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Youth Participation, Democratic Leadership and Governance Reforms for Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

Despite the global population's growth, youth continue to play a significant role as agents of social change in community engagements that enhance political efficiency in democratic governance worldwide. Empirical studies show that youth engagement manifests as increased political awareness, civic engagement, and citizen involvement, thereby building institutional trust that helps achieve the SDGs. Given this context, this paper investigates the potential of youth for innovation, grassroots movements, and participation in governance in the transformative agenda of the SDGs 2030, with particular reference to SDGs 16 and 17. A qualitative research methodology was used in the paper, enabling the study to probe, scrutinise, explore, and analyse existing studies using secondary data; thematic analysis was adopted to identify themes. The findings revealed that the youth were not consulted or involved in decision-making processes, leading to disillusionment and a shift towards community growth and development in many states in Nigeria. The paper opined that meaningful youth participation is not merely desirable but a requirement for achieving the SDGs' vision, and that policymakers should transition from consultation to enabling youth attainment of leadership positions in Nigeria.

Keywords: Youth, Participation, Democratic Governance, Leadership, SDGs

Introduction

Youth participation, democratic leadership, and governance processes are interdependent variables that are significant in modern-day discourse on democratic governance, as they shape the inclusiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability of the democratic system. Scholars have argued that for a democratic system to thrive, it must incorporate some elements of leadership structure that promote youth participation (Pateman, 1970; Young, 2000; Arowolo, 2010; Arowolo & Aluko, 2012). Thus, youth participation becomes a variable that impacts leadership practices, institutional responsiveness, and participatory governance. Democratic leadership fosters an environment conducive to youth participation in formal government institutions and reinforces democratic accountability, public confidence, and institutional legitimacy (Gastil, 1994). According to Checkoway (2011) and Itodo (2020), societies that encourage democratic participation are likely to promote youth civic engagement. Within the Nigerian political system, these two variables are critical because the exclusion of youth in government has generated political tensions and protests. This relationship also reflects broader governance concerns, particularly the link between leadership quality and development outcomes, a connection Akindele et al. (2026) underscore in their analysis of how corruption and weak governance structures undermine progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals.

Democratic leadership interacts with youth participation in a context shaped by governance structures and the formal systems in which these interactions occur. Governance processes such as consultation, representation, accountability, transparency, and participative decision-making are institutional variables through which democratic leadership and youth participation interact. The idea of participative governance is said to strengthen the democratic system through decentralisation of power and by broadening political participation beyond formal voting (Fung & Wright, 2003). However, critics of the participative governance system note that such frameworks can be purely cosmetic if institutional structures fail to enable young citizens to influence governance outcomes.

Empirical evidence from Nigeria suggests that young people participated in various activities such as election campaigns, digital advocacy, public protests, and political mobilisation, but could not wield substantive influence in formal institutional settings, owing to leadership constraints such as political elite exclusion, clientelism, economic dependency, and a culture of gerontocracy (Sule et al., 2018). This interaction can lead to distrust and antagonism between young citizens and political leaders, rather than positive engagement in the democratic system. The *End SARS* protests also demonstrated how a lack of leadership response, as well as a low degree of youth inclusion within the system of governance, often results in greater antagonism in a democratic polity (Iwilade, 2021). Nonetheless, others assert that the inclusion of young citizens in the governance process through responsible, accountable democratic leadership will positively affect institutional trust and citizen confidence

within the democratic system (Fung & Wright, 2003). These arguments align with broader governance debates, particularly the emphasis on accountable leadership as a foundation for strengthening democratic institutions, as indicated by Yusuf and Fagbadebo (2025).

In terms of sustainable development, the interdependence of these three variables is increasingly seen as essential to building sustainable, democratic and inclusive governance. With reference to the Sustainable Development Goals 16 and 17, they require strong and responsive leadership and emphasise participation in decision-making; the inclusion of young people, and democratic governance in particular, are key elements in the quest for a sustained development process. In Nigeria, the demand for the inclusion of youth in governance is accompanied by aspirations for institutional transformation, generational representation, accountability, and justice-driven development processes. The interaction among these three variables in this study demonstrates that sustainable democracy depends on the institutional capacity to promote youth participation in governance, leadership, and democratic processes, which facilitate the nation's development.

Youth Participation

Youth participation has become a dominant discourse in analyses of democratic governance, development administration, and civic participation, as young people are increasingly viewed as indispensable players in the political change process and in sustainable development. Youth participation is defined not just as the physical participation of youth in public affairs but also as their constructive involvement in decision-making processes, policy formulation, political structures and institutions, community mobilisation, and mechanisms for institutional accountability. International institutions, for example, the UN, view youth participation as an 'active involvement of young people in societal life, on issues that are relevant to them', and in decision-making processes that affect them and their future goals (Jacobs & George, 2022; Tijani et al., 2026).

In a democratic setting, participation refers to a fundamental process through which citizens exercise agency in the public realm (Pateman, 1970). However, participation, as far as youths are concerned, is argued to have peculiar characteristics due to several challenges young people face, including age hierarchies, structural exclusion, political marginalisation, economic vulnerability, and limited inclusion within established structures (Checkoway, 2011). These structural exclusions are also reinforced by cultural practices and institutional norms that limit meaningful engagement, a pattern Yusuf and Agbonifo (2025) describe as deeply embedded in cultural, religious, and governance barriers that consistently restrict the participation of marginalised groups, especially women and youth. Hart (1992) views participation as a developmental continuum from consultation to partnership and decision-making processes. Youths' participation, according to Checkoway (2011), implies their capacity to "make a meaningful contribution to social and political development through engagement and action within a democratic framework". Scholars such as Apav et al. (2025), Adeoye (2023), and Shola (2021) posit that youth participation in developing democracies does not end with voting but also entails their ability to influence governance institutions and development priorities. Thus, youths' participation is multi-dimensional, encompassing political, social, economic and developmental aspects of democracy.

While there is wide agreement among scholars on the desirability of youths' participation in governance, varying views exist on the level of this participation, and on the quality and the institutional dimension it has taken. Liberal Democrats opined that participation entails voting, joining political parties, campaigning, and civic advocacy. Their view seems to revolve around the procedural aspect of democratic participation and participation within existing structures (Verba et al., 1995, as cited in Apav et al., 2025). However, critical theorists of participation regard this as a "procedural perspective" because it fails to capture the exclusion of youth, whose participation remains symbolic rather than transformational (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). Studies from Nigeria have confirmed this: youths have shown an overwhelming presence during campaigns, political rallies, digital activism, and mobilisation, but have limited influence on policy and executive leadership (Sule et al., 2018).

In Nigeria, youth participation reached a new level of engagement during the *#EndSARS Movement* demonstration, which showed that youths have massive political awareness, mobilising power and organisational capabilities. But there were institutional constraints and suppression (Iwilade, 2021). The lack of effective youths'

participation in the policy process could be attributed to socio-economic disadvantages such as unemployment and poverty, structural imbalances, gerontocracy, and political godfatherism (Arowolo & Aluko, 2012). Even though the advent of the internet and social media provided more opportunities for civic expression and activism, critics still maintain that the transformative aspect of digital activism should not be taken for granted, as it has not resulted in institutional changes or the election of youth to high political offices (Amoah & Owusu-Boateng, 2019). These institutional limitations also reflect deeper governance deficits, particularly weak accountability and compromised institutional integrity, further illustrating how fragile institutions struggle to respond effectively to citizen-led activism (Yusuf et al., 2026). More attention is now shifting towards analysing the various dimensions of youth participation, including civic awareness, political efficacy, leadership position and participation, policy participation, capacity for advocacy, public trust, among others. Scholars have also presented participatory typologies, which range from symbolic, consultative, and cooperative to youth-driven governance (Hart, 1992). This implies that a certain quality of youths' participation would be desirable to complement the goals of sustainable development, especially the challenge of ensuring social inclusion, and, in this regard, youths can lead the process of social change through their political capabilities (Itodo, 2020).

Democratic Leadership and Youth Participation

Democratic leadership involves determining the extent to which political institutions tolerate inclusion, responsiveness, representation, and participatory decision-making in a democratic society (Khan, 2026). This requires public consultation, political responsiveness and inclusiveness, openness and transparency, citizens' involvement and legitimate leadership. This concept evolved from democratic theory, which explains leadership not only as the exercise of political authority but also as a relational process through which leaders enhance citizens' participation and promote the general societal interest (Apav et al., 2025). Northouse (2021) sees democratic leadership as one that encourages and empowers people to participate in policymaking and governance processes, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of democratic governance and public confidence. This definition aligns with Gastil's (1994) assertion that democratic leadership entails distributing power, encouraging participation, and fostering greater ownership of the outcomes of governance processes. Okolie (2020) insists that democratic leadership goes beyond electoral representation to include the willingness to equip deprived members of society, such as women, youth, and civil society activists, to contribute to and influence political leadership. This supports the arguments of Yusuf and Fagbadebo (2026) that overcoming structural exclusion requires deliberate engagement among leaders, political institutions and marginalised citizens. Hence, interaction among leaders, political institutions, and citizens is vital to democratic leadership.

Despite its theoretical merit, the democratic leadership has been controversial due to conflicts over its practices and applications, as well as its relationship to political structures. Advocates of liberal democracy describe it as grounded in constitutionalism, democratic practices, and competitive elections, highlighting formal political institutions and mechanisms (Dahl, 1989). In contrast, proponents of participatory governance highlight a gap between the theory and practice of democratic leadership when political structures remain dominated by the ruling elite and exclusionary political norms (Young, 2000). Indicators of democratic leadership include accountability, responsiveness, inclusiveness, participation, institutional transparency, ethical leadership, and leaders' access to the populace. This approach to leadership also implies a transformational nature, as leaders are expected to harness people's strengths and motivation towards collective development.

Youth participation in democratic governance means the meaningful integration of young people into the governing structure as actors in the policy process. Checkoway (2011) argues that when youth are active political stakeholders rather than passive beneficiaries of state policies, democratic governance achieves greater legitimacy and social responsiveness. Itodo (2020) asserts that the participation of young people in government strengthens democratic consolidation. Adeoye (2023) conceptualises the context of youth participation in democratic governance in Nigeria as the active role of young people in electoral processes, public administration, advocacy networks, legislative representation and community-based governance structures. It encompasses the ideas of citizenship and inclusion. The liberal-democratic perspective largely views youth participation in electoral processes, such as voting, political campaigning, becoming party members, and public consultations, as adequate

(Verba et al., 1995). However, scholars have argued that the notion of democratic governance cannot be considered inclusive when youth are excluded from decision-making roles (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007).

Youths are more visible during election campaigns, protests, media activism, and advocacy, rather than in the occupation of leadership roles (Sule et al., 2018). Shola (2021) suggests that amending the constitution and changing electoral laws do not automatically bring about new realities unless there are genuine political inclusion of youth and the creation of economic space for youth leadership participation. Youth participation has increasingly been recognised as crucial to building peaceful, socially just, and responsible public institutions with greater accountability, as reflected in SDG 16 and SDG 17. If young people remain outside democratic structures, this risks political alienation and diminishing public trust. This aligns with broader regional analysis of governance and sustainable development, as Fagbadebo et al. (2026) have noted, emphasising the importance of inclusive leadership structures in achieving long-term development outcomes.

Youths and leaders have emerged as central subjects of academic inquiry as tensions and conflicts persist around them within Nigeria's democratic governance structure. This notion of youth-and-leader relations should not be considered a matter of conflict primarily; rather, it refers to the structural contradictions between a young, increasingly politically aware populace and an old political elite that retains control over governance institutions. Although democratic governance is meant to involve people from all social strata, it continues to exhibit clear patterns of gerontocratic leadership, in which older people dominate, with political authority stemming from their long control of institutions and parties (Arowolo & Aluko, 2012). Scholars have blamed Nigeria's governance crisis on the widening gap in youth representation in the leadership of democratic institutions. Itodo (2020) has noted that this exclusion undermines democratic legitimacy by preventing the fulfilment of youths' hopes, economic realities, and developmental aspirations. The structuralists view exclusion as resulting from structural constraints such as *godfatherism*, elite capture, and weak democratic institutions (Sule et al., 2018; Fagbadebo, 2020; Yusuf, 2026). Conservative democrats, on the other hand, argue that competence should be separated from generational considerations because a leader needs political experience. This argument perpetuates old models of elite exclusion and politics. The #EndSARS protest, for instance, brought to the fore how youth marginalisation affects their daily lives and democratic participation (Iwilade, 2021). The intensity and outcomes of the protest demonstrated the massive civic capacity of young people. This highlighted that political leaders resort to using youths as mobilisation tools during election periods, only to be marginalised in post-election decision-making, reinforcing a sense of tokenism and lack of actual involvement.

Youth Participation in Governance Process

Democratic processes of governance are inherently defined by participation, consultation, accountability, and consensus amongst state institutions and civil society. This implies that democratic and youth participation in governance have become central topics in governance scholarship because of growing concern that the sustenance of democratic development in any state hinges on the extent to which governance institutions are responsive to broader civic inclusion, especially among youth populations. Governance processes are the institutional interactions, decision-making arrangements, and procedural measures through which public policy matters are handled, and various societal interests are negotiated (Hyden et al, 2004). Thus, democratic participation in this process involves citizens shaping policies, influencing governance and decision-making institutions, and influencing policy outputs and developmental programmes. It introduces a temporal dynamic, as it concerns the inclusion of young people and the youth generation within governance processes and structures.

This discourse suggests that governance is more participatory and democratic when a country's government actively includes its citizens, rather than viewing them as objects to be governed, thereby contributing significantly to the legitimisation of the political system (United Nations Development Programme: 2004). Fung and Wright (2003) also argue that in a participatory governance arrangement, citizen participation enhances institutional responsiveness and democratic accountability. The general sentiment in Nigeria is that the inclusion of youth in governance processes is an indispensable precondition for the successful democratic consolidation, as youth possess the capacity to foster innovation, mobilisation, and community building (Shola, 2021; Adeoye, 2023).

Thus, youth participation in governance entails a degree of integration of youth into the political decision-making processes and structures.

Under Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 16 and 17, participative governance processes have become one of the pillars of good governance that promote peace and justice, effective institutions, and international cooperation and partnerships. The exclusion of young people from the governance process has led to weak legitimacy of governance because governing systems lose touch with the aspirations and needs of large segments of the populace (The European Parliament, 2015). In Nigeria, the “*Not Too Young to Run*” reforms and growing youth social movements demonstrate social pressure for greater participation, representation, and responsiveness of state institutions to generational demands. Still, democratic participation remains a far cry because of structural factors such as exclusion and elitism (Fagbadebo, 2020).

Young people are drawn to democratic participation through a variety of mechanisms. The findings of Sheredeka et al. (2021) indicate that interactive technologies can engage youth in democratic conversations (Amuda-Kannike & Shiyanbade, 2023). Nwosu et al. (2021) explore civic engagement in the fiscal process, arguing that it shapes democratic budgeting and empowers citizens to generate transformative change in governance practices. Thus, civic involvement is essential for improving transparency and accountability. Adogbeji and Isonah (2025) argue that youth involvement in political and governance activities is crucial to strengthening democratic institutions and inclusive governance, especially in Nigeria’s context. Thew et al. (2021) illustrate, in the international arena, how youth engagement in global governance processes, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) climate negotiations, can help increase the legitimacy of international environmental policies. Ramos et al. (2025) and Apav et al. (2025) highlight that although youth participation is consistently advocated in policy documents, in most instances there has been minimal attention to its democratic impacts, pointing to an enduring gap between policy intent and reality.

These insights all shed light on the reasons why the participation of young people is not a single, uniform experience. Walther et al. (2021) provide a structural dimension for analysing youth participation in European cities and highlight the role of power relations and institutional design. Individual willingness to participate is just as important as institutional design. The digital space has proved to be a special place in this regard. Saud et al. (2021) show that online platforms can help bring youth together, engage them in civic life, and promote political participation, thereby playing an active role in promoting democracy today. Nevertheless, digital access is not enough to address the more fundamental challenge of inequities. Increased youth participation is essential but requires targeted and inclusive strategies. Trivelli and Morel (2021) have emphasised a lack of systematic involvement of rural youth in decision-making processes and the need for strategies specifically designed for and accessible to rural communities.

Youth Participation in Governance and Democratic Processes in Africa

Youth engagement in governance and democratic processes in Africa has significant potential to enhance the powers of public institutions, service delivery, and to foster more informed, representative voters. Mutereko et al. (2021) argue that community engagement at the local level can meaningfully contribute to democratic governance by improving public service delivery. Chitondo (2022) believes that civic education is crucial for fostering young people’s participation in democratic processes because it equips them with the capacities. Hove et al. (2022) found that more community engagement in health and water governance is associated with more effective governance and better health services. When this engagement involves marginalised communities, such as youth, there are tangible improvements in public services. Jacobs et al. (2022) highlight the specific roles and responsibilities of youth in health policy processes and the need for their meaningful participation in building healthier and more equitable societies.

Youth participation is, thus, a tangible contributor to democratic consolidation in Africa, especially through a structured, sustained, and education-based process (Ayofe & Shiyanbade, 2026). Despite these possibilities, considerable evidence suggests that systemic challenges, tokenism and lack of concrete mechanisms limit youth involvement in governance processes in Africa. The lack of effective mechanisms for youth engagement is

another aggravating factor, as it leads to inadequate representation and a persistent failure to consider youth needs and interests in local governance (Maponya et al., 2024). It can therefore be seen that, in reality, the vision of youth's right to participate in African governance structures is yet to be realised and that unless deliberate changes are made in the system to remove the barriers of minimum effort, low accountability and lack of real participatory platforms, the barriers to meaningful inclusion of youth in governance will continue to exist.

Challenges of Youth Political Leadership in Nigeria

The governance gaps in Nigeria's political system are deeply entrenched and present a significant obstacle to the development and consolidation of youth political leadership. Duyile (2023) attributes this to ineffective leadership and high rates of corruption. Political instability, limited institutional capacity, and inadequate public service delivery exacerbate these structural weaknesses (Amin et al., 2024; Apav et al., 2025). The structural context of a "competitive clientelist" political settlement, as described by Croke and Ogbuonji (2024), generates strong resistance from top politicians who are unwilling to accept fundamental changes to the system. Ososona (2022) adds a historical perspective, observing that an environment of electoral violence and conflict undermines the merit-based leadership values that youth political aspirants are more likely to promote. Ekot and Momoh (2024) have noted the absence of attempts by the dominant political parties to involve youth in leadership contestation during the 2023 general elections, due to the financial obligations associated with the nomination process. Female youth were also disadvantaged, as Wakeel et al. (2025) and Yusuf and Fagbadebo (2026) have noted, facing significant barriers to their political participation and representation, including cultural, economic, and legal barriers, as well as entrenched societal biases, norms, and unequal access to political networks. These constraints are further reinforced by broader structural exclusions, as Yusuf & Agbonifo (2026) have noted; cultural resistance and institutional norms often restrict genuine participation.

Oke and Ahoton (2024) cite high levels of youth unemployment, inadequate quality of education, poverty, and inequality as factors responsible for restiveness among youths in Nigeria, which they attribute to the failure of good leadership. The government's action to improve these conditions has had only limited success: the N-Power socio-economic policy has been evaluated by Charles and Ifedayo (2024), who found that it had made "little impact" because of its design, which lacks the necessary focus on the meaningful participation of beneficiaries and is potentially unsustainable. Kanu et al. (2024) highlight the economic, political, and social impacts of banditry-related insecurity, noting that it negatively affects youth development and political participation. Ainabor and Akuza (2025) also refer to cybercrime, often attributed to poverty, unemployment, and social inequality, as another impediment to youth empowerment. Tijani et al. (2026) point to the brain drain syndrome, driven by socio-economic factors and the apprehension that this might lead to their disconnection from the local and religious context in which civic engagement is nurtured.

A key challenge to Nigeria's nationhood is the "toxic elite consensus and leadership gaps," in which ruling elites plunder power through corrupt practices, to the detriment of the nation's progress (Ososona, 2022). Thus, it is challenging for emerging leaders, especially young people, to take root or make an impact (Ndukwe et al., 2025). Onuorah (2024) describes it as a "leadership conundrum" that is characterised by corruption, political instability, and the politicisation of ethnic and religious conflicts. Importantly, Duyile (2023) asserts that these circumstances are not coincidental but rather are deliberately created by the ruling elite. These problems are highly interdependent, and reinforcement must be addressed comprehensively and in a coordinated manner to harness the significant leadership potential of the country's youth (Shiyanbade et al., 2023).

Theoretical Explanation

Participatory theory is grounded in a set of interrelated theoretical propositions that are pertinent to the study of youth participation in public leadership. The tenets of these include agency, inclusion, deliberation and empowerment. This theory was developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century, and later in the 19th century, John Stuart Mill also joined the conversation to elaborate on the basic ways of citizen participation in the decision-making process. Participatory theory is rooted in the idea of agency, the ability of people to make meaningful contributions within contexts of structures that both limit and support their actions (Breel, 2025).

From this point of view, participation is not a passive experience or a “default” option; it is an active, deliberate experience of processes that impact one’s life and community. Invited spaces, the formal ones where participation is organised and controlled by institutions and claimed spaces, which are the ones produced autonomously by citizens claiming the right to be heard, are the basic categories (Cornwall, 2008).

Participatory theory focuses on the conditions for inclusion: who can participate, how and how much. The ladder of citizen participation is a landmark typology useful as a benchmark for assessing participatory processes (Arnstein, 1969). Arnstein describes eight levels or rungs of participation that move from manipulation and therapy at the lowest levels to citizen control and delegated power at the highest. The theory developed by Habermas (1984) about communicative action is critical to participatory theory as it emphasises the quality of dialogue as a key element in participatory processes. According to Habermas, democratic results must be achieved in conditions of undisturbed communication when everyone can participate in line with the rule of reasoned argument, not coercion, manipulation, or structural exclusion. This principle identifies a series of necessities for youth involvement in government. This includes communicative skills, available institutional contexts, and deliberative skills. Empowerment is a critical element of participatory theory, referring to a mechanism by which people and groups gain power, resources and confidence to confront and alter inequitable power structures. Freire (1970) sets the definition of empowerment in the dialectical manner of reflection and action (praxis), regarded as a process that not only provides a solution to immediate problems but also creates a greater ability to critically examine structural issues. Participatory theory has some critics, and a serious use of the theory demands recognition of its flaws. Participatory processes can become ideologically hegemonic as a form of governance that can legitimise pre-determined institutional agendas in the name of participation.

The use of participatory theory to the intersection of youth participation, democratic governance, leadership and SDGs is theoretically productive. The analytical vocabulary to consider how these normative commitments are or are not manifested in the governance and leadership practice of youth is provided by participatory theory. Kabeer (1999) makes the point that inclusion is not just formal, but substantive, and is impossible unless those spaces have content and participation is possible, a capability that varies among social groups. Participatory theory sees leadership not as an individual quality but as a collective and relational practice as part of the participatory process. This shift in the conception of leadership theory in accordance with distributed leadership theory (Spillane, 2006) and servant leadership frameworks has important implications for SDG-oriented leadership programmes for youth. In short, participatory theory is not just about youth participation; it is a call to pursue a vision of democratic governance and youth-led, SDG-focused leadership that requires young people to be active actors instead of voices in the background that might be heard from time to time.

Methodology

This is descriptive research, and secondary sources were used to collect data. This involved surveying youth participation in democratic governance in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Data were thematically analysed.

SDGs 16 and 17 for Community Development

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal tool to attain inclusive and sustainable development by 2030. SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) are of great concern to community development, as they address governance systems and partnerships. These objectives offer both institutional and operational bases of sustainable development. SDG 16 aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels, while SDG 17 aims to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. SDGs 16 and 17 are the institutional and relational enablers that are crucial to the effectiveness of other SDGs in communities. SDG 16, associated with peace, justice and institutions, is an important driver for achieving SDG 3: good health and well-being (Anderson et al., 2022). Good governance structures and institutional honesty are structural conditions for community

advancement. Building on this, Zaki et al. (2022) examine cooperation at the community level in Indonesia and connect SDGs 1 (no poverty), 4 (quality education), and 17 (partnerships for the goals) to local economic development. They show how these can all serve as catalysts for community development, especially in states characterised by low capacity. In addition, López-Villalobos et al. (2022) argue that SDG 17 partnerships are vital to the success of local efforts. This shows that SDGs 16 and 17 are not standalone issues but rather part of a constellation of systemic conditions that enable or hinder community development across multiple sectors. While SDGs 16 and 17 are well known for their potential to contribute to community development, they have proven difficult to implement and have limited practical value due to three areas of implementation: institutional prioritisation, disclosure accountability, and strategic integration.

López-Tapia et al. (2022) note that SDGs 16 and 17 are less researched than other SDGs, which could be the result of and the cause of a lack of priority in applied settings. The gap in this research highlights that the mechanisms by which these objectives could affect community change remain underdeveloped in practice. In the financial sector, the same concern has been emphasised by Jan et al. (2023), who observed the lowest SDG 16 disclosure scores among Islamic banks in Malaysia, revealing a systemic weakness in taking up SDG 16 responsibilities in institutions that have the potential to create equitable development. This is compounded by the low levels of engagement with SDGs in disclosures, as found by Weerasinghe et al. (2024), where SDGs are mostly reported as an add-on to a company's strategy and not as an active commitment in Sri Lanka, especially as regards SDG 17, which is about collaboration and partnership.

Taken together, these findings shed light on a structural disconnect between the normative expectations of SDGs 16 and 17 and their institutional context. López-Tapia et al. (2022) identify a gap between knowledge and practice, noting insufficient scholarly work to drive weak policy translation. In the context of institutions, Jan et al. (2023) uncover the challenges arising from the reluctance of institutions, including those with a social mandate, such as Islamic financial institutions, to operationalise governance-oriented goals. Weerasinghe et al. (2024) also note that the cosmetic approach to SDG disclosures makes the partnership mechanisms of SDG 17 appear largely symbolic and lose the quality of substantive multi-stakeholder collaboration that would make them impactful for the community. While these restrictions do not preclude the developmental value of SDGs 16 and 17, they do indicate that, without accountability mechanisms, institutional engagement and continued agenda items for policy and academic discussion, these goals will remain aspirational and not drive transformation in community development practice.

The findings presented by Anderson et al. (2022), Zaki et al. (2022) and López-Villalobos et al. (2022) provide a more empirical basis for the importance of SDGs 16 and 17 for development. The results show that there are cross-domain benefits to communities of good institutions and of meaningful partnerships. However, the issues highlighted by López-Tapia et al. (2022), Jan et al. (2023) and Weerasinghe et al. (2024) cannot be ignored: they reflect repeated shortcomings in implementation that need to be addressed at the institutional level, policy level and in the practice of embedding SDG 16 and 17 in corporate decision-making if the SDGs' transformative potential is to be realised.

Concluding Remarks

The study observes that the socio-economic factors have singly and collectively led to the phenomenon of economic survival among many Nigerian youths and not political participation. If basic welfare is not guaranteed, politics is a privilege, not a right, and if participation is not nourished, the wellsprings of young political leaders dry up. Without the security of basic welfare, politics is not a right; it is a luxury, and without the nurturing of participation, the wellsprings of youth political leadership cease to exist. It's an affirmation of the intimate relationship between socio-economic development and the effectiveness of youths' political engagement; without tangible gains in the lives of young Nigerians, calls for increased political participation could be an aspiration and not action. The deliberate maintenance of elite supremacy, a challenge that has been entrenched in Nigeria, is perhaps the biggest challenge to youth political leadership. It cuts down political space and creates conditions that are not conducive to new and accountable leadership.

Nigerian governance is often criticised for being high on participatory rhetoric and low on inclusion of youth within key political and development processes. Youths are seen as highly engaged in election campaigns, advocacy, digital activism, civic movements, but excluded from the crucial governance process and decision-making institutions, for reasons such as the existing structure of elite domination, patronisation politics, economic deprivations, and the limited openness of state institutions. Thus, the paper opined that meaningful youth participation is not merely desirable but is a requirement for achieving the SDGs vision in order for policymakers to transition from consultation to youth attainment leadership positions in Nigeria. Dimensions of youths' participation in democratic leadership in Nigeria can be explored through political representation, inter-generational equity, access to leadership positions, trust in public institutions and participation in civic activities. Some institutional efforts to improve youths' stake in governance include the *#Not Too Young to Run* campaign, which lowered the age limit for aspiring to public office. Nevertheless, political reforms have limitations in addressing financial barriers to political participation. Based on the SDG 16 concept on inclusive governance, it is important that leaders incorporate diverse young demographics within institutions and decision-making processes; as a result, the relationship should be explored not only from the angle of political conflict but also from the angle of a problem in democratic governance processes and decision-making.

Policy Recommendations

- a) Governments at all levels should establish formal mechanisms that guarantee meaningful youth representation in decision-making bodies, advisory councils, legislative committees, and development planning processes.
- b) Inclusion of youth or young people to contribute directly to policy formulation and implementation, thereby strengthening democratic governance and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- c) The system should equip young people with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to enhance their capacity to engage effectively in governance processes and assume leadership roles in society.
- d) Governments should embark on educational institutions and public agencies in order to integrate democratic values, leadership development, and SDG awareness into school curricula and community-based programmes.
- e) Both governments and non-governmental organisations should invest in leadership training, mentorship programmes, policy dialogue platforms, and entrepreneurship initiatives targeted at young people to increase their participation in democratic governance.
- f) Digital participation is another mechanism that can reduce barriers to engagement and provide wider opportunities for young people to influence governance outcomes and sustainable development policies for monitoring the electioneering processes.

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