

The Participation of Stakeholders in Community Policy Planning and Implementation. A Case Study: Freetown City Council, Sierra Leone

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Abstract: Community involvement remains a central pillar of sustainable development. In recent decades, the promotion of grassroots participation has been increasingly recognized as a tool for empowerment, accountability, and inclusivity in governance. Decentralization reforms in Sierra Leone highlight the role of citizens in shaping and implementing local policies, particularly within the Freetown City Council. This study assessed the degree of stakeholder engagement in policy planning and explored the factors that influence effective participation. Data were collected through both qualitative and quantitative approaches at municipal and community levels. Findings revealed that while stakeholders play important roles in planning and implementation, their involvement is often limited by political, social, and institutional challenges. The study emphasizes the importance of strengthening inclusive participation for sustainable urban governance.

Keywords: Stakeholders, Community Participation, Local Government, Policy, Community Stakeholders.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, substantial financial and technical resources have been invested to promote stakeholder participation in policy planning and development projects, with the intention of improving living standards and achieving long-term sustainability (Peter et al., 2015). Despite these investments, many donor-supported initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa have struggled to achieve continuity after external funding ends (Ababa, 2016). Sierra Leone, like other developing nations, has faced similar challenges, particularly in ensuring that grassroots engagement is maintained throughout the project cycle.

One of the critical reasons for limited sustainability is the weak involvement of community actors in decision-making processes. In the context of Freetown City Council, successful development projects often depend on the extent to which stakeholders are included in policy design and implementation. Prior research suggests that projects adopting a stakeholder-driven approach are more likely to endure, as they empower communities to take ownership of initiatives beyond donor exit strategies (Bishop, 2001; Bishop, 2020).

Stakeholders can be broadly defined as individuals, groups, organizations, or institutions that have an interest in or are influenced by community policies. They may include residents, civic organizations, private sector actors, traditional leaders, and government agencies. Freeman (2016) emphasized that such stakeholders influence and are influenced by community agendas, decisions, and resource management. Their engagement in policymaking therefore promotes accountability, institutional trust, and social cohesion.

The Local Government Act of 2004 in Sierra Leone explicitly requires that communities be directly involved in policymaking processes, with the goal of empowering grassroots populations and strengthening local governance. Yet, in practice, participation is often inadequate, leading to policies and projects that do not fully reflect community needs. Effective stakeholder involvement, as noted by Mukundane (2011), not only helps translate local demands into institutional goals but also forms the basis for inclusive and sustainable development.

This study therefore examines stakeholder participation in policy planning and implementation within Freetown City Council. It extends earlier scholarly discussions (Zacharia et al., 2008) by investigating the

nature of community engagement, identifying motivating factors for participation, and highlighting challenges that constrain inclusivity in urban governance.

➤ Objectives of the Study

To achieve its purpose, the study was guided by the following objectives:

- To assess the relevance of government policy planning and implementation within Freetown City Council.
- To analyze the participatory roles of community stakeholders in local policy-making.
- To examine the reasons motivating stakeholder involvement in planning and implementation.
- To identify the challenges stakeholders face in engaging with the Council's policy processes.

II. STUDY METHODOLOGY

➤ Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The purpose was to objectively examine stakeholder participation in community policy planning and implementation within the Freetown City Council. Quantitative data provided measurable insights into the level of involvement, while qualitative methods captured deeper perspectives on stakeholder experiences, challenges, and contributions to policy processes. This dual approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of participation patterns.

➤ Study Location

The research was conducted in the Western Area Urban District, within the jurisdiction of the Freetown City Council. This location was selected because it represents a significant urban population with active engagement in local governance, making it suitable for examining stakeholder participation in policy planning and implementation.

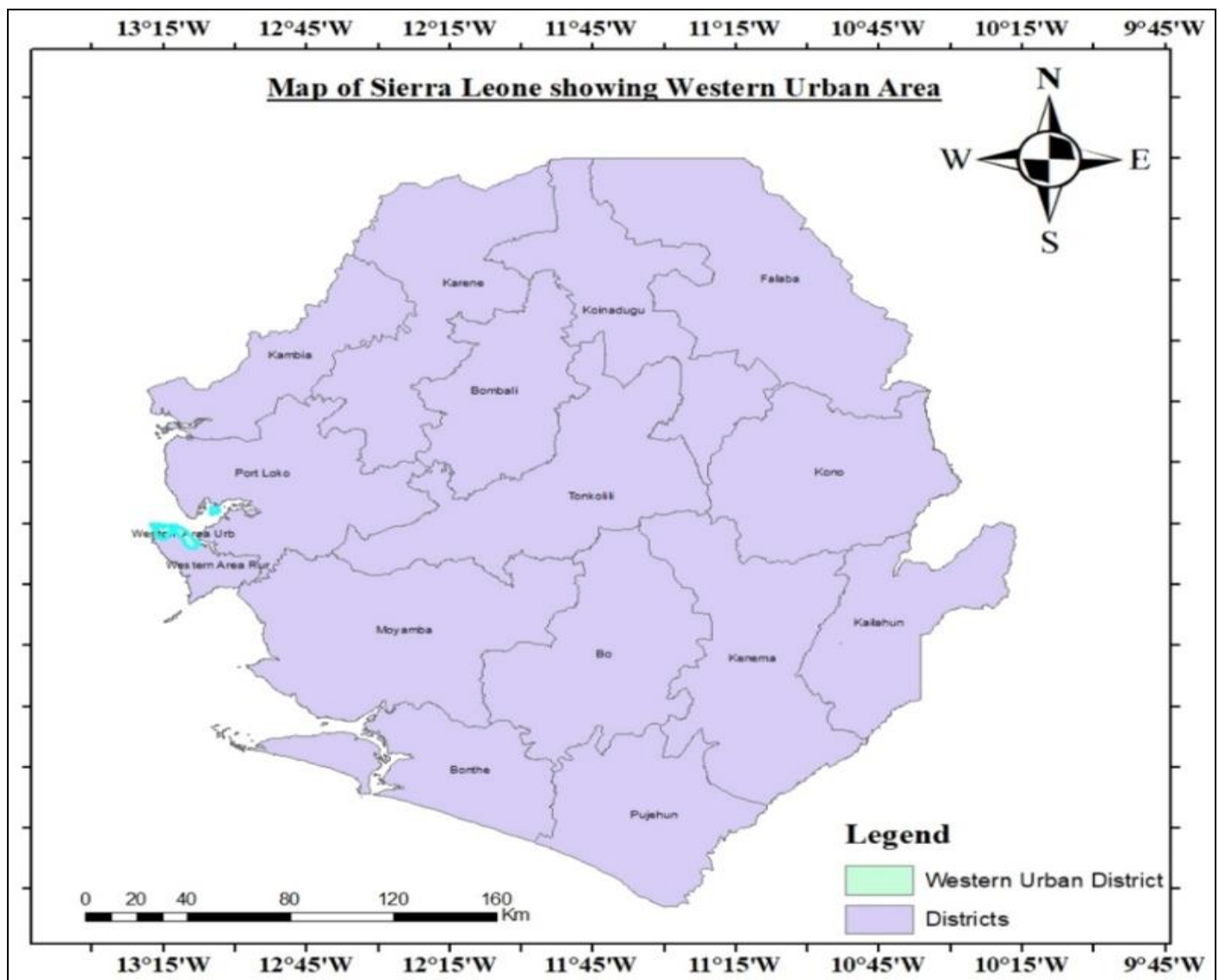


Fig 1 Map of Sierra Leone, Showing the Western Area Urban District

➤ Study Population, Sample Frame, and Sample Size

The study population included adult residents aged 18–30 years, who had lived in the study area for at least ten years. The population frame consisted of approximately 2,000 households within selected communities. Using household listing, each household head was assigned a unique code. From this frame, 200 households were randomly selected, with 180 respondents participating in the survey. The respondents included youths and household heads, providing insight into stakeholder participation and its influence on policy planning.

➤ Sampling Techniques

A random sampling method was employed to ensure an unbiased selection of respondents. This technique gave each household an equal probability of inclusion, allowing for a representative sample. Additionally, purposive sampling was applied for key informants, including community leaders and council officials, to provide detailed knowledge and perspectives on stakeholder participation.

➤ Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 3.0, with descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages used to summarize demographic characteristics

and stakeholder participation. Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were analyzed using content analysis, which involved identifying recurring themes and patterns to interpret stakeholder experiences, contributions, and challenges effectively.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the analysis of data collected from the field to assess the level of stakeholder participation in community policy planning and implementation within the Freetown City Council. The discussion is structured according to the study's objectives, integrating both quantitative and qualitative findings to provide a holistic understanding of stakeholder engagement.

A. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Understanding the demographic profile of respondents provides context for analyzing participation patterns. Socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, education, and occupation can influence the level of engagement in policy planning.

➤ Gender

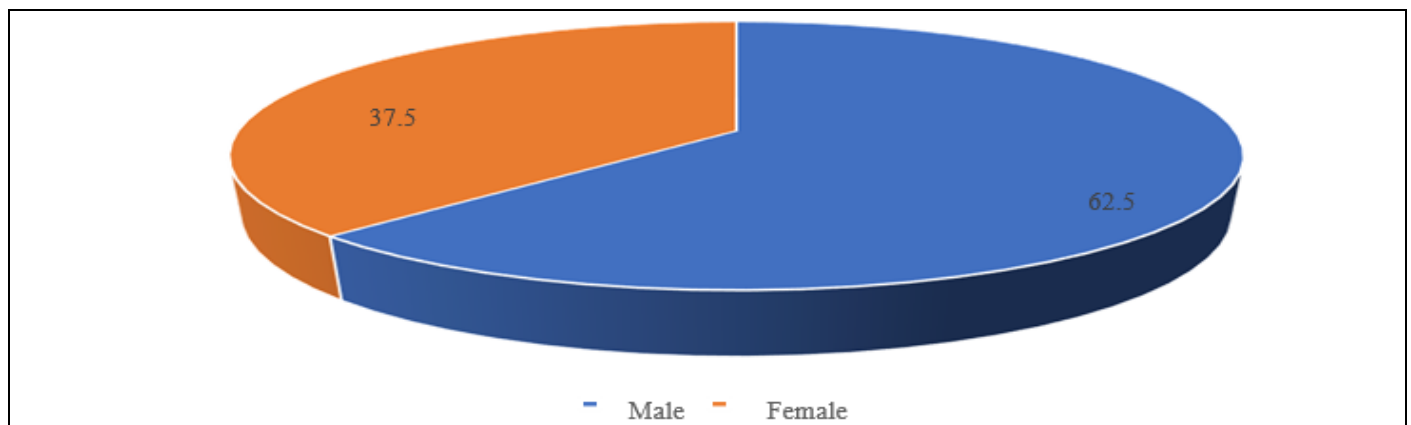


Fig 2 Distribution of Respondents by Gender, Field Survey 2024

Out of 80 respondents, 50 (62.5%) were male, while 30 (37.5%) were female. This suggests that male respondents were more involved or accessible during the study, reflecting possible gender differences in participation in local governance activities.

➤ Religion

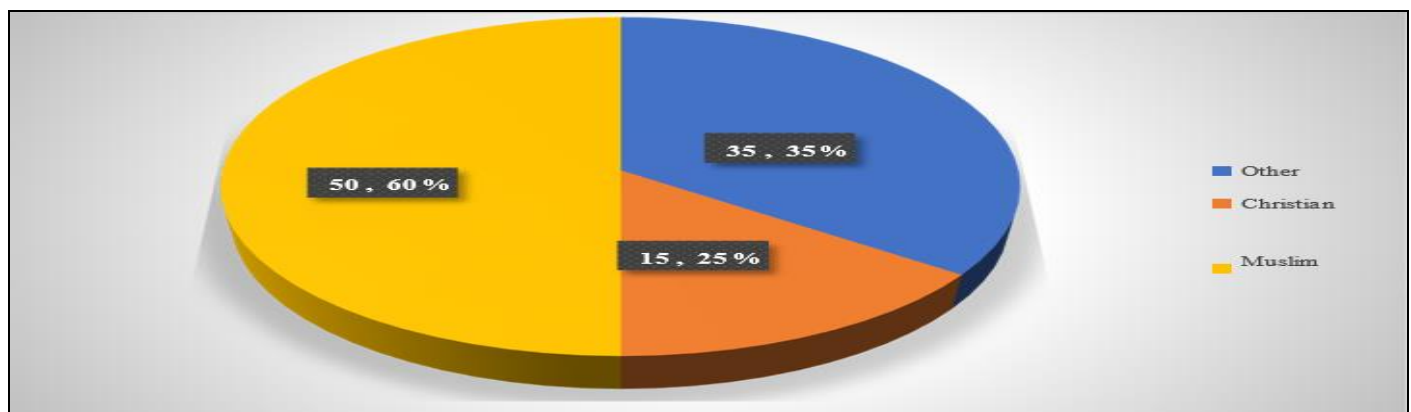


Fig 3 Distribution of Respondents by Religion, Field Survey 2024

A majority of respondents were Muslim (60%), followed by Christian (25%) and other religions (15%). The predominance of Muslim respondents mirrors the religious composition of the study area and indicates active engagement across religious lines.

➤ Age

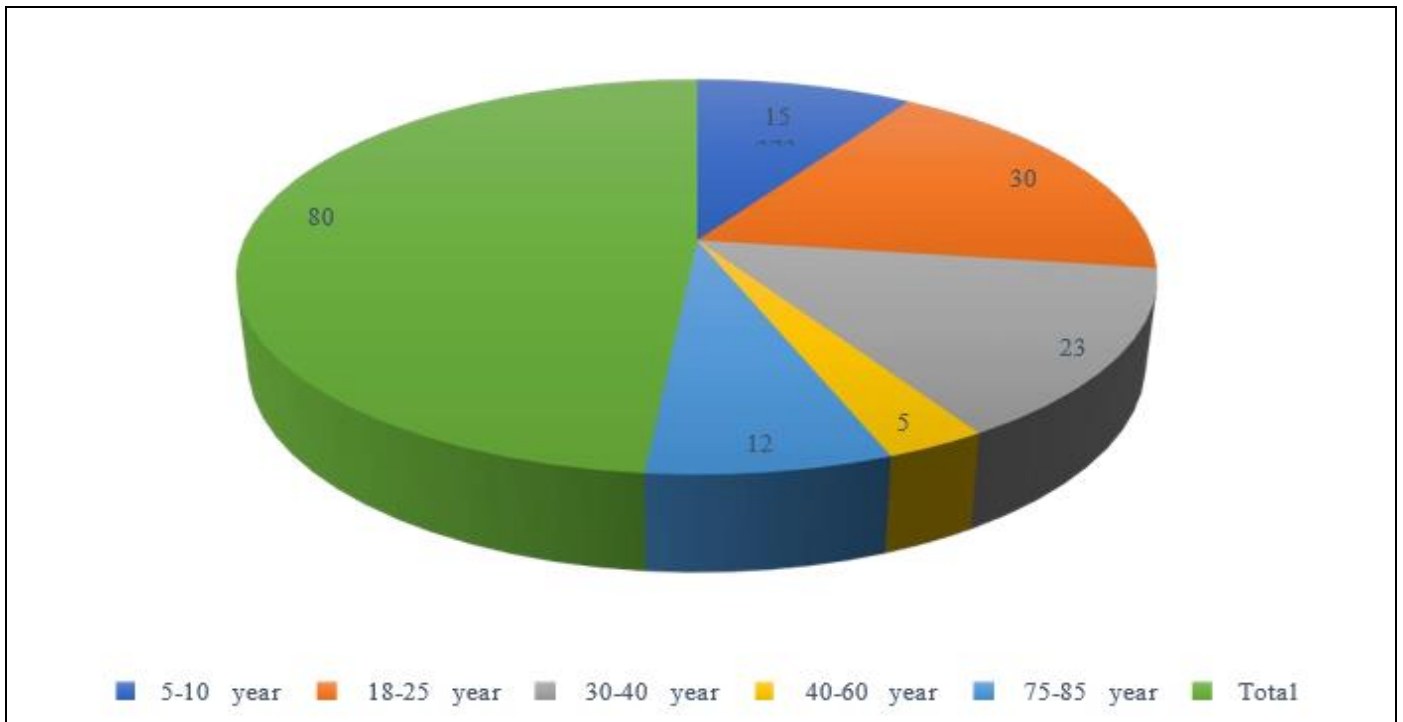


Fig 4 Distribution of Respondents by Religion, Field Survey 2024

The age distribution showed that most respondents (38%) were 18–25 years old, followed by 26.1% aged 30–40 years. Smaller proportions included 5–10 years (19%), 40–60 years (6.1%), and 75–85 years (14%). This indicates that

young adults are the most active participants in policy discussions.

➤ Marital Status

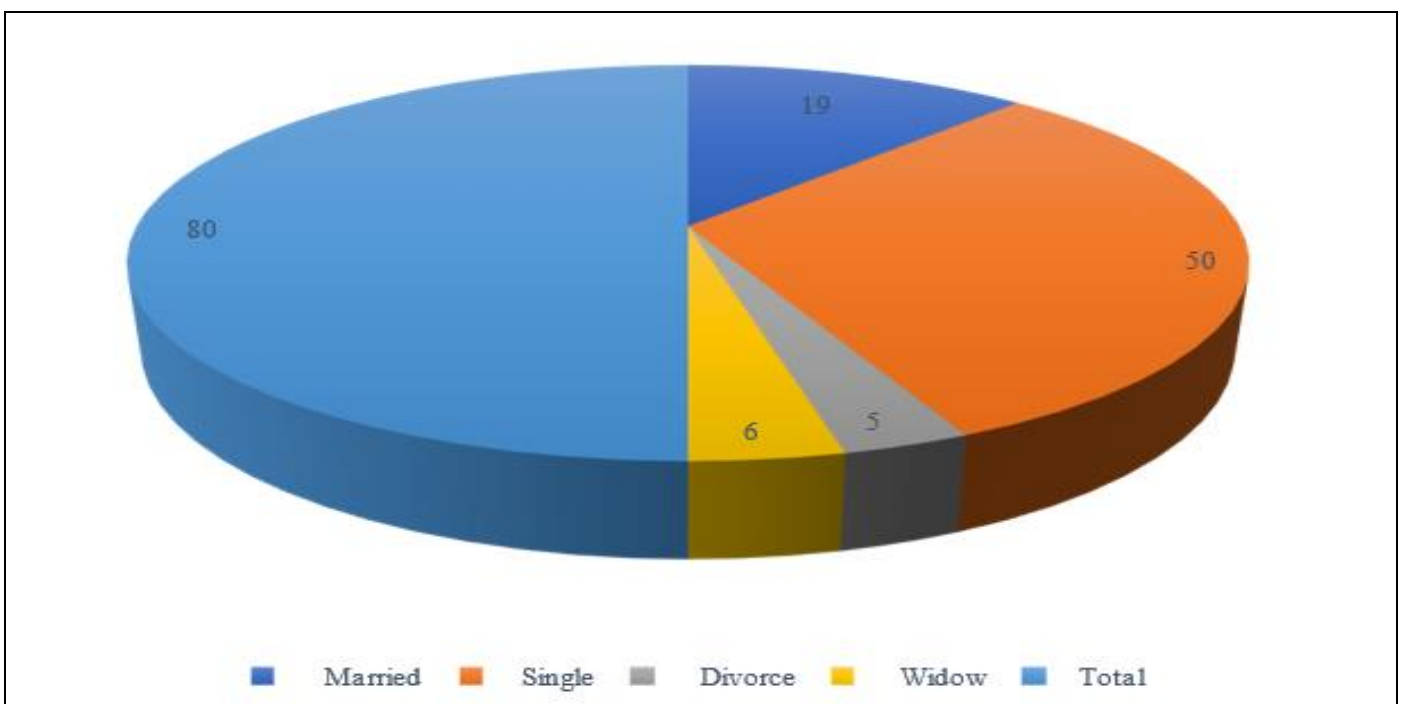


Fig 5 Distribution of Respondents by Marital Status, Field Survey 2024

Single respondents were the majority (68%), followed by married (23%), widowed (5%), and divorced (4.1%). Single individuals may have had more availability to engage in community activities, which is reflected in the higher response rate.

➤ Educational Level

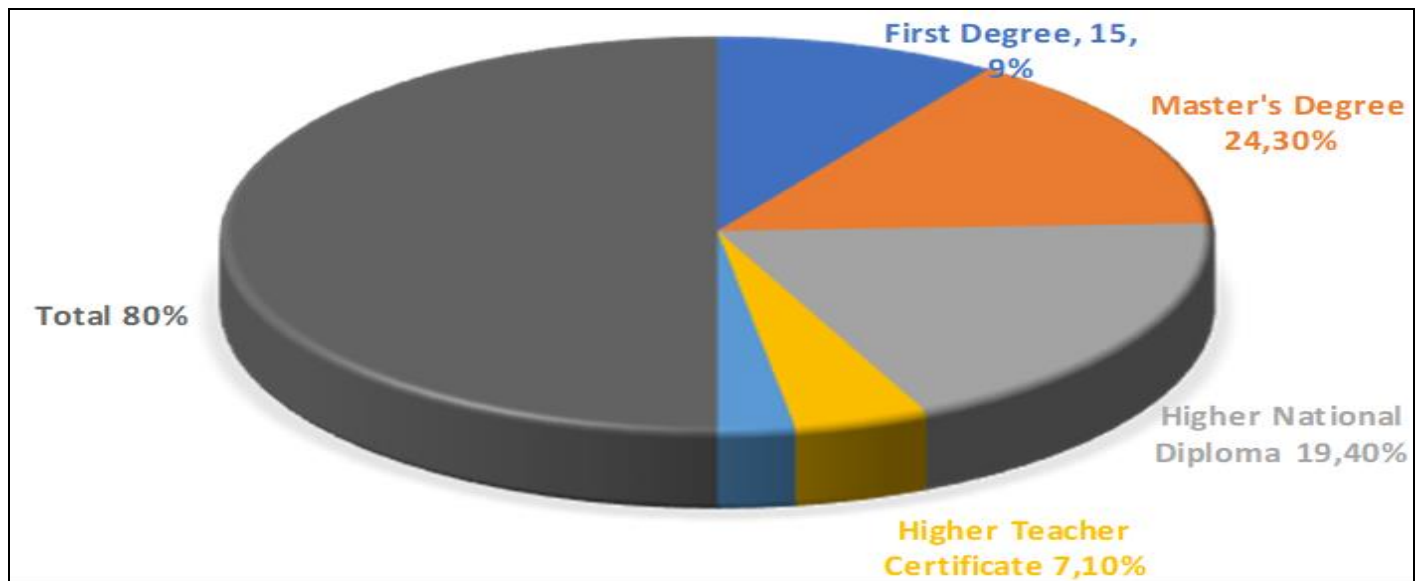


Fig 6 Distribution of Respondents by Marital Status, Field Survey 2024

Respondents' educational backgrounds were generally high: 40% held a Higher National Diploma, 30% a Master's degree, 15% a first degree, and 10% a Higher Teachers Certificate. This indicates that respondents are capable of

understanding complex policy issues, enhancing the quality of data collected.

➤ Occupation of Respondents

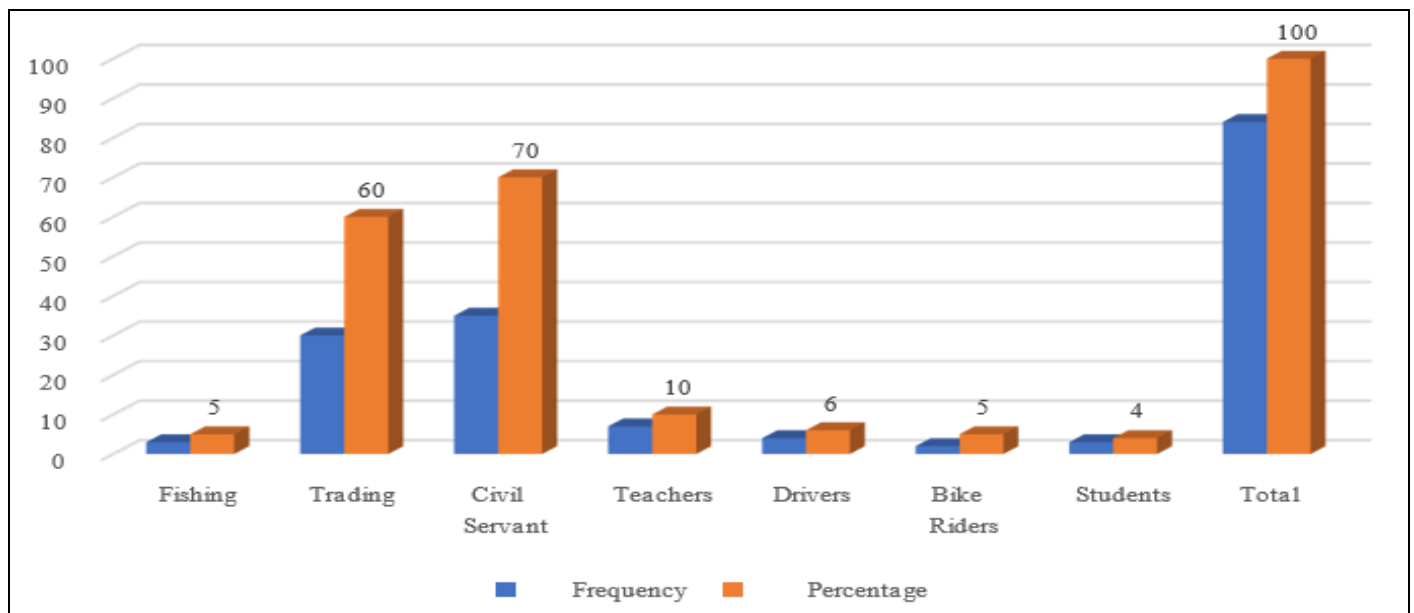


Fig 7 Distribution of Respondents by Marital Status, Field Survey 2024

Most respondents were civil servants (70%), traders (60%), teachers (10%), drivers (6%), bike riders (5%), and students (4%). The dominance of civil servants reflects their active involvement in community governance and policy matters.

B. To Assess the Relevance of Government Policy Planning and Implementation within Freetown City Council.

This objective aimed to assess how respondents perceive the importance of government participation in policy planning and implementation. Effective governance requires that stakeholders understand the rationale and benefits of policies for local development.

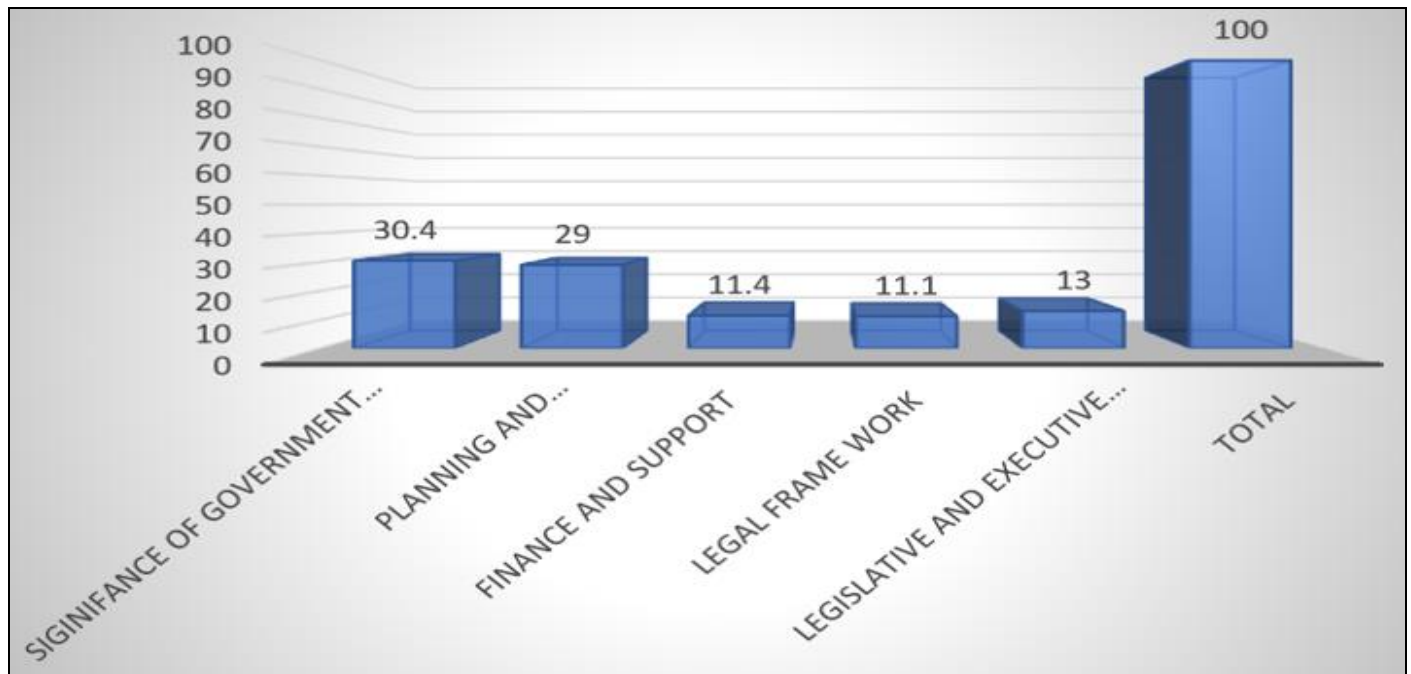


Fig 8 Explore the Significance of Government policy Planning, Field Survey 2024

The study established that government involvement is viewed as highly significant in ensuring effective policy outcomes. Respondents emphasized that government agencies provide the technical expertise necessary to design policies that address community needs. Approximately 30.4% of respondents noted that without such expertise, policy frameworks may lack professional rigor.

Political will was also identified as a crucial driver, with 29% of participants emphasizing that government commitment determines whether policies move beyond the planning stage into practical implementation. This finding reflects the reality in Sierra Leone, where strong political backing often makes the difference between stalled initiatives and successful projects.

In addition, the government's role in financing and providing institutional support was highlighted.

Respondents recognized that most community development initiatives rely heavily on government resources, and legal frameworks provided by the state give legitimacy and enforceability to policies.

The discussion therefore suggests that while stakeholders can play supportive roles, the central role of government cannot be underestimated. The combination of technical expertise, political commitment, financial resources, and institutional authority makes government participation indispensable in policy planning and implementation.

C. To Analyze the Participatory Roles of Community Stakeholders in Local Policy-Making.

This section explores how stakeholders contribute to policy planning and implementation, including their roles in project initiation, financing, and community engagement.

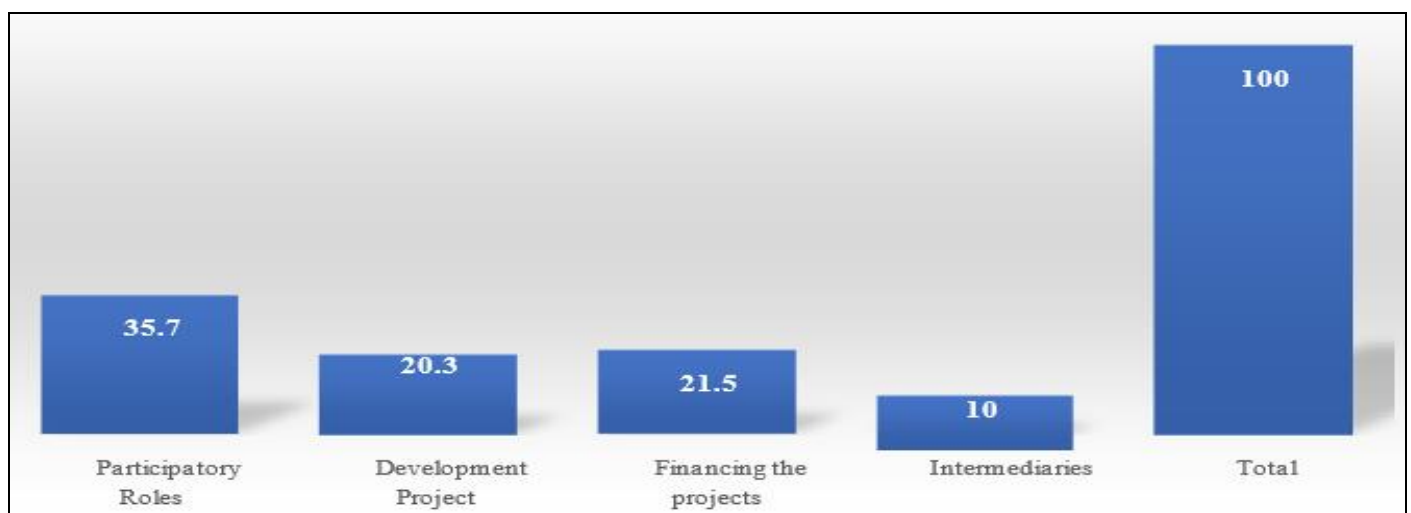


Fig 9 Examines the Key Participatory Roles of Community Stakeholders, Field Survey 2024

The findings revealed that community stakeholders play diverse and meaningful roles in supporting government-led initiatives. The most frequently cited role was educating the community, with 35.7% of respondents affirming that stakeholders help raise awareness about projects and policies. This role is particularly important in urban areas like Freetown, where misinformation and lack of awareness can undermine development projects.

Another significant contribution was participation in project development. About 20.3% of respondents indicated that stakeholders often initiate or contribute ideas to development projects, ensuring that policies reflect real community needs. Similarly, 21.5% noted that stakeholders provide financial or material support, filling gaps left by limited government resources.

Stakeholders also act as intermediaries between the council and the wider community, ensuring effective communication and building trust. Although only 10% highlighted this role, it is crucial for preventing misunderstandings and promoting accountability.

Overall, these results demonstrate that stakeholders are not passive recipients of policy but active contributors whose involvement enhances the quality, relevance, and acceptance of policy initiatives.

D. Examining the Reasons Motivating Stakeholder Involvement in Planning and Implementation.

Stakeholders participate in policy processes for various strategic reasons. Understanding these motivations helps in designing inclusive policies and enhancing participation.

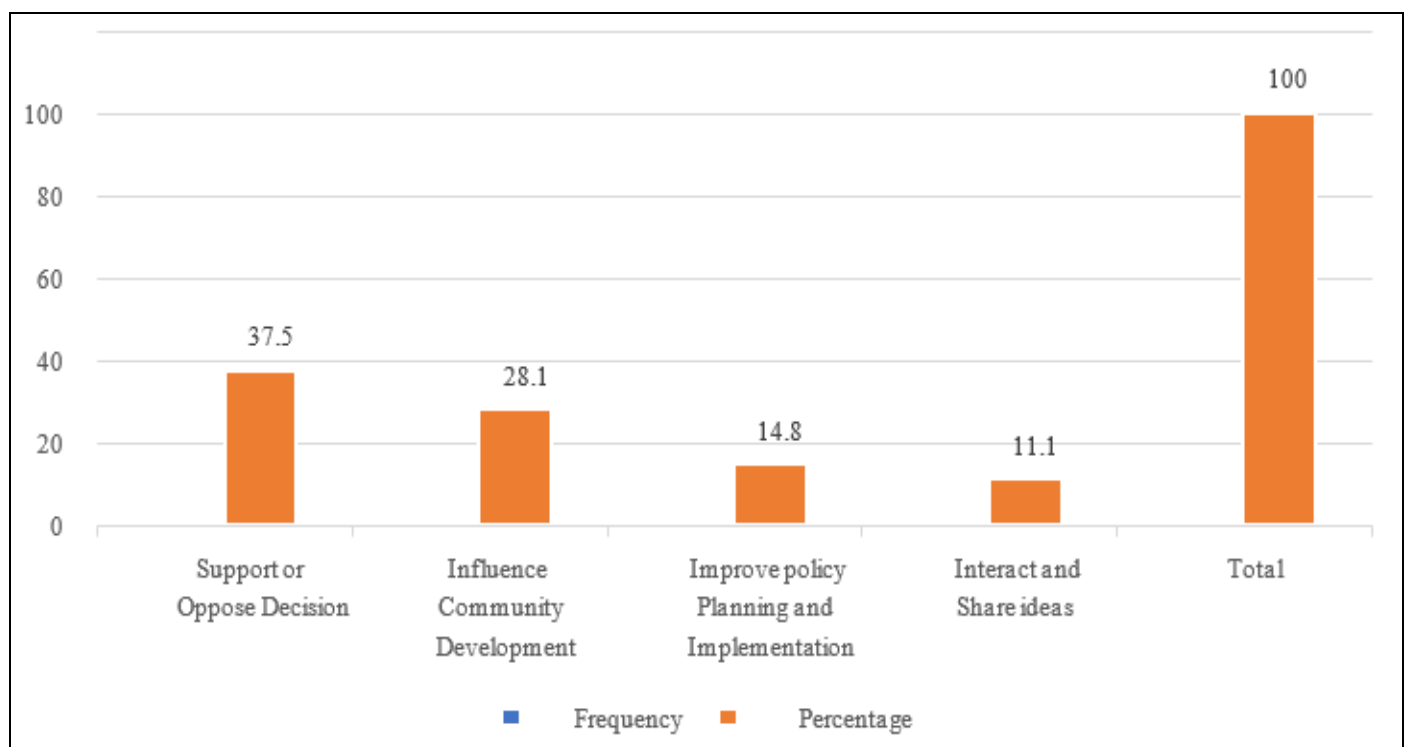


Fig 10 Community Stakeholders' Involvement in Policy Planning and Implementation, Field Data 2024

The study also examined why stakeholders choose to engage in policy processes. The most common reason, cited by 37.5% of respondents, was to either support or oppose policy decisions. This reflects the democratic nature of governance, where stakeholders view participation as an opportunity to influence outcomes directly.

A further 28.1% of respondents stated that involvement allows them to shape community development priorities. Stakeholders recognize that their participation ensures policies are not only designed from the top down but are also responsive to grassroots needs.

Additionally, 14.8% emphasized that stakeholder input improves the effectiveness and sustainability of policies. By contributing local knowledge and perspectives, stakeholders

help refine policies to ensure long-term benefits. Another 11.1% indicated that participation creates platforms for exchanging ideas and fostering collective dialogue, which strengthens community cohesion.

These findings demonstrate that stakeholders are motivated by a mix of influence, advocacy, and collaboration, underscoring their desire to be part of inclusive governance structures.

E. To Identify the Challenges Stakeholders Face in Engaging with the Council's Policy Processes.

Identifying the barriers that hinder stakeholder participation is crucial for improving future policy planning and implementation.

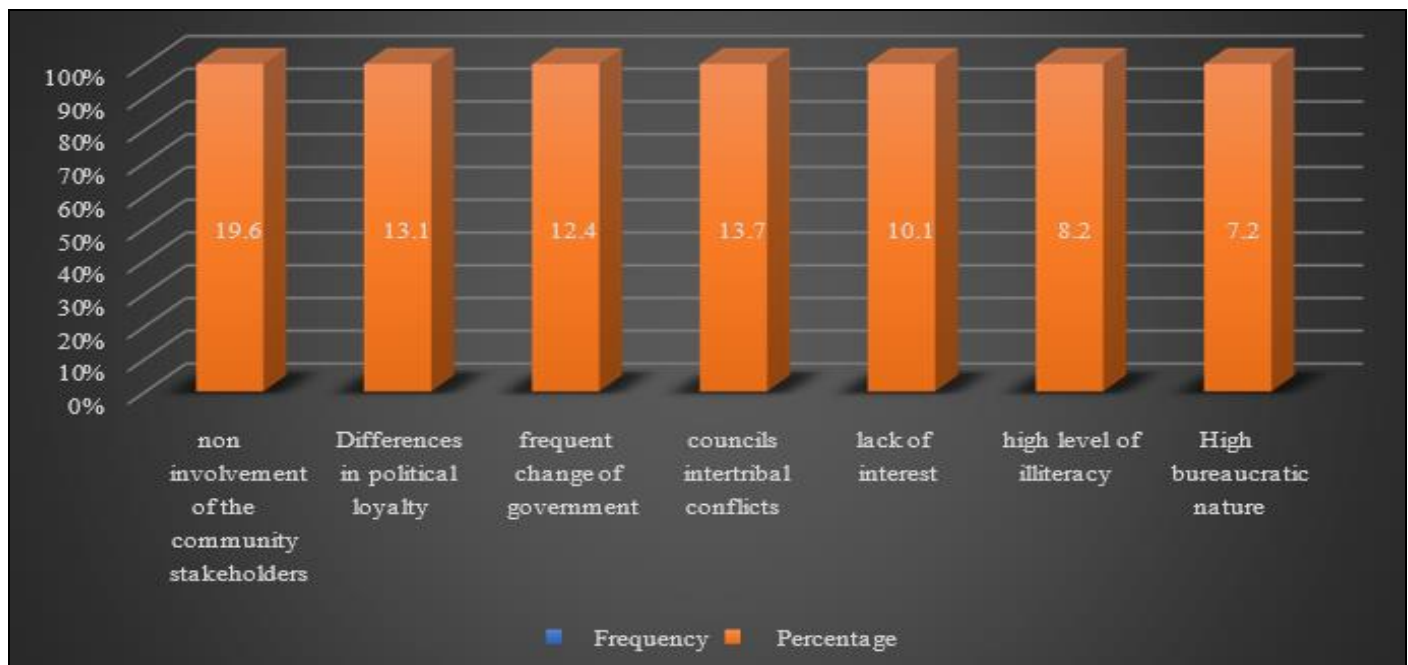


Fig 11 Challenge Faced by Community Stakeholders' Involvement in Policy Planning and Implementation, Field Data 2024

From the field data shows that (19.6%) of the respondents said one of the challenges faced by community stakeholders in the Freetown city council is non-involvement of the community stakeholders in policy planning and implementation process (13.1%) of the respondents said the challenges faced by community stakeholders in the Freetown city council is Differences in political loyalty and opinions community stakeholders (12.4%) of the respondents said the challenges faced by community stakeholders in the western area city council is the frequent change of government (13.7%) of the respondents said the challenges faced by community stakeholders in Freetown city councils intertribal conflicts (10.1%) of the respondent said the challenges faced by community stakeholders in the Freetown city council is lack of interest by the stakeholders (8.2%) of the respondents said the challenges faced by community stakeholders in the Freetown city council is high level of illiteracy by the stakeholders (7.2%) of the respondents said the challenges faced by community stakeholders in the Freetown city council is High bureaucratic nature of the council.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that stakeholder engagement is a pivotal component of effective community policy planning and implementation. The findings indicate that while there are mechanisms for participation, many community stakeholders are still inadequately involved in decision-making processes. Their inclusion, however, is essential for aligning policy outcomes with local needs, promoting ownership, and ensuring the sustainability of development initiatives. Active participation of stakeholders fosters transparency, enhances accountability, and contributes to a more responsive governance framework. The research also highlights that challenges such as political differences, low literacy levels, and bureaucratic hurdles limit the

effectiveness of stakeholder involvement. Overall, the study emphasizes that meaningful engagement of stakeholders should be a central feature in policy formulation and execution, ensuring that community voices influence decisions that affect them directly.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings and conclusions reached, knowledge gaps are identified, and a list of recommendations for practical actions and further research is presented as underscored.

➤ Recommendation for Practical Action Government:

The government should enhance structures that promote the active involvement of stakeholders throughout the planning and implementation stages of community projects. This includes establishing clear communication channels, providing platforms for consultation, and encouraging feedback from local communities to ensure policies reflect local priorities. Policies should be designed to be inclusive, allowing all relevant stakeholders to contribute their perspectives effectively.

• Community Leaders and Individuals:

Community leaders, including chiefs, elders, and other influential figures, should actively promote stakeholder participation by facilitating dialogues, organizing community meetings, and encouraging civic engagement. Individuals should recognize the importance of following established procedures and supporting initiatives that enhance stakeholder involvement to ensure successful project outcomes.

• Organizations and Civil Society:

Organizations, civil society groups, and educational institutions should provide training and resources to

strengthen stakeholders' capacity to engage meaningfully in policy processes. Awareness programs, workshops, and information campaigns can help stakeholders understand their rights, responsibilities, and the importance of their contributions to local development projects.

➤ Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should investigate strategies to overcome barriers to stakeholder participation, such as political differences, literacy gaps, and bureaucratic challenges. Comparative studies across other municipalities in Sierra Leone could provide insights into best practices and innovative approaches for enhancing community engagement. Further research could also examine the long-term impact of stakeholder involvement on policy effectiveness, project sustainability, and social cohesion within local communities. These insights would be valuable for policymakers, development practitioners, and academics aiming to promote inclusive and participatory governance.

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