

Rethinking Community-Led Development: *A Comparative Dialogue from Mukuru Informal Settlements*

***Angela R. Pashayan and Sonika Mahat**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4772-8440>

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Abstract

Community-led development (CLD) has become increasingly important as external aid declines and local capacity becomes central to development practice. Yet limited research compares how different stakeholders understand CLD or how dialogue reshapes these perceptions. This mixed-methods study examines CLD in Nairobi, Kenya, using pre- and post-dialogue surveys with 47 participants (N = 47), including Master's students from the University of Nairobi and American University, and residents of the Mukuru informal settlement engaged in community initiatives. The study also draws on interviews with residents, development professionals, and government officials. Survey findings show broad support for CLD while identifying funding abuse, gatekeeping (Bashir, 2021), land tenure insecurity, and weak trust in state programs as key barriers. Interview analysis revealed six themes: land tenure and governance, infrastructure and housing, environmental risk, government trust, citizenship and legal identity, and community vision. Structured dialogue challenges assumptions and aligns development practice more closely with community realities.

Keywords: Community-led development, informal settlements, mixed-methods research, participatory dialogue, stakeholder perceptions, Mukuru, Nairobi, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Community-led development (CLD) has gained prominence in contemporary development debates as external aid declines and local capacity becomes increasingly central to development practice. CLD emphasizes local agency, community ownership, and the co-production of solutions grounded in everyday realities. These issues are particularly urgent in informal settlements, where residents face significant deprivation while simultaneously organizing social networks, navigating political systems, and solving neighborhood-level problems. Despite growing interest in CLD, limited research compares how different stakeholders understand it or examines how dialogue may reshape these perceptions. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how community members, students, and development actors interpret CLD and how structured dialogue influences those understandings.

The intellectual foundations of CLD emerge from broader shifts in development thinking

in the late twentieth century. Early paradigms, shaped by modernization theory, assumed that governments could drive economic growth and institutional reform through centralized planning and external expertise. By the 1980s and 1990s, these assumptions were increasingly challenged. Scholars and practitioners demonstrated that externally designed interventions often produced limited or unsustainable outcomes because they failed to account for local social, cultural, and institutional dynamics. Participatory approaches emerged in response, emphasizing the importance of engaging communities directly in defining development priorities and designing solutions (Chambers, 1997). While these approaches aimed to shift power toward communities, subsequent critiques highlighted persistent gaps between participatory rhetoric and actual decision-making authority.

Building on this foundation, the present study examines CLD through a triadic dialogue

*Corresponding author:

Angela R. Pashayan Department of Political Science, George Washington University - Washington, DC

Email: a.pashayan@gwu.edu

among three groups: U.S. development students, Kenyan development students, and residents of Mukuru informal settlement actively engaged in community-led initiatives. This dialogue is complemented by interviews with development professionals, government officials, and Mukuru residents, including youth. By bringing these perspectives into a shared discussion space, the study investigates how assumptions about community capacity and leadership are formed, where misunderstandings arise, and whether dialogue can shift these perceptions. The research focuses on commonly held beliefs about informal settlements and evaluates how engagement across socio-economic groups reshapes understanding of CLD.

This inquiry is grounded in Pashayan's (2023) argument that development practice in informal settlements reflects a persistent disconnect between externally designed programs and the priorities identified by residents. In this framework, effective poverty reduction requires authentic dialogue that generates critical consciousness and aligns institutional action with lived experience. Communities in informal settlements often operate outside formal economic and governance structures—what Pashayan describes as existing “below the proletariat”—making it essential for development approaches to begin with community-defined realities rather than institutional assumptions.

The study contributes to the literature in two key ways. First, it provides a comparative analysis of CLD perceptions across stakeholders positioned differently within development discourse and practice. Second, it introduces structured dialogue as both a research method and a mechanism for revealing and challenging assumptions about informal settlements. In doing so, the study demonstrates how engagement across socio-economic boundaries can produce more grounded and responsive approaches to development in informal settlements.

THEORY

Theoretical Framework

Community-led development (CLD) is grounded in participatory development theory, which challenges hierarchical models of knowledge and emphasizes local agency. Chambers (1997) and

Pretty (1995) argue that effective development requires reversing traditional flows of expertise by centering the lived experiences of communities. Participation, in this view, is not merely procedural but a mechanism for redistributing power. However, subsequent scholarship complicates this assumption. Cooke and Kothari (2001) demonstrate that participatory approaches can reinforce existing power structures when decision-making remains externally controlled. Gaventa's (1980) framework of visible, hidden, and invisible power further clarifies how exclusion persists even within participatory settings.

Dialogue emerges as a critical theoretical bridge between participation and empowerment. Freire (1970) conceptualizes dialogue as a process of developing critical consciousness, enabling participants to recognize and challenge structural inequalities. This perspective is particularly relevant to CLD, where the effectiveness of participation depends not only on inclusion but on whether individuals gain the capacity to influence outcomes. Building on this, Pashayan (2023) argues that development in informal settlements often fails due to a disconnect between institutional programming and lived realities. Her concept of populations existing “below the proletariat” highlights the need for development approaches grounded in community-defined priorities. This study draws on these theoretical insights to examine whether structured dialogue can reveal and reshape assumptions about CLD across stakeholder groups.

Participation and Social Inclusion

The literature consistently emphasizes that participation alone does not guarantee empowerment. Pretty (1995) identifies a spectrum ranging from passive consultation to full community control, while Mohan and Stokke (2000) argue that meaningful participation depends on access to decision-making authority. Cornwall and Coelho's (2007) distinction between invited and claimed spaces further demonstrates that participation is shaped by who defines the agenda. These insights suggest that CLD outcomes depend less on participation itself than on the distribution of power within participatory processes.

Critical perspectives highlight how participation can reproduce exclusion. Kothari (2001) shows

that participatory processes often privilege institutional forms of knowledge, marginalizing local perspectives. Jenkins and Goetz (2001) similarly demonstrate that elite capture and internal hierarchies can limit the effectiveness of community-led initiatives. Agarwal's (2001) work on gender further illustrates that formal inclusion does not necessarily translate into substantive influence, particularly for marginalized groups.

Together, these studies shift the analytical focus from participation as a normative goal to participation as a contested process shaped by power relations. This perspective informs the present study by framing CLD not as inherently empowering but as dependent on how different actors understand and engage with it. The research therefore examines whether dialogue across stakeholder groups can surface these dynamics and challenge assumptions about community leadership and capability.

Social Inclusion and Critical Consciousness

Another strand of texts focuses on the intersection of community-led development with issues of gender, social exclusion, and the particular barriers faced by marginalized groups. Agarwal (2001) demonstrates that participatory structures may formally include women while still denying them substantive influence. Her work on community forestry in South Asia shows that women's presence in decision-making bodies does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation if institutional norms and power relations remain unchanged.

These findings underscore the importance of examining who speaks within participatory forums and whose knowledge is valued. Participation that fails to address underlying inequalities may reproduce exclusion even while appearing inclusive. This insight is particularly relevant in informal settlements, where differences in gender, age, and ethnicity shape access to leadership positions and community networks.

Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness offers a complementary perspective on participation, emphasizing the transformative potential of dialogue. For Freire, dialogue is not simply a method for gathering information but a process through which individuals collectively analyze their conditions and develop the capacity

to act upon them. Through dialogue, participants can recognize structural forms of oppression and develop strategies for social change.

Understanding dialogue is central to the methodology of the present study. By facilitating discussion between students and Mukuru residents, the research creates a setting in which participants can confront assumptions and learn from one another's experiences. The dialogue process itself becomes a form of knowledge production that reveals differences in perception between groups and encourages reflection on the social dynamics of development practice.

Critiques, Local Realities and Structural Constraints

A parallel body of literature situates CLD within broader structural contexts. Scott (1998) critiques high-modernist planning for its reliance on simplified administrative models that fail to capture local complexity. Gupta & Ferguson (2002) extend this critique by emphasizing that local development processes are embedded within global political and economic systems. These perspectives highlight the tension between local agency and structural constraints, particularly in informal settlements.

In Nairobi, informal settlements such as Mukuru illustrate this tension. Residents develop informal governance systems and social networks that enable daily survival, yet they operate within conditions shaped by land tenure insecurity, state policy, and uneven access to services. Community-led initiatives, including participatory mapping and enumeration led by groups such as Muungano wa Wanavijiji, demonstrate the potential of locally driven development. At the same time, initiatives such as the Mukuru Special Planning Area reveal ongoing challenges in translating community participation into decision-making power.

The present study builds on this perspective by examining how different stakeholders interpret CLD within these structural conditions and whether dialogue can bridge gaps between external frameworks and community experience.

Pashayan's (2023) theory of extreme poverty reduction adds an important intervention to this conversation by grounding the need for authentic dialogue in the everyday realities of

African informal settlements. Pashayan argues that development policy frequently fails because it assumes that poor populations operate within the same institutional frameworks as formally employed urban residents. Pashayan purports that these populations live below the proletariat, emphasizing that development strategies must embrace slum dwellers' lived experiences rather than rely on institutional knowledge. The present study builds directly on this insight by examining how structured dialogue between development students and Mukuru residents may reveal misunderstandings about community leadership, organization, and development priorities.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presented in **Figure 1** illustrates the interrelationship between participatory development theory, community-led development (CLD) processes, and the role of structured dialogue in shaping development outcomes. It is grounded in the understanding that development is not merely a technical process but a socially constructed practice influenced by power relations, local knowledge systems, and stakeholder engagement.

The framework positions participatory development theory as the foundational layer, emphasizing principles such as inclusion,

empowerment, and critical reflection. These theoretical underpinnings inform CLD processes, which are operationalized through community participation, stakeholder interaction, and the integration of local knowledge. Within this process, structured dialogue is conceptualized as a critical mediating mechanism that facilitates communication, negotiation, and mutual learning among diverse actors.

Through dialogue, stakeholders are able to exchange perspectives, challenge assumptions, and co-produce knowledge, thereby reshaping perceptions of development practice. This interaction enhances shared understanding and fosters alignment between community priorities, institutional frameworks, and policy interventions. Ultimately, the framework demonstrates how dialogue strengthens the effectiveness of CLD processes by bridging gaps between theory and practice, particularly within the complex and dynamic context of informal settlements.

Empirical Application and Evaluation of CLD

A growing body of literature examines community-led development through empirical case studies that evaluate how participatory approaches function in practice. Jenkins and Goetz (2001) provide a critical evaluation of community-led development initiatives by examining how such

Conceptual Framework for Community-Led Development

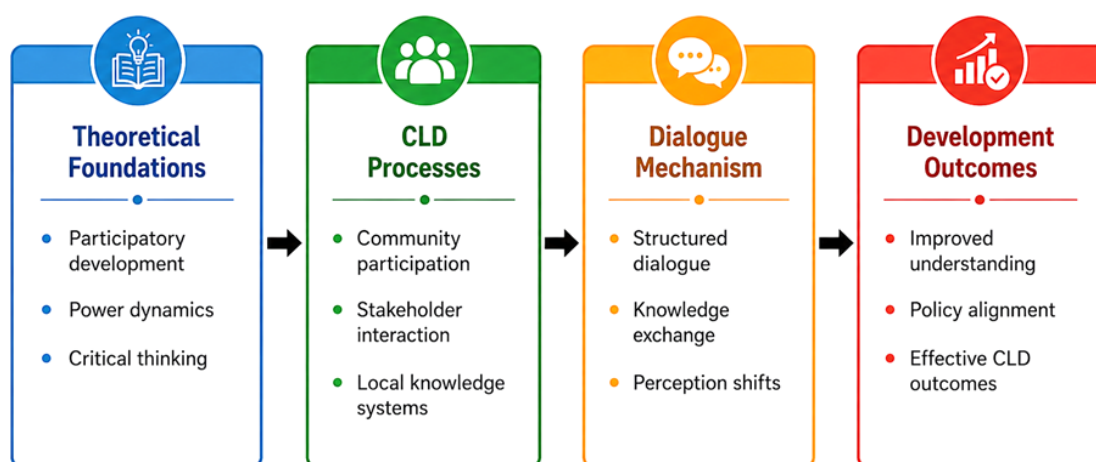


FIGURE 1

Conceptual framework linking theoretical foundations, community-led development processes, dialogue mechanisms, and development outcomes

Source: Authors, 2026

programs operate in real-world contexts. Their analysis demonstrates that while CLD approaches are often framed as empowering, outcomes vary widely depending on how participation is structured and whether communities gain influence over resources and decision-making. Drawing on multiple case studies, Jenkins and Goetz highlight the importance of examining power distribution within development initiatives rather than relying solely on indicators such as the number of meetings or participants. This critique aligns with the broader theoretical arguments of Mohan and Stokke (2000), who emphasize that empowerment cannot be assumed merely because participatory mechanisms are in place. Instead, meaningful participation must be evaluated by whether marginalized voices gain real authority in decision-making processes.

These insights suggest that evaluating CLD requires moving beyond output-based success metrics toward more qualitative assessments of social and political change (Warren, 2002). For example, rather than measuring the number of individuals attending community meetings or training workshops, researchers and practitioners should examine whether those participants later influence local policy decisions, gain leadership roles, or reshape community governance structures. Narayan's (1995) analysis of 121 rural water supply projects provides further empirical evidence supporting the value of community participation in development initiatives. Narayan found that projects incorporating meaningful community involvement were significantly more likely to achieve long-term sustainability than projects implemented through centralized state or donor-led approaches. Narayan's research also highlights the importance of recognizing informal governance structures within communities. In many contexts, local councils, neighborhood associations, or co-operative groups play a central role in managing shared resources. The lessons drawn from such case studies are highly relevant to contemporary community-led development initiatives in urban informal settlements.

Research Gap

While the literature on participatory development provides valuable insights into the design and critique of CLD initiatives, relatively little research has systematically compared how different stakeholder groups interpret CLD within a shared

analytical framework. Moreover, few studies have examined dialogue not only as a participatory tool but as a mechanism for reshaping stakeholder perceptions and revealing underlying assumptions about informal settlements. This study addresses this gap by integrating comparative stakeholder analysis with structured dialogue as both a methodological approach and an analytical lens.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design integrating surveys, structured group dialogue, and qualitative interviews (Warren, 2002) to examine how different stakeholders understand community-led development (CLD). The design aligns with the study's objective of comparing perspectives across groups while assessing whether dialogue can shift assumptions about community capacity and leadership in informal settlements (Wiles et al., 2006).

Sample and Data Collection

A total of 47 participants were included in the survey component: 20 U.S. graduate students in international development, 19 Kenyan graduate students, and 8 residents of Mukuru informal settlement actively engaged in CLD (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001). All participants were brought together in a conference setting at the University of Nairobi to enable direct interaction across groups.

Participants first completed a pre-discussion survey designed to assess baseline perceptions of CLD, including beliefs about leadership capacity, community knowledge, and development effectiveness in informal settlements. Following the survey, the principal investigator facilitated a structured group dialogue aimed at surfacing assumptions, clarifying misconceptions, and incorporating lived experiences of community-led work. Participants then completed a post-discussion survey using the same core items to assess changes in perceptions following the dialogue.

The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted in Mukuru with residents, private-sector actors, and government officials. Participants were identified through publicly available records and local networks.

Interviews focused on experiences with CLD, perceived barriers, and conditions necessary for successful implementation.

Participants were selected through a combination of institutional affiliation (for student groups) and community engagement networks within Mukuru, which may introduce some degree of selection bias toward individuals already involved in development activities.

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns in perceptions across groups and to assess changes between pre- and post-discussion responses. Comparative analysis was used to examine differences in how each group evaluated the potential and limitations of CLD.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded iteratively to identify recurring patterns and categories, which were then organized into six cross-cutting themes: (1) land tenure and governance; (2) infrastructure and housing barriers; (3) environmental and climate vulnerability; (4) government programs and trust; (5) citizenship and legal identity; and (6) community vision and participation. The analysis focused on how different stakeholders define development challenges, assign responsibility, and conceptualize the conditions under which CLD can succeed. Findings are presented as a comparative thematic analysis across stakeholder groups.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided verbal consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Identifying information was not included in the analysis or reporting of results. Given the inclusion of Mukuru residents, particular care was taken to ensure that participation did not create risk or discomfort, and that discussions were conducted in a respectful and inclusive environment (Wiles et al., 2006).

Limitations

The study's sample size is relatively small, which limits the generalizability of findings. The survey

participants represent a subset of stakeholders engaged in CLD and include residents from five villages within Mukuru, one of Nairobi's largest informal settlements. As Mukuru consists of multiple villages with varying conditions, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across the settlement.

Additionally, the interview sample could be expanded to include a broader range of institutional actors, particularly representatives from international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank, whose perspectives on financing and governance could provide further insight into structural constraints on CLD. These limitations point to opportunities for future research with larger and more diverse samples.

These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than representative, while still offering valuable insight into how dialogue shapes stakeholder perceptions within informal settlement contexts.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the survey, dialogue sessions, and qualitative interviews conducted across the different stakeholder groups. It outlines key patterns in perceptions of community-led development (CLD), including levels of awareness, confidence in local leadership, and the main barriers and enabling factors influencing implementation.

The results also distinguish between challenges that can be addressed through community-led action and those requiring broader structural intervention. In addition, the section examines how structured dialogue influenced stakeholder understanding, highlighting shifts in perspectives and areas of convergence across community members, students, and institutional actors.

Table 1 shows the composition of the respondents, of which the survey results indicate strong overall support for community-led development (CLD) across all participant groups. Most respondents reported familiarity with CLD and expressed confidence in the presence of leadership within informal settlements such as Mukuru. Baseline responses showed high confidence in CLD as a

TABLE 1
 Respondent composition of survey participants

Group	n	Percent
Mukuru Resident	8	17.0
Kenyan Student	19	40.4
U.S. Student	20	42.6

Source: Author’s survey data, 2026

Note. Percentages are based on N = 47 unique respondents in the survey sample.

concept (98%) and moderate confidence in local leadership capacity (70%).

Participants identified several key barriers to CLD. The most frequently cited challenges included lack of funding, misuse of funds, and gatekeeping (Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, 2015) within communities. Respondents also noted broader structural constraints, including poverty and health-related challenges, that limit the effectiveness of community-led initiatives. In contrast, factors identified as enabling CLD included reliable leadership, trust within community groups, and a shared commitment to development goals.

Respondents distinguished between problems that can be addressed through community-led action and those requiring external or structural intervention. CLD was viewed as effective for addressing community-level issues such as waste management, health education, water access, and job creation. However, participants were more skeptical about the ability of CLD alone to resolve structural challenges, including land tenure conflicts, flooding (Pashayan, 2024), and large-scale housing shortages. These distinctions are summarized in **Figure 2** and **Table 2**.

Note: Blue bars represent issues respondents identified as addressable through community-led development, while orange bars represent issues perceived as requiring structural or external intervention. Values indicate number of selections.

Dialogue Outcomes

The distinctions in **Figure 2** are analytically important. Respondents associated CLD with problems amenable to collective coordination, peer learning, and neighborhood-level action,

such as waste removal, health knowledge, water access, and job creation. By contrast, land tenure, flooding (Pashayan & Kenechukwu, 2025), bribery, and large-scale housing upgrades were more often treated as problems beyond the reach of community action alone and requiring structural intervention.

After the baseline survey, dialogue commenced on each issue. The US graduate students gained a better understanding of funding issues from multilateral stakeholders such as the World Bank, as well as of structural approaches to program implementation, monitoring, and impact evaluation. Graduate students from Nairobi lacked knowledge about the World Bank’s role in development and Western industry jargon, but shared well-known local terminology, such as gatekeeping – a term to describe a local leader’s power to grant or deny outsiders access to the community. The Mukuru residents clarified to both US and Nairobi graduate students that gatekeeping, while not inclusive, is sometimes applied as a protective measure for the community. Outsiders come and go, raising hopes for impactful change in the slum with no means, strategy, or intervention planned to initiate such programs.

Qualitative Interview Findings

Interview data further contextualize the survey results and provide insight into how different stakeholders understand CLD. Across residents, private-sector actors, and government officials, six recurring themes emerged: (1) land tenure and governance; (2) infrastructure and housing barriers; (3) environmental and climate vulnerability; (4) government programs and trust; (5) citizenship and legal identity; and (6) community vision and participation.

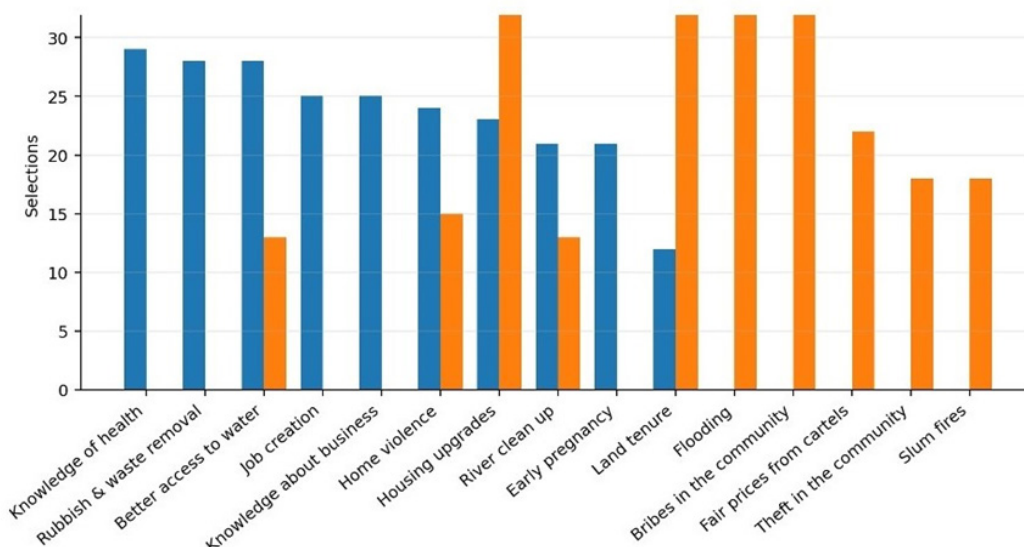


FIGURE 2
Issues community-led development can and cannot solve
Source: Author’s survey data , 2026

TABLE 2
Most frequently selected barriers and enablers of community-led development

Barriers	Count	Enablers	Count
Lack of funding	36	Reliable leadership	47
Abuse of funding	33	Growth mindset	39
Gatekeeping	31	Trustworthy members	39
Health issues	26	Basic needs met	33
Western ideas that do not work	26	Belief in project/community	32
Extraction mindset	22	Partial funding	28
Selfish decisions	18	Free meals during work days	14
No formal recognition	15	CBO registration help	11
No time / constant hustling	13	Child care during work days	8
Non-professional attitude	12		

Source: Author’s survey data , 2026

Stakeholder perspectives varied across groups. Residents emphasized lived experiences of insecurity, exclusion, and limited access to services. In contrast, private-sector actors and government officials described development challenges primarily in terms of institutional frameworks, policy constraints, and program implementation. These differences reflect variation in how stakeholders define problems and identify potential solutions within CLD (**Figure 3**).

Land Tenure and Governance

Land tenure emerged as a foundational issue across all stakeholder groups, but not in the same language. Private-sector actors described corruption, political interference, bureaucratic confusion, and legal ambiguity. Government representatives framed tenure through administrative fragmentation and competing jurisdictional claims. Residents, by contrast, described land tenure as insecurity in everyday

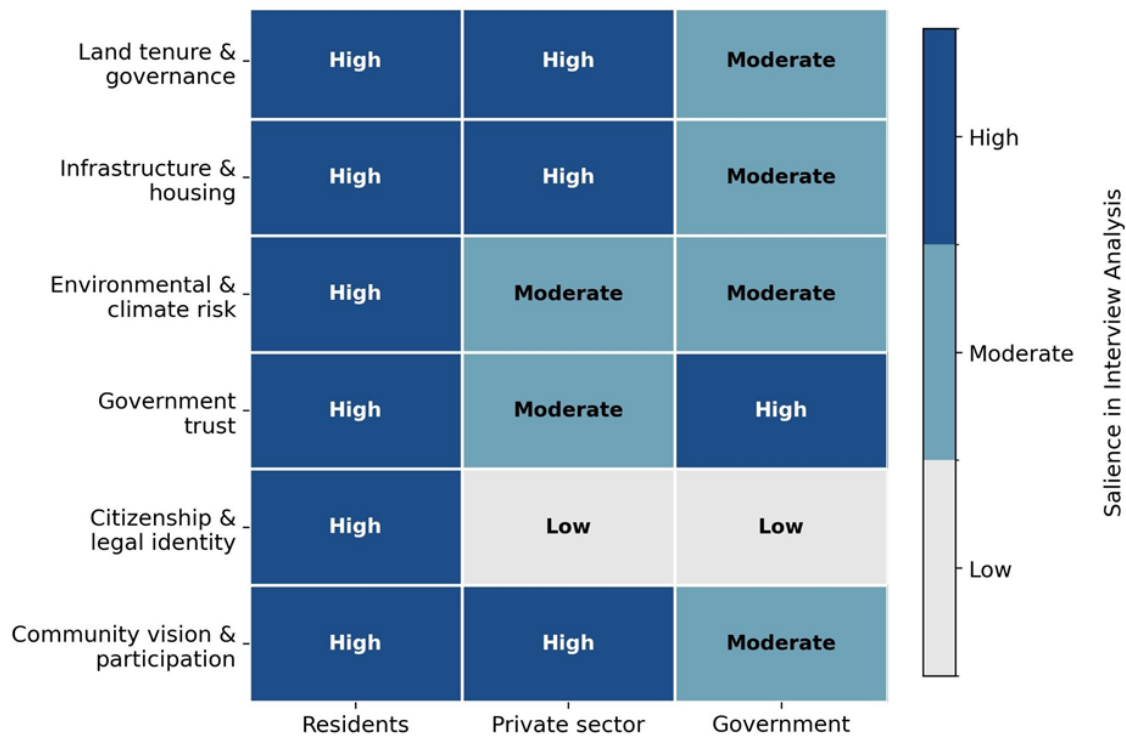


FIGURE 3
 Issues community-led development can and cannot solve
 Source: Author’s survey data , 2026

life: inherited plots without papers, fear of eviction, informal renting, and incomplete information about redevelopment. This divergence matters because it reveals why tenure reform often stalls. Residents experience tenure as existential, while institutions frame it as a technical matter.

Infrastructure and Housing Barriers

Infrastructure was consistently treated as the practical architecture of development. Residents emphasized water, electricity, sanitation, drainage, and housing designs that match household realities. Private-sector actors criticized conventional design templates that ignore the realities of life in informal settlements. Government actors stressed the need for integrated planning but also acknowledged fragmented delivery. The combined evidence suggests that infrastructure is more than a construction output; it represents the difference between habitable and uninhabitable urban inclusion.

Environmental and Climate Vulnerability

Flooding (Pashayan, 2024), waste, fire risk, and sanitation issues recurred across the interviews, but again with different emphases. Residents spoke

of lived precarity and practical improvisation, including container gardening, informal cleanup, and interest in collaborative kitchens. Private-sector actors proposed low-cost, design-sensitive interventions. In contrast, government actors referred to formal infrastructures and plans. The theme shows that environmental vulnerability is not separate from governance. Climate risk is experienced through service shortages, clogged drains, waste politics, and unequal ability to prevent disasters (Pashayan, 2024).

Government Programs and Trust

Trust emerged as one of the clearest dividing lines between government narratives and the community (Murumba & Pashayan, 2024). Government respondents described housing and youth programs as necessary and inclusive. Residents reported learning about such programs through rumor rather than through consultation, and several described the proposed affordable housing as ill-fitting and imposed. Resident responses indicate that building trust requires respectful timing, consultation, transparency, and the extent to which residents can help shape project design before decisions are finalized

(Murumba & Pashayan, 2024).

Citizenship and Legal Identity

The interviews show that legal identity remains a significant but under-recognized barrier to community-led development. Residents linked missing birth certificates, exclusion from services, and weakened claims to belonging to limited political agency. In comparison, government interviews were notably thin on this issue. This silence is analytically important because it suggests that institutional actors may assume legal recognition where, in practice, many residents experience forms of administrative invisibility.

Community Vision and Participation

The final theme reveals the strongest source of optimism in the data. Residents were not passive recipients waiting to be helped; they articulated concrete visions for sanitation, water, gardens, kitchens, safety, and improved housing. Private-sector participants strongly endorsed co-design and community ownership, while government actors spoke more about inter-agency coordination than about resident agenda-setting. The finding reinforces a central CLD principle: communities need power in defining priorities from the beginning.

DISCUSSION

Regarding participation, knowledge, and the limits of CLD, the findings reinforce a central insight in participatory development theory: communities are critical interpreters of their own development priorities. However, they also clarify the limits of this claim. This distinction aligns with Chambers' (1997) argument that development knowledge must be grounded in lived experience, while also supporting critiques that participation alone does not guarantee transformative outcomes (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Rather than positioning CLD as a comprehensive solution, the findings suggest that its effectiveness depends on the alignment between community-defined needs and institutional responses. Critically, Pashayan's work also points to dialogue as a mechanism for bridging this disconnect. In this respect, her approach aligns with Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness, in which dialogue enables participants not only to exchange information but to interrogate and reframe the

structures shaping their conditions. Together, these perspectives suggest that effective CLD depends not simply on participation, but on dialogical processes that align institutional action with lived experience.

The study also highlights how power, gatekeeping (Bashir, 2021), and uneven participation operate within CLD processes. Gaventa's (1980) framework provides a useful lens for understanding these dynamics. Visible power is reflected in formal programs and policies, while hidden power appears in practices such as gatekeeping and the control of access to communities. Invisible power is evident in normalized expectations of exclusion and limited agency.

Gatekeeping emerged as a central issue across stakeholder groups. While often framed as a barrier to inclusive participation, the findings demonstrate that gatekeeping can also function as a protective mechanism in contexts where communities experience repeated external interventions without sustained impact. This dual role complicates conventional assumptions about participation and underscores the need to examine how power is negotiated within CLD, rather than assuming that inclusion is inherently equitable.

The structured dialogue component provides insight into how perceptions of CLD are formed and reshaped. Drawing on Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness, the findings suggest that dialogue can function as more than a method of data collection (Wiles et al., 2006). It creates a space in which participants confront assumptions, engage with alternative perspectives, and reconsider their understanding of development processes.

The findings also illustrate the tension between local knowledge and large-scale development planning. Scott's (1998) critique of high-modernist planning is reflected in participants' skepticism toward externally designed interventions that prioritize institutional objectives over everyday usability. Rather than rejecting development itself, participants questioned approaches that fail to account for the social and organizational structures that sustain communities.

This tension is particularly visible in informal

settlements, where residents navigate complex conditions shaped by land tenure insecurity, environmental risk, and uneven access to services. These constraints limit the extent to which CLD can operate independently, reinforcing the need for coordination between community initiatives and broader institutional frameworks.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study extends existing scholarship in two key ways. First, it provides a comparative analysis of CLD perceptions across stakeholders who are rarely examined within a single analytical framework. Second, it demonstrates that structured dialogue can function as both a research method and a mechanism for revealing and addressing disconnects between professional and community perspectives.

The findings contribute to CLD theory by reframing it as a process of aligning knowledge systems rather than simply promoting participation. In this sense, CLD is neither a substitute for the state nor an insufficient alternative; it is a framework for improving the fit between development interventions and community-defined priorities. Central to this contribution is the integration of Pashayan's (2023) emphasis on epistemic alignment with Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness, highlighting dialogue as the mechanism through which more effective and grounded development practice can emerge.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that community-led development (CLD) is both more promising and more constrained than simplified development narratives suggest. It is promising because stakeholders widely recognize that communities possess leadership, knowledge, and collective capacity. It is constrained because the most significant barriers—land tenure insecurity, corruption, environmental risk, housing finance, and weak trust in state institutions—are structural and cannot be addressed through community action alone. This duality highlights the need to move beyond binary framings of CLD as either a solution or a limitation, and instead understand it as a context-dependent approach shaped by institutional alignment and structural conditions.

The findings contribute to the literature in two

key ways. Substantively, they show that residents of Mukuru understand development challenges as interconnected, linking land, infrastructure, legal identity, governance, and everyday survival. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of structured dialogue as a tool for surfacing and challenging assumptions across stakeholder groups. In doing so, it reinforces the argument that community members are not only participants in development but co-producers of knowledge. This contribution is particularly significant in contexts where external expertise has historically dominated development planning, often at the expense of locally grounded knowledge systems.

More broadly, the study highlights that effective development practice requires moving beyond surface-level engagement toward dialogue grounded in critical reflection. In line with Pashayan's (2023) emphasis on bridging epistemic divides and Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness, the findings suggest that dialogue is central to aligning institutional approaches with lived realities. Such alignment is not a one-time intervention but an ongoing process that requires sustained engagement, reflexivity, and institutional willingness to adapt to community-defined priorities.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the future of CLD lies not in expanding participation alone, but in transforming the relationships between communities, institutions, and knowledge systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening Structured Dialogue in Development Practice

For development practitioners, the findings underscore the importance of prioritizing structured dialogue with community members as a foundational component of program design and implementation. Moving beyond consultation toward genuine co-production can improve the alignment between interventions and community-defined priorities. Practitioners should also recognize and engage informal governance systems, including gatekeeping practices, not simply as barriers but as embedded features of local power structures that require careful navigation.

Addressing Structural Barriers Through Policy Reform

For policymakers, the study highlights the need to address structural barriers that limit the effectiveness of CLD. Efforts to strengthen land tenure security, expand infrastructure, and improve access to legal identity are essential for enabling community-led initiatives to succeed. At the same time, improving public accountability and transparency is critical for building trust between communities and state institutions. Incorporating community-generated data, such as participatory mapping and local enumeration, can further strengthen policy responsiveness.

Advancing Experiential Learning in Development Education Systems

For academic institutions, the findings point to the value of integrating experiential and participatory learning models into development education (Gorski, 2012). Creating opportunities for students to engage directly with community actors can challenge assumptions about informal settlements and deepen understanding of development practice. Such approaches can also prepare future practitioners to work more effectively across socio-economic and cultural boundaries.

Expanding Research on Dialogue-Based Development Approaches

Future research should expand the scope of this study by including larger and more diverse samples, particularly incorporating perspectives from international financial institutions and multilateral actors. Further work is also needed to examine the long-term impact of dialogue-based approaches on development outcomes and to explore how similar methods can be applied across different informal settlement contexts.

Reframing Community-Led Development Beyond State Substitution Models

Community-led development should not be understood as a substitute for the state nor as a limited local intervention, but as a framework for aligning knowledge, power, and practice. This study shows that such alignment is most effectively achieved through sustained, critical dialogue that bridges the gap between institutional systems and the lived realities of informal settlements.

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