

Community Engagement Depth for Intervention Fit in Rural Development Projects: Policy Evaluation

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Abstract

Rural development projects frequently encounter operational and sustainability challenges, largely attributed to superficial community engagement and poor alignment between external interventions and local socio-economic contexts. This paper provides a comprehensive policy evaluation of how community engagement depth and intervention fit influence the long-term success of rural development initiatives. Employing a mixed-methods research design across diverse programmatic implementations, the study operationalizes engagement depth through a continuum ranging from nominal participation to transformative empowerment. Concurrently, intervention fit is assessed by evaluating the congruence between policy mandates, resource allocation, and indigenous community needs. Findings indicate that policies promoting deep, continuous stakeholder engagement significantly enhance the contextual appropriateness of interventions, thereby reducing implementation friction and fostering sustainable socio-economic growth. However, systemic bureaucratic constraints often incentivize tokenistic engagement, undermining policy effectiveness. The research highlights the critical necessity for adaptive policy frameworks that prioritize localized decision-making autonomy and flexible resource deployment. By identifying the specific mechanisms through which engagement translates into intervention fit, this evaluation offers strategic insights for policymakers and development practitioners seeking to optimize rural revitalization strategies.

Keywords: Rural Development; Public Policy Evaluation; Community Engagement; Intervention Fit; Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

1.1 The Imperative of Rural Development Policy

Rural development remains a cornerstone of global poverty alleviation and socio-economic stabilization efforts. Despite decades of targeted policy interventions, immense disparities persist between urban centers and rural peripheries in terms of economic opportunity, infrastructure quality, and access to essential public services. Governments and international development organizations have historically deployed a wide array of policy instruments designed to stimulate rural economies, ranging from agricultural modernization subsidies to large-scale infrastructure investments. However, the efficacy of these policies is frequently undermined by a fundamental disconnect between macroeconomic policy objectives and the micro-level realities of rural communities. The traditional top-down approach to policy design often operates on standardized assumptions about rural needs, neglecting the profound socio-cultural, ecological, and economic heterogeneities that characterize rural landscapes. Consequently, evaluating the mechanisms that drive the success or failure of rural development policies has become a paramount concern for public policy scholars and practitioners alike. As highlighted by preliminary studies on rural policy outcomes [1], a shift toward decentralized, participatory models is necessary, yet the mere inclusion of participatory rhetoric in policy documents does not automatically translate into effective grassroots execution.

1.2 Defining Community Engagement Depth and Intervention Fit

To understand the disparities in rural development outcomes, two critical conceptual dimensions must be evaluated: community engagement depth and intervention fit. Community engagement is frequently treated as a binary variable in policy evaluations, categorized simply as either present or absent. This reductive approach fails to capture the multidimensional nature of participation. Engagement depth refers to the intensity, quality, and influence of community involvement throughout the policy lifecycle, encompassing problem identification, project design, resource allocation, implementation, and post-project monitoring. It spans a spectrum from nominal information-sharing to transformative co-creation, where marginalized rural populations acquire substantive decision-making authority [2].

Intervention fit, on the other hand, describes the degree of congruence between the characteristics of a development policy and the specific contextual dynamics of the target community. It involves not only the appropriateness of the technological or economic solutions proposed but also their alignment with local cultural norms, institutional capacities, and environmental constraints. When a high degree of intervention fit is achieved, policies are seamlessly integrated into the existing community fabric, minimizing resistance and maximizing synergistic outcomes. Previous administrative evaluations [3] suggest that poor intervention fit is a primary driver of project abandonment, as communities reject or fail to maintain infrastructures and programs that do not organically address their self-identified priorities.

1.3 Research Objectives and Structural Outline

The primary objective of this paper is to rigorously evaluate the causal relationship between community engagement depth and intervention fit, and to determine how their interaction shapes the overarching success of rural development policies. This research challenges the prevailing assumption that any form of community participation inevitably leads to better policy outcomes. Instead, it posits that only when engagement reaches a sufficient threshold of depth can it generate the contextual intelligence required to optimize intervention fit.

This paper is structured into six main sections to systematically unpack these dynamics. Following this introduction, Section 2 provides a comprehensive theoretical framework and literature review, tracing the evolution of participatory rural development and synthesizing contemporary debates on policy implementation. Section 3 delineates the mixed-methods methodology and evaluation design utilized for this research. Section 4 analyzes the realities of policy implementation, focusing on the bureaucratic constraints that inhibit deep engagement. Section 5 presents the empirical results and a detailed discussion of the findings, demonstrating the quantitative and qualitative impacts of intervention fit on project sustainability. Finally, Section 6 offers concluding remarks and strategic recommendations for reforming rural development policy frameworks.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Evolution of Participatory Paradigms in Rural Policy

The paradigm of rural development policy has undergone profound transformations over the past half-century. Initially, modernization theories dominated the policy landscape, advocating for exogenous interventions driven by technical expertise and centralized state planning. Under this paradigm, rural populations were predominantly viewed as passive recipients of state-sponsored modernization, leading to policies that heavily favored large-scale capital accumulation and agricultural industrialization. While these approaches yielded aggregate economic gains in some regions, they frequently exacerbated rural inequalities and led to massive ecological degradation. The failure of these top-down models to eradicate rural poverty prompted a critical reassessment within the academic community, leading to the emergence of endogenous development theories [4].

Endogenous development emphasizes that sustainable rural revitalization must be rooted in the mobilization of local resources, knowledge, and social capital. Central to this paradigm shift was the popularization of Participatory Rural Appraisal and subsequent participatory policy methodologies [5]. These frameworks argued that local populations possess an intricate, context-specific understanding of their environments that external experts lack. Consequently, international development agencies and national governments began mandating community participation as a prerequisite for funding and project approval. However, critical public policy

literature [6] has increasingly pointed out that the institutionalization of participation has often resulted in a depoliticized, technocratic exercise. Engagement mechanisms are frequently designed to legitimize predetermined policy agendas rather than to devolve genuine power to rural stakeholders, creating a facade of participation that masks entrenched administrative hierarchies.

2.2 Dimensions and Measurement of Engagement Depth

The concept of engagement depth addresses the qualitative deficiencies of institutionalized participation. Foundational models of participation introduced ladders of citizen involvement, conceptualizing participation as a hierarchical progression from manipulation and therapy at the lowest rungs to citizen control at the highest. In contemporary rural policy evaluation, scholars have adapted these frameworks to measure engagement depth across several distinct dimensions [7].

The first dimension is inclusivity, which evaluates who is permitted to participate. Deep engagement requires the active inclusion of marginalized subgroups, such as landless laborers, women, and ethnic minorities, whose voices are often marginalized by local elites. The second dimension is temporal continuity, assessing whether participation is a one-off consultative event during the planning phase or a continuous process extending through implementation and evaluation [8]. The third dimension is authoritative influence, which measures the extent to which community input actually alters policy design and resource distribution. Studies [9] indicate that when participation is restricted to nominal or merely consultative levels, communities experience consultation fatigue, leading to increased cynicism and disengagement from future public policy initiatives. Conversely, transformative engagement, characterized by high inclusivity, continuous involvement, and significant authoritative influence, fosters local ownership and enhances the democratic legitimacy of the development process.

2.3 The Concept of Intervention Fit in Public Policy

Intervention fit is an evaluative concept derived from organizational management and implementation science, newly applied to the domain of rural public policy. It posits that the effectiveness of any policy instrument is contingent upon its alignment with the complex, multifaceted environment in which it is deployed. Intervention fit is generally disaggregated into three primary components: strategic fit, structural fit, and socio-cultural fit [10].

Strategic fit concerns the alignment between the objectives of the development project and the urgent, self-identified needs of the community. For example, a state-mandated digital agriculture initiative lacks strategic fit if the target community fundamentally lacks basic irrigation infrastructure. Structural fit refers to the compatibility of the intervention with local institutional capacities and governance structures. Complex projects that require sophisticated maintenance protocols often fail if the local municipal capacity is insufficient to sustain them. Socio-cultural fit evaluates whether the project respects and integrates into the prevailing cultural norms, values, and traditional knowledge systems of the community [11]. When policy interventions exhibit high fit across all three components, they generate positive feedback loops, reducing the transaction costs associated with project implementation and maintenance. The central theoretical proposition of this paper is that achieving high intervention fit is virtually impossible without mechanisms that facilitate substantial community engagement depth, as local stakeholders are the primary arbiters of contextual compatibility.

3. Methodology and Evaluation Design

3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

To rigorously evaluate the nexus between community engagement depth, intervention fit, and long-term project outcomes, this study employs a retrospective, mixed-methods evaluation design. A multi-case study approach was selected to provide both statistical breadth and contextual depth. The research sample comprises sixty distinct rural development projects implemented across diverse geographical and administrative regions over the past decade. These projects encompass a wide array of policy sectors, including agricultural infrastructure development, rural eco-tourism initiatives, community health programs, and vocational training facilities.

Case selection was conducted using a stratified random sampling technique from a national database of state-funded rural revitalization initiatives. The stratification criteria included the scale of financial investment, the primary sector of intervention, and the socio-economic baseline of the target region. This diversity ensures that the findings are robust and generalizable across different typologies of rural development. By analyzing projects that have been operational for a minimum of five years, the research design specifically accounts for long-term sustainability, avoiding the common pitfall of evaluating projects immediately after their inauguration when artificial implementation support is still present [12].

3.2 Evaluation Metrics and Indicators

The quantitative component of the methodology relies on a structured evaluation framework that assigns composite scores to each project based on three primary constructs: Engagement Depth, Intervention Fit, and Project Sustainability.

The Engagement Depth Index was constructed using indicators such as the frequency of community assemblies, the percentage of marginalized group representatives in steering committees, and the documented instances where community feedback led to a substantive modification of the project blueprint. The Intervention Fit Score was derived from post-implementation audits, assessing the utilization rate of the provided facilities, the congruence between project outputs and baseline community deficits, and the absence of socio-cultural friction during the operational phase. Finally, the Project Sustainability Metric evaluated the current functional status of the project, local financial contributions to ongoing maintenance, and the generation of secondary economic benefits.

Table 1: Evaluation Framework Metrics for Rural Development Policy

Primary Construct	Evaluative Dimensions	Key Indicators for Measurement	Primary Data Sources
Engagement Depth	Inclusivity and Representation	Proportion of minority participants in planning	Attendance records, meeting minutes
Engagement Depth	Authoritative Influence	Number of project modifications driven by locals	Project revision logs, qualitative interviews
Intervention Fit	Strategic Alignment	Match between outputs and pre-project surveys	Baseline reports, final audit documents
Intervention Fit	Structural Compatibility	Local capacity to independently manage operations	Financial audits, maintenance schedules
Project Outcome	Long-term Sustainability	Percentage of infrastructure fully operational	Field observations, operational logs
Project Outcome	Socio-economic Impact	Measurable increase in local household income	Household surveys, municipal tax records

3.3 Data Collection and Analytical Procedures

Data collection involved a triangulated approach utilizing archival document review, extensive field surveys, and semi-structured interviews. Initially, project prospectuses, financial records, and official evaluation reports were scrutinized to establish the bureaucratic timeline and formal objectives of each intervention. Subsequently, a standardized survey instrument was administered to a randomized sample of households within the sixty project catchment areas, yielding a total of four thousand valid responses. The survey quantified community perceptions regarding their level of involvement and the perceived utility of the interventions.

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including regional policymakers, frontline project managers, village leaders, and ordinary community members. These qualitative insights are crucial for understanding the informal dynamics, power struggles, and bureaucratic pressures that shape the implementation process [13]. The quantitative survey data underwent multiple regression analysis to test the correlation between engagement variables and sustainability outcomes, while the interview transcripts were subjected to thematic coding to extract recurring patterns of bureaucratic behavior and community response.

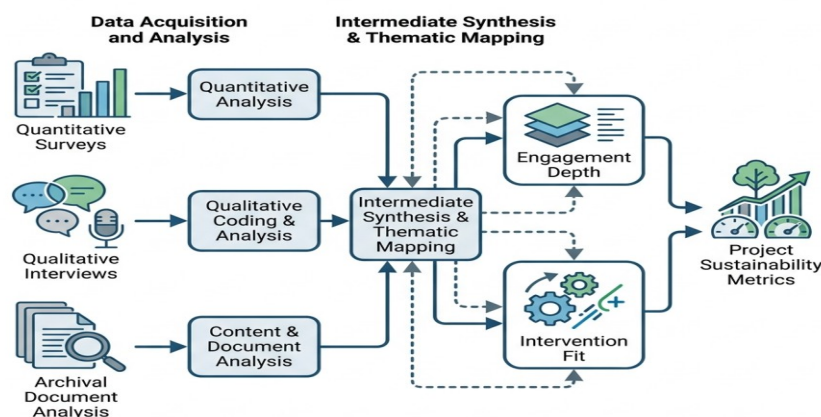


Figure 1: Comprehensive Methodological Workflow and Theoretical Construct Mapping

4. Policy Implementation Analysis

4.1 The Gap Between Policy Intent and Local Execution

A recurring theme in the evaluation of public policy is the persistent gap between the benevolent intentions formulated at the macro-level and the friction-laden realities of micro-level execution. The analysis of the selected rural development projects reveals that national policy frameworks almost universally mandate participatory processes. However, the translation of these mandates into practice is heavily mediated by the institutional incentive structures surrounding local government officials and project administrators.

Frontline implementing agents are often evaluated based on their ability to disburse funds rapidly and meet rigid, pre-defined project milestones. The bureaucratic imperative for speed and quantifiable outputs inherently conflicts with the slow, iterative, and unpredictable nature of deep community engagement. Consequently, administrators frequently resort to a "box-ticking" approach to participation [14]. Public consultations are organized rapidly, often after the core parameters of the intervention have already been established by external engineering or economic consultants. Information is disseminated to the community, but there is no structural mechanism or temporal allowance for the community to contest the project's strategic direction. This administrative distortion transforms participatory mandates from a tool of democratic empowerment into a mechanism of bureaucratic compliance, severely limiting the potential for achieving genuine intervention fit.

4.2 Categorizing the Realities of Engagement Mechanisms

Based on the field observations and qualitative coding of community interactions, the implementation of engagement mechanisms can be categorized into distinct typologies that reflect varying depths of participation. Understanding these typologies is essential for policymakers to diagnose why specific interventions succeed or fail in the long run.

Nominal engagement occurs when community members are treated merely as an audience. They are informed of the project through public notices, but their feedback is neither solicited nor recorded. Consultative engagement involves extracting information from the community through surveys or focus groups, but the implementing agency retains absolute control over how that information is utilized, often ignoring data that contradicts the original project design. Instrumental engagement goes a step further by involving the community in the implementation phase, usually by soliciting cheap local labor or land contributions to reduce project costs, but decision-making power remains externalized [15].

In contrast, representative engagement establishes formal institutional structures, such as joint steering committees, where elected community representatives share governance responsibilities with state officials. Finally, transformative engagement represents the deepest level of participation. It is characterized by

community-led needs assessments, decentralized control over specific budget lines, and the capacity of the community to veto inappropriate technical designs. The evaluation demonstrates that the vast majority of analyzed projects clustered around the nominal and consultative levels, with transformative engagement remaining a rare exception driven by exceptional local leadership rather than systemic policy design.

Table 2: Categorization Typology of Community Engagement Depth

Engagement Category	Decision-Making Locus	Community Role	Impact on Project Design
Nominal	Strictly External	Passive Recipient	None; purely informational
Consultative	External Authorities	Information Provider	Minimal; selective integration
Instrumental	External Authorities	Resource Contributor	Low; focus on cost reduction
Representative	Shared Governance	Active Partner	Moderate; negotiated adjustments
Transformative	Local Community	Primary Driver	High; design matches local demands

4.3 Navigating Bureaucratic and Social Constraints

The qualitative evaluation further highlights the dual constraints that impede deep engagement: structural bureaucratic barriers and localized social stratifications. From a bureaucratic standpoint, inflexible funding cycles are a major deterrent. State grants for rural development often stipulate that funds must be expended within a single fiscal year. This temporal rigidity precludes the lengthy consensus-building processes required for transformative engagement, forcing administrators to push through standardized, off-the-shelf interventions that guarantee rapid disbursement but exhibit poor intervention fit [16].

Simultaneously, rural communities are not monolithic entities; they are traversed by complex power dynamics based on kinship, wealth, and gender. When engagement mechanisms are deployed without careful attention to inclusivity, they are easily captured by local elites who steer project resources toward their own interests. For instance, agricultural subsidies ostensibly designed for smallholder farmers may be disproportionately captured by wealthy landowners who possess the social capital to dominate village assemblies. Therefore, achieving engagement depth requires policy frameworks that not only mandate participation but also provide the specialized facilitation skills necessary to navigate and neutralize local power imbalances, ensuring that the resulting intervention fit reflects the needs of the broader, marginalized community rather than a privileged minority.

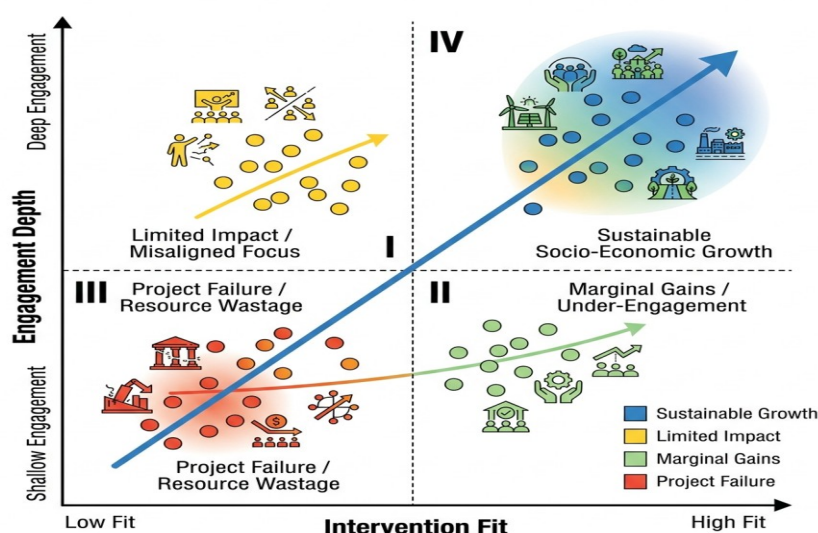


Figure 2: Matrix of Policy Outcomes Based on Engagement Depth and Intervention Fit

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 The Statistical Impact of Engagement on Intervention Fit

The quantitative analysis of the sixty rural development projects provides compelling evidence supporting the central hypothesis: there is a strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation between community engagement depth and the resulting intervention fit. Projects that scored in the upper quartile of the Engagement Depth Index consistently exhibited the highest Intervention Fit Scores. Regression models controlling for initial regional wealth, project scale, and sector type indicated that a one-unit increase in engagement depth corresponded to a substantial increase in both strategic and structural fit.

The mechanism driving this correlation is the optimization of information asymmetry. External policymakers operate with imperfect information regarding the micro-ecological and social conditions of the target area. Deep engagement mechanisms act as highly efficient information-gathering systems, surfacing latent local knowledge that corrects flawed external assumptions. For example, in several water management projects analyzed, external engineers proposed centralized irrigation systems that conflicted with historical, decentralized water rights held by different village clans. Where engagement was deep, community members identified this conflict early, leading to a redesign that respected traditional governance structures, thereby achieving high structural fit. In cases of nominal engagement, the centralized systems were built but subsequently vandalized or abandoned due to unresolved local disputes [17].

5.2 Comparative Analysis of Project Sustainability

The ultimate test of rural development policy is the long-term sustainability of the interventions. The evaluation reveals a stark divergence in outcomes based on the degree of intervention fit achieved through engagement. Projects characterized by low intervention fit generally experienced rapid degradation. Despite passing initial post-construction audits, these interventions suffered from negligible maintenance, low utilization rates, and a failure to generate anticipated economic multipliers. The local communities felt no sense of ownership and viewed the decaying infrastructure as a state responsibility.

Conversely, interventions that achieved high fit demonstrated remarkable resilience. Because the projects directly addressed pressing local needs in a culturally appropriate manner, communities voluntarily mobilized their own resources—both financial and labor—to sustain the initiatives long after formal state funding had ceased. The data indicates that projects categorized under transformative engagement achieved significantly higher long-term sustainability scores compared to those with merely consultative processes [18]. This discrepancy was particularly pronounced in capacity-building and complex infrastructural projects, which require continuous, adaptive management by the end-users.

Table 3: Comparative Outcomes of High versus Low Intervention Fit Across Project Types

Project Typology	Prevailing Engagement Level	Intervention Fit Score	Post-5-Year Operational Rate	Economic Multiplier Effect
Large-scale Agricultural Tech	Consultative	Low to Moderate	35% fully operational	Minimal secondary growth
Centralized Water Infrastructure	Nominal	Low	20% fully operational	Stagnant
Community Eco-Tourism	Representative	High	85% fully operational	Significant local job creation
Localized Vocational Training	Transformative	Very High	92% fully operational	High graduate retention
Rural Health Clinics	Instrumental	Moderate	55% fully operational	Moderate improvement

5.3 Discussion on Policy Redesign and Flexibility

The findings of this evaluation challenge the rigid standardization that characterizes much of contemporary public administration in rural development. The data clearly demonstrates that standardizing technical inputs across heterogeneous rural landscapes inevitably leads to suboptimal outcomes. The pursuit of intervention fit requires an administrative tolerance for variation and localized adaptation.

However, embracing such flexibility poses significant challenges for centralized auditing and accountability mechanisms, which rely on standardized metrics to prevent the misappropriation of public funds. A key discussion point emerging from this research is the need to shift accountability frameworks from a focus on standardized inputs and outputs to an evaluation based on participatory processes and localized outcomes. If local administrators are penalized for deviating from the original, centrally approved project blueprints—even

when such deviations are requested by the community to improve intervention fit—they will continue to enforce inappropriate projects [19]. Therefore, policy reform must focus on creating safe harbors for administrative flexibility, empowering project managers to iterate and adapt designs in real-time based on the insights generated through deep community engagement.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

6.1 Summary of Evaluative Findings

This comprehensive policy evaluation has systematically unpacked the critical relationship between community engagement depth, intervention fit, and the sustainability of rural development projects. The historical shift toward participatory policy paradigms, while conceptually sound, has frequently been hampered by institutional inertia and bureaucratic constraints that reduce engagement to a nominal, compliance-driven exercise. The empirical analysis demonstrates that superficial consultation is insufficient to bridge the informational gaps between external policymakers and local realities.

The data unequivocally shows that when rural communities are empowered through representative or transformative engagement, the resulting interventions exhibit a vastly superior fit with the strategic, structural, and socio-cultural dimensions of the local environment. This high intervention fit is the primary catalyst for long-term project sustainability, as it fosters profound local ownership and aligns the development initiative with the community's indigenous capacity for maintenance and growth. Conversely, standardized interventions forced through accelerated, rigid bureaucratic pipelines systematically fail, resulting in wasted public expenditure and increased communal disenfranchisement.

6.2 Strategic Recommendations for Policymakers

To translate these findings into actionable public policy, several strategic reforms are imperative. First, funding structures for rural development must be fundamentally redesigned to incorporate extended temporal horizons. The mandate for rapid capital disbursement must be relaxed to provide adequate time for the deliberate, iterative processes required for deep community engagement. Policy frameworks should introduce distinct, fully funded preparatory phases dedicated exclusively to participatory planning and capacity building before any infrastructural investments are finalized.

Second, the evaluation metrics used to assess the performance of local government officials and implementing agencies must be overhauled. Reward systems should incentivize the achievement of intervention fit and community satisfaction rather than mere adherence to predetermined technical schedules. This requires the development of robust, qualitative auditing tools that can measure the depth and inclusivity of participatory processes.

Finally, public policy must recognize that genuine engagement is a specialized skill. Significant investments must be made in training rural development practitioners in facilitation, conflict resolution, and participatory methodologies, ensuring they possess the tools necessary to navigate local power dynamics and amplify marginalized voices. By institutionalizing these flexible, deeply participatory approaches, policymakers can transform rural development from a standardized state imposition into a collaborative, sustainable endeavor that organically revitalizes rural economies.

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