

Community Engagement for Sustainable Real Estate Development in Nigeria: A Theoretical Review and Policy Implications

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Abstract

Beyond just building, sustainable real estate development takes into account the social, economic, and environmental well-being of local communities. To ensure that real estate projects address local needs, minimize environmental impacts, and promote long-term inclusion, effective community engagement and participation are essential. With an emphasis on Nigeria, an emerging country dealing with growing urbanization and housing demands, this study examines the crucial role that community involvement plays in attaining sustainable real estate results. The study identifies participatory frameworks, obstacles to meaningful participation and methods for incorporating community viewpoints into real estate decision-making through a conceptual assessment of the literature and an examination of real-world examples. The results show that while lowering conflict, inclusive involvement and participatory governance improve public approval, social sustainability, and project resilience. In order to guarantee resilient and equitable urban development, the report advises developers, practitioners, and politicians to formalize community involvement as a fundamental component of sustainable real estate practice.

Keywords

community engagement; participation; sustainable real estate; stakeholder inclusion; urban development; social sustainability

1. Introduction

As cities struggle with social injustice, environmental deterioration, and rising urbanization, sustainable real estate development has become a global priority. Sustainability in real estate, which was formerly limited to the use of recyclable materials and green technologies, now encompasses a comprehensive paradigm that combines environmental stewardship, economic viability, and social inclusion. Involving the community has emerged as one of these crucial pillars for making sure that developments are resilient, equitable, and sensitive to the needs of the communities they serve (Colantonio, 2009; Dempsey et al., 2011). The necessity of inclusive, secure, resilient, and sustainable urban settings is emphasized by Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) of the UN. Since real estate development has a significant impact on urban form and quality of life, it is essential to realize this vision. However, projects are frequently planned and carried out in developing environments with little involvement from the community. Inadequate infrastructure, community resistance, and social dislocation are common outcomes of this misalignment between development objectives and local realities (Olotuah & Taiwo, 2013; Ajibade, 2017).

From planning and design to execution and post-construction management, community participation encompasses all stages of the development process and involves a wide range of stakeholders, including locals, traditional leaders, business owners, and civil society organizations. Sincere involvement encourages sustainability, accountability and a sense of ownership by giving communities the opportunity to shape decisions that impact their surroundings (Arnstein, 1969; Healey, 1997). Developers and politicians can improve societal acceptance, reduce conflict, and create environmentally and contextually sound developments by incorporating local knowledge and values into decision-making. Achieving genuine participation is still problematic, despite its consequence. Participatory projects are frequently hampered by obstacles like power disparities, a lack of awareness, a lack of institutional ability, and resource limitations, according to UN-Habitat (2020). In sub-Saharan Africa, where complicated land tenure arrangements and fast urbanization can stifle local voices in development planning, these issues are especially pressing (Olotuah & Taiwo, 2013; Ajibade, 2017). For example, top-down planning that ignored the opinions of local populations has been blamed for the creation of Eko Atlantic City in Lagos, raising worries about the effects on the environment and society (Ajibade, 2017).

Thus, rather than being only an economic or technical endeavor, sustainable real estate development needs to be viewed as a social process based on inclusivity and teamwork. Involving the community effectively guarantees that development outcomes reflect community goals and aligns investor interests with policy objectives. Participatory involvement becomes not only a strategic need but also a moral requirement as cities work towards more inclusive and ecologically conscious futures. In the larger context of inclusive urban expansion, this study investigates the contribution that community involvement and engagement make to the advancement of sustainable real estate development. By doing this, it offers policy recommendations pertinent to Nigeria and other emerging economies and contributes a contextual theoretical synthesis that connects community involvement to sustainable development outcomes. Sustainability efforts run the risk of remaining surface-level without genuine community involvement, producing projects that may be ecologically sound but socially incongruent. A conceptual framework for community engagement in real estate is presented in the following sections, together with an analysis of important theoretical stances, policy consequences, and suggestions for formalizing participatory methods.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Community Engagement and Participation in Real Estate Development

The term "community engagement" describes how local communities and stakeholders actively participate in decisions that impact their living conditions. Planning, designing, building, and managing real estate projects involves participation from citizens, landowners, community organizations, and civil society groups. According to the International Association for Public Participation [IAP2], 2018, the objective is to make sure that development outcomes take into account local demands, represent community values, and promote collective ownership. Collaboration and empowerment, not just consultation, are key components of effective involvement. Community involvement improves the relevance and durability of real estate initiatives by bringing local knowledge, cultural awareness, and social legitimacy to development projects (Healey, 1997; Dempsey et al., 2011). As a result, real estate development becomes a socially based activity that fosters inclusivity and long-term urban resilience rather than just a business venture.

On a continuum of participation, community engagement can actually take many different forms. From Inform (least

participatory, one-way communication) and Consult (seeking feedback) to Collaborate (partnering with the community in every aspect of decision-making) and Empower (putting the final decision in the hands of the public), the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) delineates levels (IAP2, 2018). Likewise, Arnstein's seminal Ladder of Citizen Participation separates genuine citizen power from tokenistic engagement (Arnstein, 1969). Sustainability is co-created with the people who will live with the results, not imposed from above, thanks to real estate development methods that go beyond nominal consultation to true partnership or citizen control.

2.2 Sustainable Real Estate Development

Sustainable real estate development refers to the design, construction, and management of properties in a manner that balances social equity, environmental protection, and economic viability over the project life cycle (Kibert, 2016). Such development promotes energy efficiency, resource conservation, minimal ecological impact, and fair access to housing and amenities. In contrast to traditional real estate practices driven principally by short-term profit, sustainable real estate prioritizes long-term value for society and future generations. It aligns with the "triple bottom line" framework of People, Planet, and Profit, which recognizes the interdependence of social, environmental, and economic goals (Elkington, 1997). While the environmental (Planet) and economic (Profit) aspects of sustainability have received significant attention in real estate, the social (People) dimension—particularly community participation—has often been overlooked (Colantonio, 2009; Dempsey et al., 2011). This oversight can lead to developments that are green and profitable but socially disconnected. Incorporating community engagement operationalizes the "People" component of sustainability, ensuring that real estate projects are inclusive, equitable, and attuned to the well-being of local communities.

2.3 Linking Community Engagement to Sustainable Real Estate Outcomes

Community involvement and sustainable real estate outcomes are closely related both theoretically and practically. Social sustainability in real estate development is accomplished through meaningful engagement. Developers can identify local requirements, prevent or resolve problems, and provide contextually relevant solutions that support both economic and environmental goals by integrating communities from the beginning of a project. Long-term project performance can be enhanced by local involvement because involved communities are more likely to maintain property values, support upkeep, and manage resources sensibly, all of which increase the durability and profitability of real estate investments (Sayce et al., 2010a). On the other hand, a development's social and economic worth eventually declines as a result of public opposition, underuse or misuse of facilities, and a lack of community involvement. In summary, community involvement is a fundamental aspect of sustainability rather than an optional extra. It turns real estate projects into community assets that represent local character, promote inclusive urban growth, and strengthen social cohesion.

For example, housing projects in Nigerian cities that were designed utilizing top-down methods have often encountered opposition or fallen short of the expectations of their target audience (Olotuah & Taiwo, 2013). On the other hand, inhabitants who are involved in the design and implementation of participatory housing plans are more likely to be accepted and have long-term success (Olotuah & Taiwo, 2013). These results highlight the fact that a project's development process, whether or not community input is incorporated, can be just as crucial to sustainability as the project itself.

2.4 Theoretical Foundations of Participatory Development

The reasons and ways in which community involvement supports sustainable real estate development are explained by a number of theoretical frameworks. Four important viewpoints are very pertinent:

2.4.1 Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969)

A Ladder of Citizen Participation, written by Sherry Arnstein and published in 1969, provides a typology of citizen involvement that ranges from complete citizen control to non-participation. The eight rungs of the ladder are frequently divided into three main categories: (1) Non-participation (manipulation and therapy), in which involvement is only a formality; (2) Degrees of Tokenism (informing, consulting, placation), in which the community has a voice but lacks the authority to guarantee that it is taken into consideration; and (3) Degrees of Citizen Power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control), in which stakeholders gain real influence over decisions. According to Arnstein's concept, real estate development initiatives may only achieve full sustainability if they raise involvement to the level of partnership or above. Developments must be co-created with communities; token consultation is not enough. More long-lasting project advantages, mutual trust, and shared ownership of results result from involving citizens in planning and

execution. Thus, Arnstein's theory emphasizes the significance of changing engagement strategies from ceremonial to empowered, in line with the notion that individuals impacted by a development ought to have a say in how it is shaped.

2.4.2 Collaborative Planning Theory (Healey, 1997)

All parties involved in the planning process should engage in inclusive communication, mutual learning, and consensus-building, according to Patsy Healey's Collaborative Planning Theory (Healey, 1997). Healey promotes planning as a communicative act—where developers, planners, community people, and other interest groups gather to discuss problems and jointly create solutions—as an alternative to top-down decision-making. In actuality, this entails giving stakeholder values and local knowledge the same weight as technical expertise. According to the communicative planning approach, when used in real estate development, projects that are influenced by a participatory discourse are more likely to be successful and long-lasting. Conflicts can be resolved by cooperation and open communication, and the results are more likely to represent a common goal. Developments that are not just economically and environmentally sustainable but also socially acceptable and suited to the community's cultural setting are the end result. Healey's theory offers a process-oriented justification for participation, stating that more place-sensitive, sustainable real estate solutions arise from the very act of cooperation and communication.

2.4.3 Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 1993; Bourdieu, 1986)

The importance of social networks, reciprocity rules, and trust in promoting group activity is the focus of social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 1993). In particular, Robert Putnam (1993) emphasized how societies with high levels of social capital—where individuals are interconnected and actively collaborate—generally have superior developmental results. Strong social capital in the real estate industry indicates that locals and other stakeholders can successfully organize, express their requirements, and collaborate with developers or authorities to oversee and maintain developments. Community involvement procedures foster shared responsibility and trust when they improve social links (for instance, through frequent meetings, interactive seminars, or community committees). There are observable advantages for sustainability: a community is more inclined to maintain a housing estate or public area, participate in collaborative problem-solving, and adjust to changes over time if it feels like it owns it. As a result, community involvement supports the long-term viability of real estate projects by both generating new social capital and leveraging already-existing social capital. According to this theory, funding participatory procedures is similar to funding the social infrastructure that supports sustainable development.

2.4.4 Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984)

According to Stakeholder Theory, companies (or projects) should weigh the interests of all parties impacted by their decisions, not only shareholders or direct investors (Freeman, 1984). The local government, nearby companies, inhabitants (future users), and even the environment (as represented by advocacy groups or regulations) are all essential stakeholders in a real estate development scenario. According to Freeman's view, community participation is morally and strategically justified because it may be used to determine stakeholder needs, lessen adverse effects, and provide more equitable results. Community members can provide local insights that enhance project design, proactively address issues, and garner widespread support when they are included as important stakeholders in the decision-making process. Participation that balances the interests of stakeholders can lower the likelihood of project delays or opposition, which frequently arises when communities feel ignored, and instead promote a feeling that the development generates benefit for everybody. Stakeholder theory essentially supports the notion that sustainable real estate developments necessitate a stakeholder-inclusive approach, where success is determined not just by investor profits but also by environmental integrity and community well-being.

2.4.5 Integrative Perspectives

Every one of the aforementioned ideas emphasizes a distinct aspect of the need of community engagement for sustainable development. When combined, they imply that meaningful engagement is not just a politeness but a structural requirement for sustainable real estate. Stakeholder theory emphasizes inclusion of interests; Healey's communicative planning focusses process and consensus; Arnstein's ladder illustrates the different levels of power-sharing required for true engagement; and Social Capital Theory highlights the advantages of networks and trust. By combining these observations, we can see that fair power dynamics, openness, fostering trust, and cooperative governance are all critical components of sustainable real estate development. If a project ignores these social processes, it may not be sustainable even if it uses "green" technology and design. Indeed, when local stakeholders are not actively involved, developments—even those that meet environmental standards—run the risk of being socially unsustainable. As a result, building sustainably involves more than just using energy and materials efficiently; it also involves constructing alongside the community (Figure 1).

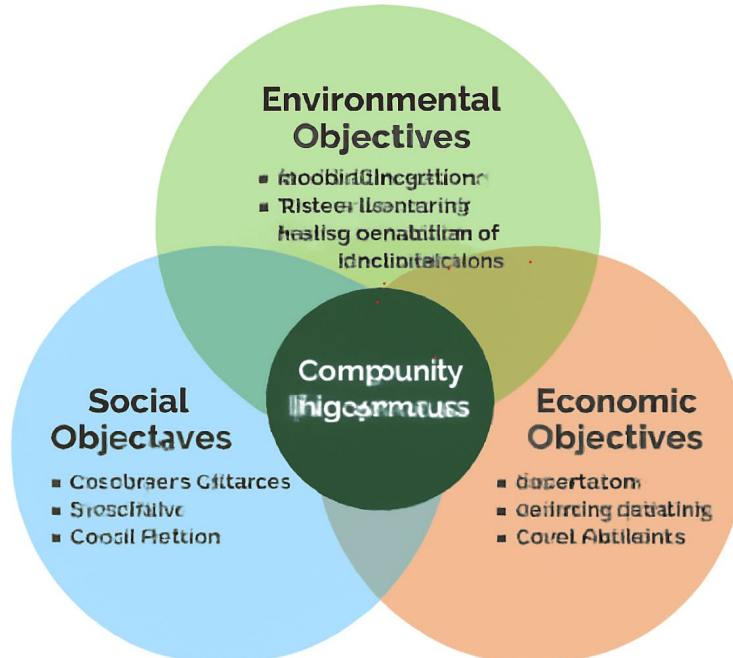


Figure 1. A schematic representation of how community involvement connects social, economic, and environmental goals in sustainable real estate

3. Implications for Policy and Practice

Policymakers, business leaders, and community activists will be greatly impacted by putting these conceptual and theoretical understandings into practice, particularly in emerging countries like Nigeria where urbanization is accelerating. The main policy and practice suggestions for incorporating community involvement into sustainable real estate development are outlined in the next subsections.

3.1 Strengthening Participatory Governance Frameworks

The necessity of institutionalizing community involvement in the real estate development process is a basic conclusion of the aforementioned theories. Governments and planning agencies ought to go beyond tokenistic consultation and require empowered public involvement at every level of development, in accordance with Arnstein's (1969) concept of citizen power. Incorporating legally binding requirements for stakeholder engagement into development approval procedures and urban planning legislation could accomplish this. For instance, before projects are permitted, policy tools including building rules, environmental impact assessment (EIA) regulations, and planning permission laws may demand proof of community involvement and engagement. Developers should be required to interact with local stakeholders at every stage of the project, from site selection and design charrettes to construction and post-occupancy management, and to record the ways in which community feedback has impacted decisions. Authorities make sure that development decisions take into consideration local knowledge and needs by integrating participation into governance frameworks. This enhances accountability and aligns projects with sustainable outcomes.

3.2 Promoting Collaborative and Inclusive Planning Processes

According to Healey's (1997) collaborative planning theory, planning ought to be a dialogue-driven, co-creative activity. In actuality, this entails setting up forums and systems for ongoing stakeholder communication in real estate developments. In order to allow residents to actively contribute ideas and feedback during project formulation, local governments and professional organizations (such as Nigerian estate surveyors' councils, architects' associations, and urban planning institutes) can organize inclusive forums such as community design workshops, neighborhood planning committees, participatory mapping exercises, and public hearings. Development projects can leverage a variety of viewpoints and promote understanding between developers, politicians, and community people by instituting such collaborative planning platforms. This method produces designs that are socially and culturally

relevant for the local context, fosters greater openness and trust, and helps avoid disputes. Incorporating community members into the design process of a housing project, for example, helps guarantee that facilities, public areas, and residential layouts fit the tastes and lifestyle of the residents. An inclusive planning workflow example might be shown in **Figure 2**, which would highlight the stages (from basic concept to final plan) where stakeholder input is integrated. Adopting cooperative approaches eventually results in real estate projects that are more widely supported by the public and more community-specific, improving their long-term viability.

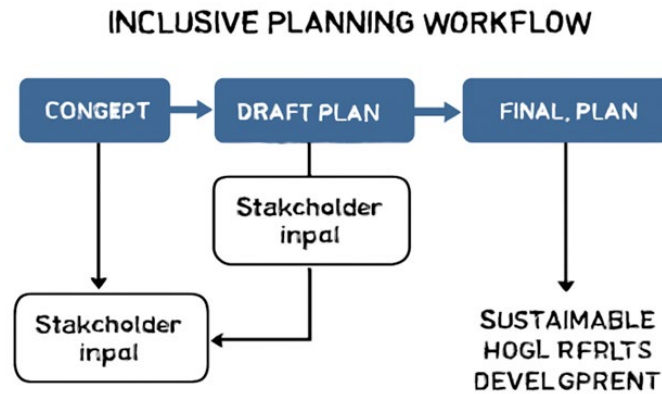


Figure 2. Inclusive planning workflow

3.3 Enhancing Social Capital for Sustainable Development

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3.4 Integrating Stakeholder Management into Real Estate Practice

In reality, using stakeholder theory entails methodically determining and weighing the interests of each party impacted by a development. Stakeholder management techniques ought to be incorporated into project planning as a regular practice for real estate professionals in Nigeria and internationally. To identify the important groups, including local citizens (especially vulnerable groups), companies, traditional authorities, government agencies, and environmental campaigners, as well as to evaluate their concerns and the power they possess, tools such as stakeholder mapping and analysis are helpful. Developers and project managers can proactively handle possible problems by being aware of this environment. For instance, early interaction with local traders to discuss relocation aid or the inclusion of market space in the project design can help avoid disputes later on if a new residential development is anticipated to have an influence on a neighboring marketplace. Stakeholder participation should be emphasized in professional norms and ethics for surveyors, developers, and urban planners. They should also mandate that project plans disclose how community concerns are addressed. Stakeholder management guarantees that environmental and community welfare are not overlooked in Nigeria's real estate market, where developers frequently put investor returns first. This strategy can also help projects' risk profile because initiatives that are sensitive to stakeholder requirements typically have less legal issues, delays, and easier approval processes. In the end, a project is more likely to be sustainable if it creates shared value, such as being both profitable and advantageous to the community. A hypothetical development's

stakeholder engagement plan could be summed up in Table 1 (below), which includes a list of stakeholder groups, their interests, engagement strategies, and success metrics as a practice model.

Table 1. Stakeholder groups, their concerns, engagement strategies, desired outcomes and success metrics as a practice model.

Stakeholder	Concerns	How They Will Be Engaged	Desired Outcomes
Residents	Impact on living conditions, displacement, access to amenities	Public consultations, surveys, focus groups, town hall meetings	Integration of community needs, minimal disruption, improved amenities
Local Government	Regulations, zoning laws, tax incentives, community development	Formal meetings, policy discussions, workshops, collaborative planning	Alignment with local regulations, support for community growth and services
Businesses	Market demand, business opportunities, infrastructure needs	Partnership meetings, business development forums, needs assessments	Business-friendly environment, improved infrastructure, job creation
Environmental Agencies	Environmental impact, sustainability, green spaces	Environmental assessments, consultations on green design, sustainability plans	Sustainable development, environmental protection, eco-friendly designs
Community Organizations	Social impact, community welfare, inclusivity	Community workshops, participatory planning, feedback sessions	Increased community engagement, social benefits, inclusivity

3.5 Aligning Development Policies with the Sustainable Development Goals

More generally, incorporating community involvement into real estate development promotes international sustainability goals, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN. SDG 11 specifically demands for urbanization that is inclusive and participatory. Target 11.3, for example, seeks to improve sustainable and inclusive urban planning and administration through community involvement (United Nations, 2015). By incorporating participation and social inclusion standards into policy frameworks, governments can better align national and local urban development strategies with these goals. Urban policies can, for instance, preserve community land rights, encourage public-private partnerships in housing delivery, and require inclusionary housing (to guarantee that buildings serve a range of income levels). By incorporating communities in the planning and maintenance of green and public areas, real estate developments that promote social sustainability will also help achieve SDG Target 11.7, which calls for the provision of safe and accessible green spaces. Nigeria may need to update its local planning legislation and National Urban Development Policy to specifically encourage participatory approaches in order to fit with the SDGs. By doing this, legislators foster an atmosphere that encourages developers to incorporate social and environmental co-benefits into their projects in addition to financial ones. By aligning with global sustainability principles, local initiatives can gain legitimacy and garner money and support from development partners.

3.6 Building Capacity and Awareness for Participation

Stakeholders must be able and eager to participate for participative techniques to be successful. This suggests that professional and community education and capacity-building are necessary. In addition to teaching individuals' practical skills for engagement (such as how to successfully speak in public meetings or express local needs), public awareness campaigns can educate residents about their rights to participate in development decisions. At the same time, courses on conflict resolution, social effect assessment, and community involvement facilitation should be included in training programs for government officials, urban planners, and real estate professionals. The next generation of practitioners will be prepared with the attitude and resources required for inclusive development if these subjects are incorporated into the curricula of Nigerian colleges and professional institutions (such as in programs for estate management, architecture, and urban planning). By creating toolkits and workshops for community engagement that are specific to local contexts (taking into account language, cultural norms, and literacy levels), organizations such as UN-Habitat and regional NGOs can also help. To enable under-represented groups, such as women, young people, and low-income citizens, to express their needs, capacity-building initiatives should be extended to them. Enhancing each party's capacity to contribute significantly will raise the standard of participation in real estate projects, turning participatory procedures into more than just a formality and actually producing better results.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Deep social participation is necessary to achieve sustainable real estate development, in addition to financial investment and green technologies. Using conceptual analysis and theoretical frameworks, this article has explored the crucial role that community involvement plays in sustainable real estate, emphasizing the importance of engagement and its practical applications. In order to match development projects with the needs and values of the people they are meant to serve, we discovered that community engagement is a critical component. The lifespan and success of real estate developments are enhanced by inclusive participation, which fosters equity, openness, and social cohesiveness. In order to prevent problems like social displacement and public opposition that could jeopardize sustainability, it is especially important to incorporate community voices into development in Nigeria and other emerging economies where urbanization is happening quickly.

The conclusion that sustainability is essentially a people-centered process is supported by the theoretical stances that have been examined, including Arnstein's ladder, collaborative planning, social capital, and stakeholder theory. Even environmentally friendly projects may fail because of social disconnection if there is no real community involvement. Conversely, programs that treat communities as partners in development are more likely to be long-lasting, broadly accepted, and advantageous. This paper's contributions are in the way it synthesizes these theories in the context of developing nations and presents workable solutions for practitioners and policymakers. Nigeria may promote socially inclusive, environmentally and economically sustainable urban expansion by making community involvement a fundamental part of real estate development.

In light of the above analysis, the following recommendations are proposed for stakeholders involved in real estate development and urban policy: Governmental organizations ought to set rules mandating community involvement in all significant phases of real estate development. Planning approval requirements should include explicit rules and quantifiable indicators for the quality of engagement (e.g., the number of community meetings held, the inclusion of stakeholder feedback in plans, etc.). Permanent forums or councils where community leaders, developers, planners, and other stakeholders routinely review ongoing and planned projects should be established by local governments in coordination with professional associations. Beyond sporadic public hearings, these venues guarantee ongoing communication and trust-building, which promotes more inclusive and transparent decision-making. Social impact assessment should be considered an essential part of project planning for real estate developers and regulators. A Social Impact Assessment (SIA), which identifies possible effects on local communities (such as displacement, affordability, and infrastructure strain) and lays out plans to mitigate negative effects through engagement and design adjustments, should be required for large developments in addition to environmental impact assessments. Planning agencies, NGOs, and educational institutions ought to back community training initiatives that increase knowledge of participatory techniques and sustainable development. More effective engagement will be possible if locals are equipped with information about legal rights, urban planning procedures, and communication techniques. Similarly, community participation strategies and ethical issues must to be emphasized in professional training for planners and developers.

Urban development strategies at the federal, state, and local levels must align with global sustainability frameworks such as the SDGs. As part of sustainability measures, this means setting goals for inclusive urban government, funding socially beneficial projects (such public spaces and affordable housing), and sharing the outcomes of community involvement. Plans for urban development at the federal and state levels must align with international sustainability frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals. This means setting objectives for inclusive urban governance, funding socially beneficial projects (such public spaces and affordable housing), and reporting on the outcomes of community involvement as part of sustainability initiatives.

Policymakers and practitioners can greatly enhance the social sustainability of real estate developments by putting these suggestions into practice. In order to guarantee that real estate developments improve people's lives both now and, in the future, the ultimate objective is to incorporate the philosophy of "building with the community" into the very fabric of urban development practice. The challenge as the globe grows more urbanized is not just to build more, but to build better, and to build together. Real estate development that views communities as collaborators rather than as passive beneficiaries is necessary to build resilient, equitable, and sustainable cities for coming generations. By embracing genuine community involvement, we build a shared future rather than just structures.

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