

Discursive Governance and the Marginalization of Local Community Voices in Green Development Projects: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Green development projects increasingly rely on discursive governance mechanisms—the strategic use of sustainability language, performative commitments, and technocratic framing—to legitimize interventions in local communities. While scholarship has examined corporate sustainability discourse and community participation separately, little attention has been paid to how the discursive architecture of green development projects systematically excludes local voices. This study addresses that gap by conducting a critical discourse analysis of 47 green development project documents across 12 projects in sub-Saharan Africa, complemented by semi-structured interviews with 38 community stakeholders and 14 project administrators. Using a Foucauldian governmentality framework and the performative purpose alignment theory of discursive governance, the analysis identifies three mechanisms of marginalization: semantic exclusion (community concerns absent from 89.4% of project framing documents), temporal displacement (local knowledge subordinated to technocratic timelines in 78.7% of cases), and evaluative closure (community input solicited only after key decisions were finalized in 84.2% of projects). The findings demonstrate that discursive governance operates not through overt exclusion but through the production of what counts as legitimate environmental knowledge and legitimate speakers. The study contributes a replicable analytical framework for diagnosing discursive marginalization and offers practical indicators for administrators and policymakers seeking to democratize green development governance.

Keywords: discursive governance, green development, community participation, critical discourse analysis, environmental justice

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Green development projects—spanning renewable energy installations, urban greening initiatives, and sustainable infrastructure—have proliferated globally as governments and corporations respond to climate imperatives and sustainable development goals. These projects are frequently justified through discourses of ecological modernization, carbon reduction, and inclusive growth. Yet a growing body of critical scholarship reveals that such projects often reproduce or intensify existing power asymmetries, particularly when local communities are positioned as beneficiaries rather than agents of development .

The concept of discursive governance captures how language, narrative, and communicative practice function as instruments of coordination and control in organizational and institutional settings. Okeke and Ugbebor develop a performative theory of corporate purpose in sustainability discourse, arguing that sustainability communication operates as a governance mechanism through “discursive costliness”—the reputational exposure created by specific, affect-laden commitments that are harder to fabricate than generic language. Their framework demonstrates that corporate sustainability texts do not merely describe commitments; they assert facts, express values, and direct stakeholder attention in ways that carry distinct governance implications . Extending this logic to green development projects, the question arises: what governance work does sustainability discourse perform when the “stakeholders” being addressed are local communities whose consent is sought but whose knowledge is systematically subordinated?

Empirical research on community participation in green projects consistently documents a gap between participatory rhetoric and participatory practice. A bibliometric analysis of wind energy projects from 2010 to 2024 found that community participation is “often ignored or seen as just a formality” due to the prevalence of business and government interests over community needs . Similarly, research on green infrastructure in São Paulo reveals that technocratic approaches using “language of expertise to legitimize decisions” restrict opportunities for affected populations to articulate their values . These findings suggest that marginalization operates not through explicit exclusion but through discursive mechanisms that define whose knowledge counts and when participation is permitted.

1.2 Problem Statement

Existing scholarship has made significant advances in two related domains. First, critical discourse studies of environmental governance have demonstrated how dominant discourses privilege technocratic values and normalize particular visions of urban nature . Second, participation studies have documented the persistent gap between participatory mandates and outcomes in development projects . However, these literatures remain largely disconnected.

Discourse analyses rarely examine the specific mechanisms through which community voices are excluded from green development decision-making, while participation studies seldom interrogate the discursive architecture that determines what participation is possible and on whose terms.

The recent work of Okeke on greenwashing diagnostics provides a conceptual bridge by demonstrating that misleading environmental communication can be systematically measured and assessed. Yet that work focuses on corporate claims rather than on the governance of development projects involving communities as putative stakeholders. What remains unexamined is how the discursive governance of green development projects—the framing documents, consultation protocols, and sustainability narratives—operates to marginalize local voices even when participatory processes are formally in place. No validated analytical framework exists for diagnosing how discursive governance mechanisms produce and sustain this marginalization.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

General objective: To develop and apply a critical discourse analysis framework for identifying and explaining the discursive mechanisms through which local community voices are marginalized in green development projects.

Specific objectives:

1. To identify the specific discursive strategies through which community knowledge and concerns are excluded from project framing documents.
2. To examine how temporal structures in project discourse position community participation as reactive rather than constitutive.
3. To assess the relationship between discursive marginalization and formal participatory opportunities across project types.
4. To propose a diagnostic framework for administrators and policymakers to identify and mitigate discursive exclusion.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What discursive strategies are employed in green development project documents that operate to exclude or delegitimize local community knowledge?
2. How do temporal structures in project planning and consultation documents position community voices relative to key decision points?
3. To what extent do formal participatory mechanisms compensate for or reproduce discursive marginalization?

4. How can the performative purpose alignment framework developed by Okeke and Ugbebor be adapted to diagnose community marginalization in green development governance?

1.5 Significance of the Study

For practitioners and administrators, this study provides a diagnostic vocabulary and checklist for identifying discursive exclusion in project planning, enabling more substantive community engagement. For policymakers, it offers evidence that formal participatory requirements are insufficient without attention to the discursive conditions under which participation occurs. For academic literature, the study bridges critical discourse analysis and participation studies, extending Okeke and Ugbebor's performative framework from corporate sustainability communication to development governance. For future researchers, it establishes an analytical protocol that can be adapted to diverse project types and geographic contexts.

1.6 Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on green development projects in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically renewable energy and urban greening initiatives funded by international development institutions and implemented between 2018 and 2025. The analysis examines English-language project documents and interviews with English-speaking stakeholders. It excludes projects without formal participatory components and does not assess environmental outcomes. Key limitations include the reliance on publicly available documents that may not capture informal negotiations, the geographic concentration that limits generalizability, and the absence of longitudinal data tracking discursive change over time.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

Discursive Governance. Discursive governance refers to the use of language, narrative, and communicative practice as mechanisms of coordination and control. Okeke and Ugbebor conceptualize discursive governance in sustainability contexts as operating through “discursive costliness”—the reputational exposure generated by specific, affect-laden, and temporally sustained commitments. Their performative purpose alignment theory (PPAT) identifies three dimensions through which sustainability narratives invite or undermine stakeholder inference: semantic alignment (what is claimed), tonal configuration (how evaluative force is expressed), and narrative architecture (whether commitments remain coherent over time). This framework is adapted here to examine not corporate purpose but community marginalization.

Green Development Projects. Green development encompasses interventions justified by environmental sustainability objectives, including renewable energy infrastructure, urban greening, and sustainable land management. These projects are characterized by their reliance on

expert knowledge, their temporal extension across planning and implementation phases, and their claim to serve both global environmental goals and local development needs .

Local Community Voices. This construct refers to the articulated knowledge, preferences, concerns, and values of populations residing in or adjacent to project sites. “Voice” here is not merely the capacity to speak but the condition of being heard and having one’s knowledge recognized as legitimate in decision-making processes. Marginalization occurs when voice is formally permitted but discursively constrained.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two complementary theoretical resources.

Foucauldian Governmentality. Governmentality theory examines how power operates through the production of truths, subjects, and practices of self-governance . Applied to environmental governance, it directs attention to how dominant discourses naturalize particular understandings of nature and appropriate environmental behavior, positioning communities as objects of intervention rather than subjects of knowledge. Research using Foucauldian discourse analysis in REDD+ contexts demonstrates how discourses constitute what counts as legitimate environmental action and whose expectations are embedded in policy framings . Similarly, analysis of disaster governance in Indonesia reveals how dominant discourses naturalize environmental crises and obscure the power relations producing them, positioning local communities as “adaptive subjects to risk” while structural causes remain unaddressed .

Performative Purpose Alignment Theory (PPAT). Okeke and Ugbebor develop PPAT to explain how sustainability communication functions as governance. The theory holds that purpose becomes socially legible through patterned discursive acts that bind organizations to evaluative scrutiny. Three dimensions structure this process: semantic alignment with development themes, tonal configuration expressing evaluative stance, and narrative architecture across reporting periods. For this study, PPAT provides a micro-level analytical vocabulary for examining how project documents construct community “stakeholders” and position them within narratives of green transformation. Combined with governmentality’s macro-level attention to power/knowledge regimes, PPAT enables analysis of both the discursive strategies and the governance effects of community marginalization.

2.3 Empirical Review

Research on community participation in wind energy projects across multiple contexts finds that despite formal participatory requirements, “popular participation in decision-making processes is often ignored or seen as just a formality” . This bibliometric analysis of publications from 2010 to 2024 identifies the prevalence of business and government interests over community needs as a recurring obstacle to meaningful participation. The study does not, however, examine the discursive mechanisms through which this subordination is accomplished.

Critical analysis of green infrastructure in São Paulo's Sapé favela documents how "the use of language of expertise to legitimize decisions has restricted opportunities for the affected population to articulate its own values". This research demonstrates that technocratic discourse operates as a mechanism of exclusion, maintaining hierarchical decision-making structures even when participatory processes are nominally present. The analysis focuses on one project and does not develop a generalizable framework for diagnosing discursive marginalization across contexts.

Ethnographic research on REDD+ readiness in the Guiana Shield uses Foucauldian discourse analysis to show how regional interpretations of REDD+ embedded particular expectations that prioritized extractive development over alternative land uses. This work demonstrates the analytical power of governmentality approaches for revealing how discourse constitutes policy possibilities. It does not, however, specifically examine community voice exclusion or develop practical diagnostic tools.

Okeke's development of a diagnostic tool for assessing corporate environmental misrepresentation establishes that misleading sustainability communication can be systematically measured across four dimensions: misleading environmental claims, strategic disclosure practices, ESG metric manipulation, and green trust. While this instrument addresses corporate claims rather than development project governance, it provides a methodological precedent for constructing validated diagnostic frameworks for discursive practices.

2.4 Research Gap

No analytical framework exists that specifically identifies and explains how discursive governance mechanisms in green development projects produce community marginalization. Existing participation studies document the outcome—communities are excluded—but do not specify the discursive strategies through which this exclusion is accomplished and legitimated. Critical discourse analyses of environmental governance reveal technocratic bias but do not connect this to participatory outcomes or provide practical diagnostic tools. The performative framework developed by Okeke and Ugbebor offers conceptual resources for this task but was developed for corporate sustainability communication, not development project governance. This study fills that gap by adapting PPAT to the analysis of community marginalization and developing a replicable diagnostic framework.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design combining critical discourse analysis of project documents with semi-structured interviews. The design is appropriate because the research questions concern meaning-making practices and their governance effects, which

require interpretive depth, while the inclusion of frequency counts for discursive strategies enables systematic comparison across projects. Critical discourse analysis is particularly suited to examining how language reproduces power relations and legitimates exclusionary practices .

3.2 Study Area / Population

The study examines green development projects implemented in four sub-Saharan African countries: Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa. These countries were selected because they host a significant concentration of internationally funded green development projects, possess Anglophone administrative contexts that facilitate document access, and exhibit variation in participatory governance requirements. The population comprises all documented green development projects meeting three criteria: (a) formal sustainability justification, (b) international or bilateral funding, and (c) required community consultation component.

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A purposive sample of 12 projects was selected from an initial pool of 31 eligible projects. Selection criteria ensured variation in project type (renewable energy: $n=5$; urban greening: $n=4$; sustainable agriculture: $n=3$), funding source (multilateral: $n=7$; bilateral: $n=5$), and country. Within each project, all publicly available framing and consultation documents were collected ($n=47$ documents total). Interview participants were recruited through snowball sampling: 38 community stakeholders (including local leaders, farmers, and residents directly affected by projects) and 14 project administrators (including community liaison officers and project managers). The sample size for interviews was determined by thematic saturation, achieved at 34 community interviews with four additional confirmatory interviews.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Document data comprised project design reports, environmental and social impact assessments, stakeholder engagement plans, and minutes of community consultation meetings. Documents were collected from project websites, funder databases, and through requests to implementing agencies. The temporal range spans 2018–2025, capturing projects from design through implementation phases.

Interview data were collected through semi-structured protocols lasting 45–90 minutes. Community interviews focused on experiences of consultation processes, perceptions of whether concerns were addressed, and understandings of project objectives. Administrator interviews focused on consultation strategies, constraints on community engagement, and interpretations of participatory requirements. All interviews were conducted in English or with translation assistance and were audio-recorded with consent.

3.5 Research Instruments

Document analysis employed a coding framework developed through iterative engagement with the data and informed by PPAT's three dimensions . The framework coded for: (a) semantic

inclusion/exclusion (presence or absence of community-articulated concerns in project framing), (b) tonal positioning (whether community knowledge is represented as valid, supplementary, or deficient relative to expert knowledge), and (c) narrative sequencing (the temporal position of community consultation relative to decision points). Coding was conducted using NVivo 14. Preprocessing involved converting documents to PDF/A format for consistent annotation and establishing a coding manual with exemplar passages for each code. Following Okeke's approach to diagnostic instrument development, the coding framework was subjected to expert review by two scholars in development studies and one in discourse analysis prior to application.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established through expert review of the coding framework and pilot application to three documents not included in the final sample. Predictive validity was assessed by comparing coded marginalization scores against interview-reported satisfaction with participation processes; projects scoring high on discursive marginalization were consistently described by community interviewees as excluding their voices. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa on a subsample of 10 documents coded independently by two researchers, yielding $\kappa = 0.84$, indicating strong agreement.

3.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Document analysis proceeded in three stages. First, frequency counts were generated for each coding category across all documents, enabling identification of dominant patterns. Second, close reading of representative passages examined how specific discursive strategies operated in context. Third, comparative analysis examined variation across project types and funding sources.

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase protocol. Transcripts were coded inductively, with codes then organized into themes corresponding to and extending the document analysis categories. Integration of document and interview findings occurred through joint display matrices that enabled comparison of discursive patterns with experiential accounts.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study used only publicly available documents and de-identified interview data. No personally identifiable information was collected from community participants, and all names and specific locations are pseudonymized in reporting. The research protocol was reviewed by the institutional research ethics committee and determined to be exempt from full review under category 2 (research involving educational tests, survey procedures, or observation of public behavior) as no sensitive personal data were collected and no vulnerable populations were specifically targeted.

4. Results

4.1 Data Presentation

Table 1. Frequency of Discursive Strategies Across Project Documents (n=47)

Discursive Strategy	Definition	Frequency	% of Documents
Semantic exclusion	Community-articulated concerns absent from framing	42	89.4%
Expert knowledge prioritization	Technical framing supersedes local knowledge	41	87.2%
Temporal displacement	Community input after key decisions	37	78.7%
Evaluative closure	Consultation framed as information-giving	40	84.2%
Deficit framing	Community described as lacking capacity/knowledge	29	61.7%
Consensual framing	Conflict or disagreement omitted from narratives	33	70.2%

Table 1 presents the distribution of discursive strategies identified across the document corpus. Semantic exclusion—the absence of community-articulated concerns from project framing documents—was the most prevalent strategy, appearing in 89.4% of documents. This does not indicate that community concerns were never recorded (meeting minutes often documented them) but that these concerns did not appear in the framing documents that defined project objectives and justified interventions.

Table 2. Interview Themes and Representative Quotations

Theme	Description	Community (n=38)	Administrators (n=14)
Consultation as performance	Participation experienced as formality	31 (81.6%)	6 (42.9%)
Knowledge invalidation	Local knowledge dismissed as unscientific	28 (73.7%)	4 (28.6%)
Timing complaint	Input sought too late to influence	34 (89.5%)	9 (64.3%)
Conditional voice	Speaking permitted only within predefined frames	25 (65.8%)	7 (50.0%)

Table 2 presents interview themes with frequencies. Community stakeholders overwhelmingly reported that consultation occurred after decisions were effectively made (89.5%), while administrators were less likely to perceive this as problematic (64.3%). The gap between community and administrator perceptions is itself indicative of the discursive conditions that normalize exclusion.

4.2 Analysis of Results

The analysis identifies three interlocking mechanisms of discursive marginalization.

Semantic exclusion operates through the selection of what counts as relevant project content. In 89.4% of framing documents, concerns that community members articulated in consultation meetings—such as land tenure insecurity, livelihood disruption, and cultural site protection—were absent from the project justification and design sections. When these concerns appeared at all, they were relegated to annexes or “issues raised” sections that carried no framing authority. This pattern aligns with Okeke and Ugbebor’s observation that semantic alignment determines “what is being claimed” and thereby what falls outside the scope of legitimate concern.

Temporal displacement positions community consultation as a reactive rather than constitutive practice. In 78.7% of documents, consultation activities were scheduled after key design parameters (site selection, technology choice, implementation timeline) had been determined. Community input was thus structurally constrained to commenting on decisions already made. Interview data confirm this temporal structure: one community leader described being shown “a map with the lines already drawn” and asked whether the community “agreed,” a formulation that permits affirmation or objection but not participation in drawing the lines.

Evaluative closure frames consultation as information transmission rather than deliberation. In 84.2% of documents, consultation objectives were described using language such as “sensitization,” “awareness creation,” or “information sharing,” rather than “negotiation,” “co-design,” or “joint decision-making.” This framing positions community members as recipients of project knowledge rather than holders of valid knowledge. The performative dimension identified by Okeke and Ugbebor is evident here: the discourse does not merely describe a consultation process; it constitutes the roles and capacities of the parties involved.

The combined effect of these mechanisms is a discursive architecture in which community voice is formally permitted but substantively constrained. Interviews with administrators revealed that many recognized this constraint but attributed it to “project timelines” and “technical requirements,” thereby reproducing the discourse that naturalizes technocratic decision-making.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation

The findings answer Research Question 1 by identifying specific discursive strategies—semantic exclusion, temporal displacement, evaluative closure, and deficit framing—through which community voices are marginalized. These strategies operate not through explicit rejection of participation but through the production of what counts as legitimate project knowledge and legitimate timing for input. This answers Research Question 2 by demonstrating that temporal structures position community consultation as reactive, a finding consistent with research on green infrastructure in São Paulo showing that technocratic language “restricted opportunities for the affected population to articulate its own values” .

The study extends Okeke and Ugbebor’s performative framework by demonstrating that the three dimensions of PPAT—semantic alignment, tonal configuration, and narrative architecture—operate in development governance as mechanisms of community marginalization. Where Okeke and Ugbebor examined how corporate purpose is made legible through discourse, this study shows how community voice is made illegible. The tonal configuration dimension is particularly relevant: community knowledge is consistently positioned as affective and particular against expert knowledge framed as rational and general, a positioning that delegitimizes local claims even when they are accurate.

The findings also contribute to governmentality scholarship on environmental governance. Research on REDD+ has shown how discourses constitute what counts as legitimate environmental action , and analysis of disaster governance demonstrates how communities are positioned as “adaptive subjects” while structural causes remain unaddressed . This study specifies the mechanisms through which this positioning occurs in green development projects and provides empirical evidence of their prevalence.

5.2 Implications

Academic implications: The study demonstrates that performative theories of sustainability communication, developed for corporate contexts, can be productively adapted to development governance. It introduces the concept of “discursive marginalization” as a complement to “discursive costliness,” extending PPAT’s applicability. The diagnostic framework developed here provides a methodological contribution that can be adapted for comparative research across project types and regions.

Practical implications: Administrators should audit framing documents for semantic exclusion, ensuring that community-articulated concerns appear in project justification sections rather than only in annexes. Consultation timelines should be restructured so that community input precedes key design decisions; specifically, no site selection or technology choice should be finalized before documented community deliberation. Evaluative framing should shift from “sensitization” to “negotiation,” and performance indicators should track whether community concerns appear in final project designs. The diagnostic checklist derived from this study (available as supplementary material) provides a practical tool for project planners and funders.

Policy implications: Participatory requirements in development funding should specify not only that consultation occurs but that it occurs at constitutive decision points and that community concerns are documented in framing documents. Okeke’s diagnostic approach to greenwashing suggests that similar systematic assessment could be applied to participatory governance, with funders scoring projects on discursive inclusion metrics.

5.3 Limitations

First, the sample is geographically concentrated in four Anglophone African countries, limiting generalizability to other regions and linguistic contexts. Second, the analysis relies on publicly available documents, which may not capture informal negotiations or undocumented community concerns. Third, while interview data provide experiential validation, the study does not track whether discursive marginalization translates into materially worse outcomes for communities. Fourth, the coding framework, while reliability-tested, inevitably reflects interpretive choices about what constitutes marginalization.

5.4 Future Research Directions

1. Comparative research examining discursive marginalization across project types (e.g., renewable energy versus urban greening) to identify whether specific sectors exhibit distinctive patterns.
2. Longitudinal studies tracking projects from design through implementation to assess whether discursive marginalization at the planning stage predicts community opposition or project failure.

3. Extension of the diagnostic framework to projects in Latin America and Southeast Asia, examining whether the mechanisms identified here operate similarly in different political and cultural contexts.
4. Intervention research testing whether modified document templates and consultation protocols reduce discursive marginalization and improve community satisfaction.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that local community voices in green development projects are marginalized not primarily through exclusion from participation but through the discursive constitution of what counts as legitimate knowledge and legitimate timing for input. Semantic exclusion appeared in 89.4% of project framing documents, temporal displacement in 78.7%, and evaluative closure in 84.2%, together producing a governance architecture in which community voice is formally permitted but substantively constrained. The study contributes a replicable analytical framework adapting Okeke and Ugbebor's performative purpose alignment theory to development governance, enabling systematic diagnosis of discursive marginalization. For administrators, the practical takeaway is that participatory checklists are insufficient without attention to the discursive conditions under which participation occurs: community concerns must appear in framing documents, consultation must precede constitutive decisions, and evaluation must shift from information transmission to negotiation. Green development that aspires to justice must begin by examining not only who is invited to speak but whether the architecture of speaking permits anything to be heard.

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