

# I Belong Here: The Role of Sport Participation and Social Inclusion for Community Development in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

## Original Research Article

Community development is a complex process which aimed to improve the quality of life for its people by transforming a community into a desired social, political, intellectual, and economic condition irrespective of gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, or marital status in which the role of sport participation and social inclusion cannot be overemphasized in community development, therefore this study examined the roles of sport participation and social inclusion on community development in Owo local government area of Ondo state using social system theory to look at how sports participation and social inclusion ultimately influence community development in Nigeria. Social system approach has aided in understanding the dynamics and interactions among various categories of individuals in the community as well as how all system factors affect their engagement in development activities. The study used purposive sampling techniques in selecting one hundred and fifty participants for this study across various communities in Owo local government area. The findings revealed that sport participation had a negative relationship on engagement in community development ( $r(150)=-.19, p<.05$ ) and also shown that social inclusion had a positive relationship on engagement in community development ( $r(150)=.52, p<.01$ ) with clear indication of interplay of sport participation and social inclusion on community development. The study hence recommended that sport events that would promote diversity be organized in order to bring individuals in the community together.

**Keywords:** Community Development, Draft, Football, Social Inclusion, Sport.

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## Introduction

Community development is a complex process that aims to improve the quality of life for its people by transforming a community into a desired social, political, intellectual, and economic condition (Mohamud et al., 2018). Regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, or marital status, community development is designed to ensure that all community members have access to the tools and opportunities necessary to improve their living circumstances and support the community's overall growth.

Community development, however, becomes extremely difficult if members are not empowered to take charge of their local environments and utilise resources through effective community leadership and gatherings, such as

sports, that unite people to strengthen positive communal relationships and improve members' sense of identity, inclusion, values, capability, and self esteem. This is because, in order to ensure the smooth operation of the community, most members of such communities choose to voluntarily carry out developmental activities even if they are not paid (Amakye, 2017; Ngowari, 2022). Participating in sports, on the other hand, has not only been a social activity that consistently unites all ethnic groups in the community without discrimination, but it has also promoted social inclusion in all Nigerian communities.

Social inclusion is a continuous relational process in which individuals and communities work together to create environments that allow community members to choose when

and where they want to participate in physical activity and sports. It also highlights the significance of acknowledging and valuing individual differences, such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, consequently improving the conditions for communal participation and development (Karstensen et al., 2024).

The importance of sports participation in developing the mind and body through a variety of physical activities can therefore never be overstated (Ashrafy, 2018; Obande-Ogbuinya et al., 2023), because participating in sports fosters the development of critical life skills like self-control, teamwork, and leadership, as well as the inclusive nature of sports, which fosters the love, respect, and understanding that are necessary for social cohesion and community growth. However, in spite of the fact that community development is seen as a tool for enhancing living conditions, there are still many obstacles that prevent it from being implemented effectively and having a positive impact.

Nigeria's great cultural diversity significantly impacts sport participation trends. Traditional sports and games, including wrestling (kokowa) and indigenous dances (such as bata and masquerade dances), are culturally significant and remain widespread in many communities (Adeyanju, 2017). To encourage participation and talent development, the Nigerian government and several sports federations have implemented structured sports programs. The Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development organizes the National Sports Festival, which allows athletes from different states to compete in a variety of sports disciplines (Okwara, 2015).

This study therefore, considers the significant roles of sport participation and social inclusion in achieving formidable community development in Nigeria, asking the following research questions:

- What is the relationship among the personal factors, sport participation, social inclusion and community development in Nigeria?
- What is the influence of sport participation on community development in Nigeria?
- What is the influence of social inclusion on community development in Nigeria?

## Literature Review

According to the World Health Organization (2018), sport is the term used to describe physical activities that are skill-based, competitive, and entertaining, usually in the form of organized games or competitions. Regular participation in sports can cultivate qualities and abilities like discipline, time management, teamwork, and goal-setting, which are transferable skills applicable to academic endeavors and social cohesion (Eime et al., 2013). It also greatly contributes to the development of various skills and attribute that can be beneficial for community cohesion. According to recent studies, over 85.7 million people globally engage in sports on a regular basis; over 28% of these people are from developing countries like Nigeria (WHO, 2023). Nigeria, however, is one of the most diverse nations in Africa, with more than 250 different ethnic groups, numerous religions, and large socioeconomic gaps. While these differences are undoubtedly

a source of cultural richness, they have also been a source of conflict, division, and exclusion in national development processes. Sport has long been utilized as a potent social tool to promote inclusion, unity, and development across all disparities. Beyond entertainment, sport serves as an instrument for social cohesion, nation-building, and economic empowerment (Adedeji & Ayeni, 2022) sport has the advantages of bringing young people from diverse backgrounds together, fostering intercultural dialogue, dispelling stereotypes, and fostering social cohesion and continue to maintain continuity at the individual level and transfer skills from one generation to another (Yerima et al., 2023) making the number of people participating in sporting activities to grow every day (Sherlock, 2024).

Studies examined how community-led sport programs in Sub-Saharan Africa foster social development, empowerment, and ownership. In addition to providing recreational opportunities, community-led sport projects promote greater ownership and serve as a platform for social cohesion, leadership development, and ongoing community involvement. This shows that sport led development is more than just a top-down approach; in many African contexts, community-driven sport initiatives can be highly effective development tools. Meanwhile, traditional sports like stick fighting, wrestling, and hunting have been popular for centuries in Nigeria because they are frequently used to resolve conflicts and disputes within the community (Nwankwo & Okafor, 2017). Nigeria, however, has made significant achievements in sports over the years. In football, the Nigerian national team, known as the Super Eagles has won the African Cup of Nations three times and has qualified for the FIFA World Cup six times (FIFA, 2021). In athletics, Nigerian athletes have also won several Olympic medals, including gold medals in the long jump and 4x100m relay events (Olympic.org, 2021). Understanding the dynamics and factors associated with sport participation in Nigeria is essential for fostering physical fitness, social integration, and general well-being among the populace. However, sport participation in Nigeria has remained a complex concept that encompasses various aspects of engagement in organized physical activities and has taken the form of both formal and informal sports involvement among individuals of different age groups, genders, and sociocultural and religious backgrounds.

Participating in sports and engaging in physical activities has many benefits, such as improved physical fitness, expanded social support systems, elevated positive affective states, and the development of perceptions of competence and enjoyment. In particular, football has been shown to promote compliance and support the maintenance of a socially and physically active lifestyle. In Nigeria, there are notable gender disparities in sport involvement, with female engagement frequently lagging behind that of males, according to numerous studies. Despite the significant role that sport plays in promoting social progress as highlighted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, women participate in fewer sports overall, which may be due to sociocultural norms, a lack of resources and support, and limited opportunities for female athletes (Olorunsola, 2020).

In line with the United Nations General Assembly resolution from 2021 highlighting the significance of sports as a means to encourage, enhance, and promote peace, dialogue, and understanding among peoples and civilizations, research by UNICEF (2023) demonstrated the potential benefits of sports participation, including improved learning and academic performance, decreased risk of substance abuse, reduced stress and depression, increased confidence and self-esteem, and decreased insecurity. For example, in a mixed state like Rivers, where ethnic and cultural groups coexist, sport may have a strong potential to bridge understanding and intolerance. Sports have continued to be a tool for mobilizing youth and adults to achieve common goals for security, peace, and development in Nigeria's danger zones. In addition to having a positive influence on socialisation, the sense of self-worth and cultural integration, also enhancing the agents' unifying function in multi-ethnic communities (Spaaij, 2015; Castagna et al., 2021).

According to studies, participating in sports offers chances for cross-cultural contacts that promote respect, understanding, and unity among people from various origins (Koenker, 2020). It is impossible to overestimate the importance of sports in promoting community growth and social cohesiveness. With its special ability to draw, inspire, and motivate people across ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic divides, sports serve as a unifying factor in Sub-West Africa's diverse cultural environment. Sport by its very nature encourages civic engagement and inclusion. It embodies human values that are consistent with the United Nations Charter, including respect for opponents, acceptance of legally bound rules, teamwork, and fairness.

The United Nations acknowledges sports as a global phenomenon, an essential part of society with significant economic effects, and a potent instrument for promoting social inclusion, equality, peace, health, and development. According to the International Development Agency (2022), sport contributes to a culture based on peaceful principles and thereby strengthens civil institutions by teaching fundamental social qualities like tolerance, teamwork, justice, and constructive conflict management. In the process of fostering peace, sport undoubtedly plays a significant part in bridging divides and misconceptions between individuals and communities.

## Theoretical Framework

Talcott Parsons' (1951) social systems theory serves as the foundation for this study. According to the theory, society is a complex system of interconnected elements, each of which supports the equilibrium, stability, and proper operation of the whole. Parsons claims that the social systems theory ensures order, integration, and cohesiveness within society by means of interconnected institutions, roles, and norms. It highlights the interdependence of the social structures by emphasizing how changes to one component of the system can impact how other components operate (Parson, 1951; Macionis, 2017). According to this theoretical viewpoint, community development results from a healthy social system in which several subsystems, including family, education,

religion, and sports, cooperate to foster social integration, cohesiveness, and the welfare of the group as a whole (Coleman, 1988). According to social systems theory, sport has its own rules, roles, and regulated relationships, making it an important social subsystem within the community. Coalter (2007) asserts that sports offer opportunities for teamwork, discipline, socialization, and the transfer of values. From the standpoint of social systems, people who participate in sports play roles that uphold social norms and expectations, which help the community function and remain stable. By applying the theory to this study. Since participation in group activities is influenced by the socialization process and the connection between individuals and society, the theory highlights the importance of both. It also examines how community members' participation in sports and social inclusion affects their participation and involvement in community development initiatives and aids in understanding the dynamics and interactions among various categories of individuals in the community as well as how all system factors affect their engagement in development activities. This affects participation, individual productivity, community development activities, and community value. Local sport initiatives in Nigeria, such as football leagues, community competitions, and school-based sports, provide chances for young people and adults to engage, collaborate, and form common social identities (Omorogiuwa & Onifade, 2021). In turn, this engagement helps people perform their social roles, lessens antisocial conduct, and fosters peaceful relationships, all of which improve community cohesion. According to Levitas et al. (2007), social inclusion in sport refers to procedures that guarantee equal access and participation for all members of society, especially marginalised groups. This theory highlights how inclusive sport programs are essential for preserving system equilibrium because they prevent the marginalization of particular groups and promote integration into the larger community.

## Methodology

### Design

The study employed a survey research design using a combination of both descriptive and inferential statistics to report the findings of the study. All of the participants used for this study were males, 150 respondents (100%). The independent variables are sport participation and social inclusion, while the dependent variable is community development. The design included purposive sampling techniques and random sampling techniques. The researcher(s) purposively selected four (4) sports locations within the Owo community where sports activities are done. The location includes two (2) football fields and a location where people play draughts, chess and ludo. The football field also accommodated a corner of the field where people equally play draughts and ludo, and then the respondents are randomly selected across all games. The mode of instrument used in this study is a questionnaire which measures the demographic variables such as employment status, age, religion and marital status, with other sections of the scale

measures sport participation, social inclusion and the level of community development in Owo Local government of Ondo State in Nigeria.

## Measures

### Sport Participation

The Sport participation scale was developed by the researcher(s), and it comprises seven (7) items such as 'I am happy when I am involved in sport activity and games'. The scale made use of the 5-point Likert scoring of Strongly Agree- Strongly disagrees. However, after three (3) items were deleted, the scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .76.

### Social Inclusion

The Social inclusion scale was adapted from Ceri Wilson and Jenny Secker (2015) Social inclusion scale. The new adapted scale comprises 15 items, which include items such as 'My sports team is involved in community services that benefit my neighbourhood'. The scale was adapted and restructured to fit into the community and location of the study.

### Community Development

The scale was also developed by the researcher(s) and comprises 13 items after two items were deleted. The scale reliability was tested, and it was found to have a Cronbach's alpha of .82.

## Procedures

The first stage was a pilot study, which was conducted using forty-five (45) students of Rufus Giwa Polytechnic who were accidentally found and selected at the Polytechnic Sport Complex. The participants for the pilot study were found in the act of the sporting events, and they include students who play football, basketball and volleyball. Some of the students are also involved in more than one game. Games which also include ludo, chess and draft.

The pilot study was conducted to test for the reliability of the sport participation scale and the community development scale which were developed by the researcher(s). The validity of the scales was established using face validity, where the scales were given to three (3) sport experts in the sport unit of Rufus Giwa Polytechnic.

The second stage, hence, involves the field stage where one hundred and fifty participants were selected for the main study across three (3) sports fields/locations across the Owo community. The respondents were educated about the purpose of the study, and consent was given before the administration of the questionnaire to each of the respondents. Respondents who could not read the questionnaire were assisted in reading it to them and interpretation of the items to local dialect were done to some of the respondents who do not understand English language.

## Results

**Table 1:** Frequency Distribution showing Respondents' Social Demographics

Factors	Options	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	150	100.0
	Total	150	100.0
Age	18-25	103	68.7
	26-32 Years	15	10.0
	33-40 Years	7	4.7
	Above 40 Years	25	16.6
	Total	150	100.0
Religious Affiliation	Christianity	127	84.7
	Islamic	23	15.3
	Total	150	100.0
Educational Level	Primary	13	8.7
	Secondary	44	29.3
	Tertiary	93	62.0
	Total	150	100.0
Marital Status	Single	111	74.0
	Married	39	26.0
	Total	150	100.0
Occupation	Employed	54	36.0
	Unemployed	49	32.7
	Self-employed	47	31.3
	Total	150	100.0
Socioeconomic Status	High	40	26.7
	Average	75	50.0
	Low	35	23.3
	Total	150	100.0
Sport type Engagement	Football	115	76.7
	Draft	35	23.3
	Total	150	100.0
Frequency of Sport Engagement	Everyday	103	68.7
	Once in a week	28	18.7
	Weekends	19	12.6
	Total	150	100.0



The findings on the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics were presented in Table 1. The distribution of the respondents' gender revealed that all of the respondents were males. The age categorisation of the respondents was with the indication that 68.7% of them were aged 18-25 years, showing that the majority of the respondents were young adults. 10.0% of them were aged between 26-32 years, 4.7% of them were within the age range of 33 and 40 years, and 25% of them were aged above 40 years. This indicated that aside from young adult, the elders also use sports or games as a way of leisure and fully participate in sport activities. A reasonable number of the respondents (84.7%) were Christians by religious practice, and 15.3% of them were Muslims. In respect to the respondents' level of education, it was reported that 8.7% of them had completed their primary education, 29.3% of them had completed their secondary

education, and while 62.0% of them had either completed their tertiary education or were currently in the program. Information relating to the respondents' marital status had indication that the majority of them (74.0%) were single, while 26.0% of them were married. The details relating to the respondents types of sport engagement had shown that 76.7% of them were more engaged with football against 23.3% who were engaged with draft playing, while it was reported that 68.7% of them are engaged with their sport type every day, 18.7% are engaged with the sport type once in a week and 12.7% of them only get engaged during the weekend. Findings also revealed that 26.7% of the respondents are high on their socioeconomic status, with 50% average and 23.3% low on socioeconomic status; however, 36% are employed, 32.7% unemployed, and 31.3% self-employed.

**Diagram 1:** Showing the occurrence of sport participation, social inclusion and community development in Owo local government area of Ondostate, Nigeria.

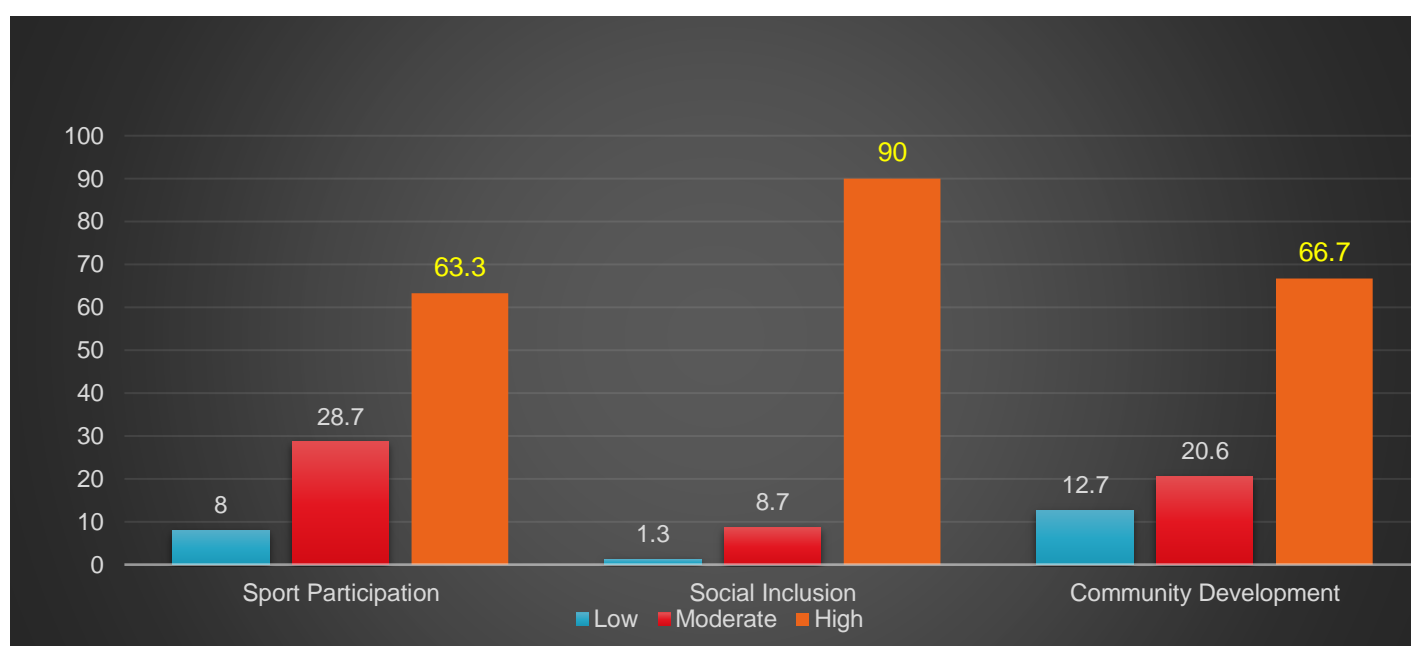


Diagram 1 presents the level of occurrence in sport participation, social inclusion and community development among residence in the Owo local government Area of Ondo State. It was reported that 8% of the respondents had low sport participation, and 28.7% of them had moderate engagement in sport-related activities, while a reasonable number of them (63.3%) had a high rate of participation in sport related activities. This implies that there is a notable rate of engagement in sport related activities among residence of Owo local government. It was also observed that based on mean distribution with respect to social inclusion, 1.3% of them engage in low social inclusion, and 8.7% were engaged in moderate social inclusion, while 90% of them were highly engaged in social inclusion. This had shown that nearly all the residents in Owo local government had equal access to essential services, and also is that people from different social status or classes had an equal chance to participate in decision making processes and community activities. In addition, engagement in community development revealed that 12.7% of the respondents had low engagement in community

development, and 20.6% of them had moderate engagement in community development, while a reasonable percentage of them (66.7%) were of high engagement in community development. This implies that a notable number of the residents in the Owo local government area engage their endless efforts in addressing community needs, building capacity, and also promoting sustainable development. Conclusively, it is clarified that a notable percentage of the residents in the Owo local government area had due participation in sport-related activities, and nearly all the residents in the study area had an equal chance of participating in communal essential services, with a notable number of the residents in the study area synergising efforts in addressing community needs and communal capacity building.

**Questions 1:** What is the relationship among the demography variables, sport participation, social inclusion and community development in Owo local government area of Ondo state, Nigeria.

**Table 2:** Correlation Matrix Showing the Relationships among the Study Variables “demography factors, sport participation, social inclusion and community development in Owo, Ondo state, Nigeria

Factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Age	1												
2. Gender	-	1											
3. Religion Affiliation	-.03	-	1										
4. Level of Education	-.005	-	-.01	1									
5. Occupation	.48**	-	.32**	-.07	1								
6. Marital Status	.89**	-	.04	.05	.35**	1							
7. Socioeconomic	.14	.14	-	-.35**	.07	-.07	1						
8. No of Sport Involvement	.18*	-	-.04	.06	-.15	.26**	-.06	1					
9. Sport type engagement	.82**	-	.71	-.28**	.57**	.60**	.03	.03	1				
10. Frequency of Sport engagement	.24**	-	.02	.06	-.10	.36**	-.05	.15	.01	1			
11. Sport Participation	-.01	-	.07	-.16*	.36**	-.04	.08	-.05	.24**	-.38**	1		
12. Social Inclusion	-.30**	-		-.07	-.43**	-.30**	.23**	-.30**	-.34**	-.00	-.12	1	
13. Community Development	-.03	-	-.44	.09	-.25**	-.04	.30**	-.18*	-.21*	-.02	-.19*	.52**	1

The result in Table 2 concerning the relationship among the tested personal/demography variables, sport participation, social inclusion and community development had shown that there exists a significant negative relationship between occupation and community development ( $r(150)=-.25, p<.01$ ), meaning that when members of the community are fully employed, they are less committed to community development activities in their community. There is also a significant positive relationship between socioeconomic status and community development ( $r(150)=.30, p<.01$ ); that is, the higher the socioeconomic status of the people, the more committed they are to community development.

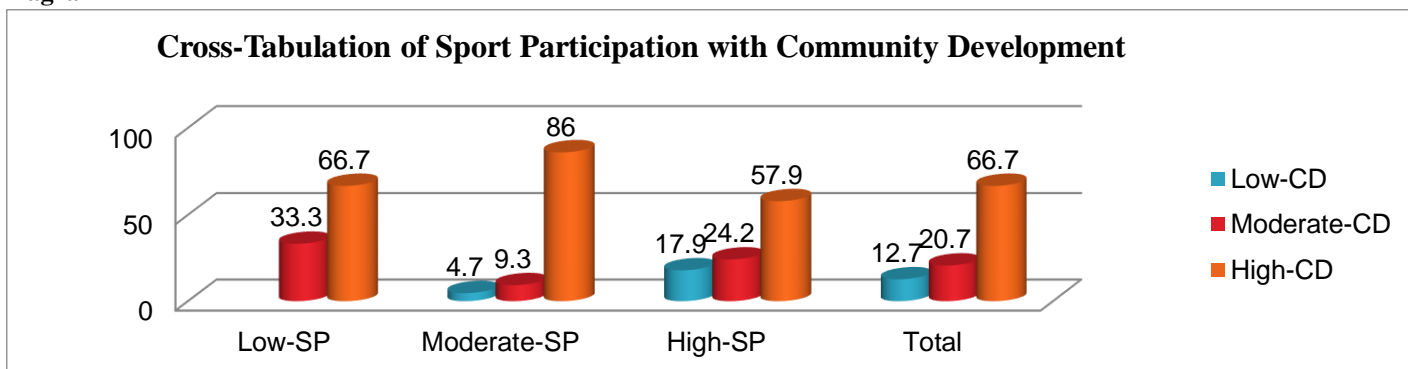
In addition, the result indicated that sport involvement (the number of sports the individual can play), sport type engagement (either football or draft) and sport participation all had a significant negative relationship on community development, however social inclusion had a positive significant relationship ( $r(150)=.52, p<.01$ ) on community development. As an individual feels included in the community, the more involved they are in the activities leading to community development.

**Question 2:** What is the influence of sport participation on community development in Owo local government area of Ondo State, Nigeria?

**Table 3:** Cross Tabulation showing the influence of sport participation on community development in Owo local government area of Ondo State, Nigeria

Factor	Community Development				Statistics		
	Low (F/%)	Moderate (F/%)	High (F/%)	Total (F/%)	X <sup>2</sup>	df	p-value
<b>Sport Participation</b>							
Low	-	4(33.3)	8(66.7)	12(100.0)			
Moderate	2(4.7)	4(9.3)	37(86.0)	43(100.0)	13.466**	1	0.009
High	17(17.9)	23(24.2)	55(57.9)	95(100.0)			
Total	19(12.7)	31(20.7)	100(66.7)	150(100.0)			

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , N= 150

**Diagram 2**

The result in Table 2 had reported that 33.3% of the respondents with low sport participation had moderate engagement in community development, though 66.7% of them with low sport participation had high engagement in community development. It was also reported that 4.7% of the respondents with moderate engagement in sport participation were of low engagement in community development, and 9.3% of them with moderate participation on sport-related activities had moderate engagement in community development, while 86% of they with moderate participation in sport had high engagement in community development. There was further indication that 17.9% of the respondents with high participation in sport had low engagement in community development, and 24.2% of them with moderate sport participation were with moderate engagement in community development; meanwhile, 57.9% of them with

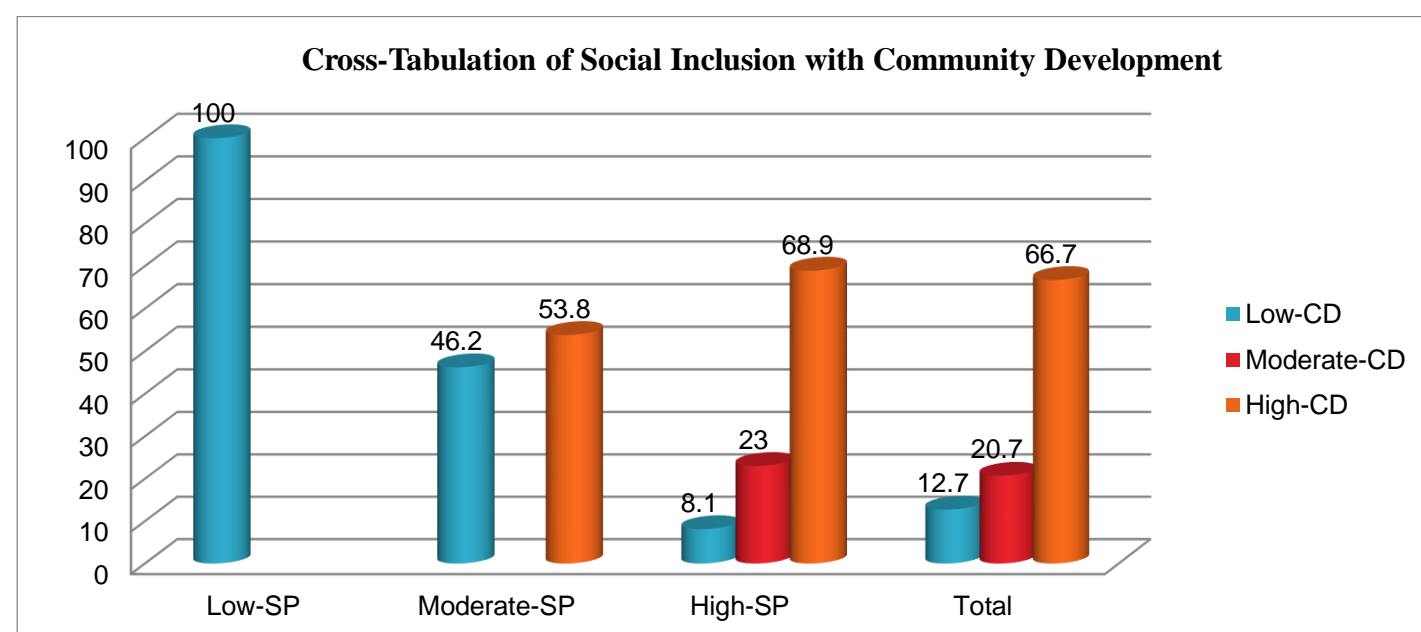
high participation in sport had a high level of engagement in community development. This implies that sport participation appears to have a positive influence on community development, notably, even when residents with low sport participation exhibit high engagement in community development, though those with moderate participation in sport seem to have the most viable impact, as most of the residents (86%) in this category engage most in community development. The reported chi square value of ( $X^2=13.466$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.05$ ), had shown that sport participation had a positive influence on engagement in community development, which implies that sport participation is a catalyst for community development.

**Question 3:** What is the influence of social inclusion on community development in Owo local government area of Ondo State, Nigeria?

**Table 4:** Cross Tabulation showing the influence of social inclusion on community development in Owo local government area of Ondo State, Nigeria

Factor	Community Development				Statistics		
Social Inclusion	Low (F/%)	Moderate (F/%)	High (F/%)	Total (F/%)	X <sup>2</sup>	df	p-value
Low	2(100.0)	-	-	2(100.0)			
Moderate	6(46.2)	-	7(53.8)	13(100.0)			
High	11(8.1)	31(23.0)	93(68.9)	135(100.0)	30.926**	1	0.009
Total	19(12.7)	31(20.7)	100(66.7)	150(100.0)			

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ ,  $N = 150$



The result in Table 3 had shown that all the respondents with low social inclusion (100%) had low engagement in community development. It was also reported that 46.2% of the respondents with moderate social inclusion were of low engagement in community development, while 53.8% of those with moderate social inclusion had high engagement in community development. It was further reported in this result that 8.1% of the respondents with high social inclusion had low engagement in community development, and 23% of those with moderate social inclusion were with moderate engagement in community development, although 68.9% of

them with high social inclusion had a high level of engagement in community development. This indicates that there is a clear and direct interplay between social inclusion and community development. This was such that as social inclusion increases, so does engagement in community development. Notably, residents in the study area with low social inclusion are entirely absent from community engagement, highlighting the critical importance of social inclusion in fostering community development. The reported chi square value of ( $X^2=30.926$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.05$ ), had shown that social inclusion had a positive influence on engagement in

community development, which insinuates that by promoting social inclusion, communities can unlock the potential for collective growth and social cohesion which ultimately drives community development and propensity.

## Conclusion

According to the study's findings, social inclusion and sports involvement have multiple benefits for boosting community development and social inclusion in Nigeria with result of the study showing significant relationship among sport participation, social inclusion and community development. This implies that sport participation initiate and promote social inclusion which encourage members of the community to participate in activities leading to community development. This study therefore further emphasizes and elaborates the effectiveness of the dynamic relationship that exist within the social system and achieving social cohesiveness is a substantial developmental task in a nation like Nigeria which has wide range of ethnic groups, religious views, and socioeconomic gaps. Nonetheless, sport positions itself as a social cohesion-promoting force serves as a catalyst for social integration by establishing neutral environments in which people from all backgrounds can communicate, work together, and promote understanding.

Sporting activities at the national and local levels always offer unique chances for constructive interactions where teamwork and shared objectives take precedence over differences in race, religion, or economic status, which helps to lessen preconceptions and foster tolerance and build relationships that extend beyond the field particularly as Nigeria struggles to keep its youth involved in positive activities, sports have played a crucial role in promoting dialogue, healing, and reconciliation even in many conflict-affected communities, including North-East and Niger-Delta and serve as a platform for youth engagement and crime reduction, providing a clear substitute for delinquency by encouraging self-control, leadership, and purpose. Sports should therefore be seen as strategic tools for inclusive development rather than just as forms of physical exercise or amusement.

## Recommendation

Thus, this study has demonstrated the significance and beneficial effects of sport participation on community engagement by demonstrating that involvement in sport-related activities does have a significant impact on social inclusion and participation in communal development, which in turn increases community members' interest and effort in addressing needs and building capacity. This study hence recommended that sport festivals/events should be organized regularly such that this activities will bring people together thereby bringing people of diverse background and circumstances together, creating atmosphere for inclusiveness in Nigerian communities while community leaders should also create a platform for community volunteering engagement.

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