Leadership Effectiveness and Foreign Assistance: Assessing Community-based Infrastructure Sustainability in Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract: Foreign assistance remains a major facilitator of development in developing countries, but its effectiveness is largely conditioned by the quality of leadership that mediates implementation. Effective leadership and governance of foreign assistance within government-established agencies are mandated to achieve sustainable development of community infrastructure. Situated within the development administration and foreign assistance effectiveness discourse, this study investigates how effective leadership shapes the transition of foreign assistance toward achieving community-based infrastructure sustainability in Southeastern Nigeria through the activities of the Community and Social Development Agency (CSDA). This study is anchored on institutional theory. A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted. The study employed a multi-stage, stratified, and purposive sampling technique with a sample size of 398 respondents. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The data collected were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were employed. Descriptive statistics include frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviation, while multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypothesis. The study finds that leadership effectiveness and foreign assistance influence the sustainability of community-based infrastructure for water, electricity, and roads and that institutional weakness, corruption, lack of transparency, and accountability challenge and shape the outcomes of infrastructure projects, with R^2=0.967, indicating that leadership effectiveness and foreign assistance account for 96.7% of the variance. The study contributes to development administration by emphasising the role that national and sub-national leaders, administrators, development agencies, local communities, and donor institutions and organisations should play in achieving community infrastructure development. This study recommends strengthening local leadership and institutional capacity, inclusive governance, and transparency to enhance the sustainability of community-based infrastructure. The policy implication would inform government and policymakers about the importance of effective leadership, institutional reforms, and capacity building as desiderata in enhancing foreign assistance administration to achieve sustainable community-based infrastructure development that will enhance the socioeconomic livelihoods of local communities in Nigeria.

Keywords: Community-based infrastructure, Community and social development agency, Foreign assistance administration, Leadership, Sustainability, Southeastern Nigeria

1. Introduction

Foreign assistance is one of the main tools of international development, particularly for alleviating infrastructure deficits in developing economies. In sub-Saharan Africa, low fiscal and institutional capacity and governance problems result in limited access to public infrastructure, which can be supplemented by foreign aid (Riddell, 2014; OECD, 2020). This support is provided by bilateral development organisations and institutions such as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), or multilateral development institutions and organisations such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank (ADB), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Foreign assistance approaches have placed greater emphasis on sustainable infrastructure investments as an integral part of sustainable socioeconomic transformation and community development in recent years. In developing effective infrastructure financing in Nigeria, USAID INVEST (2023) envisioned the need for various development partners, government institutions, private-sector investors and communities to form partnerships. They mainly focus on improving typical rural services, including rural roads, potable water, health, education, sanitation, and rural electrification. Overall, these interventions aim to improve human

development outcomes, reduce poverty, and strengthen institutional capacity at the grassroots level (World Bank, 2020; AfDB, 2021).

Institutional theory provides insight into a framework for understanding the influence of leadership on development outcomes. The following are common attributes of good leaders (Bass and Riggio, 2014; Northouse, 2021): vision, integrity, inclusiveness, and the ability to inspire a shared commitment to developmental goals. Good leadership in the development administration context can facilitate teamwork, coordination, and coherence of effort among donor agencies, government, civil society organisations, and community stakeholders, thereby improving policy coordination, project implementation, and sustainability. Good leadership also contributes to trust in institutions, stakeholder engagement, and accountability mechanisms for effective aid delivery (Salifu and Salifu, 2024).

Sustainable socioeconomic development is an important aspect of sustainable infrastructural development, which, in turn, is a key building block for long-term socio-economic development, especially in areas facing persistent developmental shortcomings, particularly in developing countries in Africa (Chidozie et al., 2024). Sustainability in infrastructure is not only about physical sustainability but also about the institutional and community capacity to finance, maintain, and effectively operate infrastructure over time without relying on external support (Sachs, 2015). Foreign assistance has a positive effect on reducing poverty, but this effect is far greater when directed towards infrastructure investments. Their results highlight strategic deployment and effective coordination between major sectors, such as water, transportation, energy, and other social services, and their influence on aid effectiveness. This is particularly relevant in Nigeria's Southeast region, where the administrative capacity of most jurisdictions remains weak, and the availability of development infrastructure varies among states, creating inequalities in access to it (Hamidu et al., 2020).

In many subnational settings, the administration of donor-funded interventions was often fragmented, inter-agency coordination was inadequate, and supervision was lacking. The presence of such structural weaknesses is exacerbated by the absence of leadership at the political and management levels, resulting in inadequate planning, weak implementation, and ineffective monitoring and evaluation. Leadership capacity is a consistent theme in the empirical governance literature and is associated with project efficiency and overall development (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017).

2. Statement of Problem

The unsustainability of infrastructure remains a challenge at the subnational level in Southeastern Nigeria. While governments have made tremendous investments and donors have initiated interventions, a large percentage of projects are not sustained beyond the implementation stage. However, this is mainly due to a poor maintenance culture, low levels of stakeholder engagement, and a lack of institutional and technical capacity at the local government level (Akinwale, 2020; World Bank, 2020). These constraints, taken together, undermine the sustainability of infrastructure initiative projects and thus have significant consequences for sustainable development in Southeastern Nigeria.

Southeastern Nigeria has a significant number of donor-supported infrastructure projects that have been constructed over the years but have not worked for long; a few are not even functional after some time has passed since their construction, and some are outright abandoned. Nigeria continues to receive foreign assistance for the development sector, especially for building infrastructure in communities, but the results of this funding remain far from sustainable and long-term (World Bank, 2020; OECD, 2020).

One crucial aspect of this challenge is the lack of sustainability on donor-financed infrastructure projects. One of the focal points of this challenge is the weak sustainability of donor-financed infrastructure. The quality of leadership, institutions, bureaucratic processes and corruption are important factors that affect the results of infrastructure investments. In Southeast Nigeria, the deficiencies manifest as rapid deterioration in infrastructure quality soon after donor withdrawal, negatively impacting the long-term developmental value and effective administration of foreign-assisted infrastructure development in the region. In view of this, the general objective of the study aims to investigate the effects of leadership effectiveness and foreign assistance on the sustainability of community-based infrastructure initiatives in Southeastern Nigeria, while seeking to answer this research question:

RQ1: How do leadership effectiveness and foreign assistance influence the sustainability of community-based infrastructure in Southeastern Nigeria?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Foreign Assistance

Foreign assistance is the unconditional transfer of resources from developed to developing countries, mainly to promote economic development, enhance welfare, and meet humanitarian needs. Foreign assistance refers to the provision of financial resources, goods, or services from a high-income country to a lower-income country. It is mainly focused on development and welfare outcomes (Aliprandini and Stingl, 2016). Foreign assistance is used across sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, and humanitarian assistance, based on context-specific needs and donor priorities. It also highlights the development potential of foreign aid when properly targeted, including its impact on health indicators, agricultural productivity, and institutional strengthening (Thapa, 2020).

Community development projects in Nigeria have been greatly aided by programmes funded by the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the European Union, and other development partners. The Community and Social Development Project (CSDP) is one of the country's key community-based development projects (CSDP) implemented by the Community and Social Development Agency (CSDA) (NASCCO, 2025). The programme aims to enable communities to define their own development needs, engage in the project implementation and maintain the completed infrastructure. However, project sustainability varies across communities, showing that sustainable development is not solely dependent on financial support and thus underscoring the role of leadership and institutional capacity (World Bank, 2022).

3.2 Leadership Effectiveness and Infrastructure Sustainability

Effective development interventions have become one of the most important factors for leadership. In public administration, leadership effectiveness encompasses strategic vision and visionary goals, accountability, transparency, ethical behaviour, stakeholder engagement, coordination, and the efficient administration and utilisation of public funds. Therefore, to ensure that institutional goals are met efficiently and sustainably, effective leadership fosters inclusivity and the participation of various government institutions, development agencies, civil society organisations, and beneficiary communities (Northouse, 2021).

Leadership is the ability to inspire and motivate others to attain personal and professional objectives. Transformational leaders are visionary people who use creative approaches to motivate and inspire their followers to address a problem. Leaders must have a charismatic, visionary and emotionally intelligent approach. There is a problem with the successful adoption of this leadership style because not everyone has the characteristics needed to be effective at the task (Abasilim, Gberevbie and Osibanjo, 2019). Leadership is a process that involves self-awareness, intentional goal-setting, and other forms of development. This view sees effective leadership as about understanding individual strengths and applying them in a smart way to motivate, rally, and energise teams toward a common goal. (Sustainable community-based infrastructure (Northouse, 2021).

Sustainable infrastructure is a system planned, designed, built, run, and dismantled to enhance economic, environmental, social, and institutional sustainability throughout its life cycle. Sustainable infrastructure is the provision of systems that deliver sustainable socioeconomic and environmental value while promoting climate change resilience and achieving overall infrastructure sustainability goals. It also emphasises the functions of sustainable infrastructure in minimising greenhouse gas emissions, optimising resource use, and promoting community well-being while ensuring the equitable provision of important infrastructural services such as access to clean water, rural electrification (energy), and roads for transportation (Chandra Asri Group, 2025).

Infrastructural initiatives should not only support socioeconomic development but also be planned to be resilient, socially inclusive, and environmentally sustainable throughout their lifespans. It also emphasises the importance of coherence among infrastructure financing, institutional arrangements, and policy frameworks for effective development outcomes. It concludes that sustainable infrastructure is one of the key pillars for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and moving towards low-carbon and resilient economies (Yanamandra, 2020).

Leadership effectiveness and infrastructure sustainability have become an area of increasing academic interest. Sustainable infrastructure is more than just operational service, maintenance, community ownership and long-term socio-economic returns to the project; it is a continuous process. Effective leadership helps enhance sustainability through inclusive, youth-involving planning, open resource allocation, frequent monitoring, and institutional coordination and accountability procedures. Involving the community in the

management of the facilities promotes local ownership, which boosts beneficiaries' commitment to maintaining completed facilities and safeguarding public investments (Chukwudi and Owoh, 2024; Ezebuilo et al, 2025).

3.3 The Effectiveness of Foreign Assistance and Infrastructure Development

The quality and accessibility of infrastructure, specifically transport systems, have a significant effect on the development in Sub-Saharan Africa. The absence of infrastructure and the failure of policy coordination make it difficult to achieve inclusive, sustainable, and transformative development from foreign aid. This research has shown that infrastructure is a two-way street; it is not a by-product of aid but essential to its effectiveness (Ofori et al., 2024).

Jambadu et al. (2024) provided evidence of the potential dangers to the sustainability of infrastructure projects in Africa posed by reliance on foreign assistance, resulting from unequal relationships and externally led technology transfer processes. Restriction of local participation in design, development, and operation will create barriers to capacity development at the local level. As a result, foreign aid can be used to build infrastructure, but is often ineffective at maintaining it and delivering institutional sustainability. Acemogolu and Robinson (2012) opined that neoliberal policy frameworks and unequal donor–recipient power dynamics significantly influence the effectiveness of aid in Africa within a broader political economy context. The study argues that foreign aid generally reflects donors' agendas and priorities, potentially affecting recipient countries' development agendas and reducing ownership. This can affect institutional independence and reduce the degree of congruence between the local development agenda and the nature of the aid action (Moyo, 2009).

This study by Aja-Eke (2025) shows a cross-cutting pattern of differences in perceptions of the effectiveness of foreign assistance in Nigeria by socioeconomic status and geographical location. Based on the study, support is not equally effective; it depends on the context in which it is implemented, including income inequality, the institutional context, and regional characteristics. The result highlights the need for context-sensitive analysis for understanding the differential impacts of foreign-assisted development interventions. This is particularly crucial in Southeastern Nigeria, where donor-funded infrastructure projects are often poorly coordinated and implemented.

The results from empirical research, especially in Southeastern Nigeria, suggest other governance-related constraints to assist effectiveness. Sub-optimal implementation, delays, and abandonment of donor-funded infrastructure projects are caused, in part, by a lack of effective technical leadership and administrative capacity within local government institutions to carry them out (Ezeani, 2018). They are weak, which significantly limits the sustainability of development interventions at the grassroots level. In further research, ‘elite capture’ is cited as one of the primary issues in the effective administration of aid in the region. Project allocation and implementation are sometimes guided by political patronage networks, which decreases transparency and accountability (Okoye and Chukwu, 2021). This hurts the equity of infrastructure provision and public trust in governments and development institutions. Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that the failure rate of rural infrastructure projects, such as water supply, rural road networks, and rural electrification, is especially high in Southeastern Nigeria. Poor maintenance structures, lack of post-project financing, and lack of community ownership structures are common reasons cited for these failures (World Bank, 2020).

4. Theoretical Framework

Institutional Theory was adopted in this study. The theory offers a framework for understanding the relationships among leadership quality, institutions, and the transition to good governance, and their impact on the effectiveness and sustainability of community infrastructure development in Southeastern Nigeria, with assistance from foreign partners. Institutional Theory was developed by scholars Meyer and Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983), and Scott (2014). To them, institutions are formal rules, regulations, policies, administrative procedures, and informal norms that affect how an organisation works, its legitimacy, and decision-making (Dacin, Goodstein and Scott, 2002).

Institutional theory argues that "development programmes brought about by donations" have lasting effects only when the recipient institutions have the administrative capacity, governance mechanisms and accountability systems that will enable the development programme to be implemented effectively. Development agencies, such as the Community and Social Development Agency (CSDA), are developing within institutional settings shaped by government regulations, donor conditions, community expectations, and

political pressures (Berthod, 2018). These institutional structures impact leadership, project implementation, resource allocation, monitoring and stakeholder engagement. Foreign aid is more likely to lead to sustainable infrastructure outcomes when institutions are transparent, accountable, and professionally managed. On the other hand, the lack of effective coordination, political interference, corruption, and inefficient public administration in project implementation reduces project sustainability despite high levels of donor financing (Hargadon and Douglas, 2011).

Institutional Theory also underscores the significance of leadership to improve institutional effectiveness. Leaders shape the organisation's culture, ensure adherence to rules, ensure the organisation utilises its resources, and coordinate relationships among stakeholders. Thus, effective leadership contributes to institutional legitimacy through transparency, accountability, and participatory governance. In the context of community-based infrastructure development, institutional leadership is especially important as various actors, donor agencies, government institutions, local governments, community development associations, contractors, and beneficiary communities have to cooperate throughout the project planning, implementation, monitoring and maintenance processes. The theory gives a coherent basis for analysing the relationship between leadership and governance and their consequences for the sustainability of community and social development projects (CDPs) in Southeastern Nigeria.

5. Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design to investigate the influence of leadership effectiveness and foreign assistance on the sustainability of community-based infrastructure in Southeastern Nigeria. This research approach was considered appropriate because it allows data to be collected from a population, examines its features, attitudes, and relationships among variables, and facilitates hypothesis testing through statistical analysis. This approach was adopted because data were collected from respondents at a single point in time, thus providing empirical evidence on views of leadership effectiveness, foreign assistance, governance practices, institutional capacity and infrastructure sustainability in Southeastern Nigeria.

The study covered Southeastern Nigeria, comprising the five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. The region has benefited from foreign-assisted community-driven development initiatives executed through the Community and Social Development Agency (CSDA) in partnership with the World Bank. The region was chosen for this study because of the various foreign-assisted community infrastructure projects and programmes. Using the Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination table, 398 respondents were considered as the sample size for this study. Multi-stage, stratified and purposive sampling techniques were employed. The primary method of data collection was a structured questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale to elicit participants' responses. The collected data were further analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used for the data analysis. The descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to analyse the respondents' demographic data, while multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypothesis.



Source: Adapted from Obi, Nwalusi, Ibem and Okeke (2021).

Figure 1: Map of the Southeastern Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria

6. Data Presentation and Analysis

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18 – 28 years	52	13.1
	29 – 39 years	94	23.6
	40 – 50 years	120	30.2
	51 – 61 years	80	20.1
	62 years and above	52	13.1
	Total	398	100.0
Gender	Male	199	50.0
	Female	199	50.0
	Total	398	100.0
Education	Secondary	117	29.4
	Higher Diploma	134	33.7
	Bachelor	94	23.6
	Masters	40	10.1
	PhD	13	3.3
	Total	398	100.0
Occupation	Student	52	13.1
	Farmer	92	23.1
	Artisan	67	16.8
	Business	68	17.1
	Civil Servants	119	29.9
	Total	398	100.0

Source: Author's Field Survey (2026).

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents who participated in the study. The demographic variables examined were respondents' age, gender, education, and occupation, along with the percentage distribution of their responses.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Leadership Effectiveness, Foreign Assistance, and Community-based Infrastructure Sustainability Initiatives

s/n	Statements	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	provision of clean and drinkable water	3.4372	1.40880	Agree
2	Motorised water projects are durable and functional	3.2362	1.40510	Agree
3	Road access has improved through culverts and bridges	3.4397	1.47869	Agree
4	Road construction has improved the transportation of farm produce	3.5075	1.36110	Agree
5	Rural electrification addressed energy needs	3.2714	1.43604	Agree
6	The provision of transformers improved business activities	3.4045	1.38349	Agree
Grand Mean		3.3838		

Source: Field Survey Data (2026).

Table 2 shows that the majority of the respondents agreed that foreign assistance has been effective in supporting the sustainability of infrastructure projects. The improvement in transportation services was rated

highest (Mean Score = 3.5075), followed by the enhancement of water services (Mean Score= 3.4475). The improvement in transportation services through road construction and grading activities was rated highest (Rating = 3.5075, Mean Score), followed by the improvement of water services with a mean score of 3.4475. On the other hand, the lowest mean was observed for the durability of the motorised water project, at 3.2362. The overall grand mean is 3.38, which attests to the tremendous contribution of foreign assistance to sustainable infrastructure development in water supply, transportation, and rural electrification.

Hypothesis

H_0: Leadership effectiveness and foreign assistance have no significant influence on the sustainability of the community-based infrastructure in Southeastern Nigeria.

H_i Leadership effectiveness and foreign assistance have a significant influence on the sustainability of the community-based infrastructure in Southeastern Nigeria.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	0.983	0.967	0.967	0.24687	2.215

Predictors: Leadership Effectiveness, Foreign Assistance

Dependent Variable: Community-based Infrastructure Sustainability

Source: Field Survey Data (2026).

The Model Summary shows a very strong relationship between the predictor variables and community-based infrastructure sustainability, with an R value of 0.983. Leadership effectiveness and the challenges that constrain the efforts explained 98.3% of the variation in sustainability initiatives in community-based infrastructure (R^2 = 0.967). Additionally, the adjusted R^2 is 0.997, close to 1, indicating that the regression model is robust and has high explanatory power.

Table 4: Anova

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	701.132	4	175.283	1876.077	0.000
Residual	2.228	393	0.061		
Total	725.084	397			

Dependent Variable: Community-based Infrastructure Sustainability

Source: Field Survey Data (2026).

The ANOVA results indicate that the regression model is statistically significant, with an F-value of 2876.077 and a p-value of 0.000, both of which are below the 0.05 significance level. This evidence demonstrates that the predictor variables collectively have a considerable impact on Community-based Infrastructure Sustainability.

Table 5: Regression Coefficients

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	Sig.	VIF
Constant	0.048	0.118	–	0.410	0.0682	_
Foreign Assistance	0.556	0.019	0.0578	29.982	< 0.001	4.427
Leadership Effectiveness	0.427	0.021	0.435	20.597	< 0.001	5.299
Corruption and Lack of Transparency	-0.023	0.015	-0.022	-1.542	0.124	2.339
Institutional Weakness	0.023	0.014	0.021	1.668	0.096	1.882

Source: Field Survey Data (2026)

7. Discussion of Findings

Some factors were estimated to predict the sustainability of community-based infrastructure through effective leadership and foreign assistance using multiple regression analysis. Infrastructural indicators such as water supply, roads, and electrification, with a significant statistical model of $F(4, 393) = 2876.077$, $p < 0.001$. The coefficient analysis shows that leadership effectiveness is a highly significant and positive predictor of infrastructural sustainability ($\beta = 0.578$, $t = 29.982$, $p < 0.001$). At the same time, foreign assistance is also a very significant and positive predictor of infrastructural sustainability ($\beta = 0.435$, $t = 20.597$, $p < 0.001$). That is, the negative effect of corruption ($\beta = -0.022$, $p = 0.124$) and institutional weakness ($\beta = 0.021$, $p = 0.096$) were not statistically significant in this model. Thus, the overall p-value (.000) is less than the significance level (0.05) used in this study, so the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected. The alternative hypothesis is accepted: Leadership effectiveness and foreign assistance have a significant effect on the sustainability of community-based infrastructure projects in Southeastern Nigeria. The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 64{,}089.606$; $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), with $R^2=0.967$, indicating that the predictors of leadership effectiveness and foreign assistance can explain 96.7% of the variation in infrastructural success, which implies that leadership effectiveness and foreign assistance have a significant influence on the sustainability of community-based infrastructure.

8. Summary and Conclusion

The effect of leadership effectiveness and foreign assistance on the sustainability of community-based infrastructure (CBIs), which involved water boreholes, road grading, and rural electrification, in Southeastern Nigeria was studied. The study was conducted amid continued underinvestment in infrastructure, rising donor-driven activities, and existing anxieties over the sustainability of donor-funded development projects in the region. Inspired by the Institutional Theory, the study examined the interplay among leadership quality, institutional capacity, and community involvement in the effectiveness and sustainability of foreign-assisted infrastructural projects. The findings of this study confirmed that leadership remains a critical factor in effective aid administration and sustainable infrastructure outcomes. The leadership structures worked efficiently, coordination improved, accountability strengthened, and stakeholder involvement enhanced, supporting efficient implementation processes. In conclusion, sustainable community-based infrastructure in Nigeria needs to shift from the quantity of foreign assistance to the quality of leadership and governance that manages it. Enhancing the effectiveness of donor-funded programmes and strengthening local institutions to sustain development gains after the end of external support will require strengthening institutions, capacity building, transparency and accountability, and meaningful community participation. The reforms are critical for enhancing the socioeconomic welfare of communities and for Nigeria to progress towards inclusive, sustainable development.

9. Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the results of the study:

- The Federal and regional governments, as well as other stakeholders, should invest in the strengthening and reform of institutional frameworks and capacity to effectively administer foreign assistance projects for sustainable community-based infrastructure projects in Nigeria.
- Federal and regional governments should encourage local leadership capacity within the institutions that are responsible for the administration and implementation of foreign-assisted development projects. They should prioritise continuous leadership training and capacity building in areas such as project management, strategic planning, stakeholder coordination, financial accountability, and participatory governance.
- The Federal Government should enact measures to minimise political interference in appointments and to professionalise the institutions of development administration, which should be given great attention. The effectiveness of subnational-level leadership would greatly enhance project coordination, implementation efficiency, and the sustainability of donor-funded infrastructure projects.
- Federal and regional governments should ensure that institutional accountability reforms are comprehensive and cover all aspects of the transparency and effectiveness of governance in aid administration systems, and reduce corruption.

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Ethics Declaration: The study adhered to ethical principles, as participation was entirely voluntary and respondents were informed of the study's purpose before completing the questionnaire. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, as respondents' personal and identifiable information was not disclosed.

AI Declaration: Grammarly was used to correct and proofread this manuscript.

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