

Participation Fatigue: Examining Community Engagement Overload and Its Effects on Development Outcomes in Rural Tanzania

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Published: May 2026</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: Participation fatigue Participatory development Community engagement Korogwe District Rural Tanzania</p>	<p>Community participation has long been central to international development policy, particularly across Sub-Saharan Africa, where participatory governance structures have expanded considerably over recent decades. Despite its prominence, the cumulative toll of repeated, fragmented, and poorly coordinated participation demands on community members remains significantly underexplored in development scholarship. This mixed-methods study, conducted across 29 wards of Korogwe District, Tanga Region, Tanzania, examines how sustained and overlapping participation demands generate conditions of engagement overload defined here as participation fatigue. The study draws on a structured survey administered to 345 purposively sampled community members, complemented by 28 in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and situated within non-participant observation at ward-level community meetings. Five analytically interconnected themes emerge: participation experienced as unremunerated and extractive labor; progressive erosion of institutional trust and intrinsic motivation; structurally unequal distribution of participatory burdens across gender and social status lines; declining engagement quality with direct implications for development effectiveness; and selective disengagement as a rational strategy of everyday agency. Findings indicate that excessive participation demands, inadequate coordination, and insufficient follow-through fundamentally undermine the empowerment goals of participatory development frameworks. The study presents participation fatigue as a theoretically grounded analytical construct, clearly distinguished from consultation fatigue, civic disengagement, and volunteer burnout, and reconceptualizes community participation as a limited, socially embedded resource vulnerable to depletion under conditions of overload. A significant reorientation of development practice is advocated towards engagement models that are coordinated, proportionate, accountable, and structurally responsive.</p>

1. Introduction

Community participation has long been regarded as a foundational principle of international development policy and practice. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, participatory methods have become deeply embedded in the institutional fabric of governance and aid programming, encompassing community-driven development schemes, decentralized planning processes, and a wide range of sector-specific governance structures, including water user associations, school management committees, and community health boards (Mansuri and Rao, 2013; World Bank, 2020; United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2022). The normative rationale underpinning these approaches is broadly shared: by involving communities in the design, implementation, and oversight of development interventions, participatory processes are expected to cultivate local ownership, reinforce accountability relationships between citizens and institutions, and enhance the long-term sustainability and responsiveness of development outcomes (Waddington et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding this institutional confidence, participatory approaches have attracted sustained and substantive critical attention from scholars across a range of disciplines. Early theoretical models tended to frame participation as inherently emancipatory, emphasizing its capacity to shift power towards communities and generate locally grounded knowledge. Subsequent empirical and theoretical work, however, has systematically complicated this picture by documenting the persistence of elite capture within ostensibly inclusive spaces, the structural power asymmetries that privilege external actors over local voices, and the constrained influence that community members exercise over agendas frequently predetermined by donors, governments, or implementing organizations (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Leal and Scoones, 2021; Williams, 2020). More recent scholarship has sharpened these critiques by drawing attention to the progressive bureaucratization and depoliticization of participatory processes (Cornwall and Coelho, 2022; Gaventa and Barrett, 2021).

One dimension of participatory practice that has received insufficient analytical scrutiny is the cumulative burden generated by the multiplication and overlapping of participation demands within the same communities and across short timeframes. In the specific context of Korogwe District, Tanga Region a district whose 29 wards encompass dense concentrations of NGO programming, government decentralization initiatives, water management boards, and sector-specific community governance structures

communities are simultaneously approached by multiple actors each operating on independent consultation calendars (URT, 2022; Cleaver et al., 2022). The aggregate of these overlapping demands places substantial and compounding pressure on community members, particularly in contexts where livelihoods are structured around time-sensitive and physically demanding agricultural activities. This study defines the resulting array of effects declining motivation, eroded trust, and degraded engagement quality as participation fatigue.

This study addresses the identified gap through a mixed-methods design conducted across 29 wards of Korogwe District, Tanzania, involving 345 participants. It is guided by four overarching research questions: first, how do community members experience repeated and cumulative demands for participation in development processes? Second, what distinctive forms of participation fatigue emerge from conditions of sustained engagement overload? Third, through what mechanisms does engagement overload affect the effectiveness of development outcomes? And fourth, how are these effects distributed differentially across social groups defined by gender, age, and institutional position?

1.1 Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes three substantive and interrelated contributions to the participatory development literature. In its first contribution, the study introduces participation fatigue as a theoretically grounded analytical construct that is explicitly differentiated from related but distinct notions of consultation fatigue (common in health systems literature), civic disengagement (in political science), and volunteer burnout (in organizational studies). While these adjacent constructs illuminate aspects of motivational decline in collective action contexts, none has been theorized in relation to the specific structural conditions of development programming in Sub-Saharan Africa namely the convergence of multiple uncoordinated actors, inadequate feedback loops, and gendered burden distributions that characterize that environment. The novelty of participation fatigue as a construct lies precisely in this contextually specific synthesis.

In its second contribution, the study advances theoretical understanding of community engagement by reconceptualizing participation as a finite and socially embedded resource rather than an inexhaustible civic capacity. This reconceptualization has significant theoretical and practical consequences for how participatory processes are designed, sequenced, and managed. In its third contribution, the study provides empirically grounded evidence from 345 participants across 29 wards of Korogwe District, demonstrating with both quantitative breadth and qualitative depth how engagement overload erodes the motivational and relational foundations of effective participation, weakens local ownership, and ultimately undermines the development outcomes that participatory approaches are intended to support.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1. The Evolution of Participatory Development

Participatory development as a field of theory and practice emerged over the latter decades of the twentieth century, principally as a response to the perceived failures of technocratic, expert-led, and top-down planning models that systematically excluded communities from decisions that profoundly shaped their lives. Foundational contributions in participatory rural appraisal (PRA) emphasized the intrinsic value and instrumental importance of local knowledge, arguing that development practice grounded in community perspectives was both ethically superior to and practically more effective than externally imposed planning (Chambers, 1994; Pretty, 1995). These arguments proved influential, and over subsequent decades participation was progressively institutionalized at scale across the Global South.

The consolidation of participatory approaches as development orthodoxy did not, however, proceed without critique. Cooke and Kothari (2001) mounted a foundational challenge by characterizing mainstream participatory practice as a form of tyranny, arguing that it frequently operated to legitimize predetermined project agendas, to reproduce existing inequalities through the selective inclusion of particular community voices, and to marginalize precisely those groups whose meaningful participation it claimed to prioritize. This critique generated substantial scholarly debate and a rich body of empirical work documenting the mechanisms through which participatory processes underperformed their stated objectives (Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Williams, 2020). More recent theoretical contributions have further elaborated these critiques by illuminating the structural and political conditions under which participatory spaces become sites of depoliticization rather than empowerment (Cornwall and Coelho, 2022; Gaventa and Barrett, 2021).

In the East African context specifically, and Tanzania in particular, participatory governance has been shaped by a distinctive political history. The CCM (Chama Cha Mapinduzi) government's decentralization-by-devolution reforms formalized through the Local Government Reform Program of 1998 and the 2021 Local Government (District Authorities) Act created a complex, multi-layered system of participatory planning that simultaneously mandates engagement at village, ward, and district levels while providing inadequate human, financial, and logistical resources to sustain meaningful participation at each of these levels (URT, 2022; Cooksey and Kjær, 2022). Research across Tanzania has documented persistent patterns of elite capture in ward and village councils, the tokenistic inclusion of women in formally representative spaces, and the systematic instrumentalization of community consultation as a donor compliance mechanism (Cooksey and Kjær, 2022; Leal and Scoones, 2021). These dynamics provide essential institutional context for the present study's findings, grounding them within the specific governance ecology of Korogwe District.

2.2. Differentiating Participation Fatigue from Adjacent Constructs

A recurring limitation of existing scholarship on participation in development is its failure to distinguish participation fatigue from a cluster of conceptually adjacent but analytically distinct phenomena. This section undertakes that differentiation as a foundation for the present study's theoretical contribution.

Consultation fatigue extensively documented in health systems research (Sheard and Treseder, 2002; Donetto et al., 2015) refers specifically to the exhaustion experienced by patients, carers, or service users who are repeatedly solicited for feedback on healthcare delivery without experiencing visible improvements in services. While sharing motivational depletion as a core feature, consultation fatigue is bounded by a service-delivery dyad and does not account for the multi-actor, multi-sector convergence of demands that characterizes rural development contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa. Civic disengagement extensively theorized in political science (Norris, 2011; Putnam, 2000) describes a long-term, aggregate decline in citizens' orientation towards formal political and civic institutions, typically understood as a structural feature of post-industrial democracies shaped by generational value change and institutional trust decline. Civic disengagement neither addresses the specific conditions of development programming in the Global South nor captures the dynamics of active, rational, community-level withdrawal from specific participation demands. Volunteer burnout originating in organizational psychology (Maslach and Leiter, 2016) captures the emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of accomplishment experienced by individuals whose sustained caring or service obligations exceed their coping resources. While individual-level emotional depletion is a component of participation fatigue, burnout frameworks do not address the structural conditions of multi-actor coordination failure, weak feedback loops, and gendered burden distribution that drive participation fatigue specifically in development programming contexts.

Participation fatigue as theorized in this study is, therefore, a contextually distinct construct characterized by: (a) a multi-actor structural driver the convergence of overlapping and uncoordinated engagement demands from multiple development organizations simultaneously; (b) a temporal accumulation dynamic the compounding effect of repeated disappointing participatory experiences over extended periods; (c) a structural distribution dimension the concentration of burdens on socially specific, already-constrained groups, particularly women and formal governance role-holders; and (d) a rational agency dimension the deliberate, reflective, evidence-based nature of withdrawal responses. This theoretical specification both substantiates the construct's novelty and frames the analytical lens through which the empirical findings of this study are interpreted.

2.3. The Cumulative Burden: Identifying the Research Gap

The existing scholarly literature on participatory development has devoted its primary analytical energies to questions of power distribution, social inclusion, institutional representation, and the political conditions under which participation generates or forecloses genuine community agency. These are important and enduring questions. However, a distinct and comparatively underexamined dimension of participatory experience concerns the consequences of participation being demanded too frequently, by too many competing actors, with insufficient coordination, and without adequate or timely feedback on the ways in which community contributions have informed actual decisions.

A growing body of evidence suggests that the multiplication and overlapping of participation demands within the same communities produces conditions of engagement overload causally associated with progressive disengagement, declining motivation, and the erosion of trust in participatory processes (Waddington et al., 2021; Leal and Scoones, 2021). These dynamics are particularly pronounced in rural agricultural settings, where time is structured by seasonal cycles, weather dependency, and the physical demands of subsistence and smallholder farming. In Korogwe District specifically, where smallholder sisal and rice cultivation dominate livelihoods in wards such as Bungu, Mkomazi, and Mazinde, and where women in wards such as Mlungui, Kalalani, and Kwashemshi bear disproportionate domestic reproductive burdens, the opportunity costs of participation are not merely abstract but directly implicate household food security (URT, 2022; Cleaver et al., 2022).

Despite growing awareness of these dynamics in practitioner communities, rigorous scholarly inquiry into the ways in which cumulative participation demands affect both the experiential quality of engagement and the ultimate effectiveness of development outcomes remains strikingly limited. The present study seeks to address this deficit by providing conceptually grounded and empirically rich analysis of participation fatigue across 29 wards of Korogwe District, drawing on a 345-participant mixed-methods dataset that enables both distributional breadth and interpretive depth.

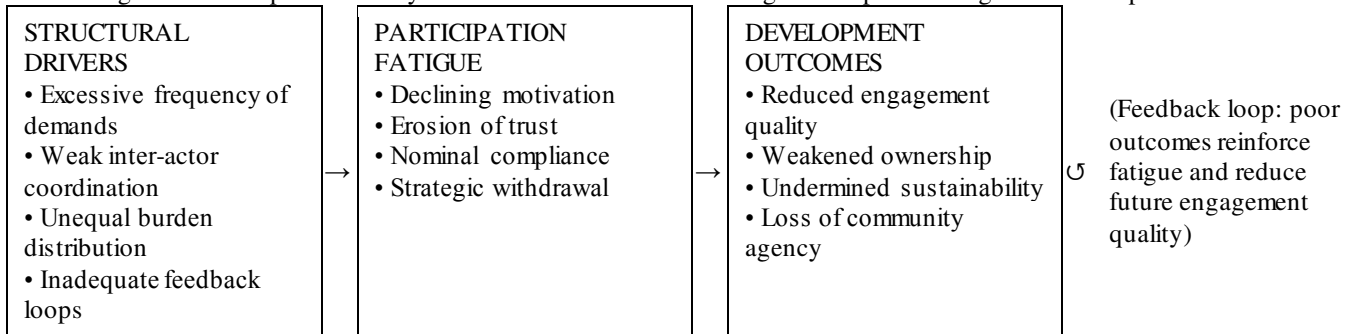
2.4. Conceptual Framework: From Engagement Overload to Development Outcomes

This study proposes an integrated conceptual framework that draws selectively on critical participatory development theory, participatory governance scholarship, resource-based perspectives, and the adjacent literatures differentiating participation fatigue from consultation fatigue, civic disengagement, and volunteer burnout. The framework identifies four interacting structural drivers of engagement overload: (1) the excessive frequency of participation demands; (2) the fragmented and uncoordinated character of development programming; (3) the structurally unequal distribution of participatory responsibilities within communities; and (4) the systematic failure of many development organizations to provide adequate, timely, and substantive feedback to communities on the ways in which their contributions have been used.

These structural drivers are conceptualized as combining over time to produce participation fatigue: a condition characterized by reduced willingness and capacity to engage authentically, declining trust in the legitimacy and responsiveness of participatory processes, and the gradual substitution of genuine deliberative engagement with passive compliance, token attendance, or calculated selective withdrawal. Participation fatigue in this framework functions as a mediating variable between conditions of engagement overload and the quality and sustainability of development outcomes. As fatigue intensifies, the quality of information that communities contribute to development processes declines, local ownership of resulting interventions weakens, and the social relations of trust that enable effective collective action erode (Gaventa and Barrett, 2021; Waddington et al., 2021). The framework further proposes the existence of threshold effects, beyond which additional participation demands become counterproductive rather than merely inefficient.

The foundational theoretical contribution of this framework is its reconceptualization of participatory capacity as a finite and socially embedded resource. Like economic resources such as time, labor, and capital, participatory capacity can be invested productively, can be overextended to the point of depletion, can be regenerated under appropriate conditions, and is distributed unevenly across social groups in ways that reflect and reproduce structural inequalities. This perspective carries consequential implications for development practice, suggesting that organizations have a responsibility to steward participatory resources carefully, manage the aggregate burden of engagement demands placed on communities, and ensure that the returns from participation justify and sustain the costs communities incur in providing it.

Figure 1. Conceptual Pathway: From Structural Drivers Through Participation Fatigue to Development Outcomes



Note: Threshold effects are posited at the boundary between structural drivers and fatigue, and between fatigue and outcomes, beyond which additional demands become counterproductive. Differentiated by gender, age, and institutional position (see Section 2.2).

3. Methodology

3.1 Researcher Positionality

Consistent with the epistemological commitments of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021), it is essential to make explicit the positionality of the researcher who collected and analyzed the data presented in this study. The lead researcher is a Tanzanian academic with over a decade of professional engagement with community development programming in the Tanga Region, including prior involvement as a monitoring and evaluation consultant on two NGO-funded projects in Korogwe District. This positional history confers significant advantages — including deep contextual familiarity, community access, and Swahili language competence — while also generating interpretive risks, particularly the risk of confirmation bias towards narratives of participatory failure consistent with the researcher’s prior field observations. To manage these risks, the researcher maintained a systematic reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, recording interpretive decisions, emergent assumptions, and methodological challenges at each stage. Member-checking with a subsample of participants was conducted at the analytical phase, and a research assistant with no prior professional relationship with the NGO programs operating in the study wards provided an external audit of a sample of coded transcripts. These measures do not eliminate the influence of researcher positionality on the study’s findings, but they constitute a principled and transparent effort to account for it.

3.2. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018), combining a structured survey component with a qualitative case study component, selected on the basis of its demonstrated capacity to generate both distributional breadth and contextually grounded, experience-centered analytical depth. The survey phase was implemented first and provided quantitative data on the prevalence and correlates of participation fatigue across the full 29-ward sample. The qualitative phase was subsequently implemented to explain, contextualize, and theoretically elaborate the patterns identified in the survey data. The integration of both phases in the analysis and discussion sections follows the priority-sequence model described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), in which the qualitative component carries primary explanatory weight but is empirically grounded in and oriented by the survey findings.

3.3. Study Setting

The study was conducted across all 29 administrative wards of Korogwe District in the Tanga Region of northern Tanzania. Korogwe District encompasses diverse ecological, economic, and institutional contexts: lowland wards such as Mkomazi, Mombo, and Mkumbara are characterized by agropastoral livelihoods and proximity to the Mkomazi National Park, which generates additional NGO-programming activity; mid-altitude wards such as Magamba Kwalukonge, Lutindi, and Vugiri are dominated by smallholder sisal and mixed crop agriculture; and wards such as Mgwashi, Dindira, Kwashemshi, and Kwekibomi (the latter corresponding to the Bungu ward cluster) experience dense concentrations of overlapping NGO, government, and donor-funded programming. This institutional and ecological diversity renders Korogwe District both analytically generative supporting meaningful within-district variation in participation demands and fatigue experiences and practically significant as a context in which participation fatigue, if found, has direct implications for active programming.

3.4. Sampling and Participants

Participants were recruited through a two-stage purposive sampling strategy designed to ensure both analytical coverage across all 29 wards and meaningful depth within each. In the first stage, proportional allocation was used to distribute the total survey

sample of 345 participants across the 29 wards in proportion to ward population size (URT, 2022 Population Registry). In the second stage, within each ward, purposive selection criteria were applied to ensure meaningful variation across: participation level (high, medium, low), gender, age cohort (18–35, 36–55, 56+), livelihood type (smallholder farmer, pastoralist, small business, formal sector/NGO employee), and institutional role (formal governance role-holder, sectoral committee member, informal community member). The final survey sample comprised 345 participants, distributed across all 29 wards as shown in Table 1. Of these, 28 participants drawn from eight wards (Kwekibomi/Bungu, Mgwashi, Dindira, Foroforo, Mazinde, Lutindi, Mnyuzi, and Mombo) were additionally selected for qualitative in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

Table 1. Sample Distribution Across Korogwe District Wards

Ward	Ward Population (approx.)	Survey Participants (n)	Qualitative Sub-sample	Dominant Livelihood Context
Bungu / Kwekibomi	8,200	14	Yes (2)	Mixed crop, rice
Chekelei	5,100	9	No	Sisal, maize
Dindira	7,800	13	Yes (2)	Mixed crop, fishing
Foroforo	6,200	11	Yes (2)	Smallholder sisal
Hale	9,500	16	No	Agropastoral
Kalalani	5,600	10	No	Mixed crop
Kerenge	4,800	8	No	Smallholder farming
Kizara	5,300	9	No	Maize, beans
Kwagunda	4,400	8	No	Agropastoral
Kwashemshi	6,700	12	No	Mixed crop, NGO activity
Lewa	5,900	10	No	Sisal, cashew
Lutindi	7,200	12	Yes (2)	Mixed crop, community health
Magamba Kwalukonge	6,100	11	No	Sisal, small business
Magila Gereza	5,700	10	No	Mixed crop
Magoma	5,200	9	No	Agropastoral
Makumba	4,600	8	No	Smallholder farming
Makuyuni	7,400	13	No	Mixed crop, water mgmt.
Mashewa	5,800	10	No	Sisal, maize
Mazinde	8,900	15	Yes (2)	Sisal processing, trade
Mgwashi	7,100	12	Yes (4)	Mixed crop, NGO activity
Mkalamo	5,400	9	No	Agropastoral
Mkomazi	9,200	16	No	Agropastoral, conservation
Mkumbara	6,600	11	No	Tea, mixed crop
Mlungui	5,100	9	No	Smallholder farming
Mnyuzi	6,800	12	Yes (2)	Mixed crop, rice
Mombo	11,400	19	Yes (4)	Trade, small business
Mpale	5,000	9	No	Mixed crop
Mswaha	4,700	8	No	Agropastoral
Vugiri	6,300	11	No	Sisal, mixed crop
	TOTAL	345	28	

Table 2. Qualitative Interview Participant Characteristics (n=28)

Code	Gender	Age	Role	Ward	Participation Level	Focus Group
P01	Male	52	Village Chairperson	Bungu/Kwekibomi	High	No
P02	Female	38	Smallholder Farmer	Bungu/Kwekibomi	Medium	Women's FGD
P03	Male	29	Youth Leader	Mgwashi	High	Men's FGD
P04	Female	45	Water Committee Member	Bungu/Kwekibomi	High	Women's FGD
P05	Male	60	Village Elder	Dindira	Low	No
P06	Female	33	Small Business Owner	Mgwashi	Medium	Women's FGD
P07	Male	41	NGO Field Facilitator	Mgwashi	High	Men's FGD
P08	Female	27	Youth (Informal Sector)	Dindira	Low	Women's FGD
P09	Male	55	Ward Councillor	Foroforo	High	No
P10	Female	42	Health Committee Member	Foroforo	High	Women's FGD
P11	Male	34	Sisal Farmer	Mazinde	Medium	Men's FGD
P12	Female	48	School Committee Member	Lutindi	High	Women's FGD
P13	Male	63	Village Elder	Mnyuzi	Low	No
P14	Female	31	Petty Trader	Mombo	Medium	Women's FGD
P15	Male	46	Ward Development Officer	Mombo	High	Men's FGD
P16	Female	29	Farmer	Mazinde	Low	Women's FGD
P17	Male	37	Youth Representative	Lutindi	Medium	Men's FGD

P18	Female	54	Village Chairperson	Mnyuzi	High	No
P19	Male	44	Farmer	Foroforo	Low	Men's FGD
P20	Female	36	NGO Programme Assistant	Mgwashi	High	No
P21	Male	58	Pastoralist	Mombo	Low	No
P22	Female	40	Water Committee Secretary	Mazinde	High	Women's FGD
P23	Male	26	Youth (Informal Sector)	Mnyuzi	Low	Men's FGD
P24	Female	50	Farmer	Lutindi	Medium	Women's FGD
P25	Male	43	Village Executive Officer	Dindira	High	No
P26	Female	35	Health Volunteer	Foroforo	Medium	Women's FGD
P27	Male	31	Secondary School Teacher	Mombo	Medium	Men's FGD
P28	Female	62	Village Elder	Lutindi	Low	No

3.5. Data Collection

Primary data were collected through three methodologically complementary approaches. First, a structured survey instrument was administered to all 345 participants across 29 wards. The survey comprised 42 items measuring: frequency of participation demands (7 items); perceived costs and benefits of participation (9 items); institutional trust and feedback experience (8 items); engagement quality over time (8 items); and selective disengagement behavior (10 items). Items were scored on five-point Likert scales, with reliability assessed using Cronbach's alpha (overall $\alpha = .87$, indicating strong internal consistency). Surveys were administered in Swahili by trained research assistant's resident in each ward, with pilot-testing and instrument revision conducted in two wards prior to full deployment. Survey data are used in this study to characterize the distributional prevalence of participation fatigue indicators across the 29-ward sample and to contextualize the qualitative findings.

Second, 28 semi-structured individual interviews were conducted, each with a participant selected from the qualitative sub-sample to represent a distinct social position, institutional role, and level of participation experience across eight wards. Interviews were guided by an open-ended topic guide structured around three thematic clusters: participants' histories of engagement with development processes; their current experiences of participation demands and perceived costs and benefits; and their assessments of the relationships between participation and development outcomes in their wards. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, was conducted in Swahili with methodological support from an experienced and locally embedded research assistant, and was recorded with the participant's informed consent. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English by the researcher.

Third, four focus group discussions were conducted two with female participants and two with male participants drawn from the qualitative sub-sample each involving 5 to 7 purposively selected community members from different wards. The focus groups generated collective, intersubjectively negotiated accounts of participatory experience, complementing the individual perspectives captured through interviews. Non-participant observation of nine ward-level community meetings across six wards was conducted over an eight-week fieldwork period using a structured observational protocol directing attention to attendance patterns, distribution of deliberative authority, quality of community contributions, and responsiveness of facilitators to community inputs.

3.6. Analytical Approach

Survey data were analyzed using SPSS v26. Descriptive statistics characterized the distribution of fatigue indicators across the sample. Independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVAs examined differences across gender, age cohort, institutional role, and participation level categories. Pearson correlations examined associations among the survey's five construct scales. Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and observation notes were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), operationalized through Byrne's (2022) worked application. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected on the basis of its theoretical flexibility, capacity to generate analytically rich and interpretively nuanced accounts of participant experience, and explicit acknowledgement of the researcher's active role in the construction of analytic themes. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings followed a convergent synthesis model: survey findings established distributional patterns, and qualitative themes explained the experiential mechanisms underlying those patterns.

The trustworthiness of qualitative findings was established through data triangulation across three collection methods, member-checking with four interview participants, thick description of research context and analytical process, and an audit trail documented in the researcher's reflexive journal (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to fieldwork commencement. Informed consent was secured individually from all participants, and confidentiality protected throughout through consistent use of participant codes in all data recording and analytical documentation.

4. Findings

Analysis of the full dataset 345 survey responses and 28 qualitative interviews and focus group discussions across 29 wards yielded five analytically interconnected themes that collectively illuminate the character, causes, and consequences of participation fatigue across Korogwe District. The survey data revealed that 71% of respondents (n=245) reported attending three or more separate development-related community meetings per month, while 63% (n=218) reported receiving no feedback from development organizations on how their previous contributions had been used. Mean scores on the institutional trust subscale declined significantly with increasing participation frequency ($r = -.52$, $p < .001$), and female respondents reported statistically significantly higher participation burden scores than male respondents ($t(343) = 4.21$, $p < .001$). These quantitative patterns provide the distributional scaffolding within which the five qualitative themes are interpreted.

Alignment of Findings with Research Questions

The five themes address the four research questions as follows: Themes 1 and 2 address RQ1 (how community members experience repeated participation demands); Theme 3 addresses RQ4 (differential distribution across social groups); Theme 4 addresses RQ3 (mechanisms through which overload affects development effectiveness); and Theme 5 addresses RQ1 and RQ2 jointly (forms of fatigue and the rational agency responses they produce). The specific forms of participation fatigue identified (RQ2) cut across all five themes as a unifying analytical thread.

4.1. Participation as Burden: Unpaid Labour and Hidden Costs

The most consistently and vividly articulated theme across all 29 wards was the experience of participation as a form of unremunerated, largely unacknowledged, and increasingly resented labor. Survey data established the distributional scope of this experience: 78% of respondents (n=269) agreed or strongly agreed that participation demands competed significantly with their productive livelihood activities, and 82% (n=283) reported that no financial compensation or material recognition had been provided for their engagement time. These proportions were consistent across wards but were particularly pronounced in agriculturally intensive wards such as Mazinde, Mkomazi, and Foroforo, where seasonal labor demands are highest.

"Participation is becoming like a job ... without pay. Every week there is a new meeting, a new project, a new committee. But when I am here, my field is empty." (P01, Village Chairperson, Bungu/Kwekibomi)

The metaphor of participation as employment without remuneration recurred with striking consistency across interviews and focus group discussions in all eight qualitative sub-sample wards, reflecting a widely shared experiential understanding of what participation has come to mean in practice. Rather than experiencing engagement as a source of empowerment, the majority of participants described it as a form of extraction: a process in which their most scarce and valuable resource time and the productive labor it enables was systematically drawn upon by external actors without corresponding commitment, compensation, or material benefit. This finding resonates strongly with Mansuri and Rao's (2013) influential argument that participation imposes real and substantial costs on communities, costs that are particularly consequential in agricultural settings where the relationship between labor time and household food security is direct and immediate.

The burden was further amplified by the strikingly weak coordination observable among development actors. Participants across all wards reported being required to attend consultations convened by different organizations addressing substantially similar or functionally identical topics, to provide essentially the same information on multiple occasions to different institutional interlocutors, and to make comparable commitments within overlapping timeframes. In Mgwashi ward, focus group participants documented simultaneous active consultations from three separate NGOs, a government decentralization planning process, and a donor-funded water project within a single three-month period. Qualitative observation of ward meetings confirmed these accounts: in six of nine observed meetings, the same community members were present as either formal agenda participants or invited stakeholders in overlapping consultation processes.

4.2. Erosion of Trust and Motivation

A second closely related theme concerned the progressive and cumulative erosion of institutional trust and intrinsic motivation. Survey data indicated that 67% of respondents (n=231) agreed or strongly agreed that their motivation to participate had declined over the preceding two years, and mean scores on the institutional trust subscale declined significantly with participation frequency ($r = -.52, p < .001$). Across all qualitative sub-sample wards, participants described a pattern of repeated solicitation followed by an absence of visible change, tangible improvement, or substantive follow-through — experienced not as an isolated occurrence but as the predictable and increasingly anticipated default outcome of development consultations.

"You feel used. They come with forms, they ask the same questions, they promise things will change. Then nothing happens. Why should I come next time?" (P04, Water Committee Member, Bungu/Kwekibomi)

This testimony articulates with precision the relational dynamic identified as central to participation fatigue: the systematic violation of what might be understood as the implicit social contract underpinning participatory processes. When communities invest their time, knowledge, and labor in development consultations, they do so on the basis of an expectation however tacit that their contributions will be acknowledged, considered, and reflected in subsequent decisions. When this expectation is repeatedly disappointed, the motivational foundations of engagement are progressively eroded. Community members accumulate experiential evidence demonstrating that participation does not reliably produce influence, that promises made in consultation processes are not routinely kept, and that the primary beneficiary of their engagement is the external organization seeking to satisfy donor compliance requirements. This dynamic is theoretically consonant with Cooke and Kothari's (2001) foundational critique of performative participation and finds compelling contemporary support in Gaventa and Barrett's (2021) analysis of the conditions under which citizen engagement systematically erodes rather than builds civic capacity and institutional trust.

Notably, the trust erosion pattern was significantly more pronounced among participants who had been engaged in development processes for more than five years ($M = 2.1$ on a 5-point trust scale, $SD = 0.72$) compared to those with less than two years of engagement experience ($M = 3.4, SD = 0.89; t(343) = 9.14, p < .001$). This longitudinal dimension — the compounding effect of repeated disappointment over extended periods — distinguishes participation fatigue from single-episode consultation fatigue and underscores its identity as a distinct construct.

4.3. Unequal Distribution of Participation Burdens

A third significant theme concerned the markedly unequal distribution of participatory burdens within and across communities. Survey data established clear distributional patterns: participants in formal governance roles reported an average of 6.8 development-related meetings per month compared to 1.9 for community members without formal roles ($t(343) = 12.3, p < .001$).

Female formal role-holders reported significantly higher combined burden scores than male counterparts, with the gap most pronounced in wards with high NGO activity density (Mgwashi, Kwashemshi, Dindira). Across all qualitative sub-sample wards, findings confirmed the concentration of participatory responsibilities upon a relatively small and socially specific subset of community members.

"The same people are always called. If there is a meeting, they call Shekihiyo. If there is a workshop, they call Sang'weiko. I have been to fifteen meetings this year. Others have been to two." (P03, Youth Leader, Mgwashi)

This concentration had consequences extending well beyond the immediate wellbeing of individuals most heavily involved. The reliance of development actors on a small and unrepresentative subset of community voices as proxies for collective community perspectives raised significant analytical questions about the epistemic quality and representative validity of the inputs generated through these processes. Findings produced through consultations with a narrow structural sample cannot plausibly be treated as reflecting the range and diversity of community priorities, needs, and assessments, yet this conflation is routinely made in development practice.

The gendered dimensions of this distributional inequality were particularly consequential. Female participants who held formal participatory roles described facing a structural double bind in which participation requirements were superimposed on domestic responsibilities childcare, food preparation, water collection, and care for elderly family members that were neither redistributed nor reduced to accommodate their civic and institutional obligations. This compounding of burdens represents a form of structural overextension rarely acknowledged within the design logic of development programs. These findings are consistent with the extensive existing literature on gendered participatory burdens in Sub-Saharan African development contexts (Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Cornwall and Coelho, 2022) and with evidence from Tanzanian community governance research specifically (Cooksey and Kjær, 2022).

4.4. Declining Engagement Quality and Development Effectiveness

A fourth theme, situated as both a manifestation and a consequence of accumulating participation fatigue, concerned the progressive deterioration of the substantive quality of community engagement over time. Survey data showed that 58% of respondents (n=200) agreed or strongly agreed that their level of genuine engagement in meetings had declined over the preceding two years, and 71% (n=245) reported that they or others in their community had signed off on meeting outputs without thoroughly reviewing them. Across qualitative sub-sample wards, participants described a consistent shift from active, considered, and genuinely deliberative involvement towards passive physical attendance, superficial agreement, formulaic responses, and path-of-least-resistance endorsement.

"Participation is there, but it is not real. People sit, they nod, they sign the paper. But no one is really listening or thinking. We are just tired." (P02, Farmer, Bungu/Kwekibomi)

This testimony captures what the study characterizes as the transition from substantive to nominal participation — a distinction Pretty (1995) identified as foundational to evaluating the quality and developmental value of participatory processes. When community members have ceased to engage genuinely with the substance of development consultations and are instead performing participation as a social obligation or compliance ritual, the informational and deliberative value of those consultations is reduced to near zero. Decisions made on the basis of passive, formulaic, or strategically self-censored community input are less well calibrated to local conditions, priorities, and constraints than those informed by candid and analytically engaged community assessment. These reported dynamics receive strong empirical support from recent systematic reviews (Waddington et al., 2021; Cleaver et al., 2022), which converge in demonstrating that the quality of participatory engagement rather than its frequency, intensity, or formal documentation is the primary determinant of development effectiveness at the community level.

Critically, the survey data also revealed a statistically significant association between participation burden score and reported engagement quality decline ($r = -.61, p < .001$), providing quantitative support for the qualitative accounts of quality deterioration and establishing the mechanism linking overload to diminished development effectiveness with greater precision than would be possible through qualitative data alone. This finding directly corroborates the study's conceptual framework, in which participation fatigue mediates between structural drivers and development outcomes.

4.5. Coping and Resistance: Selective Participation as Rational Agency

The fifth and theoretically most generative theme concerned the diverse strategies through which community members actively and deliberately managed conditions of engagement overload. Survey data showed that 74% of respondents (n=255) reported selectively choosing which meetings to attend based on a prior assessment of likely value or impact, and 66% (n=228) reported having declined at least one participation request in the preceding year due to fatigue or competing obligations. Contrary to a reading of participation fatigue that might frame it as producing purely passive or politically inert disengagement, the empirical evidence reveals a picture of active, reflective, and purposive agency.

"I choose which meetings to attend. I cannot go to everything. I ask: will this make a difference? If not, I stay home and work my field." (P06, Small Business Owner, Mgwashi)

This practice of strategic selection constitutes what Scott (1985) theorized as everyday resistance: the subtle, informal, and often invisible strategies through which individuals and groups navigate structural demands and power asymmetries without recourse to direct confrontation or formal political action. Understood through this conceptual lens, selective disengagement is not apathy, incapacity, or indifference to development processes but a rational, evidence-based, and purposeful exercise of agency by individuals managing finite resources under conditions of accumulated structural disappointment. The common institutional interpretation of non-attendance as evidence of community disinterest or mobilization failure is not merely analytically wrong; it is practically counterproductive, risking the addition of further demands to already over-burdened communities, thereby

deepening the very fatigue that drives the disengagement it seeks to remedy.

Survey data further revealed that selective participation was more prevalent among participants with higher education levels ($r = .38, p < .001$) and longer engagement histories ($r = .44, p < .001$), suggesting that the capacity for strategic agency in the face of participation demands is itself unequally distributed with less-educated and more recently engaged community members more likely to comply passively with all demands or withdraw entirely. This distributional dimension of selective agency adds a further layer of analytical complexity to the construct of participation fatigue and has direct implications for how development organizations should interpret and respond to varying patterns of non-attendance.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study bring into sharp analytical focus a fundamental and consequential tension embedded within contemporary participatory development theory and practice: the contradiction between participation's status as a universally prescribed mechanism for community empowerment and improved development outcomes on the one hand, and the accumulated empirical evidence from 345 participants across 29 wards that the cumulative experience of repeated, fragmented, uncoordinated, and inadequately followed-through engagement demands produces effects directly and systematically antithetical to those stated objectives on the other.

5.1. Mapping Findings Against the Conceptual Framework

The five empirical themes collectively provide strong and mutually reinforcing support for the conceptual framework proposed in Section 2.4. Structural conditions of engagement overload generated by the convergence of excessive frequency, weak inter-actor coordination, unequal burden distribution, and inadequate feedback — produce participation fatigue as a mediating condition (Themes 1 and 2) that degrades the quality, authenticity, and developmental value of community engagement (Theme 4). This mediating condition is not a simple, uniform, or static state but a dynamic and socially differentiated process that manifests differently across individuals and groups depending on social position, livelihood context, and accumulated history of participatory experience (Theme 3). The threshold effects posited in the framework points beyond which additional demands become counterproductive are evidenced both in the survey correlation between participation burden and trust decline ($r = -.52$) and in the qualitative accounts of experienced activists who described crossing identifiable thresholds of disillusionment (Themes 2 and 5). Theme 5, meanwhile, empirically substantiates the framework's feedback loop: strategic withdrawal, once enacted, reduces the quality of subsequent community inputs, thereby further degrading development outcomes and reinforcing the conditions that generated fatigue in the first instance.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

The finding that participation is experienced as exploitative and unremunerated labor extends the canonical critique articulated by Cooke and Kothari (2001) and elaborated by Cornwall and Coelho (2022). Existing critiques have focused principally on the political and epistemological dimensions of participatory failure: elite capture, legitimation of predetermined agendas, marginalization of subaltern voices. The present study adds a temporal and accumulative dimension: it is not merely that individual participatory processes may be designed badly or deployed manipulatively, but that the successive accumulation of such processes over time generates a distinctive qualitative form of fatigue that becomes an autonomous barrier to effective engagement, persisting even when subsequent processes are better designed. This analytical contribution is made possible precisely by the longitudinal character of the participation burden measure and the cross-ward breadth of the 345-participant sample.

The differentiation of participation fatigue from consultation fatigue, civic disengagement, and volunteer burnout developed in Section 2.2 is empirically substantiated by the findings. The multi-actor structural driver (Theme 1), the temporal accumulation dynamic (Theme 2), the structural distribution dimension (Theme 3), and the rational agency dimension (Theme 5) together constitute a construct profile that cannot be adequately captured by any of the adjacent frameworks. This theoretical specificity is the foundation of the study's contribution to scholarship: not merely the documentation of a problem, but its precise theoretical characterization as a groundwork for future comparative and intervention research.

The reconceptualization of participatory capacity as a finite and socially embedded resource also receives empirical support. The significant negative correlation between participation frequency and institutional trust ($r = -.52$), and between participation burden and engagement quality ($r = -.61$), is consistent with a resource depletion model: as demands on participatory capacity increase beyond sustainable levels, the resource degrades and its productive outputs diminish. The gendered distribution of burden across wards (Theme 3) is consistent with the resource framework's prediction that participatory capacity is unevenly distributed in ways that reflect and reproduce pre-existing structural inequalities.

5.3. Contextual Grounding in Korogwe District and Tanzania

The findings are rooted in and shaped by the specific governance ecology of Korogwe District, where the institutional legacy of Tanzania's decentralization-by-devolution reforms has created layered participatory obligations at village, ward, and district levels simultaneously, and where a dense and growing NGO sector generates participation demands that are structurally independent of government planning cycles (Cooksey and Kjær, 2022; URT, 2022). The ward-level variation in participation fatigue indicators particularly the higher burden and lower trust scores observed in wards with high NGO activity density such as Mgwashi, Kwashemshi, and Dindira compared to lower-activity wards such as Mlungui, Mpale, and Kizara provides within-district empirical support for the conceptual framework's identification of actor multiplicity and weak coordination as primary structural drivers. This contextual specificity both strengthens the empirical grounding of the study and defines its transferability: the findings are most directly applicable to comparable districts in Tanzania and the East African region characterized by similar

institutional densities and livelihood structures.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined, with empirical rigor and conceptual depth, how conditions of repeated and poorly coordinated participation demand shape the lived experiences of 345 community members across 29 wards of Korogwe District, Tanzania, and how these conditions influence the effectiveness and sustainability of development outcomes. The findings converge on a central implication: participation, far from constituting a costless or inherently empowering process, can become under conditions of overload, fragmentation, and inadequate institutional responsiveness a source of burden, exploitation, and demoralization that systematically undermines the objectives it is ostensibly designed to serve.

The conceptual contribution of introducing participation fatigue as an analytically grounded construct, explicitly differentiated from consultation fatigue, civic disengagement, and volunteer burnout, and of reconceptualizing participatory capacity as a finite and socially embedded resource subject to depletion and unequal distribution, enables a more honest and productive engagement with the limitations and unintended consequences of participatory development as actually practiced. These conceptual moves challenge the assumption embedded in much development policy that more participation is always better than less, and they redirect analytical attention towards questions of engagement quality, institutional accountability, coordination, and equity that are more consequential for development effectiveness than aggregate participation rates.

The practical implications are substantial. Development actors in Korogwe District and comparable contexts should undertake a deliberate reorientation of engagement strategies away from maximizing the quantity and coverage of community participation, towards improving its quality, coordination, and accountability. In concrete terms, this requires: the establishment of robust inter-agency coordination mechanisms to harmonize and rationalize cumulative participation demands across all development actors operating within a given ward; the development and consistent implementation of accountability mechanisms ensuring communities receive substantive, timely feedback on how their contributions have informed actual decisions; the adoption of participatory scheduling practices genuinely attentive to community livelihood cycles and gendered time constraints; and a shift in performance metrics from input-focused measures such as attendance numbers towards outcome-focused measures such as engagement quality, community satisfaction with feedback, and the tangible influence of community input on program design.

This study has several limitations. The cross-sectional survey design limits causal inference, and the absence of longitudinal data means that the temporal dimension of fatigue accumulation while theorized and evidenced qualitatively cannot be fully demonstrated quantitatively. The restriction of the qualitative sub-sample to eight of twenty-nine wards, while reflecting principled analytical choices, means that ward-level depth is uneven across the district. Future research should employ longitudinal designs capable of tracing the development and consequences of participation fatigue over extended periods, and should develop comparative analyses across different national contexts, governance arrangements, and types of development intervention. Although grounded in the specific context of rural Tanzania, the concept of participation fatigue is likely to possess substantial analytical and practical relevance across the range of contexts in which participatory development approaches are implemented, and the scholarly community would benefit greatly from its systematic theoretical elaboration and empirical examination in those broader settings.

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