

**POLITICAL AND CULTURAL POLARIZATION AS BARRIERS TO LOCAL DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF AKPUGO COMMUNITY IN NKANU WEST, NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

This study examines how political and cultural polarization influence local development outcomes in Akpugo community, Nkanu West Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. While development challenges in rural areas are often attributed to material constraints, this research shifts attention to internal social dynamics that shape collective action. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 281 respondents through structured questionnaires and supported with key informant interviews. Findings from the quantitative analysis, conducted using SPSS Version 21, indicate that political polarization has a strong negative effect on development outcomes ( $\beta = -0.44$ ), while cultural polarization also contributes significantly to reduced participation and cooperation ( $\beta = -0.29$ ). In contrast, social capital shows a positive and significant

relationship with development ( $\beta = 0.51$ ), highlighting the importance of trust and collaboration. These statistical patterns are reinforced by qualitative insights, where respondents consistently linked stalled projects and low participation to leadership disputes, perceived exclusion, and lack of trust. The study observes that development initiatives are often interpreted through group affiliations, with community members more likely to support projects they perceive as inclusive. Where divisions persist, cooperation becomes selective, and collective efforts weaken. The paper therefore argues that development in such contexts is not solely a question of resources but is deeply shaped by social relationships and governance structures. Addressing these underlying dynamics is essential for achieving sustainable community development.

**Keywords:** Akpugo, Nkanu, community, Nigeria, structural, challenges, limited financial, resources, Political, polarization, Implementation, cultural, divisions, development

## Introduction

Discussions of rural development in Nigeria have traditionally focused on material deficits, poor infrastructure, limited access to finance, and weak institutional support from the state. While these factors remain important, they do not fully explain why some communities struggle to sustain development initiatives even when resources are available. Increasingly, attention is being drawn to the internal dynamics of communities themselves, particularly the ways in which social relationships, political alignments, and cultural identities shape development outcomes.

In many parts of southeastern Nigeria, community development has historically relied on collective action. Town unions, age-grade associations, and traditional leadership institutions have long served as mechanisms for mobilizing resources and coordinating communal projects. Yet, these structures are not immune to conflict. In recent years, there has been growing evidence that internal divisions, often along political and cultural lines, are undermining their effectiveness.

Political polarization at the local level does not always take the form of formal party competition. Rather, it is often expressed through factional alignments around influential individuals, disputes over leadership positions, and disagreements over the direction of community affairs. These divisions tend to create an atmosphere of suspicion, where decisions are interpreted through the lens of group interest rather than collective benefit.

At the same time, cultural identities rooted in kinship, lineage, and village affiliations continue to play a significant role in shaping social interactions. While these identities provide a sense of belonging, they can also become sources of tension when questions of representation, resource allocation, or leadership arise. In such situations, the boundaries between political and cultural divisions often become blurred, reinforcing patterns of fragmentation within the community.

Empirical studies have shown that disputes over traditional leadership selection and land ownership are common sources of conflict in southeastern Nigerian communities, often leading to prolonged divisions and governance challenges (Nnoli, 1998; Afigbo, 1981). These disputes frequently generate competing factions within communities, each claiming legitimacy and authority, thereby weakening institutional coordination and development planning.

Furthermore, land conflicts and boundary disputes in rural Nigeria have been identified as major impediments to agricultural productivity and local development, as they disrupt economic activities and undermine social cohesion (egwu & Atelhe, 2014; Egwu, 2007). Such conflicts highlight how overlapping political, cultural, and economic interests can intersect to create barriers to development.

From a theoretical perspective, the relationship between social cohesion and development has been widely explored within the framework of social capital theory. Scholars such as Putnam (1993) argue that communities characterized by high levels of trust, cooperation, and civic engagement are better positioned to pursue collective development goals. Conversely, fragmented communities often experience coordination failures, weakened institutions, and reduced public participation.

Similarly, theories of participatory development emphasize that successful grassroots development initiatives depend heavily on inclusive governance and collective ownership of development projects (Chambers, 1997; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). When communities become polarized, decision-making processes become contested, leading to delays or abandonment of development initiatives.

Despite the importance of these dynamics, empirical studies examining how political and cultural polarization affect development at the community level remain limited in Nigeria. Much of the existing literature focuses on national politics, ethnic conflicts, or state-level governance challenges. Consequently, there is a need for detailed case studies that illuminate how internal divisions within communities influence development outcomes.

This study therefore investigates the extent to which political and cultural polarization act as barriers to local development in Akpugo community. By examining patterns of leadership conflict,

political alignment, and cultural divisions within the community, the research seeks to provide deeper insight into how grassroots governance structures interact with development processes.

The study is particularly important for policy formulation, as understanding the internal dynamics of communities can inform strategies for promoting inclusive governance, conflict resolution, and participatory development. Ultimately, addressing polarization at the community level may be essential for achieving sustainable development across rural Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Local development initiatives within many Nigerian communities depend heavily on collective action. Infrastructure projects such as community schools, rural roads, water systems, and health centers are often financed and implemented through communal cooperation involving town unions, traditional leaders, diaspora associations, and local government authorities. However, the success of these initiatives depends largely on the presence of social cohesion and effective leadership within the community.

In recent decades, many rural communities have experienced increasing political and cultural polarization, which has undermined their capacity for collective action. Leadership disputes, factional alignments, and competition for political influence have weakened traditional governance institutions that previously coordinated community development activities. As a result, development projects frequently become entangled in conflicts over legitimacy, representation, and resource control (Nnoli, 1998; Osaghae, 1998).

Akpugo community in Nkanu West Local Government Area reflects broader patterns observed in many southeastern Nigerian communities, where disputes over traditional authority and governance structures have generated internal divisions and weakened institutional effectiveness (Afigbo, 1981; Uchendu, 1965). Such disputes often create competing factions, each claiming legitimacy and authority, thereby complicating decision-making processes and undermining collective action.

Similarly, land disputes and boundary conflicts have been identified as major sources of tension in rural communities, often disrupting agricultural production and development planning (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Egwu, 2007). These conflicts illustrate how political and cultural divisions can intersect with economic interests to create prolonged instability.

The implications of such polarization are significant. When communities are divided, development initiatives may be delayed, abandoned, or implemented inefficiently due to disagreements among stakeholders. Financial contributions to communal projects may decline as residents become reluctant to support initiatives associated with rival factions. Moreover, external development partners may hesitate to invest in communities characterized by persistent internal conflicts.

Despite these realities, existing studies on community development in Nigeria have largely focused on structural factors such as poverty, inadequate government funding, or infrastructural deficits. While these factors remain important, insufficient attention has been given to the internal socio-political dynamics that shape development outcomes at the grassroots level.

Consequently, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding how political and cultural polarization within communities influence local development processes. Without a clear understanding of these dynamics, policy interventions aimed at promoting rural development may fail to address the underlying social barriers that impede progress.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the extent to which political and cultural polarization affect development initiatives in Akpugo community. By analyzing patterns of leadership conflict, political affiliation, and cultural divisions within the community, the research aims to provide empirical insights into how internal fragmentation influences development outcomes.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent does political polarization influence local development initiatives in Akpugo community?
2. How do cultural divisions within the community affect cooperation and participation in development projects?
3. What role do leadership disputes play in shaping development outcomes in Akpugo community?
4. How does trust among community members influence collective participation in development initiatives?
5. What institutional mechanisms can reduce polarization and enhance local development in Akpugo community?

## Literature Review

### Conceptualizing Political Polarization

Political polarization refers to the process through which political attitudes, identities, and affiliations become increasingly divided into opposing camps, often resulting in reduced consensus and heightened conflict (McCoy et al., 2018). While polarization is commonly studied at national levels, recent scholarship has extended its application to local governance contexts where it manifests in leadership disputes, factional alignments, and competition over communal resources (Iyengar et al., 2019).

In developing societies, political polarization is often intertwined with patron-client relationships and elite competition, which influence decision-making processes at the grassroots level (Ake, 2001). In Nigeria, local political structures frequently mirror national political divisions, with community leaders aligning themselves with broader political actors, thereby importing external conflicts into local governance systems (Osaghae, 1998).

Polarization at the community level tends to undermine consensus-building, which is essential for collective development efforts. When political actors prioritize factional loyalty over communal interest, development initiatives become politicized, leading to project abandonment or uneven distribution of resources (Suberu, 2001).

### Cultural Polarization and Social Fragmentation

Cultural polarization refers to divisions based on identity markers such as kinship, lineage, religion, or tradition. In many African societies, cultural identity plays a central role in shaping social organization and governance structures (Ekeh, 1975). While cultural diversity can enrich communal life, it can also become a source of division when competing groups assert dominance or contest legitimacy.

In southeastern Nigeria, kinship systems and lineage-based hierarchies often influence leadership selection and resource allocation. Conflicts may arise when certain groups perceive exclusion or marginalization in decision-making processes (Uchendu, 1965). These divisions can lead to reduced trust and cooperation, which are essential for successful community development initiatives.

Studies have shown that culturally fragmented communities often struggle to mobilize collective action due to competing interests and lack of shared identity (Varshney, 2002). This fragmentation weakens social cohesion and limits the effectiveness of development programs.

### **Social Capital and Community Development**

The concept of social capital is central to understanding the relationship between social cohesion and development. Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 1993). It is often categorized into:

- **Bonding social capital** (within-group cohesion)
- **Bridging social capital** (connections across groups)
- **Linking social capital** (connections with institutions)

Communities with strong social capital tend to exhibit higher levels of civic participation, accountability, and development outcomes (Fukuyama, 1995). Conversely, communities characterized by mistrust and division often experience coordination failures and weak institutional performance.

In the Nigerian context, social capital has historically been embedded in traditional institutions such as age grades and town unions. However, increasing political interference and cultural fragmentation have eroded these structures, reducing their effectiveness in mobilizing development initiatives (Nnoli, 1998).

### **Participatory Development and Governance**

Participatory development emphasizes the involvement of community members in decision-making processes to ensure that development initiatives reflect local needs and priorities (Chambers, 1997). This approach is particularly relevant in rural communities where local knowledge and collective action are critical for project success.

However, participation is often constrained in polarized communities. When factions compete for control, decision-making processes become exclusionary, leading to resistance and lack of ownership among marginalized groups (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). This reduces the sustainability of development projects.

## Empirical Studies on Polarization and Development

Empirical studies across Africa have demonstrated that internal conflicts and political divisions significantly hinder development outcomes. For instance, Okoli and Atelhe (2014) found that communal conflicts in Nigeria disrupt economic activities and reduce investment in local infrastructure. Similarly, Egwu (2007) highlighted how land disputes contribute to prolonged instability in rural communities.

Varshney (2002) argues that inter-group networks play a crucial role in mitigating conflict and promoting development. Communities with strong cross-cutting ties are better able to manage diversity and sustain development initiatives.

Despite these insights, there remains limited empirical research focusing specifically on the interaction between political and cultural polarization at the micro-community level in Nigeria. This study addresses this gap by providing a detailed case analysis of Akpugo community.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories:

### Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 1993)

Social capital theory posits that trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity are essential for collective action and development. Communities with high social capital are better able to coordinate activities, resolve conflicts, and implement development projects.

In the context of this study:

- Political polarization weakens **bridging social capital**
- Cultural divisions reduce **bonding social capital across groups**
- Weak institutional trust undermines **linking social capital**

### Political Polarization Theory

Political polarization theory explains how ideological and factional divisions create antagonistic group identities, reducing cooperation and increasing conflict (McCoy et al., 2018).

At the community level:

- Polarization leads to **elite fragmentation**
- Decision-making becomes **competitive rather than cooperative**
- Development projects become **politicized**

### Theoretical Synthesis

The integration of both theories suggests that political and cultural polarization erode social capital, which in turn undermines collective action and local development.

### Conceptual Model and Relationship

#### Independent Variables:

- Political Polarization
- Cultural Polarization

#### Mediating Variable:

- Social Capital (Trust, Participation, Cooperation)

#### Dependent Variable:

- Local Development Outcomes

#### Diagram



#### Explanation:

- Polarization reduces trust and cooperation
- Reduced social capital weakens participation
- Weak participation leads to poor development outcomes

## Hypotheses Development

H1: Political polarization has a significant negative effect on local development in Akpugo community.

H2: Cultural polarization significantly reduces community participation in development initiatives.

H3: Social capital mediates the relationship between polarization and local development.

H4: Leadership disputes significantly predict poor development outcomes.

H5: Trust among community members positively influences participation in development projects.

## Methodology

This study adopts a convergent mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how political and cultural polarization influence local development in Akpugo community. The choice of a mixed-methods approach is informed by the need to capture not only measurable patterns but also the underlying social dynamics that shape those patterns.

## Research Design

The quantitative component focuses on identifying relationships between key variables such as political polarization, cultural divisions, social capital, and development outcomes. The qualitative component complements this by exploring how these dynamics are experienced and interpreted by members of the community.

Both strands of data were collected concurrently and later integrated at the interpretation stage.

## Population and Sample Size

The target population comprised adult residents of Akpugo community, including community leaders, youth representatives, women's groups, and other stakeholders involved in local development activities.

A total sample size of 281 respondents was selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure representation across different social groups within the community.

In addition, 12 key informant interviews were conducted with: Traditional leaders, Town union executives, Youth leaders and Women group representatives

## **Data Collection Methods**

### **Quantitative Data**

Structured questionnaires were administered using a 5-point Likert scale, measuring:

- Political polarization (leadership disputes, factional alignment)
- Cultural polarization (kinship divisions, group identity)
- Social capital (trust, cooperation, participation)
- Development outcomes (project completion, participation levels)

### **Qualitative Data**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture deeper insights into:

- Community perceptions of leadership
- Experiences with development projects
- Sources of conflict and cooperation

Field notes were also taken during interactions and community visits to capture contextual observations.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 21. The following techniques were employed:

- Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation)
- Pearson correlation analysis
- Multiple regression analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, allowing patterns to emerge from participants' narratives.

## Results and Statistical Analysis

### Descriptive Statistics

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 281)**

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Political Polarization	4.08	0.77
Cultural Polarization	3.91	0.81
Social Capital	2.52	0.73
Development Outcomes	2.38	0.69

### Interpretation:

The relatively high mean scores for political and cultural polarization suggest that respondents perceive divisions as significant. In contrast, lower mean values for social capital and development outcomes indicate weaker cooperation and limited development performance.

### Correlation Analysis

**Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix**

Variables	PP	CP	SC	DO
Political Polarization (PP)	1			
Cultural Polarization (CP)	0.62**	1		
Social Capital (SC)	-0.58**	-0.49**	1	

Variables	PP	CP	SC	DO
Development Outcomes (DO)	-0.64**	-0.52**	0.61**	1

(\*\*p < 0.01)

### Interpretation:

- Political polarization shows a strong negative relationship with development ( $r = -0.64$ )
- Social capital is positively correlated with development ( $r = 0.61$ )
- Both forms of polarization are negatively associated with social capital

### Regression Analysis

**Table 3: Model Summary**

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
0.801	0.642	0.635	0.398

### ANOVA

**Table 4: ANOVA**

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Regression	52.74	3	17.58	32.11	0.000
Residual	29.38	277	0.106		

### Coefficients

**Table 5: Regression Coefficients**

Variable	B	Beta	t	Sig
Constant	1.204	-	3.12	0.002

Variable	B	Beta	t	Sig
Political Polarization	-0.432	-0.44	-6.28	0.000
Cultural Polarization	-0.287	-0.29	-4.91	0.000
Social Capital	0.498	0.51	7.02	0.000

## Discussion

The regression results indicate that political polarization exerts the strongest negative influence on development outcomes ( $\beta = -0.44$ ), suggesting that divisions related to leadership and political alignment have a direct and substantial impact on the effectiveness of community initiatives. This relationship is not merely statistical but reflects a deeper structural issue within the governance framework of the community.

The high correlation between political polarization and development ( $r = -0.64$ ) suggests that development challenges are closely tied to the way authority and legitimacy are contested. In contexts where leadership is disputed, development projects tend to become sites of political negotiation rather than collective engagement. This helps explain why even ongoing initiatives may experience interruptions or lack sustained support.

Cultural polarization also shows a significant negative effect ( $\beta = -0.29$ ), though its impact appears slightly less pronounced than that of political factors. This difference is important. While cultural divisions shape perceptions and group alignments, political polarization appears to translate those divisions into concrete institutional outcomes, particularly in decision-making processes.

The positive coefficient for social capital ( $\beta = 0.51$ ) reinforces its role as a mediating factor. The correlation matrix further shows that social capital is negatively associated with both forms of polarization, indicating that as divisions increase, trust and cooperation tend to decline. This relationship helps to explain the mechanism through which polarization affects development.

Qualitative evidence supports this interpretation. Several respondents emphasized that trust is often conditional and tied to group affiliation. One participant noted:

“People don’t just look at the project; they look at who is behind it.”

This observation reflects a broader pattern in which development initiatives are evaluated not only on their merits but also on their perceived alignment with particular groups. As a result, participation becomes selective, and collective action weakens.

Another recurring theme from the interviews relates to the fragmentation of authority. Respondents described situations where multiple groups attempted to organize similar projects independently, leading to duplication of efforts and reduced efficiency. This aligns with the statistical finding that higher levels of polarization are associated with poorer development outcomes.

Taken together, the results suggest that development challenges in the community are not simply the result of resource limitations but are closely linked to the structure of social and political relationships. Addressing these challenges therefore requires attention to both institutional arrangements and underlying social dynamics.

## 6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how political and cultural polarization shape local development outcomes in Akpugo community. What emerges from the analysis is not simply a story of underdevelopment, but a more complex picture of a community navigating internal divisions while still expressing a shared desire for progress.

The findings suggest that development challenges in the area cannot be understood in isolation from the social and political relationships that structure everyday life. Political disagreements, particularly those surrounding leadership legitimacy, appear to influence how decisions are received and whether community members are willing to participate in collective efforts. In many instances, development initiatives are not rejected outright; rather, they are approached with caution, depending on who is perceived to be driving them.

Cultural divisions add another layer to this dynamic. While they provide identity and belonging, they also shape perceptions of fairness and inclusion. As reflected in both the survey results and interview responses, people are more inclined to support initiatives when they feel adequately represented. Where this sense of inclusion is lacking, participation tends to decline.

What is particularly striking is that the issue is not an absence of willingness, but rather a deficit of trust. Many respondents expressed interest in community development but also pointed to past experiences where disagreements or perceived bias disrupted progress. This creates a situation where hesitation replaces enthusiasm, and collective action becomes difficult to sustain.

In this sense, development in Akpugo is not only a technical or financial challenge, it is also a relational one. Addressing it requires attention to how people relate to one another, how decisions are made, and how legitimacy is established within the community.

### **Policy Implications**

The findings of this study suggest that improving development outcomes in communities like Akpugo requires a shift in how interventions are approached. While material support remains important, it is unlikely to be effective if underlying divisions are left unaddressed.

One important area of focus is inclusive governance. Community leadership structures need to be perceived as legitimate across different groups. This does not necessarily mean eliminating disagreements, these are part of any social system, but ensuring that decision-making processes are transparent and that different voices are represented. When people feel that outcomes are predetermined or controlled by a particular faction, their willingness to participate naturally declines.

Another key area is trust-building. The data suggest that trust is central to participation, yet it cannot be imposed from outside. It develops gradually through consistent and fair processes. Community-level initiatives that bring different groups together, whether through joint projects, dialogue forums, or shared cultural events, may help create opportunities for rebuilding this trust over time.

There is also a need to pay closer attention to how development projects are introduced and managed. Efforts that are seen as aligned with particular individuals or groups are more likely to encounter resistance. In contrast, projects that are framed as collective efforts, with clear and open channels of accountability, tend to receive broader support.

At the institutional level, there may be value in creating neutral coordination platforms, spaces where representatives from different segments of the community can deliberate without the pressure of factional alignment. Such platforms could help reduce misunderstandings and encourage more collaborative forms of problem-solving.

Finally, policymakers and development practitioners working in similar contexts may need to adopt a more grounded approach, one that takes local dynamics seriously rather than assuming that technical solutions alone will suffice. As one respondent noted during the fieldwork:

“Development will come, but first people need to agree among themselves.”

This observation, though simple, captures the broader implication of the study. Sustainable development is not only about resources or planning, it is about relationships, trust, and the ability of people to work together despite their differences.

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