

Residents' Contribution towards Improving Physical Quality of Neighborhood Open Spaces in Multi-cultural Community of Nigeria

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Abstract – *The residents' contributions towards uplifting the status of neighbourhood open space such as Oja through diverse mechanisms is paramount. There have been challenges encountered by the planners, landscape architects and allied professionals towards improving the physical quality of Oja in recent time. Plethora of relevant literatures revealed persistence advocacy necessary to improve the physical quality of Oja in diverse forms. However, fewer studies have attempted to explore the residents' contributions to its improvement through community efforts initiatives in South-west region of Nigeria. Consequently, this research explored the factors responsible to improvement on the physical quality of Oja through residents' collective opinion efforts. The qualitative method was adopted for the study through focus group interview comprising thirty-five (n=35) Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba participants. The decision extracts from the deliberations were analysed using content analysis and QSR (10) Nvivo software. Research findings revealed that Oja physical quality could be improved upon through residents' opinions and views as supportive mechanisms to government initiative drives. This research suggests joint collaboration efforts between governments; stake holders and community residents towards improvement of Oja. It is therefore recommended that residents' participation and opinions in decision making concerning Oja could further enhance the physical condition towards higher satisfaction in Nigeria. Copyright © 2016 Penerbit Akademia Baru - All rights reserved.*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Neighbourhood is coined as areas encompassing resident's key nodes of activity. Its paramount function is to link the physical and social dimensions of shared and liveable spaces [1]. Neighbourhood encompasses resident's dwellings and permits their social interactions [2]. Similarly, the basic elements of neighbourhood comprises of residents, place, interaction system, shared identification and public symbols [3]. In a related development, neighbourhood comprises of residents' population that form interaction network of formal and informal social ties expressing common identification [4]. It should be noted that neighbourhoods are

permeated in diversity, civic life and social interaction. Open space is simply referred to all built up and physical environment found within the neighbourhood, which are of public value, and freely accessible by the residents [5,6,7]. Similarly, [8] refers to public open space as a common ground where people carry out various functional activities either on daily routines basis or periodically. Therefore, it is a contested arena that favoured public activities, accessibility, meetings, interactions and engagement. Open space includes streets, squares and urban green spaces, which are open and accessible to everyone. Similarly, they are places that create community identity, foster social interaction and improve community sustainability. The three traditional functions of public space are (i) meeting place, (ii) market place, and (iii) connection space. [9], reinstated that place values intertwine with both the physical and social environment. Implications according to [10] that place meanings showcase human experiences, physical dimensions, social relations, and symbolic meanings.

The definitions of public space are in three folds, namely, ownership, accessibility and inter-subjectivity which encapsulate various encounters and interactions within the open space [11]. Similarly, [12] buttressed this to include functions and perceptions, while [11] identified accessibility, inclusion, and tolerance of difference as core dimensions. Earlier research work of [6] and [13] substantiated three dimensions of place as: (i) access to place as well as the activities provided, (ii) agency, in terms of control and decision-making, and (iii) interest, targeting beneficiaries of actions and decisions impacted on a place. Typology of open space ranges in size, benefits derived facilities and amenities. The typology includes (i) Green space, parks and playgrounds which offers social and physical benefits to communities [14, 15], (ii) Water environment such as rivers, canals, lakes and reservoirs, which offer important opportunities for sport and recreation [7], (iii) Neighbourhood open space (NOS) includes streets, squares or plazas and green spaces, which are open and accessible to everyone with the primary functions as meeting place, market place and connection place.

Examination of NOS is in various perspectives, as have been studied by scholars such as, [16, 17, 18, 19, 20]. Likewise, accessibility to green spaces has equally been studied by [21, 22, 23] and access to open spaces [19, 24]. The need for the examinations of the physical quality conditions of NOS could not be overemphasized as a result of its immense benefits, roles played in the life of the users. [6] Also reinstated the positive contribution of NOS to the quality of life of its users. According to [25, 26], NOS directly or indirectly influences the quality of life and well-being of its users through adequate provision of amenities, facilities, social and cultural services. In affirmation, hosts of literatures have established that NOS forms parts of the rural environment organs [27,28]. Other benefits include provision of a venue for people to socialise, interact, and gather; which therefore contributes to social inclusion and community social capital [29, 30]. Parts of the social benefits derived according to [31] are increase in community pride, place for social interactions, reduction in crime, enhancement of cultural diversity, and strengthened neighbourhood involvement. Other benefits derived from NOS usage range from physical and health benefits. Researchers such as [32, 33, 34, 35], have stressed the significant of NOS to the physical environment and quality of life of residents. Also, proximity to NOS is often regarded as a key principle for encouraging user's physical, mental, and social outcomes. Thus is capable of increasing the quality of life [21], and community cohesion [36]. NOS remain important assets to the community, as it serves as place enhance aesthetics experiences, permit formal and informal activities and contribute to residents' sense of place [37].

Aftermath of benefits derived from NOS, it becomes important to examine the present physical conditions. For the purposes of this research work, NOS is also known as *Oja* is a freely accessible interactive arena, which have received little attention in Nigerian neighbourhood environment. *Oja* is a spatial planning that housed people for effective distribution of their commodities and services [38]. Likewise, [39,40] coined *Oja* as a free arena, where goods and services are exchanged between individuals on demand and supply basis. The study of *Oja* could be in diverse perspective in terms of its size, mode physical quality, facilities for users and maintenance level [41]. Hence, the exploration of its physical quality in relation to the user's contribution towards its improvements to create a sustainable environment becomes useful to the professionals in terms of planning, design and management implications. The management and maintenance of NOS becomes important as reinstated by [5,6] and [16]. In line with this, [42] stressed the need for integration of public participation in open space activities. It was asserted that when residents' opinions, views, suggestions, and objectives are sought in plan making decisions through public meetings, it could contribute immensely to the execution and implementation of such plans [42].

Place attachments and meaning theories have been explored diverse ways of environmental and community psychology. This has helped in ascertain the importance of particular preferences, perceptions, and emotional connections to place with much desired attention to community social interrelationship, citizenship participations and community development. In view of this, the appropriateness of promoting joint collaborations between the government and the community residents is a panacea for improving the physical quality conditions of NOS in multicultural and diverse community. Thus, this fact needed to be recognized and understood by policymakers and allied professionals in the built environment.

2.0 ISSUES AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

It has been established that residents' involvement in community participation through opinions, suggestions and contribution could help improving physical quality and development of *Oja* as supported by [43,44]; and [45,46]. However, little efforts have been geared towards the involvements of resident's opinions towards improving the quality of the *Oja* in Nigeria. The contribution could be through implementation of policies formulation targeting maintenance and planning as supported by [47,48, 49]. In response to this, this study explores residents' diverse views and opinions aiming at suggesting an appropriate improvement mechanism towards a better planning of *Oja*. This view is in consonance with *Oja* physical management and planning considerations for the professionals in the built environment. The research findings ought to answer the following research questions. (i) Why are residents attached to the present location of *Oja*? (ii) Do they wish to be relocated to another area? (iii) Does the residents' opinions sought in decision making process as regards the management, planning and design of *Oja* residents concerning their satisfaction with the *Oja* physical conditions?

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Residents' usage and interactions within neighbourhood open space

The use of neighbourhood open space depends on two factors as identified by [50] as (i) attractiveness, (ii) proximity. Attractiveness is in term of NOS's features such as trees, water, and maintenance, while proximity relates to the distance of open space location to the residents' abode. Similarly, the residents' interaction within NOS defers and subsequently relied on socio-economic, gender, activities initiated, and facilities provided. According to [51] residents' involvement and interactions in NOS is capable of improving sense of belonging and neighbourhood attachment. The success of NOS design and planning is achieved while it is permits social interactions under a conducive atmosphere [52]. It was also established that the success of NOS design also relied on affordability of various activities by the users [52]. The pre-requisites for social interaction in NOS included familiarity, regular use, and endurance over time, cum available facilities which gives purpose and enhance social encounters as affirmed by [53]. According to [38] *Oja* remains a focal and important place for social interactions among ethnic groups in Nigeria. According to the author, it is regarded as an arena for social activities such as courtship, visits, dating, re-uniting friends, exchange of ideas and host of other recreational and commercial activities. In addition, it is a place for religious, cultural and traditional activities that associates with dancing and drumming. These three activities showcase the perception in terms of traditional, Islamic and Christian occurrences. Social encounters within the *Oja* signalled residents' positive perceptions which remain key element in residents' attachment and subsequent influence on desire to stay. Figure 1 indicates the frame work of interrelationships be-tween neighbourhood open space's utilization, interactions, and perception.

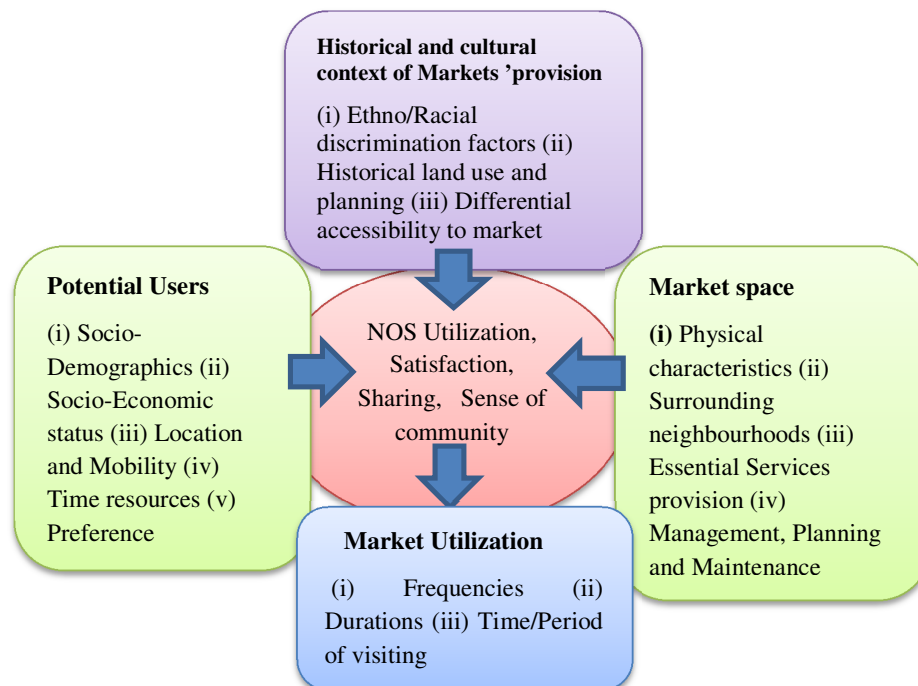


Figure 1: Frame work of interrelationship between neighbourhood open space's utilization, interactions, and perception.

3.2 Physical qualities of Neighbourhood open space

The Quality according to [54] is interpreted as standard of something and equally could be referred to as congruity to the usage. Thus, there is a dynamic interaction between the physical

quality condition of open space, and the users' lives. It has been revealed by literatures that the quality condition of environment could significantly impacts either positively or negatively on residents' expectations. According to [55], determining the criteria of good quality NOS is anchored on meeting residents' needs in consonance with their interactions and perceptual characteristics.

The principle of open space quality associates with aesthetics, safety, activities, conveniences, maintenance etcetera [56]. However, the qualities that make open space successful are character, continuity, enclosure, ease of movement, adaptability and diversity [57]. Appraisal in line with users' views vested upon individual perception and mode of engagement [58]. Likewise, the perceptual evaluations of open space physical quality could be explored in terms of the level of its permissible utilization characters and its appraisal focusing the maintenance, aesthetics, safety from traffic, and crime, as well as the availabilities of facilities among others. [59] buttressed that the utilization or mode of engagements of open spaces are the cogent indicators of the spatial quality. The Author further substantiated that; the status of the quality of outdoor spaces could impact on user's needs, users' satisfaction and effectiveness in usage. Successful NOS have four paramount qualities, namely (i) accessibility and activities (ii) suitability and comfort ability.(iii) management.

3.2.1. Accessibility and engagements to various activities

NOS could be explained by its connections adjoining surroundings in response to both visual and physical features. The open space should afford diverse activities without any form of limitation, restrictions and barriers. The open space should permits groups or individual usage tailored towards enhancement of social interactions. Provision of opportunity to meet friends, neighbours, and visitors corroborates residents' stronger sense of place and attachment to their community. [60] Reinstated the impact of quality of open space on the users 'activities. In furtherance to this, the activities in open space in three folds necessary activities, optional activities, and social activities [61,62]. The poor quality of open space restricts people activities, while a quality one encourages optional activities. An improvement in optional activities leads to improved social activities in this regard.

3.2.2. Suitability, comfort and identity

This hinged to residents or users' perceptions about security and safety, cleanliness and the interactive spaces where users could be seated, coupled with thermal, acoustic and visual comfort. This means that a place should be well protected from bad environmental conditions such as sun, wind and rain. All these culminated to open space's quality, planning and design features leading to the people attractiveness.

3.2.3. Management of open space

Management relates to proper monitoring of activities, security consciousness. In relation to this, [63] opined that the level of quality, design and management of open spaces could further enhance the quality of life of residents.

3.3 Citizenship participation in Open space planning, management and design formulation

Sociologists and community psychologists such as [64, 65] have expressed in clear terms the understanding of community development concepts such as citizenship participation. Studies have shown the importance of residents' opinions in the decision making process. For instance, [47] highlighted that most human-interaction studies reinstated the need for citizen to participate in the design process. The importance of citizen's participation helps achieving better designs capable of fostering community supports for open space. [66], buttressed how community-focused emotions, cognitions, and behaviours can impact community planning and developments. These initiations drives have been supported by numerous studies in developed countries, such as Great Britain, [67]; Brazil, [68]; Canada, [69]; Germany, [70]; Singapore, [71]; Netherlands, [35]; United State, [72,73]; and host of other countries. The studies provide evidences that planners, designers, and researchers are focusing and recognizing the necessity. Residents' opinions could be seen as ingredients relevant towards human needs cum, local culture, religion and history of a particular zone [47] buttressed. Active involvement of communities is paramount when taking decisions regarding their living environment [74]. In line with this, [75], asserted that involvement of communities in decision-making process accord them feeling of ownership and responsibility towards their environment. The utmost gain of this led to their improved quality of life. Studies on community-level place attachment have identified cogent behavioural implications, in which emotional bonds to place have relationships with community participation in planning and design efforts. Explicitly, ascribing meaning to certain place signified community participation in the design process, with aftermath of which result to preservation or redevelopment of such place by the designers.

4.0 STUDY AREA

The Ijebu-jesa, Ijeda and Iloko are ancient communities situated in Oriade local government of Osun state (figure 2 and figure 3), at the South-western part of Nigeria, in Africa. The population of the local government stands at about 148,379 (Year 2006 Nigerians census figure), with an average coverage area of about 465 square kilometres. Ijebu-jesa town is the local government headquarter, distant eight kilometres north of Ilesha and around 128 kilometres east of Ibadan, and lies approximately on latitude 7.45 degrees north within the rain forest zone. The town is encircling by two villages, Iloko-jesa and Ijeda towns among others. These two towns are located in the north eastern part of the highly mineralized Ilesa schist belt south western Nigeria; bounded by Latitudes 7°37'000"N and 7°41'100"N and Longitudes 4°43'500"E and 4°50'700"E [76]. The neighbourhood map showing different sections of the market areas are depicted in figure 4. However, the populations of the residents are presented in table 1.

5.0 METHODS AND ANALYSIS

'Focused' is a word that emanated from result of the involvement in specific group activity, targeting at gaining adequate understanding and explanation of people's opinions, beliefs and cultures [77]. A focus group according to [78] has remained a valuable tool that enables explorations of relationship between people and place. The focus group methods consist of a small number of grouped respondents deliberated on an issue presented by the researcher. This focus group discussion adopted in this study consists of a total number of thirty-five (35) participants out of which 16 were Yoruba participants, 10 were Ibo participants, and 9 number of Hausa participants. It is an interaction that involves fewer numbers of participants who are

vast in knowledge of the study context [78,79]. There were no standard sample sizes for qualitative research such as focus group discussion. Literature established that finding gotten from fewer numbers of participants will not invalidate the research outcome, as the major aim of the research is to obtain in-depth understanding of the research concept and not to represent a larger population [80]. Purposive sampling was adopted in the selection focus group participants in this study as supported by [81]. Participants were nominated through the market leaders, community heads and local government administration board in unbiased procedures, whose occupations varies from government employee to self-employed. Focus group discussion made up of four sessions in all, which was held on Saturday 27th September; 2014 at the community town hall.



Figure 2: Map of Africa continent showing Nigeria

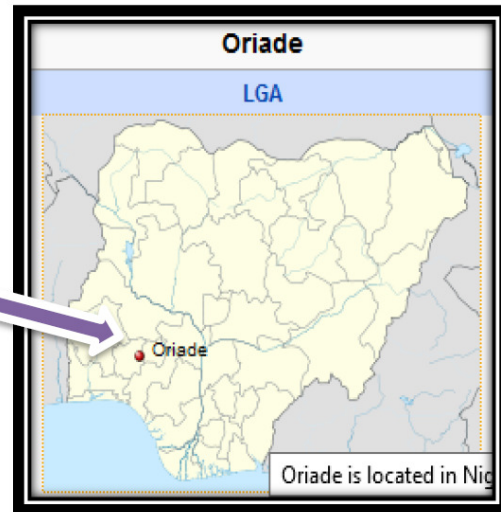


Figure 3: Map of Nigeria indicating the case study

Table 1: Year 2015 projected residents' populations for the case study towns

Locality	1991 Population	1996 Population	Projected	2015 Projected Population
Ijebu- Jesa	11,680	13,314		22,499
Iloko	1,987	2,265		3,827
Ijeda	3,119	3,555		6,007
Total	16,786	19,134		32,333

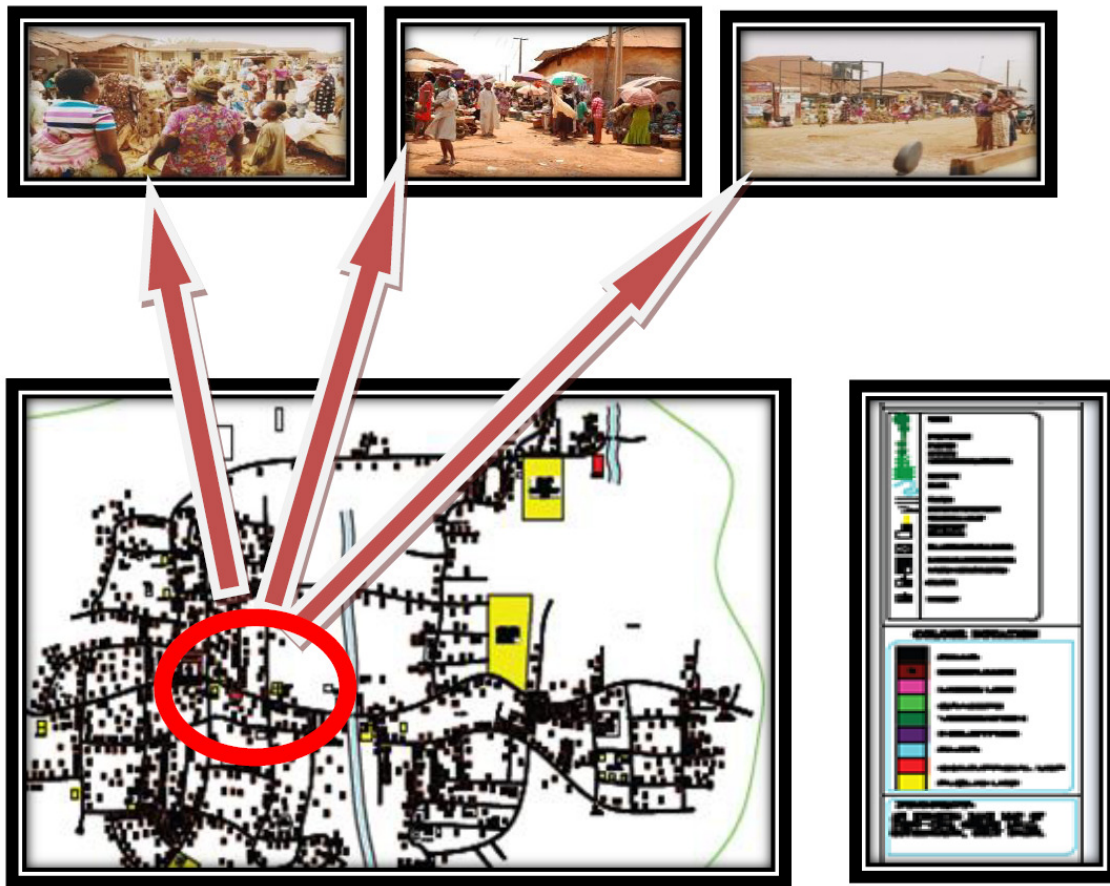


Figure 4: Area occupied by the *Oja* within the neighbourhood. Source: Researcher's field work (2015).

The groups' moderators that oversee the deliberations document each participant's responses, through notes and tape recorders to ensure accuracy [82]. The consensus decision extracts from each group and their tapes were retrieved and transcribed for research findings. Transcripts were coded and analysed by contents analysis and QSR N10 (Nvivo). Initially, was the development of coding tree, after which modifications were made, based on consensus participants' responses that were used for the subsequent transcript analysis. The coding trees identified the key themes and matched to the subjects. Thus, the themes comprises of the participants' appraisals of current state of *Oja's* physical conditions, participants' level of satisfaction with market square's conditions. Other themes include whether residents' opinion are sought and finally, participants' suggestions on how to improve the present conditions of *Oja*.

6.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Participants profile

Out of the 35 total numbers of participants, 20 (57.1%) were males and the female participants were 15 (42.9%) as revealed in figure 5. Participants that have been residing within around the

neighbourhood for between 1-3 years were 4 (11.4%), 4-6 years residents were 13 (37.1%). Those residing for 11 years and above were 11(31.4%) as indicated in figure 6. Similarly, figure 7 showed that the Yoruba ethnic participants made up of 16 (45.7%) participants, while Ibo ethnic participants comprised 10 (28.6%) of the participants. Meanwhile, the Hausa ethnic participants comprised of 9(25.7%) participants. Participants from Ijebu-jesa township were 18(51.4%), while those from Iloko town were 10 (28.6%), and Ijeda town were 7(20%) as depicted in figure 8. Participants whose age categories fell between 12-18 years old were 9 (25.7%), while those aged between 19-29 years were 9 (25.7%), and 30-59 years old were 17 (48.6%) as reflected in figure 9. Participants with no formal education were 10(23%), those with high school background were (9) 23%, while holders of post graduate degree and above stood at 8 (26%) as indicated in figure 10.

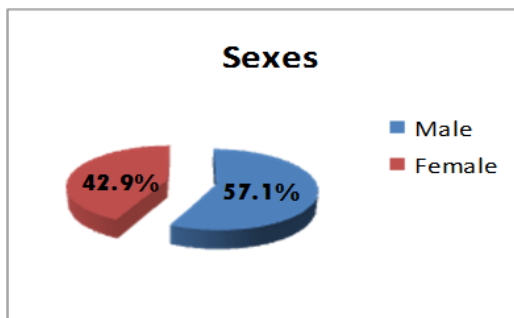


Figure 5: Participant's Sexes

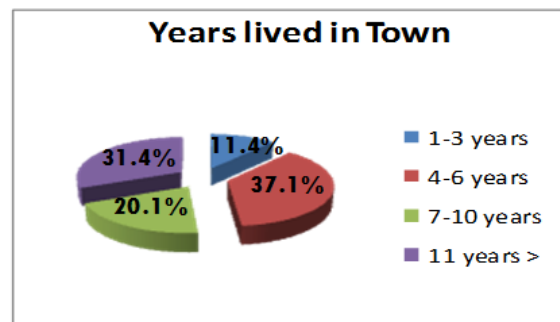


Figure 6: Years participants lived in Town

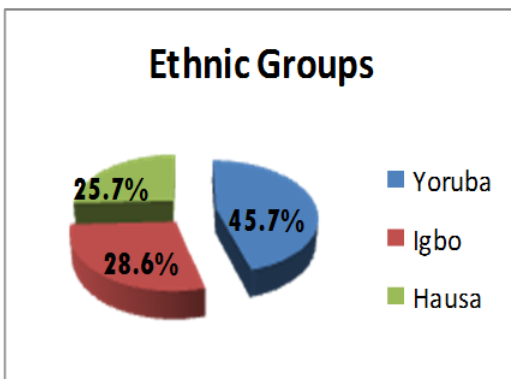


Figure 7: Participants' Ethnic background

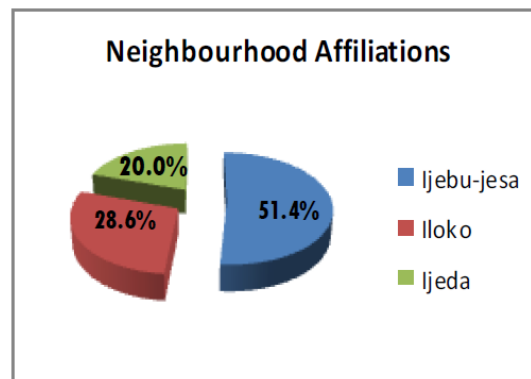


Figure 8: Participant's neighbourhood affiliations

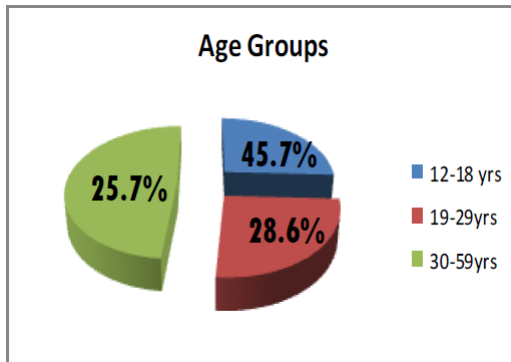


Figure 9: Participants' Age groups

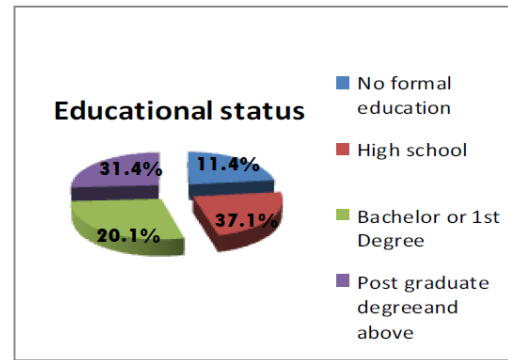


Figure 10: Participants educational status

6.2 Qualitative Findings: Focus Group Consensus Decision Extract

Findings were based on themes emerged from the focus group transcription and presented in table 2.

Table 2: Summary of findings extracted from focus group decision extract of the sessions

Research Questions	Main theme	General consensus decisions	Findings /Domain Recommendation
RQ(1) Residents' attachment to Oja, and their willingness to be relocated	Physical and social attachment	Not willing to be relocated	Long habitation, cultural and traditional affiliations (performance of spiritual rites)
RQ2. Residents' opinions in decision making towards improving the quality condition of neighbourhood market square.	Residents' opinion in decision making	Non-inclusion of residents' opinion, views and suggestions in decision making process at various stages of open space planning has not been practising	There is need to inculcate residents' opinion, views and suggestions in decision making process through policy formulation

Source: Author's compilation, 2015

6.2.1 Theme one: Residents' attachment to the present location of Oja. And do they wish to be relocated somewhere else?

At first instance participants relate their social and physical attachment to the present location of *Oja* due to its long period of existence (almost 100 years). This attest to the fact that *Oja* was inherited from their forefathers. Therefore the ownership of most of the stalls was transferred from their lineage. Secondly, the attachment was attributed to the easy location and accessibility by the residents. The location of *Oja* is at close proximity to the residents' abode, which therefore enhanced their accessibility. The third factor revealed the socio-economic and psychological services benefited from the usage. As a result of all the aforementioned users preferred re-planning of the *Oja*, rather than been re-located elsewhere.

Yoruba focus group participant's consensus extract read thus: *"We have been transacting our businesses in this Oja for long period of years. It is almost running to almost 100 years now. We earn our daily livings from the gains gotten from transacting in various businesses from the Oja. This present location is easily accessible to everybody. Therefore we prefer re-planning of Oja rather than relocated us to another place."*

The Ibo participants' consensus read thus: *"This is the only place that met on ground which has been used as trading centers for trading. We have been selling our goods here for long periods of time now. There is no other place known to us for this purpose .of trading. Government should "re-plan" and "re-organize the market for us, we won't like taking us to another place. Our customers may not be willing to come there. This place is closer to every resident."*

The Hausa participants' consensus read thus: *"This is the only place where we can sell our goods to the customer. There is no other place provided to sell our goods. We have been occupying this place for long time now. It is very easy to locate and it is at the centre of the town. Government should "re-plan" and "re-organize the market for us. Moving us away to another place would not be good for us. Our customers may not be willing to come to the new place, they are used to us here"*.

Long existence of the *Oja* since the pre-colonial periods; easy accessibility by all shoppers and sellers for socio-economic reasons and mutual social interaction culminated to affections and sense of attachments. This affirmed diverse literatures findings that residents established bonding or rootedness to a long existence place [83,84]. Attachment according to [85] is pitched on residents' satisfaction and experience of stability within the domain. Users and shoppers are not willing to be relocated, rather preferred the present *Oja* to be improved upon.

6.2.2. Theme two: Residents' opinion in decision making process

The participants were sought if they have ever been involved or heard situation where residents individual or groups get involved in policies regarding to improvements on the planning, design and quality of *Oja*.

Yoruba focus group participant's consensus extract read thus: *"There is market development committee set up by the "oba" and headed by a traditional chief. The committee renders a voluntary service and ensuring an improvement in market conditions.....they maintain decorum*

within the market often time.....in spite of this, they have not been invited for any formulation or implementation of government policies as regards the Oja or community at large. We would like if government could endeavour to seek for our consent in this regard as we learnt it is been done in other countries”

Hausa focus group participant’s consensus extract refers: *“We have not been invited either as individual or as a group to any community development meeting.....we would like the initiatives in future.”*

The Igbo participants’ consensus read thus: *“Every sellers and stalls owner paid compulsory market dues at every market days to the local government revenue board....this we believed is our contribution to the development of the market...but own opinion have never been sought on the decision making as regards the market management and policies.*

Resident’s opinion, suggestion and contribution in decision making in open space planning, design, management and physical developments of their areas have not been in practise. The idea if adopted will help resolving the challenges associated with open space and community as supported by [48,49] and [86,87]. Community residents’ opinion in formulation and implementation of policies such as neighbourhood maintenance, planning etcetera is vital and should not be underrated as equally supported by [84,88]. Similarly, [47] affirms that involving local groups in planning process most importantly at early stage valuable, which can also lead to outcomes that respect the local culture, religion, or history of the community as well.

7.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

There is need for integration of residents’ participation and opinion in open space planning and activities. Findings revealed that resident’s opinion, views, and suggestions in decision making process at various stages of open space planning will go a long way at resolving the planning of *Oja* in Nigeria in affirmation to the suggestion by [42]. The desire to improve the quality of life of residents in *Oja* should be the priority of the planners and other professionals in the built environment as supported by [18, 89]. Thus the residents’ potential contributions, developments, motivations, and opinions towards the improvement of the physical quality conditions of the market square remain paramount. Residents’ opinion in decision process towards the design and quality of open spaces can promote appropriate utilization and activities initiated.

Appropriate policy formulation in this regard is necessary. Other strategy proposed in this study to improve the physical quality of *Oja* include; embarking on community self-help programs, government intervention, and provision for redevelopment program, creation of management committees that would see to the maintenance and sustainability of the amenities, facilities and utilities within the *Oja*. [86,87] pitched tent with this assertion that community residents should be allowed to participate and take ownership of initiatives in their neighbourhood. In the same vain, [49] reinstated the view that community member’s holds potential to genuinely influence the decision-making process of community initiatives. Residents’ (men and women, community organizations, voluntary groups, market women organizations etcetera) have significant roles to play on the issues that concern the *Oja*. The research recommends that the onus lies on policy makers, landscape designers and other allied professionals in built environment towards effective creation of *Oja* for communal usage.

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