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From blessing to burden? Evaluating Chief Kelvin Okolie's empowerment efforts in Ukwu-nzu community

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Abstract
Community empowerment programmes are widely recognized as important strategies for socio-economic development, yet limited research has examined the outcomes of individual-led empowerment initiatives or their simultaneous benefits and unintended consequences. Addressing this gap, this study investigates Chief Kelvin Okolie's empowerment programmes in the Ukwu-Nzu community, Nigeria, to examine their perceived socio-economic impacts and implementation challenges. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, involving 125 programme beneficiaries, community leaders, and local stakeholders. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis. The findings suggest that active programme participation was associated with improved vocational skills, economic opportunities, self-confidence, and social cohesion. However, participants also identified unequal access to programme benefits, concerns about programme sustainability, dependency on external support, and limited inclusiveness as key challenges. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates that empowerment initiatives can simultaneously promote community development and generate governance-related challenges when issues of equity and sustainability are insufficiently addressed. This study contributes to the community empowerment literature by providing empirical evidence on individual-led empowerment initiatives in rural Nigeria and highlights the importance of participatory implementation, transparent governance, and sustained community engagement to achieve more inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

Keywords
Community Empowerment, Individual-Led Empowerment, Socio-Economic Development, Sustainable Livelihoods, Nigeria.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Community empowerment has become a central strategy in contemporary development practice, particularly in rural and marginalized communities where poverty, unemployment, and limited access to public services constrain socio-economic progress. Empowerment initiatives seek to enhance individuals' capabilities, strengthen local institutions, improve access to productive resources, and foster community self-reliance (Honarvar & Gholami, 2025; Ndlela & Worth, 2021; Obiagu, 2025). Across developing countries, including Nigeria, such initiatives commonly involve vocational training, microfinance programmes, educational assistance, entrepreneurship support, and social welfare interventions designed to improve livelihoods and promote inclusive development (Ipinnaiye & Olaniyan, 2023).

Although the literature consistently reports that empowerment programmes can generate positive socio-economic outcomes, it also recognizes that their impacts are not uniformly beneficial. Previous studies have documented unintended consequences, including dependency on external assistance, elite capture, unequal distribution of benefits, exclusion of vulnerable groups, and social tensions arising from unequal access to programme resources (Kosec & Mo, 2025; Lind, 2022). Consequently, scholars increasingly argue that empowerment should be understood not merely as the provision of material assistance but as a long-term process that strengthens community capacity, participation, and sustainable livelihoods.

Despite these advances, three important gaps remain in the existing literature. First, most studies evaluate government-led or non-governmental organization (NGO)-driven empowerment programmes, while comparatively little attention has been paid to empowerment initiatives spearheaded by individual community leaders or philanthropists. Such initiatives often operate through different governance mechanisms, rely on personal legitimacy rather than institutional authority, and may produce distinct social and economic outcomes. Second, existing research predominantly emphasizes measurable programme successes, whereas relatively few studies systematically investigate the coexistence of positive impacts and unintended negative consequences within the same empowerment programme. As a result, the conditions under which empowerment becomes both a source of opportunity and a potential burden remain insufficiently understood. Third, empirical evidence from rural communities in southeastern Nigeria remains limited, particularly regarding how local beneficiaries perceive programme effectiveness, equity, and long-term sustainability.

The empowerment programmes implemented by Chief Kelvin Okolie in the Ukwu-Nzu community provide an important case for addressing these gaps. Over the years, Okolie has initiated various interventions, including vocational support, microcredit schemes, educational assistance, and social welfare programmes that have attracted considerable public recognition (Adegoke & Alvarez, 2025). While these initiatives are widely perceived as improving socio-economic opportunities for community members, questions remain regarding their long-term sustainability, inclusiveness, and broader implications for community development. Examining this case therefore offers an opportunity to move beyond conventional assessments of programme success by exploring how beneficiaries simultaneously experience empowerment as both an opportunity and a potential source of dependency, inequality, or social tension.

This study is informed by an integrated theoretical framework combining Community Empowerment Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Sustainable Livelihood Framework. Community Empowerment Theory emphasizes participation, local ownership, and the development of community capacity as prerequisites for sustainable development. Social Capital Theory explains how trust, networks, and reciprocal relationships facilitate collective action while also shaping access to empowerment opportunities. Meanwhile, the Sustainable Livelihood Framework highlights how different forms of capital—including human, financial, social, and physical assets—interact to influence households' resilience and long-term well-being. Together, these complementary perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for examining not only the immediate benefits of empowerment programmes but also their sustainability, inclusiveness, and unintended socio-economic consequences.

Against this background, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What socio-economic impacts have Chief Kelvin Okolie's empowerment programmes generated for beneficiaries in the Ukwu-Nzu community?; (2) What unintended consequences or challenges have emerged from these empowerment initiatives?; (3) How do beneficiaries perceive the sustainability, inclusiveness, and long-term effectiveness of the programmes?

The novelty of this study lies in three respects. First, it extends the empowerment literature by examining an individual-led community empowerment initiative rather than a conventional government or NGO programme. Second, it adopts a balanced analytical perspective that simultaneously investigates both developmental benefits and unintended adverse consequences, thereby moving beyond the predominantly success-oriented evaluations found in previous studies. Third, by integrating Community Empowerment Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, the study offers a multidimensional explanation of how empowerment programmes shape community development, social relationships, and livelihood sustainability. Empirically, the findings contribute new evidence from rural southeastern Nigeria and provide practical insights for policymakers, philanthropists, and community leaders seeking to design empowerment programmes that are participatory, equitable, and sustainable.

2 | REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 | Community Empowerment as a Development Strategy

Community empowerment has become one of the most influential paradigms in contemporary development discourse. Rather than viewing communities as passive recipients of external assistance, empowerment emphasizes strengthening people's capabilities, expanding access to productive resources, enhancing participation in decision-making, and promoting self-reliance (Honarvar & Gholami, 2025). Within developing countries, empowerment programmes frequently include vocational training, entrepreneurship support, microfinance, educational assistance, and social protection interventions intended to reduce poverty and improve community well-being (Nurlinah et al., 2026; Wahab et al., 2018).

The present study draws upon three complementary theoretical perspectives. Community Empowerment Theory argues that sustainable development depends on increasing people's capacity to control decisions affecting their lives through participation, local ownership, and collective action (Ahmad & Abu Talib, 2016). Social Capital Theory emphasizes the importance of trust, social networks, and reciprocal relationships in facilitating cooperation and equitable access to development opportunities (Ansar et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the Sustainable Livelihood Framework explains how empowerment interventions influence the accumulation of human, financial, social, and physical capital that enables households to build resilient and sustainable livelihoods (Amaliah et al., 2025; Natarajan et al., 2022). These perspectives suggest that empowerment cannot be evaluated solely by measuring economic outputs but should also consider participation, social relationships, equity, and long-term sustainability.

Importantly, these theoretical perspectives also imply that empowerment is not inherently beneficial. The developmental outcomes of empowerment programmes depend on institutional arrangements, governance quality, community participation, and the equitable distribution of resources. Consequently, empowerment should be understood as a socially negotiated process whose outcomes vary according to local contexts rather than as a universally successful development intervention.

2.2 | Empirical Evidence on Community Empowerment: Consensus and Contradictions

A substantial body of empirical research reports positive outcomes of community empowerment initiatives. Studies conducted across Africa and other developing regions consistently demonstrate that empowerment programmes improve household income, strengthen entrepreneurial capacity, increase access to education and health services, and encourage greater community participation in local governance (Atisa et al., 2021; Helmsing, 2003; Mensah & Benedict, 2010). These findings support the argument that empowerment contributes to poverty reduction while enhancing individual agency and collective resilience.

However, this optimistic perspective is increasingly challenged by studies documenting more complex outcomes. Rather than generating sustainable independence, some empowerment programmes have unintentionally fostered dependency on continuous external assistance, reinforced existing inequalities, or intensified competition among community members for limited programme resources (Husni et al., 2023; Rusli et al., 2023). In several cases, unequal beneficiary selection, elite capture, and weak programme governance reduced community trust and undermined programme legitimacy.

These contrasting findings reveal an important theoretical debate within the empowerment literature. One perspective considers empowerment primarily as a mechanism for increasing agency and improving livelihoods, whereas another argues that empowerment interventions may reproduce existing power inequalities when participation is superficial or when access to programme benefits is uneven. Consequently, programme success cannot simply be inferred from the existence of empowerment activities but must be evaluated according to how interventions are designed, implemented, and experienced by beneficiaries.

Methodological differences also contribute to these divergent conclusions. Quantitative studies often emphasize measurable economic indicators such as income generation, employment, or business creation, leading to generally positive assessments of programme effectiveness (Ansar et al., 2026; Nurlinah et al., 2026). In contrast, qualitative research tends to reveal social dynamics—including perceptions of exclusion, dependency, unequal participation, and declining trust—that remain invisible in purely quantitative evaluations. These methodological differences suggest that a comprehensive understanding of empowerment requires attention to both measurable socio-economic outcomes and beneficiaries' lived experiences.

2.3 | Individual-Led Community Empowerment in Nigeria

Within Nigeria, empowerment programmes have become an important component of both public policy and community development initiatives. Existing studies generally focus on programmes implemented by government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or international development partners, emphasizing their contributions to poverty reduction, employment creation, and capacity building (Adebayo & Butcher, 2023; Ite, 2007; Mela et al., 2024).

More recently, individual philanthropists, political leaders, and local elites have increasingly assumed prominent roles in financing and implementing community empowerment programmes. Such initiatives often respond more quickly to local needs, mobilize community trust, and provide immediate socio-economic assistance. Nevertheless, scholars have questioned whether these interventions can achieve sustainable development without institutional support, transparent governance, and mechanisms for community participation (Ahmad & Abu Talib, 2016; Amaliah et al., 2025; Natarajan et al., 2022).

Existing evidence further indicates that individual-led empowerment programmes may face unique governance challenges. Because programme decisions frequently depend on personal leadership rather than institutional procedures, issues relating to beneficiary selection, accountability, continuity, and equitable distribution of benefits become particularly important. Despite these concerns, empirical research examining the long-term developmental implications of individual-led empowerment initiatives remains limited, particularly within rural Nigerian communities.

2.4 | From Blessing to Burden: Remaining Research Gaps

The preceding review demonstrates broad agreement that empowerment programmes have the potential to improve socio-economic conditions while simultaneously revealing substantial disagreement regarding their long-term developmental consequences. Although previous studies acknowledge that empowerment may generate both positive and negative outcomes, several important gaps remain.

First, existing research has overwhelmingly concentrated on government- and NGO-led interventions, leaving individual-led empowerment programmes comparatively underexplored despite their increasing prominence in many African communities. Second, most empirical studies evaluate either programme achievements or implementation challenges, with relatively few examining how both positive impacts and unintended consequences coexist within the same empowerment initiative. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to understanding why empowerment programmes may simultaneously function as opportunities for development and sources of dependency, inequality, or social tension. Third, previous research has generally emphasized objective programme outcomes such as employment, income generation, or poverty reduction while giving less consideration to beneficiaries' subjective perceptions of programme sustainability, inclusiveness, and fairness. Yet these perceptions are critical for understanding whether empowerment interventions genuinely strengthen community resilience over the long term. Finally, empirical evidence from rural southeastern Nigeria remains scarce, particularly regarding locally driven empowerment programmes initiated by influential community leaders. The empowerment initiatives implemented by Chief Kelvin Okolie in Ukwu-Nzu therefore provide an important opportunity to examine how individual-led programmes generate both developmental benefits and unintended socio-economic consequences within a specific community context.

Accordingly, this study extends the existing literature by integrating Community Empowerment Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Sustainable Livelihood Framework to evaluate empowerment from multiple dimensions. Rather than treating empowerment as inherently successful or inherently problematic, the study investigates the conditions under which empowerment simultaneously becomes a blessing for some beneficiaries while creating new challenges for others. This multidimensional perspective represents the principal theoretical and empirical contribution of the present research.

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to comprehensively evaluate the socio-economic impacts of Chief Kelvin Okolie's empowerment initiatives in the Ukwu-Nzu community. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase of the research process, analysed independently, and subsequently integrated to produce a comprehensive interpretation of programme outcomes.

The quantitative component was designed to measure beneficiaries' perceptions regarding programme effectiveness, socio-economic improvements, community participation, and programme sustainability. The qualitative component complemented these findings by exploring participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and explanations of both the intended and unintended consequences of the empowerment initiatives. Integrating both datasets enabled methodological triangulation, allowing quantitative patterns to be interpreted through qualitative narratives while identifying areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence.

3.2 | Study Area and Research Participants

The study was conducted in Ukwu-Nzu Community, Delta State, Nigeria, where Chief Kelvin Okolie has implemented several community empowerment initiatives, including vocational skills training, entrepreneurship support, educational assistance, microcredit programmes, and social welfare interventions.

The target population comprised programme beneficiaries, community leaders, and key stakeholders directly involved in or knowledgeable about programme implementation. Participants were selected because of their direct experience with the empowerment initiatives and their ability to provide information regarding programme implementation, outcomes, and sustainability. A total of 125 respondents participated in the study, consisting of 85 programme beneficiaries, 25 community leaders, and 15 stakeholders involved in programme implementation and community development activities.

3.3 | Sampling Strategy

The study employed different sampling strategies for the quantitative and qualitative components in accordance with the convergent mixed-methods design.

For the quantitative survey, stratified random sampling was adopted to ensure adequate representation of different participant categories based on gender, age group, occupation, and programme participation status. The sampling frame consisted of registered beneficiaries of Chief Kelvin Okolie's empowerment programmes obtained from community programme records. Eligible participants were adults (18 years and above) who had participated in at least one empowerment programme. Individuals without direct programme experience or those unable to provide informed responses were excluded from the survey. The required sample size was determined using Cochran (1977), resulting in a minimum sample of 99 respondents. Of the 185 questionnaires distributed, 125 were successfully completed, representing a response rate of 68%.

For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with substantial knowledge and experience regarding the empowerment programmes. Selection emphasized participants representing diverse demographic backgrounds, programme participation histories, and community leadership roles to ensure rich and varied perspectives.

3.4 | Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted between August 2025 and October 2025. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently to facilitate integration during interpretation. A structured questionnaire was administered to programme beneficiaries. Prior to full-scale administration, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 20 respondents possessing characteristics similar to the target population. Feedback from the pilot study was used to improve item clarity, wording, and questionnaire structure.

The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). A total of 5 in-depth interviews were conducted with community leaders, programme coordinators, and selected beneficiaries, while 2 focus group discussions involving 5 participants per group were organised to facilitate collective reflection on programme experiences. The interview guide contained open-ended questions exploring participants' experiences with programme implementation, perceived socio-economic benefits, challenges encountered, programme accessibility, equity in beneficiary selection, community participation, and perceptions of programme sustainability. Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes, whereas focus group discussions ranged from 60-90 minutes. With participants' consent, all interviews and discussions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate systematic qualitative analysis.

3.5 | Research Instruments

The quantitative questionnaire consisted of 30 items organised into five constructs: Socio-demographic characteristics; Participation in empowerment programmes; Perceived socio-economic benefits; Community participation and social inclusion; and Programme sustainability and overall satisfaction.

Most questionnaire items employed a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree, allowing respondents to indicate their level of agreement with statements concerning programme outcomes. Content validity was established through expert review involving specialists in community development and social research methodology. Their recommendations informed revisions to improve item relevance, clarity, and content coverage. Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha. The overall instrument achieved a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.76, with each construct exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability (Ursachi et al., 2015).

3.6 | Data Analysis

Quantitative data were entered into R Package for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarise respondents' characteristics and perceptions of programme outcomes. To examine associations between programme participation and perceived socio-economic outcomes, cross-tabulation and Chi-square tests were employed where appropriate. Correlation analysis was additionally performed to explore relationships among key variables, including programme participation, perceived benefits, community participation, and programme sustainability. Statistical significance was determined at the 5% significance level ($p < 0.05$).

Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. First, interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments relevant to participants' experiences. Third, similar codes were grouped into preliminary themes. Fourth, emerging themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency across the dataset. Fifth, themes were clearly defined and appropriately labelled. Finally, representative quotations were selected to illustrate each theme while preserving participants' anonymity. To enhance analytical credibility, coding was conducted iteratively, and emerging interpretations were continuously compared across interviews and focus group discussions.

Following independent analyses, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated using a triangulation approach. Areas where both datasets produced consistent evidence were interpreted as convergent findings, thereby strengthening confidence in the results. Where discrepancies emerged between statistical patterns and participants' narratives, qualitative evidence was used to explain contextual factors underlying the observed differences. This integration enabled the study to move beyond statistical description by providing richer explanations of how and why the empowerment programmes generated both positive socio-economic outcomes and unintended consequences within the Ukwu-Nzu community.

4| RESULTS

4.1 | Participant Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 125 respondents participating in this study. Male respondents accounted for 56.0% of the sample, while females represented 44.0%, indicating relatively balanced gender representation. Most respondents were between 26 and 45 years old (64.0%), suggesting that the study primarily captured the perceptions of economically active adults who were most likely to participate in community empowerment programmes. Regarding programme participation, 64.0% of respondents reported active involvement, whereas 24.0% participated occasionally and 12.0% reported limited or no participation. This distribution indicates that most respondents possessed direct experience with the empowerment initiatives, providing a sound basis for evaluating programme outcomes.

To explore whether participation differed across demographic groups, cross-tabulation and Chi-square analyses were conducted. No statistically significant association was observed between gender and participation level ($\chi^2 = 5.99, p > 0.05$), suggesting that both men and women had comparable opportunities to engage in the programmes. In contrast, participation varied significantly across age groups ($\chi^2 = 5.99, p < 0.05$), with respondents aged 26–45 years demonstrating the highest level of active participation. These findings indicate that age rather than gender influenced programme engagement.

The qualitative findings supported these quantitative patterns. A female beneficiary explained:

> *"The programme was open to everyone, but younger adults were generally more active because they had the energy and motivation to participate in the training activities."* (Female beneficiary, 34 years)

Similarly, a community leader noted:

"Most participants who attended regularly were those trying to establish small businesses or improve their family's income." (Community leader)

These qualitative accounts help explain why participation was concentrated among economically productive age groups.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 125).

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	70	56.0
	Female	55	44.0
Age Group (years)	18–25	25	20.0
	26–35	45	36.0
	36–45	35	28.0
	46–55	15	12.0
	56 and above	5	4.0
Programme Participation	Active	80	64.0
	Occasional	30	24.0
	Rare/None	15	12.0

Source: Author's Computation (2025).

4.2 | Perceived Benefits of the Empowerment Programmes

Table 2 summarizes respondents' perceptions of the benefits generated by the empowerment programmes. The most frequently reported benefit was improved skills and knowledge (76.0%), followed by increased income or economic opportunities (68.0%), increased self-confidence and autonomy (60.0%), enhanced social cohesion (56.0%), and improved access to education and public services (48.0%).

Table 2. Perceived Benefits of Chief Kelvin Okolie's Empowerment Programmes (N = 125).

Perceived Benefits	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean*	Rank
Improved skills and knowledge	95	76.0	4.31	1
Increased income and economic opportunities	85	68.0	4.12	2
Increased self-confidence and autonomy	75	60.0	3.98	3
Enhanced social cohesion and community ties	70	56.0	3.84	4
Greater access to education and public services	60	48.0	3.71	5

*Mean scores were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Source: Author's Computation (2025).

Beyond these descriptive findings, correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between programme participation and perceived socio-economic benefits ($r = 0.67$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that respondents with higher levels of participation generally reported greater improvements in their livelihoods and social well-being. Cross-tabulation further demonstrated that actively involved participants consistently reported higher perceived benefits than occasional participants, particularly regarding skill acquisition and income generation. This finding suggests that sustained engagement in empowerment activities contributes to more positive developmental outcomes.

The qualitative findings reinforced these statistical results. One beneficiary remarked:

> *"Before joining the programme, I had no vocational skills. After receiving training and financial support, I was able to start a small business and contribute to my family's income."* (Male beneficiary, 31 years)

Another participant emphasized the social dimension of empowerment:

> *"Apart from the financial assistance, we learned to work together and support one another. The relationships created through the programme were just as valuable as the economic benefits."* (Female beneficiary, 42 years)

These narratives illustrate that empowerment extended beyond economic gains by strengthening confidence, social networks, and collective action.

4.3 | Unintended Consequences and Implementation Challenges

Although respondents generally viewed the programmes positively, Table 3 indicates that several unintended consequences were also identified. Unequal access to programme benefits was reported by 40.0% of respondents, followed by concerns regarding programme sustainability (36.0%), dependency on external support (28.0%), social tensions (24.0%), and limited inclusiveness of women and marginalized groups (20.0%).

Table 3. Perceived Unintended Consequences and Challenges of the Empowerment Programmes (N = 125)

Challenges	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean*	Rank
Unequal access to programme benefits	50	40.0	3.42	1
Lack of programme sustainability	45	36.0	3.35	2
Dependency on external support	35	28.0	3.14	3
Exacerbation of social tensions	30	24.0	2.98	4
Limited inclusiveness of women and marginalized groups	25	20.0	2.83	5

*Mean scores were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Source: Author's Computation (2025).

Comparative analysis revealed that respondents with only occasional participation expressed significantly greater concern regarding unequal access and programme sustainability than those actively involved ($\chi^2 = 5.99$, $p < 0.05$). This finding suggests that differences in programme exposure may influence how beneficiaries evaluate programme fairness and long-term effectiveness.

Qualitative evidence provides additional insight into these concerns. One participant explained:

> *"Not everyone had the same opportunity to benefit. Some people received support more than once, while others were still waiting."* (Male beneficiary, 45 years)

Another beneficiary highlighted sustainability issues:

> *"The assistance was helpful, but after the programme ended there was very little follow-up. Some businesses survived, but many struggled without continued support."* (Female beneficiary, 39 years)

Community leaders similarly acknowledged that sustaining programme outcomes requires stronger institutional collaboration:

> "*The programme achieved many positive results, but long-term success depends on partnerships with government agencies and continuous monitoring."* (Community leader)

These qualitative findings explain why concerns regarding sustainability and equitable access emerged despite generally positive perceptions of the programme.

4.4 | Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates a nuanced picture of Chief Kelvin Okolie's empowerment initiatives. Quantitative analysis indicates that respondents generally perceived substantial improvements in skills, income opportunities, self-confidence, and community participation. These positive findings were consistently supported by interview narratives describing enhanced livelihoods, entrepreneurship, and stronger social relationships. At the same time, both datasets converged in identifying important implementation challenges. While survey respondents highlighted unequal access, sustainability concerns, and dependency as the principal limitations of the programme, interview participants explained how these challenges emerged through inconsistent beneficiary selection, limited post-programme support, and unequal distribution of opportunities.

The mixed-methods findings suggest that the empowerment initiatives have generated meaningful socio-economic benefits while simultaneously revealing structural challenges that may limit their long-term sustainability. Rather than portraying the programmes as either wholly successful or unsuccessful, the integrated evidence demonstrates that empowerment functions simultaneously as a catalyst for community development and a source of new governance and equity challenges that require continued policy attention.

5| DISCUSSION

5.1 | Explaining the Socio-economic Benefits of Community Empowerment

The findings demonstrate that Chief Kelvin Okolie's empowerment initiatives have generated substantial socio-economic benefits for participants, particularly through improved skills, expanded economic opportunities, enhanced self-confidence, and stronger community relationships. Rather than simply indicating programme success, these findings illustrate how empowerment functions as a process of capacity development in which individuals acquire both material resources and the confidence necessary to improve their livelihoods. The strong positive association between programme participation and perceived socio-economic benefits further suggests that sustained engagement, rather than one-time assistance, plays a critical role in achieving meaningful developmental outcomes.

These findings are consistent with Community Empowerment Theory, which argues that empowerment is most effective when individuals actively participate in decision-making and capacity-building processes rather than merely receiving external assistance (Ahmad & Abu Talib, 2016). The qualitative evidence also indicates that beneficiaries valued not only financial support but also the acquisition of vocational skills, entrepreneurial knowledge, and social relationships that enabled them to pursue long-term economic opportunities. This observation supports the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, which emphasizes that sustainable poverty reduction depends on strengthening multiple forms of capital—including human, social, and financial capital—rather than focusing exclusively on income generation (Amaliah et al., 2025; Natarajan et al., 2022).

The present findings are broadly consistent with previous studies conducted in Nigeria and other developing countries that have reported positive relationships between empowerment programmes and improved livelihoods (Adeyanju et al., 2023; Sahu et al., 2024; Shahin et al., 2022). However, unlike many earlier studies that primarily evaluated economic outcomes, this study demonstrates that empowerment also strengthened social cohesion and community trust. The qualitative interviews revealed that beneficiaries developed stronger collaborative relationships through programme participation, suggesting that empowerment initiatives can simultaneously generate economic and social capital. This finding extends previous research by illustrating that successful empowerment is not solely measured through financial outcomes but also through improvements in collective agency and community resilience (Rahmayanti, 2024; Raysa & Amalia, 2025).

Nevertheless, the magnitude of these positive outcomes appears closely related to participants' level of engagement. Respondents who participated more actively consistently reported greater improvements than occasional participants. This finding reinforces previous international research demonstrating that programme effectiveness depends not only on resource availability but also on continuous participation, beneficiary commitment, and supportive institutional environments (Åhlfeldt et al., 2023; Ansar et al., 2026; Wahid et al., 2019).

An important explanation for these outcomes is that empowerment appears to operate through a cumulative process rather than through isolated interventions. Skills training, access to resources, and opportunities for participation can reinforce one another over time (Ahmed et al., 2020). For example, the acquisition of vocational skills may increase an individual's capacity to generate income, while participation in community activities may simultaneously increase access to information, networks, and informal forms of support. In this sense, the programme's contribution extends beyond the immediate material value of assistance because beneficiaries may develop capabilities that remain useful after direct programme support has ended. The findings therefore support a capability-oriented interpretation of empowerment in which development is associated not merely with the possession of resources but with the ability to convert those resources into meaningful livelihood opportunities.

The findings also indicate that psychological dimensions of empowerment are important in explaining socio-economic outcomes. Increased self-confidence and perceptions of personal capability may encourage beneficiaries to take greater initiative in economic activities and community affairs. This is particularly relevant in contexts where limited access to formal employment, financial institutions, or government support constrains individual opportunities. Empowerment can consequently create an enabling environment in which beneficiaries become more willing to pursue entrepreneurial activities, cooperate with others, and participate in collective problem-solving (Lintner & Elsen, 2020). The relationship between material assistance and psychological agency suggests that the effectiveness of empowerment programmes should be understood as multidimensional.

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the benefits of empowerment can extend from individual households to the wider community. When beneficiaries develop new skills, establish economic activities, and strengthen social networks, the resulting benefits may circulate through families and community groups. This can occur through knowledge sharing, informal mentoring, reciprocal assistance, and collaborative economic activities. Such processes are particularly important in communities where formal institutional support remains limited. Thus, the socio-economic benefits identified in this study should not be interpreted exclusively as individual-level outcomes; they may also represent the early formation of broader community-level resilience.

At the same time, the positive outcomes should not be interpreted as evidence that empowerment automatically produces sustainable socio-economic transformation. The benefits observed among participants remain dependent on the availability of markets, continued access to resources, institutional support, and the capacity of beneficiaries to maintain the activities initiated through the programme. Without these enabling conditions, newly acquired skills or resources may not translate into sustained improvements in livelihood security. The findings therefore suggest that the central challenge is not simply initiating empowerment but creating an institutional environment in which the capabilities generated by the programme can be maintained and expanded.

5.2 | Understanding the Unintended Consequences of Empowerment Programmes

Despite the generally positive findings, the study also reveals that empowerment programmes may generate unintended consequences that complicate their long-term developmental impact. Concerns regarding unequal access, programme sustainability, dependency, and limited inclusiveness demonstrate that empowerment interventions can simultaneously produce opportunities and new forms of vulnerability.

These findings provide empirical support for scholars who argue that empowerment should not be regarded as an inherently positive intervention but rather as a socially embedded process shaped by existing power relations, governance structures, and institutional capacity (Kiss et al., 2022; Tchida & Stout, 2024; Turnhout et al., 2020). The qualitative findings suggest that perceptions of unequal beneficiary selection and insufficient post-programme support contributed to concerns regarding fairness and sustainability. Consequently, some participants viewed empowerment as temporary assistance rather than a pathway toward long-term self-reliance.

This finding differs from several earlier studies that portray community empowerment largely as a successful poverty alleviation strategy with relatively limited attention to its unintended consequences. While previous studies have acknowledged challenges such as resource constraints or implementation barriers, comparatively few have examined how positive and negative outcomes coexist within the same programme (Lowe et al., 2021; Tsai et al., 2020). The present study therefore demonstrates that empowerment should be understood as a dynamic process in which developmental benefits and governance challenges emerge simultaneously.

The Nigerian context further helps explain these findings. Individual-led empowerment initiatives often rely heavily on personal leadership, philanthropic commitment, and informal community networks rather than institutionalized governance arrangements. While this structure enables rapid programme implementation and responsiveness to local needs, it may also create uncertainty regarding continuity, accountability, and equitable beneficiary selection (Kalu & Imoagwu, 2021). These contextual characteristics explain why respondents simultaneously reported significant programme benefits alongside concerns regarding sustainability and unequal access.

One of the most important unintended consequences concerns the possibility of dependency. Although assistance can initially strengthen household capabilities, repeated reliance on externally provided resources may reduce incentives or opportunities for beneficiaries to develop independent mechanisms of livelihood generation (Choudhury & Wu, 2023; Fisher et al., 2017). Dependency is therefore not necessarily a direct consequence of assistance itself but may emerge when programmes fail to establish clear pathways from support toward self-reliance. The distinction is important because it shifts analytical attention from whether beneficiaries receive assistance to how assistance is structured, implemented, and eventually withdrawn.

Unequal access represents another significant challenge. Empowerment programmes inevitably operate within communities characterized by differences in social status, political connections, gender, economic capacity, and access to information (Nurlinah et al., 2026). If beneficiary selection is perceived as opaque or concentrated among particular groups, the programme may unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities. In such circumstances, an intervention designed to redistribute opportunities can instead reproduce pre-existing power structures. This finding highlights the importance of procedural fairness as a substantive component of empowerment rather than treating it merely as an administrative concern.

The issue of sustainability is similarly significant. Programmes led by prominent individuals may benefit from strong personal legitimacy and mobilization capacity during their implementation phase (Bolden et al., 2020; Igalla et al., 2020; Ziervogel et al., 2022). However, such arrangements can become vulnerable when the principal sponsor reduces involvement, changes priorities, encounters financial constraints, or transfers attention to other initiatives. Institutionalization is therefore essential if programme benefits are expected to persist beyond the period of direct intervention. The findings suggest that sustainability requires the transition from personality-driven empowerment toward locally embedded institutional arrangements.

Moreover, the coexistence of positive and negative outcomes demonstrates that empowerment involves distributive and relational dimensions. Providing resources changes not only what beneficiaries possess but also relationships among beneficiaries, programme administrators, community leaders, and non-beneficiaries. Those who receive assistance may gain new opportunities, while those excluded from the programme may perceive themselves as disadvantaged. Consequently, the social consequences of empowerment extend beyond the direct beneficiaries. A programme can therefore be successful according to individual-level indicators while simultaneously generating dissatisfaction or perceptions of exclusion at the community level.

These findings underscore the importance of viewing empowerment as a governance process. The question is not simply whether resources reach communities, but who determines priorities, who receives benefits, how decisions are justified, and what mechanisms exist for accountability. Such questions become particularly important in programmes that operate through informal or philanthropic structures. Greater attention to participatory decision-making, publicly communicated eligibility criteria, feedback mechanisms, and community monitoring could help minimize unintended consequences while preserving the flexibility that characterizes locally driven initiatives.

5.3 | Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to the empowerment literature in several important ways. First, they provide empirical support for Community Empowerment Theory by demonstrating that meaningful participation and capacity development remain fundamental determinants of successful empowerment outcomes. However, the findings also suggest that participation alone is insufficient unless accompanied by transparent governance and equitable resource allocation.

Second, the findings extend Social Capital Theory by demonstrating that empowerment initiatives influence not only economic outcomes but also interpersonal trust, collaborative networks, and collective action within communities. Beneficiaries consistently emphasized that social relationships developed through programme participation were as valuable as direct financial assistance. This suggests that social capital functions both as an outcome of empowerment and as a mechanism through which empowerment generates sustainable community development. Third, the study reinforces the Sustainable Livelihood Framework by illustrating that livelihood improvement depends on the interaction between multiple forms of capital. Although beneficiaries experienced gains in human and financial capital, weaknesses in institutional support and programme continuity limited the long-term sustainability of these improvements. Consequently, sustainable empowerment requires balancing investments across economic, social, institutional, and governance dimensions rather than concentrating solely on financial assistance.

More broadly, this study contributes to the growing international debate regarding whether empowerment initiatives should be evaluated primarily according to their immediate socio-economic achievements or according to their long-term capacity to strengthen community resilience. The findings suggest that these two dimensions should not be separated because short-term programme success does not necessarily guarantee sustainable development. Theoretically, the study therefore proposes a more integrated understanding of empowerment in which resources, capabilities, relationships, and institutions interact to shape developmental outcomes. Community empowerment cannot be adequately explained by considering participation in isolation because participation produces different outcomes depending on whether beneficiaries have access to resources and whether institutional structures support the continuation of those gains. This suggests that empowerment should be conceptualized as a relational process in which individual agency is continuously mediated by social networks and institutional conditions.

The findings also offer an important qualification to conventional interpretations of empowerment as a linear process. Rather than moving sequentially from assistance to capacity, and from capacity to self-reliance, empowerment appears to involve feedback loops. Increased capability can strengthen participation, participation can expand social networks, social networks can facilitate access to resources, and access to resources can further reinforce individual agency. Conversely, weak institutional support can interrupt this process and cause initial gains to stagnate. This non-linear perspective provides a more realistic theoretical explanation of why similar empowerment interventions may produce different outcomes across beneficiaries.

The study further suggests that power should be placed more explicitly at the centre of empowerment analysis. Decisions regarding beneficiary selection, resource distribution, programme priorities, and institutional continuity are inherently political because they determine who gains access to opportunities and whose interests receive recognition. Consequently, empowerment is not only about increasing individual capabilities but also about modifying the relationships through which resources and opportunities are distributed. This interpretation helps explain why questions of fairness and inclusion emerged alongside positive perceptions of programme outcomes. These theoretical implications point toward an integrated framework of community empowerment in which individual capability development constitutes the micro-level foundation, social capital provides the relational mechanism, and institutional governance provides the structural condition for sustainability. Such a framework may be particularly useful for analysing empowerment initiatives implemented through philanthropic or community leadership structures in contexts where state capacity is uneven.

5.4 | Practical Implications

The findings have several practical implications for policymakers, community leaders, and philanthropic organizations implementing community empowerment programmes. First, empowerment initiatives should move beyond one-off financial assistance by incorporating continuous mentoring, skills upgrading, and post-programme monitoring to enhance sustainability. Second, transparent beneficiary selection procedures should be established to improve fairness and strengthen community trust. Third, greater collaboration between individual philanthropists, local government institutions, civil society organizations, and community-based organizations is needed to ensure institutional continuity beyond the involvement of individual programme sponsors. Finally, programme evaluation should adopt multidimensional performance indicators that include not only economic outcomes but also social cohesion, community participation, inclusiveness, governance quality, and long-term livelihood sustainability. Such an approach would provide a more comprehensive assessment of empowerment effectiveness while reducing the likelihood that short-term programme achievements conceal emerging structural challenges.

At the implementation level, empowerment programmes should incorporate a clear capacity-transition strategy from the beginning of programme design. Rather than defining success as the completion of training or distribution of resources, programme managers should establish measurable stages through which beneficiaries move from receiving support toward managing activities independently. This may involve mentoring periods, business or livelihood planning, access to markets, peer-support mechanisms, and periodic assessments of beneficiary independence. Such an approach would reduce the risk that programme participation becomes permanently dependent on external assistance. Beneficiary selection should also become more transparent and participatory. Clear eligibility criteria, community consultation, and accessible mechanisms for expressing concerns can reduce perceptions of favouritism and improve programme legitimacy. Importantly, transparency should not be limited to announcing who has been selected; communities should also understand why beneficiaries were selected and what responsibilities are attached to participation. This would strengthen accountability while helping non-beneficiaries understand the objectives and limitations of the programme.

Another practical implication concerns institutional partnerships. Individual philanthropic leadership can be highly effective in mobilizing resources and responding quickly to local needs, but it should be complemented by partnerships with local government, civil society organizations, community groups, and relevant private-sector actors. Such partnerships can provide technical expertise, market access, monitoring capacity, and institutional continuity. The objective is not to replace community leadership but to create a broader support ecosystem that allows successful initiatives to survive beyond the involvement of a single individual. The findings also suggest that monitoring and evaluation should be designed as a continuous learning mechanism rather than a final administrative exercise. Regular feedback from beneficiaries can reveal whether training remains relevant, whether resources are reaching intended recipients, and whether programme activities are generating unexpected inequalities. Qualitative feedback is particularly valuable because quantitative indicators may capture changes in income or participation without revealing perceptions of exclusion, dependency, or declining trust. Combining quantitative and qualitative indicators would therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of programme performance.

Finally, community empowerment programmes should explicitly incorporate an exit and sustainability strategy. Before programme assistance ends, beneficiaries should have access to mechanisms that enable them to maintain and expand the capabilities developed during implementation. These mechanisms may include peer networks, cooperatives, linkages to financial institutions, market partnerships, technical assistance, and connections with local government programmes. The central practical lesson is that empowerment should not end when external assistance ends. Rather, the conclusion of direct support should represent a transition toward locally sustained forms of collective and individual capacity. The practical implications indicate that the effectiveness of Chief Kelvin Okolie's empowerment initiatives should be understood not simply in terms of the number of beneficiaries reached or the amount of assistance distributed, but in terms of whether the programme creates durable capabilities, equitable access, accountable relationships, and institutional mechanisms capable of sustaining community development. Such an approach would preserve the strengths of community-led and philanthropic intervention while addressing the vulnerabilities associated with informality, dependency, and personality-driven programme governance.

6| CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 | Conclusion

This study examined beneficiaries' perceptions of Chief Kelvin Okolie's community empowerment initiatives in the Ukwu-Nzu community using a convergent mixed-methods approach. The findings suggest that the programmes have been widely perceived as contributing to improvements in vocational skills, economic opportunities, self-confidence, and community cohesion. Quantitative evidence showed that respondents with higher levels of programme participation generally reported greater socio-economic benefits, while qualitative findings provided contextual explanations of how capacity building, entrepreneurship support, and strengthened social relationships contributed to these positive outcomes. Rather than demonstrating direct causal effects, the findings indicate a consistent association between active participation in empowerment initiatives and more favourable perceived development outcomes.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that empowerment initiatives are accompanied by important implementation challenges. Concerns regarding unequal access to programme benefits, limited long-term sustainability, dependency on external support, and the inclusion of marginalized groups suggest that empowerment is not a uniformly positive process. Instead, the evidence indicates that programme outcomes are shaped by governance arrangements, beneficiary selection mechanisms, institutional support, and the extent of community participation. These findings reinforce the argument that empowerment should be understood as a context-dependent and socially negotiated process whose effectiveness depends not only on the provision of resources but also on transparent implementation and sustained community engagement.

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the community empowerment literature. Theoretically, it extends existing research by demonstrating that individual-led empowerment initiatives can simultaneously generate developmental opportunities and governance-related challenges. By integrating Community Empowerment Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, the study provides a multidimensional perspective for understanding how empowerment influences human, social, and economic capital while also revealing structural constraints affecting long-term sustainability. Empirically, the study contributes new evidence from rural southeastern Nigeria, a context that remains underrepresented in the international empowerment literature, particularly regarding programmes initiated by individual community leaders rather than government agencies or non-governmental organizations.

6.2 | Recommendations and Future Research

The empirical findings indicate that future empowerment programmes would benefit from greater emphasis on transparency, inclusiveness, and long-term sustainability. Because unequal access to programme benefits emerged as one of the principal concerns expressed by participants, programme implementers should establish transparent beneficiary selection procedures, strengthen community participation throughout programme planning and implementation, and ensure that women, youth, and other marginalized groups have equitable opportunities to participate. Likewise, concerns regarding sustainability suggest the importance of complementing financial assistance with continuous mentoring, entrepreneurship support, skills upgrading, and systematic programme monitoring in collaboration with local government institutions and civil society organizations. Such measures would reduce dependency while strengthening community ownership and institutional continuity.

The findings also suggest that evaluating empowerment programmes should extend beyond immediate economic indicators to include broader dimensions such as social cohesion, community participation, governance quality, and livelihood sustainability. Adopting multidimensional evaluation frameworks would enable policymakers and development practitioners to identify both programme achievements and emerging implementation challenges at an earlier stage. This study provides several directions for future research. Because the present investigation focused on one community and relied primarily on beneficiaries' perceptions, future studies could examine multiple communities, compare different models of individual-led and government-led empowerment programmes, or employ longitudinal research designs to assess how empowerment outcomes evolve over time. Additional quantitative analyses using larger samples and more advanced analytical techniques, such as structural equation modelling or multilevel analysis, would also contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which empowerment initiatives influence sustainable community development.

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Disclosure Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, its analysis, or the interpretation of the findings.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to appropriate ethical and confidentiality considerations.

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