poverty alleviation, and social change, although its impact varies widely by country and programme design (Aderinoye & Rogers, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). In Ghana, adult literacy and functional education programmes have been associated with improved agricultural productivity, health-seeking behaviour, and community participation in local governance (Amoako & Asamoah, 2023). In Uganda, adult education initiatives targeting farmers and women's groups have contributed to improved household income and social cohesion, though sustainability challenges remain (Hoppers, 2021). In Malawi and Zambia, community-based adult education has supported livelihood diversification and resilience, yet limited empirical documentation of long-term transformation persists (Moorosi & Ndzi, 2022).

In Tanzania, adult education has historically been a central component of national development, dating back to the post-independence era and the philosophy of Education for Self-Reliance. Contemporary policy frameworks, including the Education and Training Policy (2014) and the Adult and Non-Formal Education

Development Strategy, reaffirm the role of adult education in promoting literacy, employability, and active citizenship (MoEST, 2021; URT, 2022). Current adult education programmes in Tanzania encompass adult literacy, Integrated Community-Based Adult Education (ICBAE), vocational skills training, and entrepreneurship education, particularly in rural and peri-urban communities (UNESCO, 2023). Despite these efforts, national reports indicate persistent challenges such as low completion rates, limited alignment with local economic opportunities, and inadequate assessment of programme outcomes beyond literacy attainment (MoEST, 2024).

Empirical studies in Tanzania increasingly suggest that adult education contributes to improved livelihoods, enhanced social participation, and community resilience, especially among women and rural populations (Komba & Mfaume, 2023; Mhando & Tibandebage, 2022). Adult learners have been shown to adopt improved farming techniques, engage in small-scale enterprises, and participate more actively in community decision-making structures. However, much of the existing research focuses on programme implementation and participation, rather than systematically examining evidence of broader social and economic transformation at the community level (UNESCO, 2024). Consequently, the extent to which adult education translates into sustained community transformation remains insufficiently documented.

Conceptually, adult education is grounded in the understanding that learning among adults is inherently transformative, empowering individuals to critically reflect on their social realities and take collective action for change (Mezirow, 2000; updated applications in Taylor & Cranton, 2021). Contemporary scholars emphasize that adult education functions not only as a mechanism for skill acquisition but also as a catalyst for social capital formation, civic engagement, and economic empowerment (Torres, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). From this perspective, community transformation emerges when adult education enables individuals to improve their livelihoods, strengthen social networks, and actively participate in shaping their communities.

Generally, from the foregoing discussion, it is evident that while adult education is widely acknowledged as a powerful instrument for social and economic development, there is limited empirical evidence demonstrating how and to what extent adult education contributes to community transformation in the Tanzanian context. This study, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by examining evidence of social and economic change attributable to adult education, thereby contributing to policy, practice, and scholarly discourse on adult learning and sustainable community development in Tanzania.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the recognized role of adult education in promoting literacy, livelihoods, and civic engagement, there is limited empirical evidence in Tanzania demonstrating its impact on broader community transformation. Most research has focused on participation and programme implementation, leaving a critical gap in understanding whether adult education leads to sustained social and economic change, including improved livelihoods, community participation, and resilience. Consequently, policymakers and practitioners lack clear evidence on how adult learning translates into tangible community development, highlighting the need for research that systematically examines the social and economic effects of adult education in Tanzanian communities.

1.2 Research Objectives

Specifically, the study aimed;

- (i) To examine the social outcomes of adult education programmes in Tanzanian communities
- (ii) To assess the economic outcomes of adult education programmes in Tanzanian communities

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Community Transformation through Adult Education

In any community development context, adult education is widely regarded as a fundamental factor explaining differences in the extent to which communities achieve social and economic transformation. Across development and education literature, adult education is consistently positioned as a catalyst that equips individuals with knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to improve livelihoods, strengthen social cohesion, and enhance participation in community decision-making (UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Although scholars conceptualize adult education from different perspectives, there is a shared understanding that adult education functions as an empowering and transformative process through which individuals and groups gain the capacity to influence their own development trajectories.

Several scholars define community transformation through adult education by emphasizing its role in enhancing human capabilities and collective agency. Torres (2023) conceptualizes adult education as a lifelong learning process that enables adults to critically reflect on their social realities and take informed action to improve their economic and social conditions.

Similarly, the OECD (2023) views adult education as a strategic investment that strengthens employability, social inclusion, and civic engagement, thereby contributing to sustainable community development. From this perspective, adult education is not limited to literacy acquisition but extends to skills development, entrepreneurship, health education, and civic learning, all of which are essential for community-level change.

Contemporary literature further highlights that community transformation occurs when adult education leads to observable improvements in social and economic outcomes. According to the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2022), adult education contributes to transformation by increasing income-generating opportunities, improving health and well-being, strengthening social networks, and fostering active citizenship. In a similar vein, Aderinoye and Rogers (2021) argue that adult education enhances social capital by promoting cooperation, trust, and collective problem-solving within communities. These processes enable communities to mobilize local resources more effectively and respond to development challenges in a sustainable manner.

In the African context, adult education is commonly framed as a tool for poverty reduction, empowerment, and community resilience. Empirical studies indicate that adult education programmes support improved agricultural productivity, small-scale entrepreneurship, and women's empowerment, which collectively contribute to social and economic transformation at the community level (Amoako & Asamoah, 2023; Hoppers, 2021). In Tanzania, adult education initiatives such as adult literacy and community-based skills training have been associated with improved livelihoods, increased participation in local governance, and enhanced social awareness among adult learners (Komba & Mfaume, 2023; Mhando & Tibandebage, 2022). These findings reinforce the view that adult education operates as a facilitating mechanism that enables individuals to translate learning into meaningful community change.

Generally, community transformation through adult education involves empowering adults with relevant knowledge and skills that enable them to improve their economic conditions, participate actively in social life, and contribute to collective community development. Thus, adult education serves as both a personal and collective transformative force, linking individual learning outcomes to broader social and economic change within communities.

2.2 Social-Economic Indicators of Community Transformation

Adult education has been increasingly recognized as a key driver of socio-economic transformation in communities, with contemporary research highlighting indicators such as employability, income improvement, and enhanced social participation. For instance, evidence

from Tanzania shows that adult education contributes to self-employment and improved standards of living among graduates, underscoring its role in addressing poverty and expanding economic opportunities at the community level (Katete, 2023). Participation in adult learning also correlates strongly with broader socio-economic engagement, as recent OECD data reveal substantial gaps in adult education participation linked to literacy and skills proficiency, which in turn influence labour market outcomes and economic resilience (OECD, 2025). Furthermore, global reviews of adult learning and the Sustainable Development Goals affirm that adult education promotes inclusive and equitable opportunities that can mitigate inequalities and foster sustainable livelihoods (International Review of Education, 2024). These transformations are reflected in measurable indicators such as increased employment prospects, higher productivity, enhanced civic participation, and reduced socio-economic disparities in community contexts.

Beyond individual economic gains, adult education influences social dimensions of community transformation, including empowerment, governance participation, and structural inclusion. Research on lifelong and gender-inclusive education across African contexts indicates that educational engagement enhances productive capacity and governance quality, demonstrating how education intersects with broader institutional and social transformation processes (Katete, 2023). Adult education participation also remains a critical indicator of social inclusion, as disparities in access and engagement often align with persistent socio-economic inequalities (OECD, 2025). Evidence from educational equity research shows that adult education participation lags in less advantaged populations, suggesting that strengthening adult learning opportunities is essential for reducing structural inequities within communities (Advancing Equity, 2025). Taken together, these socio-economic indicators, employment, income growth, social inclusion, governance involvement, and equitable access to learning, provide a multifaceted picture of how adult education contributes to sustainable community transformation in the current development landscape.

2.3 Theoretical Review

This research was informed by the transformative learning theory propounded by Mezirow (2021). This theory argues that adult learning involves a process of critical reflection on one's assumptions, beliefs, and experiences, which leads to a shift in perspectives and the ability to take informed action (Taylor & Cranton, 2021; Mezirow, 2021). Transformative learning theory posits that adults become agents of change when they are empowered to question existing social, economic, and cultural norms, thereby facilitating personal and collective transformation (Kitchenham, 2022). It is also argued that transformation occurs not only at the

individual level but also extends to community development when adult learners apply newly acquired knowledge and skills to improve social and economic outcomes (Torres, 2023; UNESCO, 2022).

In the context of this study, Transformative Learning Theory provides a conceptual lens to examine how adult education contributes to community transformation in Tanzania. Specifically, it explains how critical reflection and participatory learning enable adult learners to adopt improved agricultural practices, engage in entrepreneurship, enhance household income, and participate in local governance, key socio-economic indicators of community transformation (Katete, 2023; OECD, 2025). The theory further supports the understanding that sustainable change in communities arises when individual empowerment through learning is translated into collective action, resulting in measurable improvements in employment, social inclusion, civic participation, and overall community well-being. Thus, transformative learning theory serves as a foundation for analysing the pathways through which adult education fosters social and economic development at both individual and community levels.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study research design to explore the challenges and experiences of adult learners and programme facilitators within adult education programmes. The case study design was chosen for its flexibility, allowing participants to express themselves freely and enabling the collection of rich, detailed data from a relatively small sample. It also facilitates the exploration of complex social phenomena in real-life contexts, providing an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences.

The sample was purposively selected from the Dar es Salaam, Ruvuma, and Mbeya regions, based on the presence of a significant number of adult learners and programme facilitators actively involved in adult education. A total of three programme facilitators were interviewed, and fifteen adult learners participated in focus group discussions, with five learners from each region. Purposive sampling ensured that participants possessed direct experience and relevant knowledge about adult education programmes.

Data collection tools included semi-structured interviews for programme facilitators and focus group discussions (FGDs) for adult learners. These tools were designed to capture participants' perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to adult learning programmes. The data collection procedures involved conducting interviews and FGDs in settings convenient for participants, ensuring privacy and comfort to encourage open and honest discussions. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent from participants and later transcribed verbatim to maintain data accuracy and

completeness. Ethical considerations, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and participants' rights, were strictly observed throughout the study.

For data analysis, the study employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step procedure. This method enabled the identification, reporting, and interpretation of patterns (themes) within the data, providing a systematic approach to generate meaningful insights into the social and educational experiences of adult learners and programme facilitators. Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility and suitability for exploring complex, context-specific qualitative data, allowing the researcher to understand the depth and diversity of participants' perspectives.

4. Results and Discussion

Several concerns and insights were raised by participants during interviews and focus group discussions, reflecting their experiences with adult education programmes in Tanzania. The participants' perspectives on the social and economic changes attributable to adult education and the factors influencing community transformation are presented and analysed in the sections that follow.

4.1 Livelihood Improvement

The findings revealed that adult education programmes enabled learners to improve their livelihoods through practical skills acquisition. Participants reported that the knowledge gained allowed them to engage in income-generating activities that directly supported their households. Learners emphasized that skills in agriculture, entrepreneurship, and vocational activities enhanced their capacity to secure sustainable sources of income and reduce household economic vulnerability. Several participants indicated that adult education equipped them with problem-solving and financial management skills, enabling better planning and utilization of available resources. As a result, many households experienced improved food security, increased savings, and greater economic stability. Participants collectively noted:

"After attending the adult education programme, I started small vegetable farming. Now I sell produce in the local market and support my family better than before" (FGD with Adult Learners, Mbeya, on 25th August, 2025).

Similarly, the adult learners' programme facilitator added:

"I have seen many learners applying the skills taught, especially in agriculture and small businesses,

which has improved their household incomes significantly" (Interview with Programme Facilitator, Dar es Salaam, on 20th September, 2025).

4.2 Income Diversification

The findings revealed that adult learners were able to diversify their income sources, reducing economic vulnerability. Skills in small business development and entrepreneurship were highlighted as key drivers of this change. Participants reported engaging in multiple economic activities alongside their primary occupations, such as combining farming with petty trade, tailoring, or craft production. This diversification enabled learners to spread financial risks and maintain household income even during periods of economic uncertainty or seasonal fluctuations. Participants were quoted as saying:

"We learned how to make soap and candles during the training. Selling them has given us extra income, and we no longer rely only on farming" (FGD with Adult Learner, Ruvuma, on 2nd October, 2025).

On a similar note, one participant noted:

"Our learners often combine farming with small enterprises such as tailoring or craft production, which spreads their financial risk and boosts family income" (Interview with Programme Facilitator, Mbeya, on 25th August, 2025).

4.3 Social Cohesion and Networking

The findings indicated that adult education fostered stronger social networks and enhanced collaboration within communities. Participants emphasized that group learning activities promoted mutual support and collective problem-solving. Through regular interactions, learners developed trust, shared experiences, and exchanged ideas that strengthened interpersonal relationships. These learning groups created platforms for cooperation in addressing common social and economic challenges facing the community. Participants further noted that collective learning encouraged a sense of belonging and shared responsibility for community development. As a result, adult education programmes contributed to increased social cohesion and strengthened community solidarity. Participants explained the following:

"We now meet every week to discuss problems and help each other. The learning group has brought us closer together" (FGD with Adult Learners,

Dar es Salaam City, on 20th September, 2025).

Another participant added:

“The learning groups encourage cooperation and collective decision-making, which strengthens community relationships and social bonds” (Interview with Programme Facilitator, Ruvuma, on 2nd October, 2025).

4.4 Civic Engagement and Participation

The findings revealed that adult education increased learners’ participation in local governance and community decision-making processes. Participants noted enhanced awareness of civic rights and responsibilities. Adult learners reported greater confidence in attending community meetings, voicing their opinions, and contributing to discussions on local development issues. The programmes enabled learners to better understand leadership structures, decision-making procedures, and their roles as active citizens. As a result, participants became more engaged in collective actions such as village planning, community projects, and local accountability initiatives. This increased civic engagement strengthened democratic participation and promoted inclusive community development. Participants explained the following:

“Before the course, we didn’t know about community meetings. Now we attend and share ideas that affect our village development” (FGD with Adult Learners, Mbeya, on 25th August, 2025).

Similarly, another participant noted:

“Adult education empowers learners to understand their civic rights and motivates them to engage in local governance and development activities” (Interview with Programme Facilitator, Dar es Salaam, on 20th September, 2025).

4.5 Knowledge Application in Daily Life

The findings revealed that adult learners applied the knowledge and skills acquired through programmes in practical ways to improve both individual and community outcomes. Participants emphasized that the ability to implement lessons learned strengthened their

personal and social capacity. Learners reported applying skills such as financial management, health practices, improved farming techniques, and small business planning in their daily lives. This practical application enhanced household welfare and contributed to better decision-making within families and communities. Participants further noted that sharing acquired knowledge with others promoted collective learning and problem-solving. Consequently, adult education strengthened both individual competence and community capacity for sustainable development. During the focus group discussions, they explained:

“We used the financial management lessons to plan our small business. We can now save and reinvest for growth” (FGD with Adult Learners, Ruvuma, on 2nd October, 2025).

During the interview, a participant was quoted as saying:

“We observe that learners often implement what they learn immediately, from budgeting to health practices, which benefits both their families and communities” (Interview with Programme Facilitator, Mbeya, on 25th August, 2025).

4.6 Empowerment and Confidence

The findings revealed that adult education enhanced learners’ self-confidence and empowered them to take initiatives that foster social and economic change. Participants indicated that this confidence translated into active participation in community development activities. Adult learners reported increased self-esteem, improved communication skills, and a greater willingness to express their ideas in public forums. This empowerment encouraged learners to assume leadership roles, mobilize others, and initiate community projects aimed at improving social and economic conditions. Participants further noted that enhanced confidence enabled them to challenge limiting norms and contribute meaningfully to collective decision-making. As a result, adult education catalyzed both personal empowerment and broader community transformation. During the focus group discussions, participants explained:

“We feel more confident now. We speak in meetings and help others understand important community issues” (FGD with Adult Learners, Dar es Salaam, on 20th September, 2025).

Another participant added:

"Many learners develop leadership qualities after attending the programmes; they begin taking initiatives that positively impact their communities" (Interview with Programme Facilitator, Ruvuma, on 2nd October, 2025).

Based on the findings, it is evident that adult education programmes have significantly contributed to social and economic transformation in Tanzanian communities, although challenges remain in maximizing their full potential. The findings revealed that adult learners improved their livelihoods through practical skills such as agriculture, small-scale businesses, and vocational activities. As participants noted, these skills directly enhanced household incomes and financial stability. This aligns with Katete (2023), who observed that adult education equips learners with practical skills that improve employability and household economic outcomes. Similarly, OECD (2025) emphasized that adult learning contributes to economic resilience by enabling learners to diversify income sources and reduce vulnerability.

Regarding income diversification, the study showed that learners combined various economic activities, such as farming, tailoring, and craft production, to stabilize their income. Adult education programmes thus serve as catalysts for entrepreneurship and economic self-reliance. Aderinoye and Rogers (2021) support this by asserting that adult learning enhances financial literacy and business skills, which empower learners to adopt multiple income-generating strategies. Torres (2023) further notes that adult education strengthens community capacities by enabling learners to innovate and apply knowledge in economic activities, fostering sustainable development.

The findings also highlighted that adult education promotes social cohesion and networking. Learners reported that group learning activities encouraged collaboration, mutual support, and collective problem-solving, thereby strengthening community bonds. UNESCO (2022) observed that adult learning programmes enhance social capital, enabling communities to mobilize resources and cooperate effectively in addressing local challenges. Similarly, UNESCO (2024) emphasizes that adult education contributes to participatory development by fostering trust, cooperation, and shared responsibility among community members.

In terms of civic engagement and participation, the study revealed that adult education increased learners' awareness of civic rights and responsibilities, encouraging active participation in local governance and development initiatives. Participants reported attending community meetings, advocating for local needs, and influencing decision-making processes. Torres (2023) argues that adult learning enhances active citizenship,

while OECD (2025) stresses that civic engagement is a critical indicator of community transformation resulting from lifelong learning.

The findings further indicated that adult learners effectively applied knowledge in daily life, enhancing both individual and community outcomes. Practical application of skills such as financial management, health awareness, and agricultural techniques contributed to improved livelihoods and strengthened community capacity. Taylor and Cranton (2021) support this, noting that transformative learning enables adults to translate knowledge into action, producing tangible social and economic benefits. Similarly, UNESCO (2022) highlights that the practical implementation of adult learning content fosters community resilience and sustainable development.

Finally, the study showed that adult education enhanced learners' empowerment and confidence, enabling them to take initiatives that drive social and economic change. Participants reported increased self-efficacy, leadership skills, and proactive engagement in community development activities. Katete (2023) asserts that adult education fosters self-confidence and agency, allowing learners to influence both personal and communal outcomes. This is supported by Torres (2023), who emphasizes that empowerment through adult learning is a critical pathway for achieving sustainable community transformation.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that adult education in Tanzania contributes to community transformation through livelihood improvement, income diversification, social cohesion, civic engagement, knowledge application, and empowerment. By equipping adults with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to actively participate in economic and social development, adult education serves as a powerful catalyst for sustainable change, consistent with recent empirical evidence from Africa and other developing contexts (Katete, 2023; OECD, 2025; UNESCO, 2022; Torres, 2023).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study lead to the conclusion that adult education plays a critical role in fostering social and economic transformation within Tanzanian communities. Participation in adult learning programmes enables learners to improve livelihoods, diversify income sources, strengthen social cohesion, enhance civic engagement, apply knowledge in practical ways, and build self-confidence and empowerment. These outcomes demonstrate that adult education is not only a tool for personal development but also a catalyst for broader community development and sustainable change. It is therefore high time that policymakers, community leaders, and educational institutions recognize and support adult education as a strategic

mechanism for driving community transformation, particularly in regions where economic vulnerability and social disparities persist.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the foregoing findings, this study recommends the following:

1. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) should provide funding, resources, and technical assistance to ensure access to quality adult education programmes that promote social and economic development.
2. Educational institutions and programme facilitators should equip adult learners with practical knowledge for income generation, entrepreneurship, civic engagement, and community development.
3. Support structures should guide learners in applying knowledge effectively, developing leadership skills, and initiating community projects that enhance social cohesion and economic growth.
4. Measures should be implemented to remove obstacles that limit participation in adult education, especially for women and marginalized groups, ensuring equitable access and empowerment.
5. Adult education programmes should be regularly assessed to determine their impact on social and economic outcomes, enabling improvements and strategic refinement.
6. Communities should be informed about the value of adult education to encourage local support, participation, and collective ownership, ensuring the sustainability of development initiatives.

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