

ANALYZING THE INTERCONNECTED DYNAMICS OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS STRATEGIES AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

MARCELLUS IZUEGBU EKWEZUO

Department of Marketing, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus, Nigeria.
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7565-6089>

SHEDRACK C. MOGULUWA

Department of Marketing, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus, Nigeria.

JANE NWAKAEGO ANENE *

Department of Marketing, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus, Nigeria.
*Corresponding Author Email: joy.chris-nnamchi@unn.edu.ng,
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0725-3042>

ACHI DAVID ACHI

Department of Marketing, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus, Nigeria.
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3404-1113>

CHARLES EZE OBETA

Department of Marketing, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus, Nigeria.

Abstract

The focus of this study was to investigate the relationship between rural development and community relations strategies in south-east Nigeria. The purpose was to determine how the availability of improved healthcare infrastructure affects rural communities to access it, as well as how events sponsorship affects the cultural advancement of the ground host community. The study, which focused on the south-east Nigerian states of Abia, Enugu, and Imo, used a survey research design. A purposive sample technique was used to select 400 individuals. Cronbach Alpha was used to verify the reliability of the tool after a pilot survey was used to collect data. Regression was used to test hypotheses as part of the data analysis process, which also included descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings showed that access to better healthcare was positively and significantly impacted by the availability of health infrastructure. Furthermore, it was found that the focus on corporate event sponsorship significantly helps in the cultural advancement of rural communities. The study came to the conclusion that the interaction between corporate entities and rural development significantly shapes the socioeconomic structure of the area. Among the recommendations was a call for companies to make investments in all-encompassing health infrastructure in order to improve access to healthcare in rural areas. In addition, companies hoping to foster cultural development in rural areas were encouraged to actively support and take part in community events.

Keywords: Cultural Development, Events Sponsorship, Health Infrastructure, Rural Development, Community Relations Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In today's global scenario, organizations actively seek favorable, peaceful, and amicable environments for their operations (Hugh & Nowaczyk, 2022). The positive interactions a company has with host communities play a crucial role in determining its preference for locations where its positive impact is acknowledged (Shiwank, 2020). However, the dynamic nature of human behavior and environmental factors presents challenges to maintaining stable relationships between organizations and their host communities (Asemah, 2015). To address these uncertainties, it becomes imperative to establish a reliable system that enhances the interaction and relationship between companies and their host communities, ensuring sustained success.

Ngwu et al. (2020) emphasize community relations (CR) as a vital mechanism for improving a company's relationship with the host community. CR involves an organization's deliberate and continuous engagement within a community, benefiting both the community and the company (Moore, 2015). Recognized as a long-term survival strategy, CR extends beyond mere profit maximization, fostering mutually beneficial relationships and portraying the company as a responsible corporate neighbor (Googins, 1997). The well-being of a company is intricately linked to the well-being of its host community (Adekunle et al., 2019). Building and sustaining relationships through CR entail networking with community leaders, organizations, government officials, and other relevant entities (Kim et al., 2020). Strategic networking with community leaders is integral to initiatives such as providing health infrastructure, sponsoring events for cultural development, and constructing access roads to rural communities.

CR strategies, as elucidated by Adeyanju (2012), serve as tools to address community concerns, potentially unlocking larger markets, reducing regulations, and providing a competitive advantage. Importantly, CR strategies are anticipated to result in the community gaining access to improved healthcare, the cultural development of rural areas, and enhanced food production. CR practices contribute to a company being acknowledged as a responsible community citizen through support programs that enhance the quality of life in the ground host community.

Focusing on the states in the South East of Nigeria, this study underscores the significance of companies operating in various communities engaging in CR projects that address developmental needs. Community relations projects of some companies in South East Nigeria appear to be visible. Notwithstanding, their existence over time, the visibility of most of their community relations programmes relative to specific measurable indices of rural development has not been subjected to scholarly investigation with respect to provision of health infrastructure and events sponsorship all of which are essential elements of rural community development. This absence creates a huge gap in the literature, requiring therefore an empirical study to fill. Consequently, this present study centers on examining the impact of community relations strategies on rural development in South East Nigeria.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Relations

Community relations (CR) is a purposeful and strategic method for overseeing an organization's interactions and connections with the ground host communities. It entails intentional, well-planned, and continuous initiatives aimed at establishing and maintaining a shared understanding between the organization and the impacted host communities. The ultimate objective of CR is to nurture and sustain mutually beneficial partnerships with ground host community that contribute to the organization's sustainability across social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Dimitrova, 2014). Organizations pursue their CR goals through a range of activities and initiatives designed to foster enduring and mutually beneficial relationships with the communities in their operational sphere (Adeyanju, 2012).

CR functions as a strategic approach for organizations to facilitate rural development (German et al., 2016). It involves conscientiously utilizing initiatives, programs, and collaborative efforts to positively influence the well-being and progress of rural areas where the organization operates. Through CR strategies, organizations actively engage with local communities, address their specific needs and challenges, stimulate economic growth, enhance infrastructure, and support various social and environmental initiatives (Kim et al., 2020). Ultimately, these endeavors aim to establish a sustainable and mutually beneficial partnership between the organization and rural communities, leading to improved living conditions, increased opportunities, and overall advancement in these areas.

A sustainable CR program can also serve as a multifaceted strategic asset for an organization. Proactively nurturing positive relationships with the host communities in which it operates enables the organization to garner several significant benefits (Kuo & Hou, 2017). Meaningful and sustainable engagement with host community fosters goodwill and trust. This positive perception can translate into greater community support for the organization's activities. Host communities are more likely to embrace and collaborate with a company that demonstrates a commitment to their well-being through initiatives such as the provision of health infrastructure and community development. CR activities often lay the foundation for the development of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, reflecting a company's ethical and responsible behavior towards society. This encompasses its commitment to address and manage its impact on various stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, the environment, and society at large (Angela et al., 2021; Sanclemente-Télez, 2017).

Rural Community Development

Rural Community Development involves a purposeful and strategic process that includes targeted efforts, initiatives, and interventions aimed at improving the overall quality of life, social well-being, and sustainability of rural communities. It encompasses a diverse range of activities designed to address the unique challenges and opportunities faced by rural

areas, with the overarching goal of empowering local residents, enhancing infrastructure, and fostering resilience within the community. The ultimate objective is to nurture stronger, more vibrant, and self-sufficient rural communities that thrive socially, economically, and environmentally (Ukah et al., 2012).

The concept of Rural Community Development is both comprehensive and holistic, focusing on enhancing the quality of life and economic well-being of rural inhabitants. It underscores the importance of rural residents acquiring self-help skills, gaining access to quality education, improving healthcare, and actively participating in community development initiatives. The interconnection between rural dwellers' acquisition of self-help skills and the broader goals of Rural Community Development is a pivotal aspect of our perspective on this matter (Malatji, 2020; Odoom, 2021).

Community relations and Rural Community Development

Community Relations (CR) involves intentional endeavors by companies to strengthen their engagement with host communities, fostering mutual understanding, trust, and support (Kemp & Owen, 2013). It is a crucial aspect of effective organizational functioning, establishing mutually beneficial relationships with host communities. Described as various methods to initiate and sustain these relationships, CR is conceptualized as an organization's deliberate actions to gain visibility as a responsible community member (Burke, 1999). CR entails purposeful communication efforts and programs aimed at maintaining enduring and beneficial relationships with host communities (Durán-Díaz et al., 2020). When considered as an institution's planned and active involvement within a community, CR suggests that a company, by embracing civic responsibility and acting in the community's best interest, earns loyalty and goodwill.

CR initiatives may encompass health and safety promotions, events sponsorship, and the provision of access roads to rural communities, among other activities. These endeavors often contribute to rural community development (Adekunle, et al., 2019). The establishment of health infrastructure in rural areas is seen to have a significant impact on access to improved healthcare. When companies invest in creating healthcare facilities, it not only enhances the overall health and well-being of community members but also ensures convenient access to medical services (Germack et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2020). This initiative plays a role in preventing, diagnosing, and treating illnesses, ultimately raising the quality of life in rural areas.

Sponsoring events in rural communities is instrumental in fostering cultural development. Such sponsorships provide financial support for cultural events, festivals, and activities that celebrate the community's traditions and heritage. This not only preserves cultural identity but also stimulates community pride and cohesion. By supporting these events, companies contribute to the preservation and promotion of diverse cultural practices, enriching the social fabrics of the rural community.

The provision of access roads to rural communities has a direct and positive impact on food production. Improved transportation infrastructure facilitates the movement of agricultural products to markets, reducing post-harvest losses and increasing the efficiency of the agricultural supply chain (Anand & Barua, 2022; Clark & Hobbs, 2018; Filho & Péra, 2018).

Farmers in rural areas benefit from easier access to inputs, equipment, and markets, leading to increased productivity. Access roads also enable the expansion of agricultural activities, promoting economic growth and food security in the community.

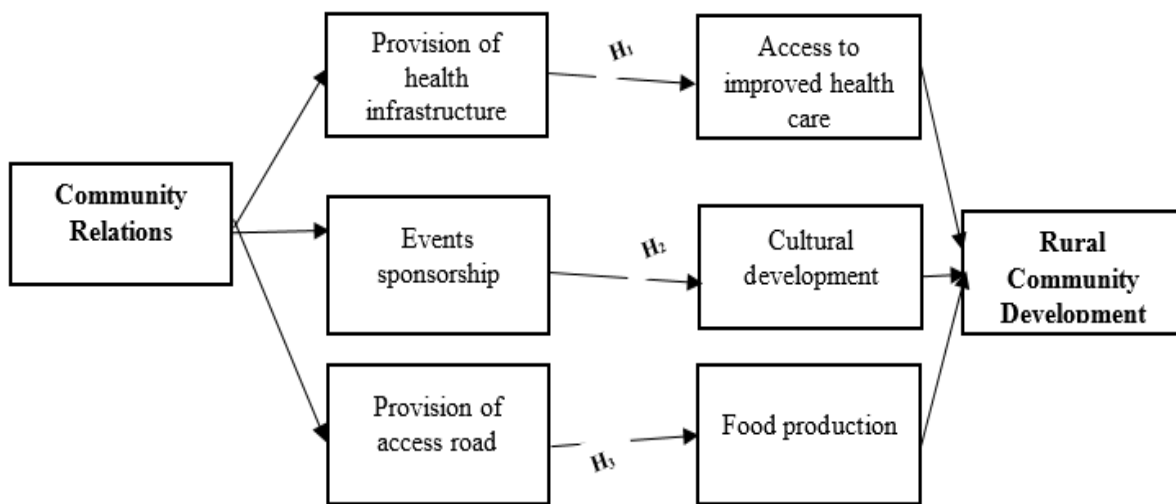


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a survey research technique as its adopted research design, characterized as a descriptive method (Etuk, 2010). The survey research design functions as a blueprint for systematic data collection, measurement, and analysis (Etuk, 2010; Kang, 2018).

The geographical scope of the study encompasses Abia, Enugu, and Imo States in South East Nigeria. These states were chosen due to the presence of functional production plants of many companies, making them key host communities for the study. Purposive sampling was utilized, with 400 participants selected for inclusion in the study.

The validation of the research instrument involved content validity, where copies of the instrument were provided to research experts for correction, suggestions, and modifications. The inputs from these experts were crucial in refining and producing a validated instrument.

To ensure the reliability of the instrument, the researcher conducted a pilot survey. Data generated from the pilot survey underwent reliability analysis using Cronbach Alpha, with the aim of ensuring the reliability of the scales used in measuring the investigated concept.

The results, as presented in Table 1, demonstrate the reliability of all variables, given that the alphas exceed 0.70. Data analyses encompassed both descriptive and inferential statistics. Regression analysis was employed for testing hypotheses in the study's research framework.

Table 1: Reliability of Instrument

S/N	Variables	No. of Items	Results
1	Provision of health infrastructure	4	0.793
2	Events sponsorship	4	0.720
3	Provision of access road	4	0.711
4	Access to improved health care	4	0.812
5	Cultural development	4	0.719
6	Food production	4	0.728

Source: Field Survey (2023)

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Four hundred (400) survey questionnaires were disseminated to the participants.

Table 2: Questionnaire distribution, response rate/return and usage

Category of respondents	Number distributed	Number returned /Response rate	Number not returned	Number used
Kings	80	77	3	77
Town union executives	150	144	6	144
Youth leaders	100	95	5	95
Women leaders	65	60	5	60
TOTAL	395	376(94%)	19(6%)	376 (94%)

Source: *Data obtained from field survey*

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of 395 survey questionnaires across the four states in South East Nigeria, with an uneven allocation among the four respondent categories. Out of the 80 questionnaires assigned to kings of autonomous communities, 77 were completed and returned, while 3 were not returned.

For town union executives of autonomous communities, 144 out of 150 administered questionnaires were properly filled and returned, with six not returned. The youth leaders wing of the town union received 100 questionnaires, and 95 were completed and returned, while five were not. Women leaders were given 65 questionnaires, and 60 were returned, with five not returned. In total, 19 copies, equivalent to 4.8%, were not returned.

Table 3: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Demographic Variables	Items	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	216	57.4
	Female	160	42.6
	TOTAL	376	100
Age	20-30years	59	15.7
	31-40 years	103	27.4
	41-50 years	112	29.8
	51 & above years	102	27.1
	TOTAL	376	100
Educational qualification	SSCE/NECO	88	23.4
	Diploma	78	20.7
	Degree/HND	124	33
	Master's degree &above	86	22.9
	TOTAL	376	100
Existence of community relations (CR) projects	Yes	283	75.3
	No	93	24.7
	TOTAL	376	100
Duration of CR project Implementation	Once every 2years	79	21
	Twice a year	112	29.8
	Once every 2quarters	122	32.4
	Once every year	63	16.8
	TOTAL	376	100

Source: Field survey (2023)

Table 3 illustrates the breakdown of respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, including gender, age, educational qualification, the presence of community relations projects, and the duration of CR project implementation. Out of the 376 respondents, 57.4% (216) are male, while 42.6% or 160 respondents are female. Regarding age distribution, 112 respondents (29.8%) fall within the 41-50 years' category, 103 (27.4%) are aged between 31-40 years, and 27.1% or 102 respondents are 51 years and above. The remaining 59 (15.7%) respondents are between 20-30 years old.

Educational qualification data indicates that 124 respondents (33%) hold a first degree/HND, 88 (23.4%) possess a Senior Secondary Certificate (SSC) or its equivalent, National Examination Council (NECO). Seventy-eight respondents (20.7%) hold Diploma certificates, while 86 (22.9%) respondents have master's degrees and other higher degrees. Table 4.2 also reveals that 283 respondents (75.3%) affirmed the existence of NB Plc's community relations project implementation in their host communities, while 93 (24.7%) answered in the negative. Regarding the duration of implementation, 122 respondents (32.4%) believed that NB Plc implements its CR projects once every two quarters, 112 (29.8%) believed the company implements CR projects twice a year. Seventy-nine respondents (21%) stated that the company implements its CR projects once every two years, while 63 (16.8%) respondents mentioned that the company implements its CR projects once every year.

Table 4: Regression result on provision of health infrastructure and access to improved health care

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	0.9909	0.1306	7.5887	0.000
PHI	0.7421	0.0340	21.7987	0.000
R-squared	0.5441	Mean dependent var		3.7275
Adjusted R-squared	0.5431	S.D. dependent var		1.0635
S.E. of regression	0.7189	Akaike info criterion		2.1828
Sum squared resid	205.7034	Schwarz criterion		2.2028
Log likelihood	-434.5695	Hannan-Quinn criter.		2.1908
F-statistic	475.1816	Durbin-Watson stat		1.5134
Prob(F-statistic)	0.0000			

Source: Field survey (2023)

Note: PHI- Provision of health infrastructure (independent variable); AIH- Access to improved health care (dependent variable); μ = Stochastic Error Term

$$ModelLine : AIH_{it} = \beta_{0it} + \beta_{1it}PHI + \mu$$

$$Regression Line: AIH= 0.9909 + 0.7421PHI$$

The R2 value of 0.5442 within the regression model (presented in table 2) indicates that approximately 54.4% of the variability in access to improved health care is accounted for by the provision of health infrastructure in the model. The remaining 45.6% suggests that there are other factors contributing to the variations in access to improved health care. The F-statistic, measuring the overall significance of the model, is 475.1816. With a probability (Prob. (F-statistic) = 0.0000) approaching zero, it strongly suggests that the overall model is highly statistically significant, providing substantial evidence that the independent variable significantly relates to the dependent variable. The Durbin-Watson statistic, measuring autocorrelation in the residual, is 1.5134, indicating no issue of autocorrelation.

Table 2 presents the results of the regression analysis. The constant (C) in the regression model has a coefficient of 0.9909, indicating that when the independent variable is zero, the expected value of the dependent variable (access to improved health care) is predicted to be 0.9909. This constant serves as a baseline estimate, suggesting that even in the absence of other factors, there is an almost one-to-one relationship between the constant and the anticipated increase in access to improved health care. Regarding the variable "provision of health infrastructure," it has a coefficient of 0.7421 with a p-value less than 0.05. This implies that, while keeping all other variables constant, a one-unit increase in the provision of health infrastructure is associated with an average increase of 0.7421 units in access to improved health care. In practical terms, this suggests that the provision of health infrastructure has a positive and statistically significant effect on access to improved health care.

Table 5: Regression result on events sponsorship and cultural development of rural community

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	1.6998	0.1075	15.8131	0.0000
ESP	0.6254	0.0255	24.5572	0.0000
R-squared	0.6024	Mean dependent var		4.2375
Adjusted R-squared	0.6014	S.D. dependent var		0.9372
S.E. of regression	0.5917	Akaike info criterion		1.7932
Sum squared resid	139.3270	Schwarz criterion		1.8132
Log likelihood	-356.6473	Hannan-Quinn criter.		1.8011
F-statistic	603.0557	Durbin-Watson stat		1.5745
Prob(F-statistic)	0.0000			

Source: Field survey (2023)

Note: ESP - Events sponsorship (independent variable); CDC- Cultural development of rural community (dependent variable); μ = Stochastic Error Term

$$ModelLine : CDC_{it} = \beta_{0it} + \beta_{1it}ESP + \mu$$

$$Regression Line: CDC= 1.6998 + 0.6254ESP$$

The R2 value of 0.6024 (found in table 5) implies that approximately 60.24% of the variability in the cultural development of rural communities can be explained by events sponsorship in the model. The remaining 39.76% suggests that there are other factors contributing to the variations in the cultural development of rural communities. The elevated F-statistic of 603.0557 indicates that the model significantly explains more variability in the cultural development of rural communities than what is left unexplained. The Durbin-Watson statistic, with a value of 1.5745, indicates the absence of autocorrelation.

The results of the regression analysis in table 5 show that in the model, the constant term (C) is 1.6998, representing the expected value of the dependent variable (cultural development of rural communities) when the independent variable (events sponsorship) is set to zero.

Essentially, it establishes a baseline for the dependent variable in the absence of any influence from other factors. Additionally, the coefficient of "events sponsorship" is 0.6254 with a p-value less than 0.05. This coefficient signifies the expected change in the cultural development of rural communities for every one-unit change in events sponsorship. The p-value less than 0.05 suggests a significant positive association, indicating that as companies emphasize events sponsorship, there will be a substantial increase in the cultural development of rural communities.

Table 6: Regression result on provision of access road to rural community and food production

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	0.3979	0.1283	3.1004	0.0021
PAR	0.8776	0.0316	27.7364	0.0000
R-squared	0.6590	Mean dependent var		3.8250
Adjusted R-squared	0.6582	S.D. dependent var		1.1887
S.E. of regression	0.6949	Akaike info criterion		2.1150
Sum squared resid	192.2141	Schwarz criterion		2.1350
Log likelihood	-421.0044	Hannan-Quinn criter.		2.1229
F-statistic	769.3054	Durbin-Watson stat		2.0845
Prob(F-statistic)	0.0000			

Source: Field survey (2023)

Note: PAR - Provision of access road to rural community (independent variable); FPN- Food production (dependent variable); μ = Stochastic Error Term

$$ModelLine : FPN_{it} = \beta_{0it} + \beta_{1it}PAR + \mu$$

$$Regression Line: FPN= 0.3979 + 0.8776PAR$$

The regression analysis, as presented in table 6, examines the relationship between the provision of access roads to rural communities and food production. The R² value, standing at 0.6590, signifies that approximately 65.9% of the variance in food production can be explained by the provision of access roads to rural communities in the model. The remaining 34.1% suggests that other factors may also contribute to variations in food production. The F-statistic assesses the overall significance of the model, yielding a value of 769.3054, and with an extremely low p-value (0.0000), indicating that the model as a whole is statistically significant. The Durbin-Watson statistic, registering at 2.0845, tests for autocorrelation in the residuals, and a value close to 2 implies an absence of autocorrelation. The coefficient for the constant term (C) is 0.3979, representing the estimated effect on food production when other variables are zero. The coefficient for "provision of access road to rural community" is 0.8776 with a p-value less than 0.05. This indicates that, on average, for every unit increase in the provision of access roads, food production is expected to increase by 0.8776 units. The p-value less than 0.05 further suggests that an increase in the provision of access roads will lead to a significant rise in food production.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results indicate that the provision of health infrastructure has a positive and statistically significant impact on access to improved health care. This suggests that investments in healthcare facilities play a crucial role in enhancing the accessibility of quality healthcare services. This finding aligns with the research of Castro et al. (2019), emphasizing the positive effect of healthcare service provision on access to improved health care.

The outcome underscores the direct link between increased health infrastructure and improved healthcare access, emphasizing the importance of targeted efforts and investments in developing and maintaining health facilities to positively influence overall health outcomes in communities in South East Nigeria.

The study also reveals that increased emphasis by companies on events sponsorship significantly leads to an increase in the cultural development of rural communities. This underscores the potential positive impact of corporate involvement in sponsoring events and highlights its role in fostering cultural growth. Companies engaging in such sponsorship activities can be considered catalysts for cultural development, contributing to the enrichment and preservation of cultural practices within rural settings. This finding supports the assertion of Steiner and Atterton (2014) that corporate initiatives, particularly in event sponsorship, have the potential to positively influence and contribute to the cultural vibrancy and identity of rural communities.

Furthermore, the study shows that the provision of access roads has a significant positive effect on food production in communities. This indicates a notable correlation between companies providing access roads and a substantial positive impact on food production in South East Nigeria communities. This finding supports the assertion of Bjornlund et al. (2020) that the construction of roads also plays a role in shaping agricultural production. It highlights the crucial role of infrastructural support, specifically access roads, in fostering agricultural productivity. Companies contributing to the development of transportation infrastructure can be seen as instrumental in enhancing logistical efficiency, facilitating the movement of goods, and ultimately promoting increased food production. This emphasizes the potential for corporate involvement in addressing critical infrastructural needs, contributing significantly to the agricultural advancement and overall well-being of communities in the region.

6. CONCLUSION

In South East Nigeria, the interaction between corporate entities and rural development has emerged as a crucial determinant in shaping the socio-economic landscape of the region. This study establishes that the manner in which companies engage with communities can have a profound impact on rural areas. It demonstrates that when companies employ effective strategies to connect with the community, it positively influences various aspects of rural life. The research highlights the pivotal role that corporate entities play in enhancing the health sector. Through investments in robust health infrastructure, companies become key players in bridging gaps and ensuring improved healthcare services for rural communities.

The emphasis on events sponsorship is identified as a catalyst for cultural development in rural areas. The study suggests that increased sponsorship not only fosters cultural vibrancy but also serves as a channel for community engagement and cohesion. By actively participating in and supporting cultural events, companies become integral contributors to the preservation and enrichment of local traditions. Importantly, this study

unveils the impact of access roads on food production in rural communities. It demonstrates the significant positive effect of well-developed access roads, underscoring their pivotal role in fostering agricultural productivity. As companies contribute to the establishment and maintenance of these vital infrastructures, they play a crucial role in enhancing food security and economic prosperity within these communities.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study provides the following recommendations:

- 1) Companies are advised to consider investing in comprehensive health infrastructure to improve access to quality healthcare in rural areas. This involves constructing and supporting healthcare facilities with necessary resources and personnel. Prioritizing health infrastructure enables companies to make significant contributions to the well-being of local communities.
- 2) Companies with the goal of enhancing cultural development in rural communities should actively sponsor and participate in local events. This entails supporting cultural activities, festivals, and initiatives that celebrate the community's heritage. Through such involvement, companies can play a role in preserving and enriching local culture, fostering a sense of pride and unity among residents.
- 3) Companies are encouraged to prioritize the provision and maintenance of access roads to positively impact food production in rural areas. Investing in well-constructed roads facilitates the transportation of agricultural goods, reduces post-harvest losses, and enhances overall productivity. Supporting infrastructure development in this manner directly contributes to the economic growth and food security of local communities.

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